

## You Might Get It

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# You Might Get It

by [likearecord](#)

## Summary

The one where Andrew makes a perfectly reasonable request and Neil takes it too far like the dumbass he is.

Or, relationships are complicated and communication is hard. They don't always nail it.

*So, Andrew has hit his limit. Neil's charged silence next to him is so loud that Andrew can't read over the buzz of it in his ears.*

*"Get out," he says, turning to glare at Neil.*

*Neil blinks at him.*

*"Whatever stupid thing you're obsessing over. It's irritating. I don't have time to solve your problems for you. Handle it. I have to study."*

*Instantly, he realizes it was a mistake. He watches Neil's face and body shutter up, closing tight like he's locking down for a hurricane. It took so fucking long to get Neil to open up in the first place. Andrew had to peel him open one truth at a time. Fuck.*

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

He knows immediately that he fucked up.

Neil has been antsy all day, fidgeting with his pencil, frowning at walls and textbooks and sometimes watching Andrew with an intense but unusual silence. And normally Andrew has the patience to wait out Neil's processing, he does. It just happens to be midterms. Andrew has an enormous exam that he can't sail through by virtue of memorization and an excellent fucking memory. Kevin is being more militaristic about exy practice than usual. Aaron and Katelyn are in a spat and his twin has been with them more often, sulking and needling Neil.

So, Andrew has hit his limit. Neil's charged silence next to him is so loud that Andrew can't read over the buzz of it in his ears.

"Get out," he says, turning to glare at Neil.

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"Whatever stupid thing you're obsessing over. It's irritating. I don't have time to solve your problems for you. Handle it. I have to study."

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He doesn't believe in regret and he meant what he said but—but he thinks he didn't exactly mean it the way Neil is taking it and that *shouldn't* be his problem. It shouldn't. But Neil hasn't looked at him like this in a long time and he doesn't like it. He says, "Neil," evenly, but he's not sure how to follow it up and anyway, Neil is already off the couch and headed for the door.

"Sorry," Neil says. "You're right. I'm going for a run."

It will be fine, Andrew tells himself. Neil will deal with whatever bullshit he's stressing over and they'll take their midterms and then they'll all go to Columbia and it will be fine.

He tells himself that again, when he's finally done studying and Neil isn't back from his run. He repeats it when he ends up at the dining hall with Aaron and Nicky. He repeats it again when he eventually climbs into bed with a book and puts in his headphones to block out the sound of Kevin's exy game. According to his Find Friends app, Neil (or at least his phone) is still at the stadium. Andrew wants to text him and tell him to come home, but he feels, weirdly and very uncomfortably, like he doesn't have the right. He stares at the dot on his phone for about ten minutes, trying to crush that part of him, and is ultimately saved from the decision by movement: Neil's little dot heading out of the stadium and towards the dorms. He's probably running. Alone. At 10pm.

Andrew tells himself very firmly that it is not actually his problem if Neil decides to get himself run over by a car.

He still closes his book and rolls onto his side before Neil comes into the bedroom, though. He's not ignoring Neil—he just doesn't want to know if Neil is ignoring *him*. They can sleep on it. It will be fine.

It's not fine.

Neil is there in the morning, the way he's supposed to be, but he's also not there. They eat their usual combinations of protein bars and smoothies and pop tarts and Kevin gives them his usual pep talk about how they can maximize their days and Neil sits right next to him like he always does, but there is a part of Neil that Andrew can sense is just...not with him.

It's still not there when they meet for lunch between classes.

It's still not there when they all change out for practice.

It's still not there when Jack gets in Neil's face. He makes one of his typical shitty comments—there have been so many of them, they've all started melding into one big airhorn sound in Andrew's head—and Neil just nods at him distractedly, then tells him to run some kind of drill.

Andrew knows he is particularly well attuned to Neil, but he thinks even Kevin notices, because he ignores most of the rest of the team and spends even more time than usual yelling at Neil.

It's the same the next day and the day after. Nothing has changed about their routines, other than Neil going for more especially long runs. But something *has* changed. He wouldn't say they fit the traditional criteria for *couples who tell each other everything* but they basically do. It would probably be more accurate to say that Neil tells Andrew everything and Andrew tells Neil anything worth telling once he's figured out how to articulate it.

Neil, though—Neil tells Andrew about his days, about his classes, about the latest in exy news, about the freshmen, about weird shit he sees on the internet. If it was anyone else, Andrew would probably find it annoying. He doesn't, though. Neil doesn't ever expect Andrew to invest in what he's saying, he just offers the minutiae to him and Andrew appreciates at his leisure the glimpse into a world that's noisier and more colorful and less flat than his own.

But it's been four days since Andrew has heard anything about Neil's bananas Intro to Psych professor. He hasn't mentioned the weird rivalry he's convinced is playing out between the baristas at the campus coffee shop. He hasn't even complained about Kevin.

Andrew is annoyed. He told Neil to stop obsessing and go away so that he could focus. He didn't tell Neil to stop talking to him entirely. If he actually wanted to sit in silence, he'd go prop himself up in front of a mirror. He glares at the other end of the couch, where Neil is staring vacantly at a book that hasn't had a page turned for at least five minutes.

"What happened today?" Andrew demands. He thinks he sounds angry.

Neil looks at him, surprised. "Nothing. It was fine. Why?"

“Your professor?” Andrew prompts.

“Which one?”

He sees Neil’s forehead crease the way it does when he’s trying to solve a math problem or figure out why a play went wrong in game tape.

“The baristas?” Andrew asks, switching tactics.

“I—” Neil frowns at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” Andrew says. He turns his attention back to the TV and tells himself that he is absolutely not seething with anger.

There’s a bruised feeling in his chest, though, and he doesn’t like it.

The thing is, Andrew realizes after another day of his world feeling just a little off kilter, is that there’s nothing actually *wrong*. Neil isn’t mad at him. He’s not being punished. It’s the opposite—he asked Neil to do something and Neil is respecting it and doing it without complaining or sulking. The problem is, though, that it means Neil is keeping a secret. And what Andrew had forgotten in his moment of frustration is that Neil doesn’t get himself worked up over little things. Whatever he’s stewing over, it isn’t an argument with a classmate or a low grade or a grievance about someone on the team.

When Neil has secrets, they tend to be catastrophic.

That means that there is something big weighing on him and Andrew does not know about it.

It’s a problem. It’s especially a problem because Neil is an idiot, so whatever he ultimately decides to do about this problem—however he *handles it*, as Andrew had short-sightedly instructed him to do—is going to be stupid and probably self-sacrificial. Or maybe it’s not life or death. Maybe it’s something Andrew would think is a waste of time. The point is: there is something Andrew does not know. Something big enough to linger. And Andrew is on the outside of it again—a place he hasn’t been in over a year. He has to speculate. He has to wonder. He fucking hates it.

The next day, he locks their bedroom door and backs Neil onto his bunk. It’s been days. It’s not because they’re fighting, because they’re not. It’s just, he thinks, that Neil is so distracted and pensive all the time. Andrew will ground him. He will touch him and keep Neil here with him. In this room. Alone.

Neil goes, as he always does, with *yases* mumbled into Andrew’s mouth and careful, reverent hands. Andrew had wanted him for months, thought about him for months, and expected the intensity of his desire to fizzle out once he got his hands on him, but no. Neil never stopped being a walking fantasy. Of course, he isn’t, not really. Not a pipe dream, not a hallucination, but a real boy, solid beneath Andrew’s hands and unquestionably present in the smooth, muscled lines of his body, the taste of his mouth, the warm press of his skin against Andrew’s.

They've figured out about a hundred ways to ask for consent that don't involve tearing their mouths away from each other. Andrew rubs the hem of Neil's shirt between his fingertips and Neil pulls it over his head and off; Andrew pulls his own off and tosses it in the direction of Neil's, somewhere off to the side of the bed. He smooths his hands down over Neil's ribs, his scars, kisses his mouth, drags his lips over the light stubble on Neil's jaw, tastes the skin above Neil's throbbing pulse. He had refused to allow himself anywhere near Neil for so long because he'd known this was going to be dangerous. Every time Andrew touches him he knows he'll never want to stop.

He allows himself to sink into Neil's arms, letting the press of their bodies and the closeness of the bunk around them cloister them—no space for anything but each other, the world around them fading into dim obscurity.

They still kiss for the sake of kissing, often, tucking themselves into corners and nooks and Wymack's office to lose time in the slide of mouths and the small, shameless sounds Neil makes when Andrew works his hands under his clothes. He can play Neil like a piano once he gets going; he knows exactly what to expect when he pushes his hands down the back of Neil's pants and squeezes or works a knee between Neil's thighs or thumbs light circles over his nipples. They're too hard too fast for that this time, though; Andrew feels the itch at the base of his spine, but he can sense Neil's want much more clearly in the restlessness of the body beneath him.

Neil tumbles unresisting into desire, his hands mapping Andrew's back, his knee up and over Andrew's hip. Andrew rubs on him lazily—he knows Neil will get needy, knows Kevin will be waiting impatiently in the living room, but he doesn't really care. In this, he has mastered living in the moment. He hasn't decided between hands and mouths yet when Neil pulls his mouth away, gasping, and says, "Can I suck your dick?"

The answer hits his mind and body at the same time: *yes*. He can see it and feel it suddenly, his breath catching, his dick throbbing. Andrew says, "Yes," and pushes himself up and off of Neil. Cool air rushes between them as Andrew lets himself fall backwards, shoving at the comforter to soften the back rails of the bunk before he leans against them.

Neil is slow with Andrew's buttons, slow with pushing aside of fabric, and slow to trace the tip of his tongue around the head of Andrew's dick. Andrew cups a hand around the back of Neil's skull and enjoys the way it rides the steady bob of Neil's head. Neil's eyes are closed. His auburn lashes cast shadows on his cheeks even in the bright sunshine of the room. His lips are shiny and stretched, his cheeks hollowing.

"Look at me," Andrew says, gratified when Neil's eyes flicker open and their vivid irises rise to meet Andrew's. They don't quite focus—hazy and glazed with arousal, flagging to half-closed when Andrew stops talking.

"You look good like this," Andrew says roughly. He feels Neil moan around his dick and shudders, lurching closer to the edge. With the fingertips of his free hand he traces the stretch of Neil's lips around his dick. "Your fucking mouth is obscene."

Neil chokes on a moan and has to swallow hard around him. Andrew feels his head spin. His toes curl tightly. His hand is almost involuntarily tightening in Neil's hair.

He thinks, if he wanted to, he could tie Neil down and drive him crazy with nothing but his voice.

“Keep looking at me,” Andrew orders. “Make me come.”

Neil locks eyes with him, a spark of determination making it through the haze of sex. He doesn’t look away. The last thing Andrew sees before he comes, his head tipping back, is the heat in their impossible blue.

After, he pushes Neil back and hooks his knees over his shoulders, folding him when he shifts higher to thoroughly lap the precum off the head of Neil’s dick. Andrew swallows him down, setting a relentless pace with his mouth until Neil starts to get loud. Both of Neil’s hands grip the slats of the headboard above him, fingers occasionally slipping as he scrambles for leverage. Andrew wraps his hands around the front of Neil’s thighs, holding him still. If Neil is his orchestra, this is Vivaldi, fast and light and merciless. He swallows when Neil hits the crescendo, arching and crying Andrew’s name as he spills in his mouth.

While he comes down, Andrew rolls Neil onto his side and pulls him close, letting their shared air and the warmth of the late afternoon sunshine sustain the delicate bubble of afterglow. He rests his palm on Neil’s throat, his fingertips over Neil’s pulse, and wallows in the *right-here-ness* of him. The unshakeable connection. For the first time in days, he has all of Neil here, tucked tight and safe against his chest. There’s no distance between them. It feels right in a way he hadn’t had to notice before.

The bubble breaks with Kevin’s sharp knock and impatient voice, complaining that he needs to get changed so they can head to practice.

Andrew shouts, “Go away,” just loudly enough to be heard through the door, but with an edge of seriousness that has Kevin’s knock halting. It picks up again in a minute, though Kevin changes tactics and starts appealing to their weak point: Neil’s commitment to that stupid fucking game.

In the lobby after practice, Neil’s phone buzzes in the space between their thighs. Anyone who should be texting him is in the room, most of them conspiring in hushed tones about how to drive Kevin out of his mind in their routine post-practice feedback session. Neil pulls the phone out and stares at it, biting his lip for a minute before haltingly texting out a response. Andrew’s iron will strains at the effort it takes not to lean over and look at Neil’s screen.

Who’s texting him? Who is he texting back? For most people, the answer could be virtually anyone. Neil, though, is not most people. Neil responds about as well to being asked for his phone number as he would to be asked for his social security number: with suspicion and cold refusal.

Andrew keeps his eyes locked on the stretch of wall across from him, over Dan’s shoulder. He doesn’t look at Neil again, not when he sends and receives a couple more texts, not when he shoves his phone back into his pocket, and not even when Neil leans his tense body against Andrew’s shoulder.

“Can you tell me why you won’t ask him?” Bee says in their session.

Andrew occupies his eyes with a survey of the figurines on the shelf across from him. “I told him to handle it.”

“It seems like you asked him to give you some space so you could study, not to withdraw significantly.”

“He’s not withdrawing,” Andrew says flatly. “He’s keeping it to himself.”

“Can you explain the difference to me?”

Andrew glares at the perfectly polished horse figuring he’d given her for their first Christmas. “Withdraw means to take away. To remove. It would have to have been given to be taken away. I told him not to.”

“Would you have told him that if you’d known it was something that would continue to bother him?”

Andrew shrugs. In general he tries to resist the lure of the ‘what if’ speculation. “Doesn’t matter.”

“But this is bothering you?” Bee asks.

Bother. It’s a very mild term. At the bare minimum, Andrew should be able to agree that it *bothers* him. It’s still a stupid word. He’s more inclined to say he hates it, but that’s a pretty loaded word itself, and he’s not sure he wants to give this that much emphasis with Bee.

“I don’t like it,” Andrew says. “He’s not equipped to make his own decisions. He’s an idiot.”

“So your concern is purely motivated by the probability of Neil making a mistake you’ll have to fix?”

Andrew glares harder at the horse. “We have trust,” he says haltingly. “Maybe I broke his.”

Bee’s pause is loaded with things Andrew can catalogue easily: sympathy, affection, analysis.

“It’s your decision,” she says finally. “But I hope you’ll ask him. You’re bothered because there’s something going on with him that you don’t know about. But isn’t *this* something going on with you that he doesn’t know about? From what I know about Neil, I think he’d tell you if he knew you wanted to know.”

Andrew resists the urge to argue that he wants nothing. He’s making some progress on that. He can’t bring himself to agree with her advice, though. He *told* Neil to leave him out of it. Neil is doing it. They hadn’t used the word ‘deal’ at the time, but he’s pretty sure it qualifies. Neil is keeping up his end, so Andrew should do the same.

If he’s being really honest, he has to admit that he doesn’t like the idea of undermining himself either. When he says a thing, that’s it—that’s what happens. He doesn’t think Neil would hold it against him if he went back on something minor, but the idea of admitting fault



about something like this rubs him the wrong way. Not caring has never led him astray in the past—he's not ready to let go of it as an infallible system.

And then Kevin corners him in the locker room after night practice. Neil had been late onto the court, spending too much time huddled over his phone chewing his lip. Once he was on it, he'd fucked up nearly every drill, even the ones he could usually nail in his sleep.

"What's wrong with him?" Kevin demands.

"Ask him," Andrew responds blandly.

"I did. He said he's *fine*."

Andrew snorts a laugh. Of course Neil said he's fine. It's practically his middle name.

"Andrew," Kevin says firmly. "He can't play for shit. Fix it."

This is, of course, when Neil turns up, still damp from his shower. His hair is dark when it's wet like this. He almost looks like the man Andrew had met in Millport.

"Leave him alone, Kevin," Neil says. "He's not my keeper."

Andrew knows they both turn outraged eyes on Neil. Kevin because he can work himself into a furious lather over Neil's career like nothing else; Andrew because he *absolutely fucking is* Neil's keeper. He can order the business cards if he needs to prove it.

"Since when?" Kevin demands. "Is that what this is? Did you break up?"

Andrew suppresses a wince. The instinct to insist there's nothing to break up wars with the substantial chunk of him that knows perfectly well there is—and that hates thinking about the possibility.

"We didn't *break up*," Neil says, exasperated. "Are you trying to get stabbed?"

"We're going now," Andrew says. "Both of you get in the car or I'm leaving you here."

Kevin sulks all the way back to Fox tower. Neil sits in the passenger seat and reads and re-reads a text message thread, his teeth gnawing on his bottom lip again.

Andrew remembers the last time Neil got mysterious text messages he wasn't told about. His hands tighten reflexively on the wheel. He fights the urge to rip the phone out of Neil's hands.

What would happen if he did? Probably nothing. Once Neil had cracked himself open for Andrew, he'd let Andrew dig his hands in and rearrange his insides without protest. He'd hand over that phone without hesitation if Andrew told him he wanted it. Andrew knows this. Neil also knows this. But Andrew hasn't asked for it, which means Neil must absolutely think he doesn't care. The truth is, he cares so much it's eating at him all the time. And isn't that just the story of his fucking life?

He stares at himself in the bathroom mirror the next morning, assessing the ever-present brush of shadows under his eyes and the faint golden sheen of the stubble he should be shaving off. It has occurred to him that most people would be worried about infidelity if their partner was constantly and secretly texting someone else. Andrew can dismiss that in no more time than it takes the idea to make it through the gears in his head. He's not one of those people who says "he would *never*" about other people's bad behavior. If his neighbor turned out to be a 93 year old lady serial killer, Andrew's total lack of surprise would interrupt the parade of "she seemed so nice" that the evening news loves to put on. But about this, he's certain: Neil would simply never fuck around on him. And that's not just because he couldn't technically cheat on someone with whom he's never agreed to exclusivity. And it's also not because he thinks Neil is sexless in general. Neil's libido rivals the engines of the Maserati. It's just that Andrew has the only key.

So, if it's not a romantic interloper, what could it be? Who could he be texting?

The Moriyamas? Andrew hopes even Neil isn't so fucking stupid he'd keep that to himself. He'd at least tell Kevin, wouldn't he?

The FBI? Unlikely. The only thing Neil gives fewer fucks about than the FBI is probably baseball. Or small talk.

It can't be one of Nathan's old people—Neil would never spend that much time texting one of those pieces of shit.

If it was something good, some kind of interview or magazine feature or press-related nonsense, Neil would have already told the team about it. He'd promised not to keep secrets that could impact anyone else anymore.

Does it even matter who it is? No, Andrew realizes. It's probably nothing they couldn't face—together or as a team or with Wymack and Abby. The problem remains that Andrew is in the dark, left to wonder and formulate possibilities and probabilities, measuring the people he can imagine with what he knows about Neil already.

He should just fucking ask.

He can't ask.

It should be so easy. It would take so few words. His throat closes around them before he can even formulate the question in his mind.

Aaron and Katelyn work out their shit and Aaron is intolerably smug about it. He's around less, which has its pros and cons, but when he's with them he sticks out like a sore thumb—a noisy, self-satisfied intruder in the quiet cathedral of their pensive silence. Kevin is more on edge than usual. Andrew thinks he shouldn't be surprised that Neil's odd new behavior would throw Kevin off balance; Neil is the other half of Kevin's striker machine. He clearly doesn't know what to do with a Neil who can't hurdle whatever obstacle is coming between him and his usual laser focus. The reasons for Neil's silence are obvious to Andrew, but he supposes the rest of the team has less information than him. And Andrew, who already doesn't see the

point in filling the quiet with useless words, certainly isn't interested in picking up the slack for the others.

When Aaron makes comments about the vibe of the room, Andrew ignores him. He ignores the little digs about trouble in paradise. If he's grimly determined to destroy or murder Aaron as soon as possible in every video game they play, well, that's a victimless crime. Except maybe for Aaron's ego.

He just wants something to happen. Something *has* to happen. Neil can't abuse his bottom lip in the glow of his phone screen forever without something happening.

Andrew resolutely tries not to think about what that *something* could be.

The worst case scenario would be Neil leaving. That simply cannot happen—not if the FBI wants it to, not if Neil's being recruited early by the pro teams, not even if he's been hand-selected to replace the most recently retired Supreme Court Justice. Neil is not going anywhere, not without Andrew. And he knows, in the small part of him that indulges in whispers of romanticism about Neil, that there is no way Neil would leave anyway. Not Andrew. Not again.

So he's not worried right away when he wakes up on Saturday morning and Neil's bunk is empty above him. It's a little late for Neil to be out on a run, but he's been going out for longer lately, and maybe he's grabbing breakfast or coffee on the way back.

When it hits 10:30, he allows himself to grab his phone and open Find Friends. He still refuses to be *worried* about Neil leaving, but something unpleasant clenches in his chest when he sees Neil's dot to the north of them. Far north. At least an hour by car. Heading straight for Charlotte, West Virginia.

He's immediately furious—there are three possibilities and all three of them make Andrew want to shake Neil until his teeth clatter: Neil has taken the Maserati and driven almost a hundred miles without giving Andrew a heads up, Neil is taking a fucking bus to another state (he's way too cheap to take an Uber that far), or Neil has gotten a ride with someone else. The worst case scenario is the third with a twist; Neil has already hitchhiked before. Andrew wouldn't put it past him to do something that fuckign stupid again. The worst-worst case scenario is, of course, that he hasn't gone willingly.

He flicks his Messages app open and types out a short, angry text: *where are you*.

Quickly (at least relatively, because Neil is still a very slow texter, even when he's not stalling for an answer), the reply comes in: *meeting someone for lunch. be back later*

They should have developed a kidnapping code. Of course, if he was being kidnapped, that probably isn't the fucking answer the kidnapper would have given—anyone who knows Neil well enough to want to kill him probably knows “meeting someone for lunch” isn't an ordinary or unalarming activity for Neil Josten. Especially not in another state.

Andrew rolls out of bed and throws on clothes, brushing his teeth with one hand and pissing with the other so that he can get out to the parking lot as fast as possible and check on the car,

which is still there. He knows that should make him happier, but it doesn't—not that he wants the Maserati to disappear out from under him, but he'd prefer knowing Neil was in charge of his own movements and destination.

He stops long enough to grab an enormous coffee and cake from Starbucks and then he starts following that fucking dot.

The dot stops and stays still after another couple of hours. Andrew has made up time in the Maserati—enough that he decides Neil must have been on a bus or with a fucking trucker after all—the other vehicle just wasn't moving that fast. He flexes his fingers rhythmically on the steering wheel once Neil arrives at his location in southeast Charlotte, willing him to stay still long enough that Andrew won't have to chase after him somewhere or, worse, run a Greyhound off the interstate.

When Andrew finally arrives, he pulls into a parking spot outside of an aging Olive Garden. Neil's still in there—their dots are so close on the map that they're touching. Andrew climbs out of the Maserati and leans against it, lighting a cigarette and keeping his eyes trained on the door. He gets through four cigarettes before he spots Neil coming out, accompanied by a tall, good looking guy and a woman a few inches shorter. The woman has a heavily dyed version of Neil's hair.

Andrew watches as Neil stands in front of them, his hands shoved deep into his pockets, the jiggle in his right heel a clear sign that he wants to run. The smile on his face is pasted on, but not entirely false—just uncomfortable. The guy gestures broadly with his hands and then suddenly reaches forward and pulls Neil's stiff body into a hug, which Neil endures awkwardly. It looks, Andrew thinks, like what would probably happen if Aaron tried to hug Neil.

Neil is finally released, only to be pulled into another hug by the woman. He seems less stiff this time, though his 'Thanks but I'd rather not' body language is screaming at Andrew even from 40 feet away.

This time, once he's let go of, Neil takes a cautious half-step back out of grabbing range. Andrew itches to go insert himself between him and these people who keep reaching out for him. They may seem to be harmless idiots, but Neil is clearly a foreign language.

Andrew lights a fifth cigarette and watches as their conversation wraps up and Neil heads down the sidewalk on foot—not in Andrew's direction. Not that Andrew had any way of knowing which way Neil would go. He resents it, this ignorant position Neil has put him in.

Scowling, he purses his lips and whistles loudly for Neil's attention. Neil's head spins fast, spotting Andrew and his black car after only a few seconds of panicked situational assessment. Something in him visibly sags in relief but the string is quickly pulled tight again. Neil's shoulders straighten and set.

"What are you doing here?" Neil asks when he's close enough.

"You didn't tell me you were leaving the state."

“You sound like a parole officer,” Neil huffs.

“You need one,” Andrew says. “You’re too stupid to reintegrate into society without supervision.”

“Did you track me?” Neil asks, frowning. “With the phone thing?”

Andrew takes another long drag off his cigarette and eyes Neil’s flushing face. He’s not going to bother answering a question that obvious. “Bus? Or did you hitchhike.”

“Bus.” Neil frowns harder. “Why are you here?”

“Why are *you* here?” Andrew snaps. “I thought you’d stopped running.”

“I’m not—” Neil stops, breathes, rubs his hands on his face. “I have a return ticket.”

“On the bus,” Andrew says, letting his disgust spill into his voice. “Did you forget about the car?”

“The bus is fine.”

Fine. *Fine*. Everything is always fine with Neil.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Andrew asks, finally breaking. “What mysterious secret was it that led you to a shitty Olive Garden in West Virginia? What are you hiding?”

“I’m not—” Neil stops again, scrubbing harder at his face before dropping his hands and glaring. “I’m not *hiding* anything.”

Andrew gestures around them with his cigarette. West Virginia. Olive Garden. Mysterious handsome strangers.

“You told me to handle it,” Neil says, a sharp edge to his voice that Andrew is familiar with but rarely on the receiving end of. “You told me to take care of my own problems. That’s what I’m doing. You don’t get to accuse me of anything when I’m doing what you asked.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Andrew says, even though he knows Neil is technically right. “I told you to solve your own problem. I didn’t tell you to make secret assignments across state lines and leave without telling anyone where you were going.”

He takes another drag and blows the smoke at Neil’s face. He can see the irritation in Neil’s eyes whipping itself into a frenzy. Good. At least it means he’ll fucking talk.

Neil’s jaw sets in the way it always does before he rips someone a new one. The idiot he’d had lunch with chooses exactly this moment to pull his car up next to them and lean through its open window.

“Everything okay here?” the guy asks. His voice drips with the pedestrian concern of someone who’s never seen real danger in his life.

“Fuck off,” Andrew says. “Mind your own business.”

“Hey,” the guy says. “This *is* my business.”

“It’s fine, Jacob,” Neil says. He finally tears his narrowed eyes away from Andrew and turns his focus to car guy—Jacob. “He’s my ride.”

Andrew blows his smoke towards Jacob’s face this time. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, Josten.”

Jacob frowns, waving the smoke away. “Get in,” he says to Neil. “I’ll drive you back.”

“No,” Neil says. “It’s three and a half hours.”

Andrew can tell—though he imagines *Jacob* cannot—that Neil’s objection is more about the misery of the hours they’d spend in the car together than it is the inconvenience. He sighs and drops the stubby remainder of his cigarette, grinding it beneath the sole of his boot before straightening off the car and stepping closer to Neil and the stranger’s car. Neil’s eyes catch his and Andrew gives him a very clear look: *get rid of this asshole or I will*.

“I told you to fuck off,” Andrew tells Jacob, though he doesn’t bother to look away from Neil. “I don’t like repeating myself.”

This seems to tip Jacob over some sort of lame normal-guy edge. He says, “Okay, no, that’s enough,” and decisively turns off his car, dropping the keys into the lap of the woman next to him before he climbs out, stepping onto the curb and pushing his sleeves up his forearms. “Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Andrew raises his eyebrows. Neil winces. Jacob straightens. He has about 10 inches on Andrew. Andrew has met enough assholes in his life to know that means Jacob thinks he can take Andrew easily.

“Jesus,” Neil mutters. “Andrew, this is Jacob. My...” the briefest of pauses, then, “cousin. Jacob, this is Andrew, my,” another brief pause, then, “partner.”

The semantics of what they are to each other doesn’t interest Andrew right now. He turns back to Neil and looks at him sharply. “Cousin.”

“Second cousin,” Neil clarifies.

“*Family*,” Jacob adds. “So if one of us is going to fuck off, it should probably be you.”

“Hey,” Neil says. He frowns and turns his back to Andrew, stepping most of the way between him and Jacob. “Don’t.”

“You don’t have to deal with this shit,” Jacob says, gesturing over Neil’s shoulder. “I know your home life has always been pretty shitty, but you get to choose something better now and you don’t have to put up with some controlling asshole.”

Neil's spine goes ramrod straight. His chin tips up. Andrew tangles his fingers in the back of Neil's hoodie—he's not sure if he's holding on or holding back, but he wants the contact. Something bristling in him is soothed by the way Neil sways back against his hand.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Neil says, his voice chilly. "I met you five minutes ago. Andrew is my family."

"Neil," Jacob says, his tone level and reasonable. "We just want to help you."

"I don't need your help." Andrew can't see Neil's face clearly, but he can hear the frown. "I need you to get out of my business and stop insulting us with your weird assumptions."

Jacob's mouth works its way open and closed a few times. The look on his face is a weird mix of affront and confusion and something that may actually be genuine concern.

"This is boring," Andrew says, after a long minute of silence. "And you're interrupting. Go away."

Neil nods vehemently in agreement. Andrew isn't really sure if Jacob surrenders and gets in his car because Neil has convinced him or because he's too confused to keep going or because he decides to wash his hands of his new, incomprehensible cousin, but as long as the end result is the man fucking off, he doesn't really care.

They watch the car drive away before Neil turns back to him and frowns. "You're still being a dick," he says.

"Cousin," Andrew repeats, prompting even through the flatness of his voice. He'd lost his grip on Neil's hoodie when he turned, so he relocates his fingers to the front and holds on there instead.

"My father's aunt's grandkids," Neil says, ticking off the levels of genealogy on his fingers as he explains. "They didn't know about Nathan until after he died. They reached out about a week and a half ago."

Andrew considers this. There are a lot of potential pitfalls and warning signs here, but he starts with the most important thing: "You should have told me."

"You said—"

"I said you were being annoying with all of your twitchy angst. You should have told me right away instead of wallowing in it."

"I thought you didn't do 'should haves.'"

"Next time, then," Andrew says, narrowing his eyes. "From now on you just tell me."

"Family is—" Neil stops, frowning, but soldiers on one halting word at a time. "Complicated. For both of us."

"They're relatives," Andrew says. "You get to decide if they're family or not."

Neil should know this by now, after everything he's seen. After watching Andrew and Aaron feel each other out. After watching Nicky finally walk away from his shitty parents. After Seth's mother didn't bother to pick up his ashes. He stays quiet, swaying into Andrew's grip and closer to him until Andrew tugs, pulling Neil against his chest and pressing his face against Neil's shoulder.

"I didn't like this," Andrew says, very, very quietly. "Don't do it again."

He thinks he can guess how most people would react to that. It sounds nothing at all like "I'm sorry" or "I missed you" or "we can do better than this." This is Neil, though, and Andrew trusts him to accept the words, defrost them, and pick them apart to find all of those things anyway. Sometimes, he thinks Neil can find things in Andrew's words that even he doesn't really realize he's saying. Or maybe Neil will be an idiot and misinterpret again--he thinks not, though, by the way Neil's body is relaxing to fit, loose and warm, against Andrew's.

After a moment, Neil rubs their cheeks together and presses a quick kiss in front of Andrew's ear. "Okay," he says, solemnly, "in the future I'll remember how deeply invested in my feelings and our relationship you are."

"I hate you," Andrew says. Mostly he says it because they both know Neil is right, even if he is making it sound like a joke. It feels, Andrew realizes, a little like the moment after a plane lands when the flight attendants tell you it's okay to take your phone off airplane mode: back on solid ground, reconnected to the world, fully immersed in your life again. "Get in the car."

"Oh," Neil says, dropping another kiss lower, against Andrew's jaw. "Did you decide to give me a ride?"

"Thin ice, Josten."



## End Notes

Exposed: my secret love for reflective, prolonged angst and miscommunication.

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