

fragile

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fragile

by [likearecord](#)

Summary

A new guy starts working at the radio station.

He's fragile.

Better keep Andrew away from him.

Notes

For [@willow_bird](#), my first AFTG fandom friend, whose beautiful words I get to read fresh off the fingers, who is kind and generous and lovely and very funny and props me up when I need propping and agrees with me about raccoons and deserves all the good things this world has to offer: rainbows and horses and kittens and 10,000 pens and a never-ending supply of AUs and literally hours of speeches about their greatness.

Happy birthday, boo. I heart you.

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

Chapter 1

Andrew is in Germany when the new guy starts. Wymack sends him an updated schedule with *Neil* written in slots that used to be empty or only penciled-in. There's a (?) next to the name on the line for Kevin's two-hour sports block. It's written in right after Andrew's 2am - 5am weeknight show, too, during those hours they could never find anyone to stick with long enough to develop them past bleary introductions of random music and a pathetic attempt to hype the morning commuters: *Neil*

Andrew says it out loud. Neil. *Neil*. Neil who is, according to a later email, now consistently covering Andrew's slot while he's on vacation. Is he playing music from the pre-approved playlists Andrew had set up before he left? Ten of them, contents not that different but the flows varying, three-hour blocks that require the host only to press play and occasionally cut in to give the name of the song or the band.

He doesn't care that much about the job, but he doesn't want anyone getting the bright idea to put on some sort of overplayed hipster shit and chip away at his late-night cred.

There are a few texts about the new guy, too, but the group chat is oddly quiet on the subject. Andrew gets out of the shower once to find that *Neil J* has been added to the thread. Allison introduces him with a weird set of emojis that Andrew assumes are intended as a grand entrance; Neil J says *thanks* and then nothing again, ever, or at least for the rest of the ten days Andrew is in Berlin. His little-used thread with Allison gets a notification only once: *dibs*. His more frequently visited thread with Renee gets: *definitely a fox. might be one of yours. needs careful handling*. Kevin sends: *new sports guy you're off the hook*.

Wymack's message is more formal. A full email.

To: Andrew Minyard
From: David Wymack
Subject: New Employee

For once in your life take it easy on someone. He needs to be here. Don't scare him off.

David Wymack
Program Director, KFOX 93.9

There must be something about this guy that's setting them all off. Some fragility that they're worried Andrew will take pleasure in exploiting. Neil J is probably one of those lanky emo boys with the haunted eyes and the floppy hair and the pouty mouths, tiptoeing around the station, maybe crying every now and then, one dignified tear after another slipping down his pale cheek. Images of newborn foals taking their first wobbly steps come to mind. Little baby birds lifting their gaping mouths to the sky in screeching pleas for sustenance. *He needs to be here*, Wymack said. *He's one of us*, Renee said. What they're not saying reads as clearly between the lines as every gray bubble on his phone screen does: *he's fragile, he's been through too much, he needs a second chance, don't break him*.

They all think his cruelty outweighs his apathy. They're wrong. Andrew wants to lay eyes on Neil Josten now, wants to parse him and label him and set him aside. But if they think he's going to get some kind of joy out of crushing Neil's delicate spirit, they're inventing that out of whole cloth. New guy is at best a curiosity, at worst an irritation.

Andrew doesn't reply to a single one of their texts or emails.

But the first time he lays eyes on the new guy, his foot takes half a second too long to hit the ground. The guy—Neil, Andrew reminds himself—is up on the counter in the kitchenette, hands turned inwards and tucked under his thighs. He's almost all silhouette against the bright light streaming through the window, graceful profile and lean muscles, and then he turns and looks right at Andrew, his expression as smooth as sleep. Andrew sees the eyes, a flat, unconvincing brown even from this distance, and the still-healing scar that curves over Neil's jaw, and the fresh bandage peeking out from under his long-sleeved shirt. He looks not quite real. As ethereal as a fever dream. A goddamned fucking mirage. An enigma, wrapped in a mystery, inside of a thirst trap.

His first thought is: *fuck Allison's dibs*

His second is: *Lets see how easily he breaks.*

"Neil Josten," Andrew says, stopping short of tripping on his own feet to lean against the door frame. "I keep hearing about you."

"That doesn't sound good," Neil replies.

"Did no one think to explain to you how radio works?" Andrew asks.

Neil blinks at him.

"They can hear but not see you," Andrew explains in a mockery of patience, "so it isn't actually necessary to look like that."

"Like what?" Neil asks.

"Like you are going undercover as a train-hopping vagabond. Like you fear a demon who lives in the mirror and will steal your soul if you look at one. Like you are dressed by color-blind squirrels in the mornings." Andrew keeps his voice flat, impassive, lets each word roll off his tongue as precisely spaced as items on an assembly line. Each one drops into the air between him and Neil and sends ripples through the small room, ripples Andrew can feel the way he always does when he talks to someone normal, the psychic clash of person v. monster, the harshest vibe check, but Neil doesn't seem to sense them. They affect almost nothing on Neil's face except the right corner of his mouth, which pulls up and then down again. Up and down.

Neil asks, "Why color-blind?"

Andrew waves at the faded grayish-blue of Neil's jeans, the faded grayish-green of Neil's battered henley, the faded, frayed edges of Neil's black-on-black-on-black sneakers. "Look at

yourself.”

“Can’t,” Neil says. His brow pinches a little and his mouth slopes downward and Andrew thinks, ah, there it is, that was easy, and then Neil continues, “I promised my dying mother that I wouldn’t succumb to the demon.”

“Did she live to dig through thrift store clearance bins another day?”

“Nope.”

Andrew supposes this is what they’d all been afraid of—that he’d start talking about Neil’s dead parents within thirty seconds of meeting him. The offhand way Neil says it, though, that throws him. Before he can respond, there’s movement behind him and Matt’s bulk comes within inches of slamming into him. Only the vitality of Matt’s body, the pulsing presence of him, stirs Andrew’s clothes, but he steps further into the room anyway, into the deeper rings of what should have been the splash of Andrew’s rudeness into the calm waters of Neil’s face.

“Andrew,” Matt says sharply. “What are you doing here?”

“I work here.”

“You’re early.”

“I am punctual.”

“You’re something,” Matt mutters. “Neil, this is Andrew. He’s mean. Don’t take it personally.”

“Good to know,” Neil says.

“Come with me,” Matt insists. He casts a suspicious sidelong look at Andrew. “I want to show you something.”

Show him literally anything other than Andrew.

Neil pushes himself off of the counter. He is shorter than Andrew had realized, almost level with Andrew himself, only a few inches closer to the impressive peaks of Matt’s spiked hair. He favors his left side, not wincing but taking short, careful steps that betray some hidden source of pain. Two of the twitchy fingers on his right hand are missing most of their nails, only little nubs grown back over the pink, shiny skin. The scar on his jaw is new and tender, still vivid against his wan complexion. A few tiny hairs catch the light along its length—places it must hurt too much to shave. And then there are the unconvincing contacts and the too-dark dye job.

Neil Josten looks like he’s been to hell and back.

But he’s not fragile. Andrew knows broken. This guy is something else.

What are you? Andrew wonders. There are no answers in the lifeless green of Neil's retreating back.

At the staff meeting, Wymack says, "With Nicky and Erik gone, we have a soundboard shortage."

"Very uncool of them to quit on us like that," Matt says. "What could possibly be better than working here?"

"Germany," Allison says drily.

"Yeah, but did they *both* have to go?"

"They're married."

Glumly, Matt says, "You have an answer for everything."

"Anyway," Wymack interrupts loudly. "These are the hours we need coverage." He taps a large board with the end of his pen—several areas are colored-in red, chunks of time where there aren't enough bodies to do all the talking and all the button pushing at the same time.

The room is silent other than some rustling. A number of people become suddenly very interested in their fingernails or the seams on their bags.

"I can do some," Neil says after a long moment. "I'm a quick learner."

"Fine," Matt says, sighing heavily. "I'll help too."

"And me," Renee adds, "though not on Sundays."

"Great, I knew you'd step up," Wymack booms. He looks at Neil thoughtfully and then around the room again—skimming over some of the employees who had managed to keep their enviable loner status by virtue of not having their summer-camp-counselor-friendly cousin present to drag them into unwanted socializing. Wymack's eyes land on Andrew for a moment, linger, and then he says, "Neil will need training."

Ah. Andrew knows that soundboard inside and out. Almost as well as Erik, their resident expert, had. Aaron had been good, too, before he left for medical school. As a teacher, though, Andrew is—

"Me," Allison says, raising her hand insistently in the air. "I will teach him everything I know."

"So he will know how to press the *on* button," Andrew says.

"This is ridiculous," one of the loners grumbles. "I thought this was going to be a serious radio station."

“Why?” Wymack asks her.

Renee says, “Cross-training is always good. I’ll help, but I think we all know Andrew is the most experienced.”

Andrew glances briefly from skeptical face to skeptical face, soon landing on Neil’s. His eyes lock with Neil’s bland brown ones; they’re too flat, none of the richness and depth of walnut or earth or stone. Andrew itches to find out what’s beneath that artifice. He wonders if he could find out Neil’s real hair color, too, in glimmers at the roots, if he dug his fingers into the thick waves and got close enough to smell Neil’s shampoo.

Wymack drops his pen onto the table and claps his hands with finality. “So, we’re all set. Renee and Allison can train Neil on the soundboard. You won’t have to do anything complicated, kid. We just need someone to sit in the chair and push the buttons sometimes.”

Neil nods, but his eyes don’t leave Andrew’s. They don’t skitter or slide away, he doesn’t blink his way out of the contact and pretend it hadn’t happened, he doesn’t blush or blanch or clear his throat. He holds steady, undaunted by the threat that Andrew knows lives in his own eyes.

—

Kevin can easily talk about sports for his whole slot all alone, reciting stats and preaching strategy and teamwork to a faceless mass of worshippers, but his ratings do better when he has someone to back-and-forth with. Sometimes that’s Dan and they fill the time with impassioned and earnest debate. Sometimes it’s Matt, who riles Kevin up by asking him deliberately obtuse questions and pretends not to know the answers. *Sports for Dummies*, Allison suggests as a new title. Once it was Andrew—it had only taken the once to discover that his bored, monosyllabic responses weren’t exactly what the daytime sports-freak listeners were showing up for.

He turns the show on anyway that Monday, crams his knock-off AirPods into his ears, and sets to adding weights to the squat bar as Kevin’s cheerfully intense voice breaks through the fading conclusion of the last song.

Welcome to By the Balls! I’m Kevin Day, here with my fellow sports obsessive, Neil Josten. A lot went down at the Clemson/Alabama game this weekend and Neil and I were there to see it, weren’t we?

Andrew slides another 15lb plate onto the bar, clamping it on just in time to avoid dropping it on his toes when the rich, resonant sound of Neil’s laugh pours over him. Had he sounded like that in person? He’d been quiet, mostly—blending, avoiding notice, saying almost nothing other than what was necessary.

We were, Neil confirms. The buttery tone slides down Andrew’s spine, melting everything with its heat. *You refused to buy me popcorn.*

You were going to throw it at Alabama.

Yes, Neil says easily. The y rides his breath in a smooth arc.

Andrew closes his eyes. He opens them. He decisively moves to the other end of the bar and picks up the first weight. So Neil gives good radio voice. So it feels like he's murmuring every word right into Andrew's ear for only him to hear. That's the whole fucking point. That's how everyone feels. That's probably why Wymack hired him.

Bad sportsmanship, Kevin chides. And disrespectful to the field.

You threw your beer.

Just the cup. And not at the players. And it was empty. Really, I dropped it.

You wept at the Alabama sweep in the third quarter.

It was a thing of beauty, Josten.

Something is different about Kevin's voice, too, Andrew realizes. It's as familiar to Andrew as his own, from the almost musical sway of its vowels to the clipped consonants of Kevin's anger. But now it's also—teasing, maybe? Comfortable. Confident. Usually, Andrew can hear the tone of it see-sawing between apologetic and defiant during Kevin's sports talk; apologies for the intensity with which he approaches the subject, for the thread of *shut the fuck up already* he knows all too well runs through heads when he's talking; defiance when he decides he will not, in fact, shut any fucks up. Even with Jeremy as a guest, Kevin doesn't sound like this. There's too much awe in his voice then.

But with Neil, well. Kevin doesn't outpace him. Neil lets the sharper barbs bounce off of him, always coming back with some point that Kevin has to take on its merits, all in that bourbon and honey voice that sears through Andrew's veins and then soothes the burns. The gym's too-loud music pounds away on the other side of his headphones. He pushes himself hard. Pushes his muscles to their limits. Does an extra rep when Neil laughs. Adjusts his grip when Neil makes Kevin sputter in outrage. Rips his headphones out when his workout ends and chugs half a gallon of water and tells himself that the heat in him is all exertion.

—

Andrew plods through the last hour of his shift that night, unusually antsy, waiting for Neil to show up, waiting to see what happens when they're face-to-face again, but when the door outside of the booth opens, it's Dan who comes in. He checks the clock: 4:34 a.m.

She waves halfheartedly through the glass and then brings her hand up quickly to smother a yawn into the back of it. Her hair is messily tied on top of her head, her sweatsuit is very obviously sleep-rumpled, and her shoulders are hunched from exhaustion.

Andrew has no fucking idea what she's doing here.

And neither does Neil, if the surprise on his face when he walks in a few minutes later is any indication. He frowns and says something. She smiles and says something back. Neil frowns

a little harder and then seems to give up, shrugging and passing into the larger studio space that adjoins the smaller, darker room that Andrew prefers.

He queues up a couple of songs and stands, stretching out his aching back and shoulders, his legs still protesting from the punishment he'd put them through earlier. By the time he opens the door, Dan has settled herself into one of the plush rolling chairs and strapped a travel pillow around her neck.

"Why are you here?" Andrew demands.

"Keeping Neil company," Dan says, cool and calm and typical Wilds.

"Neil is a big boy. Or are you still afraid of monsters under the bed?"

"Knock it off," Dan says. "What do you care?"

"It is curious that you have never come to keep me company," Andrew muses.

"You don't need it. You definitely don't want it."

Neil mutters something under his breath but remains stubbornly and studiously focused on surveying the board in front of him.

"Maybe I get lonely, Danielle."

"Or maybe you want to sharpen your knives on me."

At this, Neil stills. Stiffens. It's only a moment, but Andrew catches it from the corner of his eye, catalogues the jerkier movements of Neil's hands on the board.

"How old are you?" Andrew asks Neil. "Twelve? Thirteen?"

"Twenty," Neil answers flatly.

"Surely *twenty* is old enough to supervise oneself, Danielle?"

Dan's eyes narrow but her mouth widens into a smile. She says, sweetly, "Oh, but Andrew. You never know what kind of monsters you can run into in the wee hours of the morning."

She's here because of Andrew, he realizes with absolute clarity. She's here to stand between him and Neil, to mother hen, to protect poor, delicate, tragic Neil from whatever heartless depravity Andrew will inevitably inflict on him. It's so pathetic he could almost laugh about it—almost, but not quite. Almost, but not if he thinks about it too hard. Almost, but he's never done one thing to Dan Wilds and she's still looking at him like a wild beast. Almost, but Neil's shoulders are stiff and his movements are sharp and Andrew thinks, maybe, that he's more annoyed by this than Andrew is. That he is chafing under the supervision. That he is less a baby bird and more of a hawk in his own right.

That he is, for some reason, not telling Dan to fuck off.

That he doesn't think Andrew is anything to be scared of.

Andrew shrugs and steps back into his booth. They can't keep this up forever. Someday, alone in the soft hours before dawn, Andrew will get a chance to see what Neil is made of.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Happy slow, ongoing birthday, willow_bird!

Tuesday's chaperone is Matt. Wednesday is Dan again. Thursday, no one comes in the door other than Neil, his shoulders dotted with rain and hunched against the sudden flow of cold air. It stays hot when it rains, even when the sun has long since turned its attention to the other side of the world, so the shock of the perpetually cold building sends a visible shudder through Neil's body. It's 4:40 a.m. Andrew deliberately turns his attention back to the board before Neil can pull his hood down and catch him watching.

The queue shifts to something mournful and electronic, something pushing the limits of how long a radio station listener is willing to spend on the same song. Andrew double-checks the ad spot that's coming up next and looks up at the light knock of knuckles against his door.

"Hot chocolate?" Neil offers, holding out one of the mugs from the kitchenette. It's a free promotional mug, advertising a local law firm. The air just above it is hazy with heat. Neil's thumb covers the grinning face of the personal injury lawyer gracing the ceramic, which is an improvement on the man's already thumb-shaped head.

"No chaperone today?" Andrew asks. He takes the mug.

"Nope."

"How did you shake them?"

"I told them I would quit if they didn't stop," Neil says flatly.

"Hmm," Andrew hums.

"I had to tell them a few times," Neil admits. "They seem to be—" he stops, frowning, and shifts his attention to his own mug.

"Stalking you?" Andrew asks.

"Maybe," Neil says. His face does something complicated where he almost smiles—or, at least, Andrew thinks that he almost smiles—and then it folds back in on itself, and then smooths out completely. "They mean well."

"Hmm," Andrew hums again.

This time, the half-smile stays.

“I won’t bother you,” Neil says. “This is just a peace offering.”

“Are we at war?” Andrew asks, raising one eyebrow very deliberately as he punctuates the question with a careful sip.

“Not yet,” Neil says.

“Yet,” Andrew parrots. Another crooked half-smile works its way onto Neil’s face. Andrew wonders what Neil would look like if he let the other half of it loose, wonders if it’s so shallow because it still hurts to pull the scar that tight; quickly, unsure of how much time has passed, he turns to the monitor to check the queue. When he turns back, Neil has gone and taken the geometry of his face with him. Andrew watches him move around the other studio, adjusting the height of the chair, signing into the computer, clicking and clicking and clicking. Neil spins, once, pushing off against one piece of equipment and doing a 180 degree turn as the chair rolls quickly across the room. It’s darker in Andrew’s booth. He can watch without being seen.

It’s annoying, that Neil doesn’t talk to him.

It would be annoying too, though, if Neil did talk to him—or, rather, if most people talked to him. Maybe Neil is annoying. Maybe Neil is a Scientologist. Maybe he’s on the paleo diet. Maybe he studied abroad for a year. Maybe he says *Ibitha* instead of Ibiza.

He looks up, though, when Andrew steps through the doorway in the last minutes of his last song.

Neil says, “See you tomorrow.”

Andrew asks, “Are you affiliated with any cults, religious or otherwise?”

“No.”

“On a special diet?”

“No,” Neil says. “You?”

Andrew leans against the doorframe and tsks. “Shouldn’t you be getting on the air?”

Neil says, “Shit,” and only looks up again when Andrew knocks goodbye against the studio window on his way out of the building.

—

Friday, Neil strolls in the door at 4:30 with a ridiculous soccer ball-printed blanket draped over one shoulder, his keyring between his teeth, two brown paper bags clutched in one hand, and the other balancing a drinks carrier. The contents of its two cups are hot enough that Andrew can faintly see the blurring of the air above them as Neil slips into the studio.

He adds a few things to the queue just in case and opens the door between them, moments after Neil drops his keys onto the table and turns. The bags in his hand are faintly dotted by

something that may be grease; both of the cups are enormous.

“You liked the shitty pod stuff yesterday,” Neil explains, handing one of the cups to Andrew. “So I figured.”

“What is in the bag?” Andrew asks.

“Muffin. Pumpkin apple streusel. And a bacon and cheddar scone. Pick one.”

“Muffin.”

Neil hands it over. The bottom of the bag is warm in Andrew’s hand, the air inside spiced and fragrant when he opens the top. He ducks his head to breathe it in, fruit and sugar and the wafting chocolate steam from his cup. The logo of his favorite coffee shop is printed on both and he knows that Neil wouldn’t have known that—and that it’s a lot of people’s favorite coffee shops. But it’s...a gift. Neil brought him a gift. Andrew can’t remember the last time someone did that without a holiday obligation. Nicky, maybe, with one of his many gay pride offerings. Wymack, possibly, with a bottle of whiskey. His doctor’s office, occasionally, with lollipops.

“Listen, I’ve been thinking,” Neil says. “Does CrossFit count as a cult?”

“Yes,” Andrew says sharply. “Are you in it?”

Neil flashes a smile at him, a fuller one, a real one, and says, “No. Just wondering.”

“Does that hurt? Smiling?” Andrew asks.

“A little.”

Neil’s dull brown eyes are open, and honest, and close enough that Andrew can see the pixelation at the edges of his cheap contacts. He can’t make out the color beneath them, not without getting really, really close. Close enough to smell whatever is in the other cup on Neil’s breath.

“Bring a chair,” Andrew tells him decisively. “Not the gray one. It won’t fit.”

There’s just enough room in the smaller booth for Neil to drag the mesh-backed black chair in from the larger studio, and only enough room to move when Neil braces himself against the arm rests and crosses his legs on the modest, worn span of the seat. The booth is dimly lit, stealing light from its view into the other studio and the riot of tiny colored lights that make up the sound board. In the dusk of the room, Neil seems all the more unreal. All the more a hallucination.

“Is it my turn to ask weird random questions?” Neil says, pinching off one piece of the scone in his bag and popping it into his mouth.

“No.”

“That seems not fair.”

“I did not promise you fair.”

“What about your own questions?” Neil asks. “You skipped the one about the cult.”

“Do I look like someone who would be in a cult?” Andrew asks.

Neil cocks his head to the side, considering, mindless of the shaggy bits of bangs that fall across his forehead. “No,” he says, finally, sounding certain. “But you do look like someone who could lead one.”

“I do not like people enough to lead them,” Andrew says.

“Fine. If you won’t answer questions, I’ll make guesses.”

Andrew gestures for Neil to continue, watching blandly as Neil pops another bite of scone and stares Andrew down, some sort of complex process going on behind his eyes.

Finally, Neil says, “You’re from the West Coast. California?”

Andrew stares flatly at him.

“The accent,” Neil explains. “It’s not strong, but I’ve been around.”

“Near San Diego,” Andrew confirms. It’s a lucky guess—or, it isn’t. Neil has an ear for accents—or, he doesn’t, and someone has been talking about him. God knows they’ve been talking about Neil enough.

“Okay,” Neil brushes his hands against his thighs and straightens in his chair, making exaggerated eye contact. Andrew stares back, into the lie of them, and waits. Neil touches a finger to his temple and says, “The next song you’re going to play is... “

“No,” Andrew interrupts, his hand up. “I know what you like and I refused to be insulted in that way.”

Neil laughs, then. It’s warm. It fills the small room. It fills Andrew’s chest like a deep breath.

When it’s time for Neil to take over, Andrew drags the black chair back with them and settles himself into it, his feet braced against an empty span of table. He watches as Neil presses a flurry of buttons, slowly types like someone to whom it’s not second nature, and finally introduces the new slot and himself with that wet dream of a voice. When Neil finishes, flips the right button, and turns back to him, Andrew says, “The next song you are going to play is... Justin Bieber.”

“Justin Bieber is not a song,” Neil says, hard stop, no question mark, but there’s a fading train of *right?* in his voice.

“Oh, so you do know what music isn’t.”

The weekend is uncomfortably empty. Andrew had grown used to—you might even say accustomed to—Nicky’s frequent not-particularly-optional weekend activities. With him moved overseas, though, and with Aaron two hours away in the city, Andrew is looking ahead at years of still, home-bound weekends, him floating around his empty rooms, unmoored and alone, litigating an endless battle between loneliness and misanthropy.

He finds himself longing for work, counting down to the Monday staff meeting, itching to settle into his chair, put on his first song, and start watching the door to see when Neil shows up. When did that become a thing? At what point in the *single week* that they’ve been overlapping did he start giving a shit? It can’t even really be Neil, Andrew thinks. It’s a coincidence that Neil showed up right after Nicky and Erik left. That they’d all promised him something breakable and instead handed him some mysterious alloy of cagey and gorgeous, every shade of his face a lie that he wears with an honesty Andrew has never seen before.

Just because Andrew feels something, that doesn’t mean Neil *is* something. Neil was in the right place at the right time. He’s new. He’s resisting the others because they’re mother-henning, like some dumb teen hanging around with the deadbeat because her parents keep telling her what bad news he is. Andrew isn’t going to pull any punches, not for the sake of a few idle fantasies and an unexpected Pavlovian response to the shape of Neil’s mouth.

“You like everyone I hate,” Andrew reminds his cat, Almond. She rolls onto her back and stretches her paws at his face, her enormous green eyes guileless. “You will probably hate him.” One spread paw curls under his chin; the tips of its claws are sharp pricks against his skin. Andrew rubs her belly with disapproving fingernails. She doesn’t call him on what he left unsaid.

—

On Monday, Neil shows up at four a.m. with milkshakes and fries, incorrectly guesses that Andrew plays the trombone, and earns Andrew’s eternal disdain when he admits he got bored by the *Bohemian Rhapsody* biopic and turned it off after twenty minutes. His excuse: it was really loud.

Tuesday: Neil brings sack full of tacos, somehow guesses that Andrew played soccer in his teens (that these sports mostly occurred in Juvie isn’t mentioned), and pulls self-consciously at his hair, drawing enough attention to it that Andrew realizes there’s a glimmer of something alive at the dead, dark roots.

Wednesday: quarter-to-four in the morning, a big carton of deli soup that they reheat, pour into mugs, and sip instead of spoon. Neil asks, “Are you a car guy?” and lights up to incandescence when Andrew confirms it. It turns out to be a lucky guess. Neil has less than none reciprocal car guy-ness to offer, to the degree that Andrew tells him that he is useless and should be banned from operating a motor vehicle. Andrew doesn’t leave the building until his shift has been over for forty-five minutes.

Thursday: Neil shows up at half-past three with two grease-stained white paper bags, a hideous beanie pulled down low over his ears, and bruise-dark shadows under his eyes.

“I went to the worst restaurant,” he says irritably.

“And you thought of me,” Andrew says drily. “I’m touched.”

“No,” Neil frowns. “I mean, yeah, sort of, but everything was small and weirdly fancy. I stopped for tacos. Is it weird that I keep bringing you stuff? I’m kind of just discovering food.”

This is the kind of shit that must make the others think he’s an entire litter of kittens in a box on the side of the road. Ignoring it, Andrew half-stands in his chair to pluck one of the bags from Neil’s hand and says, “Not weird. You look like shit.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you sleep?”

“Sometimes,” Neil says. He rubs at his eyes with the back of his hand and then seems to give up, allowing himself to collapse inwards like an accordion, flopping into the chair Andrew had dragged in and casually used as a footrest so as to not give the appearance that he’d been expecting Neil’s company. “Weird night,” Neil adds after a long moment.

“Tell me if you want to or do not,” Andrew tells him. “I am not tempted by vague half-confessions.”

“It’s not—” Neil starts, and then sags further into his chair. He pulls his knees to his chest, his battered sneakers balanced on the edge of the seat, and takes the wrapped taco Andrew hands to him. “Allison was being weird.”

“How unprecedented.”

“No,” Neil says decisively. His jaw sets. His mouth pinches a little at the sides, ironically making his ludicrously inviting mouth a little plusher. Andrew fights the sudden urge to press Neil’s bottom lip down with his thumb, see how much give it has, see if Neil would open for—Neil shakes his head. He says, “It doesn’t matter. Tell me about your day.”

“That is not the game,” Andrew reminds him. “Guess.”

“Guess.”

Andrew crams half a taco into his mouth and nods.

“Guess what you did today?” Neil asks slowly.

His mouth too full to talk, Andrew gives Neil an unenthusiastic thumbs-up, giving it all the attitude of a middle finger. The rudeness lightens something in Neil’s face, adds a little life to his flat, fake eyes. Andrew can see the gears turning, a slow, ratcheting, mechanical process that lifts the corners of his mouth and adds frown lines he’s much too young for. He’s going to say something bizarre or something so spot-on Andrew will have to wonder if Neil is psychic or working for the NSA or has cameras in Andrew’s apartment or is some kind of fucking hallucination.

Andrew braces himself the way he would to stand firm against the waves, his feet buried in shifting sand, his eye on the horizon. Neil is the walking wounded. He obviously has more ghosts than all of New Orleans put together. But dammit if he doesn't also have some kind of gravity all his own, something that pulls you in closer and closer until, Andrew suspects, it would take extraordinary effort to part from him for more than a moment.

Andrew hates the word *barcade* on principle but, in practice, it's a pretty good combination. *Bar*, obviously, stands on its own. The *arcade* part allows him to tipsily race spaceships, shoot zombies, design his own roller coasters, and shove money into the claw machine until he eventually triumphs over the sinister machinations of gravity and the limp wrist of the claw.

All of these things are preferable to the team bonding these little station excursions are supposed to promote. In a perfect world, Andrew wouldn't have to go at all. In the Nicky world, he'd shown up last and left first. In this Neil world, well. Andrew still shows up last. Just not quite as late as last usually suggests. And he has no idea what's going to happen after that.

He finds the group with little effort. There are too many of them to cram into a single booth or table, so they appear to have taken over one end of the bar and two adjacent tables. Andrew does a quick head count: Renee and Jean and Kevin at one table, bowed towards each other, deep in some serious conversation that Andrew can't even begin to guess the nature of. Matt is (loudly) celebrating the swish of Dan's basketball through the game's second-rate hoop. And then his eyes land on Neil and he doesn't bother looking for the others.

Andrew is taken aback, though, by how inert he is. He's against the bar but not quite leaning, nothing casual or natural—he's just bobbing there like a buoy, tethered by the hand Allison has curled around his bicep. The bottle in his hand looks more or less untouched, its heavy perspiration long since dripped and puddled on Neil's fingers. The worst of it, though, is the vacancy on Neil's face. But, is he drifting? Or is he drowning? Whatever it is, Andrew hates it immediately. He hates the smooth placidity of Neil's expression. He hates the shallow half-smiles Neil gives just a second or two after Allison or Jeremy laugh at either side of him. It's just...not right. Its disco played at elevator music volume. It's an action movie without a musical score. It's a careful, half-asleep walk through a stranger's apartment in the middle of the night.

Before he can question the urge to do so, Andrew finds himself moving through the room in a straight line, deviating not even an inch for the obstacles in his way, until he can plant himself right in front of Neil's fucking face and kick at the toe of one of Neil's shoes. Neil blinks, and the fog clears, and Neil focuses on Andrew's face, and then Allison says, "Hello, Andrew," in a voice precisely balanced between grudging and suspicious.

"Josten," Andrew says, flatly ignoring both Allison's toothy smile and Jeremy's more sincere one.

“Andrew,” Neil answers. Andrew can feel his interest like a tug at the end of a fishing line—a gentle little *pop* against Andrew’s palms.

“I am wondering,” Andrew says mildly, “if you will suck at everything here as much as you suck at your job.”

“*Andrew*,” Allison says sharply.

Andrew ignores her. There’s a flutter of movement in Neil’s cheek. Andrew starts to reel him in. He says, “I will even allow you to choose the game, out of a sense of fairness.”

“Fairness,” Neil echoes, but it’s mostly drowned out by the surprised laugh Jeremy tries to hide in his glass.

“Yeah,” Jeremy says, mumbling the words against the rim of his glass. “That’s our Andrew. Always doing the right thing.”

“Skee-ball,” Neil says suddenly.

“I don’t know if you’re fifteen or fifty,” Andrew tells him derisively.

“Twenty. If you’re afraid of losing, I can pick something else.”

“Losing to you? You have the upper body strength of a newborn ferret and two-inch thick contacts in.”

And there it is—the first flash of real light in Neil’s eyes. Neil asks, “What do I get when I win?”

“My respect.”

“I kick your ass at skeeball and you respect me? That’s all it takes?”

“A little of my respect.”

Neil straightens. He hands his bottle absently to the side, more or less forcing Allison to let go of his arm and take the beer before he drops it. She says, “*Neil*,” meaningfully, but he just directs another vague half-smile at her. He never really takes his eyes off of Andrew’s.

Neil asks, “And if I lose?”

“When you lose,” Andrew corrects, “you can confront yet another of what I suspect is a long list of pathetic failures.”

Even Jeremy blanches at that. But all of the color that drains from his face seems to find its way onto Neil’s, re-blooding him, re-animating him.

Neil says, “You’re on.”

It turns out Neil is fucking amazing at skeeball.

It also turns out that Neil is a lot more Neil when he's away from the others, when there's no obviously unwanted beer in his hand, when he takes reckless sips of Andrew's whiskey and makes a face like he's been punched in the throat.

But most of all, he's some kind of fucking ringer at skeeball.

"You played me," Andrew admits after their second round. The tickets piling up at Neil's feet vastly outnumber the ones at Andrew's, looping into a tight spiral that dwarfs Andrew's own flaccid length of paper.

"Did I?" Neil asks lightly. "Maybe I'm just a half-blind baby ferret getting lucky."

"No," Andrew says, shaking his head in disgust. "I played myself. I forgot you are as much of a jock as Kevin is."

Neil just grins at him. It's a full smile—wide and bright. It takes Andrew's breath away. When he tries to burn his way through the tightness in his chest with another heavy swallow of his drink, he just ends up coughing embarrassingly. Neil's face illuminates even more of the room. Neil says, patronizingly, "You're not so bad."

Andrew puts his glass down very precisely and then, with equal precision, lifts his middle finger right in Neil's face.

Best out of three turns into best out of five, but before Andrew can insist on best out of eight, Matt materializes at their side.

"Neil!" Matt booms, grinning very widely. He steps in close to Neil and then, seeming to notice the looming that is inevitable at that height difference, takes an awkward step back. "Come back to the bar. I'll buy you another beer."

"That's okay," Neil says. "Thanks though."

"They have great food, too," Matt offers, "wings, burgers, these little fried macaroni and cheese things."

Neil starts to get that vaguely spectral look on his face again. He rolls a ball through his fingers with the kind of obsessive consistency that can only come from doing it unconsciously. He says, "Um," in a way that clearly wants to be a no but doesn't have the guts.

Matt edges a little closer and says, lower, a little more pointedly, "I know Allison was looking for you."

The problem is, Matt's eyes flick towards Andrew at the end of that sentence. Andrew suddenly remembers the *dibs* text, remembers Neil saying Allison was being weird, remembers the fingers on Neil's bicep, and gets fucking annoyed.

"Learn to take no for an answer, Boyd," Andrew warns.

"He didn't—"

“No,” Neil blurts. “No thank you.”

“Neilio—”

This time, Andrew interrupts with, “Does she think they are dating?”

Matt flushes. Neil, in inverse, passing on Jeremy’s lifeblood from earlier, pales quickly. Neil says, “No,” very quickly, almost stumbling over it. “I’m not— that’s not. Something. That’s happening.”

“There you have it.” Andrew tosses his own ball in his hand, catches it, turns his hand over and gestures back towards the bar with it. “Fuck off and go remind Reynolds about informed consent.”

Boyd fucks off, his enormous body radiating grudging discomfort, but he takes all the life out of Neil with him. There’s a sheen of panic on Neil’s blank face now, a shimmering disruption of the practiced smoothness. Andrew takes the ball from Neil’s hand and says, “Fine. You beat me. I respect you 3%. Smoke?”

Neil’s nod is vague and, somehow, so are his footsteps as he trails Andrew through the arcade. Andrew gets it, suddenly—the impulse to take this lost boy by the hand, to hold on tight and lead him somewhere safer, pull the blankets up over their heads and coax a wobbly smile out of him. The problem is, none of them know where *safer* is for Neil. No one knows where *safer* is for anyone else. Not even Andrew. Hell, Andrew barely knows what it looks like for himself.

He walks more determinedly outside, refusing to look back even when the soft falls of Neil’s feet are drowned out by the clangs and dings and shouts of the barcade. He won’t make Orpheus’s mistake. He leads them out the front door and around the to the side of the building with his eyes firmly trained on the ground ahead of him, only looking at Neil when he feels him settle against the wall beside him. All he has of Neil at this angle is his profile—the strong line of his nose, the pout of his bottom lip, the sharp angle of his unscarred jaw. Andrew taps a couple of cigarettes out of his pack and puts them both in his mouth to light them, mumbling out of the corner of his mouth to say, “You did say Reynolds was being weird.”

This earns him half a smile. Andrew will take it. He hands over one of the cigarettes and turns, propping his shoulder against the wall and watching Neil watch the curls of smoke that lift away from the red glow of fire on paper.

“I don’t know what they want,” Neil says, but then stops himself. He shakes his head. “No, that’s not true. I know they want me to be normal.”

Andrew says, “There is no such thing.”

Neil ghosts another smile at him. Finally, he lifts the cigarette to his mouth to take a drag. “I know everyone at the station has been through something. My shit isn’t special.”

Andrew shrugs one shoulder. He wants to know—of course he wants to know—but the last thing Neil needs right now is curiosity. So, he shrugs. And waits.

When Neil exhales, he blows the smoke out of his mouth in a perfect ring that floats, and drifts, and expands, illuminated by the lights back at the end of their alley. He says, “I’ve never had space for anything but survival and now—I don’t think I know how to feel anything else.”

“Is that what you want?” Andrew asks.

“I think so,” Neil says slowly. “I’m trying. To stop feeling fear, at least. But what else is there?”

Five years ago, Andrew wouldn’t have had an answer to that question. Even now, he can’t get any more specific than *so many fucking things*, even if he’s never been able to unchain himself from Plato’s fucking cave wall long enough to see any of them in sunlight. His mouth drier than it should be, he drops his cigarette to the ground and crushes it with his foot. Neil watches, then lifts his eyes to Andrew’s. They’re bottomless in the dim light of the alley, pools of black like water in the night. Black, but not truly. Black, but you know it isn’t.

“Can I kiss you?” Andrew asks.

This doesn’t seem to surprise Neil. He weighs it as if Andrew had asked if Neil wanted to come over and play video games, wanted to go back inside and order a burger, wanted to grab an Uber and go home without saying goodbye to any of the others. Eventually, Neil says, “Yes.”

Andrew’s heart knocks violently against his chest. He says, with a practiced blandness he doesn’t feel in even a single cell of his body, “Do you need the contacts to see?”

Neil lifts a hand absently, touching the corner of his eye with one nailless finger. “No.”

“Take them out.”

He braces for Neil’s refusal, but it doesn’t come. Neil drops his own cigarette, grinds it out, then expertly slides one contact off, and then another. He looks at Andrew dead-on then, a million shades of blue layered in his eyes like an orgy of pigment.

Andrew forces himself to take one deep, full breath. Straightening, brisk, business-like, he holds out his hands for Neil’s, gratified when Neil settles his palms atop Andrew’s. With more care than Andrew can stand to look too hard at, he wraps around Neil’s ribs, slowly, so that Neil’s arms can cross safely behind his back and away from Andrew without an ache.

Neil is pliant and watching, golden in the glow of the massive bulb of the streetlight, the blue in his eyes deep and doing unwelcome things to Andrew’s insides. Andrew closes his own eyes against them. He shifts closer, lifts his face, and finds Neil’s lips already parted, soft, tasting faintly of Andrew’s favorite whiskey. This is supposed to be about making Neil feel something, but Andrew floods with sensation in an instant—a heaviness low in his stomach, a shimmering urgency in his fingers and toes and the tips of his ears.

He keeps it slow. Shallow. Allows himself to do no more than lick the inside of Neil's bottom lip, and then feels his control come perilously close to shattering when Neil whimpers and sags against him. Fuck. *Fuck*. He realizes he's gripping Neil's hands tightly, probably too tightly, and forces himself to drop them, to tear his mouth away and step back.

It's been ten seconds, maybe fifteen, some kind of eternity condensed into a dozen heartbeats. Neil is looking at him like he's stopped the planet in its tracks and set it to spinning in the wrong direction—shocked, unbalanced, reeling. But somehow still steady on his feet. Unmovable in a way Andrew can't quite figure out.

“Okay?” Andrew asks. He doesn't know what it means. He doesn't know if *he's* “okay”, quite fucking frankly, or what's burning through even the smallest of his veins. Neil just nods.

“Good,” Andrew says. He pulls his cigarettes back out of his pocket with trembling fingers and taps another two out, willing himself steady but still needing three attempts before he can get his lighter to spark.

Chapter 3

There's nothing to talk about, so they don't talk about it.

By Thursday, Neil is showing up—his eyes a hundred shades of blue—at least an hour before Andrew's time slot ends. For his part, Andrew finds himself wandering out to his car at some point after daybreak. They keep the lights dimmed in the rest of the building, so it's just the two of them, the low hum of the equipment, and the subtle changes of timbre in Neil's voice that Andrew is cataloguing, memorizing, learning how to coax out of him.

There's this one that comes out when Andrew volunteers basically any information. There's something especially intimate in it—it's a little quieter, a little richer than his normal tones. It invites Andrew's secrets to come and curl up in it.

Andrew has to stop being so goddamn fixated on Neil's voice.

He should be ashamed, probably, about the amount of time he spends with Neil. About staying in the station for just about as long as they can be alone. About having whole conversations with his feet up, his seat reclined, his eyes closed. But the alternative is going home, lying in bed, listening to Neil's voice from afar and wishing he was there to fill all the spaces between Neil's on-air chatter.

Andrew has to stop being so goddamn fixated on *Neil*.

Except, he doesn't want to. Except, he's not *fixated*. He's interested. They hang out a few hours at work on weeknights. It's not like they're texting constantly—Andrew doesn't have Neil's number and he hasn't volunteered his own. It's not like they're hanging out when they're not at the station—although, Andrew supposes, he could tell Kevin to invite Neil next time they do a movie thing at his apartment.

Andrew doesn't need more. He has plenty of stuff to do on his own time. He has the gym, and his cat, and a stack of twenty books. He keeps compulsively buying them, even though he gets new ones faster than he can read them. Even though the stack next to his bed is tall enough to be a nightstand.

Even though the people in the books have things that feel further and further from Andrew's grasp every year.

—

Except, Andrew is still there when Neil's replacement comes in Saturday morning, and Neil says, "You want to grab some waffles or something?"

And who could say no to waffles?

—

When a half-dozen excessively energized coworkers crash into the station at 5:45 in the morning on a Thursday, almost an hour into Neil's slot, Andrew has his feet up on an empty stretch of counter and is slumped down so far in his chair that he's only properly on it from the waist up.

The main door bangs open and Neil jumps about a foot—actually, he leaps out of his seat, sending the chair rolling violently away from him, and then almost trips on it somehow anyway. Andrew, without giving it a moment's thought, reaches out and circles his fingers around Neil's wrist, squeezing.

"There he is!" Matt shouts, more than loud enough to be heard through the thick studio glass. He's wearing a lavender crop-top that says, *'kinda want to work out, kinda want to eat tacos,'* and a pair of hardcore men's athletic leggings that leave absolutely nothing to the imagination. It's pretty much the same thing Allison is wearing. Andrew remembers, now, the 10k Kevin had put together a team for. The 10k that he'd asked Andrew several times to run with him, usually while Andrew took calm sips of his drink and made bland, uninterested eye contact.

Against his fingertips, Andrew feels Neil's frenzied pulse start to slow. His shoulders, high and tight around his ears, relax.

Reasonably confident that Neil won't bolt for the back door if he lets go, Andrew releases Neil's wrist and uses the armrests to haul himself upright in his chair. Matt's face, now pressed against the glass, goes from abashed regret to outright surprise. Still standing, Neil fortifies himself with a deep breath, presses some buttons to buy them some time, and waves the group in.

"Sorry," Matt says as soon as his head is through the door. "I'm hyped for the race. I have natural caffeine." He throws another look at Andrew, this one having settled into confusion. "Hey, Andrew."

Andrew nods briefly in acknowledgment and uses everyone's distraction to pull Neil's chair closer to him for a footrest; he crosses his ankles on it and leans back in his own, taking a bored sip of his coffee like this little pre-dawn klatch has even existed in anyone's imagination before this exact moment.

Kevin pushes through after Matt, looking exasperated by Matt's very convincing impersonation of a highway barrier. "Andrew," he says, his voice sleep-rough, brusque, and probably hiding its amusement from everyone other than Andrew. "You've decided to join us."

Andrew makes eye contact—bored, uninterested—and takes a long sip of the coffee in his cup. Kevin's mouth makes a scowling shape, but Andrew catches the little quirk of humor in it.

"Well," Kevin says, in his trademark *'moving on'* voice, "then you can cover for Neil and he can join us."

“Can’t,” Neil says, finally joining the conversation. His voice is not quite right. Andrew wishes he still had his fingers on Neil’s pulse. “Not for a few months.”

“But then?” Kevin asks.

“Then, yes,” Neil says. It sounds, to Andrew’s surprise, wistful. That whisper of a limp, Andrew remembers. The way he favors his left a little, better than it had been the first time they’d met, but not totally gone. The way Neil’s hand sometimes hovers around his side when he’s talking about the past, unconsciously shielding the same spot over and over again, protecting it from a threat that will probably exist in his mind for years. Forever, if he’s unlucky.

“Waste of time,” Andrew interjects.

“Fun is not a waste of time,” Kevin counters.

Andrew lifts his free hand and articulates deliberate, precise scare quotes. “‘Fun.’”

Allison chimes in with, “Everyone has different ideas of fun, Andrew.” She smiles, sweetly. “For example, I like doing face masks and yoga, and you like scowling at babies and heckling restaurant workers.”

“Not true,” Andrew says mildly. “I also like face masks.”

Kevin sighs heavily. “You do have beautiful skin.”

“Maybe if you ran fewer pointless kilometers in the sun, you wouldn’t have premature wrinkles.”

Predictably, Kevin’s hand lifts to touch the corner of his eye. Andrew hides his smirk in his coffee. Allison takes the moment to toss her ponytail unnecessarily back over her shoulder and aim another smile, this one stiff, at Andrew. She says, “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Andrew gestures with his cup towards the room. *Feel free.*

“Privately,” she says. “Please.”

Please.

Andrew sets himself against the wall and stands, hit with a sudden rush of restlessness, wanting to get out of the room before the please drifts to him like pepper spray. He feels okay leaving Neil here with—well, there’s no reason not to feel okay with leaving Neil with any and all of these people. But Andrew remembers the life-or-death speed with which Neil had reacted to *‘there he is,’* and stops in the doorway to look back and watch the relief on his face settle back into calm.

Down the hall, Allison draws herself up resolutely and says, “I’m not forcing Neil to date me.”

Which is. “Okay.”

“Matt said you said something at the barcade last weekend.”

“Did I,” Andrew muses. “It’s so hard to remember.”

“I asked him to dinner, there wasn’t a vibe, it’s not a big deal. We can hang out without it being some plot to manipulate him into liking me.”

“Hang out,” Andrew repeats in a slow drawl.

“God, you’re so difficult. I don’t even know why I care what you think.”

“You couldn’t,” Andrew tells her.

“Couldn’t what?”

“Manipulate Neil into liking you. This is not Hollywood in the 1950s and he did not just step off a bus from Kansas.”

“Ugh,” she says, “*obviously*, I just mean. I want to be there for him, we all do, but I don’t, like, need him to be my boyfriend. That dibs text was a joke.”

“Okay,” Andrew says again.

“Okay?”

“I believe you. You can run unburdened by my moral judgment. Let’s never do this again sometime.”

Andrew walks back into the studio in the middle of one of Matt’s big, joyful laughs. He ducks under Kevin’s obnoxious attempt to block his way and drops right back into his seat. Neil’s still standing, so Andrew reclaims his chair as a footstool and picks his coffee back up again, ignoring the squinty looks Dan and Matt keep sending him. This is his. He belongs here way more than they do.

“Okay,” Kevin says, clapping his hands together. “In light of Andrew’s intractable aversion to anything that wasn’t his own idea, we should get going. We don’t want to be at the back of our corral.”

“Under 45 minutes,” Neil says, sparking a scowl on Kevin’s face. Neil smiles in return, settling into the familiar rhythms of shit-talking. “Or don’t show yourself around here again calling yourself an athlete.”

“*Under 45*,” Kevin mutters. “And they call me a drill sergeant”

“Under 40?” Neil suggests.

“45,” Kevin says. He points a finger very deliberately at Neil’s face and says, “And you buy me lunch.”

“Anywhere you want,” Neil says, with the serenity of a person who is absolutely confident they’ll never have to pay up. Andrew thinks—no, he is sure—that he fucking adores this asshole already.

The others pile out as chaotically as they piled in, taking the scent of sunscreen and adrenaline with them.

Neil almost sits on Andrew’s feet before he realizes they’re on his chair; he swats at them until Andrew relents and moves, relocating his stacked ankles to the counter they’d been on in the first place.

“You are a runner?” Andrew asks.

“Yeah,” Neil says. The wistfulness is gone from his voice, which is now all linear and straightforward and even and under control. “But then I got stabbed a little.”

Andrew feels the room itself hold its breath. Dust motes freeze in the air; even the whir of the computers seems to still itself. Carefully, Andrew takes another sip of his coffee, thinking, evaluating, assessing, reading. He says, “They do these a few times a year. Let me know if you want me to stab you again before the next one.”

Everything else kicks into motion again when Neil laughs. The room exhales. The servers hum. Neil says, “A win-win?”

Andrew shrugs. “Sometimes things work out that way.”

—

“53 minutes,” says Neil’s cocky radio voice. *“I’m so disappointed in you, Kevin Day.”*

“Big talk for someone who didn’t run it at all.”

“It sounds like I shouldn’t bother. We’d barely see each on the course.”

“Alright, alright, I owe you lunch. But I expect you to put your money where your mouth is next time.”

Neil hums. Andrew’s expensive new headphones transmit the sound with perfect fidelity, pouring the easy rasp of it into his ears. It reverberates down his spine, through his stomach and thighs. His toes curl in a desperate bid to keep it inside of him.

For fuck’s sake.

—

It should surprise absolutely no one that, when Kevin calls early the next week to schedule a movie night at Andrew’s, Andrew says, all casual, very chill, no desperation at all, “Bring Neil if you want.”

“If I want,” Kevin repeats.

“Shut up.”

“I don’t know,” Kevin says musingly, “I think maybe I see enough of Neil as it is.”

Andrew says, “I hate you,” and then hangs up his phone, tapping the red button on his screen so hard that the noise of his nail hitting the glass rouses Almond from her nap. “Behave yourself,” he tells her. “Don’t embarrass both of us by throwing yourself at him. Save the belly rubs for the third date.”

She blinks and makes no promises.

Movie night is always at Andrew’s. So are game days. So is anything that Kevin wants to do that takes place in a house. This is for one reason and one reason only: Kevin is in love with Almond. Kevin has more pictures of her on his phone than Andrew does. Packages addressed to Almond Minyard and containing various cat toys and treats show up on Andrew’s doorstep with disturbing frequency.

So, Andrew has a tv wider than his arm span. He has a subwoofer he’d tried to use as another surface for books, but he’d given up after half a dozen hostile takeovers by the cat. The subwoofer does double-duty as cat hair storage.

“Okay,” he tells Almond. “I need you to stop shedding until after Saturday.”

She yawns and tucks her face back under a paw.

Andrew stands, briskly, determined, and looks around at the stacks of books, the torn-out pages of newspapers slipped between them, the general heaps of a life spent *meaning* to do a lot of things and never really getting around to any of them—why should you, when it’s so much easier to not do things?

It’s not filthy. He’d learned to keep things clean in foster care, because there would be repercussions if he didn’t—discipline, sometimes; theft, other times; having to leave one of his few precious possessions behind if he couldn’t find it, more than once. It just...needs some air. He needs to let some air in.

So, he does just that. First things first: he opens the windows to the early evening air. It’s not fresh or cool in the way that he wanted to be, and the whine of crickets almost drowns out the rumble of the cars passing by, but he stands in front of his screen and inhales it deeply anyway.

Is it better than what he’s had closed up with him for months?

What a pointlessly stupid question, Minyard. What are you doing?

Second things second: he’s probably going to need to buy a bookshelf.

—

His apartment doesn’t look substantially different to him by the time Saturday rolls around, but it *feels* different. Like the walls have all moved back a couple of feet. Like there’s space

for other people to be there with him.

He's being ridiculous. Since when is he this figurative language guy? Things either *are* or *aren't* and there's no point to romanticizing anything. He dusted his apartment. He vacuumed. He opened some windows. He bought a cheap bookshelf. None of these things have anything to do with his soul.

But there's still something jittery inside of him all afternoon, something that doesn't settle until he opens his front door to find Kevin and Neil; Kevin has stacked the pizza boxes high in Neil's arms and rested too many of his favorite weird local beers on top of them.

Kevin says, "Where's my girl?" and pushes past Andrew without so much as a nod of greeting.

Andrew looks at Neil, instead. Neil, whose contacts aren't in. Neil, who is poised awkwardly on Andrew's threshold with probably 35lbs of pizza and beer held in his arms. Neil, who is smiling right at Andrew in that way that no one else does. Who always seems to see something there worth looking at.

Neil says, "Hey, thanks for letting me tag along."

So Kevin didn't sell Andrew out. Maybe he's good for something after all.

"No problem," Andrew tells him. "Put that on the counter before you drop it."

There are three people and four pizzas, because Kevin is the most extra person Andrew has ever met. He loves him for it. This is something Kevin must never know.

Kevin has claimed the massive bean bag chair before Neil and Andrew have even gotten the door closed. One of his enormous feet is braced on the arm of the couch—Andrew knocks it off on his way past and pretends to drop Kevin's plate onto his lap, answering Kevin's indignant glare with a blank look of his own.

"Andrew," Kevin scolds. "You could have crushed her tiny head."

Her tiny head lies, undisturbed, on Kevin's chest, with an expression of pure bliss on her face.

"Traitor," Andrew tells her. She ignores him. "Turncoat. Judas. Haver of very low standards."

"We can't hear you," Kevin says breezily. "Turn on the movie."

So, Andrew settles onto his couch with Neil tucked beside him and a plate with six slices of pizza balanced on his knee. He puts on the movie. It's an old one—*Dante's Peak*—featuring a youngish Pierce Brosnan who should be the hottest thing in the room but isn't, because Kevin could probably be a model and Neil is the most gorgeous thing Andrew has ever laid eyes on, and he thinks only like 20% of that is about how completely gay he is for Neil.

Anyway, this is Andrew's curse. He is surrounded by beautiful people living beautiful lives. His twin, off in medical school. His cousin, shackled up with a German hunk at a far remove

from the train wreck of American politics. Kevin, with his *GQ* face and his *Men's Health* body and his *Smithsonian* brain. Andrew is usually an observer—he skirts the edges, watches backs, holds the line of what people can get away with around him. Except, for some reason, with Neil. With Neil, Andrew always feels right in the middle of it. What are those spinning things at the playground? Andrew was always the kid who held onto the outside and ran until it was going almost too fast for him to jump on himself. It felt a little like the cushion sloping beneath Neil's weight next to him. Like breathing Neil in every time he inhales. Breathing himself out when he exhales.

He has really got to get out more often.

Neil says, “Wow,” about four minutes into the movie and it goes downhill from there. Andrew spends at least half the movie sneaking glances at Neil instead of at the for-the-time-pretty-decent volcano special effects—he watches the disbelief on Neil's face, his genuine, credulous worry about whether or not Pierce Brosnan is going to make it, the warmth in his eyes when he turns and catches Andrew looking. Time and time again.

“Wow,” Neil says, again, when the credits roll.

“This is intermission,” Kevin tells him. “The next one is Norwegian. It's time for bathroom breaks and new drinks.”

And then, Kevin makes himself scarce, disappearing not towards the half-bath off the hallway, but towards Andrew's bedroom and master bath towards the back. This leaves Andrew alone with Neil. In his apartment. In the hushed, post-movie silence, with only the residual buzz of the movie's bass in his ears and the whirring of Andrew's ceiling fan moving above them. Andrew grabs Kevin's plate and stands, stacking his own on top. Neil follows like it's an old habit, snagging the empty cups and bottles as he goes.

In the kitchen, they silently sort their shit between the trash, the recycling, and the sink. Andrew consolidates the rest of the pizzas into two boxes and finds a place in the fridge to stack them while Neil busies himself rinsing off the plates. The refrigerator tick-tick-ticks gently—Andrew puts his back to it and watches Neil turn, lean his hips against the counter, and dry his hands with the towel hanging next to the sink.

“Hey,” Neil says quietly.

“Hey.”

The kitchen is small, so they're only a few steps apart. Andrew takes one forward, and then a second, drifting closer because—because he wants to, and he can, and no one else looks at him quite like this, like closer is where he should be. Not really.

“Thanks again,” Neil says. “For letting me come.”

“Shut up.”

Neil smiles crookedly at him. Andrew is fucked. He takes another step forward.

When he's only a foot away, Neil lifts his hands slowly and cups them a few inches from either side of Andrew's head. He says, "Can I?" and it's a real question, and Andrew knows he can say no and Neil will drop it, so, he says yes.

He says yes and he forces himself to keep his eyes open when Neil's warm hands form themselves to Andrew's face, to the rise of his cheekbones, the lines of his jaw, the agonizingly sensitive curves of his ears. Carefully, Neil strokes his thumbs in a smooth arc. They skim over the barest hint of stubble starting to come in for the night. He looks at Andrew with some kind of awful, simple reverence.

All Andrew has to do is take half a step forward and lean up a couple of inches. He starts to, too—he takes the step, feels the brush of Neil's legs against his knee, and then. Stops. So close, right in Neil's space, but— but Andrew can't kiss Neil right now, in his apartment, with Kevin in the bathroom, with at least one more movie to go, and then return to sitting side-by-side on his couch for hours, not touching at all, not looking at each other, not talking about it because there wouldn't be anything to talk about.

Andrew says, "I can't."

Instantly, without even a breath of hesitation, Neil's hands lift away from his face.

Andrew catches them, wraps his hands around Neil's forearms and brings them back. He doesn't know how to say *touch me*. *He doesn't have any practice*.

He doesn't have to, anyway. Neil cradles him again, slowly tips his forehead down to rest against Andrew's, and stays like that—his skin warm, his fingers gentle, his breath on Andrew's lips. He stays like that right through the door down the hall opening and closing, through Kevin breezing into the kitchen with Almond curled up in one arm. He stays like that like it's worth doing all on its own, like it doesn't matter what happens after, like it's enough. Like for maybe the first time in his fucking life, Andrew is enough.

The Norwegian movie has subtitles. Andrew spends too much of it trying to watch Neil out of the corner of his eye to follow along with any of the plot. Maybe it's more subtle than most disaster movies, or maybe it isn't; there's a big fucking wave that will destroy everything in its path, ebb, settle, and leave everyone with the rubble to deal with. So, it's about as subtle as a tidal wave can be. It hits a little close to home.

—

Neither of them comment on how Neil's arrival times swing earlier and earlier as time goes on. When he starts spending more than half of Andrew's time slot in the studio with him, Andrew finally moves himself into the larger studio space. There are benefits to the smaller one, but Andrew can only take so many brushes of hands and knees and feet before he goes out of his goddamn mind and does something he regrets. Like pushing Neil away hard, with sharp words and a cruel twist of the tongue.

He has the ammunition now. He thinks he knows where the soft spots are.

The larger space means there's more room to spread out, anyway. It's easier to keep track of the cups and wrappers and bags that Neil shows up with every night. It's easier to drag a third chair between them and share it as a footrest, with Neil's battered canvas sneakers bumping up against Andrew's thick, black soles. He still leaves most of the lights off, though—they're not in any danger of falling asleep when they're both there together, and Andrew appreciates the way the dim falls around them, making the room feel smaller, cloaking the untamed quirks of his mouth that break through when Neil talks.

Tonight it's hot, crispy egg rolls, lo mein, coffee that doesn't go well with the food *at all*, and Neil's confession that he'd had a 90s lesbian rock phase.

"k.d. lang," Neil says, like that's a complete argument.

"That's it?" Andrew asks. "That is your entire defense?"

"Do I need a defense?"

"For being a sixteen year old boy listening to *k.d. lang*? You at least need an explanation."

"My mom liked her. She had the CDs."

Neil had learned about music by way of a discman he'd snagged out of a lost & found and whatever CDs he could grab at the Goodwill when they hit a new town. It means, to Andrew's fond disgust, that Neil has things like *90s lesbian rock* opinions but no British punk knowledge.

"And it resonated?" Andrew asks drily.

"Well. Yeah, kind of. There was a lot of longing. I understood longing."

"Ah. The trail of broken hearts you left behind."

Neil gives him an arch look. "No."

"Just longing love songs for no reason," Andrew says, his tone even dryer.

"Yes," Neil says, very serious. "I liked that they'd found something. It wasn't something I'd felt, but... I don't know. Love songs aren't all the same. Some of it sounds like a nightmare, honestly, but some of them—I don't know. I think there's probably one that feels real for everyone."

"Bullshit. They're all phony as shit."

"They are not," Neil counters.

And that, well. Andrew straightens in his chair, presses some buttons, flips a switch, and swings the second mic towards Neil's face. Neil makes a ??? face at him, but Andrew ignores him in favor of watching the screens so he can get on the air when the last notes of the song trails off.

“Breaking news, insomniacs,” Andrew says into his own microphone. “I have Neil Josten here with me in the studio, and he has just made the most ludicrous assertion.”

Neil gets it quickly. Andrew thinks he gets most things quickly, though, so. Neil pulls himself a little closer to the mic and says, “Not all love songs are terrible.”

“Ludicrous.”

“Some of them are real.”

“Hmmm,” Andrew says. “Prove it.”

Neil’s eyes light up. He leans closer to the mic and says, low, silky, “I can do that.”

“Then do,” Andrew says, because he is his own worst enemy.

Neil has to lean over Andrew to get to the keyboard and the mouse. He’s so close that Andrew could pull him into his lap, could duck his head and bury his face against Neil’s pulse, could taste coffee and soy sauce on his tongue.

So, so fucked.

Neil finds what he’s looking for. He turns to Andrew’s mic, his lips all but pressed against the smooth curve of the surface, and says, “Here you go.” There’s going to be a little bit of scratch to it in the speakers of the people listening, the scrape of Neil’s mouth against soft fabric. He hits play and removes himself from Andrew’s space, settling back into his own chair.

Andrew doesn’t look at the screen to see what’s playing. He looks at Neil. He looks at the way Neil is looking right back at him. He looks at the raw, naked honesty on Neil’s face. The drums come in. And then the whistling starts.

*if I told you things I did before
told you how I used to be
would you go along with someone like me*

It’s either move or explode. Andrew pushes himself out of his chair and crosses the room in less than half a dozen steps, defying the usual length of his strides. Through the door. Hard right turn. Down the hall until he’s out of sight of the studio windows. The song keeps playing over the speakers above him, all around him, muted but insistent. *all we care about is talking, talking only me and you*. Just. Holy shit. What the fuck.

The speakers say, *no one will surprise me unless you do*, and Andrew thinks, what the fuck am I doing? He’s back into the studio in maybe half as many steps as he’d taken to get out, not running, just—the Earth is moving with him, rolling under his feet to bring him closer faster. Neil looks up when Andrew pushes through the door. There’s a war on his face, shadow and guilt and uncertainty. In a blink, Andrew is in front of him, has his hands in Neil’s messy hair, has Neil’s mouth open, Neil’s taste on his tongue, Neil, Neil, Neil, rushing

through him like a blush, thickening his blood, drumming on his heart until it trips over itself to keep up.

—

Young Folks
Peter Bjorn and John

—

Chapter 4

Kissing someone dramatically in the workplace is... well, Andrew wouldn't recommend it.

Because afterwards, what do you do? You awkwardly break away before the song he played for you ends, you keep your voice as level as possible and ignore the roughness in it when you say, into the microphone, into radios all over the city, "Okay, fine, he got one. Here's my counterpoint." And then you play Katy Perry.

And *then*, you stare at the flushed, beautiful boy you just kissed on the mouth because he played you a song. The room is too quiet. Andrew's skin is hot and on too tight. Neil is there—right there, within arm's reach—but not, at the same time. Andrew could reach out and grab him, but what would he be holding onto, really? Two kisses. One song. Some waffles. Neil's hands cradling his face with a tenderness Andrew that still can't believe he survived.

Neil opens his mouth, closes it, opens it, closes it. His brow pinches. He looks about as much at a loss as Andrew is. Or, he sees the wildness caged in Andrew's eyes and does, somehow, exactly what Andrew needs him to do: slumps into his chair and says, "What is this abomination of a song?"

What else are they supposed to do? Have a long conversation about feelings he hasn't mapped out for himself? Dry hump each other at their job? Start planning the wedding? Try to ghost someone he's sitting in the same room with?

Andrew responds to Neil's disgust by playing "Last Friday Night" next, then tucks his feet up under him and watches Neil deliver a scathing review of its irresponsible messages into the second mic. It's like being the only car at a drive-in theater. While a tornado rips through town. Neil says, "And *furthermore*..."

Andrew feels the tires lift off the ground, just a few inches.

They pass the rest of the hours the way they usually do—*talking only me and you, talking only me and you, talking only me and you*—while Andrew's brain struggles to fight its way out of the whirlpool Neil tossed it into in the span of a few seconds and a couple of clicks of a computer mouse. There's no more kissing, and neither of them make a whole lot of direct eye contact, but things aren't *weird*. Andrew just doesn't know how to translate what happened, and he knows Neil doesn't, either.

There are certain possibilities now, in the light of whatever wordless confessions they just made, but they all feel slippery to him. Every time he thinks he's grasped a handful of one—Neil draped on his chest napping, the two of them holding hands across a restaurant table, kissing in the middle of the dance floor at a dark club, putting his head in Neil's lap so that Neil can play with his hair—it skitters away, any lengths of it beyond that glimpse lost to the void of Andrew's mind. The idea of asking Neil on a *date* right now is. Horrifying. Unbearable. Truly, truly awful.

The idea of walking away is awful too. Actually, even worse. Whatever happened, if he doesn't—if he doesn't do something about it or say something about it or somehow communicate that it could happen again. *Should* happen again. That he *wants* it to happen again—then what? Will all of that possibility be lost? If he doesn't—if he doesn't do something *now*, do something *tonight* to turn the half-step into a full step, there may not be another opening.

Stepping through is terrifying, but stepping back feels like grief. Something in his stomach curdles and tries to claw its way out of his throat when he thinks about it; leaving sometime during Neil's shift; walking away; not talking about it again because there's nothing to talk about.

So, when Neil's slot ends, when Robin and Renee come in to take the morning commute hours, no longer even a little surprised to see Andrew still there, Andrew tells Neil, "I'm buying you waffles."

And he does. They've only done this a few times, but they already have a usual place. Usual orders. He dips his bacon in syrup, even though Neil looks a little bit surprised every time he does it. He watches Neil drink two glasses of orange juice. He insists on paying, the way he has before, because Neil brings him shit every damn day of the week. And in the parking lot after, he leans against the driver's side door of his car and hooks a finger through one of Neil's belt loops, tugging him closer.

Neil comes with his hands shoved into his back pockets, easy, pliant and warm, the weight of him reassuring when Andrew pulls it into his chest. Andrew asks, "yes or no?" even as his hands slide from Neil's ribs to his back, even as he shifts so that Neil's leg can slip between his.

It feels like a first kiss. It is the first one they've had the time and space to linger in, for Andrew to be as lazy or hungry as he wants, to close his eyes and let himself eat Neil alive, just a little, splay his hands out on Neil's back and memorize the lines of him. The side of the car is cool and smooth, curving with his spine. A little residual dew soaks through Andrew's shirt, a welcome respite from the heat burning through the rest of him.

It's just so fucking easy. The way Neil's mouth opens for him. The way Neil's body falls into him when Andrew drags both hands down to his hips and pulls him tight. The way Neil's hands never move from his own pockets, never put themselves anywhere Andrew might have to worry about them. But Andrew wants them...somewhere. Wants to be touched, a little, wants Neil wrapped around him, here, in the fucking parking lot, in the still-gentle light of the morning sun. He tugs Neil's hands out of their pockets and pulls them up and over his shoulders, lets them go and tries to talk himself out of sliding his own hands to fit where they used to be.

The shift closes the last couple of inches between them. He feels Neil stretch his arms out over the roof of the car and cross them—carefully, Andrew can tell, but Andrew would take a fucking belt sander to the paintjob if it meant getting closer. If it meant his hands could roam this freely, could trace the play of muscle under Neil's shirt, be surrounded by all the heat of him.

Andrew drags his palms slowly, over Neil's ribs, thumbs brushing his stomach; up to flatten against his back and pull him closer; down, until his fingers wrap just under the curve of Neil's ass. He kisses him, slow and sweet, harder, fucking ravenous, until Neil breaks away and buries a yawn against the collar of Andrew's shirt.

"Sorry," Neil mumbles, trying to suppress another yawn.

Andrew kisses his neck, his cheekbone, the side of his head, and says, "Go home. Get some sleep."

"See you later?"

"Later," Andrew agrees.

It takes three more yawns and at least a dozen more kisses pressed to Neil's shoulder, the skin behind his ear, his temple, before Neil finally straightens and makes his way to his own car.

—

At home, he peels himself out of his clothes and steps into the hottest shower he can stand, takes himself in hand and jerks off to a wildly spinning kaleidoscope of thoughts of Neil, of being touched by Neil, of taking Neil apart, of having Neil's mouth on him, of feeling the way he did today again, *Neil, Neil, Neil* and—and himself, there, a part of it, able to be touched, *wanting* to be touched, asking for it and getting it and taking nothing but pleasure in it.

After, he falls into bed, spent, emptied out in the best way, nothing but static in his mind and his body, a gentle hum that comes from somewhere inside of him and lulls him into hours of deep, heavy, dreamless sleep.

—

Wymack's house is tucked on the outskirts of the suburbs, close enough to everything that DoorDash still delivers, but far enough that his yard backs onto depths of the landscape that haven't yet been developed out of existence. Andrew has spent some of his best hours here, settled in next to Wymack's fire pit, splitting a bottle of scotch with the old man, letting the crickets do all the talking.

For all the shit people talk about how anti-social he is, Andrew has never missed a single Wymack barbeque. Or a holiday party. Or turned down even one invitation to come stare into the flames until he becomes a part of them. He's the one who spent three hours in the July heat last year helping Wymack hang the hundreds of feet of string lights, handing over length after length of thick black cable, careful not to break any of the gleaming glass bulbs.

He's the one that shows up first this time, hours early, with half a trunk full of free-range meat and twenty pounds of wood pellets for Wymack's smoker. Kevin will wander in at some point with a small mountain of vegetables. The others will bring a bizarre assortment of sides. Matt and Dan will bring...Neil. Andrew has no fucking clue what Neil will bring, other than himself.

Himself is enough. Andrew has spent much of the last week kissing Neil in parking lots and breezeways and benches that have only just shaken off their dew. He's not tired of it. He's not sure he could get tired of the unabashed pleasure Neil takes in being close to him, the way Neil's breath hitches when Andrew lets his hands creep up under Neil's shirts, how natural it feels to press together and intertwine.

Andrew isn't sure how much more he can take of limiting himself to public spaces. But he's less sure that he can handle Neil against him somewhere private, beneath him, touching him with all the adoration of those still-healing hands. It's the chance of someone wandering past that keeps him from chasing the quiet sounds Neil makes until he can conduct them like an orchestra.

It's not an idle wanting, this thing with Neil. He's not an opportunity to be seized, *carpe coitus*, some nameless boy who Andrew thinks can shut up and follow instructions for fifteen minutes. It swells in him—when Neil is there, when he isn't, when they're kissing until Neil's mouth doesn't taste like anything separate from Andrew at all, when they're five feet away from each other in the studio and quietly, haltingly trying to put the darkest things they've ever felt into words.

There's a lot to do to get the smoker prepped and the grill going and the meat seasoned and marinated, so Andrew doesn't have a chance to obsess about Neil at all until well after Kevin shows up and starts working on the vegetables in the kitchen. Wymack grabs a couple of cold beers from the fridge and hands one to Andrew. They lean against the railing of the porch, Andrew in the deepest corner of it so that he can keep an eye on the road and mentally prepare himself once he eventually he sees Matt's enormous blue truck cresting the horizon.

"So, Andrew," Wymack starts.

"No," Andrew interrupts. "Whatever you are going to say, the answer is no."

Wymack, immune to Andrew's bullshit through long years of experience, ignores him. "I got some emails about your show the other night."

That could go a lot of ways. Andrew takes another sip and waits him out.

Wymack says, "You had Neil on."

Ah. There it is. "Briefly," Andrew confirms. He keeps his eyes on Wymack, watching the play of amusement and frustration and caution on his face.

"Well, they loved it. I got almost two dozen emails begging for more."

"It takes very little to make most people happy," Andrew says drily.

"Happy people spend money. Just think about it."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Oh look," Wymack booms cheerfully. "There's Matt's truck."

Andrew doesn't even pretend not to immediately turn and see whether or not the ludicrous behemoth is actually cresting the road. It is. He has a chest full of butterflies and they're all alight, battering themselves against his heart and ribs in a frenzied bid for freedom.

Wymack can smile into his bottle all he wants. It won't stop the way Andrew feels at the sight of the truck, the dust billowing around its tires, the unreal waft and wane of heat that makes it seem to shimmer in and out of existence.

"Do not," Andrew warns.

Wymack grins broadly, widening it in direct proportion to the narrowing of Andrew's eyes. He touches a hand to his chest and says, his voice all fake astonishment, "Why, Andrew, I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

—

Kevin and Neil get into a bitter and brutal cornhole competition that turns into a whole tournament. Andrew resists for all of three rounds of Neil looking over at him wistfully before he breaks, downs the rest of his beer, and wades into combat.

The first time Andrew overshoots the hole, Neil turns a wicked smile on him and starts shit-talking him to death.

"It's sad that all you have is sports," Andrew tells Neil when he's finally done running his mouth. "It will never love you back and it will inevitably trade you in for a younger model when you get old and gross—" he pauses, looks at Neil's Crocs, his ripped, light-wash jeans, the copper freckles scattered across the backs of his arms that almost taste like spice when Andrew runs his mouth over them, and clarifies, "*more* gross."

"Andrew," Dan chides. "Be nice."

"You're just jealous," Neil says, ignoring the interruption. He sticks a leg out and shows Andrew all the hideous angles of the rubber foot-mitten thing he's calling a shoe. "They're very comfortable."

"So is eating Cheetos in your underwear, but we don't do *that* in public either."

"Wow," Neil says. "I feel like I just learned so much about you."

Andrew scoffs. "I learned nothing. I already knew you were mentally impaired and had terrible taste."

"*Andrew*," Dan says.

Neil waves her off. "Tell you what," he says. "I got you one of those Mexican hot chocolate cupcakes you like so much. If you win, I'll give it to you. If you lose, I will eat it myself. In front of you."

Andrew raises an eyebrow at him. There are far worse things he can imagine than watching Neil lick frosting off of his lips and fingers. It takes a couple of beats, but Neil gets it. And

flushes. And misses his next shot.

To Neil's delight and Kevin's annoyance, Andrew wins. He wants that cupcake. He wants to smear the frosting on Neil's lips and lick it off.

They all eat, grabbing spots on the chairs around the fire pit, at the folding tables he'd helped Wymack set up, at the actual patio table on the deck. The group is uncharacteristically quiet while they eat, everyone too busy trying to fit as much food into themselves as possible before their bodies get the message that they're full. It's as peaceful as this circus ever gets. No sarcasm, no snark, no lectures, no pep talks. Just heaping plates and the crackle and smell of campfire.

There's a blur of eating and then a blur of cleaning up and then a blur of a bunch of people talking off for a walk while the low-slung sun still hangs in the sky. Andrew's empty plate disappears, as do half the people at his table, and then he blinks and sees Neil falling into the seat next to him, golden in the glow of the bulbs above. Neil's dark, dyed hair mostly absorbs the light, but there's a fiery gleam at his roots that Andrew wants to dig his hands into.

"I hate your hair," Andrew tells him.

Neil smiles, but it looks sad. He says, "Me too."

Andrew knows this look. He hates it. If it was just them, he could reach out, cup his hand around the back of Neil's neck, and squeeze until the tension loosens. "Hey," he says sharply. "It's nothing a good haircut can't fix."

"Oh?" Neil asks. And Andrew knows. He knows a little about the father. He knows enough to extrapolate a life on the run, the reasons Neil hides behind the hair dye and the contacts. Nothing can fix any of that.

Under the cover of shadow, Andrew reaches out and rubs his thumb against the seam of Neil's jeans. It's weirdly intimate, this conservative touch—or maybe it's the way Neil props his elbow on the table and shields them from view. His upper body angles towards Andrew, curving to keep this moment between them. Secret. He casts Andrew mostly in shadow, catches the light from the lights on the peaks of his profile.

"Come inside with me," Andrew says, his voice low. His thumbnail scrapes along the thick, textured fold of denim. "We'll take a razor to it."

"Deal," Neil says.

Inside, Andrew leads him to the laundry room and pushes Neil up against the back of the door. Neil ducks to kiss him, but Andrew gets both hands into Neil's hair and tugs him down until his chin is touching his chest.

"Um," Neil says, muffled. "I thought that was a euphemism."

"Weird euphemism," Andrew tells him. He moves Neil's head, angling it better towards the light so he can twist the length around his fingers and get a good look at what's growing in.

Auburn. Deep red with golden glints.

“Does Wymack keep his razors in his laundry room? Because otherwise this is a little strange.”

“Why this color?” Andrew asks. “The dark brown.”

“It covers the red well.”

“Is that what you want?”

Neil hesitates. His inhale catches and sticks in his chest. Andrew gives him a count of three and then, when nothing is forthcoming, uses his hands to raise Neil’s head enough to meet his eyes. “Neil.”

“My...father.”

“Is dead,” Andrew reminds him.

“It’s his hair.”

Andrew considers this. Neil had told him about the eyes, that they were almost the same as his father’s, that if he looks at himself for too long in the mirror he forgets that it’s actually him on the other side. “Fuck him,” Andrew says concisely.

Neil gives him that look, that stiff-upper-lift almost-smile that looks for all the world like he’s fine and breaks Andrew wide open. Because he knows better. Because he knows Neil.

“I will cut it for you tomorrow,” Andrew says. “And dye it. You decide the color.”

“What do you think?” Neil asks.

“I think you do not need to hide from a dead man.”

Quietly, Neil says, “Is he really dead if I look just like him?”

“Yes.” Andrew slides his hands onto Neil’s face, framing it between his palms, careful not to press too hard against the scar on his jaw. “Yes. He is really dead.”

Neil smiles weakly at him. He turns his head enough to kiss the tender skin at Andrew’s wrist, a soft brush of lips that threatens his undoing. “Is this your seductive talk?”

Andrew raises an eyebrow. “Do I need seductive talk?”

He smothers the cheeky *yes* Neil starts to give him, kisses the smile off of his face, shoves Neil back against the door when he presses off it to plaster himself to Andrew. It isn’t until later, when they’ve helped Wymack clean up, when Andrew has dismissed Matt and Dan and driven Neil home himself, that Neil says, “Maybe my real color?”

Andrew goes straight to the store, while the rich, coppery color of Neil's hair is fresh in his mind. He buys three boxes, trying to match it as closely as possible. He buys color remover. He buys deep conditioner. He buys hair scissors, since he hasn't used the ones he has for years. At home, he lines it all up on his bathroom counter and thinks about it for hours while he stares up at his bedroom ceiling.

Neil turns up at Andrew's apartment mid-morning, self-conscious in jeans that were obviously made within the last year, hair curling just this side of damp, and a KFOX 93.9 t-shirt identical to the twelve in Andrew's dresser that have been cut into muscle tanks for the gym. Neil looks a little nervous, a little unsure, a little out of place, and then he sees Andrew and does this grotesquely annoying thing where he lights up. His body language loosens. All of the uncertainty falls away. He says, "Hi," in that soft voice he only ever uses when they're alone.

So, Andrew kisses him. He fists a hand in Neil's shirt and pulls him close, groping to close and lock the door blindly. He'd meant to wait for this, to prove himself wrong in his certainty that he'd have Neil on his back within minutes of closing the door behind him, but... But it's not just him, is it? Neil is the one who steps into him faster than he can pull. Neil is the one who carefully cups his hands around Andrew's head and bites at Andrew's bottom lip.

It's weird—in Andrew's head, he wants Neil, has to manage the wanting, has to dole out indulgence to himself in little portions. In the flesh, he thinks Neil matches his desire. That Neil stumbles over it the way Andrew hasn't ever really allowed himself to, finds it in his path and throws himself at it head-on, climbs right up instead of trying to go around.

It's an easy turn and five steps back to reach the couch. Neil's legs hit it first. He almost topples, but Andrew is there, close, tightens the arm he has around Neil's waist and uses his other hand to lift him off of his feet and take them both down onto the cushions. The kiss is slow and intense. They break apart and come back together and break apart and come back together while Neil pulls himself into the right position and Andrew works one of his legs between Neil's and braces enough that he can spread his hand on Neil's ribs and feel the rapid beat of Neil's heart against his palm.

It's just. Good. The heat of Neil beneath him, the strength, the play of muscle in Neil's thighs as he belatedly toes his shoes off. The hands in Andrew's hair, the way Neil's chest presses against his own whenever Neil drags in a deep breath. Everything is restless, short, halting movements that bring them into contact again and again. Neil's back comes off the couch and Andrew pushes his hand into the loosened fall of his shirt, tracing muscle and bone and texture he knows is scars.

Belatedly, Andrew pulls back and says, "Hi," just far enough away to see Neil's reddened mouth curve and the blue in his eyes glow.

Neil uses the hand in Andrew's hair to pull him back and kisses him softly and sweetly until Andrew makes an impatient noise and pushes closer, deepens it. The space between them vanishes, a breath at a time, when Neil presses up and closer, when Andrew presses down

and harder, until they're so entangled that Andrew isn't sure where either of them begins and ends.

Neil moves against him with that athletic grace that infuses everything he does and makes Andrew want to strip him down and fold him like origami. It sets Andrew's head to spinning.

Andrew wants and *wants* and has—he has Neil right here, the lines of him matching up to Andrew's, his breath as shallow, his shirt up around his ribs, his dick half hard against Andrew's hip every time they rub together. He could reach down. He could—he could do so many things. There are so many possibilities that they become impossibilities. He could get Neil off, with his hands or his mouth, could take him apart slowly until he's a wreck, could chase him dirty and fast to the finish line. But what if he picks the wrong thing? What if he picks wrong and it's the only time? All of the horizons shatter in front of him and Andrew is jerked to a stop. He recovers, kisses Neil again, slides his hand over Neil's hip, and jerks to another stop. This time, when he goes back for more, Neil diverts him with a kiss to his jaw, tracing the line of it to the hinge, pressing another kiss into its hollow.

Against his skin, Neil mumbles "It's a lot," in a way that's more of an agreement than an observation. Andrew closes his eyes tightly.

"I—" he starts.

Neil kisses his neck, his collarbone. He kisses Andrew's chin, then does it again despite the murder Andrew opens his eyes to threaten.

"I'm nervous about the haircut," Neil mumbles, his lips buzzing against Andrew's skin. "Tell me you know what you're doing?"

Andrew buries his face against Neil's neck and breathes, pacing himself to the rise and fall of Neil's chest. He mumbles, "I always know what I'm doing," while Neil mouths down his neck. His fingers stroke gently against Andrew's scalp. His laugh swirls over Andrew's skin.

—

"One of my foster sisters cut hair," Andrew explains as he prods at Neil to sit up straighter in the chair. "She taught me how to do it."

"I could see you as a hairstylist," Neil muses. "People putting their lives in your hands and telling you all of their deep, dark secrets."

"Have we met?" Andrew asks flatly.

"Yes," Neil says. "We have."

"Stop talking," Andrew commands. "Do you care what I do to this?" He gestures vaguely at 'this,' the mess of what had been Neil's hair before Andrew had destroyed it on the couch.

"Nope," Neil says. "I trust you."

Andrew ignores whatever feeling it is that crawls its way up his chest at that. Instead, he digs his hands into Neil's hair and watches himself in the mirror as he works through it. Neil has been adding color rather than bleaching, so the hair could be in worse shape. It's just a bit dry, a little staticky.

"Color remover first," Andrew tells Neil's reflection. "Then we'll see about dye. And then the cut."

The worst thing about it is the way Neil tips his head back into Andrew's hands without hesitation, closes his eyes, and rests easily in that trust Andrew has gotten from so few people in his life.

The second worst thing is that the process involves a lot of rinsing. And shampooing. And then more rinsing. Which means that Andrew sits in the chair with his back to the shower and listens as the water hits Neil's skin and drips down over him. With his eyes closed, Andrew can just about hear the shape of him in the patterns of the sound. Neil keeps up a fairly steady stream of conversation, a third of which is asking about twenty times if he really needs to rinse and shampoo this much. The answer is yes. He does.

It's an hour of painful awareness, and then Andrew holds out a towel with his eyes resolutely averted from the sight of Neil's wet, bare arm, water running in rivulets over the stretch of muscle when Neil reaches out to get it.

Or, maybe the worst thing is the actual cutting, once Neil's hair has been dried and re-dyed and curls, damp, around his ears. It's the comb and the scissors, Neil loose and relaxed even while Andrew wields blades around his throat, even though Andrew knows he's been cut before. It's agonizing in a tremulous way, Andrew's hands in Neil's hair, shearing away years of fear and facade.

When he finishes, Andrew sets his scissors and comb carefully onto the bathroom counter and watches in the mirror as Neil stares himself down. The hair makes his eyes even more of a shock. It brings a warmth to his skin, a burnished copper that sparks next to the cool blue. Neil meets his own gaze steadily, a determined set to the shape of his jaw and the flat line of his mouth.

It's a very long minute before Neil's eyes lift to meet Andrew's in the mirror.

"What do you think?" Neil asks.

"Honestly?" Andrew asks.

Neil nods.

"There is no way your father was this hot."

It takes Neil a minute to get it. His eyes widen, then narrow. He blinks. He opens his mouth, closes it. "I—" Neil says.

"Especially now," Andrew says. "Decomposing bodies are not attractive."

“Well—” Neil starts.

Andrew throws up a hand to stop him, but allows it when Neil reaches back for it, slips his fingers between Andrew’s, and squeezes.

“Stop right there,” Andrew says. “You win at macabre humor. 10%.”

“10%?”

“Of my respect. Let’s go argue over what food to order.”

They end up on the couch. Andrew pulls Neil close and arranges him on his chest so that he can rub his fingers over the short, fresh hair and toy with the longer strands. The cut exposes more of Neil’s neck, the little knob at the start of his spine, his delicate, pink ear that Andrew is horny for because everything about Neil makes his blood roar greedily in his veins. Neil wears it self-consciously though, a little stiff in the shoulders, bringing his hand up over and over in an aborted instinct to touch it.

When Neil leaves, eventually, after two movies and more kissing and one halting conversation about what made his mother grab him and run, Andrew picks up his phone and DMs every single person they know with one decisive sentence: *mention his hair and I will kill you.*

—

Andrew waits until Nicky’s Facetime call has rung through three times before he answers it. He’s been missing Nicky, but there’s no reason Nicky has to know that.

“Andrew!” Nicky says when his face fills the screen. “My favorite baby cousin.”

Andrew raises an eyebrow at him.

“Don’t tell Aaron,” Nicky faux-whispers. “He’d be crushed.”

“Does he believe this routine?”

“Every time,” Nicky says cheerfully. “How are you? How are things?”

“Things are fine.”

“Oh?” Nicky’s face does that thing it does when he thinks he’s being the picture of innocence. “Nothing new at all to report?”

“What did you hear?”

“Noooothing,” Nicky says, his eyelashes fluttering. “Except *maybe* a little bit that you were tormenting the new guy.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t tell them that you were probably flirting.”

Andrew closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose tightly.

He can still hear the grin in Nicky’s voice, even if he can’t see it. “Allison told me you called him a pathetic failure. Dan said you told him he was gross and unloveable and mentally deficient.”

“Yep,” Andrew says. “I hate him.”

“Uh huh. Sure. Do you have any pictures? No one else does.”

“No. He is squirrely.”

“No wonder you like him.”

Andrew glares pointedly into the phone.

Softer, Nicky says, “You do like him, don’t you?”

Is ‘like’ the right word? You can like an ice cream flavor. You can like a social media post. This is something else. This is something that inhabits him, has colonized him, races around in his veins until he’s dizzy.

Andrew says, “I suppose,” with every ounce of apathy he can muster.

Nicky’s face gets a lot larger when he leans closer to the camera lens. His voice shifts into its rarest tone, sincere but very, very serious. He says, “Good. They wanted me to get you to back off, but fuck them all. You hold on tight and don’t let go. Do you hear me?”

“Yeah,” Andrew says quietly. “I hear you.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

TW: references to nausea

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Andrew pushes his chair down the length of the desk and lifts the phone off of its cradle, stilling the red light flashing next to it. “KFOX 93.9,” he says.

“Ohmygod,” the voice at the other end of the line says. “Oh my god, is this Andrew?”

“It’s 3:15 in the morning,” Andrew says. “Were you expecting someone else?”

“No!” The laugh at the other end of the line is tipsy, Andrew thinks. College-aged. Probably heading home from doing college-aged-people things. She says, “I’m just, like, a big fan?”

“Great,” Andrew says. “What is your name?”

“Cass!” she says, bubbly, young, loving life. Andrew’s stomach sinks like lead, dropping to his toes in a rush that makes his head spin. Silence roars in and around his ears like wind through a canyon.

“Um?” she says. This time she sounds very far away. “Andrew? Are you there?”

The next thing he knows, the handset is being lifted gently from his grip. The cord isn’t very long, so Neil ends up leaning across Andrew’s lap—Andrew inhales a deep breath of Neil’s detergent and maybe aftershave and then leans forward enough to rest his forehead against Neil’s side.

“Uh huh,” Neil is saying. He’s tucked the handset against his ear, braced on the desk with one hand, and is writing something down with the other. “No problem,” he says. “We’ll play it in the next half hour or so.”

A pause.

“Yeah, it is,” Neil says.

Another pause.

“Yeah, thanks, you too.”

The handset clicks into its cradle with a soft noise. Neil tosses the pen onto the desk and turns towards Andrew, cups the back of his head with one hand, rubs between Andrew’s shoulder blades with the other. He doesn’t ask if Andrew’s okay. He doesn’t ask what happened.

Andrew wraps his arms around Neil's hips and buries his face against the front of Neil's soft, clean-smelling shirt. He keeps the drape of his hold loose, but presses his nose closely against Neil's sternum until he can't see anything else.

It's weird. There has been very little in Andrew's life that he could reach for without getting bitten one way or another. This seems... too easy. He wants to be wary, but he's too desperate for it. Whatever else Andrew may feel for Neil, this is maybe something existential—they're pouring water onto parched, sun-scorched soil. Andrew isn't quite sure what to do with the flood of it, the sheer quantity. He takes a breath, and then another. A third. A deep fourth that he doesn't let go until Neil exhales too.

After a long moment, Neil says, "The Jonas Brothers."

Andrew's answer comes out garbled against Neil's shirt. "What about them?"

"She wanted you to play a song. She thinks you'll like it."

"Did you tell her?" Andrew asks.

"That you secretly like the Jonas Brothers? I did not."

Andrew huffs. "Admitting that some of their songs are catchy is not the same as *secretly liking* them."

"Sure," Neil says. "Keep telling yourself that."

Andrew looks up, just so he'll be able to see Neil smiling at him.

"Hey," Neil says. He cups his hands around the sides of Andrew's face gently. They're close enough that Neil's body is a sheer vertical plane. Andrew has to tip his head all the way back and prop his chin against Neil's chest to be able to see him, all rust and shadow in the dim light. Neil suggests, "Coffee?"

"Sure," Andrew says. It could be bracing. And a change of subject.

"Great," Neil says, rubbing his fingers lightly against Andrew's scalp. "Give me a lot of cream and no sugar."

Andrew is still in the kitchen when the next song in the queue plays and finishes. He was scheduled to do a little stretch of talking here, but he assumes Neil will just play the next song. Instead, Neil's voice fills the space around him, crackling in high fidelity over the speakers in the ceiling. It's his three a.m. voice, a little huskier than his daytime voice, a little bit of a yawn in it. Andrew feels it shiver through him all the way to its bones.

"Hello, insomniacs and shift workers," Neil says. "This is Neil. Andrew is busy making me coffee, so you and I can chat. Sometimes, when you're listening to the music he's playing for you, we talk about the worst things we've ever done. This is your invitation to join the confessional. Call us and tell us about the worst thing *you've* ever done. If it could get you arrested, maybe think twice. Andrew and I don't snitch, but the phone records might. Here's

‘Cool,’ by the Jonas Brothers. Thanks for the request, listener. You have more in common with your boy than you think.”

“Yeah, uh, ha.” The caller laughs nervously. “I’ve never told anyone about this before, but, um. I bought almost every single one of my college papers online.”

“Shocking,” Neil draws. “And with so many tragic real world consequences. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Yeah, so—wait, can you maybe change my voice when you broadcast this?”

“No,” Andrew says.

“Fine, whatever. No, you know what, I can’t do it. Sorry.”

“Okay, it’s me again. I changed my mind, I *can* do this. Here I go. One time, on a family vacation, I peed on my brother’s girlfriend in the middle of the night. I blamed it on being blackout drunk, but that was a lie. I hated her. I did it on purpose.”

“Wow,” Neil says.

“Verdict?” Andrew asks him.

“No, you know what? Good for you. It’s simple, free, straightforward, and probably really effective. Good job caller.”

“Neil,” Andrew says drily. “I know you would burst into flames if you stepped foot in a church, but generally the point of confession is penance and attrition, not an enthusiastic two-thumbs up for pissing on someone.”

“Guys,” the caller says. A man, middle-aged, booze-drowsy drawl. “I know you’ll feel me on this one.”

“Go ahead,” Neil says.

“Look, I send a lot of dick pics. My female friends tell me I should be ashamed, but—ladies, it’s just a dick. It’s not a big deal.”

“No, you suck,” Neil says disgustedly. “Don’t be gross.”

“Completely gross,” Andrew agrees.

“So, let me get this straight,” the caller says. “Cheating and pissing on people is okay, but sending pictures of a good-looking dick is not?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Andrew hits the button to disconnect the call and turns back to see Neil leaning into the microphone. “New plan, everyone: if you get an unsolicited dick pic, send them back an unsolicited picture of your last bowel movement.”

“Colon health is very important,” Andrew adds.

“Yeah,” Neil says, “it’s always good to get a second opinion. Stay on top of your stool, guys.”

—

“I have a bad one,” the caller announces matter-of-factly. “But I’m not sorry.”

“You have our attention,” Andrew says.

“Yeah, so. My ex-husband got this tattoo on his bicep of the American flag, like, ripped all to hell after a battle, and he wanted it to say ‘your hero’ — and no, before you ask, he did not spend a single moment in an armed force of any variety, unless you count his douchebag paintball friends. This was late in our marriage and I obviously already hated him, so when he showed me the design before he got it, I did not tell him that they’d spelled ‘your’ wrong. It was the y-o-u-‘-r-e instead. Apparently someone eventually told him, because he asked if I’d noticed. At the divorce lawyer’s office. It was really big, too. We hadn’t signed the papers yet, so I lied and said I hadn’t realized.”

Neil starts laughing so hard that he has to push himself away from his mic. His chair spins him halfway around, but Andrew can still see him burying his face in his hands.

“You have broken Neil,” Andrew tells the caller. “So I think we can call that a job well done.”

—

By now, they’re regulars at the waffle place. The waitress, a white-haired force of a woman named Sharron, smiles her luminous gap-toothed smile at them often, calls them “boys” as a collective noun, and responds to Neil’s more exhaustion-fueled absurdities with a pause, a half-shrug, and an, “Uh huh, honey.” Once, to Neil’s delirious delight, she draws a little devil face with whipped cream on his pancakes.

They’re regulars in the parking lot afterwards, too, kissing with sweet, sticky mouths until one of them starts yawning and can’t stop or until Andrew dozes off with his arms around Neil’s ribs and his face against Neil’s shoulder and once—only once, but Andrew intends to hang onto it for as long as he lives—until Neil got irritated with Andrew for not answering the questions Neil was asking him. In French.

So, these days, Andrew tumbles into bed mid-morning with kiss-sore lips and the taste of blueberries in his mouth and half of a hard-on that he's usually too tired to do anything about.

It feels delicate on one hand, but as solid as steel on the other. Precarious for how precious it is; unshakeable for how unflinching it is every time Andrew leans any weight into it. It's everything. It's impossible. Neil is impossible.

Neil is right there, every time.

—

The Blueberry Festival is held every year on a hellmouth. Everything is, unsurprisingly, blue. Andrew would give just about anything to Violet Beauregarde his ass out of there—except that, as they drift from booth to booth before their shifts, Neil's tongue gets bluer and bluer and tastes sweeter and sweeter when Andrew tugs him down for quick, stolen kisses in moments that feel private for no good reason—when they stumble upon an isolated niche, after taste-testing weird candied blueberries, in line to guess how many blueberries are in a jar, after Andrew swats away the dangly blueberry earrings Neil is holding up to his unpierced ears.

His fingers get bluer, too. Andrew can't stop looking at the smoky stains where they're interlaced with Andrew's white, untainted fingers, still clean because Neil had gotten around Andrew's refusal to handle the berries by feeding them to him.

"I'm on air in fifteen minutes," Andrew says quellingly when Neil starts moving towards a stand brimming with pies.

"And I suppose you want to get there early."

"I am very punctual."

"Fine," Neil says. He presses a quick kiss to Andrew's temple. "I'll try to find something you'll like."

"It's pie," Andrew reminds him. "Just buy big ones."

He lingers a little to kiss Neil, steps close and settles his hands on Neil's ribs, tips his head back and feels the air move around him, the wide-open, small-town charm of kissing a boy in public, where people can see. The world doesn't end. No one says a goddamn word about them, thinks it's weird or extraordinary, has an opinion on the weave of Neil's blue fingers into Andrew's blonde hair.

They part, Andrew shoving Neil away and pretending like the open affection in Neil's smile doesn't pull at him like a magnet.

The sidewalk gives way easily beneath Andrew's feet as he journeys back to the booth where the station has been set up. The sun is putting itself to bed, yawning in rose and aubergine across the sky. Andrew weaves around a group of giddy teenagers, patiently paces himself behind an elderly couple shuffling down the street, and ducks between a booth selling

blueberry jerky and one selling light-up and inflatable kids toys. The station booth finally comes into view on the opposite corner, just across from a bungee trampoline place packed with kids. Andrew steps off the curb and then stops abruptly when a guy on a bicycle with a DoorDash bag strapped to the back almost runs him over.

Annoyed, Andrew takes a step backwards. The bicycle bell dings obnoxiously and way too late, more of a censure for Andrew almost walking into him than anything else. Andrew scowls after him and then there is a sharp, hot pain in the back of his head and everything goes black.

He blinks his eyes open and sees nothing but the fine grain of the sidewalk. His ears are ringing. His hands are scraped raw from concrete. He reaches for the ache in the back of his head and comes away with wet fingers that blur scarlett when he looks at them. Disoriented, he rolls over and is hit immediately with a violent, vicious roll of his stomach. The light is too bright—blindingly bright. He closes his eyes against it desperately, but it seeps through his eyelids. He squeezes them shut more tightly and it finally goes blessedly dark.

Someone is pulling at him. Andrew tries to open his eyes again, but the light is too intense. Organs that shouldn't mind react in violent revolt, surging and rearranging, sending a wave of cold nausea through him. He tries to knock away the invading hand but misses, making contact with something that's probably a face. Someone curses. Everything wobbles.

He's half-upright, with hands propped under his shoulders, lifting him. Andrew says, "No," and "Stop it," but no one listens. He throws his head back to try to break someone's nose with his skull. There's a satisfying crunch, an almost incomprehensible flare of pain, and then, more darkness. Andrew tries desperately to keep his eyes open, to force them to confront the light and make sense of the shapes around him, but he can't. They close despite how badly he wants them to stay open; every time they do, Andrew loses things—time, his voice, control over what happens to his body. It—

People are holding him down. His wrists are pinned to the ground. There's a foot on his ankle, maybe. Andrew tries to kick out with his free leg but doesn't hit anything. If he could just figure out when they were grabbing him, maybe he could stop it. But it just happens, changes from one moment to the next. There are no hands and then there are hands. You got hit in the head, Andrew tells himself. He tries kicking with his free leg again, but still doesn't make contact.

"It's *me*," a voice says. "Calm the fuck down."

Then someone is shouting, "—the fuck do you think you're doing?" and the hands withdraw. *Neil*, Andrew thinks. That's Neil's voice, but different from the way Andrew usually hears it. All of its rasp is sharpened and lethal, the vowels twisting into some bastard of English and New Englishish, abrupt and furious. Andrew tries to open his eyes, but there's a street light or a minor sun above him screaming sickly yellow light that makes his head throb. Neil is saying, "He obviously doesn't want it from *you*. Back the fuck off." There are no hands anymore, only Neil's barbed, icy voice. Something unclenches in Andrew's chest, just a little. The lights and shapes imprinted inside of his eyelids fade to black.

When his senses break through the surface again, everything is quieter. Nothing is pinned, no one is touching him. The ground beneath him is hard, too hot, gritty, unyielding. Everything hurts, but he can deal with that. He flexes his fingers. They're free. He shifts a foot. No one stops him. Neil's voice is close, flat and uncompromising. He's saying, "I know. Just give him a minute. He's been coming in and out."

Andrew gropes towards the sound. His hands hit fabric, then air, then fabric again. He manages to mumble, "Neil." It's not much, but it seems to be enough. A hand finds his — warm and steady and scarred and familiar in a way that Andrew can cling to with more than just his flesh.

"Andrew," Neil says, winding their fingers together, "some asshole threw a bottle of beer and it hit you. The paramedics are here. Can I let them help you?"

"Mrgh," Andrew says, hopefully communicating his cautious agreement. He clears his throat and tries again. "Neil?"

"I'll stay with you the whole time," Neil tells him. "I won't let anything happen. I promise."

Words are hard. Andrew nods. The abrupt, awful pain of it starts to pull him back under the surface.

"Are you—" a woman's voice starts to say.

Neil cuts her off. "Yes."

"I didn't—"

"Hey," Wymack interjects. "You really want to try taking him alone?"

The present drifts away, but Andrew doesn't feel the same sense of panic. Neil is there. Neil is holding on. Neil won't let go.

Andrew realizes that he's in a cramped box. He can feel the closeness of the people near him—a knee lightly pressing against his leg, another just close enough to his shoulder that he can feel its warmth. It's got to be an ambulance; there's a bed beneath him. His fingers are still tangled with Neil's, both sides of his hand pressed close by Neil's palms. Neil squeezes and says, "I'm right here."

There's a lurch as the ambulance slows. Andrew's insides rush towards his head like one of those fucking wave machines. He winces and presses his lips together to keep everything from coming out of him. *Stay awake*, he scolds himself. *Stay the fuck awake*. "It's okay," Neil's voice says, this time close to his ear. "I've got you."

Andrew lets his eyes close. The light when he opens them again is clinical, tinged with blue. Andrew feels his eyes sizzle against it like eggs in a frying pan. He closes them. Neil squeezes his hand. Andrew grips it back hard. Something beeps. Someone talks in a brisk voice.

It's better the next time. Everything is still and quiet. The room is dim, lit only by the muted TV hanging on the wall. Andrew squints his eyes open experimentally and doesn't feel it like a lance through the skull. He moves his body carefully, stretches his calves under the blanket, shrugs his shoulders, squeezes his fingers together and finds that Neil's hand is still tangled with his. When he blinks his eyes open further he finds Neil in a chair pulled up close to the side of the bed; he's sleeping with one arm folded under his head onto the mattress as a pillow. Their hands are too warm now, sweaty. Neil's fingers are loose in sleep.

"Well, good morning," a voice says drily. Andrew jerks towards it and winces when his brain swishes around in his head.

Aaron. Leaning back in another shitty hospital chair, his feet kicked up on the other side of the bed.

"What are you doing here?" Andrew croaks.

"I was in the neighborhood," Aaron says. He drops his feet and stands, reaching for a cup of half-melted ice on the counter next to him. "Here, drink this, it'll help."

Aaron must have come from the city, so it's been...hours. It's been hours. Someone would have called him, after. He would have driven here. Andrew tries to focus on that. He takes a long sip of the water; it's cold, scraping Andrew's throat clean of rust. He swallows, clears his throat, swallows again. "Thanks."

"Uh huh," Aaron says. "So. How have you been? Anything to share? Make any new friends?"

Andrew looks down the bed. Neil hasn't moved. He's still passed out, his lips dry and parted, his eyes moving rapidly beneath the thin white skin of his eyelids. His sleeve is shoved up inelegantly, revealing the jagged tip of one of the worst of his scars, a thick, gnarled red thing that Andrew has kissed the length of dozens of times now.

"What time is it?" Andrew asks, remembering his task. *Focus*.

"Eleven," Aaron tells him. "Well, a little after."

Andrew had been set to go on air at six. He's lost all but a handful of moments of the last five hours. That feels... not the best.

"Oh, maybe you just haven't heard," Aaron says. "This is Neil. He's been guarding you like he's the fucking secret service all night. They wouldn't let him in with you when you got a CT, so he apparently stood right outside the door in case anyone—you know, some opportunistic axe murderer or con man or Bible salesman—tried to weasel their way in there with you."

"I know who Neil is," Andrew says drily.

"I would hope so," Aaron retorts. "Otherwise it seems like he should have lost a hand by now."

Andrew squeezes that hand. Hard. It wakes Neil up—he squeezes back, blinks his eyes open, buries a yawn against Andrew’s knuckles, and straightens, grimacing at what must be a stiff neck and stiffer back. He’s alert immediately, though, registering the presence of a third person with a dangerous snap of attention that releases and deflates as soon as he realizes who it is. Andrew assumes they’ve met already. He feels a sharp pang of disappointment that he hadn’t been awake to watch it happen.

“Hey,” Neil says, “you’re awake. How do you feel?”

“Fine,” Andrew says.

“Hungry?” Neil asks. “Thirsty? Cold? Hot?”

“*Fine*,” Andrew repeats.

Neil looks from him to Aaron and then back again. There’s a question on his face when he says, so casually that Andrew could almost be convinced Neil wasn’t asking if he needed guarding against his twin, “I can get you more water.”

Andrew nods. Regrets it. It’s too soon for sharp head movements.

When Neil disentangles their hands, there’s an ache in Andrew’s fingers. It’s difficult to bring the digits back to each other, they’ve been separated so long by Neil’s. He makes a fist, releases it, spreads his fingers out wide. Makes another fist. It feels like half of something, incomplete.

“The others are here,” Aaron tells him after the door clicks quietly closed behind Neil.

“Wymack, Kevin, Renee, Matt, Allison, Dan. Jeremy.”

“Why?” Andrew asks.

“I think they were a little afraid of your guard dog,” Aaron says, sounding amused. “I mean, they’d have been here anyway, but I’ve never seen them so cowed.”

“He is…” Andrew gropes for a way to end that sentence. It’s too soon for a vocabulary test, too. “A menace.”

“Listen,” Aaron says. “We obviously don’t have to talk about this now, but. I’m happy for you, okay? If you found some kind of weird thing with that feral, cold-as-ice motherfucker, then. Good. It’s good.”

“Uh oh,” Andrew says flatly. “I think I’m losing consciousness again. What a shame.”

—

The doctor comes and says things about aftercare and rest and concussions not being like you see in the movies, about taking it seriously and not trying to be a hero or go back to normal in the next couple of days. Neil nods attentively. Aaron watches Neil nodding attentively. Andrew watches Aaron watching Neil and tries to see him through Aaron’s eyes. Neil is rumped but sharply focused, squared against the doctor like he’s ready to fight him over

Andrew's health—like he would throw down the paperwork in his hands and swing if the doctor said something Neil didn't like. Hell, he probably would.

Andrew watches Aaron catch it all: the distrust in Neil's voice, the half-grown-back nails on his hands, the smears of blood on his shirt that Andrew must have left when he reached for him, the scars peeking out from under his shoved-up sleeves.

He knows what Aaron is seeing, but he doesn't know what Aaron is *thinking*.

Anyway, Aaron turns out to be right about the party in the waiting room. There are too many coworkers and/or friends to come all back to visit, so they send Wymack and Renee as some sort of ambassadors for the others.

"I'm glad you're well," Renee says quietly. "You scared us."

"You broke a guy's nose," Wymack says.

Neil mutters, "He deserved it."

"Yeah," Wymack says. "I think we're all very clear on your perspective by now."

His voice is considering, his eyes calculating. Andrew puts a temporary stop to it, wincing exaggeratedly and telling him, "Try to keep your voice down, old man. I have a head injury."

Wymack huffs a quiet laugh. "You can come home with me if you need to."

"Or me," Renee adds.

"But," Wymack continues, "I think between these two you might have it covered?"

Neil says, "Yeah. I can. If you want."

Aaron says, "I have an early class in the morning, but I could skip it."

"Go to class," Andrew tells him. "I'm good."

Maybe great, actually, despite the throbbing pain in his head, the dry grit of his mouth, and the exhaustion that soaks him even after having spent the last several hours more or less out of it. Who would have thought, though—Andrew Minyard, spoiled for choice in caregivers. Friends who dropped everything to camp out for hours in the waiting room, a brother who would blow off medical school for him, a... Neil who would fight all of the above and the paramedics and the entire hospital staff for him, if it came down to it.

"I'm good," Andrew says again, except this time he thinks he's telling himself.

—

Andrew had driven himself and Neil to the festival that day, which means his car is still parked in the historic downtown, which means he refuses to entertain any agenda for the night that doesn't start with driving it home so that hooligans and vandals can't get their

hands on it. Aaron points out that it'll be past midnight by the time he's discharged and rolled out to the parking lot, but Andrew's not entirely sure why he bothers—it's not like he's going to change Andrew's mind. For a minute, Andrew thinks Aaron's going to make them call an uber but he caves and takes them himself.

Neil drives them back to Andrew's apartment from there, winding them expertly through quiet, rain-damp streets that gleam red and green in vivid echoes of the streetlights. They make a brief stop to run through Steak n Shake for milkshakes and burgers and pull into Andrew's covered parking spot just as the clock ticks from four digits to three: 1:00 a.m. The grease-stained bags are heavy in Andrew's lap. The back of his head is sore when he forgets and lets himself tip back against the headrest. Neil looks wiped, too, his scarred hands wrapped around the wheel at ten and two, the skin under his eyes dark and thin, his hair a total fucking disaster.

They sit, still and silent, as the engine settles with a quiet click or two. Andrew realizes that they haven't actually talked—they've been tethered for hours, but there hasn't been time for checking-in.

"Hey," Andrew says quietly.

He pauses, half hoping that Neil will fill in the blank for him, will say something like 'don't mention it,' but he doesn't. Of course he doesn't. Andrew says, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Neil says. A pause. "I think I'm starving."

Upstairs, Neil over-feeds Almond because he is a sucker and can't resist the enormous, miserable eyes of a cat who hasn't eaten food for a long, long five minutes. Andrew had moved to do it himself, but Neil stopped him with a single very pointed and unamused look; instead, Andrew spreads their food out on the coffee table and starts dipping his fries into his strawberry milkshake.

They eat. Every bite settles something in Andrew that's only just realizing it's ravenous. His hand gets heavier and heavier, though, his eyelids droop more and more, until it takes heroic effort to lift the last bite of his burger to his mouth.

"Sleep," Neil says with a tangible finality. "Let's go."

"Shower," Andrew tries half-heartedly.

"Nope," Neil says. "Tomorrow. You're dead on your feet."

Andrew wants to argue for the sake of arguing, but he knows before he's hoisted himself to standing that Neil is right. He'd need one of those plastic shower seats if he wanted to stay even a little bit upright in his shower. He can't even take off his boots—Neil has to do it for him, kneeling at Andrew's feet and carefully loosening each crossed lace, and then the tongue, and then grasping them at the heels so that Andrew can pull each foot out. He peels off Andrew's sweaty, pungent socks without so much as a shift in expression. He stands behind Andrew and makes sure the neck of Andrew's t-shirt doesn't drag on his bandages when he tugs it up and off. He gets a warm washcloth and cleans the dried blood that made

its way down Andrew's neck and back. He takes all the dirty clothes to the hamper, pulls back Andrew's covers, and waits expectantly. He is matter-of-fact and not coddling and Andrew would pay one million dollars to have met him when he was much younger.

The bed is soft when Andrew slides into it, the bedding cool and smooth and clean. He'd had ideas, earlier, about bringing Neil home with him after the festival, about rolling around on fresh sheets and tracing every one of Neil's ribs with his tongue, maybe getting him off for the first time and memorizing every single tiny noise Neil made along the way. Instead, he's climbing in alone, exhausted, saturated with a bone-deep weariness that makes just keeping his eyes open feel impossible.

"Stay?" Andrew asks when Neil starts to lay the blankets back down to tuck him in.

"Where?" Neil asks carefully. "I'm fine anywhere. Couch, the floor in here, bathtub in a pinch."

"Bed," Andrew says. "Sleep with me?"

Neil's body hangs in suspended motion for all of a second as he considers. He doesn't ask if Andrew is sure—he trusts Andrew to know what he wants and ask for it, a thing so improbable that Andrew's tender head aches. "Okay," Neil says. "Let me grab you some water and Tylenol for later."

A few hazy minutes later—supplies on the nightstand; Neil stripped out of his jeans and changed into a ridiculous purple t-shirt Nicky had bought for Andrew once upon a time, merch for some coffee shop that loudly proclaims *thirst come, thirst served*—Neil climbs in next to him, leaving a healthy buffer between their bodies.

They stare at each other in the dark. It should be awkward or tentative, but it isn't. Just flat and featureless with exhaustion. Andrew closes his eyes and the world goes dark again—except this time he slips into sleep instead of dropping off a cliff into nothingness.

—

Andrew wakes to the whisper of a gray haze seeping through the windows and an unrelenting pounding in his head. Neil is still there, curled up against the other side of the bed. He's all hair and no face, the way he's burrowed into the pillow. Andrew thinks, maybe, that he can reach over Neil without waking him and grab the Tylenol if he moves carefully enough.

He's wrong. He gets all of one limb's worth of weight shifted and then Neil emerges from his wadded-up pillow, his movements sharp and alert and focused.

"Hey," Neil says. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Andrew says. The word cracks on a yawn that he stifles mercilessly into the back of his hand. "Head hurts. Drugs?"

"Drugs," Neil agrees.

Andrew watches Neil twist, lever himself, get the pills, get the water—all tiny, mundane tasks that are exceptional only because they’re taking place in Andrew’s bed, for Andrew’s benefit. He takes the pills Neil hands him and swallows them, then downs half the rest of the water bottle in two gulps. Neil is barely more than a specter in this light, bathed in shadow and weak glow that makes him seem a little unreal. Andrew puts a hand on Neil’s ribs, maybe to make sure he’s really there, maybe to make sure he’s real at all, maybe just because he wants to. He can’t get his head straight enough to tell.

“Go back to sleep,” Neil says. “No insomnia bullshit tonight.”

“Wow,” Andrew says drily. “So effective. Why didn’t I think of that.”

Neil grins at him, a little slice of white in the early morning gloom. Andrew twists Neil’s obnoxious, borrowed shirt between his fingers and tugs.

“Are we cuddling?” Neil asks seriously. “What kind of spoon are you?”

“Big,” Andrew says. “C’mere.”

—

“So, what do you think?” Wymack asks.

Andrew isn’t sure what he thinks. He stalls. “I think you are losing your mind, grandpa.”

“You’re deflecting,” Wymack says. “You don’t have to answer now, just think about it. The listeners really like you two together.”

“The drunk, insomniac, all-nighter crowd likes us together.”

“I like you together,” Wymack says easily.

“Like I said.”

“Give it some thought. If it’s a hard no, then I’ll drop it. I came to you first.”

“Because I am your favorite?” Andrew drawls.

“Because you have seniority,” Wymack corrects. “And— fuck, I don’t know. If you’d asked me a week ago, I would have said you’d be the hard one to convince. But now...”

“Oh no,” Andrew says in monotone, lifting one bored hand to his chest in what is clearly not horror. “Have I been replaced as chief pain in your ass?”

“Never.” Wymack grins broadly at him. “*Now* I think you’re clinging to your apathy by your fingernails. I think you have actual fun with him. I think the two of you are fun to listen to. And I think he’d burn this place to the ground for you, so I’m expecting a confetti cannon of a ‘yes’ when I ask him.”

“He would burn a lot of things to the ground for a lot of reasons.”

“Deflecting,” Wymack says again, pointedly. “Should I ask him?”

Andrew considers. A show with Neil. The two of them, their time slot shifted a little earlier in the evening, entertaining the 10pm - 2am crowd. Let loose to do their worst, more or less, *carte blanche* for Neil to purr menacing things into the microphone and tease cutting comments out of Andrew. Most of the time when he’s on his own, Andrew just plays music, casts aspersions on the taste of his listeners, and occasionally delivers barbed comments about whatever he feels like, but with Neil...well, a lot of things are different with Neil. It’s somehow more intimate with the two of them and Andrew can admit that their listeners feel it, too. They call in more. They suggest songs for Neil to critique. They ask Andrew to weigh in on potential food combinations. On paper, that should make it a lot worse for Andrew, but it somehow doesn’t. He likes the connection this way—on his own terms, unseen, anchored by Neil’s presence. So, maybe it could be...good. ‘Fun’ is Wymack’s word, but Andrew supposes it isn’t entirely inaccurate. Just juvenile.

He doesn’t have a better word for the time he spends riffing with Neil, but there has to be a better option than *fun*.

“Ask him,” Andrew tells him. “We’ll see what he says.”

—

“Here we go, guys,” Neil says. His mouth is up close to the microphone, but his face is turned towards Andrew. His voice is low and self-satisfied and makes Andrew’s breath catch when it wraps around his name. “It’s 10 p.m. The normies are still awake. Andrew, are you ready for this?”

His enthusiasm is infectious. Andrew tries, and hard, to tamp down on the thrill that dances across his skin at the gleam in Neil’s eyes, but he fails. Miserably. He never even stood a chance—he’d never been able to resist Neil, not for a single moment. Not since the first time Andrew laid eyes on him. Neil has always been unexpected. Always a little more than Andrew had bargained for. A little better.

Caught up in the moment, in the man, in what it all means, Andrew indulges Neil’s sense of drama and leans closer to the microphone. “The better question is,” Andrew says, “is this ready for us?”

Epilogue.

The adirondack chair is orange, faded from its original level of eye-murdering neon by years in the sun. The paint is still smooth, keeping the wood together and un-splintered, even if the edges are starting to peel a little. In the golden glow of the lights strung above, it’s almost a rich coral.

It clashes horribly with Neil’s hair, even though it’s only a few shades off from the highlights that twist their way through the new growth—three or so inches by now, long enough that

Neil has been making noises about cutting off all the stuff they'd dyed.

Andrew is an expert on this comparison, chiefly because Neil is blocking his view of everything else in Wymack's yard with his head as he leans halfway out of the chair to play thumb wars with Matt. Neil's weight is heavy on Andrew's right thigh because of the way he's sitting—one leg over the arm of the chair, the other braced against the ground, neither of them doing anything to alleviate the solid heft of him in Andrew's lap.

"Best out of five," Neil challenges Matt. "You have an advantage. Your hands are enormous."

Andrew pinches Neil's side, pleased when he jerks and glares back over his shoulder.

"Andrew," Neil says quellingly, "I'm losing here."

"I'm losing feeling in my leg," Andrew tells him. "Which of these is more important?"

Neil hesitates dramatically—an ostentatious display of weighing his options.

Andrew pinches him again.

"Fine, fine," Neil huffs. He settles back into position, his ribs curving into Andrew's chest perfectly, like they were made to nest together. "Value your personal comfort above my victory in athletic competition."

"I always do," Andrew says.

Dubiously, Dan echoes, "Athletic competition?"

Andrew's leg is still asleep. He bounces it, jostling Neil until he obediently shifts his weight, slouching down a little, adjusting the fit of his body against Andrew's, his hip rubbing against Andrew's zipper in a way that Andrew suspects is not entirely innocent. Andrew slips his arm back around Neil, where it had been before Neil and Matt had drawn each other into a frenzy of grade school gladiator shit. It settles easily, falling into place in a way that's become habit.

In revenge for the rush of heat Neil had sparked low in his stomach, Andrew blows a soft stream of air at Neil's ear and smirks when Neil shivers and squirms in his lap.

"Should we go inside?" Neil asks in a tipsily indiscreet whisper. "I can come up with a good haircut euphemism."

"Control yourself," Andrew tells him mildly. "We're in mixed company. You can get on my dick when we get home."

Neil grins at him, bright and beautiful and illuminated by the light and right here, curled against Andrew, pressed close, a familiar, cherished, and still miraculous source of warmth that wards off much of the autumn evening's creeping chill. He shifts again, wraps an arm around Andrew's neck, and presses a kiss to Andrew's cheek. It's dry and sweet and lingers, the soft skin of his lips dragging against the bare hint of stubble.

He drops another one closer to Andrew's mouth, but halts his hopeful course when the sound of leaves crunching and low muttering approaches. They both look up at the interruption of shadows against the fire's flickering light—Kevin and Jeremy, linked arm in arm, each of them swaying with the drunken confidence that they're the more sober of the two.

“Guys,” Jeremy says, glancing surreptitiously back over his shoulder. “Listen.”

“The new guy,” Kevin says, not bothering to hush his voice.

“Yeah,” Jeremy says. “Maybe steer clear of him. He's...”

The last time Andrew had heard this speech, they'd been talking about Neil. They'd been so wrong about him. Neil was—*is*—bruised, but not brittle. Battered, but not broken. So far from fragile that he'd been able to heft and hold so much of Andrew's weight, so much more than Andrew had ever thought possible, even for himself.

“An asshole,” Kevin finishes. “He's a real asshole.”

Chapter End Notes

The end.

Happy every single day, @willow_bird. You are incredible. I am so blessed to call you a friend.

End Notes

Thanks to @justadreamfox for, like, everything?

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