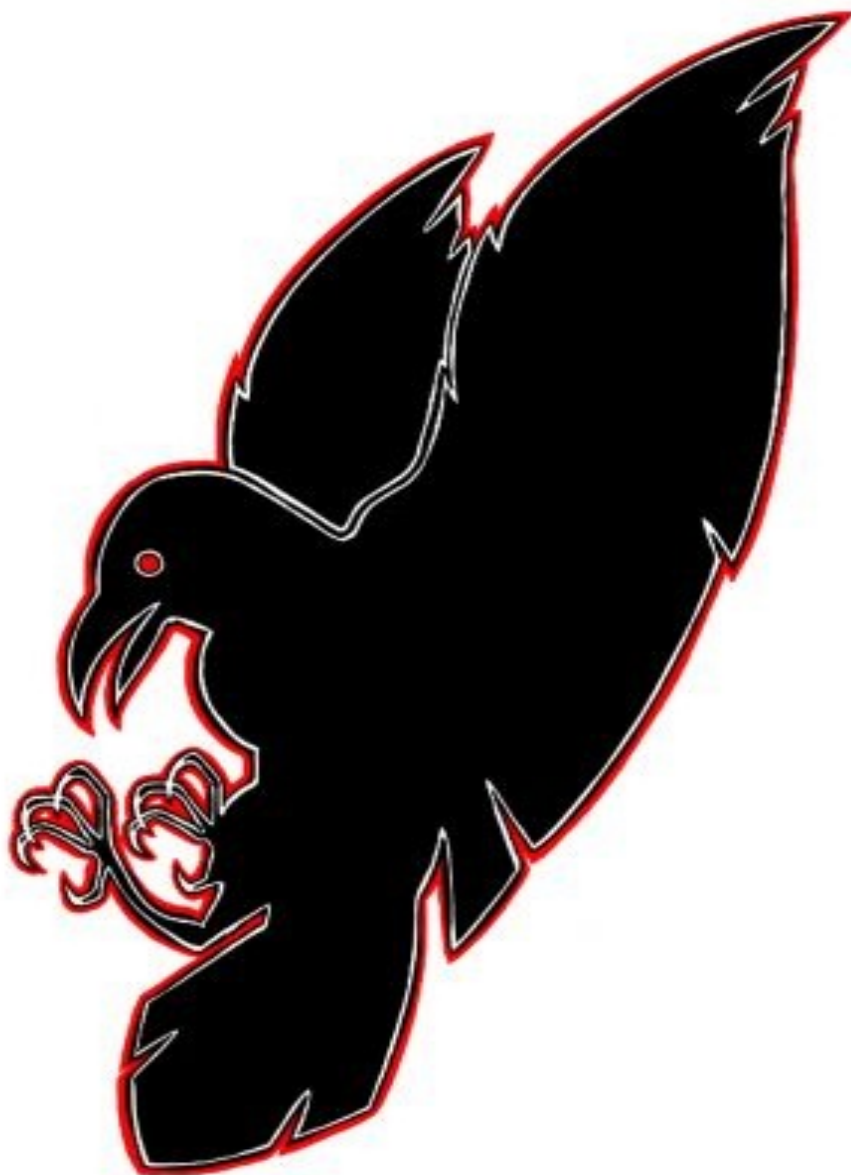


**THE
RAVEN KING**



NORA SAKAVIC

THE RAVEN KING

Nora Sakavic

ALL FOR THE GAME
The Foxhole Court
The Raven King
The King's Men

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Smashwords Edition

CHAPTER ONE

It looked like Halloween outside, only two months too early. Last week Palmetto State University was covered in orange and white streamers to celebrate the start of the school year. Over the weekend someone had replaced all of the white ribbons with black ones. It gave the impression the campus was in mourning. Neil Josten thought it a cheap tribute, but that might have been his cynicism talking.

He forgave himself for being jaded. At eighteen years old, he'd seen more people die than he could comfortably count. Death was unpleasant, but it was a familiar and tolerable ache in his chest. Seth Gordon's unexpected overdose Saturday night should have meant something more to Neil since they'd been teammates and roommates for three months, but Neil felt nothing. Keeping himself alive was hard enough most days; he had no time to linger over others' misfortunes.

Rock music blared to life, temporarily filling the silence in the car, but it vanished as quickly as it'd come. Neil dragged his attention away from the streamers and looked up front. Nicholas "Nicky" Hemmick let his hand fall away from the dashboard with a quiet curse. Across the backseat from Neil, Nicky's cousin Aaron Minyard shoved the back of the driver's seat. Whether it was admonition for trying to pretend things were okay or a silent show of support, Neil wasn't sure. The cousins' relationship was a tangled mess he wouldn't live long enough to figure out.

Nicky reached for the radio again. Kevin Day was sitting shotgun, so he saw Nicky move first. He pushed Nicky's hand away and said, "It's fine. Let it go."

"I don't want to do this," Nicky said, low and miserable.

No one else answered him, but Neil thought they all agreed. None of them were looking forward to today's practice, but they could only take so much time off when the season was already underway. At least Coach David Wymack was calling them back to the court on a Wednesday afternoon. Andrew Minyard, Aaron's twin brother, had his weekly therapy sessions on Wednesdays.

Generally Andrew's wild mood wasn't a problem, but Andrew's cheer didn't make him at all friendly. An excitable Andrew confronted with the death of his least-favorite teammate was a recipe for disaster. The team should have come together Sunday morning to grieve their loss, but Andrew and Matt got into an ugly brawl instead.

Wymack forcibly separated the team after that. The upperclassmen moved in with team nurse Abby Winfield, and the cousins and Kevin were banned to the dorm. Neil would have stayed at the dorm, too, but Wymack didn't want him alone in the room he'd shared with Matt and Seth. Instead Neil spent a couple nights sleeping on Wymack's couch. Neil thought Wymack's concern was misplaced but he knew better than to argue.

Seth died Saturday night and was cremated Monday afternoon. From what Neil heard, Seth's mother signed off on everything but didn't even show up at the crematorium to collect her son's ashes. Allison Reynolds, Seth's on-again off-again girlfriend and the Foxes' defensive dealer, kept his urn instead. Neil didn't know if she planned on burying it or keeping it in her dorm room the rest of the year. He wasn't going to ask. He still didn't know what to think about the role he might have played in Seth's death. Until he sorted that out he'd rather avoid Allison altogether.

Allison wouldn't be at practice today, but the others would. Neil hadn't seen the upperclassmen since Sunday morning and he knew the reunion was going to be rough. They were only two days away from the second game of the season, though, and they had to pull together somehow. The Foxes had never had particularly good odds, but this upcoming year was looking bleak. They were already the smallest team in NCAA Class I Exy. Now they were the smallest a team could be and still qualify to play. They'd lost their only fifth-year senior, and their remaining offense team consisted of an injured national champion and an amateur.

Orange glinted at the edge of his peripheral vision. Palmetto State's Exy stadium was hard to miss, built to seat sixty-five thousand fans and painted with the brightest orange and white paints the school could find. Giant fox paws marked each of the four outer walls. The black ribbons extended all the way here: every lamp post in the parking lots and every one of the twenty-four gates was covered in streamers. The Foxes' locked entrance was covered in silent tribute. Pictures of Seth with friends and scribbled notes from teachers were taped to the door.

Nicky pulled up to the curb but didn't kill the engine. Neil climbed out of the backseat and looked over the hood of the car to count squad cars. Kevin's presence on the team meant the Foxes needed full-time security, but the numbers had doubled over the summer when Kevin's former team transferred to the southeastern district. Neil was getting used to seeing campus police everywhere he went, but he would always hate the sight of them.

Nicky pulled away as soon as Aaron and Kevin got out. There was no point in him changing out for practice yet, since he'd have to get Andrew from Reddin

Medical Center in a half-hour. Neil watched his car turn out of the parking lot onto the road, then looked to his teammates.

It was no secret everyone in Andrew's four-man group hated Seth, but Aaron and Nicky were still human enough to be rattled by his sudden death. Kevin's initial reaction to the news had been heartless, but he'd also been completely wasted at the time. Neil didn't know if he'd scrounged up any remorse since sobering up.

Neil was curious which one of them would cop to apathy first, but he was only so patient. When thirty seconds passed and neither had moved, Neil gave up on them and went to the Foxes' entrance. The code was supposed to change every couple months, but with the Ravens in their district Wymack now changed it every week. This week it was the last four digits of Abby's phone number. Neil was starting to think his teammates were right about Wymack and Abby's invisible relationship.

They filed down the hall to the locker room. That door was unlocked, and the lights were on inside, but the lounge was empty. Neil went to investigate while Aaron and Kevin got settled. A hallway connected the lounge to the foyer, the official meet-and-greet room where the Foxes could speak to the press before and after games. The door on the foyer's back wall, which led into the stadium itself, was still locked. Neil backtracked to the hall where the changing rooms and offices were. Wymack's office door was closed, but if Neil listened for a minute he heard Wymack's muffled voice through the wood. Satisfied no one was here who shouldn't be, Neil went back to the others.

Aaron and Kevin were rearranging the furniture when Neil walked in. Neil watched as they pushed the chairs and couches into a V-shape, then asked, "What are you doing?"

"Finding a new way to make us fit," Aaron said, "unless you want to stare an empty chair in the face all season."

"It's the same number of cushions," Neil said.

"Four people barely fit on a couch. Five is out of the question."

"Five?"

Kevin looked at him like he was stupid. Neil was painfully familiar with that look by now, but even after four months working with Kevin he still didn't appreciate it.

"You do know your place, don't you?" Kevin asked.

Until Saturday night, Neil had never been stupid enough to think he had a place. Andrew promised he could change that, but his protection had a price tag. Andrew would protect Neil from his past if Neil helped him keep Kevin at Palmetto State. It sounded easy enough, but Nicky warned him there was more

to it. Neil was supposed to do it from the inside of Andrew's dysfunctional group. He couldn't hide on the fringes anymore.

Neil looked at the new arrangement in the lounge again and understood. This summer Andrew's four had all squished onto one couch. Now they could spread out, three on the couch and two to the chairs on either side. The remaining upperclassmen got the couch and chair opposite them.

Neil started for the chair on the end, since he'd always had the outside seat, but Aaron sank into it first. Neil hesitated a second too long, and Aaron finally spelled it out for him. "You're on the couch with Kevin and Andrew. Sit down."

"I don't like being boxed in," Neil said, "and I don't want to sit next to your brother."

"Nicky put up with it for a year," Aaron said. "You can deal with it."

"You're his family," Neil said, not like it meant a thing to them. Wymack only recruited athletes from broken homes. At the Foxhole Court "family" was a fantasy invented to make books and Hollywood movies more interesting. Neil knew it was a lost cause even as he said it, so he took the seat Aaron had assigned him.

Kevin sat after Neil did, leaving space between them for Andrew. Neil looked around the room again and wondered how the upperclassmen would adjust to the new layout. His stare fell on the oversized schedule hanging above the TV and his stomach knotted as he read down the list. Friday, October 13th was the day the last-ranked Foxes went up against the first-ranked Edgar Allan University Ravens. It was bound to be a disaster.

Wymack's door opened down the hall, but a half-second later the phone started ringing. Wymack didn't bother to close his door again before answering. From what Neil could hear, someone was harassing Wymack about the team's tiny line-up. Wymack's obvious irritation made his reassurances less than convincing, but Neil knew he believed every word he was saying. Wymack didn't care if he had nine Foxes or twenty-five. He'd stand behind them until the bitter, bloody end.

Wymack was still going at it when the lounge door opened. Captain Danielle Wilds was the first into the room, but her boyfriend Matt Boyd and best friend Renee Walker were right behind her. They only made it a couple steps into the room before grinding to a halt.

Dan pointed at Neil but stared at Kevin. "What is that about?"

Aaron answered, "You knew what it meant when we took him Saturday night."

Wymack slammed his phone down. Neil wondered if the argument really was over or if he'd used the arrival of more Foxes as an excuse to get off the

phone. He strode into the lounge a couple seconds later and followed Dan's finger to Neil. He looked from Neil to Kevin to Aaron, then around the room at the new layout, then back at Neil.

"Last I checked Andrew didn't like you," Wymack said.

"He still doesn't," Neil said, but he didn't bother to explain.

"Interesting." Wymack eyed Neil a moment longer before turning on the upperclassmen. "Sit down, would you? We need to talk."

Wymack leaned against the entertainment center and waited for them to get settled. He folded his arms across his chest and studied each of his Foxes in turn.

"Abby wrote me a speech to give you this afternoon. It sounded nice, had lots of stuff about courage and loss and coming together in everyone's time of need. I tore it up and tossed it in the trash can beside my desk.

"I'm not here to offer you kind words and pats on the back. I'm not here to be a shoulder to cry on. Take that up with Abby or go down to Reddin and talk to Betsy. My job is to be your coach no matter what, to keep you moving and get you back on the court whether you're ready to be there or not. That probably makes me the bad guy here, but we all have to live with it."

Wymack looked at the empty chairs across from him. Palmetto State's Exy team was on its fifth year now. Wymack built the Foxes from the ground up and handpicked Seth for his first starting line. Between the players' personal problems, a faulty original contract that let players walk out, and the option to graduate in four years instead of five, Seth was the only one who'd made it to a fifth year with the team. Seth had been a lot of things, most of them unpleasant, but he'd definitely been a fighter. Now he was gone.

Wymack cleared his throat and scratched a hand through his short hair. "Look. Shit happened. Shit's going to keep happening. You don't need me to tell you life isn't fair. You're here because you know it isn't. Life doesn't care what we want out of it; it's up to us to fight for what we want with everything we've got. Seth wanted us to win. He wanted us to make it past the fourth match. I think we owe it to him to perform. Let's show the world what we've got. Let's make this our year."

"We've lost enough, don't you think?" Dan asked her teammates. "It's time to win."

Matt laced his fingers through hers and squeezed. "Let's take it all the way to finals."

"Words don't mean anything to me," Wymack said. "Prove to me on my court you have what it takes to make it to championships. I want you on the court in light gear in five minutes or I'll sign you all up for a marathon."

Wymack's odd idea of pep talk was missing its usual feigned anger, but his words were familiar enough to get the team moving. The men's locker room was silent as they dressed. Neil carried his things into one of the bathroom stalls to change. A vanity separated the toilets from the shower stalls, and Neil stopped there on his way back to consider his reflection.

Neil had a love-hate relationship with his reflection out of necessity. He was the spitting image of the murderous father he'd run away from eight years ago. Hair dye and contacts were the easiest way to hide his face, but keeping up with it when he lived with the Foxes was exhausting. He checked his roots twice a day every day and slept with his back to the room so he could take his contacts out at night. The case was kept in his pillow case and he had spare lenses in his wallet. It was tricky, but it helped keep him alive and safe. Neil didn't think it was going to be enough anymore.

He didn't realize how long he'd stalled until Matt and Kevin came looking for him. He saw their reflections as they stepped into the doorway behind him but didn't turn around.

"All the way to finals?" Neil asked.

"Miracles happen," Matt said.

"Don't rely on something as insubstantial as a miracle," Kevin said. "You won't win anything by standing around. Finish getting changed and get down to the court."

"One day I want you to look up 'insensitivity' in the dictionary," Matt said, annoyed. "I'm sure it'll do your ego wonders to see your picture printed there beside it."

"No," Neil said before Kevin could respond. "He's right. The chance of Coach finding us another striker when the year's already started is slim. Until he figures something out, Kevin and I are all you've got, and neither one of us is good enough."

"Hear that, Kevin?" Matt said. "Your sub said you're incompetent."

"His opinion doesn't matter to me," Kevin said.

He didn't deny Neil's words, though, and Neil heard that even if Matt didn't. Kevin was raised a left-handed striker, but Riko broke his playing hand last December in a fit of jealous rage. Kevin had been trying to relearn the game right-handed since March, but he was nowhere near as good as he'd once been. Public opinion said he was a genius for managing to play at all these days, but Kevin felt his fall from grace keenly. As brutal as Kevin could be toward the rest of the team, he was hardest on himself. It was the only reason Neil tolerated his condescension.

Neil pushed away from the mirrors and finished getting ready. Dan and Renee were waiting for the men in the foyer, and they went into the stadium for warm-ups. After forty minutes of laps and interval runs they trekked back into the locker room for water. They were stretching out as a group when the front door open.

Neil glanced at the upperclassmen to judge their reactions as Nicky and Andrew joined them in the foyer. Dan went back to her stretches after a split-second glance in their direction, and Matt's expression tightened when he spotted Andrew's smiling face. Only Renee managed a smile, and her voice was friendly, if quiet, when she said hello.

"Hi Renee," Andrew returned. "Are you moving back into the dorm yet?"

"Tonight," Renee said. "We packed Matt's truck this morning."

Andrew accepted that without argument and vanished into the locker room to change. Nicky hung back a minute, looking a little uncertain as he faced his teammates for the first time in days. Dan looked at him again, but her stony face was not encouraging.

"Hey," Nicky said, subdued. "Holding up?"

"Somehow or other," Dan said. She didn't ask how Nicky was. Chances were she didn't want to know.

Nicky said nothing for a bit, then, "How is Allison?"

"Do you care?" Matt asked.

"Matt," Renee said in quiet rebuke. To Nicky, she said, "She's having a hard time right now, as expected, but we make sure she's never alone. She still won't speak to Betsy, but I think she'll open up soon."

"Yeah," Nicky agreed, barely a whisper.

Wymack waited until he was sure they were done and then gestured at Nicky. "You two get down to the court and start doing laps. I don't pay for electricity in this place so you can stand around and gossip. The rest of you finish up here and get some water. As soon as Andrew and Nicky are ready we're suiting up for drills. We've got—" Wymack stopped at the sound of his phone ringing down the hall. "These leeches are going to drive me insane. I should have invested in a secretary."

Nicky went into the changing room while Wymack went in search of the phone. Neil was standing at the back of the foyer, closest to the hall, so he heard when Wymack answered. Despite Wymack's obvious annoyance, he managed a civil tone.

"Coach Wymack, Palmetto State University. Say again? One moment." Wymack stepped into the hall with the portable receiver in his hand. He muted the speaker with the press of his thumb and kicked open the door to the men's

changing room. "Andrew Joseph Minyard, what the flying fuck have you done this time?"

"It wasn't me, it was the one-armed man!" Andrew yelled from out of sight.

"Get out here!" Wymack yelled back as the door swung closed. Andrew appeared a couple seconds later, already changed into his uniform. Wymack pointed the phone at him and said, "The police are on the phone for you. You'd better come clean with me before I get the unabridged version from them."

"It wasn't me. Ask my doppelganger?"

Wymack scowled at him, turned the microphone back on, and put the phone at his ear. "What seems to be the problem, Officer... Higgins, you said?"

"Oh," Andrew said, startled. "No, Coach."

Wymack waved at him to be quiet, but Andrew grabbed Wymack's wrist and wrenched the phone out of his grasp. Wymack caught his jersey before Andrew could run off. Andrew didn't try to wiggle free but stared at the phone in his hand like he'd never seen such technology before.

"Don't make him wait all day," Wymack said.

Andrew turned, not enough to break loose but enough he could see his brother. Aaron had stopped mid-stretch to stare at him. Andrew threw his hands up in an exaggerated shrug and finally put the phone at his ear.

"Pig Higgins, is that you?" Andrew asked. "Oh, it is. Yes, I'm surprised. Did you forget I don't like surprises? What? No, don't stall. You wouldn't hunt me down after all this time just to chat, so what do you want?" Andrew went quiet for a few seconds to listen, then said, "No," and hung up.

The phone started ringing again almost immediately. The Foxes were staring openly now, their stretches forgotten. Wymack didn't order them back to business, so Matt sat on one of the benches to watch this odd scene unfold. Andrew yanked at his jersey until Wymack let go, then put space between them as fast as he could. He leaned against the wall, clapped his free hand over his ear, and answered the phone.

"What? No, I didn't hang up on you. I wouldn't do that. I—no. Shut up."

Andrew hung up again, but Higgins was persistent enough to call a third time. Andrew let it ring five times before answering with an explosive sigh.

"Talk to me," Andrew said, and waited as Higgins explained himself all over again.

Higgins went on for a good two minutes. Whatever he was saying couldn't be good; the conversation was visibly cutting through Andrew's drug-induced mania. Andrew's smile was long gone, and he started tapping his foot halfway through Higgins' story. He looked away from Aaron as the last of his cheer bleached out of his expression and pointed his gaze at the ceiling instead.

"Go back," Andrew finally said. "Who complained? Oh, Pig, don't give me the runaround. I know where you work, you see. I know who you work with. That means there's a child in her house. She isn't supposed—what? No. Don't ask me that. I said don't. Leave me alone. Hey," Andrew said, a little louder like he was trying to drown the officer's arguments out. "Call me again and I'll kill you."

He hung up. This time the phone stayed silent. Andrew waited to make sure Higgins got the hint, then put one hand over his eyes and started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Nicky asked as he rejoined them. "What did I miss?"

"Oh, nothing," Andrew said. "No worries."

Wymack looked from Andrew to Aaron and back again. "Now what have you done?"

Andrew spread his fingers and peered between them at Wymack. "What makes you think this is my fault?"

"I hope that's a rhetorical question," Wymack said, not at all fooled by Andrew's innocent act. "Why is the Oakland PD calling you?"

"The pig and I go way back," Andrew said. "He just wanted to catch up."

"You lie to my face one more time and we're going to have a problem."

"It was mostly the truth." Andrew dropped his hand and tossed the phone across the room. It hit the ground so hard the back popped off. The handset slid one direction and the battery went the other. "He worked with the Oakland PAL program. Thought he could save at-risk kids by teaching them sports after school. Kind of like you, yes? Idealistic to the core."

"You left Oakland three years ago."

"Yes, yes, I'm so flattered he remembers me, or something." Andrew waved one hand in a lazy 'what can you do' gesture and started for the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Wymack put an arm into his path. "Where are you going?"

"I'm leaving." Andrew pointed past Wymack in the direction of the exit. "Didn't I say I'll see you tomorrow? Maybe I mumbled."

"We've got practice," Dan said. "We have a game on Friday."

"You have Joan of Exy over there. Make do without me."

"Cut the shit, Andrew," Wymack said. "What is really going on here?"

Andrew put a hand to his forehead dramatically. "I think I'm coming down with something. Cough, cough. Best I leave before I infect your team. There's so few of them left. You can't stand to lose anyone else."

Impatience pulled Kevin's mouth into a hard line. "Knock it off. You can't leave."

There was a heartbeat of silence, and then Andrew turned around with a wide, wicked smile on his lips. "I can't, Kevin? I'll show you what I can't do. Try

and put me on your court today and I'll take myself off it permanently. Fuck your practice, your line-up, and your stupid fucking game."

"That's enough. We don't have time for your tantrums."

Andrew twisted and punched the wall hard enough to split the skin along his knuckles. Kevin took a quick step forward, hand out like he could stop Andrew from landing a second blow, but Wymack was closer. He caught Andrew's arm and hauled him away from the wall. Andrew didn't look away from Kevin to acknowledge the interference. Only when Kevin finally stepped back did Andrew try to pull free of Wymack's grip.

"Cough, cough, Coach," Andrew said. "I'm leaving now."

"Coach, let him go," Aaron said. "Please."

Wymack flicked a frustrated look between them, but Aaron was staring at his feet and Andrew's smile explained nothing. Finally Wymack dropped his hand and said, "You and I are going to have a very long talk later, Andrew."

"Sure," Andrew said, a bright and blatant lie. He was gone a heartbeat later.

"Seriously," Nicky said when the door slammed behind Andrew, "what did I miss?"

"Answers now, Aaron," Wymack said.

"I don't know," Aaron said.

"My ass you don't."

"I don't know," Aaron said again, a little louder. "I don't know why Higgins is calling. Call him back or take it up with Andrew if you want answers. He was Andrew's mentor, not mine. I only met the guy once."

"He obviously left an impression if you still remember him."

"Oh," Nicky said in startled realization. "Is he—?"

He didn't finish, but Aaron understood what he was asking.

"Yeah," Aaron said. "He's the one who told me I had a brother."

CHAPTER TWO

Aaron's cryptic remark was the only answer they got from him at practice. Wymack stopped pushing the second things got personal. Neil expected the upperclassmen to say something about it when they put court walls between themselves and Wymack, but apparently they shared Wymack's tact. They flicked curious looks at Aaron and Nicky from time to time but no one pushed for an explanation.

Without Seth around to pick fights with Kevin and Nicky, Allison on hand to fuss at anyone within hearing range, or Andrew chattering away in goal, their drills were almost alarmingly quiet. Practice could have been a complete waste of time if not for Kevin and Dan. Kevin was too single-minded about Exy to let anything distract him when he was on the court, and Dan knew her role as their captain. She kept them moving when they slowed and talked through the awkward silences. Even still, Neil thought they were all relieved when Wymack finally called an end to practice.

They left the stadium at the same time, but Nicky's distaste for traffic laws got them to Fox Tower first. Nicky found a spot near the back of the athletes' parking lot and they headed for the dorm as a group. Halfway there they noticed the figure waiting for them on the sidewalk. Andrew sat cross-legged on the curb, hands on his ankles as he watched their approach.

"You shouldn't be outside if you're coming down with something," Kevin said.

"Such concern." Andrew grinned at Kevin's cool tone. "Don't cry, Kevin. It's nothing a nap and some vitamin C can't fix."

Nicky crouched in front of Andrew. "Hey. You good?"

"You ask strange questions, Nicky."

"I'm concerned, is all."

"Sounds like your problem. Oh, there we go, finally."

Neil looked back as Matt turned into the parking lot. Matt circled twice before he found a spot large enough to fit his truck. Andrew batted at Nicky's face in a silent order to get out of the way, so Nicky stood and stepped off to one side. Andrew waited until Dan, Matt, and Renee were close enough to hear him before lifting his hand in greeting and saying,

"Renee, you made it! Welcome back. I'm borrowing you. You don't mind, do you? I knew you wouldn't."

Renee nodded. "Do I need anything?"

"I've already got it." Andrew hopped to his feet and set off across the parking lot.

Renee did an about-face and followed. She caught up in a couple long strides and fell in alongside him. Neil looked at Dan. Her mouth was a thin, hard line but she didn't look surprised and she didn't call after them. Matt opened his mouth, then took his cue from Dan's silence and decided not to say anything. No one else moved until Andrew and Renee reached the far edge of the parking lot, and then Aaron turned abruptly away. Instead of heading inside, he started down the sidewalk that looped around front of Fox Tower and led back to campus.

"Right," Matt said at last. "Are we going to talk about this?"

Nicky rubbed his arms as if warding off a chill, never mind that it was almost a hundred degrees outside, and jerked his chin at the door. "Not without a drink, we aren't."

The school's Exy team had three suites on the third floor. Andrew's lot had the room closest to the stairs, the girls were in the middle, and Matt and Neil were on the end in the room they'd once shared with Seth. Dan slipped her hand into Matt's as they approached the suite door and squeezed so hard her knuckles went white. Matt didn't seem to take any strength from it. He stared at the key ring in his free hand like he'd forgotten which one would let him in.

"He was such an asshole," Matt said quietly.

"I know," Dan said.

Matt sucked in a slow breath and finally unlocked the door. He pushed the door open, then flinched back from the doorway and clutched harder at Dan's hand. The grim look on Dan's face had Neil edging forward, but it was difficult to see past Matt. Neil didn't have long to wait; Dan steeled up the courage to move first and tugged Matt into the room with her. Neil paused in the doorway to take stock of the changes.

Neil hadn't been in his room since Sunday morning, and then he'd stopped by only long enough to pack a bag for Wymack's place. On Sunday the room looked as it always had. In the few days since then someone had come by and cleared out Seth's things. The third desk was gone, as was the nightstand Seth converted into shelves for his schoolwork. It left a too-obvious gap between Neil's and Matt's things.

Neil left Matt and Dan staring at the new emptiness and went to the bedroom. His and Matt's beds were still lofted one above the other, but Seth's bed had been taken back by resident services. The remaining two dressers that'd once been hidden under Seth's bed were now exposed to the room, their neglected tops covered in a fine layer of dust. It was like Seth had never been here, like he'd never existed at all.

Neil wondered if he would disappear so easily.

He left his duffel on his dresser and went back into the living room. Matt and Dan were sitting pressed together on the couch. Matt was looking at the wall where Seth's desk used to be. Dan studied Neil's face but said nothing. Maybe she knew he didn't need her comfort, or maybe there was just nothing to say.

Kevin and Nicky weren't long in joining them. Nicky brought a handle of rum and an open bottle of cola, so Kevin collected glasses from the kitchen cabinets. Nicky tore his gaze away from the open space in the room with obvious effort. He set the drinks down on the coffee table before kneeling across from Dan and Matt. Kevin set five glasses on the table and sat at Nicky's side.

Neil took his cup off the table before Nicky could serve him anything and sat at one end of the coffee table where he could see everyone. Nicky poured their drinks, passed them out, and raised his glass in silent toast to the room. No one joined him, but Nicky didn't wait. He downed half his drink without coming up for air. Nicky topped it off with more rum and looked across the room again to the gap where Seth's desk once stood.

"So," Nicky started, sounding more than a little uncomfortable. "This is, uh."

Matt didn't give him time to figure it out. The look on his face said he wasn't ready to talk about Seth yet, especially not with Nicky. He dragged Nicky's attention back to a safer topic by saying, "Why didn't Aaron know he had a brother?"

Nicky winced, but Neil didn't know what bothered him more: the question or the rough edge in Matt's voice.

"They're twins," Nicky said. He waited for them to catch on, looked from one blank face to another, and frowned disbelief. "Think about it for a sec, would you? Imagine you're my Aunt Tilda. How eager would you be to tell Aaron you gave up his brother at birth? She hoped that secret would stay buried forever."

"But Aaron found out," Neil said.

Nicky flashed Neil a tight-lipped smile. "Yeah, and that's why I believe in fate. See, Aaron was born and raised in San Jose. Apparently Aunt Tilda got bored of dating locally and started going to online matching sites. Right after Aaron turned thirteen Aunt Tilda hooked up with this new guy up in Oakland. Her boyfriend thought they should meet at a Raiders game, something nice and public and fun, so she stuffed Aaron in the car and off they went.

"Aaron said he was at the concession stand when this cop walked up, calling him Andrew and talking like they knew each other. Aaron thought he was either crazy or confused, but it didn't take the cop long to figure out something was wrong."

"Higgins," Matt guessed.

"Yeah. Soon as Higgins figured out he had the wrong brother he made Aaron take him back to where Aunt Tilda was. See, Higgins thought Aunt Tilda was another foster mother and that Aaron and Andrew had somehow gotten split up in the system. Higgins wanted to reunite them, so Aunt Tilda gave him her phone number to pass along and took Aaron home again.

"I don't know why she bothered. Maybe she was too embarrassed to say no or didn't want to explain to a cop what was going on. Either way, Andrew's foster mother called the next day to set up a meet-and-greet, and Aunt Tilda refused. She told the fosters she didn't want anything to do with Andrew, didn't want to know what he was like or how he was doing, nothing. She even made them promise to not contact her ever again."

Nicky finished his second drink and mixed a third. "But Aaron knew who was calling, and he was too excited to wait on his mom to hang up to find out the details. As soon as she picked up in the kitchen, he ran to her bedroom and listened in on the upstairs phone. That's how he found out the truth." Nicky looked down at his drink. "Aaron said it was the worst day of his life."

"Jesus," Matt said. "I don't blame him. Did he tell her he'd heard her?"

"Oh, yeah. Aaron said they had it out. But Aunt Tilda wouldn't budge, so Aaron went behind her back and called the Oakland PD. He found the PAL coordinators and gave them his information to give to Andrew. Two weeks later he got a letter in the mail that basically said 'Fuck you, go away'."

Matt rubbed at his temples. "Yeah, that sounds like Andrew."

"Some things never change," Nicky said.

"So how'd Aaron change Andrew's mind?" Dan asked.

Nicky gave her an odd look. "He didn't."

"Wait," Dan said. "What do you mean, he didn't?"

"I mean he didn't try again. I don't know who told Andrew's foster parents about Aaron, if it was Andrew or this Phil guy, but Andrew's foster mom wrote Aaron a letter. She wanted Aaron to try again in spring and said something about holidays being rough and there being a lot of changes at the house. So Aaron waited, but he waited too long. In March Andrew went off to juvie, and Aaron started rethinking this brother thing. Two months later Aunt Tilda sold the house in San Jose and moved Aaron to Columbia."

Dan looked bewildered. "Then when did they meet?"

"Dad found out about Andrew five years ago, so..." Nicky counted time on his fingers. "Four and a half years ago, give or take a bit. Dad went to California to interview Andrew's foster family and stop by juvie. A month later he flew Aaron out so Aaron and Andrew could talk, but I don't count that half-hour supervised session as a first meeting. They met for real when Andrew made

early parole a year later and Dad bullied Aunt Tilda into bringing Andrew home."

Nicky nursed his drink for a bit. "Weird when you think about it, right? They've only really known each other for three years."

"That's messed up," Matt said.

"Yeah, and that's the nice version of the story," Nicky said. "Anyway, that's how Aaron and Andrew know Higgins. I don't know why he's calling Andrew now, but I'm not going to ask. I kind of view Andrew's foster life as an off-limits topic. I don't bring it up until he does."

"Is that really okay?" Dan asked. "It didn't sound like a 'Long time no see' kind of phone call. What if someone's dug up some past crime of his that could get him taken off our court? Maybe Phil was calling to warn him about an investigation."

"Andrew will take care of it," Nicky said.

"That's not comforting," Dan said, but she let it drop.

Somehow Nicky and Kevin ended up eating dinner with them. It was the first time since the upperclassmen moved to campus in June that Neil had seen any of Andrew's lot socialize with the rest of the team. Neil attributed it to the twins' absence. He'd heard Nicky complain to Aaron about the cousins' isolationist stance, but Aaron hadn't been swayed by Nicky's unhappiness. Now, without Aaron to distract him or Andrew to shepherd him out of the way, Nicky was free to do as he liked.

They ordered delivery so they wouldn't have to leave again, and Dan put in a movie to avoid another unpleasant conversation. The film was over before any of their teammates made it back, but that was as far as Nicky cared to press his luck.

"Good night," he said after he'd helped clear away the dinner trash.

"See you in the morning," Dan said, and closed the door behind him and Kevin. When she let go of the knob, she turned a strange look on Matt. "That was weird."

"Yeah," Matt agreed. "Chances of it happening again?"

"Matt," Dan said, but hesitated. She glanced at the far wall where Seth's desk had been as if she wasn't sure she dared say her next words aloud. "What could this mean for our season?"

Because Wymack purposefully recruited troubled individuals, the Foxes had been a fractured mess from day one. They were a team with no concept of teamwork and they determined their hierarchy through force. But when summer practices started, ninety percent of conflict on the court began with Seth. Seth was always ready for a fight with Kevin and the cousins. He wouldn't work with

them on the court and refused to deal with them off it. It constantly forced the Foxes to take sides.

Matt's expression was guarded, like he wasn't sure they could have this conversation so soon after Seth's death, but he answered. "Don't get your hopes up. They don't care about Seth. They won't rally behind him like this."

"But," Dan said, because she and Neil heard it in Matt's tone.

"But," Matt agreed, and looked at Neil. "We finally have an in."

Neil looked from one to the other. "I don't understand."

"We saw this once before, with Kevin," Matt said. "They staked a claim on you. They're going to drag you down their rabbit hole."

Dan put her hands on Neil's shoulders and fixed him with an intent look. "Don't go so deep you forget about us, okay? Put one foot in their hole and keep the other up here with us. You've got to be the piece that finally brings this team together. We can't make it to championships without them. Promise me you'll try."

"I'm not exactly a uniting force," Neil said.

"You've obviously got something Andrew wants," Matt said. "Where Andrew goes, they all go. You just have to pull him harder than he pulls you."

They made it sound easy when Neil knew it wasn't. "I'll try."

"Good," Dan said, squeezing his shoulders once before letting go. "That's all we ask."

Dan sat on the couch and pulled Matt down beside her. Neil sat at his desk and attempted to catch up on his homework. It was only the second week of school and he was already behind. He tried to read his chemistry notes, but a few paragraphs in he started zoning out. He made it three more pages before he gave up and pushed his textbook off his desk.

"Neil?" Dan asked.

"Why is chemistry so awful?" Neil asked, reaching for the next assignment.

"If I figure it out, you'll be the first to know," Dan said. "You could always ask Aaron for help. He's majoring in biological sciences."

Neil would rather fail than spend more time with Aaron. His Spanish homework was easier to get through, but his history was too boring to stand. Neil dropped that book on top of his chemistry one and stared blankly at his English assignment. He gave the paper a half-hearted effort, then dug around in his backpack for his math book. As he did he realized Matt and Dan were watching him.

"How many classes are you taking?" Dan asked, frowning at him.

"Six," Neil said.

"You aren't serious," Dan said. "Why?"

Neil looked from her to Matt. "That's what the catalogue suggested."

Dan grimaced at him, but Matt answered. "That schedule is for people graduating in four years. Your contract's five for a reason. Everyone knows you can't take a full course load and play on a team."

"Four classes," Dan said, holding up her fingers at him. "That's all it takes to be considered a full-time student. That's the most I want you taking this semester, okay? Figure out which two are going to make your life the most difficult and get rid of them. You're not doing us or yourself any favors by burning out this early."

"Can I drop classes?" Neil asked, surprised.

"In your first two weeks, yes," Matt said. "Where's your schedule? Let me see."

Neil dug it out of a binder and brought it over. Dan motioned for Neil to sit on her free side. She held the schedule where they could all see it.

"See this?" she asked, pointing out Neil's Monday-Wednesday-Friday classes. "This can't stay. If you don't leave yourself any breathing room you're going to snap. When I was in high school I worked an overnight job, went to school, and captained my high school Exy team. It made me hate everything about my life. I don't want the same thing happening to you. Matt said you and Kevin have night practices on top of all of this. Tell me: when do you actually sleep?"

"During class," Neil admitted.

She thunked Neil on the forehead. "Wrong answer. You've got a GPA to maintain."

"Dan's had a couple years to perfect this speech," Matt said over Dan's head. "If Court is your end goal, you're never going to need these classes. School is just a means to an end and an excuse to play Exy, so don't kill yourself over it. Here, I'll get my computer so we can log you into the school portal."

Neil stared at his schedule while Matt dug his laptop out of its bag and debated what to cut. It wasn't about which ones were time consuming, like Dan suggested, but ones he didn't need at all. Neil was only going to be at Palmetto State for a year, though he hadn't told his teammates that. Whatever he dropped, he dropped for good.

That made history and chemistry his prime choices, since he hated them. Neil wasn't a fan of his English or Speech classes, but those lessons might come in handy somehow when he had to run away. He needed his Spanish lessons for sure, and math was at least interesting.

Matt passed Neil his laptop when it booted, and Dan and Matt watched as Neil logged into his student profile. Matt reached across Dan to point out the

appropriate links to follow.

"Better?" Dan asked when his modified schedule loaded. "Look here. You had a break between history and speech, right? Now you've got two open periods. You can squeeze your tutor hours in there if you want. You have one morning class on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so you have all that time until practice for sleeping and homework. Works out perfectly, don't you think?"

Neil was more interested in the sleeping than the homework part. "Yes, thank you."

"Don't thank us, remember us," Dan said. "We're your teammates. We're here to help you with whatever you need, whether it's this or games or general stress. We've all got different experiences, but we're used to needing help. We're just not used to getting it. But you've got us now."

Neil didn't know how to respond. He wasn't sure what bothered him more: that he believed she meant it, or that he could never take her up on that offer regardless. The Foxes couldn't deal with his demons. The only one Neil quasi-trusted with the truth was Andrew, and that was only because he was desperate.

He was saved from answering when someone knocked at the door. Neil started to get up, but he had the computer in his lap still, so Matt beat him to his feet. Neil thought it might be one of the other athletes from their hall who'd known Seth for years, but Renee was waiting in the hallway. Matt stepped out of the way to let her in. Dan cursed quietly at Neil's side. Neil heard her tone but missed her word choice; he was distracted by Renee's new limp.

"I wish you wouldn't do this," Dan said.

"I know," Renee said.

She eased onto the cushion Matt had abandoned while Matt rummaged in the kitchen. Matt returned with a cold pack. Renee smiled as she took it and pressed it to the knuckles on her right hand. Pain pulled at the corner of her mouth, but her expression was otherwise calm as she flexed her fingers. Neil expected Matt and Dan to smother Renee with alarm and concern, but neither one of them asked if she was okay.

"Tell me if this is going to be a problem," Dan said.

Renee shook her head. "Not for us. Whatever it is, it's strictly personal. He'll be back on the court tomorrow."

Neil wondered what alternate universe he'd stumbled into. "Andrew hit you."

"A couple times," Renee said. "I forgot how fast he is when he's high."

Neil looked from Renee's smile to her rainbow-streaked hair to the cross necklace hanging around her throat. He didn't understand. Renee warned him not to overestimate how good she was, but everyone else said Renee was the gentle

soul of the team. She'd been nothing but conciliatory since he first met her. Up until now, the only questionable part about her was her friendship with Andrew.

"Renee and Andrew are sparring partners," Matt said.

It obviously didn't sound as ridiculous to them as it did to Neil, but aside from flat-out asking what a sweet Christian girl was doing fighting the unofficial sociopath of the team, Neil didn't know what to say. He looked at Matt for help, but Matt only grinned at his confusion. Neil looked at Dan next, but she was too intent on Renee's hand to notice the attention. Finally Renee glanced up and took pity on him.

"I am a born-again, Neil. Andrew is not interested in my faith; he is interested in the person I was before. He and I have more in common than you think. That is why I make you uncomfortable, isn't it?"

Dan and Matt sent Neil curious looks at that. Apparently they hadn't noticed how hard Neil worked to avoid getting caught alone with Renee. Neil ignored them and said, "You make me uncomfortable because you don't make sense. I don't understand you."

"You could ask," Renee said.

"Is it really that easy?" Neil asked.

"I'm not proud of my past, but I can't heal if I hide it. When you think you are ready to trust me, let me know. I don't want it to be a problem between us. We can get a cup of coffee and talk about anything you like. Right now, though..." Renee braced her good hand against the arm of the couch and got to her feet. "All I want is a hot shower and my bed. I'm exhausted."

Dan looped her arm through Renee's and looked from Matt to Neil. "You guys can spend the night in our room, if you want. If you think..." She didn't finish, but the look she sent around the room said enough. "We've got a futon you can use, Neil."

"I'll sleep here," Neil said, "but I've got practice with Kevin tonight, so you should take Matt with you."

"You sure?" Matt asked.

"I'm sure," Neil said. "I'll be fine."

Matt hesitated, then kissed Dan goodnight. "I'll wait with him until Kevin comes by. See you in a bit."

He walked them to the door and closed it behind them. In their absence the room felt a thousand times larger, and the silence settled between Matt and Neil like a stone.

"He's late," Matt said in an awkward attempt to break the quiet. "Maybe Andrew's too mad to let him come."

"Maybe."

Neil sat at his desk to wait. Kevin usually collected Neil at ten for their night practices, but Andrew had been gone for hours with Renee. It was now a little after eleven. Neil yawned into his hand as he watched the clock. He wondered if he should just go to their room and ask Kevin if they were canceling practice and decided he'd do it at half after. Seven minutes before his self-imposed deadline, Kevin finally showed up.

"At some point you have to let him sleep," Matt said, following them into the hall so he could go next door to Dan.

"He can sleep when we've won finals," Kevin said.

Andrew was waiting for them in the car as usual. Despite the ugly way Kevin and Andrew left each other at practice, there was no obvious tension between them now. Andrew said nothing when Kevin and Neil climbed into his car and took them to the stadium in silence. Maybe his bout with Renee took the energy out of him, or maybe Andrew didn't care enough to hold a grudge. Neil wasn't sure, but he watched Andrew go up the stairs into the stands to wait on them and wondered.

"Now, Neil," Kevin said from the court door.

Neil pushed all thoughts of Andrew aside and followed Kevin onto the Foxhole Court.

CHAPTER THREE

Thursday's practice was more uncomfortable than Wednesday's was. It would be easy to blame Andrew's drugged reappearance in their goal Thursday afternoon, but Andrew mostly behaved himself. He didn't mention Seth a single time and had little to say to the upperclassmen.

The problem was what Dan and Matt had noticed Wednesday night: the team stood to be so much greater without Seth on the line. Andrew, Aaron, and Nicky might have personal issues off the court, but they worked well together on it. Matt had an in with the group thanks to his talent and whatever Andrew put him through last year. Dan led them and kept them moving from her spot as the offensive dealer. Kevin pushed Neil mercilessly on the strikers' line, but Neil fought tooth and nail to keep up. Renee smoothed over the jagged edges whenever they started to show.

For the first time in Fox history, the team was a unified force. Dan and Matt could see that, but Neil saw the guilt on their faces and heard the catch in their words when they spoke during breaks. They didn't want to find the silver lining of Seth's death and they were hesitant to exploit it. Neil wanted to tell them death was no reason to hold back, but he found their humanity interesting. He just hoped they got over it before first serve on Friday night.

Their second match of the season was an away game, for which the team was grateful. Seth's absence was noticeable enough at practices; the first home game without him would be awkward and distracting. Neil didn't think Allison was ready for that yet.

Wymack needed them at the court by twelve-thirty on Friday so they could get on the road on time. He signed them out of their late morning classes, but it didn't save Neil from his Spanish and math lessons. After calculus he dropped his bag off at the dorm and met his teammates. Dan did a headcount in the hall to make sure they were all present, and then they split up between two cars for the short drive to the stadium.

Since Saturday's trip to Columbia, Neil had been riding to the stadium with the cousins. There was more room in Matt's truck than there was in Andrew's backseat, but Andrew had given Neil an explicit order Saturday night: stay in Kevin's line of sight and keep Kevin interested in his potential. Neil could have argued that there was nothing to gain from sitting behind Kevin in a car, except now Dan and Matt trusted him to somehow bring the team together. They were right when they said Andrew was the key. Neil had to stay on his good side until

he figured out the right leverage, so he swallowed his discomfort and did as he was told.

He had a new reason to be uncomfortable when they pulled into the stadium parking lot. Abby had been out all week taking care of Allison, but her car was here now. That meant Allison was waiting for them in the locker room.

On Saturday morning Neil insulted Riko on national television. Kevin warned them Riko would retaliate the same day. The Foxes should have stayed together out of sight, but Allison and Seth went bar-hopping downtown with friends. Neil saw Seth right before they all split up. He remembered telling the upperclassmen goodbye before following Andrew south to Columbia. Four hours later Seth was dead.

It could be tragic coincidence and convenient timing. It could be Riko's handiwork. The latter was absurd, but the former was impossible. Allison knew Seth's bad habits. She knew Seth liked mixing drinks with his prescription pills. Neil saw Allison dig through Seth's pockets in search of the bottle. She'd come up empty and kissed Seth's irritation away. Somehow he overdosed anyway, and Andrew was convinced Riko was behind it.

Neil hadn't been directly responsible for someone's death in years, though he knew how many people died in his mother's quest to keep them safe. Neil never wanted to be his father, but he didn't want to turn into his mother, either. They were different kinds of heartless and Neil, for all his problems connecting with other people, didn't want to be a monster. The way this season was starting, though, maybe it was inevitable he'd turn into his parents.

Neil needed more time to figure out which theory he sided with, but it didn't matter what he thought. If Allison connected the dots and blamed Seth's death on Neil there'd be no dealing with her this year. Neil had to patch things up with her somehow, but he didn't know where to start. He'd never been good at winning people over. Someone like Allison wasn't likely to be his first success.

Allison Reynolds was a bewildering choice for Palmetto State. She looked like a picture-perfect princess, but she could brawl with the best of them on the court. She refused to bend to others' expectations of her and could be honest to the point of cruelty. She could have inherited her parents' billion-dollar empire, but she didn't want the restrictions that life came with. She wanted the right to be her own person. She wanted to prove herself on the court. And for some reason she wanted Seth despite his many issues and rude affection.

Neil hoped she could learn to live with two out of three.

Andrew must have felt Neil tense up; they were sitting shoulder-to-shoulder in the backseat of Andrew's car. He followed Neil's stare to Abby's car as Nicky pulled into a parking space a short ways down.

"She made it," Andrew said. "This should be interesting."

Nicky twisted the key out of the ignition. "For you, perhaps."

"Yes, for me." Andrew laughed and got out of the car.

Aaron was slower to move, so Neil followed Andrew out onto the asphalt. He hesitated with one hand on the door and stared at the Foxes' bus where it was parked a couple spaces down. Andrew watched him with a mocking smile on his lips. Neil was stalling and they both knew it.

Annoyed, Neil pushed the car door closed and started for the fence. He put Abby's digits into the security keypad and listened for the buzz before trying the knob. Andrew was on his heels as he went down the hall, with Kevin no doubt right behind him, so Neil didn't let himself slow. He braced himself for Allison's possible reaction and stepped into the locker room.

Neil had seen Allison at her best, dressed to the nines with flawless makeup and curls. He'd seen her fresh off the court, red-faced and sweaty and human. He'd never seen her like this.

Allison's platinum-blond hair was perfectly styled and everything she wore was trendy and expensive. At first glance it was like nothing had changed, but more than a split-second look showed the fight had gone out of her. She sat with her fingers laced together and hands locked between her knees, her shoulders slumped and expression dead. Her eyes were hooded and she stared at the floor, seemingly oblivious to the arrival of her five teammates.

Andrew went straight for his spot on the couch like he didn't even notice she was there, but Aaron and Kevin froze at the sight of her. Neil thought he should apologize or ask if she was okay, but his voice was dead inside him. Surprisingly, it was Nicky who found the strength to cross the room toward her. He crouched in front of her, moving slow like he thought she'd run off if he startled her, and gazed up into her face.

"Hey," Nicky said, soft and nice like the two of them hadn't spent all summer cutting each other down on the court. "Is there anything we can do?"

She didn't answer, but she heard him. Her lips went white as she pressed them harder together. Nicky stayed where he was, trying to either offer silent support or wait her out. It was an age before Allison moved again, but she didn't look at Nicky. Her smoky gray gaze lifted unerringly to Neil's face.

Neil stood silent and still just inside the locker room door and waited for her judgment. It never came. The seconds dragged by, endless and awful, and Allison's expression didn't change. She didn't look angry like he thought she should or sad like he was sure she would. She was just—there. She was breathing, but she was lifeless, a marionette whose strings had been cut.

Neil was saved by the arrival of the rest of the team. He had to move to avoid getting hit by the door. Dan and Renee went straight to Allison's chair and took up perches on the arms to either side of her. Dan wound her arm around Allison's shoulders, somehow looking more fierce than comforting, and murmured something at Allison's ear. Allison turned her head toward Dan's, soaking up whatever reassurances Dan had for her, and Neil finally remembered how to move. Nicky got up when it was obvious the girls could handle Allison. The rest of the team slowly settled around the rest of the room.

They were all on time, but Wymack and Abby were conspicuously absent. Neil wondered if Wymack was late on purpose. His absence took away the pressure and reality of why they were here. He was giving the Foxes a few minutes to adjust to Allison's return and grief. It gave them a chance to see her before Wymack forced their attention back to Exy.

It also showed them what they were up against tonight. Allison was back, but she looked like she was holding herself together by threads. Neil didn't know if she'd get it together long enough to play. If she couldn't, they were going to get wrecked. Belmonte University was one of the strongest schools in their district. They weren't as high-ranked as Breckenridge was, but they'd be almost as difficult to face now that the Foxes were down Seth. If they lost Allison too the game was over before it even started.

Wymack's office door opened at last. He came into the lounge and motioned to Allison. "Go on ahead of us, Allison. Nicky will load your things."

Nicky made a face at Wymack but was too smart to protest where Allison could hear. Allison slipped free of Dan's embrace and walked out without another look back. Nicky waited until the door closed behind her before speaking up.

"Seriously, whose idea was it to bring her along?" Nicky asked. "She shouldn't be here."

"We gave her the choice to sit it out," Wymack said. "She wanted to come."

"I wouldn't have asked her," Nicky said, flicking a worried look at the door. "I would have just left her behind and apologized later. She isn't ready."

Andrew laughed. "So little faith, Nicky. Don't worry. She'll play."

It was a show of support from the least expected corner. Andrew smiled in the face of his teammates' shock and suspicion. He didn't bother to explain where his confidence came from but lifted his hands and gestured at the strikers to either side of him.

"Really, you should be more worried about these two lunatics."

"That's what I want to talk about," Wymack said, moving to stand in front of the TV. "Dan and I spent this week figuring out the best way to deal with the

striker line. You know I can't get us a sub yet. Kevin's played full halves before, but not since last fall. I don't think you've ever tried," Wymack said, and nodded when Neil shook his head. "Neither one of you can play an entire game in the state you're in now. We'll have to work you up to that one week at a time.

"In the meantime, we're mixing things up to stay afloat." Wymack glanced at Dan and Renee, who hadn't yet gotten off Allison's chair to join Matt on the couch. "Our solution isn't pretty, but it's the best we can come up with on such short notice, so pay attention."

His clipboard was sitting on the entertainment center. He picked it up, flipped a couple pages, and began reading. "The starting line-up for tonight's first half goes as follows: Andrew, Matt, Nicky, Allison, Kevin, Neil. First half subs: Aaron for Nicky, Dan for Kevin, Renee for Allison."

"Wait." Nicky shot Renee a startled look. "What?"

Wymack held up one hand to cut Nicky off. "Second half line-up: Aaron, Nicky, Allison, Kevin, Dan. Matt's on for Nicky, Neil's on for Dan, and Renee's on for Allison again." He let go of the papers and looked up. "Tell me you got that, because I'm not repeating it."

"Is that a joke, Coach?" Nicky asked. "Renee's a goalkeeper."

"Dan's the only one who can fill in for the striker line," Renee said, "and Allison is going to be touch and go for a while. Coach and I talked about it on Tuesday, so I've had some time to modify our extra gear. I know I haven't played defense since middle school, but I'll give it my best shot."

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but it's not you I'm worried about," Nicky said. "If you're going to play dealer who do we have in goal second half?"

Wymack looked at Andrew. Andrew looked over his shoulder as if checking for a third goalkeeper. There wasn't one, so he quirked an eyebrow at Wymack and dragged his thumb across his smiling mouth.

"Coach knows my medicine doesn't work that way."

"I know," Wymack said.

"What are you telling me to do?"

"I'm not telling you anything," Wymack said. "We had a deal and I'm not about to renege on that. I'm offering a trade, same terms and conditions as last year. Abby picked the bottle up yesterday and put it in the first aid kit. It's yours as soon as you walk off the court. All you have to do is play. How you play is up to you."

"They won't be ready in a week. How long do you think you can keep this up?"

"As long as you can," Wymack said. "So can you hold the line or can't you?"

Andrew laughed. "I guess we'll find out."

Wymack nodded. "Anyone else have questions?"

Nicky was persistent. "Coach, this line-up is insane."

"Yup. Good luck." Wymack clapped his hands at them to drown out any other arguments. "Let's move. Get your gear and get out of my locker room. Dan, Renee, if you can sort Allison's things out Nicky will take them out to the bus. Matt, you're helping me with the stick rack. I'm starting the bus in ten minutes. If you're not on it you're not coming with us. Go, go, go."

They split up to the changing rooms to find their gear. Their travel duffels were waiting for them on the benches by their lockers. Neil picked his up and turned it over in his hands, admiring the bright orange embroidery. His name and number were on one side and a fox paw was on the other. It smelled new.

He'd just put the last number in his locker's combination when metal banged further down. Neil jerked his attention back to his teammates. Andrew was opening and closing his locker for no apparent reason. He only did it twice before Kevin caught the door to stop him. Andrew didn't fight but shoveled gear out of his locker onto the floor.

"What is going on?" Kevin asked. "You can't last a full game without your medicine."

Neil was glad someone asked, because he had his own serious doubts about this plan. Withdrawal started soon after Andrew missed a dose and came in three stages: a psychological and physical crash, violent illness, and insane cravings. Neil had gotten glimpses of the first two stages. He didn't know how long it took for the third to kick in, but Matt once said Neil would be lucky to never see it.

Withdrawal shouldn't be a problem, since Andrew was required to stay on his medicine for three years as part of his parole agreement, except Wymack let Andrew come off his drugs on game nights. The court was too hectic and Andrew's gear too thick for anyone to notice when the manic smile left his face. If Andrew could stomach the crash for first half, he could take his pills during the halftime break and recover on the sidelines the rest of the game.

Andrew seemed to have it down to an art form. Neil hadn't even noticed a difference last week. But that was for one half, and now Andrew was expected to play a full game. The obvious answer was that Andrew would have to play with his drugs tonight whether he wanted to or not, but things were never that easy with Andrew.

"No, probably not." Andrew sounded far too cheerful for someone who was going to spend half of his night in serious discomfort. He crouched and began sorting out the mess he'd made of his armor and uniform. "We'll figure something out."

"He's done it once before," Matt said.

"Yeah, last October." Nicky didn't look up from where he was stuffing things into his duffel, but he was grinning as he told his story. "We found out the ERC was going to cut us from the Class I ranks if we didn't stop losing. Coach asked Andrew for a miracle, and Andrew gave us one. He made Coach come up with a number between one and five, and that's how many points he let the other team get before he shut them out. It was probably the most badass thing I've ever seen."

If his words were supposed to make Kevin feel better about Andrew's chances tonight, they achieved the exact opposite. Kevin's face was a thundercloud.

"So you'll try," Kevin said through gritted teeth, "because Coach asked you to."

Andrew folded his arms across his knees, tilted his head back, and smiled up at Kevin. "Careful, Kevin. Your jealous streak is showing."

"For eight months you've told me no. In eight seconds you told him yes. Why?"

"Oh, that's easy." Andrew stuffed the last of his gear into his bag and zipped it shut. He slung the bag over his shoulders and got to his feet, standing up so close to Kevin he almost knocked Kevin back a step. "It's just more fun to tell you no. That's what you wanted, right? You wanted me to have fun. I am. Aren't you?"

For someone so small, Andrew made a lot of noise when shoved into the lockers. Andrew was laughing as he crashed into the orange metal. Neil didn't know what amused Andrew more: Kevin's violence or the splash of blood that now stained the front of Kevin's shirt. Neil hadn't even seen Andrew take a knife out, but it was in his hand in the air between them. Kevin retreated from Andrew with a sharp curse.

"Jesus, Andrew!" Matt said. "Kevin, are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Kevin put a hand to his chest as if checking the truth of his words.

Neil was at the far end of the lockers from them, so he couldn't see very well, but the relative lack of blood made him think the cut was shallow. It was long, but it wasn't serious. It was going to sting when Kevin put heavy armor overtop it tonight, though.

Andrew stepped away from the lockers and got in Kevin's space again. He put the edge of the blade against Kevin's chest over his heart and peered up into Kevin's face. Kevin looked more angry than intimidated as he stared back. Matt started toward them, maybe thinking he had to break up round two of their fight. Kevin didn't look away from Andrew when he motioned at Matt to back off.

Matt didn't stop until he was within lunging distance. There he waited, still and tense, for one of them to make the wrong move.

After he'd gone still, Andrew spoke again. "Kevin, Kevin. So predictable. So pathetic. How about a tip? A reward for all your hard work, or something. Ready? You'll start having more success when you ask for things you can actually have."

"I can have this," Kevin said, voice thick with frustration. "You're just being stupid."

"I guess we'll see, but don't say I didn't warn you!"

Andrew stepped around him and wiped his knife off on his arm. Whatever else Andrew wore, there was one accessory he never took off: a pair of black armbands that stretched from his elbows to his wrists. They were mostly a joke, a way for strangers to tell the twins apart, but Andrew had another purpose for them. Neil found out in June Andrew was hiding sheaths under the thin cotton. As soon as Andrew knew his blade was clean the knife disappeared from sight. Andrew was out the door a couple seconds later.

"Are you serious?" Nicky sounded exasperated as he picked his bag up. "I thought you gave up this fight months ago. You're never going to win."

Kevin stormed over to his locker without answering and began packing his bag. Nicky shook his head and started for the door. Aaron hadn't slowed long enough to watch the short fight, so he was right behind Nicky. Neil watched Kevin for another outburst, but Kevin was venting the rest of his anger silently. He shoved his gear into his bag like he wanted to break it.

The only thing that mattered to Kevin was Exy. He'd been raised on this sport and the only thing he wanted was to outperform every other striker he faced on the court. He pushed his teammates mercilessly and demanded twice as much of himself. Kevin couldn't stand incompetence and he wouldn't tolerate anything less than his teammate's best efforts.

What Kevin hated most of all was Andrew's bone-deep apathy. Andrew had some of the best 'keeper statistics in the southeast and that was without putting forth a real effort. Kevin had spent the better part of a year trying to get through to Andrew. He wanted Exy to mean something; he wanted Andrew's best performance like a dying man wanted one last breath of air. Andrew knew it, and he refused to play along.

Neil understood Kevin's anger. He'd been equally baffled this summer when he first saw Andrew play. It was impossible—should be impossible—for someone so talented to care so little. Unfortunately Andrew's drugs wrecked his attention span and kept him buzzing too high to honestly care about the game's outcome. Playing through withdrawal might actually be the better option, except

Neil had tried talking to a semi-sober Andrew about Exy this summer. Andrew said Exy was too boring to be worth his while.

It was one thing if Andrew's psychological issues and medicine made him incapable of trying, but he'd just sold his game to Wymack without a real argument. Neil didn't know what that meant, and he didn't know how to feel about it.

Matt waited until Kevin stalked out a minute later before looking at Neil. "Well, tonight is going to be awesome."

"I think you meant to say 'awful'," Neil said, zipping his bag shut.

Matt gave Neil a grim smile and closed his locker. He passed Neil on the way to the door and clapped a hand on Neil's shoulder. "Just try not to think about it until we get there. You won't do yourself any favors if you spend the ride stressing out about things you can't change."

Neil nodded and said, "Matt, I'll help Coach with the racquets. I want to ask him something."

"You sure?" Matt asked. "Then here, I'll get your duffel out to the bus. It's awkward dealing with both."

Neil handed the heavy bag over and got the door. Matt turned left and headed for the exit, and Neil went right to the foyer. Wymack had the gear closet open and had already rolled out the trolley the racquets hung on. The protective lids were open so Wymack could check heads. Neil knew the sticks were in good shape, since maintenance was one of the last things the Foxes did before leaving practices everyday, but Wymack was testing string tensions down the line.

Wymack glanced up at Neil's approach but didn't ask why Neil was here in Matt's stead. Neil said nothing at first but reached out and hooked his fingers through the head of his racquet. He was bringing both of his racquets tonight just in case. The racquets were sturdily built to put power behind their throws and withstand all the stick-checking on the court, but even the strongest racquet would break with enough abuse. Neil didn't want to be seven hours from home and have nothing to play with.

"Watch your fingers," Wymack said.

Neil moved so Wymack could snap the lids shut. Plastic latches clicked in rapid succession. Wymack rattled the rack a little to make sure none of them popped open then gestured for Neil to take the front handle. Neil did as he was told but didn't move yet. He stalled, mentally digging for the best way to word his question. He thought Wymack would hurry him along since they had a schedule to keep, but Wymack waited him out.

"I didn't think Andrew had a price tag," Neil said. "He doesn't seem the kind of person who can be bought."

"He's not," Wymack said. "If I asked him to do it for free, he would. The only reason he's getting something out of this is because I know what it'll cost him to play for us tonight."

"But why?" Neil asked. "Why are you so special?"

Wymack arched an eyebrow at him. "I'm not."

"I don't understand."

"Maybe you've noticed how much I let this team get away with," Wymack said. "I know what sort of people I've recruited, and I know some of them need a little help to keep an even keel. So long as no one gets hurt, no one gets caught, and no one is stupid enough to bring it onto my court, I don't care what you guys get up to in your free time. It's not my business because I don't want it to be my business."

Wymack meant the cracker dust party drugs and alcohol Andrew gave his group in Columbia. Neil wasn't sure what surprised him more: that Wymack knew what his defense line was into or that he let it happen. Wymack's inaction wasn't approval, but a man in his position shouldn't condone such things even implicitly. Someone else might think Wymack was being irresponsible. Maybe he was, but Neil knew it wasn't that simple.

Some said Wymack recruited troubled athletes as a publicity stunt. Others thought he was a misguided idealist. Digging up talented wrecks and giving them the chance to turn their lives around was nice in theory and a disaster in reality. Truth was Wymack picked them because he understood firsthand how much they needed another chance. He looked the other way because he knew how badly some of them needed their escapes to survive.

"Does Andrew know you know?" Neil asked.

"Of course he does."

That was interesting. Andrew knew Wymack could keep a tighter leash on him and was choosing not to do so, so when Wymack needed him to pull through he would. Neil thought about it and asked, "Is it respect or prudence?"

"We'll go with the latter," Wymack said. "Andrew likes me about as much as you do."

There was nothing in his tone to make it an accusation, but Neil still winced. "I'm sorry."

"Be sorry while you walk. We're running late."

They rolled the stick rack down the hall to the exit. Neil detoured in the lounge long enough to grab his backpack and Wymack turned off the lights as they went. They waited outside the gate long enough to make sure the lock caught. Getting the rack into the bus was awkward, as they had to load it sideways. Luckily the case around it kept the racquets from dragging against the

metal floor of the undercarriage. Wymack slammed the storage doors with a mighty shove, followed Neil onto the bus, and did a headcount from the front.

Everyone else was already on board. Abby had the front row, with Dan and Matt doubled up behind her. Allison and Renee were sitting together in the third row, choosing comfort and companionship over the room to spread out. Because the upperclassmen were doubled up, it left four empty rows between them and Andrew's group.

Unlike their teammates, Andrew's group sat one to a row. Andrew had the very last row, with Kevin right in front of him. Nicky had been in front of Kevin last time, but now Nicky and Aaron were up a row to leave an empty spot in the middle. Neil didn't have to ask why. He dropped his backpack on the third seat and sank into the cushion. Leather creaked as Nicky turned, and Nicky grinned over his seatback at Neil.

"I was starting to think you got lost."

"No," Neil said. "I just wanted to check something."

Finished with his count, Wymack got into the driver's seat. The bus rumbled to life and the doors snapped closed. A few minutes later they were on the road. Neil watched out the window until the campus disappeared from view.

CHAPTER FOUR

The ride to Belmonte University was relatively uneventful. Neil had brought along schoolwork to pass the time, but he didn't have enough homework to fill a six-hour drive. Luckily Nicky could talk for days once someone got him going, so Neil had someone to distract him from how long they were on the road. Renee joined them at one point to talk about possible plays and ask for advice. She'd already talked to Matt and Wymack, but she wanted to bounce ideas off the other half of the defense line.

Abby drove most of the way so Wymack could sleep. They were driving back after the game instead of checking into a hotel for the night. Wymack would drive that leg and hopefully wouldn't send them off the road. They could have just hired a driver like most schools did, but Wymack was almost as leery of dealing with outsiders as his Foxes were. It was apparently better to be uncomfortable but safe than to trust a stranger with his fractured team.

They stopped for gas and a bathroom break, stopped again for a quick dinner, and crossed a time zone on their way to Nashville. First serve was at seven-thirty, but Neil's watch said they reached the stadium at seven forty-five. There was no point in setting his watch back an hour just for one game, so he took it off and stuffed it in his duffel bag.

They left the bus in a fenced-in parking lot manned by a couple of dispassionate security guards. Two volunteers waited for the Foxes to unload their gear before leading them to the away team's locker room. Neil trusted his feet to get him there and looked around. Belmonte University's stadium was almost identical to the Foxhole Court in the size and build, but it was hard for Neil to see the similarities when the crowd swarming around them wore green. He looked for orange and couldn't find it anywhere.

After four months at the Foxhole Court, Neil found the layout of Belmonte's locker room disorienting. The rooms were larger, to accommodate the league's bigger teams, but it felt smaller and backwards somehow. The changing rooms were right inside the door they came in, and the bathroom was separate. Neil guessed it was cheaper to have one unisex bathroom than install toilets in both changing rooms. There was a room Abby could use in case any of her players got injured. The last and largest room was for the Foxes to argue strategies between halves and meet the press after the game.

One of the volunteers took the back door into the stadium to find the referees and alert Coach Harrison to their arrival. The other went over a checklist of basic

rules with Wymack and Abby. Wymack had to wait for the officials so he could turn in their paperwork and roster, so he sent the Foxes ahead to change out.

Neil carried his bag into the bathroom and locked himself in a stall. It was a cramped space to change out in, but he'd had a lot of practice. He pulled his shirt up over his head and draped it over the top of the door so he could get his chest armor on. He yanked the straps tight, twisted to check his mobility, and snapped the buckles to lock his gear in place. He strapped his shoulder pads on overtop and hooked them into his chest plate. Neil had to dig past the rest of his gear to find his jersey. The Foxes had two sets of uniforms: home and away. The former was orange with white lettering and the latter was reverse. Neil liked the white version better as it was a little easier on the eyes.

He didn't need to hide to put on the rest of his uniform, so he stuffed his t-shirt into his duffel and headed to the men's changing room. He only made it three feet inside the door before he realized he had a serious problem. An open, narrow doorway was all that separated the lockers and benches from communal showers. Even from here Neil could see there weren't stall doors. Neil should have expected this, but he'd forgotten, lulled to complacency by the Foxhole Court's setup. The only reason the Foxes had private stalls in the men's room was because Wymack specifically commissioned them.

Neil forcibly focused on the task at hand. First he had to survive the game. Then he could worry about the showers. Neil relaxed his death grip on his duffel bag strap and found a spot to finish changing. His teammates were almost done already, since they didn't have to worry about hiding while they dressed, and they filed out as they finished.

Neil toed out of his shoes, peeled his socks off, and traded jean shorts for jersey shorts. He had to sit down to tug his shin guards on and he kicked his legs a bit to make sure they were snug. Knee-length socks covered the guards and he put on his court shoes. His under-gloves were fingerless and buckled above his elbows. He fastened his arm guards around his forearms but wouldn't need his armored gloves until he was stepping onto the court. He tucked them into his helmet for later. His neck guard was little more than an orange choker. It was uncomfortable but it'd hopefully keep an errant ball from crushing his windpipe. An orange bandana got his hair out of his face and he hooked it tight at the back. With that Neil was ready to go.

Wymack was waiting for them in the main room. Neil was the last to show up, but because he was a striker he was bumped to third in line. They were arranged by positions, but Dan was in front as their captain and Renee was standing with Allison as the substitute dealer. That was weird, but Neil was more concerned with his spot. Standing behind Kevin meant having Allison at his

back. Neil didn't look at her as he crossed the room, and she didn't say a word to him when he stopped in front of her.

"How long do you think you can keep that up?" Andrew asked from the back of the line.

Neil grit his teeth at the mocking cheer in Andrew's voice. "Can you crash already?"

"All in good time," Andrew promised.

The Foxhole Court had an open path to the inner court. Belmonte was designed differently, and the hall they took from the locker rooms to the court was a tunnel. Neil couldn't see the crowd yet, but he could hear them. The echoing roar of excited voices drowned out his footsteps as he followed Dan and Kevin into the stadium.

The stadium's seats were rapidly filling with green-clad fans. Security guards and uniformed staff were posted around the inner court and on each of the stairwells that cut up through the stands. The first row started a few feet off the floor, and a railing kept any excitable fans from interfering with the teams. Railing couldn't keep the noise out, but Neil let the jeers and shouts roll right over him.

Neil didn't see the Vixens, the Foxes' all-girls cheerleading squad, or their mascot Rocky Foxy. Belmonte's Terrapin mascot was already hard at it, though. He skipped up and down the inner court to rile fans up. The oversized mask he wore kept him from seeing the Foxes' arrival, but students pointed fingers and yelled warnings to him. He charged their direction as best he could in such a lumpy costume. He stopped a safe distance back from their benches to make a couple crude thrusts at them. Nicky was happy to return it until Wymack swatted him upside his head. The mascot ran off to triumphant cheers from students.

Andrew and Nicky had brought the stick rack with them at the rear of the line. Dan grabbed one end of it and pulled it between two of the away benches. She crouched to lock the wheels, then stood and snapped the tops open in rapid succession. Kevin was at her side before she was done. He pulled one of his racquets free, fingered the strings like they might have come loose on the drive, and went over to the court walls. He didn't spare the crowd a single look; all he cared about was right in front of him.

Neil took his racquet and went to stand at Kevin's side. The Terrapins were already settled on home benches on the far side of the court. They were smaller than Breckenridge's team, but still easily twice the Foxes' size. Neil twisted his fingers so tight around his racquet he heard it creak.

"Any advice?" Neil asked.

He didn't think he'd get an answer, but Kevin glanced over at him. "You're in for all of first half, so you have to pace yourself. I don't want you to score in the first twenty minutes unless the goal's right there in front of you. Pass, don't shoot. Keep the ball moving. When Dan comes on for me, go as hard as you can until the break.

"You'll have halftime and the first twenty minutes of second half to rest. Get your wind back, get back on the court, and give me everything you have. If I think you're holding back just because you're tired I will throw you off the court myself. I want you dead on your feet when the final buzzer sounds."

"Okay," Neil said. He knew it was a touchy subject, but he couldn't help asking, "Do you think Andrew's going to take his medicine for second half?"

"No," Kevin said sourly. "He pushed the last dose up thirty minutes. He thinks he's going to ride it all the way to the end."

Neil looked over his shoulder for Andrew. Last week Dan said Andrew timed his missed dose for a half-hour before serve. His energy started fading during warm-ups and he started the slow slide down right around when he hit the court. The slump lasted maybe an hour and fifteen minutes tops before he started getting sick. A game had two forty-five minute halves and a fifteen-minute break. Penalties and serves added a couple minutes to the clock. It didn't matter that Andrew had pushed the missed dose to the actual first serve; the game was too long for him to hold out. Andrew had to know that, but he didn't look at all concerned. He was still riding his medicine's high and talking animatedly with Renee off to one side.

"Bring it in, Foxes," Wymack called.

Orange moved in his peripheral vision as Neil turned toward Wymack. Neil looked over as the Vixens and Rocky filed into the stadium. The cheerleaders' bench was only twenty feet down from the last of the Foxes' three benches, but Neil couldn't hear their chatter over the rest of the noise. A couple students shouted lewd remarks and gave wolf whistles. The girls completely ignored it in favor of checking each other's skirts and hair. Because they were moving around so much, it was easy for Neil to see the one girl who was holding still. She turned her pompom over and over in her hands as she stared at the Foxes.

"Hi Katelyn!" Nicky yelled with an enthusiastic wave. Aaron elbowed him for that, but Katelyn smiled brightly and waved back. Nicky gave Neil a wolfish grin as Neil stopped beside him. "Katelyn is Aaron's girlfriend."

"She is not," Aaron said. "Knock it off."

"She would be if you'd just ask her out," Matt said. "What's the hold up?"

"Oh." Andrew slapped his fist into his palm as if the answer had just occurred to him. He flashed Matt a wicked grin but answered in German.

"Maybe he's afraid she'll die on him like the last woman he really loved."

Aaron shot him a vicious look. "Fuck you."

"Christ, Andrew," Nicky complained.

"I'm going to guess that was completely inappropriate," Matt said, looking between the cousins. "Do I want to know?"

"Do you think we want to tell you?" Andrew asked in English.

"Stow that," Wymack said. "Last I checked this was a team meeting, not a gossip circle. We're on the court for warm-ups in ten. Dan's going to start you off with some laps. If any of you so much as look at the Terrapins on your way past their benches I'll let you walk home from here. Good? Then get going."

Dan set the pace with Matt at her side. The rest of the Foxes followed behind them in pairs. Neil expected to be alone in the rear, and he wouldn't have minded, but they'd only gone a quarter of the way around the inner court when Andrew and Kevin moved. Andrew swerved to one side long enough for Neil to pass him. Kevin picked up speed to fall in alongside Neil. Neil looked over his shoulder at Andrew.

"If you trip over your own feet I won't pick you up," Kevin said.

Neil faced forward and decided not to ask.

It felt good to run after spending half the day in the bus, but Dan stopped them after two laps. They stretched by the benches until the referees signaled them to enter the court. They tugged on their helmets and gloves, gathered their racquets, and stepped onto the court for fifteen minutes of drills. The captains stayed behind when everyone else was kicked off the court. Dan met the Terrapin captain at half-court for a coin toss. Dan won their team first serve, so the Terrapins chose to start at home court.

The announcer read off team statistics when the captains left the courts. He called the Terrapin's starting line-up with over-the-top enthusiasm and introduced the Foxes with polite detachment. Neil was impressed despite himself. The abrupt switch in tone was an effective reminder to the Fox team: they were far from home and friendly territory.

Neil was called onto the court second. He had to pass the Terrapins to take his spot at half-court, so he checked out his backliner mark on his way by. Herrera had half a foot on him, so he'd have a longer reach. Neil would have to settle for being faster.

Neil stood on the line and watched the rest of his team join him. Allison didn't look at anyone as she went to the dealer's spot. Matt tapped her racquet with his as he passed and settled onto far-fourth in a straight line back from Neil. Neil was glad to have Matt on his side of the court, but he knew what it meant.

Matt was the Foxes' strongest player, and Neil was the weaker half of offense. Matt was there to clean up behind Neil's inevitable messes.

Andrew was the last one on court. He carried his massive racquet across his shoulders as he headed for goal. Neil couldn't get a good look at his expression through the heavy grating of his helmet. Neil wouldn't worry about him until second half, but he turned to watch Andrew's progress anyway.

He expected Andrew to head straight for the goal, but Andrew stopped near Allison. Neil was too far away to hear if Andrew said anything to her. He didn't linger long before continuing across the court. Allison didn't watch him go, but she shifted on her feet and raised her racquet to ready position.

The head referee handed Allison the ball. A warning buzzer sounded; it was one minute until game time. The six officials split up and filed off the court on opposite sides. They closed and locked the doors behind, and Neil watched as they spread out to either side of the court. Neil could still hear the crowd's noise through the overhead vents, but the walls helped muffle it. Neil tensed to run and tried to count seconds in his head. The buzzer sounded and Neil felt it sing through every nerve in his body.

Terrapins and Foxes broke formation at the same time, racing across the court toward each other. The Terrapin goalkeeper let out a wild war cry and banged his racquet against the floor to urge his teammates forward. Neil listened for a serve that didn't come. For a second he was afraid Allison would lock up and refuse to move. He was halfway to Herrera before he heard the distinctive thump of a ball against Andrew's oversized racquet. Allison had served it back to him, and Andrew smashed it up the court toward the strikers.

The game started rough and didn't get easier. Neil tried to follow Kevin's advice but it was frustrating holding himself in check. How Dan and Allison could stand being dealers and playing middleman all the time was beyond him. Neil liked outrunning and outsmarting the defense. He liked the rush of a perfect score. He liked the pressure and the triumph. The rest of his life was a frightening mess; Neil needed the power and control of a fierce game.

The only bright point was realizing his lessons with Kevin were paying off. Since June Neil spent four nights a week learning precision drills from Kevin. Passing wasn't what Neil wanted to do in this game, but he could already see how he was improving. His shots were harder and more accurate, and it took him less time to figure out where to throw.

It didn't take Herrera long to realize Neil wasn't going to score, but Herrera attributed it to incompetence. He kept making snide remarks about Neil's inexperience and spinelessness. Neil wanted to shove Herrera to the floor and charge the goal to prove him wrong. If he missed, Herrera would remind him the

rest of the game. If he scored, Kevin would take advantage of the reset to scold him. It was a lose-lose situation and the rest of the game wasn't going much better. The Terrapins were leading three to one until Kevin scored at the twenty-three minute mark.

Wymack used the possession to send out his substitutions. Neil wasn't between Kevin and the door, but Kevin detoured past him anyway on his way out.

"Destroy him," he said.

Neil felt like he'd been waiting for this all his life. "Yeah."

Kevin, Allison, and Aaron filed off the court to let their teammates on. Nicky and Dan came first and jogged to their places. Renee gave Allison a hug at the door before taking her place on the court. She looked strange and small without her usual goalkeeper armor on. Neil hoped she knew what she was doing.

Coach Harrison took advantage of the lull to rotate his Terrapins. He didn't replace either of the backliners, likely because the Terrapin defense hadn't had much work to do so far, but put on two new strikers.

The referees locked the doors behind them. When everyone stopped moving, the buzzer sounded to restart the game. Renee was acting dealer, but she didn't serve forward. She turned and heaved the ball at Andrew like Allison had. Andrew smashed it with a mighty swing that sent it all the way to the home court wall.

Neil and Dan ran up the court after it. The ball hit the wall near the ceiling, bounced up to hit the ceiling itself, and rebounded at a steep angle to the first-fourth line. The backliners who'd already started forward to keep Dan and Neil out of their space doubled back as fast as they could. Herrera caught the ball and threw it forward.

Neil didn't try to intercept it. He was more interested in keeping Herrera on this side of the half-court line. He turned to watch the ball but pressed himself back against Herrera. When Herrera tried to move left or right to run toward half-court, Neil felt it and shifted with him. Neil couldn't hold him back for long, but he just needed to buy his teammates time to gain possession.

Defense knew what to do; Renee had suggested this play on the bus. They hadn't known which one of them would get the ball from the Terrapins after this kind of serve, but they knew what to do if they caught it. Matt was the one who won the fight. He hooked his stick around his striker's and gave it a hard swipe to pop the ball free. Matt grabbed it and threw it. He didn't even slow long enough to look, trusting Andrew to get it from any angle.

Andrew hit the ball to the left, smacking it off the wall in front of the Fox benches so it would rebound in Neil and Herrera's general direction. Neil didn't

wait for it to reach him. He bolted for it the second he saw the angle of Andrew's swing.

He knew Herrera was right behind him for a body check. If he got crushed between the wall and Herrera, he'd lose the ball in the fight. Neil caught the ball right off the wall but didn't try to protect it. Instead he gave the butt of his racquet a hard pop with one fist. It sent the ball flying straight up out of the net. He dropped to his knees in the same breath.

He almost wasn't fast enough. Herrera crashed into him at full speed a half-second later, but Neil wasn't where Herrera expected him to be. He tripped over Neil's body and, without Neil to take the brunt of the blow for him, crashed into the wall helmet-first. Neil pushed free of Herrera's crumpling body and swore at the flare of heat in his shoulder. If it wasn't for his shoulder armor, Herrera's knee might have dislocated his arm on impact.

Someone pounded on the wall nearby. It might have been support from the subs for dropping his mark like that, but it was more likely Wymack or Kevin furious over such a risky move. Neil would worry about them later. Right now all that mattered was the ball, which was bouncing off the floor just a foot away.

Neil scooped it up and took off for goal. He didn't look back to see if Herrera had gotten up or if Dan's mark had dropped her to challenge him. He looked only at the goalkeeper and knew he was going to score. He put all of his first-half frustration behind his swing. The goalkeeper swatted at it and missed. The wall lit up red to confirm the point.

Dan whooped so loud it echoed off the court walls. Neil slowed to a jog and wheeled around. Dan ran over and gave him a quick, fierce squeeze. The buzzer overhead cut her off before she could say anything. They watched side-by-side as Coach Harrison called Herrera off the court. Because Herrera might be injured from that hard crash, Harrison had the right to pull him even though it was the Foxes' serve. Neil watched his new backliner enter the court, but Dan pulled his attention back to her.

"That was perfect," she said, then gave his shoulder a hard smack. Neil couldn't hide all of his wince. Dan put her finger in his face. "But don't do something that reckless again. We can't replace you. Hear me?"

"Yes, Dan."

"Good. Now let's show these bastards what's what."

It was easier said than done, but they fought all the way to halftime. When the clock ran out they'd pushed the score to four-even. Wymack ushered his team off the court to the chaos of a riled crowd. Kevin had nothing to say to them, but Aaron went straight to Matt and Nicky to check on them. Allison was nowhere

in sight, but neither was Abby, so Neil guessed they'd stepped away from the noise together. Neil hoped Allison could hold it together for a little longer.

Wymack pointed them toward the locker room but stayed behind an extra minute to smile at cameras and secure the stick rack. Neil had his gloves and helmet off as soon as he reached the tunnel. He yanked his neck guard off next, needing a little extra room to breathe. He could barely feel his legs. He couldn't feel his feet, but he assumed they were down there somewhere. The shoulder he'd hurt in first half was still throbbing thanks to the well-aimed blows of his new backliner mark.

The Foxes spread out into a loose circle in the locker room to shed extraneous gear and stretch. The others looked beat but sounded lively. They chatted about their comeback, sounding cautiously hopeful for second half. Dan and Matt were even laughing about something rude a striker had said to Matt. Neil looked around the circle at them, soaking up their enthusiasm, but his attention caught and held on Andrew before long.

Neil had seen Andrew go through withdrawal before, but not like this. It'd always been late at night when exhaustion had set in or down in Columbia with drugs and alcohol to soften the edge. In those sorts of backdrops Neil couldn't really appreciate the dead stage Andrew went through.

Everyone warned Neil that Andrew didn't care about Exy, but some part of Neil refused to believe that. The pieces didn't add up right, especially when Andrew willingly came off his euphoric drugs for games. The fight with Kevin this morning proved something strange was going on. But Andrew stood a silent stone in their midst, looking a thousand miles away from all of this. He was a vacuum his teammates' rowdy cheer couldn't touch.

"Stop it."

He didn't mean to say it. He didn't even realize he'd spoken until his teammates' conversations petered off. Dan and Matt sent him curious looks. Renee glanced between Neil and Andrew, whereas Aaron didn't look up at all. Kevin put it together faster than anyone, since he felt the same nauseous anger toward Andrew's apathy. The look he flicked Andrew was accusatory.

Andrew slid a bored look Neil's way. "I'm not doing anything."

"Exactly," Neil wanted to say, but he knew it was a senseless argument. He didn't have the right words for that gnawing feeling in his stomach and it was his fault for being so naïve. He gave a frustrated shake of his head and let it drop.

Nicky opened his mouth, hesitated as he reconsidered his words, and then clapped a hand on Neil's shoulder in either comfort or encouragement. He left his hand there but directed his too-cheerful words at the rest of the team.

"Hey, so we're actually doing much better than I thought we would."

Wymack chose that moment to walk in and he scowled at Nicky's words. "This is horrible. This kind of game isn't going to work for us, and today is the last time I'll tolerate it. You have got to start creating point gaps in the first half. You need that cushion when it's your second wind against their fresh line-up."

"He's right," Dan said. "We need to push harder earlier. We hold back because we're trying to pace ourselves for a long night, but playing catch-up is a killer. We need to play smarter and balance this out somehow."

Wymack nodded and looked across the room. "Andrew?"

"Present," Andrew said.

Wymack interpreted that unhelpful response however he wanted to and snapped his fingers at his team. "Come on, stretch it out." He walked a couple steps away and called down the hall, "Abby?"

"Coming," Abby said from out of sight, and showed up carrying two jugs. One had water, the other a sports drink. She poured some of each for the Foxes and made rounds to pass them out. She came to Neil last and stayed with him, feeling the line of his shoulder armor through his jersey. "How are you doing?"

Neil drained both cups before answering. "I'm fine."

Nicky fist-pumped in triumph. "Thank you for being so predictable, Neil. You just scored me ten bucks with two words."

Matt looked up. "Are you serious? Who the hell bet against you?"

Nicky jerked a thumb at Kevin. "There's a sucker born every minute."

Kevin looked furious, but that anger was directed at Neil. "You are an idiot. Do you see this?" He brandished his left hand at Neil. Neil couldn't see his scars from across the room but he knew what Kevin was referring to. "Injuries are not a joke. They are not something to gloss over. If you get hurt out there, you do something about it. You take it easy, you have Coach pull you, you ask Abby for help—I don't care. If you ever say 'I'm fine' about your health again I will make you rue the day you were born. Are we clear?"

Neil opened his mouth, thought better of arguing, and said, "We're clear."

"I did warn you," Dan said, unsympathetic. "I think Kevin's threats are more effective though."

Abby eyed Neil. "I'll ask again, then. Are you okay?"

"I'm—" It was too automatic a response; Neil bit it off when Kevin took a threatening step forward. He huffed in annoyance and dug for a better answer. "It's just sore. So long as I can keep my mark off my right side I'll be—okay."

Matt laughed at the near-miss. "I don't see this experiment ending well, Neil."

"Some people are just hardwired to be stupid," Wymack said. "Now stop yapping and listen up. We have a lot to get through."

Wymack started with the backliners and worked his way forward, pointing out missed opportunities and highlighting their scattered successes. He had a list of the second half's starting line-up, so he spent the second half of the break going over their opponents.

The Foxes gave him their undivided attention, but they didn't stop moving. Matt stopped stretching in favor of pacing the length of the wall. The others shifted, stretched, and jogged in place as Wymack spoke. Abby collected empty cups, tossed them in the trash, and handed out refills. Neil drank his so fast he barely tasted it. He was starting to get his second wind back, but he was glad to sit out part of the next half. He wanted to be fully recharged before he joined Kevin on the court.

A buzzer sounded overhead. They were due in the inner court in one minute, and Allison was still missing. Abby nodded at the look Wymack sent her and went in search of the missing dealer.

"Let's get ready to move," Wymack said.

Wymack shoed them into line and grabbed his clipboard off the floor. Neil looked down the hall to where Abby stood outside the bathroom door. She motioned at Wymack to go ahead, so Wymack opened the door and led the Foxes back into the stadium.

Neil wouldn't need his gloves or helmet for a while, so he set them on the bench and helped Nicky situate the stick rack. By the time he straightened Allison was already on her way out. She was dressed to go and came straight for her racquet. Neil tried scooting out of her way without being too obvious about it. If she noticed, she didn't comment. The dead look on her face said she'd narrowed all of her attention down to the task at hand.

Starting line-ups were called to the door shortly afterward. Neil stayed near the bench with Matt and Renee and watched his teammates file onto the court. He wasn't ready to talk about Allison with either of them, so he focused on the other unsteady player on their team.

"Why does Andrew do this?" Neil asked, unable to stay quiet any longer. "If he doesn't care about Exy, what's the point of going through this every Friday?"

"Would you want to be crazy high every day of your life?" Matt asked.

"He spends the entire time winding down and getting sick," Neil said. "Is it worth it?"

"Maybe it is," Renee said with a smile. "You'll see."

The Terrapins served as soon as the buzzer sounded, and the court became a whirlwind of movement. Belmonte's starting dealer got the half going with an aggressive move: he fired straight up the court at the goal. Allison could have stopped it, but she casually sidestepped like it wasn't worth her time. Andrew

reacted with the same calm arrogance and just watched as the ball missed his goal by a scant inch. The crowd's reaction was instant and loud: they weren't going to be mocked by a ragtag team like the Foxes.

Andrew gave the ball a small pop on the rebound to bounce it off the ground and smacked it right back the way it'd come. Allison watched it pass her again, let the dealer catch it uncontested, and then smashed into him. He didn't lose his feet, but he lost the ball when he stumbled, and Allison was quick to take it from him. She passed it up the court and pushed forward after it.

The Foxes were notorious for their shoddy teamwork, so most people forgot they were a Class I school. Wymack culled his broken players from the same pool as any other Class I coach: the best athletes high schools had to offer nationwide. If the Foxes could get over their differences and learn to compromise once in a while, they would be a formidable force. Neil had warned Riko that at Kathy Ferdinand's talk show, and Dan thought the team had a better chance now that Seth was gone. Neil watched his teammates for any sign she was right.

Because he was watching so closely, he could see it, but it came only in flashes. Nicky was the team's weakest backliner, but Aaron knew how to compensate for it. Allison and Dan had never played together like this, but they'd been roommates and friends for three years. Dan was too far up to watch the court like she normally did but she could gauge the situation in a glance and adjust her play accordingly.

Neil wanted to get Matt out there and see what a difference it made. Matt was their best player. He could unite the court with his presence and control the game through his unapologetic aggression. Neil wanted to go out there himself and find out if he really deserved to play Class I. He wanted to be part of this evolution. He wanted to feel the team click into perfect synchrony, even if it only lasted for a moment.

By the time Wymack finally let him on the court, Neil was buzzing with equal parts impatience and need. He knew he clacked sticks with Dan as they passed each other at the door but he didn't hear it. He heard only his heartbeat, thumping in his veins.

The buzzer sounded to get them moving. The Terrapins came as hard as they could, but the Foxes shoved back with a ferocity the home team wasn't expecting. They were exhausted, but Matt rallied the defense around him and Neil had permission to run himself ragged on the offense. Neil was the least experienced person on their team, but he was the fastest and the most desperate. Every minute on the court brought him one minute closer to saying goodbye to Exy forever. He didn't want to regret a single second.

Neil kept his eyes off the scoreboard but he knew when the Foxes pulled ahead by the reaction from the crowd. The Terrapins almost scored a few minutes later, but Matt threw his striker into the wall. A second later they were fighting. Renee was closest, so she ran to break it up. Matt threw his hands up and retreated the second he realized she was there, but the Terrapin striker was too fired up to care. He went after Matt again and got in a couple good hits. Matt struggled with him a bit and managed to shove him away.

Renee took the opening. She caught the back of the striker's jersey and drove her foot into the back of his knee. He fell to his knees, and Renee put all her weight on his calf to keep him from getting up again.

The referees separated them with angry words and exaggerated gestures. All three of them were given yellow cards for fighting. Neil thought it a stupid call, since Renee hadn't technically been fighting anyone, but the crowd screamed approval. Because the striker initiated the fight, the Foxes were given possession of the ball near where the Terrapins lost it. Matt knocked sticks with Renee as they found their new starting places.

Kevin put them in the lead with one minute left on the clock. The last sixty seconds were a desperate push from both sides. A point from the Terrapins would put them in overtime, and none of the Foxes had enough energy left to play another fifteen-minute period. Eight seconds from the end a Terrapin striker got the ball. Aaron ran after him, but he was too exhausted to close the gap. The striker's ten steps took him all the way to the foul line for his shot.

Disappointment was a sick lurch in Neil's chest. The goal was too wide and Andrew too small; there was no way Andrew could stop a shot this close-range. The striker aimed for a spot as far from Andrew as he could and fired the ball at the bottom left corner. Even if Andrew could get there fast enough, the ball was too low to the ground for him to swing his massive racquet.

Except Andrew was moving before the striker finished taking his shot, as if he already knew where the striker was going to aim, and he didn't even try to swing. He threw himself at the ground as far over as he could and slammed his racquet down between the ball and the goal so hard Neil heard wood crack all the way across the court. He was just fast enough; the ball hit the taut strings of his racquet and bounced off.

Andrew let go of his racquet and went after the ball himself. The striker raced for it, too, but he'd lost a precious second expecting his point to be good. One second was all Aaron needed to catch up with him, and Aaron crashed into him before he could scoop the ball off the ground. They narrowly avoided colliding with Andrew, but Andrew didn't even look up. He grabbed the ball in one gloved hand and threw it to one side, clearing it away from the goal.

The final buzzer was deafening, but Matt's triumphant roar carried through it. Neil looked up, needing to see the numbers to believe it. Relief was almost enough to take him off his feet, but the heady rush of victory put the breath back in his lungs. He looked across the court for Kevin, but Kevin was striding toward the goal. Neil turned a bit more so he could see Andrew again, but the sight waiting for him took some of the edge off his excitement.

Andrew was kneeling just inside the goal line with his racquet in his lap. Neil heard Dan's excited voice as the subs were allowed onto the court, but he didn't wait for his teammates to catch up with him. He ran after Kevin and reached the goal right after Kevin did. Kevin didn't have to ask what was going on. He'd lied to cameras for years and he knew how to buy Andrew time. He crouched in front of Andrew and reached for Andrew's racquet, adding to the illusion that Andrew was inspecting his racquet for damage.

Andrew let go with one hand and gestured. Kevin gestured back as if they having an actual conversation. The only sound either of them made was the desperate gasp of air through clenched teeth as Andrew tried not to get sick in front of the crowd. Kevin turned the racquet some and dug his gloved fingers into the head. Shattered wood split beneath the pressure, showing off an awful crack all the way down to the handle. Neil winced at the sight and checked the court floor for an indent.

The rest of the team fell in around them, bringing the celebration to their strikers and forming an impromptu barricade around their fallen goalkeeper. Matt smacked shoulders and helmets in excitement and bared his teeth in a jaw-breaking grin.

"That's how we do it! That's how we do it, Foxes!"

Andrew let go of his racquet and got to his feet, but he was obviously unsteady. Neil expected him to fall, but Nicky slung an arm around Andrew's shoulders and yanked Andrew close to him. It let him take some of Andrew's weight without it being too obvious what he was doing. Andrew looked ready to say something about the unasked-for help, but Nicky didn't give him a chance to argue. He pumped his fist and whooped.

"That was awesome! We are going to own this season!"

"That was sloppy," Kevin said as he stood. "We barely had it."

"Oh, shut up, sour face," Nicky said. "Save your grouching for the ride back and stop spoiling our moment of glory."

"Seriously." Matt gave Kevin's helmet a vigorous rub. "Would it kill you to smile when no one's paying you to?"

Matt didn't wait for an answer but turned to Allison as she finally joined them. She was already clean and changed out for the ride back, and her wet hair

was pulled out of her face in a tight ponytail. Neil saw how red her eyes were and looked away. Matt scooped her up in a hug that took her feet off the ground. "You're amazing."

"Come on," Dan said. "Let's give these guys our condolences and get out of here."

They shuffled into line as fast as they could, and the Terrapins grudgingly formed their own line further down the court. They passed each other, slapping sticks and offering a chorus of "Good game!" neither side fully believed. The Foxes filed off the court as quickly as they could and swarmed Wymack. Andrew broke away in the commotion and set off for the locker room.

Neil had never seen Wymack smile like this. It was small but fierce, as angry as it was proud. "That's more like it. Draw straws and figure out who's helping me fend off the press. The rest of you get your sticky, stinky asses to the showers. We'll talk shop on the bus."

"Renee and I will handle it," Dan said as they headed to the locker room. "Neil, you can use the girls' shower while we're busy."

Neil stared at her. "What?"

Dan frowned at him, so Matt explained. "There aren't stalls here."

Neil had noticed, but he hadn't thought his teammates would. That they had, and that they were doing something about it, knocked the wind out of him. He tried to answer, but he didn't know what to say. The best he managed was, "Is that really okay?"

"Kid, you're killing me," Nicky said. "Why do you always get that deer-in-headlights look when someone does something nice for you?"

"It's really okay," Dan promised. Neil tried to thank her, but she waved it off with a breezy, "Nope. None of that. Just don't steal all the hot water."

She, Renee, and Wymack plopped down on benches in the front room to wait on the press while the others went to clean up. Neil grabbed his bag from the men's changing room and took it across the hall. The women's shower room was a little more private. It didn't have doors but it did have stall walls. Neil kept his back to the door and took a quick shower. He scrubbed dry so fast and hard he left his skin red in places, but he didn't want Dan and Renee to have to wait any longer for him. He dressed in loose clothes, grabbed his things, and hurried out.

Animated voices from the end of the hall said the press was still around. Neil crept down the hall to look in, less to see what was going on and more so Dan or Renee would see him and know he was out of their way. Wymack was nowhere in sight, so Neil guessed he'd already given his piece. Renee glanced his way when she spotted movement in the doorway and smiled acknowledgment.

Neil retreated before anyone else spotted him. There weren't a lot of places to hide from the press, but the door to the nurse's office was open an inch. Neil gave it a cautious push and looked inside. Wymack was sitting on the pristine bed with a pack of cigarettes in his hand. Neil took Wymack's nod to be an invitation and slipped inside. He was turning to close the door behind himself when he spotted Wymack's silent companion.

Andrew was sitting cross-legged on the floor in the corner. He hadn't bothered to change out yet, but he'd taken off his helmet and gloves. Abby's travel bag was upended on the ground in front of him. His medicine bottle was open on its side near his hip. A handful of white pills were scattered on the floor around it. Andrew held his prize for the night's efforts in a two-handed, white-knuckled grip: a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue. In the ten or so minutes he'd been off the court he'd already inhaled half of the pricey scotch. How he had enough feeling left in his fingers to hold the bottle Neil didn't know.

"Abby and Allison went ahead to the bus," Wymack said. "You can join them or wait here for everyone else."

Neil left the door open a crack behind him so he'd know when the reporters left and claimed the stool closest to the door. He put his bag on the ground at his feet, glanced again at Andrew, and looked up at Wymack.

"Why did you pay for stalls, Coach?"

Wymack lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Maybe I knew you'd need them one day."

Andrew smiled around the mouth of his bottle. "Neil is a walking tragedy."

"You're a pretty pathetic sob story yourself," Wymack said.

Andrew laughed. It was weak, as his medicine hadn't fully kicked in yet, but Neil knew from the sound of it Andrew would be bouncing before they left the parking lot. "I guess so, Coach. That reminds me. I'm staying with you this weekend."

"I don't remember inviting you," Wymack said, but it didn't sound like a no.

"Kevin's going to be so annoying to deal with after tonight." Andrew screwed the bottle closed and put it aside. He repacked Abby's bag with quick efficiency, shoved it out of his way, and got to his feet. "I can stab him again or I can stay with you. The choice is yours."

Wymack pinched the bridge of his nose. "Andrew, I swear to God—"

"Bye, Coach."

Andrew headed for the door, but Neil put a hand in his path. Andrew obediently stopped and sent Neil a bemused look. Neil lowered his hand and said, "How did you do it? How did you know where to go?"

"Coach said Watts always takes his penalty shots to the bottom corner. With the game riding on him he was bound to do the same."

Neil stared at him, startled and disbelieving. Wymack mentioned that during halftime when he was giving the team a rundown of the second half line-up. It'd been an off-the-cuff remark amidst a lot of other information. Neil hadn't thought Andrew was even paying attention to Wymack's spiel. How he remembered that warning well enough to use it at such critical moment, Neil didn't know.

"But," Neil said, but words failed him. Andrew flashed Neil a bright grin and left. Neil turned a frustrated look on Wymack. "I thought he didn't care. They said he didn't, and I finally started believing them, but he couldn't have saved us tonight if he didn't. Right?"

"You figure it out, you let me know," Wymack said.

The press left a couple minutes later, so Neil went to the main room to wait on his teammates. They came in straggling pairs with Dan and Renee the last ones ready to go. Loading the bus was quick work. Getting out of the parking lot was harder, even with police out in droves to manage the post-game traffic. The Fox bus was pelted with more than one crumpled beer can as it crawled through campus. Nicky pulled the window down to yell insults, but Wymack threatened him into silence. Nicky settled for flipping Belmonte students off.

The ride back felt half as long thanks to the heady rush of an unexpected victory. Allison stayed out of the celebration by dozing up front with Abby. The other upperclassmen moved to the middle of the bus so they could discuss the game with Andrew's group. As soon as they did Andrew went up front, more interested in talking Wymack's ear off than rehashing the night's plays. Kevin's tactless criticism was a necessary but unpleasant counterpoint to his teammates' excited recap.

As he listened to them, Neil realized he was happy. It was such an unexpected and unfamiliar feeling he lost track of the conversation for a minute. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this included or safe. It was nice but dangerous. Someone with a past like his, whose very survival depended on secrecy and lies, couldn't afford to let his guard down. But as Nicky laughed and leaned closer to talk about one of Neil's goals, Neil thought maybe he'd be okay just for a night.

CHAPTER FIVE

Neil had a quarter of a million dollars and directions to another half million hidden in his dormitory room. He and his mother had hit the road with far more than that, but years on the run had whittled away at their stash. What was left was considered a small fortune by most people and a dismal future by Neil. It'd be tricky getting a job when he couldn't give employers his social security number, and every time he moved he needed a new name, a new face, and a new place to live. Costs added up fast.

Disguises were cheap. A new hairstyle, a new color, some contacts, and an accent were usually enough to fool people. Neil used his mother's British accent when he was overseas and his father's American accent when he was in the United States. He needed an address, sometimes a new language, and ways to fill his time that would complete his persona without drawing too much attention. Luck let him squat in Millport, but he had to assume he'd be paying rent in the future.

Some changes took expensive to a whole new level. If Neil survived this year, he'd only do so by pulling out all the stops. A simple change in names and cities couldn't save him after he'd antagonized Riko Moriyama and put his face on the news. He needed to cut every string he had, up to and including the United States.

Getting a new passport wasn't a simple matter, but at least he knew where to start. His mother was born into a British crime syndicate, and he'd inherited a list of unsavory contacts from her. Because most of them were European, they were outside his father's reach. Neil wasn't entirely sure they'd deal with him in his mother's absence, but he hoped her name would at least smooth the process. The paperwork he needed came at a steep price, but it was some of the best work on the market. It had to be considering how fast technology was changing.

Because Neil could guess at how much money he'd need in May, he didn't want to make any unnecessary purchases until then. He'd been stupid with his money on that disastrous welcome party in Columbia, so he wanted to hold tight to what was left. His teammates had other ideas, however, which was how Neil wound up shopping for clothes on Tuesday.

No one had told him they weren't going straight home after practice. They'd piled him in the car and dragged him out to the mall without even a by-the-by. This Saturday was the southeastern district's fall banquet and they all knew Neil didn't have anything appropriate to wear. It was a less formal event than the

winter banquet in December would be, but it still required more than ratty jeans and worn-out t-shirts.

"At some point you're going to have to try something on," Nicky said.

"I could just not go," Neil said.

"Shut up. You're going," Kevin said, like he wasn't dreading this himself. All fourteen southern Class I teams would be in attendance, and that included Edgar Allan's Ravens. Kevin wanted to see his former teammates even less than Neil did. "The other teams want to get a look at you."

"I don't care," Neil said. "The only place they matter to me is on the court."

"Don't lose face, Neil." Andrew was systematically tugging clothes off their hangers and dropping them on the floor. He chucked one of the empty hangers at Nicky, who squawked and ducked just in time. Andrew shrugged at his miss and looked at Neil. "You laughed at Riko on Kathy's show. If you don't go, he'll say you're too afraid to face him! For shame, Neil."

But Neil was afraid, and Andrew knew that.

"Here," Aaron said, handing Neil a scrap of paper. "Take this before I forget it."

It was a short list of names and numbers in bubbly blue print. Nicky leaned over to see and made a dismissive noise. "Seriously, Aaron?"

"Dan asked me to get a list from Katelyn," Aaron said.

"Who are these people?" Neil asked.

"They're the single Vixens."

"They're all women," Nicky said. "That doesn't help us."

"Nicky," Neil started.

Nicky plucked the list from Neil's fingers and crumpled it. "Your ignorance is endearing, Neil. You're nineteen and you've never looked at Allison's tits? There's no way you're straight. You and I really need to sit down and talk about this sometime."

"You know what, I'm done here." Aaron put his hands up and turned away. "I'll be in the food court when you guys are finished."

"Stop being a bad influence," Kevin told Nicky. "I am going to make him Court. It'll be easier if he remains heterosexual. You know more than any of us how prejudiced people can be. Imagine the impact it would have on his career."

"We aren't really having this conversation," Neil said.

Nicky clapped his hands to either side of Neil's head as if trying to shield Neil from their argument. It didn't really work, as he missed Neil's ears completely. "You worry about Neil's career. I'll worry about his personal happiness. Come on, Kevin. Even you have to admit this is really weird."

Andrew threw his hands up. "Newsflash, Nicky: Neil isn't normal!"

"This is beyond abnormal."

"I am standing right here," Neil said, "and I can hear you."

Nicky sighed dramatically and let go. "Fine, fine. Take a cheerleader if you want to."

"I'm not taking anyone," Neil said. "I don't even want to go to this thing."

"Do you have any idea how pathetic it is showing up stag to an event like this?"

"Are you bringing someone?" Neil asked, surprised. "What about Erik?"

"He's in Germany," Nicky said. "Yeah, I'm bringing a date, but I'm not going to date the guy. I just want someone to go and have fun with. You know, fun? That thing people have sometimes? You two are impossible."

Neil looked at Andrew, but it was Kevin who answered. "It's none of your business."

"Three," Neil said. "Allison."

Two words killed Nicky's good humor. Neil refused to feel bad about it after everything Nicky had just said about him, but he didn't feel vindicated, either. Nicky muttered under his breath and left to look at shirts further down the aisle. Neil turned his attention back to the slacks hanging in front of him, but he couldn't concentrate. He pushed a couple hangers around without paying attention to size or cuts and looked up at Kevin.

"Would you take her?"

He thought maybe he was as surprised by the question as the two men now staring at him. Neil fidgeted with the hangers but refused to look away from Kevin. "She and Seth were excited to go. It was all they could talk about when we had lunch together. Now she's going to go and he won't be there."

"That's a cheap way out," Andrew supplied with a bright, mocking smile. "Getting someone else to clean up behind your mess? Oh, Neil. Do better than that next time, won't you? You're boring when your tail's between your legs."

"Fuck you," Neil said. "Your theory is still just that: a theory. When you prove it—"

"What, it'll miraculously make it easier for you to look Allison in the eyes?" Andrew feigned shock. "When I prove it, it puts a target on Seth's back and a paintbrush in your hands. Rethink that a bit, would you?"

Neil didn't have an answer for that. Andrew only gave him a couple seconds before he laughed and walked off. Neil watched him go and wondered which one of them he hated more.

"I won't bring her," Kevin said, because someone had to break the quiet. "You might have brought Riko's wrath down on the striker line, but I'm the

reason he's in the south in the first place. Neither of us has the right to speak to Allison now."

"You think Andrew's right," Neil said.

"Yes," Kevin said.

"You don't kill people over a game."

"It isn't a game where I come from," Kevin said. "I know Riko was behind this. I know what people like him are like. Be glad you'll never understand the way they think."

Any other time, Neil would be relieved to hear such words from Kevin. It meant Andrew hadn't told Kevin the truth about Neil's past and that Kevin had yet to recognize Neil. For a split second though, Neil considered correcting him. He wanted to tell Kevin he'd seen a lot of cruel things done but that none of them had been this senseless. Neil's father had a fierce and loyal syndicate. Few people were stupid enough to insult the Butcher; fewer tried crossing him. When they did, the Butcher made an example of them—of them, not their neighbor or coworker. Riko should have come after Neil for what he'd said, not taken it out on Seth.

"Hey," Nicky called from the end of the aisle. Neil was grateful for the distraction, but Nicky was slow to approach. "I can't handle anymore doom and gloom today. Whatever you guys are talking about needs to stop before I get down there, okay?"

Kevin answered by turning soundlessly away. Nicky still looked a little leery as he stopped at Neil's side. Neil looked at the massive bundle of clothes in his arms, none of which looked appropriate for a banquet. He wasn't going to ask, but Nicky noticed the glance and puffed up with pride.

"I have good taste in clothes, right? If you want to try them on you can, but you don't have to. I know they'll fit."

"Why would I try them on?"

"Oh, because these are yours." Nicky said it like Neil should already know that, then kept going before Neil could react. "Did you know Coach has been waiting for us to fix your wardrobe since, like, June? He threatened to sign us up for a marathon if we didn't do something about it. A freaking marathon, Neil. Guys like me aren't supposed to run that far. Do me a favor and don't argue about it."

"There's nothing wrong with the clothes I have."

"Can we go back to the part where I said not to argue? I remember it pretty clearly considering it happened just five seconds ago." Nicky moved the clothes out of Neil's reach when Neil moved as if to take them from him. "Um, no. I'll hang onto this. You're supposed to be finding pants."

Neil silently counted to ten, but it didn't do much against his flaring impatience. "I am not shopping with any of you ever again."

"So you think. Man, I'm starting to see why Andrew left you here," Nicky said. "Good thing he ignored me when I told him to take you along."

"Take me along where?"

"Oh, you know," Nicky said vaguely. "Task at hand, Neil. The longer you stall the longer we're stuck here."

Neil pushed Andrew, Allison, and Riko from mind and focused on finding something to wear. Slacks were easy to pick out, but Nicky rejected the first several shirts Neil considered. Finally Neil gave up and let Nicky choose something for him. They went up to the registers together, but then Nicky refused to let go of Neil's unwanted clothes. He batted at Neil's hands and turned stubbornly away.

"Why would you pay for all this when you didn't want it in the first place? Technically the university is paying for it, since Coach is going to expense it. Hey," Nicky said, retreating when Neil tried again to wrest the stack from his arms. "Touch it again and I'll bite you. Don't think I won't. I will. I'm a biter. Just ask Erik."

"Stop embarrassing us." Kevin pushed them apart. "Find a different register, Nicky."

"I can buy my own things," Neil said when Nicky pranced off.

Kevin gave him a slow head-to-toe. Neil's jeans were so faded they were whitish-gray, and the hems of his shirt were frayed and coming undone. This wasn't the first time someone had looked at Neil like he was street trash, but from Kevin condescension was a thousand times more effective. The first spike of heat in Neil's stomach was shame, but he refused to let it take hold. His reasons for letting his wardrobe slide were valid. Someone like Kevin, who'd grown up in the spotlight and made a fortune off his talent, would never understand.

"I can't stand you," Neil said.

"I don't care." Kevin pointed over Neil's head at the waiting cashier. "Let's go."

When they were done they lugged their bags into the mall. They rode the next set of escalators down and Nicky led them to the towering fountain that marked the mall's center. Andrew was waiting for them there, sitting cross-legged on the faux marble wall surrounding the water. He didn't look up at their approach, too busy tapping away at the phone in his hands. Nicky dropped the bags on the ground on front of Andrew and leaned over to get a better look.

"What is that dinosaur?" Nicky asked, dismayed. "No one put money on a flip phone, Andrew. You ruined a really good pot."

Neil idly wondered if there was anything his teammates wouldn't bet on.

"So sad," Andrew said, not a whit sympathetic.

"You couldn't have even found him a qwerty?"

"What for?" Andrew finished what he was doing, snapped the phone shut, and tossed it at Neil. Catching it was instinctive, but Neil froze at the next words out of Andrew's mouth. "Who is Neil going to text?"

"Um, me, for starters," Nicky said, like that should be obvious.

"What." Neil couldn't even make it a question.

He uncurled his fingers and stared at the gray phone resting in his palm. He didn't think a small thing like this should hurt so much, but the grief that punched through him left him in pieces. The roaring in his ears sounded like the ocean. For a moment he was back there on the beach watching fire eat through the car. He remembered how it smelled, the salt of the water and the sick stench of burning flesh. He could still feel the sand on his fingers, warm up top where the sun shone and cold deep down where he'd left his mother's bones.

He'd saved their phones for last. Every time they moved they got new cell phones, prepaid burners they could ditch at the first hint of trouble. He wanted to keep hers. He wanted something real to hold onto in her absence. Even then he'd known better. He threw them into the waves before leaving the beach. He'd never gotten a new one for himself. He'd never seen a point; Neil had no one in the world he could call.

"Neil."

The urgent tone of Nicky's voice finally cut through the buzzing in Neil's ears. Neil dragged his stare up to Nicky's face and realized too late Nicky had been speaking to him. Nicky's expression was tight with concern.

Neil swallowed hard and tried to remember how to breathe. He closed his fingers around the phone so he wouldn't have to look at it and held it out toward Nicky. "No."

Nicky held up his hands. He looked less like he was warding off the phone and more like he was trying to calm a cornered animal. "Neil," he said, speaking very slowly and carefully, "we kind of need you to hold onto that. We need a way to get in touch with you this year."

"You have this way of making people want to kill you," Andrew said.

Nicky looked pained by that tactless explanation but he didn't take his eyes off Neil. "What if Coach needs to talk to you about something or Riko's freaky fans start causing trouble? Last year got really crazy toward the end, and this

year isn't off to a good start. That's our just-in-case. You'll make us all feel better if we know we can find you."

"I can't." It was too ragged and too honest, but Neil couldn't help it. If he didn't get rid of that phone he was going to be sick. "Nicky, I—"

"Okay, okay," Nicky said, taking Neil's hand in both of his. "We'll figure it out."

Neil thought he'd feel better when Nicky had the phone, but the overwhelming sense of loss still knotted up his lungs. He tugged his hand free and took the bags of clothes Nicky had hooked over his arm. He didn't have to ask for the keys. Andrew pilfered them from Nicky's pocket and held them up in offering.

Neil grabbed them, but Andrew held on for a moment. Andrew leaned forward on his perch and smiled at Neil. "Hey, Neil. Honesty looks awful on you."

Neil wrenched the keys out of his grasp and walked away to the sound of Andrew's laughter. He didn't go back inside afterward, but they came out to find him not much later. No one mentioned the cell phone and, although Nicky kept shooting him worried looks in the rearview mirror, no one spoke to Neil on the ride back to campus.

The silence couldn't last, though Neil wished it would. He came out of the bathroom in half of his gear for his night practice with Kevin and found Kevin had already left the locker room. The scattered clothes on the bench hinted he'd been kicked out before he was ready.

Andrew was straddling the bench as he waited for Neil, and in front of him was Neil's new phone. Neil glanced down at it instinctively and quickly jerked his stare up to Andrew's face. Andrew wasn't smiling anymore. He'd skipped his nine o'clock dose so he could start winding down for bed even though he was usually out with Kevin and Neil until midnight.

"A man can only have so many issues," Andrew said.

"I don't need a phone."

"Who needs one more than you do this year?"

Andrew took his own phone out of his pocket and set it down beside Neil's. His was black but otherwise seemed to be the same model. He flicked both open and pressed a couple buttons. A few seconds later Andrew's phone started to ring. Neil expected a generic ringtone, but a man started singing. It didn't sound like something Andrew would assign to his phone until Neil listened to the lyrics. It was a song about runaways.

Neil crossed the room and sat facing Andrew on the bench. He scooped Andrew's phone up and crushed the reject button with his thumb. "You're not funny."

"Neither are you. You put a noose around your neck and handed the loose end to Riko," Andrew said. "I distinctly remember saying I would watch your back. Give me one good reason why you'd make that difficult for me."

"I survived for eight years because no one could find me," Neil said.

"That's not why."

"Are we doing the honesty thing again?"

"Do we need to?" Andrew asked, taking his phone from Neil. "You start."

Neil turned his new phone in circles on the bench, unwilling and unable to pick it up. "You know, most parents give their children phones so they can keep track of them throughout the day. I had one because of the people my father worked with. My parents wanted to know they could reach me if the worst should happen. 'Just in case'," Neil said, echoing Nicky's words.

"When I ran away, I kept the phone. I saw my parents die, but I kept thinking maybe I was wrong. Maybe one day they'd call and say it was an act. They'd say I could come home and things would be fine. But the only time it rang it was that man demanding I bring him back his money. I haven't had a phone since. I shouldn't have one now. Who am I supposed to call?"

"Nicky, Coach, the suicide hotline, I don't care."

"I'm remembering why I don't like you."

"I'm surprised you forgot in the first place."

"Maybe I didn't." Neil pushed the phone Andrew's way. "There has to be a better way."

"You could occasionally grow a spine," Andrew suggested. "I know it's a difficult concept for someone whose kneejerk reaction is to run away at the first sign of trouble, but try it sometime. You might actually like it."

"What I'd like is to put this phone through your teeth."

"See, that's more interesting."

"I'm not here for your entertainment," Neil said.

"But, as expected, you are talented enough to multitask. Question for you, Neil. Do I look dead to you?" He pointed up at his face, waited for Neil to answer, and didn't seem surprised when Neil didn't. "Here."

Andrew beckoned Neil closer as if he wanted to show Neil something on his phone's small screen. He flipped the phone open one-handed and pressed down hard on a single button. There was silence, then the distant hum of Andrew's phone dialing out. Between them Neil's phone started to sing. The words were different than Andrew's ringtone, but the voice was the same. Neil knew it was

from the same miserable song. The lyrics hurt just as much as Andrew's had. Neil stared down at the phone and let it ring.

"Your phone is ringing," Andrew said. "You should answer it."

Neil picked it up with numb fingers and opened it. He spared only a second to look at Andrew's name on the screen before he answered and put it to his ear.

"Your parents are dead, you are not fine, and nothing is going to be okay," Andrew said. "This is not news to you. But from now until May you are still Neil Josten and I am still the man who said he would keep you alive."

"I don't care if you use this phone tomorrow. I don't care if you never use it again. But you are going to keep it on you because one day you might need it." Andrew put a finger to the underside of Neil's chin and forced Neil's head up until they were looking at each other. "On that day you're not going to run. You're going to think about what I promised you and you're going to make the call. Tell me you understand."

Neil's voice had left him, but he managed a nod.

Andrew let go and snapped his phone shut. Neil closed his own with a quiet click. After looking down at it for another endless minute, he leaned over and put it in his messenger bag. Andrew watched with hooded eyes until Neil sat upright. Neil didn't want to look at him when he wasn't sure he'd gotten his expression back under control, but he couldn't help it. Andrew considered him a minute longer, then sighed and straightened out of Neil's space.

"If you're done having issues, take your turn. Kevin is probably fuming waiting on you."

Neil meant to ask about Kevin, but the phones reminded him of another problem. He could bother Kevin for a better explanation of his deal with Andrew. This other question was something only Andrew could answer.

"Why did the Oakland PD call you?"

"Right for the throat. Maybe not so spineless after all," Andrew said, amused. "Children's Services is opening an investigation into one of my foster fathers. Pig Higgins knew I lived with them, so he called me looking for testimony."

"But you won't help him."

Andrew flicked his fingers in dismissal. "Richard Spear is an uninteresting but relatively harmless human being. They won't find anything to pin on him."

"You sure?" Neil asked. "Your reaction was a little extreme for a misunderstanding."

"I don't like that word."

Neil hesitated. "Extreme?"

"Misunderstanding."

"It's an odd word to have a grudge against."

"You don't have any room to judge other people's problems," Andrew said.

Andrew swung his leg over the bench and got to his feet. Neil guessed that meant the conversation was over. He reached for his workout shorts as Andrew left. The door had barely closed behind Andrew before it was pushed open again. Andrew was right; Kevin looked thoroughly annoyed he'd had to delay practice for them. Neil expected some sort of scathing rebuke, but Kevin's angry movements spoke for him.

They finished changing as quickly as they could and worked out their stress on the court. Andrew was waiting for them when they were done, looking half-asleep on his feet, and they went back to the dorm together. Neil changed for bed in the bathroom, pushed his discarded clothes aside with a foot, and sat on the side of the tub. The overhead light glinted off the curved surface of his phone where it was nestled in his palm.

It felt like an eternity before he could open it. He slowly scrolled through the menu and wasn't entirely surprised to see Andrew had already filled out his contacts list. He'd even set a couple speed dials. Andrew was first, then Kevin, then Wymack. Neil had no idea why the team's psychiatrist was programmed as an emergency contact. He had no intention of speaking to Betsy Dobson again. Neil deleted her information.

When his contacts list refreshed, Neil went to his call history. One name was listed with two timestamps beside it. It wasn't his mother's name, but it wasn't his father's, either. Neil would learn to live with that one day at a time.

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Neil's phone went off the next morning and startled five years off his life expectancy. Neil was packing his things to leave his Spanish class when he heard the distinctive buzz. He dropped his textbook immediately and dug his phone out of the depths of his bag, mind going a million miles an hour on everything that could be going wrong.

A message was blinking at him in his inbox. Neil's heart slowed a bit when he saw Nicky's name attached to it, because Nicky was the last person Neil thought would be the bearer of bad news. He opened the message anyway and found a two-character smiley staring back at him. Neil waited to see if anything else came through, but that appeared to be it.

The next time his phone went off, it was Dan: "nicky said u have a phone y/y".

"Yes," Neil sent back, and hoped that was enough.

Seconds later Dan was back with "bout time thought u'd never get one".

Neil considered asking her how she was doing in her English classes but took the higher road of silence.

By the time Neil made it to the athletes' dining hall for lunch he had twenty messages. Most of them were from Nicky, idle comments about nothing in particular. Neil read them but didn't respond unless Nicky was asking a question. Two were from Matt, first checking up on the rumor of Neil having a phone and then complaining about the bet Andrew sabotaged by getting such a cheap model.

"No one uses those anymore. Did he find it at a pawn shop?" Matt messaged Neil.

Neil didn't know what to make of it. The Foxes spent seven hours together at practices every day and roomed with each other at Fox Tower. How they had anything left to say to each other was beyond him. He wanted to turn the messaging off somehow or tell them this wasn't why he had a phone. Phones were for emergencies, not running commentary on a teacher's boring lecture. Neil refrained because he knew he was in the wrong this time, but he still jumped every time his phone hummed at him.

The others were undeterred by his silence. Nicky peppered him throughout the day and through most of Thursday. Finally Neil's patience wore thin enough to say something. He sat on the stairs of the hall where he had his tutoring session and painstakingly typed a message out.

"What happens when you use up all your messages and then need them?"

Nicky's response was almost immediate. "???" A couple seconds later he came back with something more useful: "our plan has unlimited txt. we can't use them up. man i try tho :)".

Neil sighed and gave the fight up as a lost cause.

He had seventy messages by the time they boarded the bus late Friday afternoon. They were up against USC-Columbia tonight. Columbia was the only other Class I Exy team in the state, so the two schools had a rowdy rivalry. The odds were good, even though the Foxes were playing with the same crazy lineup they used last week.

Nicky wanted to drive to Columbia separately so they could go out to Eden's Twilight afterward, but Wymack put his foot down. He knew what sorts of things they got into at the club and didn't want to risk it this close to the banquet. If any of the officials at the banquet thought for any reason Andrew was off his drugs they could push for blood work to be done. Wymack didn't want dust showing up in the results. Andrew didn't fight Wymack's decision, but Nicky was more than a little grumpy about it.

Nicky turned in his seat to talk to Neil over his seatback. Halfway through his rant about a current class project Neil's phone hummed. Neil answered

without thinking. It was a smiley face from Nicky. Neil looked up at Nicky, not understanding.

"See?" Nicky said, sounding pleased. "That's much better. That's how a normal human being looks when they check their phone, Neil."

Neil stared at him. "Is that really why you've been messaging me nonstop?" "Mostly," Nicky said. "Andrew told me to handle it. That's the easiest way I knew how."

"Handle what?"

"You, of course. Question," Nicky said. "If I hadn't been bothering you would you have touched that phone at all this week?"

"I have it for emergencies," Neil said, "so no."

"Question again," Nicky said. "Do you honestly think you'd have used it if you had an emergency? No, really. You didn't see your face when Andrew gave you that, Neil. That wasn't disinterest or shock. That was like, mental meltdown the likes of which I haven't seen in years. I don't know why, but I know it wouldn't have occurred to you to call us if something went wrong."

Neil knew he was right, but he said, "You don't know that."

"Couldn't risk it. We didn't want to find out the hard way just how screwed your mental wiring is."

"I called Matt from Columbia when I needed help."

"Yeah," Nicky said, unimpressed. "So we all heard. You called Matt, gave him your 'I'm fine' song and dance routine, and then hitchhiked with strangers back to campus. Maybe you remember?" Nicky waited, but Neil couldn't defend himself against an accusation like that. "Anyway, you're welcome. I just saved you at least two hundred dollars in intensive therapy."

Neil didn't think Nicky wearing down his guard was something to be grateful for, but he obediently said, "Thank you."

"You ever say that like it's not a question?" Nicky asked, looking pained. "Oh well. I'll take my victories where I can. Focus on the battles first, then win the war, right? I don't know how the quote actually goes but you know what I mean. So where was I?"

It didn't take him long to remember. He chattered away a mile a minute about his upcoming presentation. Neil let it go in one ear and out the other. His mind was more on the phone still sitting in his hands than the put-upon tone of Nicky's voice. When Nicky finally turned away to harass Aaron about something, Neil flipped his phone open. He went past his packed inbox to his call history. It hadn't changed; Andrew's name was still the only one there.

It didn't make sense.

Kevin claimed he had something Andrew wanted. Neil didn't know what it was, but it had to be something big if Andrew was willing to defy the Ravens and work around all of Neil's problems. Neil made a mental note to talk to Kevin about it this weekend, but they had to survive the fall banquet first.

Thoughts of seeing Riko tomorrow were enough to sour his mood. Neil buried his phone in the bottom of the bag and tried to think of nothing at all.

CHAPTER SIX

A lottery in July chose Blackwell University as host for the fall banquet. It was a relatively lucky draw for the Foxes since they were only four hours away, but none of them were feeling particularly good about it when they boarded the bus Saturday. They pulled onto the interstate with thirteen people on board: the Fox team, the two-man staff, and Aaron's and Nicky's dates.

Nicky was bringing Jim from his improv class and Aaron finally worked up the nerve to ask Katelyn. Neil didn't think much of it until he saw all the money changing hands between his teammates. Apparently Katelyn was the center of two bets between the Foxes: whether or not Aaron would ask her, and how Andrew would respond. The latter was what interested Neil more. Andrew was high on his drugs, but he didn't spare a single smile or hello for Katelyn. Andrew looked through her and around her like she wasn't even there.

The banquet was supposed to be a two-day event to justify the costs and travel time for the further teams, but the Foxes took a unanimous vote to leave Saturday night. Six hours spent socializing with teams who'd repeatedly and loudly mocked them in the news was more than enough. According to Dan few athletes were crude enough to start trouble at an ERC-sanctioned event, but Neil wasn't reassured. He wasn't worried about thirteen rowdy teams; he was worried about one awful man.

Neil tried keeping his cool, but Kevin started losing his the first time they passed a sign pointing out the way to Blackwell. Neil heard his short, ragged breaths as Kevin valiantly fought off a panic attack and it did nothing for Neil's nerves.

It wasn't just Riko Kevin was afraid of. In twenty minutes he'd be facing his entire former team. The Ravens' coach, Tetsuji Moriyama, took Kevin in after his mother died. He'd raised Kevin to be a star but never let Kevin forget he was just Riko's valuable property. Neil didn't know much else about him. The one time Kevin mentioned him he'd slipped and called him "the master". Neil didn't need to hear anything else after that.

Blackwell was slow to appear in the distance, but it didn't take long to spot the two stadiums. The football and Exy stadium were on opposite sides of the campus like massive bookends.

"Hey, hey," Andrew said, distracting Neil from the view. "You'll tear something if you keep breathing like that, Kevin."

Neil turned enough to look back. Andrew was standing up and leaning over

Kevin's seatback, arms folded on the cushion so he could look down at Kevin's head. Kevin had a knee hugged to his chest and his face hidden in the fold of his arm. His knuckles were white where his hand was clenched into a fist. Neil didn't think it was the bus that was making Kevin shake like that.

"Look at me," Andrew said. "It'll be fine. You believe me, yes?"

"I believe you," Kevin said, muffled but noticeably strained.

"Liar." Andrew laughed and leaned forward a little to peer out Kevin's window.

They weren't the first team to arrive, but a quick count of buses said they weren't the last, either. Neil's stare inevitably went to the three black buses in the middle of the parking lot. The only hint of color on any of them was a splash of dark red around the silhouette of a raven. Wymack parked as far away from Edgar Allan's buses as possible.

Wymack took the key from the ignition, grabbed Abby's travel bag, and started down the aisle toward the back of the bus. "Off the bus," he said, and the upperclassmen obediently filed off as he passed. Aaron and Nicky waited for him to go by before ushering their dates out to the asphalt. Neil stayed where he was.

Wymack pulled a bottle of vodka out of the bag and put it down beside Kevin. "You have ten seconds to inhale as much of this as you can. I'm timing you. Go."

It was alarming how much a man could drink when he needed an emotional crutch. Wymack had to pry the bottle from Kevin's desperate fingers afterward. Kevin smeared a hand across his mouth and looked out the window. He couldn't see the Ravens' buses from this angle, but the sick look on his face said he didn't need to. Wymack sent Neil a significant look, and Neil gave up stalling. He left Kevin to their unorthodox care and got off the bus.

Abby had the storage doors open so they could get their change of clothes out. Nicky already had Neil's in hand and turned it over at Neil's approach. Neil tried not to crush wrinkles into it with his fingers.

Andrew led Kevin and Wymack off the bus. Wymack gave Abby her bag back, waited for Kevin and Andrew to get their clothes, and locked all of the bus's doors. Security guards at the gate watched their approach with interest and checked them off on a list. One stayed behind at the gate while the other escorted them to the locker room. Madison was using the home locker room to change right now, so the Foxes had to go all the way around to the away side.

By the time they were dressed, the alcohol had gotten a good hold on Kevin's system. He looked much steadier as he followed Andrew out of the dressing room. Judging by the nervous looks Nicky kept sending Kevin, Nicky wasn't

convinced that calm would last. Neil had equally weak faith in Kevin's spine but he had to trust Andrew to be enough.

One of the gear closets in the main room had a printed PALMETTO STATE sign taped to the door. They locked their personal belongings in there and Wymack pocketed the key. Wymack did a quick head count and sent Kevin a measuring look. He said nothing but looked at Andrew. Andrew grinned in response. Wymack nodded and turned on Neil.

"You," he said, "attempt to behave this time. Don't pick fights with him today."

"Yes, Coach."

Wymack looked skeptical but didn't argue. "Let's go, then."

The Blackwell stadium was eerily quiet. Everyone who'd arrived already was on the court. Thick cushioned mats covered the polished floor to keep table legs and chairs from scraping up the wood. All of the lights were on, but the overhead scoreboard was dark. Neil thought he heard music, but he wasn't sure until he'd made it to the inner court.

Fourteen teams meant there were two hundred and fifty athletes present, then another ninety or so bodies in dates and staff. Neil had never seen so many people on an Exy court before. There was still plenty of room to walk around between the tables, but Neil hated seeing a court repurposed like this.

Wymack opened the court door and shooed his Foxes on. A small group of coaches were waiting right inside the door. One picked up a megaphone and announced the Foxes' arrival. Conversations faltered around the court and chairs creaked as athletes turned to look. Wymack looked at Dan, jerked his chin in a silent command to keep moving, and peeled off to play nice with his colleagues. Abby stayed behind with him after one last pensive look at Kevin.

There was a seating arrangement on the court. Chairs had paper banners draped over the backs with school colors and mascots. Finding a short line of orange chairs didn't take a lot of looking. Spotting the Ravens was easier. The two teams were seated across from each other at the same table.

"Motherfucker," Dan said, low but with enough heat Neil had no problems picking up on it. He had to give her props, though. Dan didn't even slow on her way over to the table.

"Oh, how cliché," Andrew said, sounding almost delighted by this turn of events. "Maybe this will be fun after all. Come on, Kevin. Let's not keep them waiting."

All the blood had left Kevin's face, but he followed close behind Andrew.

Judging by Neil's quick headcount, the Ravens hadn't brought dates. They hadn't brought any color along, either. All twenty-two of them were dressed

head-to-toe in black. The twenty men wore the same shirts and slacks, and the two women wore identical dresses. They even sat the exact same way, all with their right elbows on the table, all of them with their chins in their hands. Another team might look foolish going so far, but somehow the Ravens looked imposing.

"Riko," Dan said, pulling out the chair directly opposite him. "Dan Wilds."

Riko offered her his hand in the most condescending handshake Neil had ever seen. He kept his arm straight and his wrist loose, like a lord expecting a subject's kiss upon his knuckles. Neil hoped Dan would ignore it, but she slipped her hand into his and squeezed. Riko smiled when she let go.

"I know who you are," Riko said. "Who here doesn't? You're the woman who captains a Class I team. You've done admittedly well despite your disadvantages."

"What disadvantages?"

"Do you really want me to start listing them?" Riko asked. "This is only a two-day event, Hennessey."

Neil didn't understand, but Matt did, judging by his fierce, "Careful, Riko."

Dan touched Matt's arm to calm him down and pulled out her seat. The upperclassmen sat to one side of her, with Allison neatly tucked between Renee and Matt. Andrew's group stretched out to her right in the same order they'd been in on the bus. Neil was closer to Riko than he wanted to be, but having a couple bodies between them was a little comforting.

Unfortunately, Riko wasn't the only problem. The man to Riko's right stood up as soon as the Foxes were settled and walked behind the Ravens until he was across from Neil. Two fingers to the woman's shoulder got her out of her chair and she moved to the newly-emptied seat. The stranger sat across from Neil. As he did the Ravens fell out of their frozen poses, but they did so only to lean back as one in their chairs. The only one still sitting straight was Riko, and Neil's new dinner companion was leaning forward as he considered Neil.

Neil didn't recognize the man, but he didn't need to ask. The black three tattooed on his left cheekbone meant he could be no one but Jean Moreau. He was the Ravens' starting backliner and supposedly an old friend of Kevin's. There was nothing friendly on his face tonight.

"You look familiar," Jean said in heavily accented English.

"If you watched Kathy's show you saw me there," Neil said.

"Ah, you are right. That must be it. What was your name again? Alex? Stefan? Chris?"

For a moment Neil thought he'd fallen over. He felt the world lurch out from under him and take his stomach with it. A second or minute or eternity later he

realized he hadn't moved at all. He wasn't even breathing.

In eight years on the run Neil had been through sixteen countries and twenty-two names. Hearing one name from Jean wouldn't mean anything. Hearing three wasn't a coincidence. It was a threat. Andrew had warned Neil Riko would unearth his trail no matter how well he and his mother buried it. Neil feared that eventuality, but he hadn't wanted to believe it. It sometimes took his father years to catch up with them. It was impossible to think Riko succeeded in just two weeks.

Coaxing air back into his lungs was the hardest thing Neil had ever done. It was a miracle his breath sounded so steady when his throat was closing up.

"It's Neil."

"Hmm?" Jean tilted his head to one side as if that would help him see Neil better. "You don't look much like a Neil."

"Blame my mother," Neil said. "She named me."

"How is she doing, by the way?" Riko asked.

Neil looked into Riko's dark eyes and felt like he was dying. He might have answered, but Dan beat him to it with an annoyed, "Don't antagonize my team, Riko. This isn't the place for it."

"I was being polite," Riko said. "You haven't seen me antagonistic yet."

Jean looked at Kevin. "Hello, Kevin."

"Jean," Kevin said quietly.

Jean's smile was lazy, but the look in his gray eyes was ashen ice. Neither of them had anything else to say to each other, but they stared each other down unblinking. Andrew lost interest before long and leaned forward.

"Jean," he said. "Hey, Jean. Jean Valjean. Hey. Hey. Hello."

Jean huffed a little in annoyance but looked at Andrew. Andrew held out his hand and Jean was foolish enough to take it. Andrew's knuckles went white as he crushed Jean's hand. Jean couldn't hide all of a flinch, and the smooth look on his face gave way to an irritated scowl. Andrew only smiled wider at the sight of it.

"I'm Andrew. We haven't met yet."

"For which I am grateful," Jean said. "The Foxes as a whole are an embarrassment to Class I Exy, but your very existence is unforgivable. A goalkeeper who doesn't care if he is scored on has no right to touch a racquet. You should have stayed on the sidelines like the publicity stunt you are."

"That's a bit out of line, don't you think?" Renee said.

The woman now on Riko's right gave a loud snort. "If someone like that replaced you in goal, you must be downright terrible. I can't wait to watch one of your matches. I think it will be entertaining. We would make a drinking game of it but we don't want to die of alcohol poisoning."

"Yeah, that'd be a shame," Dan said with heavy sarcasm.

"This is the first time our teams have met," Renee said, sounding completely unruffled by such rude words. "Do we have to start off so poorly?"

"Why not? You're poor at everything else you do," the woman said. "Is it honestly fun to be so terrible?"

"I imagine we have more fun than you do, yes," Renee said.

Neil could hear the smile in her voice. He didn't know how she could keep up such a nice tone. His fear was an icy ball in the pit of his stomach, but listening to the Ravens' derision was eating a hole through it. Keeping his mouth shut and staying out of the conversation was taking more willpower than he thought he had. The longer he sat there in silence the harder it became. Neil fleetingly wished he'd inherited his mother's patience instead of his father's temper.

"Fun is for children," Jean said, looking away from Andrew.

If he'd been going to say anything else, he forgot it when he got a good look at Renee. Andrew let go of Jean's hand while he was distracted, but it took Jean another moment to withdraw it. Riko barely moved, but Neil was so attuned to his presence he didn't miss it. Neither did Jean, judging by how fast he found his tongue again.

"At this level it is supposed to be about skill, and your team is sadly lacking. You have no right to play with us."

"Then you shouldn't have transferred districts," Matt said. "No one wants you here."

"You took something that does not belong to you," a Raven said. "You brought this year's humiliation on yourselves."

"We didn't take anything," Dan said. "Kevin wants to be here."

The Raven across from Renee laughed. "Don't tell me you really believe that. Kevin went to you because someone had to teach you what Exy is supposed to look like on a court. If he had stayed on as an assistant coach maybe he would learn to stomach your failures. Now that he's playing with you there's no way he will last the season. We know Kevin better than you ever will. We know how much your incompetence must grate on him."

"So do we," Aaron said. "It's not like he's shy with his opinion."

Kevin finally found his voice. "They know how I feel, but words alone won't fix anything. A team that needs this much work requires a larger commitment than that."

"You won't stay," Jean said. It sounded less like a prediction and more like an order. "You should reconsider our offer before we rescind it for good, Kevin. Face the facts. Your pet is and always will be dead weight. It's time to—"

"What?" Andrew turned a wide-eyed look on Kevin. "You have a pet and you never told us? Where do you keep it, Kevin?"

Jean flicked him an annoyed look. "Don't interrupt me, Doe."

The sound Nicky made at Neil's side was sharp and offended, but Andrew smiled in the face of Jean's strange insult. "Oh, points for trying, but save your breath. Here's a tip for you, okay? You can't cut down someone who's already in the gutter. You just waste your time and mine."

"Enough." Dan snapped her fingers at them. "Break it up. This is a district event and we have twenty officials on hand. We're here to get to know each other, not to start fights. If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. That goes for both teams."

"Is that why your new child is being so quiet?" Riko gestured at Neil. "He doesn't have anything 'nice' to say?"

"Leave him alone," Matt said.

"He was very spirited the last time we met," Riko said. "Perhaps that was just a show for the crowd? Hello, I am speaking to you. Are you really going to ignore me?"

Nicky dug his fingers into Neil's thigh under the table, a silent and desperate reminder to keep his mouth shut. Neil left half-moon marks on the back of Nicky's hand with his fingernails and counted to ten. He only made it to four before Riko opened his mouth again.

"What a coward," Riko said with exaggerated disappointment. "Just like his mother."

Neil stopped counting.

"You know, I get it," Neil said. "Being raised as a superstar must be really, really difficult for you. Always a commodity, never a human being, not a single person in your family thinking you're worth a damn off the court—yeah, sounds rough. Kevin and I talk about your intricate and endless daddy issues all the time."

"Neil," Kevin said, low and frantic.

Neil ignored him. "I know it's not entirely your fault that you are mentally unbalanced and infected with these delusions of grandeur, and I know you're physically incapable of holding a decent conversation with anyone like every other normal human being can, but I don't think any of us should have to put up with this much of your bullshit. Pity only gets you so many concessions, and you used yours up about six insults ago. So please, please, just shut the fuck up and leave us alone."

Jaws dropped up and down the line; Raven symmetry shattered as they stared at Neil in stupefied disbelief. Riko's expression could have frozen hell, but Neil

was too upset to be afraid. He'd have a nervous breakdown later. Right now he leaned forward and looked down the table at Dan, who sat with her face buried in her hands.

"Dan, I said please. I tried to be nice."

"Matt," Dan said, almost choking on his name. "Matt, Coach. Get Coach. Oh my god."

Matt left as fast as he could.

"You can't say things like that," Jean said.

Neil wouldn't have looked at him, except Jean sounded more horrified than angry. "Then he shouldn't have asked me to join the conversation. I was happy sitting here saying nothing."

Jean turned on Kevin and spoke in quick, furious French. "What the hell is this?"

"His antagonism is a personality flaw we're learning to live with," Kevin said.

"Live with," Jean echoed, like the very idea offended him. "No! You should have dealt with him two weeks ago when he first stepped out of line. We trusted you to discipline him. Why doesn't he know his place yet?"

"Neil has no place in Riko's games," Kevin said. "He is a Fox."

"He is not a Fox!"

"Funny," Neil said in French. Jean wasn't expecting him to understand them and shot Neil a startled look. "I'm pretty sure the contract I signed said Palmetto State University."

"A contract does not change facts," Jean said. "Did you forget who bought you?"

"Bought me," Neil repeated. "Nobody bought me."

Kevin frowned, lost. "Jean, what are you talking about?"

Jean looked like he swallowed a stone. "You don't know." It was supposed to be an accusation, but it fell flat. Jean shot an incredulous look between them. "How can you not know? Why else would you have recruited him, Kevin?"

"He has potential," Kevin said.

Jean's laughter sounded more than a little hysterical. "God save you both, you useless fools. No one else can. How either of you have lived this long when you're so miserably stupid is beyond my capacity to understand."

Wymack's voice nearly startled Neil out of his skin. "What the hell is going on over here?"

Neil looked up to see Wymack standing right behind him. Matt went back to his chair but didn't sit down again. Jean ignored Wymack but turned in his chair and said something in a flurry of Japanese. Whatever it was wiped the icy look

off Riko's face at last. Riko sent an intent look between Neil and Kevin before answering. Jean gestured helplessly. Kevin looked from one to the other before saying something in cautious Japanese.

Wymack interrupted before Kevin could finish and motioned to his Foxes. "On your feet. Abby is talking to the event coordinators about finding us a new table."

Neil didn't need to be told twice, but he didn't get far. Jean turned back on him before Neil had finished pushing in his chair and beckoned for him to listen. His French was almost too fast for Neil to follow, but Neil understood more than he wanted to.

"Riko will have a few minutes of your time later," Jean said. "I suggest you speak with him if you do not want everyone to know you are the Butcher's son."

Hearing his father's name aloud was a kick in the chest. The noise Kevin made at his side was worse. Neil reacted without thinking, clapping a hand to Kevin's chest and shoving him as far back from the table as he could. Kevin stumbled back so fast he almost fell. Neil didn't look back at him, but he couldn't tune out Kevin's hoarse denial.

"That's not true."

"Shut up," Neil said, but he didn't know which one of them he was speaking to. "Don't say anything else."

"Run along," Jean said. "It's what you're best at, isn't it?"

Wymack stayed behind to deal with Edgar Allan and the Foxes cleared out of there like their lives depended on it. They attracted a lot of curious stares as they crossed the room to Abby, but the Foxes were too busy watching Kevin and Neil to return any of it. Abby and Blackwell's coach walked them to their new table. They'd switched seats with the coaches. It put the Foxes on the outskirts of the event, but Neil doubted any of them really minded.

They settled in the same order they'd been in at the last table, but Kevin sat sideways to stare at Neil. He seized Neil's chin in an iron grip and turned Neil's face toward him. Neil wanted to fight it, but there wasn't a point anymore. He watched Kevin, waiting for recognition to sink in. On its heels was sick fear. Neil clenched his hands together under the table where no one could see his fingers shake.

Kevin opened his mouth, but Neil didn't want to hear it. He didn't know what Kevin was going to say and, more importantly, he didn't know what language it would be in. Neil spoke first in quiet but strained French.

"No, Kevin. Not here. You and I will talk tomorrow."

Kevin hesitated. "Does Andrew know?"

"He knows only pieces of it," Neil said. "He doesn't know my name."

"Does he know who you are?"

"I said no." Neil wrenched Kevin's hand off his face. "We're not doing this here."

Kevin stared at him a few seconds longer, then got out of his chair almost fast enough to take the whole table with him. Abby was at his side in a heartbeat, expression pinched with worry. Kevin couldn't seem to manage words, but he gestured for her to follow and started for the door. Abby took a step after him, then hesitated, torn.

"Go, Abby, go." Andrew shooed her with both hands. "Bring him back when he's drunk. We've got Neil. Right, Neil?"

Neil had used all his words on Kevin, so he just nodded. Abby hurried after Kevin, but she looked across the court toward the Ravens' table. Neil saw her wave and followed the gesture to Wymack. Wymack was heading the Foxes' way, his face a thundercloud. Neil clenched his fingers tighter and willed them to stillness.

"Neil," Dan said, taking Kevin's seat between him and Andrew. "Are you okay?"

"Does he look okay to you?" Andrew asked.

Dan shot Andrew a livid look, but his smile said he wasn't impressed by her anger. Andrew held onto the table edge and leaned back until his chair was balancing on its back legs. It gave him an unobstructed view of Neil behind Dan. Neil looked at him because he didn't trust himself to face anyone else just yet. Andrew shielded his mouth with his hand but didn't bother to lower his voice.

"I told you so."

"Sit down, Minyard," Wymack snapped, coming up behind Dan's new chair. Andrew gave an exaggerated sigh and let his chair fall back to the ground. Wymack turned on Neil next. "Did you or did you not tell me you weren't going to start a fight?"

Nicky spoke up on Neil's other side. "In Neil's defense—"

"I didn't ask you," Wymack interrupted. "Neil, talk to me."

In his head Neil was already counting steps to freedom. Their new seating arrangement made them the closest table to the court door. He'd just have to cross the inner court and get through the locker room. The fence around the stadium was ringed with barbed wire to prevent vandalism and theft, but he could leave the way they'd come in. It was a toss-up as to whether or not the guards would stop him. A young man in nice clothes running breakneck speed away from a public event was suspicious.

If he had an excuse to get out of here, like following Kevin to the vodka on the bus, he could conserve his energy until he passed the guards. From there he

just had to find a taxi, because hitchhiking wasn't going to be fast enough this time. He needed to get back to Palmetto State and get his papers from his safe. He needed his money and his numbers. Maybe it was finally time to call—

Neil's escape route ground to a sickening halt in his head. He pried his fingers apart and pressed one hand to his pocket. He could feel the hard lines of his phone through the cotton.

"Neil, if you can't be here say so," Wymack said. "Abby can take you elsewhere until it's time to leave. Get out of here and get some fresh air."

It was the perfect opening, but Neil couldn't take it. If he did, he really would go, and he wouldn't come back. Running wasn't easy, but it was easier than trusting Andrew. But Neil remembered the weight of a key in his palm, its metal soaked through with another person's body heat. He remembered Andrew's promise to see this year through with him.

"No," Neil said, finally finding his voice. "I knew this was going to happen. I just wasn't ready for it. I'm fine."

"What can I do?" Wymack asked.

Neil looked up. The tired look on Wymack's face said Neil's surprise was a little too blatant. For a split second Neil felt guilty, though he wasn't entirely sure why. He crushed it as fast as he could. He had too much else to worry about right now and was feeling too much already to deal with a strange thing like guilt.

"I don't know," Neil said.

"When you know, tell me."

"Yes, Coach."

The arrival of another team helped distract them. Kevin returned a while later, looking worlds better with an ungodly amount of vodka in his system. When all fourteen teams were accounted for, Blackwell's coach gave a short speech about the season. Event staff rolled food out, and the teams ate to the sound of scattered laughter. Away from the pressures of game night it was easier for them to behave. They just needed to avoid bringing up rivalries and tensions.

Thirteen of the coaches had taken the Foxes' original seats with the Ravens. The Foxes were stuck socializing with the other half. It was easier than Neil expected it to be. The coaches were professionals and therefore more reserved in their personal opinions. Dan and Kevin carried most of the conversation, Dan with an infectious enthusiasm and Kevin with drunken good nature. Neil was glad for that, as he didn't want to talk to anyone, but now and then a coach directed a question down the table toward him.

After dinner a crew cleared the court. The table legs were collapsible, so the tables were piled three high along one of the court walls. They stacked chairs

until the weight of them threatened to topple them over. With the middle of the court cleared out there was room to set up a couple icebreakers. Neil twitched as he watched them erect a temporary volleyball net where only Exy should be played. No one else seemed to have a problem with it; teams fell apart and mingled as they found something new to do. Further down, a stereo system started blasting what passed as popular music these days, and half of the court became an impromptu dance floor.

"Go forth," Wymack told his Foxes. "Have fun. Or don't. I don't care. Just no more fighting, you got me?"

Most of the Foxes didn't need to be told twice. Dan and Matt hurried to find a volleyball team. Aaron and Nicky tugged their dates toward the dance floor. Allison was starting to look a little unsteady on her feet, so Renee ushered her off the court for a quick break. That left Neil, Andrew, and Kevin standing alone. Wymack eyed them.

"You miss that one and need to hear it again?"

"Oh, Coach." Andrew tossed his hands up in a helpless shrug. "You can't even imagine how much fun we are having right now. It's overwhelming. Give us a minute to catch our breaths before our hearts explode in our chest."

"You have thirty seconds."

Kevin waited only another twenty before setting off with Andrew and Neil behind him. He made a slow circuit of the court, seeking out every team save the Ravens. It didn't matter what athletes honestly thought of the Foxes; Kevin could bring almost any conversation to a grinding halt when he walked up. Kevin didn't go out of his way to be polite, but he kept most of his condescension in check. Neil ended up shaking more hands than he wanted to. Only a couple people tried to shake Andrew's hand. Andrew stared them down with a smile until they gave up.

It wasn't fun, but it was interesting, and with Kevin in the mix some of the athletes got worked up. Neil didn't realize how much time they'd spent talking about past games and some of the better professional leagues until he turned and saw Allison in his peripheral vision. A glance at his watch showed they'd been making rounds for almost two hours now. The event would close in an hour in preparation for a long day tomorrow.

Neil looked up at Allison again. She stood frozen on the edge of the dance floor, hands limp at her side and half-turned toward the court. Not completely frozen, Neil noticed a second later, because her head was moving as she followed something's progress. He turned and scanned the crowd in search of whatever had caught her interest.

It took him only a few seconds to realize the Ravens were coming. The entire team was crossing the court toward Kevin, walking in V formation like a flock of birds going south.

"Andrew," Neil said.

"Oh, finally," Andrew said, stepping up alongside Neil. "Kevin, look. We have company."

"Excuse me," Kevin said to the Breckenridge Jackals they'd been chatting up.

Neil heard the strain in his voice and hoped the Jackals hadn't. Kevin moved up on Andrew's other side. Neil buried his hands in his pockets to hide his white-knuckled fists. Riko stopped further away than Neil thought he would, but Neil understood a moment later. The rest of the Ravens kept going, flipping their V until they'd trapped the three Foxes between them. Neil looked at faces down the line and waited for someone to make a move.

It came from the least expected corner. Renee appeared out of nowhere on Kevin's other side. She looped one arm through Kevin's and held her free hand out to Jean. "Jean, wasn't it? My name is Renee Walker. We didn't really get a chance to talk earlier."

Confusion eased Jean's stoic mask into something more than a little uncomfortable, but he accepted her handshake. "Jean Moreau."

"Neil Josten," someone said. Neil trusted Kevin to Renee and turned to face the man who'd spoken. Two men and a woman stood in a tight clump to his left. The man offered a sneer instead of a hand. "We are the Ravens' starting strikers. We wanted you to see us so you know what an offense team really looks like."

"Offense, or offensive?" Matt sidled up alongside Neil. Renee's arrival might have been coincidence, but Matt's wasn't. Neil guessed Allison alerted the upperclassmen to the Ravens' approach. "Matt Boyd, starting backliner for the Foxes. I'm the one who's going to be wrecking your goals this October. Nice to meet you." He held out his hand but didn't look surprised when no one took it. "Guess the pleasure's all mine."

"We're sure it is," the Raven striker said, "seeing how you're dating a prostitute."

"Stripper," Dan corrected as she showed up and wound an arm around Matt's waist. Her stilettos hung off her fingers by their thin straps and she jiggled them as she spoke. "Hopefully you're smart enough to distinguish between the two professions. If you're not, I have serious concerns about your academic standings."

Neil tried not to stare at her. He would have dismissed the Raven's insult as an outright lie if not for Dan's easy response. Too late he remembered her telling him she'd worked an overnight job during high school to make ends meet. He'd

assumed she was a night stocker at a grocery store or maybe a front desk clerk at a motel. She didn't seem the type of person who would tolerate being objectified. Neil didn't make a habit of prying into people's pasts but there had to be an interesting story there.

"Hennessey, right?" one of the strikers said. "Such a good name for such a fierce spirit."

"We were a little disappointed you didn't sign up as part of the entertainment tonight," one of the others said. "We were looking forward to the show."

The once-over he gave her was syrupy slow. Matt gave a violent twitch as he forcibly restrained himself from breaking the man's neck. Neil was amazed by his self-control until he saw Dan's fingers digging into Matt's hip in warning. Dan didn't want anyone fighting her battles for her. She slid around Matt to get in the Raven's personal space. The striker grinned at Matt over her shoulder, then tilted forward and sucked in a deep breath against her neck.

Dan brought her stilettos up between his legs in a vicious punch. The Raven recoiled with an inhuman yelp. The teammates to either side of him grimaced and cringed away. They were quick to avert their eyes from their half-crumpled colleague.

"Yeah, Hennessey," Dan said, sounding calmer than Neil thought she should in the face of such treatment. "Treats you right if you're willing to pay and will fuck you over the morning after if you're not nice enough to her. Sorry, but this bottle's got a name on it. Hope you feel that one for a while, you lowlife asshole."

She didn't wait for a response but turned back and folded herself against Matt's side. Neil didn't know if Dan's tight grip was apology for leaving Matt out of it or gratitude for letting her handle it. Either way her embrace did nothing to ease the rigid set of Matt's shoulders.

Neil couldn't help it. "What happened to being polite, Dan?"

Dan laughed. "Do as I say, not as I do, rookie."

"Kevin Day," a booming voice said, and all the Ravens turned to look.

Neil followed their stares to the man now standing at the apex of their triangle. The chill that shivered down his spine made all the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

Coach Tetsuji Moriyama was unarguably the most powerful man in Exy—as he should be, considering he and Kevin's mother, Kayleigh Day, were the two to invent the sport thirty years ago. He'd handpicked Edgar Allan to be home of the first NCAA Exy stadium and had been coaching the Ravens ever since. He was the founder of the Exy Rules and Regulations Committee, a consultant for the international committee, and owner of two professional teams. He was a legend.

He was also a demon: Riko's abusive uncle and the younger brother of the Moriyama yakuza boss.

"Master," Kevin said, voice catching with fear. "It's been a while."

Moriyama motioned to the Ravens, and they broke formation at last. They filled in the gaps between the Foxes, a wall of black suits and cold faces. Neil lost sight of Matt and Dan when the strikers bodily shifted him out of the way. He barely noticed, more intent on watching Moriyama and Kevin. Moriyama held out his hand, and Kevin obediently set his left hand in it. Moriyama lifted it to inspect Kevin's ragged white scars.

"Butcher," a quiet voice called in French.

Neil looked over his shoulder. Jean had come around the circle at some point and was standing a short space away. He tilted his head in an order and Neil followed his stare to see Riko stepping off the court. Neil didn't look back to see if any of his teammates noticed his exit and kept a casual pace on his way to the door. He stepped into the inner court in time to see Riko disappearing into the home locker room. Neil took a breath to steel his nerves and followed.

Riko was checking the locker room for unwanted company when Neil entered. Neil waited just inside the door, arms folded over his chest, for Riko to finish. It didn't take Riko long, and he beckoned imperiously for Neil to join him in the front room. The room was almost big enough to fit the Foxes' entire locker room and was crowded with matching couches. Throw rugs with Blackwell's Jackrabbit mascot covered the empty gaps on the floor and photos lined the walls. Riko considered a couple pictures before giving a derisive snort.

He turned on his heel to face Neil, and they eyed each other across the room. Finally Riko smiled. It was a horrible expression, but not nearly as bad as the words that followed it.

"Nathaniel, it has been so long."

Neil's fear was hot and thick in his chest. He could barely breathe around it. He prayed his expression didn't give him away even as he knew it was too late. "My name is Neil."

"Do not lie to me again. You will not enjoy the consequences." Riko gave Neil a beat to respond. "Imagine my surprise when the results came back. Your fingerprints," he elaborated, with a mocking twitch to his smile. "Kathy gave me your glass as a souvenir. All it took was a smile and a kiss. It seems she is growing up to be quite the cougar."

Neil's stomach knotted up inside him. He'd accepted a cup of water at the start of Kathy Ferdinand's talk show and hadn't thought twice about leaving it behind afterward. He'd assumed Kathy's crew would see to it. His mother would

beat him half to death if she were still alive. All that time and money spent covering their tracks—destroyed by a simple batch of nerves.

"Explain something to me." Riko started across the room on slow steps. "Jean says Kevin did not know who you are. After seeing Kevin's reaction I am inclined to believe him. Perhaps I can understand, as I know how blind Kevin can be when it comes to Exy. I might even forgive him for sheltering you from me. But you must know who you are, so I am very, very curious to know what you think you are doing."

"I'm just trying to get by," Neil said, squeezing his arms so tight across his chest he thought he'd crush his own lungs. "If I'd known our families were business partners I wouldn't have signed the contract."

Riko stopped so close to him they were touching, and it took all Neil had in him to not lean away. Neil hadn't realized before that they were almost the same height. Riko's Japanese genes had betrayed him just as Neil's tiny mother had betrayed Neil. Riko might be short, but he radiated power and lethal malevolence. The two inches between the strikers felt like twenty.

"You're lying," Riko said.

"I am not." Neil hated the thread of desperation that worked its way into his voice. "I don't want to cause any trouble for your family. I don't want you to cause any trouble for mine. I'm just here for a year and then I'm gone again, I promise."

"You don't want to cause any trouble for my family," Riko echoed, as if hearing them a second time would make them easier to understand. "You have already cost my family a sizable fortune and eight years of trouble."

"How?" Neil asked. "The money I took was my father's."

"If you think acting stupid will save you, you are sadly mistaken."

"I'm not acting," Neil said, finally giving in and taking a step back. "My mother said it was my father's money. She never even told me about you. If I'd known the money was yours—"

"Nothing your father owned was his!" Riko snapped.

Neil's words died in his throat. He stared blankly at Riko. Riko stared back at him, looking for deceit on his face. Whatever he found only served to infuriate him further. Riko grabbed Neil by his shoulders and slammed him into the wall. Neil's head hit hard enough to rattle his teeth.

"I refuse to believe she never told you. All that time running and you never asked why?"

Neil gave Riko an incredulous look. "Have you met my father? I didn't have to ask."

A door banged open down the hall, and Matt called Neil's name. They only had seconds before he found them, but that was enough time for Riko to lean in. He kept his voice down but packed a world of venom into his words.

"You were not running from your father, Nathaniel. You were running from his master."

The thought of anyone keeping the Butcher on a leash was insane. "He didn't have one."

Riko pushed back, putting space between them right before Matt rounded the corner. Matt leveled a furious look at Riko as he moved up alongside Neil. "What is going on here?"

Neil ignored him and insisted, "He didn't have one."

Riko pointed a finger up at his own face and waited. Neil stared back as his brain refused to put the last pieces together. What Riko was suggesting was impossible. The Butcher was one of the biggest names on the eastern seaboard. He made Baltimore his home, but his territory extended from D.C. to outer Newark. He had a fiercely loyal syndicate and a penchant for grotesque executions. No one told the Butcher what to do. But Riko's incensed reaction didn't seem like an act and he had nothing to gain by lying to Neil, especially considering how easily Kevin could set things straight.

Kevin was going to say yes to all of this. Neil knew it, and he wasn't ready to hear that yet. If the Moriyamas really were powerful enough to keep a man like the Butcher under lock and key Neil was so far in over his head he might as well be six feet under.

"I don't believe you," Neil said, but even he heard the dread in his voice.

"Denial is more infuriating than ignorance," Riko said. "You will speak to Kevin at the next available opportunity and have him explain this to you in little words your small mind can understand. Learn your place. I will never tolerate this level of disrespect from you again. Do you understand?"

Neil was already in his coffin. He might as well nail it shut. "Yeah, I understand you're a complete asshole."

Riko took a step forward, expression murderous, but Matt put an arm up between them. "Leave my team alone, Riko. You pick another fight here at banquet and we'll make sure the ERC suspends you. Have fun telling the press why you're benched for a couple games."

Riko didn't even look at Matt. He stared at Neil for half a minute as he got his temper under control. The violent gleam never left his eyes, but his voice was calm and sure when he spoke. "Later you will come to me on your knees, begging for my forgiveness. I cannot wait to deny you."

Riko turned and left. Matt didn't drop his arm until the door slammed closed behind Riko. Then he wheeled on Neil, expression tight with equal parts anger and concern.

"Neil?"

Neil was cold and shaken all the way to the core but his voice stayed steady. He stuffed his hands in his pockets in case they were shaking and held onto his phone for dear life. "I don't think Riko likes me very much. Should I be disappointed?"

Matt looked skyward as if searching for patience. "Coach is going to kill you."

"What he doesn't know won't hurt me."

"This is serious," Matt said. "Riko's got it out for you."

"He's not after just me," Neil said. "He tried getting Dan, too."

The dark look on Matt's face said he wouldn't forget that anytime soon. "He can try all he likes, but he'll piss only me off. Dan's not ashamed of the choices she made. This is different," Matt said, pointing at Neil. "I don't know what Jean said to you, but Kevin had to get shitfaced to deal with it."

"It's not what Jean said that upset Kevin," Neil lied. "It's what I said. I told Riko Kevin and I mock him all the time and wouldn't let Kevin explain himself to Jean. I spoke for him and refused to let him back out of this. I've basically made things a thousand times worse for him. I'm not sorry, though."

Matt laughed. "You're a piece of work, you know that? Let's get back out there before Coach realizes we're missing."

They headed back into the stadium to find their team. The Ravens had dispersed, likely relieved from running interference upon Riko's return. Dan and Renee were standing with Kevin and Andrew near one of the walls. Allison had joined them at some point, but Aaron and Nicky were still lost on the dance floor. Neil looked for Wymack and found him talking with Moriyama in the middle of the floor.

"Oh, Neil came back," Andrew said. "I didn't think you would."

Neil pulled his fist from his pocket and uncurled his fingers. Andrew glanced first at the phone in Neil's palm and then up at Neil's face. Neil didn't return the look but said in German, "I made a different call this time."

Andrew laughed and rocked on his feet. His grin was wide enough Neil could see it in his peripheral vision. Neil didn't really expect him to switch languages, because the conversation was likely more entertaining to him when they had an audience, but for now Andrew was willing to play along. "How interesting. How unexpected. Did it hurt a little?"

"Not as much as my next conversation with Kevin will."

"Not tonight." Andrew waved a hand in dismissal. "I'll give him to you tomorrow."

Neil put his phone away and looked up to see the upperclassmen watching them. Neil knew Matt would talk to them later and pass on his vague explanation, so he wasn't surprised when neither Dan nor Renee asked him what was going on. Instead Matt looked from Neil to Andrew and asked, "How many languages do you speak, exactly?"

"A couple," Neil hedged, and distracted them by asking Andrew, "Who is Doe?"

"Oh, that's me," Andrew said. "I didn't enter the foster system with a last name, so I was tagged as a Doe. Like John Doe. Get it? Ah, they think they're clever. I changed my name when I was adopted. Yes? Nicky said he told you all about it."

Nicky only would have confessed his indiscretion to Andrew if he felt guilty for giving so much away. Neil assumed that meant the subject was touchier than a drugged Andrew could let on, so he answered with a vague, "He summarized it for us."

Andrew grinned and shrugged the conversation off. Neil was happy to let it die and gladder when his teammates didn't bring up Riko again. Finally it was time for them to leave. Wymack rounded up his team, waited while they changed out into more comfortable clothes, and got them on the road. The others fell asleep within a few miles, but Neil spent the entire ride thinking about Riko and his father.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Neil woke up on Wymack's couch. It took him a moment to remember where he was, but the view was as familiar to him as the one from his bed at the dormitory. Wymack had dropped everyone else off at the stadium but snagged Neil before he could catch a ride with his teammates back to the dorm. He hadn't said anything last night, maybe too tired to demand an explanation for last night's fiasco, but had relegated Neil to the living room and gone to sleep himself.

Neil untangled the borrowed sheet from his legs and sat up. The clock on the mantel was buried behind crumpled cigarette packs, but the light seeping into the room through the blinds was bright enough to be late morning. He wasn't surprised he'd slept so late, considering what time they'd gotten back to campus, but he still wasn't ready to face the day. Neil knew denial was childish, but he wanted to avoid Kevin as long as possible.

He slid off the couch and yawned as he crumpled the sheet into a messy ball. The soft click of dishes said Wymack was up and likely mainlining coffee. Neil hesitated in the hallway with the sheet hugged to his chest, tempted to sneak out and avoid this conversation altogether. With a sigh he gave in to the inevitable and turned away from the front door. He dropped the sheet off in the hamper right inside Wymack's bedroom door, detoured to the bathroom to freshen up, and joined Wymack in the kitchen.

Wymack didn't look up from his newspaper but pointed at the stove. A lid was keeping a skillet of potatoes and eggs warm. Neil put together a breakfast burrito and sat across from Wymack. He was almost through with his breakfast before Wymack finished reading the paper and set it aside. Neil didn't look up from his plate to return Wymack's stare.

"You want to tell me why you have a hard-on for antagonizing Riko?" Wymack asked.

"He started it," Neil muttered into his tortilla.

"That doesn't mean you have to sink to his level. Were you listening when I told you what kind of person he is, what kind of family he's from?"

"Yes, Coach."

"You said that last night when I told you to behave," Wymack said. "Your lip-service 'yes Coach' isn't going to be enough anymore. Don't lie to me about the important shit."

"I can't help it," Neil said. He tried to chew slower, but he was fast running out of burrito to hide behind. He opted for deflection instead. "How can you stand having a team like ours, Coach? Isn't it exhausting dealing with us and our problems day after day?"

Wymack emptied his coffee with one big gulp. "Nope."

Neil just looked at him, and Wymack stared back. Neil got tired of the staredown first and finished off his breakfast. He started to get up to clear away his plate, but Wymack took it from him. Wymack dumped it in the dishwasher and poured himself a second cup of coffee. Instead of returning to the table he turned and leaned against the counter as he considered Neil.

"I'm starting to think I misjudged you," Wymack said. "I just don't know how or where. I know I'm not completely wrong, but you're still not adding up right."

"Now you sound like Andrew."

"That's because they're his words," Wymack said. When Neil frowned at him, Wymack shrugged and knocked back some of his coffee. "First day of practice I told everyone Edgar Allan had transferred districts, you remember? Andrew spent that night here with me. At first I figured he was mad at Kevin for lying to him, but he was more worked up about you. I mostly tuned him out then, but I probably should have listened."

"Andrew and I are working on our trust issues. Sort of."

"He says you're a pathological liar," Wymack said. "I'm starting to believe him."

"It's what I was raised to be," Neil said.

"Attempt to tell the truth at least once," Wymack said. "Tell me why someone who came here early to get away from his parents and who flinched away from me the first time he thought I was going to strike him goes so far out of his way to offend someone like Riko Moriyama. I would have thought you'd have better survival instincts."

Neil slouched a little in his chair and fidgeted with the edge of the table. Wymack deserved some sort of explanation, but the only one Neil had to offer was one he'd hoped to avoid sharing.

"Riko's my age," Neil said, trying not to choke on his words. "If you knew what my parents were capable of you'd understand why I don't trust men who are old enough to be my father. I know here," Neil gestured at his temple, "that you're not going to hurt me, but it's instinctive to react. I'm sorry."

"I didn't ask for an apology, wiseass."

"Yes, Coach," Neil said automatically, then winced.

"You're a real piece of work, you know that?" Wymack asked, coming to rejoin him at the table. "Your parents must be something else."

"So must yours be if you spend so much time on us," Neil said.

"They were," Wymack agreed.

"Oh," Neil said. "Are they both dead?"

Wymack looked amused by his tactlessness. "My mother OD'd almost ten years ago and my father lost a prison fight the first year I started here at Palmetto State. I hadn't spoken to either of them since I left D.C.."

Neil's heart skipped a beat. "You grew up in D.C.?"

"Interesting that that's the part you got hung up on."

Lying was easy, but Neil had never felt this guilty about it. "I was born in Alexandria. My mother worked in D.C. for a while. I just think it's funny we both started there and now we're here. Sometimes the world feels so big, but then I'm reminded how small it is."

"Big or small, just remember you're not alone in it," Wymack said. "You have your team, but that's a double-edged sword. They're there for you any time you need them, and they'll hold you up if you want them to, but your actions have consequences for all of them as well. The more you antagonize Riko, the harder you make things on them."

"Like with Seth," Neil said. "I know."

Wymack stared at him for an endless minute, then said too quietly, "The fuck did you just say to me?"

Neil realized too late Andrew hadn't shared his theory with Wymack. "It's convenient timing, isn't it? I insulted Riko on TV and applauded the Foxes' small size, and that same night Seth overdosed and made me starting line. Even Kevin thinks Riko orchestrated that."

"Even Kevin," Wymack echoed. "Do I even have to ask whose idea that was? Look at me, Neil. Are you listening? Seth had a lot of problems and no good solutions. We always knew he'd make it to graduation on a wing and a prayer. In his first four years he overdosed three times. It was past time for him to try again."

"I don't care what Andrew said to you. I don't care what Kevin thinks. If—and that's a big if, Neil—if Riko really was behind it somehow, the blame is all on him. He chose to take out his petty rage on Seth. He chose to cross a line. You didn't. You hear me? You didn't. Don't ever blame yourself for Seth's death. That is too dangerous a road to walk down. You keep your eyes on your own path and keep moving forward."

"Yes, Coach."

Wymack didn't look convinced, but he didn't push it. "So do we need to talk about last night?"

"No, Coach."

"Then come on. Andrew said you're meeting them at the stadium this morning. I'll give you a lift." Wymack emptied the rest of his coffee in one swallow and led the way out of the apartment.

Neil sat silent in the passenger seat on the short drive to the stadium. Andrew's car and the usual squad car were the only ones in the parking lot. Wymack dropped Neil off near the curb. Wymack motioned to Neil before he could shut the door and leaned across the front seat to look out at Neil.

"Tell Andrew to keep his bullshit theories to himself."

"Yes, Coach." Neil pushed the door closed and didn't watch Wymack drive away. He punched in this week's security code at the Foxes' entrance and went down the hall to the locker room. The lights were on, but all the rooms were empty, so he continued through the back door into the stadium itself. Kevin was sitting in the middle of the court on the fox paw logo. He wasn't dressed for practice. Neil wondered how long he'd been sitting here waiting for Neil to wake up.

It didn't take long to find Andrew; he was running the steps further up in the stands. Neil dropped his travel bag near the Foxes' benches and went onto the court to confront Kevin.

Kevin was facing him, but he didn't look up or say anything as Neil approached. Neil sat down just out of his reach and searched Kevin's face for a truth he still didn't want to know. Kevin didn't look any happier about this inevitable conversation, judging by the pained twist of his mouth, and that only made Neil feel worse.

"Why did Riko say he bought me?" Neil asked.

Kevin was silent for so long Neil almost hoped this was all a sick dream, but finally Kevin spoke. "You're not really him," Kevin said, so low Neil barely understood his words. "Tell me you aren't really Nathaniel."

Neil tried not to flinch at the sound of his real name and didn't quite succeed. "Don't call me that. It doesn't matter who I used to be. I'm Neil now."

"It is not that simple," Kevin said, louder and dismayed. "Why are you here?"

"I had nowhere else to go," Neil said. "When you showed up in Arizona I thought you'd come because you recognized me, but then you gave no sign you remembered me. I thought maybe I could stay until you figured things out."

"You thought," Kevin said, voice sharp with something too hysterical to be scorn. "You are a fucking idiot."

"I was desperate," Neil shot back.

"I can't believe your mother agreed to this."

"My mother is dead," Neil said. Kevin opened his mouth, but Neil didn't want to hear it. "She died last year and I buried her on the west coast. I have

nothing and no one else, Kevin. That's why I signed with you. I figured the chances of you remembering me were slim and I gambled on you not knowing the truth about my family."

"How could we not remember you?" Kevin asked.

Neil shook his head. "I didn't know when I came here that the Moriyamas and my father were business partners."

"They were not partners." Kevin sounded almost as offended as Riko had.

"I didn't know," Neil repeated. "Until Coach told me about the Moriyamas this May I knew nothing about Riko's family. After that I thought maybe that's why we met so long ago. I thought Riko's father and mine were discussing territories and borders. But last night Riko said my father belongs to the Moriyamas. What did he mean by that? Why did he say he bought me?"

"Don't lie to me," Kevin said. "We are in enough trouble as it is."

"My mother didn't tell me why we were running," Neil said. "I never asked her why she finally had enough. I was just glad to get away. We never talked about anything real after that. It was always about the weather or our current language or the local culture—the next time she had anything meaningful to say to me was when she was dying. Even then she didn't talk about my father. Not once did she mention the Moriyamas. If she had, I wouldn't be here right now, would I? So tell me the truth."

Kevin stared at him for an endless minute, then scrubbed fiercely at his face and muttered something in hoarse Japanese. Neil considered reaching out and shaking him, but Kevin dropped his hands to his lap and explained.

"Your father was Lord Kengo's right-hand man, the most trusted weapon in Lord Kengo's arsenal. The territory he held, he held for the Moriyamas. He was the force that kept the empire in line and the name that would take the fall if the government ever caught on.

"His power made you a loose end. You could never inherit his syndicate," Kevin said. "Lord Kengo handpicks his people very carefully to bolster his throne. Nepotism fractures that upward loyalty and leads families to think of their own successes first. He could have had you killed to keep things simple, but he gave you a chance to earn your keep. Your mother enrolled you in little leagues so you could learn Exy. The day you met us was your audition."

"Wait," Neil said. "Wait. What?"

"You were supposed to be like me," Kevin said. "You were a gift, another player for the master to train. You had two days to win him over: an initial scrimmage with us to show off your potential and a second scrimmage to prove you could adapt to and implement his instructions and criticisms. If afterward he

decided you weren't worth his time you would be executed by your own father." Neil swallowed hard. "How did I do?"

"Your mother wouldn't risk failure," Kevin said. "You never made it to the second practice. She disappeared with you overnight."

The heat in Neil's stomach could have been nausea or rage, but he didn't know who he was angry at. His mother had hated his fascination with Exy his entire life. She'd told him over and over he'd never touch a racquet again but she never told him why. He couldn't understand why she had never explained the totality of what they were running from.

"I'm going to be sick," Neil said, getting to his feet.

He was halfway up before Kevin grabbed his wrist to stop him. "Nathaniel, wait."

Neil wrenched free so hard he almost sent Kevin sprawling. "Don't call me that!"

He backed out of Kevin's reach, but Kevin got to his feet as if to follow him. Neil put out a hand to warn him off. His thoughts spun in a thousand directions as he stared at Kevin, at a name and a reputation that could have been his in another life. If he'd impressed Coach Moriyama he would have grown up at Castle Evermore with Riko and Kevin. He'd be wearing the "3" tattoo that adorned Jean Moreau's face.

Neil wanted to hate the way things turned out. For a moment he did. He'd grown up a frightened nothing and no-one when he could have been raised to be a Raven and future Court. Neil loved Exy so much he had to resent being cheated of that chance. But all Neil had to do was look at Kevin to know he would have hated that life too. He'd have learned from the best and played for the best, but he would have been a caged and abused wreck. Maybe he'd spent eight years running for his life, but at least he'd been free.

Now he'd finally hit the end of that leash. Last night Jean said Neil would never be a Fox. He warned Kevin to teach Neil his place in the Moriyama hierarchy and to discipline him for speaking out so strongly against Riko. Riko still considered Neil to be misplaced property. Now that Neil knew the truth, Riko expected Neil to bow his head and fall in line.

"I won't," Neil wanted to say, but what came out was, "I can't be this."

"You should run."

"I can't," Neil said again. Neil realized his fingers were shaking and raked his hands through his hair. It didn't calm the nerves shuddering over every inch of his skin. "I ran for eight years, Kevin. It was horrible even when my mother was alive. Where would I go now that I'm alone? Andrew thinks I'm safest if I stay."

"You said Andrew doesn't know."

"Andrew thinks my father was a gopher who skimmed money off his boss's payment to the Moriyamas. I told him my parents were executed for their treachery and that I ran with the money. Andrew wants me to use the Foxes' infamy to stay safe. If we're in the news every week it's hard for someone to get rid of me, or so he says."

"Notoriety can't save a security risk like you," Kevin said. "You know too much. You could destroy your father's territory by speaking to the wrong people. They knew your mother would never betray her family to the Feds, but you are an unpredictable and frightened child."

Kevin shook his head and bulled on when Neil started to argue. "The master wants to salvage you. He's going to sign you to the Raven lineup in spring. So long as you keep quiet and keep your head down he won't tell the main family he's found you."

"I'm not a Raven," Neil said. "I never will be."

"Then run," Kevin insisted, low and frantic. "It's the only way you'll survive."

Neil closed his eyes and tried to breathe. His heartbeat was loud as gunfire in his ears, drumming holes into his brain. He dug his hands into his shirt, trying to feel his scars through the cotton. When he breathed he smelled saltwater and blood. For a moment he was three thousand miles away, stumbling alone and broken down the highway toward San Francisco. Neil's fingers ached with the need for a cigarette. His legs burned with the desire to run.

But Neil's feet stayed planted, and he opened his eyes again. "No."

"Don't be stupid."

"Running won't save me this time," Neil said. "If the Moriyamas really do think I'm a threat they'll send people after me. My mother and I could barely outrun my father. How am I supposed to escape his boss?"

"At least you'd have a chance," Kevin said quietly.

"A chance to die somewhere else all by myself," Neil said, and Kevin looked away. Neil put his hands in his pockets, feeling his keys in one and his phone in the other. He twisted his fingers through the key ring, tracing ridges with his fingertips until he found the key to Nicky's house in Columbia. Andrew gave it to him in August when he first promised to protect Neil.

Neil looked down at the fox paw they were standing on. As he spoke his fear seeped away and was replaced by an unhappy calm. "If I was going to run, I should have done it in August. Andrew told me it was my last chance to get out. I decided to stay. I wasn't sure he was enough to stand between me and my father but I wanted this too much to care about the risks. Maybe I didn't fully understand the stakes then, but this hasn't changed."

Neil crouched and pressed his hands to the orange paint. "I don't want to run. I don't want to be a Raven. I don't want to be Nathaniel. I want to be Neil Josten. I want to be a Fox. I want to play with you this year and I want us to make it to championships. And in spring when the Moriyamas come for me I'll do what they're so afraid I will. I'll go to the FBI and tell them everything. Let them kill me. It'll be too late by then."

Kevin was silent for an endless minute, then said, "You should be Court."

It was barely a whisper, but it cut Neil to the bone. It was a resentful goodbye to the bright future Kevin had wanted for Neil. Kevin recruited Neil because he believed in Neil's potential. He brought him to the Foxes intending to make a star athlete out of him. Despite his condescending attitude and his dismissals of Neil's best efforts Kevin honestly expected Neil to make the national team after graduation. Now Kevin knew it was all for naught; Neil would be dead by May.

"Will you still teach me?" Neil asked.

Kevin was quiet again, but not for long this time. "Every night."

Neil swallowed against the hollow ache in his chest. "Matt and Dan want us to make it to finals. Do you think we stand any chance?"

"We have a chance to make it to semifinals if Nicky starts pulling his weight and Andrew cooperates," Kevin said. "We can't get past the Big Three."

USC, Penn State, and Edgar Allan were considered the "Big Three" of NCAA Exy. Edgar Allan always placed first. USC and Penn State usually stole second and third, though they were constantly upsetting each other in the rankings. The only way to finals was by beating one of those teams in semifinals.

"Guess that will have to be good enough," Neil said.

He got to his feet again and looked around, first at the orange lines and paw prints on the court, then through the walls to the stands. Andrew had apparently finished the stairs because he was now jogging laps around the inner court. Neil envied the stamina Andrew's medicine gave him.

"Kevin, what does he want?" Neil asked.

Realizing Kevin had no way of following his train of thought, he gestured in Andrew's direction. "Andrew doesn't know who I am, but he knows I have a price on my head. Despite that, he said he'd protect me for a year. Not for my sake, but because he thought training me would distract you from the Ravens' threats."

Neil looked back at Kevin and said, "What does he want that he'll risk so much to keep you here?"

"I made him a promise." Kevin dragged his stare away from Neil's face to follow Andrew's progress. "He's waiting to see if I can keep it."

"I don't understand."

Kevin said nothing for so long Neil almost gave up waiting for an answer. Finally he explained, "Andrew on his drugs is useless, but Andrew off his drugs is worse. His high school counselor saw the difference between his junior and senior years and swore this medicine saved his life. A sober Andrew is..." Kevin thought for a moment, trying to remember her exact words, and crooked his fingers at Neil as he quoted, "destructive and joyless."

"Andrew has neither purpose nor ambition," Kevin said. "I was the first person who ever looked at Andrew and told him he was worth something. When he comes off these drugs and has nothing else to hold him up I will give him something to build his life around."

"He agreed to this?" Neil asked. "But he's fighting you every step of the way. Why?"

"When I first said you would be Court, why were you upset with me?"

"Because I knew it'd never happen," Neil said, "but I wanted it anyway."

Kevin said nothing. Neil waited, then realized he'd answered his own question. It startled Neil into silence for a minute. Disbelief warred with discomfort, but Neil didn't know where that unease came from. He shifted on his feet and folded his arms as tight across his chest as he could.

"So, what?" he asked in a low voice. "You think he'll sober up next summer and suddenly realize he likes Exy after all? I thought you didn't believe in miracles."

"Andrew is crazy, not stupid," Kevin said. "Even he will grow bored of being a failure eventually. When his medicine is out of his system and he can actually think for himself again I will have an easier time getting through to him."

Neil doubted it, but he said, "Good luck."

It surprised him that he meant it. Andrew was hell to deal with most of the time but he really was doing his damndest to keep both Neil and Kevin at Palmetto State. The least they could give him in return was something of his own. Neil couldn't deny a little bit of bitterness that Andrew would have the future Neil couldn't, but he'd come to terms with that eventually.

"We should go," Neil said, because he didn't want to think about this anymore. "Don't tell Andrew about any of this, Kevin."

"I can't," Kevin said. "He won't respect your choice."

Neil started for the door, but Kevin put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. "Neil."

There was a world of regret in that name, but it was a promise, too. Neil pulled himself back together piece by broken piece and followed Kevin off the Foxhole Court.

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For the first time in Neil's life, he wasn't thinking about the future. He stopped counting days until the Ravens' match and scaled back on how much news he watched and read. He threw all of his energy into practices, stayed awake through most of his classes, and juggled his teammates as best as he could. He saw Andrew's lot on the way to and from practices and he was out with Kevin and Andrew most nights, so he gave his evenings to the upperclassmen.

He knew things about them he'd never bothered to learn about anyone else in his entire life. Renee's birth name was Natalie; her adoptive mother renamed her when she pulled Renee out of the foster system. Her mother was the reason she and Dan were at Palmetto State. Stephanie Walker was a reporter who'd interviewed Wymack with the ulterior motive of marketing Renee to him. Wymack flew to North Dakota during spring championships to watch Renee's team take on their biggest rivals. Dan happened to be captain of the rival team, and Wymack was impressed by her fierce performance. He signed them both that same weekend.

"It was pretty bad," Dan admitted when Renee told Neil the story. "I couldn't believe Coach actually expected us to get along, especially after her team kicked mine out of championships in my senior year."

"She took it very personally," Renee said with a fond smile on her face.

Neil tried imagining a time when they weren't friends and found it difficult. "You got over it eventually."

"I didn't have a choice," Dan said. "The Foxes didn't want girls on the line-up, and they especially didn't want one as captain."

"We had to face our teammates as a united force," Renee said, motioning from herself to Dan and Allison. "It was the only way to survive. Our friendship was a show that started and stopped at our bedroom door. It took most of the year for us to realize it wasn't an act anymore."

"I didn't figure it out until summer break," Dan said, "when I was talking to the girls about the season."

By 'the girls' she meant her stage sisters. Dan, aka Hennessey, had gotten a fake ID back in high school so she could work as a stripper in a nearby city. The hours worked well around her classes and Exy schedule, and it made the money she needed. Her aunt was unemployed and stuck at home with a newborn. Dan somehow had to support all three of them. Dan said she stopped talking to her aunt the second she moved out, but she kept in touch with her former coworkers. Supposedly they were all waiting for her to become a hotshot star.

That was how Neil found out Dan didn't want to go professional after college. She wanted to be a coach, and she planned on seizing the Foxhole Court when Wymack retired down the road. She would maintain Wymack's recruiting standards in his absence. Matt was wholeheartedly in favor of the idea.

Matt was an interesting countermeasure to Dan's scrappy background: the wealthy and well-educated son of a professional boxer and a high-profile plastic surgeon. His parents separated years ago, in large part due to his father's unending infidelity, but weren't officially divorced. Matt grew up with his father, since his mother's career meant a lot of time on the road. Matt minced his words when talking about his father but could go on about his mother at length. She was his idol, and Neil found listening to his stories as interesting as it was painful. When Matt talked about summer breaks spent drag racing in the mountains Neil remembered the sound his mother's corpse made when he tried peeling it off a vinyl seat.

Two weeks after the banquet, Allison started talking to Neil again. Neil still hadn't figured out how to apologize to her, or if he had to apologize at all, when she finally broke the silence. Neil was eating dinner downtown with the upperclassmen when Allison told him to pass the ketchup. It almost startled him into dropping his burger and he handed the bottle over as quickly as he could. It was days before she had anything else to say to him, but her chilly silence slowly started to thaw. Neil even saw her smile at one of Matt's off-color jokes. She was nowhere near done grieving, but she was learning to be okay.

Neil wished he had something to give them in return for their easy friendship and trust, but nothing about him was safe enough to share. They never pried, but it took him weeks to realize they didn't have to. They didn't ask for secrets; they settled for the breadcrumb truths of day to day life. They knew he hated vegetables but loved fruit, that his favorite color was gray, and that he didn't like movies or loud music. They were things Neil understood only in terms of survival, but his teammates hoarded these insights like gold.

They were piecing Neil together and building a real person around all of his lies. They found the parts of him no disguise could change. Nothing they were learning would change this year's outcome or tell them who he really was, but it was frightening nonetheless. Luckily midterms were coming up, so Neil could use studying as an excuse to slowly pull back out of their reach.

The library seemed a safe refuge, since it was four stories tall and had two hundred rows to hide in, but Neil wasn't the only one with exams. He was leaving the library café with a much-needed cup of caffeine when he bumped into Aaron and Katelyn. Aaron ground to a halt at the sight of Neil, looking almost offended, but Katelyn smiled in happy greeting.

"Neil, hello," she said, offering her hand. "I don't think we've been introduced."

Neil shifted his coffee to his left hand so he could give her hand a quick squeeze. "No, but I've seen you at games. You're Katelyn, right? You're on the Vixen squad."

She seemed pleased to be recognized, but Aaron still looked annoyed. Neil didn't blame him. Aaron and Katelyn always looked for each other at games, but Aaron never approached the cheerleaders. This was the first time Neil saw them so close to each other. Maybe Aaron was finally making the move his teammates were waiting for. They were already holding hands, so it had to be going well.

Aaron noticed Neil's downward glance, judging by the cool edge in his, "Goodbye."

Katelyn leaned against him in silent admonishment, but Neil slipped past them without argument. He didn't make it far before curiosity made him look back. Katelyn and Aaron were oblivious as they stood in the café line. Katelyn stood tucked against Aaron's side, a few inches taller than he was but somehow fitting perfectly against him. They looked surprisingly comfortable together for how carefully they avoided each other at games. Neil expected their first steps to be a bit more awkward.

"The coffee that interesting?"

Neil wondered if the Foxes secretly installed him with a tracking chip and turned towards Nicky's voice. Nicky was almost to the top of the stairs, his backpack dangling off one elbow and his arms loaded down with magazines.

"Not really," Neil said, but Nicky stopped beside him and looked into the café. Neil braced for an excited reaction or some triumphant spiel about all the bets he'd just won. He wasn't expecting Nicky's approving nod.

"Smart of them to pick the library as necking grounds," Nicky said. He turned Neil away from the café with a hand on his shoulder. "Andrew claims he's allergic to books, so he doesn't come here unless Kevin makes him. They're safe for another week at least. Do us all a favor and don't mention it?"

"I thought they weren't together," Neil said, setting off in search of a place to study.

"Not officially, no." Nicky followed along behind him uninvited. "Aaron's too smart to ask her out and for now Katelyn's okay with waiting. I don't know if she'll last until graduation, and I know it's not fair to ask her to, but I kind of hope she does. They're good together, right?"

"I wouldn't know."

Neil found an empty table and set his things down. Nicky promptly scattered his magazines across three-quarters of the table. Neil scooted a couple out of his

way and sat. He was half-afraid he wouldn't get anything done with someone as chatty as Nicky around, but Nicky was surprisingly focused on his own project. What Neil had assumed was leisure reading turned out to be source material for one of Nicky's marketing classes. They worked in silence for almost twenty minutes before Nicky finally spoke.

"Andrew hates her, you know?"

It took Neil a moment to figure out what Nicky was talking about. His head was full of numbers; he was working through a six-page pamphlet of mathematical equations. But Nicky said it like he'd been thinking about Aaron and Katelyn this entire time. Neil almost said nothing, because his review was more important than something as trivial as Aaron's maybe-relationship, but it was hard to ignore an opening line like that.

"Why?" Neil asked.

"Because Aaron likes her," Nicky said, as if that was obvious.

"Last I checked Andrew doesn't like Aaron, either."

"Precisely." Nicky flipped his magazine shut, looked very obviously over his shoulder to check for either of his cousins, then leaned across the table toward Neil. "Andrew's not really big on the idea of Aaron's happiness, see? So if Aaron likes Katelyn, Andrew doesn't want him to have her. Andrew might smile awful bright but he is a master of childish spite."

"That doesn't make sense," Neil said.

"It's complicated," Nicky said, rubbing the back of his neck as he leaned back in his chair. "I didn't really get into the gritty details last time because those aren't really Dan and Matt's business, but you're family, so I can tell you." He looked over his shoulder again. "I told you Aunt Tilda gave Andrew up, right? That's only half of it. Truth is she put both of them in the system at first. One week later she changed her mind."

"She could do that?"

"The system allows for panic and regret." Nicky grimaced. "She didn't have to give the clerk her name but she had to take the gray ID bands that marked which kids were hers just in case. So long as she came back fast enough, yeah, she could have her babies back.

"Aunt Tilda felt guilty about giving up her sons, but she didn't feel bad enough to take them both. She could only handle one, or so she told Dad when he found out about Andrew. I don't know how she chose which one she went back for. Did she go alphabetically, Aaron before Andrew, or did she reach into the drawer and take whichever band she touched first?"

Nicky went quiet for a moment as he thought about it. He scrubbed a hand across his forehead and continued. "They each had a fifty-fifty chance of getting

screwed. Ha!" Nicky's smile was humorless. "Guess they both got the short end of the stick. Andrew went off to foster care and Aaron became the living reminder of Aunt Tilda's guilt and failure. Aunt Tilda tried as hard as she could to not deal with Aaron at all, at least until Andrew came back into the picture. That's when Aaron says she started getting angry instead of just neglectful."

"They know she gave them both up?" Neil asked.

"When Andrew's foster mother called to set up that meet-and-greet, she asked Aunt Tilda how only one of them ended up in the system. Aunt Tilda told her, and Aaron heard it on the upstairs line." Nicky gestured up as if indicating Tilda's bedroom. "I don't know why the hell Andrew's foster family told him, but yeah, he knows. I'm thinking that's why he wouldn't talk to Aaron when Aaron wrote to him. He was—justifiably, I think—pissed off."

"But it's not Aaron's fault," Neil said. "It was their mother's decision."

"That's Andrew for you: making sense since never." Nicky spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "Finding Andrew again was a turning point for Aaron in all the worst ways. Aunt Tilda moved them cross-country, started drinking more than ever, and got heavy-handed with Aaron. Aaron got into all kinds of trouble in some sort of traumatized rebellion. He took her drugs and got into fights at school and in general grew up to be a bit of an asshole. Mom wrote me about it when I was in Germany because she was worried about him. The only good thing Aaron did in South Carolina was play Exy, and he only picked that up so games would get him out of Aunt Tilda's house."

"Then Dad found out about Andrew and began this years-long campaign to bring Andrew home. Told you last time, right? He wore Aunt Tilda down until she agreed to take Andrew in, then talked to the courts and Children's Services and Andrew's last foster family. He met Andrew, who apparently wasn't at all interested in a triumphant return with his mother, and introduced Aaron to Andrew. That's when things started moving. Andrew suddenly got motivated. He started behaving and toeing the line and got released on early parole about a year later."

"Andrew decided he wanted a brother after all," Neil said. "So what went wrong?"

"Aunt Tilda died, and Aaron blames Andrew."

"Did Andrew do it?"

Nicky motioned for him to quiet down, no matter that Nicky was the louder of the two of them. "The night Aunt Tilda died, she and Aaron got in a fight. That's how Mom and Dad finally found out Aunt Tilda was beating on Aaron. He showed up at their place with fresh bruises and cuts. Dad called Aunt Tilda over to sort things out, but she didn't stick around long. She took Aaron and left."

They didn't make it home. She went over the median into oncoming traffic and wasn't wearing her seatbelt."

Nicky shifted in his seat, looking a little uncomfortable, and said, "It wasn't Aaron in the car. Aaron was standing in for Andrew at a study session. That was before Andrew was on his drugs, so it was a pretty easy act for Aaron to pull off. He didn't know why Andrew asked him to do it until the police called. I still don't know what happened, if Aunt Tilda panicked when she realized which son was with her or if they were fighting or if it was intentional, but..."

"It's not like Aaron liked her, but she was his mother, you know? And Aaron never got to fix things with her, never got to understand why she was so messed up or why she messed them up so bad. Aaron can't accept that she's gone. He misses her. He can't forgive Andrew, and Andrew doesn't understand or care about how much it hurt Aaron. Stalemate."

Neil thought he understood Aaron's situation. He and his mother had serious issues, consequence of her background and his terrifying childhood. By the end he wondered if it was survival or love that kept them together so long. Knowing now she'd run to protect him skewed his perspective a little, but he'd violently disliked her for half his life. Despite that, losing her was the worst thing that ever happened to him.

Neil couldn't say that when his teammates thought both his parents alive and well, so he settled on the more interesting conclusion of Nicky's story. He spoke slowly, giving himself time to think and to bleach the grief from his voice. "Andrew did care. That's what went wrong."

Nicky blinked at him. "What?"

"Andrew came home for Aaron, right? It wouldn't have taken him long to realize Aaron was a wreck. Andrew would have traced Aaron's problems back to their mother. Maybe he didn't kill her for giving him up. Maybe he did it to protect Aaron."

Nicky looked skeptical. "That is a seriously big maybe, Neil."

"Is it?" Neil asked. "Do you remember how Andrew ended up on his medication?"

"Yeah," Nicky said, then went quiet as he thought about it.

Nicky used to work at Eden's Twilight down in Columbia. He was on break one night when four men decided they could beat the homosexuality out of him. Andrew stepped in to protect Nicky, but he went too far. It was one thing to join the fight and another thing entirely to keep at it when the men were unconscious and bleeding out on the sidewalk. Andrew would have killed them if the club's bouncers hadn't hauled him away. The press had a field day with it; Neil read all about it when he was researching the Foxes.

"She was hurting Aaron, so Andrew stopped her," Neil said. "Aaron should have been grateful, but he mourned her like he didn't care what she'd done to them. He took sides."

"You really think so?"

"It makes sense to me," Neil said. It might even explain why Andrew hated Katelyn, though Neil wasn't sure which interpretation to go with: that Andrew wouldn't let another girl come between them, or that he was still punishing Aaron for choosing the wrong side three years ago. "I'm guessing they've never talked about how she died."

"Not since I moved in, and I showed up the day of Aunt Tilda's funeral," Nicky said. "They won't even talk about the little things. I don't see them having a belated heart-to-heart about Andrew's intentions anytime soon."

Nicky propped his elbow on the table and cradled his face in his hand. Defeat looked unnatural on his face and made him finally look his age. Neil had almost forgotten that Nicky was several years older than his cousins. He was a sophomore like they were, but he was the second-oldest player on the team after Renee.

"The only reason I stayed when Coach offered me a spot was so I could fix this," Nicky said. "I thought if I had more time I could show Aaron and Andrew how to be brothers again. And I'm not giving up, not by a long shot, but I've realized by now I can't fix it on my own. I hate to say it, but I wish Renee would hurry up and make her move."

Neil had no idea how the conversation had gone from murder to Renee. He ran over the last couple seconds of their conversation in his head, then gave up and asked, "What? I thought you didn't like her."

Nicky bolted upright like Neil struck him. "Who doesn't like Renee?"

Neil almost volunteered himself as a prime example, but he didn't want to derail the conversation further. He amended his words to, "No one likes how friendly she is with Andrew."

"Not to throw my own cousin under the bus, but everyone knows he's not good enough for her. In a perfect world Renee would settle down with a nice Christian boy who'd invest in her charity projects and love her half to death. In this world she's got her eyes set on Andrew. I'd intervene for her sake but I'm getting desperate. Andrew needs something to distract him from all of his issues."

Neil thought about his conversation with Kevin a few weeks ago. "What about Exy?"

"Now you sound like Kevin." Nicky rubbed at his temples like he was warding off a headache. "Exy isn't an option here, okay? You can love Exy all

you want, but it's never gonna love you back."

Neil should let it go, but the challenge was out before he could stop it. "So?"

"Oh my God." Nicky looked torn between horror and pity. "Seriously? That might be the saddest thing I've ever heard."

Neil should have just kept his mouth shut. "I need to study."

"Don't you dare." Nicky snatched his math pamphlet off the desk and dropped it on the ground by his chair. "Listen up. There's obsession and there's dysfunction. You can't make Exy your end-all be-all. This won't last forever, okay? You'll shine bright, then you'll retire, and then what? You gonna spend the rest of your life at home alone with all your trophies?"

"Leave it," Neil said.

Maybe Nicky heard the quiet warning in Neil's voice, because he gentled his tone. "You can't be just this, Neil. This isn't enough to live for. I could take you down to Columbia sometime, just the two of us, and have Roland introduce you around. He's got a lot of great friends. At this point I won't even care if it's a girl so long as you—"

"Why don't you like girls?"

Nicky looked startled by the interruption, but he rallied quickly and made a face. "They're so soft."

Neil thought about Renee's bruised knuckles, Dan's fierce spirit, and Allison holding her ground on the court a week after Seth's death. He thought about his mother standing unflinching in the face of his father's violent anger and her ruthlessly leaving bodies in their wake. He felt compelled to say, "Some of the strongest people I've known are women."

"What? Oh, no," Nicky hurried to say. "I mean literally soft. Too many curves, see? I feel like my hands would slide right off. It's totally not my thing. I like..." He drew a box with his fingers as he searched for words. "Erik. Erik's perfect. He's a total outdoors junkie, rock climbing and hiking and mountain biking, all that awful bug-infested fresh-air stuff. But oh my god, you should see what it does to his body. He's like this, all hard edges." He drew another box. "He's stronger than I am, and I like that. I feel like I could lean on him all day and he wouldn't break a sweat."

Nicky's smile was slow and pleased as he thought about his long-distance boyfriend. It was a more reserved expression than Neil usually saw on his face. It made Neil wonder if Nicky was naturally loud or if he exaggerated his outgoing nature to balance his unfriendly cousins.

"Funny," Nicky said. "That didn't used to be my type. None of the others I crushed on growing up were anything like that. Maybe that's why none of them could help me."

Nicky turned his hands palm-up on the table and considered them. "My parents are kind of crazy, you know? There's religious and there's super psychotic religious. Me and Renee, we're the decent sort, I think. We go to different churches and have some different ideas, but we respect each other anyway. We understand that religion is just an interpretation of faith. But my parents are the black-and-white crazy kind. It's only right and wrong with them: hellfire and damnation and judgment from on high.

"For some reason I tried coming out to them anyway," Nicky said. "Mom was pretty upset. She locked herself in the bedroom and cried and prayed for days. Dad took a more direct route and shipped me off to Christian gay camp. I spent a year learning that I was infected by a disgusting idea from the devil, that I was a living test for every other good Christian on the planet. They tried using God to shame me into being straight.

"It didn't work," Nicky said. "For a while I wished it did. I went home feeling like an abomination and a failure. I couldn't face my parents like that, so I lied. I pretended to be straight for the rest of high school. I even dated a couple girls. I kissed a couple of them, but I used my faith as an excuse never to get further than first base. I knew I just had to keep it together until graduation.

"I hated my life so much," Nicky said. "I couldn't do that, you know? I couldn't live a lie like that day after day. I felt trapped. Some days I thought God abandoned me; sometimes I thought I failed Him. Halfway through my junior year I started thinking about suicide. Then my German teacher took me aside and told me about a study abroad program. She would set it all up for me, she said, if my parents would sign off on it. She'd handle admissions and get a host family and everything. It'd be expensive, but she thought I needed a change in scenery. Guess she knew I was that close to the edge.

"I didn't think Mom and Dad would go for it, but they were so proud of me for my so-called recovery they agreed to let me go my senior year. I just had to last another semester and then I could go. I was so desperate to get out of there I didn't even really pay attention when Aaron and Aunt Tilda moved to Columbia that spring. All I cared about was keeping it together until May. I know now I should have tried harder, but I would've been no good to him how I was.

"When the plane took off from Columbia, I was scared to death," Nicky said. "I was so relieved to leave my parents and everyone I knew, but I didn't know if being in Germany would change anything. When I landed, my new host brother was waiting for me in Arrivals. Erik Klose," Nicky said, sounding it out like he was saying it for the first time. "He taught me to believe in myself. He showed me how to balance my faith and my sexuality, and he made me okay again. I know it sounds dramatic, but he saved my life."

Nicky flipped his hands over and laced his fingers together. The look he turned on Neil was as reassuring as it was worried and made Neil want to edge away. "That's what love is about, see? That's why Exy isn't ever going to be enough, not for you or Andrew or anyone. It can't hold you up, and it won't make you a stronger or better person."

"Okay."

Nicky wasn't impressed with that neutral response. "I'm not the brightest crayon in the box, but I'm not the dumbest, either. I've figured out by now you've got all the trust issues of a stray tom cat. But sooner or later you're going to have to let someone in."

"Can I study now?"

Nicky scooped Neil's math pamphlet off the ground but held it out of reach. "It's your turn. Why don't you like girls?"

"I don't not like them," Neil said, but Nicky only snorted in disbelief.

Neil thought of his mother's heavy fists on his skin and her fingers knotting in his hair. She'd told him time and time again girls were dangerous. They got inside a man's head, she said. They got under a man's skin. They could make a man want to change the world starting with himself. They'd turn him inside out and pull out all his secrets. They might mean well but it'd get all of them killed in the end.

"It's complicated," Neil said at last. "Let me work now."

"At least promise me you'll think about it?"

"Promise," Neil said.

"You are such an unrepentant liar." Nicky huffed and handed over Neil's work.

Neil glanced at his watch, winced when he saw how much time they'd lost, and flipped to the equation he'd left off on. Nicky grumbled a bit under his breath as he reorganized his own notes but quieted down as soon as he got back to work. Neil pushed the entire conversation from mind so he could focus. Within a couple minutes he'd forgotten all about it, and honestly he expected it to stay forgotten.

It came back to him at practice when he spotted Andrew and Renee. They were standing together near the goal, and Andrew was gesturing excitedly as they went on about something or other. Neil watched them longer than he meant to and remembered Nicky's words.

There was no point dwelling on it when he knew how the year would end, but for a moment Neil wondered. He thought about Nicky's story and how he'd met Erik in the nick of time. Nicky had been at the end of his rope, but Erik was strong enough to hold him up. There was only one person in the world strong

enough for all of Neil's problems, and she was dead now. Neil wouldn't wish his mess on anyone else.

Except he'd already started sharing that burden, albeit unwillingly. He'd divided his secrets between Kevin and Andrew. Kevin reacted the way Neil expected everyone would to the truth: with a horrified demand that Neil leave immediately. Andrew, though, nodded in the face of it and told Neil to stay. He stood his ground when Neil asked him for murder and gave him a key to their house.

But that didn't count, because Andrew was Andrew, and this was definitely the last turn he needed his thoughts to take. He dragged his attention back to the task at hand and vowed never to listen to Nicky again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

October arrived without warning. Neil knew their match against the Ravens was coming up fast, but it still startled him when he realized they were already a week into the month. The game was only six days away.

If the Foxes were having a typical season, the match might have drawn a little less attention, even with Kevin on their line. This year, however, they were at an unprecedented six-and-one record. The only game they'd lost was their opener against Breckenridge. They'd won three games by the skin of their teeth, but victories were victories no matter how they got them. The Foxes were pulling together and getting stronger one week at a time. No one expected them to win against the Ravens, but it was obvious they'd put up a spectacular fight.

The Foxhole Court didn't have enough seating to accommodate the crowd this game was sure to draw, so the school sold discounted seats in the basketball stadium and promised to broadcast the game live on the scoreboard televisions there.

Palmetto State University spent the entire second week preening and prepping for its day in the spotlight. Groundskeepers trimmed every square inch of the sprawling campus. Cleaning teams drained and scrubbed out the manmade pond in front of the library. Student clubs were invited to design and hang banners wherever they could fit them. Rocky Foxy the mascot walked the campus for hours every day and poked his oversized head into classrooms to get the students worked up. The Vixens set up camp in the amphitheater to pass out temporary tattoos and foam paw prints.

There was an event every night leading up to Friday. The school's choir and jazz band had free concerts on the stadium lawn on Monday. Seventy percent of the student body wore orange for Tuesday's Orange Day. Wednesday was White Day with a higher turnout. Thursday was the pep rally, which the Foxes were required to attend. Several thousand students stopped by to cheer and party. News cameras were on hand to televise the festivities and take comments from the small team. Wymack kept Neil away from the microphone, not trusting Neil to behave himself.

Thursday was when Dan finally started to lose her cool. This was her fourth year as the team's captain. She'd been subjected to verbal abuse and outright hatred since she started. Seeing people finally rally behind her and her team flustered her. She kept a brave face in front of the cameras, but she spent Thursday night in Matt's bed.

The more excited the students grew, the more uneasy the Foxes felt, and the tension at their practices that week was suffocating. They were sick with nerves by Friday. Andrew was the only one completely unaffected. He bounced off the walls and harassed his teammates endlessly. Kevin, on the other hand, didn't say a single word at Friday morning's practice.

Traffic that day was completely out of control, no matter how much outside help campus security called in. Wymack signed his Foxes out of their afternoon classes and called them to the stadium at three. Serve wasn't for another four hours, but he wanted to shield them from the madness unfolding around the university. Dan turned on the TV and flipped channels until she found a movie to watch. Aaron and Matt went into the foyer to do their homework in peace. Neil and Kevin went to the inner court and sat on the Foxes' bench in silence.

At five-thirty Wymack ordered them enough food to feed a small army. The Foxes sat in a circle to eat but didn't speak. Only when they'd thrown their trash away did they finally look at each other. Dan pulled the Ravens' roster out and began going over it, but by now the Foxes knew all of the Ravens' names and numbers by heart. They'd been studying the Raven line for weeks, watching old games and memorizing statistics. They'd watched recordings of past Raven games to get an idea for how their opponents played and looked for any weaknesses they could exploit. They'd come back empty-handed. The only chink in the Ravens' armor was Kevin's absence.

Kevin tried explaining Raven synchrony earlier this week, but Neil almost wished he could forget that story. Ravens came to Edgar Allan University for one reason only: to play Exy. Every athlete Coach Moriyama accepted was expected to sign to a professional team upon graduation. School was a secondary concern for all of them. They were all enrolled in the same undergraduate degree and took their classes together in groups of three or four. They weren't allowed to go anywhere without taking at least one teammate with them. They weren't supposed to socialize with anyone outside the team.

They didn't even live in the student dorms, but they didn't live where everyone thought they did, either. Edgar Allan was a smaller university than Palmetto State, with fewer sports and more arts programs. One perk they offered was interest-based housing in lieu of general dorms. Sororities, fraternities, and larger clubs could all petition to have special living arrangements. The Exy team had a house of its own, but the Ravens only slept there when keeping up appearances.

Evermore wasn't on school grounds for a reason. It belonged to Edgar Allan, but it doubled as the national team's stadium. Because of its dual purpose Evermore was built with extra amenities: towers for celebrities and the ERC,

lounges for high-profile guests, and spacious living quarters for visiting teams. Those quarters were built underground beneath the court floor, and that was what the Ravens used as their dormitory. That was where Riko and Kevin grew up.

If the Ravens weren't in class, they were expected to be at Evermore. They lived and breathed Exy on a scale no other team could or would. Their intense lifestyle, forced integration, and vicious punishments put them on a whole different scale than any of their opponents. They were, in short, the complete opposite of everything the Foxes knew and understood. Tonight's game pitted a hive mind against a fractured bunch of rejects.

An hour out from serve the stadium guards unlocked the gates and started letting people in. Neil thought he could feel the stadium shake beneath the weight of tens of thousands of feet. He dressed to the distant rumble of excited voices and met his team in the foyer. Wymack had the stick rack out already. Kevin opened the lids over his pair and threaded his fingers through the nets.

"Can you do this, Kevin?" Abby asked, searching his face for any sign he was okay. "Can you play?"

"If I am breathing, I can play," Kevin said. "This is my game too."

"Words to live and die by." Wymack motioned for them to line it up. "I expect a double-digit score from my offense line. Kevin, you know their defense better than anyone else and they don't know how to face you right-handed, so run them into the ground. Neil, get at least five points or I'll have you running marathons every month until graduation."

Neil stared at him. "Five points?"

"You got four last week."

"We weren't playing Edgar Allan last week, Coach," Neil said.

"Irrelevant," Wymack said with a jerk of his hand. "Five points or twenty-six miles. Do the math and decide which one makes you happier."

He didn't give Neil a chance to argue but looked at Allison and Dan. "You ladies let offense drown if you have to. They're not your concern. Your focus tonight is keeping the defense line afloat. Get me? We know the Ravens are faster and bigger and better than us. We only have a chance so long as we can control their score. Defense, keep the strikers away from goal. Period, end of story. Andrew, for once in your miserable midgety life play like you want us to win, would you?"

Andrew looked amused by that request, which Neil didn't find at all reassuring. The warning buzzer sounded over their heads, alerting them they were due in the inner court in a minute. Neil wasn't the only one who started when it went off and he was more than a little alarmed that Kevin was one of the

ones who jumped. Abby fixed Kevin with an intent look that Kevin refused to return. Wymack clapped his hands at his team until they fell in line.

"Let's do this," he said. "The sooner we kill these bastards, the sooner we can get roaring drunk at Abby's place. I spent all damned morning stocking her fridge."

It wasn't exactly a vote of confidence, but it made most of Neil's teammates smile and Nicky whooped a little in glee. There was no point pretending they weren't going to get completely slaughtered tonight. Wymack was offering them a chance to drink themselves to sleep so they wouldn't stay up all night stewing on their failure. Neil guessed that was better than nothing, even if it didn't help him at all.

Wymack pushed the door open. Dan threw her team a tight-lipped smile over her shoulder before leading them into the stadium. Neil couldn't see the stands until they were almost to the inner court, but the noise that crashed over him seemed twice as loud as it'd ever been. The roar escalated to screams when the Foxes finally stepped into view. The Vixens waved their pom-poms and bounced around in ecstatic greeting. The school's performing band, the Orange Notes, blasted the school fight song as loud as they could. Somehow it still sounded muffled by the rest of the chaos.

Neil looked up into the sea of orange. He could spot the out-of-towners by the neutral "1 – 2" signs they carried in tribute to Riko and Kevin. The Raven fans were even easier to find. They'd come all in black and took up an entire reserved section directly opposite the Foxes' bench. It was like a black hole had swallowed up part of the stadium.

With all of the noise, Neil missed the announcement that signaled the Ravens' entrance, but he couldn't miss the sudden heavy pulse of drums. The tune struck him as oddly familiar, but it took him a second to place it. It was the music that heralded Riko's arrival at Kathy's show: Edgar Allan's fight song. It wasn't upbeat and confident like any other song Neil heard at games. This was a dark and heavy tune, an intimidating message of death and domination. The Ravens took their image seriously. Neil guessed they had a lot of intensive counseling in their futures.

The crowd's reaction was violent. Palmetto-clad students chanted derogatory phrases and screamed hateful boos. Edgar Allan's section roared a battle cry. Fans who had traveled here just to see a good show cheered for the Ravens as fiercely as they had the Foxes.

The teams were sent on warm-up laps, but Wymack ceded the inner court to the larger Raven team. The Foxes ran their laps on the court itself, following the court walls and going the opposite direction as their opponents. Neil saw the

Ravens pass as an endless line of black and red in his peripheral vision but refused to look at them. He kept his eyes on the orange and white jersey in front of him.

They followed laps with drills, but Moriyama only sent half his team onto the court. The Raven defense continued running laps while the seven strikers and five dealers took shots on goal. Even with only roughly half their team on the court they outnumbered the Foxes by several bodies.

The referees kicked them off the court long before Neil was ready to go, leaving only Dan and Riko behind. Somehow the captains managed a civil handshake at half-court. The head referee flipped the coin and signaled Edgar Allan for starting serve. He stayed where he was as Dan and Riko left the court.

Moriyama and Wymack set up their starting lines near their respective doors and waited. The Foxes' three subs went down the line, cracking racquets with their teammates and offering tight, tense smiles.

"For the Foxes, tonight's starting line-up," the announcer said. "Number two, Kevin Day."

Anything else he might have said was swallowed up by the crowd. Kevin ignored the ecstatic roar and stepped onto the court. Neil's knuckles popped as he clenched his fingers tighter around his racquet.

"Number ten, Neil Josten," the announcer said.

"Five points," Wymack said.

Neil sighed and stepped through the door. He went to his spot on half-court line and turned to watch as his teammates entered the court. Allison was the starting dealer, and Nicky and Renee were on as the Foxes' starting backliners. Andrew was the last one on for the team and he got comfortable in goal.

Neil didn't hear Riko's name, but he heard the crowd react. Riko strode onto the Foxhole Court like he owned the stadium. Instead of taking his spot, however, he stopped at Kevin's side. He took his helmet off, but the cheers echoing off the court walls drowned out whatever he was saying. Kevin unstrapped his own helmet and hooked it over his fingers as he answered. Riko said nothing else, seemingly content to stare Kevin down as the rest of the Ravens took the court.

When the Raven goalkeeper was in place and the referees moved into the court doors to check the teams, Riko finally moved. Neil was sure every Fox tensed when Riko reached for Kevin, but all Riko did was wind an arm around Kevin's shoulders and pull him into a short hug.

The crowd's response was ecstatic and deafening. Riko let go after just a second and walked down half-court to his place. Kevin stood frozen a few seconds longer. The unmistakable crash of a racquet against the court wall

snapped him out of it and Kevin jerked around to look back at Andrew. Andrew beat his racquet against the goal a second time in warning. Kevin got the hint and yanked his helmet on.

The head referee waited until Kevin lifted his stick in an okay, then walked to the Raven dealer and handed over a ball. He left the court, and the referees bolted both doors closed.

Neil closed his eyes and breathed. He locked away everything he was, burying his father and Nathaniel and the Moriyamas into a mental safe for later. He didn't need or want any of that right now. All that mattered was this game: the racquet in his hands, the Ravens' goal, and the clock counting down seconds to serve overhead. He wasn't Neil right now. He wasn't anything or anyone but a Fox, and he had a game to play.

The buzzer sounded to start the game and Neil raced up the court. He saw the Raven dealer serve but didn't look for the ball until he'd caught up with Johnson, his backliner mark. The dealer had served to the home court wall. Allison was the only one who stayed still long enough to watch it, and she snagged it on the rebound. She threw the ball to Andrew, who slammed it all the way up the court. Neil and Kevin pushed their way further up the court, racing the backliners to the ball.

Kevin was up against Jean. Jean was the Ravens' strongest backliner, but Neil was more worried about the psychological toll he might take on Kevin.

Jean was taller than Kevin, not by much but by just enough he caught the ball first. Kevin smacked his stick to fight him for possession. The sharp crack echoed off the walls as they struggled with each other. Foxes and Ravens yelled encouragement from around the court. Kevin switched tactics and slammed a shoulder into Jean hard enough to make him stumble. The ball finally popped free of Jean's racquet. Kevin didn't have time to aim with Jean in his face, but he threw the ball at goal anyway. It'd barely left his net before Jean checked him hard enough to knock him over.

The ball hit the wall and rebounded in Neil's direction. Neil dove past Johnson to catch it, and Johnson went straight for his racquet. He checked Neil's stick so hard it rattled Neil to his elbows and, in the same move, slammed into Neil to clear him away from the ball. Neil stumbled in a desperate search for balance. Johnson twisted his stick around Neil's in a lightning-quick move and gave a hard jerk. A bolt of hot pain ratcheted through Neil's right wrist. He let go of his racquet instinctively and Johnson ran off after the ball.

Neil gave his hand a fierce shake and chased after him. Johnson had a short lead, but Neil was faster. Johnson caught the ball and brought his racquet up for a throw, and Neil didn't try to slow down. He crashed into Johnson hard enough

to take them both off their feet. Neil hit the ground and used his momentum to roll back to his feet. He ignored Johnson's snarled threat in favor of locating the ball. It'd fallen far short of its intended goal. Allison and her dealer were fighting each other for it. The Raven dealer won and heaved the ball down the court.

Neil almost lost track of it as it shot between the Raven strikers. It went to Riko, then the dealer, then the other striker, and back to Riko the exact second he out-stepped Nicky. Riko moved in a blur, and the goal lit up red. The buzzer sounded to signal the point and the crowd screamed.

The Ravens wheeled back to their starting points with triumphant whoops. The Foxes were slower to react, and Neil didn't budge until he saw Andrew move. Andrew was half-turned as he stared at the red wall behind him. They were only two minutes into the first half; it was the fastest anyone had ever scored against Andrew.

Andrew waited until the glow completely faded before facing forward again. Neil hoped the loss would galvanize him. Andrew was still riding the coattails of his drugs and wouldn't start fading for another fifteen minutes or so. He probably thought it funny to be scored on so quickly, but there was the slim chance he would perk up and now see the Ravens as an interesting challenge.

"Let's go," the dealer yelled, and Neil obediently went to the half-court line.

The buzzer got them moving again, and the teams slammed into each other once more. The Foxes were a little shaken by getting scored on so quickly. They fought harder, but it wasn't enough. Five minutes later Riko scored again.

"This is humiliating," the other Raven striker said as he headed past Neil for half-court. "I can't believe we're wasting our time here."

Neil contemplated throwing his racquet at the man's head, but he couldn't take his eyes off Riko. Riko wasn't going back to his starting spot but was headed for Andrew. Andrew moved to meet him and they faced each other with just the goal line between them. Andrew waved off whatever Riko said to him with a careless waggle of his hand, but Riko didn't leave. The referees gave them a couple seconds to speak, then thumped on the court door in warning. Riko finally turned away and got in place for the next play.

The Foxes pushed up as fast and far as they could, but the Ravens shoved them back. Neil could only watch as the ball made it back to the Ravens' offense line. His stomach shredded to bits as he watched the strikers pass to one another. Riko snagged it and fired at the goal. Neil's shoulders went tense in preparation for another lost point, but Andrew slammed the ball away from his goal as hard as he could. Neil used his intense rush of relief as extra fuel to chase after the ball.

The Ravens didn't score again for another fifteen minutes, but it wasn't for lack of trying. They were so much better than the Foxes were that Neil couldn't help but feel humiliated. This was worse than Breckenridge's brute force. The Ravens made the Foxes look like clumsy children. Riko was simply too fast for Nicky to compete with. He could catch and pass in one easy flick, and his aim was scarily accurate no matter how quickly he moved. The only reason the Foxes weren't getting completely slaughtered was because Andrew had their goal, but he'd start going through withdrawal soon.

After the third goal, the Ravens sent on two substitutions: a striker to replace Riko's partner and a new dealer. Wymack took advantage of the break to send Matt and Aaron on for Nicky and Renee. Despite the score, Matt was grinning as he stopped on the first-fourth line. He was set to mark Riko and looked eager for a fight. Neil was frustrated by how the game was going but Matt's obvious excitement was almost enough to make him smile.

Matt was the strongest Fox and Aaron could outplay Nicky any day. Their arrival on the court made an immediate difference, and the Foxes finally started to hold their ground. The Ravens weren't expecting that, judging by the aggressive turn the game took. Neil wasn't at all surprised that the fights started with Riko and Matt.

Riko almost made it past Matt for a shot on goal, but Matt twisted in an impossible move and used his body like a battering ram. They collided with such a loud crash Neil cringed in sympathy pain. He forgot about them a second later when he saw what Andrew was doing.

It wasn't against the rules for goalkeepers to leave their goals, but it was extremely ill-advised considering how big their goals were and how fast a ball could move. A goalkeeper only risked it in extreme cases. Apparently tonight was one of those nights, because Andrew was moving before Matt and Riko even hit the ground. Aaron, the other striker, and both dealers were all racing for the ball, but Andrew was closer and faster.

A goalkeeper's racquet was flat, meant to deflect a ball rather than catch it, so Andrew couldn't scoop the ball up. He knew how to redirect it, though, and gave the ball a short, fierce swat. It hit the ground first, the wall second, and rebounded high. Andrew cleared it all the way up the court to his strikers with a hard swing. Neil only needed a second to realize Andrew was sending it to him, and his heart beat with savage triumph.

Jean and Johnson had pushed Kevin and Neil all the way to half-court. With that much open space Neil could outrun anyone. It didn't matter that he started with Johnson right at his back or that Johnson was better than he was. Neil had plenty of room to run and he was the fastest player in the game. He was two

steps ahead of Johnson before he passed the far-fourth line and he'd widened the gap to six by the time he caught the ball.

He spared one second to look for Kevin and one more to calculate his throw. On his tenth step he fired the ball at the away goal wall. All those long nights learning Raven drills from Kevin had to pay off here. The perfect rebound wasn't just about getting the ball to the right racquet; it was getting there at the right angle so Kevin wouldn't have to aim. Kevin just had to bring his racquet back on the catch and fire straightaway. It was the same trick the Raven strikers had been pulling all night, but the Ravens weren't ready to see it from Kevin and Neil. Jean and the goalkeeper thought they had more time to react, but Kevin wasn't waiting. The Raven goal lit up red when Kevin slammed the ball against it.

The reaction from the stands was wild enough it almost drowned out Matt's excited yell. Neil saw the Fox subs and Vixens celebrating at the edge of his vision but he couldn't take his eyes off Kevin to look at them. He and Kevin met on their way back to half-court and clacked their sticks together almost hard enough to hurt. Kevin's smile was fleeting but fierce. He didn't say anything, but he didn't have to. It was the first sign of approval Neil had gotten from him since they'd met and Neil felt it like an adrenaline boost.

Finally getting on the scoreboard reenergized the entire team. The next time Riko took a shot on goal Matt tripped him. A couple seconds later they were fighting, and the game ground to a halt as the referees ran to break it up. Matt got yellow-carded for throwing the first punch, but the furious look on his face said Riko started the fight. Neil didn't know what Riko said to set Matt off, but he couldn't believe Matt let his temper get the better of him. A foul gave Riko a penalty shot. The teams lined up to watch it happen, and Andrew missed by half an inch.

The game's sportsmanship died with that shot. Neil lost track of how many times someone hit the ground in the final twenty minutes of the half. By the time Neil got elbowed in the face at the forty-four minute mark, every player on the court had a yellow card and one Raven had been kicked off with a red card.

The referee who carded Johnson called Abby on the court when he saw the blood on Neil's face. Exy helmets had protective shields to cover players' eyes and noses, but Johnson got under it with an upward swing. Neil's gloves were too bulky to do much more than smear the mess around, but Abby brought gauze with her. Her tight expression was at complete odds with how carefully she wiped his face. This was her fifth trip onto the court so far and she wasn't happy with how violent the game was getting.

"He could have broken your nose with a hit like that," Abby said as she dabbed blood off his upper lip.

"But he didn't," Neil said. "Can I play now?"

"The referees won't let you play if you're bleeding out your face," Abby said, unrushed by his obvious impatience. She curled her fingers around his chin and tilted his head this way and that. Neil felt a trickle of blood and sniffed it back. The sour heat of it was a familiar burn on his tongue. Abby didn't look convinced, so Neil sniffed again. Finally she sighed and gave his helmet an encouraging pat.

"I'll check on you again in a minute," she said, and followed the referee off the court.

Everyone else was already set up for Neil's penalty shot, so Neil took his place and caught the ball the Raven dealer tossed him. Neil liked penalties because they were easy points, but because they were easy he usually found less satisfaction in them. Against the Ravens he'd take what he could get. It was just him, the goalkeeper, and an oversized goal. He was only allowed two steps for momentum, but Neil didn't take them. He feinted and fired the ball home against the bottom corner of the goal. Matt thumped his shoulder hard enough to set Neil's nose bleeding again.

"Maybe you should get your face smashed in a couple more times if it means you can score on it," Matt said.

"Not a fan of that strategy," Neil said.

Matt laughed and jogged to first-fourth. The last minute of first half was over in a heartbeat and the teams left the court to the screams of a rowdy crowd. Neil looked back at the scoreboard as he followed his teammates into the locker room. They were standing at six-three, an amazing start considering who they were up against, but an impossible score to come back from.

Second half was a downward tumble. The Foxes were on their second wind against an entirely new line-up and Andrew couldn't hold his ground much longer. Neil knew they were losing him the first time he saw Andrew stumble. It could have been that Andrew was just moving too fast in an effort to clear the ball away, but Neil knew better. Andrew was fast running out of steam. It was early for him to be getting this sick, but the Ravens were accelerating the process by running him into the ground.

Neil wished for a moment that Andrew had taken his drugs tonight. He dismissed that thought as quickly as it came. Andrew on his drugs would have more energy, but he'd also be infinitely more unreliable. Andrew was putting himself through this because he knew this was the only way he would actually play for them. Neil was equal parts grateful and irritated. The latter was self-directed; Neil wasn't anywhere near good enough to make that sacrifice worth it

and he hated feeling incompetent. No matter how hard he pushed he couldn't make enough of a difference.

The game ended at thirteen-six: the most goals anyone had ever taken from Andrew and the worst point gap the Foxes had seen in three years. The stands' disappointed reaction was expected and understandable, but Neil barely heard it through the buzzing in his ears. Neil's heart was pounding so violently he was sure it was beating bruises into his lungs. Every breath he managed to suck in knifed his throat open. The only strength he had left he put into holding onto his racquet.

Neil wanted to cross the court to his teammates, but he didn't trust himself to move. He and Kevin had just run two full halves against the Raven defense. He thought it a miracle he was still standing. He felt his legs only in flashes. One second they were on fire; the next they were gone entirely. Neil looked down at his feet to make sure they were still there and blinked shadows out of his eyes.

The roar outside the court escalated to feverish screams high-pitched enough to break through Neil's exhaustion. He looked up, wondering what he'd missed, and stared across the court. Andrew's hands hovered empty in front of him, and his racquet was on the ground at his feet. As Neil watched Andrew leaned over to pick his racquet up. He tried, anyway. He only got it a foot off the floor before he lost his grip again.

It reminded Neil of their first practice together, when Neil almost blew his arms out playing against Andrew. He looked up at the scoreboard. The Ravens had taken an incredible hundred and fifty shots on goal; it was unbelievable Andrew had only missed thirteen of them. He looked back as Andrew tried again to get his racquet. Andrew didn't fare any better this time, so he gave up and sat down heavily beside it.

The court doors opened and the subs flooded on. Abby and Wymack stepped into the doorway to watch their team. The subs were heading for the goal, as had become tradition since Andrew started playing full halves, so Neil took a couple unsteady steps in that direction. He didn't get far before Kevin appeared at his side.

Kevin didn't say anything, but he rested his racquet against one shoulder and paced Neil all the way down the court. They were the last to the Foxes' huddle but their teammates made room for them easily. Neil answered the tired smiles sent his way with an exhausted one of his own. Kevin had eyes only for Andrew as he crouched in front of the downed goalkeeper.

"So," Kevin said, "did you have fun?"

Andrew was too tired to put any heat in his words. "You are despicable, Kevin Day. I don't know why I keep you around."

"Foxes," Riko said as the Ravens came up at their backs. All the Foxes save Kevin turned to face him. "I admit I'm at a loss as to what to do now. I cannot thank you for the night's game because I can't call this debacle a game. I thought I knew what to expect when we came here tonight, but I am still embarrassed on your behalf. You have fallen so far, Kevin. You should have stayed down and saved us the trouble of forcing you back to your knees."

"I'm satisfied," Kevin said. It was the last response any of the Foxes expected from him. They forgot about Riko in favor of gaping at Kevin. "Not with their score or performance, but with their spirit. I was right. There's more than enough here for me to work with."

"How many balls did you take to the helmet?" a Raven asked.

Kevin only smiled, slow and sure and pleased, and offered Andrew a hand. Andrew looked at it, then at Kevin, and let Kevin haul him to his feet. Renee was ready when Kevin let go and looped her arms around Andrew in a fierce hug. It had to be awkward with all the armor Andrew was still wearing, but it gave Andrew a couple seconds to find his balance. Kevin distracted the Ravens from Andrew's unsteadiness by facing them.

"Thank you for the game tonight," he said. "We will see you again at semifinals. It will be an interesting rematch, I promise."

Riko wasn't expecting that calm confidence after tonight's awful results. "One man cannot carry you that far," he said, sounding torn between incredulity and disgust. "Even you are not stupid enough to believe that. You should give up now."

It was a threat, not friendly advice, but Kevin said, "One is enough to start with."

"Thanks for nothing and good night," Dan said. "We're out of here."

The Foxes filed off the court to the shouts of a still-riled crowd. Wymack was speaking to a couple reporters, but he excused himself at their arrival. Renee and Andrew weren't waiting for him to catch up. Renee had an arm around Andrew's shoulder still and she propelled him toward the locker room as quickly as she could without being obvious about it.

The rest of the Foxes stayed behind, waving at the cameras and crowds. They'd lost, but they were buoyed by Kevin's assessment and their fans' unflagging support. Finally Wymack got them all into the locker room. Renee was waiting in the foyer, but Andrew was nowhere in sight. Neil assumed he was puking in the bathroom.

Wymack locked the door behind them, buying them a minute or two before the press came looking for comments, and faced them. "When I told you this June you'd be facing Edgar Allan on your court you said there was no way you

could do it. But you faced them tonight and you didn't let them push you around. You took six points from the first-ranked team in the nation. You should be pretty fucking proud of yourselves right now."

"Proud of that mess?" Aaron asked, tired and annoyed. "We were destroyed."

"I'm just glad it's over," Nicky said. "They're terrifying."

"I'm proud," Allison said, earning a startled look from Nicky and a half-smile from Wymack. She turned a condescending sneer on Aaron, looking more like herself than she had since Seth died. "This is only your second season with us. I wouldn't expect you to understand what a game like this means."

Dan nodded. "Allison's right. Losing hurts, but it's not a total loss. Last year we wouldn't have managed a single point against them. This is the strongest we've ever been, and we can only get better from here. Kevin already said it: when we meet the Ravens in semifinals we're going to knock them down a peg or two."

"Well said," Wymack said. "Kevin, Neil?"

"Twenty-six miles?" Neil guessed.

"I've got something better in mind. Starting next week everyone's finally back in their proper spots. If you two can run a full game against Edgar Allan, you're ready to take on the rest of the season alone. Everyone else: thank you for your patience and cooperation while Kevin and Neil adjusted. Renee especially—you've been a damned good sport this year. Welcome back to goal."

Dan's wild whoop drowned out Renee's more modest response. Matt gave Renee a triumphant hug, and Allison clapped a hand on Renee's shoulder in a quiet but fierce show of support. Neil wasn't sure he and Kevin wouldn't let the others down in the upcoming weeks, but he couldn't lean on his teammates forever. They'd spent half the season with a screwed-up lineup. He and Kevin had been playing longer stretches each week in preparation for tonight's game. Now it was time for them to take the offense line back and run with it.

"We'll go over details of tonight's game on Monday morning," Wymack said. "Meet here instead of at the gym. Dan and Kevin, you're on press duty. The rest of you stop yapping and wash up so we can drink. Make sure you take everything important home with you tonight. I have a cleaning crew coming in tomorrow to wash the Raven stench off our court. Let's get the hell out of here and get wasted."

They were exhausted, sore, and more than a little disappointed by their loss, but the Foxes left the stadium feeling like champions.

CHAPTER NINE

The Foxes cleared out of Abby's house before noon the next day, but Andrew's group didn't head back to the dormitory. Instead they went out for an early lunch. Aaron, Nicky, and Kevin were too hungover to eat much and settled for pushing their food around their plates. Andrew was oblivious to and unsympathetic of their plight. By the time they left the three were looking a little steadier, so Nicky drove them to a party store fifteen minutes out from campus.

Halloween fell on a Tuesday this year, which mean Eden's Twilight was having an event the Friday before. Neil knew only because Nicky had been talking about it nonstop for over a week, but he hadn't really expected they would go. For one, they had a game that Friday. For another, they were all too old to celebrate such a childish holiday. Andrew and Aaron were nineteen for another month, Kevin was twenty, and Nicky was twenty-three. Apparently Neil overestimated their maturity level.

"We're a little old for costumes, don't you think?" Neil asked as he climbed out of the car.

"It's bad form to go to a Halloween party without a costume, Neil," Nicky said. "Besides, the bartenders give out a free round to anyone who comes dressed up."

"I don't drink," Neil said.

"Then give your shot to me, you stingy child," Nicky said. "I know you said you'd never come shopping with us again, but we're doing you a huge favor dragging you along. You wouldn't trust me to pick out your costume, would you? I'd probably make you a French maid or something. Come on."

The front of the store was packed with decorations, everything from packs of spider webs to skull-shaped shot glasses and ghost window clings. An animatronics raven flapped its wings and cawed at Neil as he approached. He pushed it to the back of the shelf and moved a glittery Styrofoam skull in front of it. It cawed once more at the rough handling, but the sound was muffled.

Neil passed rows of wigs, masks, and an entire shelf of face paint and gaudy makeup. The entire back half of the store was devoted to costumes. The five men spread out between the racks to search. Neil doubted he'd find anything, but he was curious enough to look. He couldn't believe how many options there were, even if some of them bordered on the ridiculous.

"People don't really wear these, do they?" Neil asked after pawing past a cereal box and a giant sponge. Nicky sent him a curious look, so Neil pulled the

next one off the rack. It was a milk carton with a cutout for the wearer's face and a bold "Have you seen me?" printed beneath it.

"Oh, that's perfect, Neil," Andrew said. Neil sent him a dirty look. Andrew laughed and held up a mottled costume. "Nicky! Look! A cow. I think you should be this."

"Cow tits," Nicky said, pointing at the rubber udder in disgust. "At least let me be a bull, as in hung like a. Or Matt. Same difference, right? Dan is so lucky."

"I'm going to pretend I don't know you," Aaron said.

"What else is new?" Nicky asked breezily.

"Just hurry up and find something. I don't want to spend all day shopping."

"You have somewhere to be?"

"I've got a paper due Monday."

"Do it tomorrow," Nicky said. "Saturdays are supposed to be lazy."

"That attitude is why your grades are so terrible," Aaron said.

Nicky muttered under his breath as he turned his attention back to the costumes. Kevin pulled something long and dark off the rack closest to him and went up front to look at decorations. Andrew watched to make sure he didn't go far and then went back to his search.

Neil's phone hummed in his pocket, and Neil pulled it out to find a message from Dan: "where u guys at". Neil tapped out the name of the store, and Dan responded almost immediately: "important txt when otw back".

Neil closed his phone but was slow to put it away. Wondering about Dan made him think about last night's game. Neil had an idea, but he could already guess how the others would take it. His chances of winning this argument were slim to none, but Neil had to try. He tucked his phone back in his pocket and looked up. Andrew was pulling costumes off their hangers and dropping them on the floor.

"We should invite the others to come with us," Neil said.

Nicky turned to stare at Neil. "What?"

"No," Aaron said. "We don't go out with them."

"We need them," Neil said, keeping his eyes on Andrew. Andrew hadn't slowed but Neil knew he was listening. "Talent alone won't get us to semifinals. If that was enough, you'd have made it last year. You have to stop breaking this team in half."

"Don't have to anything," Andrew said.

"I'm not asking you to be their friend," Neil said. "I'm asking you to give an inch."

"Give them an inch and they'll take a mile," Aaron said.

"You really think they're strong enough to take a mile from Andrew? You think he'd let them?" Neil shook his head when Aaron started to argue again. "Kevin told Riko we'd see them again at semifinals. I'd like us to get our act together before that rematch, wouldn't you? We can't do that until we respect and understand each other. We might as well start now, with this."

"I doubt they'd agree even if we invited them," Nicky said. "We kind of burned that bridge last year."

"You mean Matt," Neil said, looking between the three. Nicky's gaze shied away, so Neil looked at Andrew again. "Abby mentioned it my first night here. She didn't want you doing to me what you did to him. When Coach was yelling at you afterward, you said it was different. So what happened with Matt?"

"Ask him," Andrew said.

"I'm asking you."

"I'd rather hear how he tells it," Andrew said. He slung a striped inmate's outfit over one shoulder and detoured past Neil on his way to the front of the store. When Neil started to argue, Andrew hooked a finger under his chin and forced his mouth closed again with an easy jerk of his hand. "Ask him, and then tell the busybodies to come along if they dare."

Nicky's jaw dropped. "Wait, are you serious?"

Andrew's smile was wide and pitying. He continued like he hadn't heard Nicky. "It won't make a difference in the long run, but find that one out for yourself."

Nicky and Aaron exchanged a baffled look as Andrew left. Nicky tilted his head in silent question, as if making sure he hadn't imagined that. Aaron only shook his head. Nicky rubbed the back of his neck, looked after Andrew one more time, and went back to his search. Neil didn't know what to make of Andrew's easy agreement either, but he wasn't going to question it.

The others found their costumes long before Neil chose anything for himself. It didn't take Nicky long to realize Neil was stalling. He batted Neil's hands away from the rack with a heavy sigh.

"Never mind. I'll find something for you."

"I'll dress up as a college student," Neil said.

"No," Nicky said, and pushed a couple hangers around. "You're going to be a zombie cowboy."

"You're making that up."

"Shhhh." Nicky pulled a costume off the rack and draped it over one arm. "You are absolutely impossible to put up with sometimes. I might ban you from shopping with us ever again."

"I tried banning myself last time," Neil said. "It obviously didn't work."

He tried to take his costume back at the register, but Nicky kicked him in the shin and tossed it on the conveyer belt with everyone else's. Aaron tossed a couple vials of face paint and fake blood on top. Nicky split the bags between himself and Aaron on their way out to the car. When Neil was sure they were heading back to campus he texted Dan a ten-minute warning.

Finding a parking spot at Fox Tower on a Saturday afternoon was tricky. They ended up in street parking a short walk away. They took the stairs up to the third floor and Nicky snagged Neil when Neil continued past the cousins' room.

"Where are you going? You've got to try this on."

"I'm checking in with Dan," Neil said. "She messaged earlier to say something was up."

"Did she use punctuation?" Nicky asked.

"I'm convinced she never does."

"She does when she's angry," Nicky said. "Thinks it gives her words more emphasis or something. Did she?" He waited while Neil checked his phone, then tugged Neil's shirt again when Neil shook his head. "Good, then it can wait. Come on. This will only take a couple minutes."

"So will this," Neil said, shrugging out of Nicky's grip and going next door.

Dan answered his knock almost immediately. Instead of inviting him in, she stepped out into the hall with him and pulled her door most of the way closed behind her. She looked from Neil to Nicky, who was waiting like he thought Neil wouldn't really come over afterward, and then at the cousins' open door.

"Close that," she said. Nicky frowned but did as he was told. Dan waited until the latch clicked before speaking again. "We've got a visitor. He came by a little while ago looking for Andrew. I sent him to the library café to wait and called him when Neil said you were on the way back. I'm surprised he not back yet."

"Someone important?" Nicky asked.

"Yeah." Dan hesitated when the elevator dinged. Neil and Nicky turned and watched a stranger step into the hallway. Neil tensed. The stranger was dressed in jeans and a casual button-up shirt, but he had a cop's swagger as he approached them. Dan lifted her voice in greeting and introduction. "This is Officer Higgins of the Oakland PD."

"Whoa." Nicky held up his hands like he could ward Higgins off. "Wait. Oakland as in California, right? You are way out of your jurisdiction."

Higgins' mouth twitched into a half-smile that didn't reassure any of them. "I'm not here on official business. Not yet, anyway. I just want to talk to Andrew where he can't hang up on me. It's important. He's here?"

Dan gestured next door and came up alongside Neil. Nicky shifted like he wanted to throw himself between Higgins and his cousins, but he hesitated too long. Higgins rapped loudly on the door and waited. Neil didn't want to get any closer to Higgins than he already was, but he couldn't see Andrew's door well enough from here. He kept his eyes on Higgins as he edged down the hall. Higgins glanced back at the movement, but the door opening distracted him.

Unsurprisingly, it was Andrew who investigated the authoritative knock. He only got the door halfway open before he realized who was standing in the hallway. Neil heard the doorknob creak in warning as Andrew twisted it further than it was meant to go. It was a startling giveaway considering Andrew's wide smile and the breezy tone of his voice.

"Oh, I must be imagining things. Pig Higgins, you are a very, very long way from home."

"Andrew," Higgins said. "We need to talk."

"We talked, remember?" Andrew said. "I told you not to bother me."

"You said not to call you," Higgins said. "Just give me a few minutes, won't you, for old times' sake? I came all the way out here to see you. Doesn't that get me any sort of consideration?"

Andrew shook his head with a laugh. "You didn't come out here for me. You came on a witch hunt I already said I wouldn't help you with. Give me one good reason to not cut your throat, would you?"

Dan hissed under her breath, but Higgins looked completely unfazed by the threat. "I was wrong. I know that now. The investigation on him turned up nothing."

"I warned you," Andrew said, unsympathetic.

Higgins held out a hand like he thought Andrew would shut the door in his face. "We were looking at the wrong person, weren't we? I think I've got it right this time, but I can't do anything without a complaining witness. The other kids won't speak up. They don't trust me that much. You're all I've got."

That got Andrew's attention. "Kids? Kids, plural. You only mentioned one last time, Pig. How many are you talking about? How many has she had?"

"You wouldn't care about the number unless there really was something there for me to find," Higgins said, quiet and accusing. "Just yes or no, Andrew. That's all I want. That's all I need right now. I'll give you a name, you give me an answer, and I promise I'll go away."

"You promise." Andrew sounded highly entertained by the notion. "You'll break that promise inside a week, Pig. Don't pretend otherwise. Do I have to walk you out to make sure you leave or will you—"

"Drake," Higgins said.

Andrew shut up. Higgins stretched his hand out further, bracing for a violent reaction, and stared down at Andrew as he waited. Andrew was silent, but not for long. His drugs wouldn't let him keep still for more than a few seconds.

"How many kids, Pig?"

"Six, since you," Higgins said.

Andrew pushed his door further open and stepped out, nearly shoving Higgins aside on his way to the stairs. Higgins strode after him, and the stairwell door slammed behind them.

"You said this wasn't going to be a problem," Dan said.

Nicky sent her a helpless look. "I said if it was, Andrew would handle it."

"This is handling it?" Dan demanded. "Who's Drake?"

"Never heard of him," Nicky said. At Dan's expression he insisted, "I swear. Cross my heart and needle in my eye and all that other stuff. Ease off the Look of Death, would you?"

Dan folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the wall to wait on Andrew's return. Neil waited with her, too curious to walk away yet. Nicky disappeared into his room, likely updating Kevin and Aaron. Neither Dan nor Neil spoke as they waited, and the silence did nothing to ease Dan's obvious bad mood. She was still glowering when Andrew made it back a couple minutes later.

"A welcome party or the inquisition?" Andrew wondered when he saw them.

Dan stepped in front of his door before he could disappear into his room. Andrew obediently stopped in front of her, but he wrapped his fingers around her upper arms. It was a clear warning: he wouldn't hesitate to throw her out of his way if she didn't move fast enough. Dan tensed but held her ground.

"Why are the police looking for you?"

Andrew tilted his body toward her and smiled into her face. "I'm not in trouble, oh captain my captain. The pig is just too incompetent to make his case without some outside help. Don't try to make this your business, okay? I won't let you."

"Don't let it interfere with my team and I won't have to." Dan stepped aside, then asked, "Do you need Renee?"

"Oh, Dan," Andrew said, amused and pitying. He stopped in his doorway to look back at her. "I don't need anyone. Goodbye."

He shut the door and locked it. Dan stayed where she was a moment longer, then muttered angrily under her breath and turned on Neil. "Come on."

Allison, Renee, and Matt were sitting in a circle in the girls' living room and eating a sandwich lunch. Dan motioned to the kitchen, a silent invitation for Neil

to help himself to their fridge, and took her place at Matt's side. Neil had already eaten, so he sat between Allison and Renee.

"How'd it go?" Matt asked.

"Higgins said something about needing Andrew as a witness," Dan said. "He didn't say what for and Andrew still won't give me a straight answer. He just told us to stay out of it or else."

Dan didn't ask Neil, obviously not expecting him to know what was going on. Neil didn't know the finer details, but he'd asked Andrew about Higgins' phone call a couple weeks ago. Children's Services opened an investigation on one of Andrew's former foster fathers. Andrew told Neil they wouldn't find anything. He hadn't said there was something to find if only they'd looked at the right person.

Neil didn't know who Drake was to Andrew or what he'd done, but Higgins obviously hit a nerve with that name. He wondered if Andrew was finally willing to cooperate or if Higgins could otherwise compel him to testify. It had to be a big case; Higgins must be desperate if he'd crossed the country on his own dime for a lead. Neil said nothing about it to the others, though. Andrew hadn't given away any of Neil's secrets, so Neil wouldn't give up his.

The best he could do was change the subject. "Before I forget, Andrew said I could invite you to the Halloween party at Eden's Twilight. It's on the twenty-seventh."

Matt dropped his sandwich back to his plate with a splat. "Bullshit."

"Andrew doesn't socialize with us," Dan said.

"He's making an exception," Neil said. "He doesn't think you'll come but he says it's okay if you do. I know we've got a game that night, but it's a home game, so we should get to Columbia a bit after ten. Will you come?"

Dan and Matt exchanged incredulous looks, but Renee said, "I'll go. Allison?"

"You want us to party with the monsters?" Allison asked. Renee only smiled. Allison clicked her manicured nails together as she thought, then lifted one shoulder in a shrug and picked at her lunch. "It could be interesting, I suppose. The campus party scene got boring two years ago. Dan, we're going."

"How the hell did you talk Andrew into this?" Dan asked, staring at Neil.

"I asked," Neil said.

"And he agreed just like that?" Matt asked, skeptical.

"He implied you were the harder party to convince," Neil said.

"Oh, did they tell you that story?"

Matt didn't sound worried, but Neil said, "No. Andrew's more interested in how you'd tell it, he said. But I'm not going to ask. It's not my business."

"Why not? You're the only one here who doesn't know, and I know you've seen these already. It's not like they're subtle."

Matt turned his arm enough to show off his track marks. Neil had spotted them within seconds of meeting Matt for the first time. Matt never tried to hide them. They were scars of a battle he'd fought and won long ago. Neil didn't let his gaze linger on them now but gave a small nod. Matt ran a hand down them and picked up his sandwich.

"Dad liked partying it up with the other rich shits of New York," Matt said, "but his party favors were drugs. He let me—encouraged me, even—to try whatever I wanted so I would fit in. When Mom realized what was going on she took time off from the circuit to get me clean. We thought I was okay until I started here. The juniors we had back then were into some pretty heavy things, and I was tempted. The only way I stayed sober was by hiding from them."

"By camping out on our couch for his entire freshman year," Allison elaborated.

Matt winced, not embarrassed but guilty. "I said I was sorry."
"Whatever," Allison said.

Matt tore his sandwich into shreds as he continued. "Last year the monsters joined our team. It took Andrew all of two weeks to figure out something wasn't right with me, and he took it upon himself to fix things. They invited me out with them to Columbia. When we got there Andrew gave me speedballs."

Neil's stomach bottomed out. "He what?"

"He didn't make me take them," Matt was quick to say. "He just offered them, and I was drunk and stupid and desperate enough to say yes."

"Coach should have kicked him off the team."

"He should have, except Andrew cleared it with Matt's mother first," Dan said, jaw tightening a little in old anger. "She knew Matt was having a hell of a time here and she wanted him to kick the habit for good. Andrew promised he could help, so she gave him her blessing. She flew in for the summer to help walk Matt through withdrawal and asked Coach not to punish Andrew. She even offered to pay Coach for the trouble."

"But—"

"No harm, no foul," Allison said carelessly. When Neil stared at her, she gestured at Matt. "You can't really have an opinion on this because you weren't here then. You didn't see what Matt was like. It was pathetic. He couldn't even look any of us in the face. Look at him now. The monster's methods might have been a little extreme but they worked."

"You're not really okay with this," Neil said to Matt. "What if it backfired? What if you hadn't gotten back up again?"

"Andrew had too much invested in Matt's success to let him fail," Renee said, speaking slowly like she was choosing her words with great care. Neil guessed she knew Andrew's reasons better than anyone else did, given her friendship with him. "I don't know if they've talked to you about Aaron's history, but you understand Andrew's, don't you? He's not allowed to fight his addiction. Watching Matt struggle was very hard on them both."

Her reference to Aaron didn't make sense at first, but then Neil remembered. On his second trip out to Eden's Twilight he asked Andrew why he bothered with cracker dust. Andrew said they'd picked the habit up for Aaron's sake. Just the other week Nicky mentioned that Aaron used his mother's drugs, though he hadn't specified what all she'd been into. Chances were cracker dust was a paltry substitute. Watching Matt crumble under temptation would have wrecked hell on Aaron's own sobriety.

Neil was starting to rethink how apathetic Andrew was about Aaron's life.

Matt misinterpreted Neil's silence. "You're a year too late to get mad on my behalf, Neil. Trust me: I'm okay. I'm more than okay, really. I thought rehab was bad the first time through. The second time almost killed me. It definitely killed any chance of me being tempted ever again. I'm clean for good and I feel better than ever."

Neil needed more time to figure out how to feel about this, but it wasn't his life, so he said only, "It's your fight."

Matt smiled in gratitude for Neil's understanding. "Guess we'll have to pick up some costumes this week if we're going with you. We wait much longer and all the good ones will be taken. What'd you guys get, so we don't double up on anything?"

"I'll ask."

"You don't know?" Dan asked, bemused.

"I'm hoping Nicky was joking," Neil said, getting to his feet. "I'll be back."

It turned out Nicky wasn't joking, but at least a zombie cowboy was better than a milk carton or a cow.

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Having nine people along on a Friday night meant Andrew had to make an actual reservation at Sweetie's, no matter that they got there at half-past ten. A small crowd of people was waiting at the hostess stand, but the L-shaped corner booth was marked with a RESERVED placard. The booth was technically intended for eight people, not nine in costumes, but it helped that Aaron and Andrew were pint-sized. The Foxes squished thigh-to-thigh and pored over menus.

Usually Andrew's lot settled for ice cream and cracker dust, but it'd been six hours since any of them ate and they had a long night ahead of them. Dinner was also the safest icebreaker any of them could think of. The Foxes had never socialized en masse outside of team events and practices. They weren't really sure what to do with each other when Exy wasn't involved.

Aaron and Andrew did nothing to make the night easier on anyone. Aaron refused to speak to any of the upperclassmen, even when one of them said something directly to him, and radiated quiet anger from his spot between Nicky and Neil. Neil found it equal parts aggravating and interesting. Aaron didn't have a serious problem with his teammates on the court, so Neil couldn't understand why he was so against this.

Now that Renee was allowed to play as a goalkeeper again, Andrew only had to stay sober through first half. He'd taken a pill during halftime tonight and was still buzzing. He spent most of that considerable energy on his own group or Renee. He was a little more cooperative than his brother in that he answered Dan or Matt if they asked him something, but his answers were lightning quick, borderline rude, and always followed by a redirect to someone else at the table.

It could have been the most awkward dinner in the world if not for Nicky. Nicky hated how isolated the twins were and was desperate to make friends with the rest of the team. It was as if he'd developed a sudden allergy to silence. Any time the conversation started to slow he threw out another topic to salvage it. Renee, Dan, and Matt were happy to play along, but Allison and Kevin were slower to get involved. Neil preferred to stay out of it so he could watch the way they interacted, but since this was his idea he felt obligated to help Nicky out when he could.

They were working on dessert when Andrew's high started to noticeably peter out, and Neil didn't miss the curious looks the upperclassmen sent Andrew's way. Andrew's withdrawal wasn't a new thing but they'd always seen it through the smokescreen of a game. Here there wasn't a court and another team to distract them from his slow crash. Allison predicted earlier this week Andrew wouldn't last the night without his medicine, so Neil thought to warn them about Andrew's cracker dust habit. Andrew would ease his withdrawal with alcohol and drugs; he was going to be harder and colder than the upperclassmen had ever seen him.

Andrew acknowledged their attention with a sly grin and an elbow in Kevin's side. Kevin shifted in his seat enough to put his hand in his pocket. The rattle of pills against plastic was so soft Neil might not have noticed it if not for Andrew's reaction. The look Andrew shot Kevin's hand was so intense Neil wanted to lean away from it. Andrew dragged his stare back up to Kevin's face with obvious

effort. The slow smile that curved his lips said he was pulling free of his drugged haze and was not at all amused by Kevin's silent offer.

"Don't make me hurt you," Andrew said. "I don't want blood in my ice cream."

Kevin only shrugged and pulled his hand free. Across the table the upperclassmen were silent. They didn't know what they'd missed but they'd heard Andrew's threat. Nicky shot Kevin an accusatory look for making things awkward and distracted Matt by asking about a recent movie.

Neil let the words go in one ear and out the other. He'd just remembered a question he'd been sitting on for months. He weighed his chances of getting a real answer with so many people present, considered asking in German, and decided he didn't want Andrew's half-assed answer. Kevin sat between Andrew and Neil, so it was easy for Neil to get his attention. He nudged Kevin with his knee and asked in quiet French, "Why do you have his drugs?"

"I hold onto them when he's adjusting his schedule," Kevin answered. "Game nights or nights like tonight when he wants to go into withdrawal, it's better if someone else keeps the bottle. If he has his pills he'll take them. He won't be able to help himself."

Kevin wasn't speaking any louder than Neil had, but the foreign sounds got their teammates' attention. Neil feigned not to see the curious looks Matt and Dan sent him but went back to his snack. Kevin looked at Andrew again. Andrew missed it, as he was digging his phone out of his pocket.

Nicky noticed Andrew's distraction and whined, "That's not Coach, is it? We won tonight. He's not allowed to harass us."

"Just Bee!" Andrew said. "Bee being stupid. Bee being, ha. Look."

Andrew tossed Nicky his phone. Nicky took one look at the screen, laughed, and reached across Aaron to show Neil the phone. Neil didn't care about the team's shrink but he obediently looked at the image she'd sent. It was a grainy picture of Betsy Dobson wearing a bee costume. Nicky waited a beat for Neil's reaction, realized he wasn't going to get one, and passed Andrew's phone back via Neil and Kevin. Andrew typed out a response as soon as he had it back in hand.

"She with Coach?" Dan asked.

"Coach and Abby invited her over," Andrew said without looking up.

"Why is she messaging you?" Neil asked.

"Oh, she does that sometimes."

He didn't sound bothered by it. Neil didn't understand. He knew Andrew had mandatory weekly sessions with her, but he assumed someone like Andrew would resent counseling. "Why do you let her?"

"Not everyone dislikes her," Renee said mildly.

Dan looked startled. "What do you have against Betsy?"

"She's a psychiatrist," Neil said. "I distrust her on principle."

"Give her a chance," Matt said. "She's good people."

"She's pretty badass, you mean," Nicky chipped in. "I was really worried for her when we all went for our first meet-and-greet." He wagged his thumb between himself and Aaron. "Andrew goes through shrinks like he's trying to break a world record only he knows about. She's his eighth one at least."

"Thirteenth," Andrew said. "She made sure to ask me if I was superstitious."

"Some insane number," Nicky said. "But when Andrew waltzed out of her office at the end of his first session with her she was right on his heels and completely unfazed. Pretty impressive, right?"

"No," Neil said.

Nicky sighed. "Eat your ice cream, jerk."

Neil fought the urge to roll his eyes and dug in. When they left Andrew brought a stack of napkins away from the table with him. Neil didn't have to ask why. He didn't know how many of Sweetie's servers sold cracker dust, but hiding the packs between extra napkins was an easy way to make deliveries. Andrew waited for Kevin to get in the passenger seat first, then dumped the stack of napkins in his lap for Kevin to sort on the drive to the club. By the time they got to Eden's Twilight Andrew's smile was gone for the night.

Eden's Twilight was a two-story nightclub near the heart of Columbia. Nicky had worked there as a bartender when getting the twins through high school, and Neil had a feeling Andrew had helped out under the table. They'd left the city for school but came back as often as the season allowed. Nicky's friendship with the staff and Andrew's generous tips got them instant access and ridiculous discounts on drinks.

The upperclassmen came in Allison's car. When Nicky pulled over at the curb out front of Eden's Twilight, Allison double-parked beside him to let her passengers out. Andrew collected VIP parking passes from the bouncer on duty. Kevin handed Allison hers and gave her quick directions to the parking garage in case she got separated from Nicky in traffic. She nodded understanding and pulled away.

The bouncer on duty looked a little confused by how many people Andrew had with him, but he waved them through without question. Andrew pushed open a second set of doors and led them into the club.

The doors put them out on the dais, a curved section packed with tables and the main bar. Two short stairwells led a few feet down to a crowded dance floor. Halfway between the doors and bar were the stairs up to the second floor. Neil

had yet to go up there, as the balcony was meant for private parties. Andrew could have easily gotten them access, but his preferred bartender Roland always worked the downstairs bar.

It took work to find a table through the crowd, and the one they found only had two stools left. Andrew shrugged it off as inconsequential, since chances were most of the Foxes would end up on the dance floor anyway. He left most of his teammates to guard the table and dragged Neil through the crowd toward the bar for their first round.

It took Roland a couple minutes to work his way to them. Anyone who showed up to the club in costume was rewarded with a free shot, so Andrew gestured over his shoulder toward their table. Roland peered through the crowd until he spotted them. His eyebrows went up when he saw three unfamiliar faces with Kevin and Aaron.

"All grown up and making friends?" he asked. "Never thought I'd see the day."

"I'll tip you double if you never say such stupid things again."

Roland grinned, did another headcount, and began setting up a tray for them. He didn't ask what they wanted; he knew the cousins' tastes by now and could easily throw in a couple of the bar's more popular concoctions for the upperclassmen. Roland knew Nicky was missing, but he didn't know to include something for Allison. Neil didn't say anything, figuring Allison could have his shot, except Roland didn't stop at eight drinks. He mixed close to twenty.

"How many DDs?" Roland asked.

"Just two," Andrew said.

Roland added two cans of soda to the tray and slid it across the counter to Andrew. Neil led the way back through the crowd and made room for Andrew as he went. Andrew got the drinks to the table without spilling a drop. He passed one soda to Renee and left the other for Neil, but no one drank until Allison and Nicky caught up with them. Allison looked vaguely impressed by the amount of drinks Andrew had procured for them.

It took the Foxes almost no time at all to empty the tray. Andrew cleared the mess away, and this time Renee followed him to help. Dan watched them go, then spoke up to be heard over the music. "You sure this is safe?"

"Huh?" Nicky asked.

"Letting Andrew be sober for a full night," Dan clarified. "Good idea, bad idea, won't live to regret it idea?"

Nicky looked confused by her ignorance. "He's not sober; he never is. You've seen him go through withdrawal at games, yeah, and we," he jerked a thumb between the remaining four of Andrew's group, "sometimes get to put up with

him like he is tonight, but Andrew hasn't been sober in years. He's always got something in his system to mess him up. Trust me, you'd know if he was clean. It's, uh..."

Nicky looked at Aaron as he searched for the right word, but Aaron stared back and refused to help. Nicky was undeterred by his silence and settled for saying, "It's unmistakable. You'll see next summer whether you want to or not. He's off his program in May and should finish rehab by the time we start June practices."

"Finally," Kevin said, sounding annoyed.

"Of course you're looking forward to this," Nicky said. "Curiosity killed the cat. Fox. Whatever. I'm just hoping the past couple years of drugs and intense counseling have mellowed him out some."

"New team rule." Matt mimed banging a gavel on the table. "Never again put 'Andrew' and 'mellow' in the same—oh my god."

"Does that still count as blasphemy?" Nicky asked, because Dan and Matt had come dressed as a pair of Greek gods. He turned to follow Matt's stare to a passing partygoer. The man had come dressed as a neon yellow oven mitt. Nicky's face contorted in incredulous dismay and he laughed hard enough he almost fell over. "I think that one wins grand prize, kids. No one's outscoring that one on the crazy meter."

He was probably right, but that didn't stop the Foxes from craning their necks and looking for any other weird costumes. They were in the middle of a couple harsh critiques when Andrew and Renee made it back. The arrival of more drinks slowed the conversation, but it was the packets of cracker dust Kevin produced that completely derailed it.

Matt, Renee, and Neil abstained. Andrew divvied up the rest, keeping the most for himself since his system could tolerate more than anyone else's. Dan took only one packet and dumped half of it into a drink near Allison's elbow. Nicky counted down from three and they knocked the dust back as a group. They raced each other through their third and fourth rounds before heading for the dance floor. Renee promised Allison she'd join them as soon as she finished her soda and stayed behind with Andrew, Neil, and Kevin.

Andrew stacked the empty cups on his tray and left again. He didn't need help this time, since he was only getting enough drinks for himself and Kevin, but Neil followed after him. He had to shove past two drunks in lopsided Carnival masks to reach the bar counter and he squeezed into the small space at Andrew's side. Andrew pushed his tray across the counter for Roland to retrieve when he had a minute and slanted a look at Neil.

"Stop hiding. This was your idea; deal with the consequences."

"It's not that easy," Neil said.

Explaining his discomfort wasn't any easier. Andrew had promised to watch Neil's back until May, but when he made that deal he said Neil's growing reputation could keep him safe the rest of his Fox career. Andrew assumed Neil could graduate from Palmetto as long as Neil played his cards right with Kevin. Neil hadn't yet told him plans had changed, which made it harder to say why tonight was making him unhappy. Finally he fell back on the half-truth he'd given Andrew that summer.

"I've never been in a position where I could get to know people. I know I have to let them in if we're going to make it through the season, but it'd be easier if they were just names and faces. How have you stayed so disconnected for so long?"

"They're not interesting enough to keep my attention."

"Kevin is. So is your brother, apparently." Neil wasn't surprised when Andrew didn't acknowledge either accusation. He pressed on. "What about Renee?"

"What about her?"

"She's not interesting?"

"She's useful."

"That's it?"

"You expected a different answer?"

"Maybe," Neil said, and hesitated when Roland finally showed up. Roland stayed only long enough to get their tray before leaving again. Neil looked back at Andrew and wondered at the cool smile on Andrew's face. He was being mocked, but he wasn't quite sure why yet. "Most everyone is waiting for something to happen with you two. Even Nicky thinks it's inevitable. But Renee promised Allison nothing would come of it. Allison said as much to Seth. Why?"

"Does it matter?"

Neil gave an uncomfortable shrug. "Yes? No? It should be—it is—irrelevant, but..." He hesitated, but Andrew said nothing, unwilling to make this easy on him. Neil shouldn't be surprised by Andrew's attitude, but he was annoyed regardless. "I'm just trying to understand."

"Sometimes you're interesting enough to keep around. Other times you're so astoundingly stupid I can barely stand the sight of you."

Neil scowled at him. "Forget it. I'll ask Renee."

"You'll have to stop avoiding her first."

Neil didn't waste his time answering that. Roland returned their tray a couple minutes later and they headed back to the table. Renee's soda was finished, but

she was keeping Kevin company until their return. As soon as Andrew sat, she looked to Neil.

"Are you not coming?"

"No," Neil said.

She nodded and left to find the others. Andrew and Kevin had the chairs, so Neil stood between them in silence. He watched them drink a few more rounds, then went alone to the railing overlooking the dance floor. The metal bars were sticky with sweat or spilled liquor, but he folded his arms across them and looked out at the jumping mass below.

It'd be hard to spot his teammates on a good day. With the lights flashing overhead and everyone in costumes it was impossible. That smear of red might be Renee's Red Riding Hood cloak and the silver that kept sparking like a sequin was probably Nicky's space cadet uniform, but there was no way to be sure. He had to trust that they were all there, safe and having fun. He was content to watch and imagine.

Lonely, too, but there was nothing he could do about that.

CHAPTER TEN

Neil went looking for Renee after his math class on Monday. He'd had a couple months to learn the gist of his teammates' schedules. He didn't want that kind of knowledge taking up space in his head, but he spent too much time with the Foxes to not know where they were everyday. He knew Renee's schedule was like his: she had two back-to-back classes, then a free period before her next lesson. The trick was getting to her before she got too far from her classroom, but luckily Renee was only one building over from him. That proximity was why she'd been chosen to walk him from math to history the day of their opening game.

He took the stairs down to the sidewalk as quick as he could, dodging students who were in no particular hurry to get anywhere and neatly avoiding those who were in as much of a rush as he was. He caught the edge of a vending machine to help whip him around the corner of the building and spotted Renee's distinctive hair maybe twenty feet away. Neil squished his reservations and unease deep and set off after her.

Renee glanced over when he finally caught up with her, and Neil didn't miss the way her eyebrows shot up. "Neil, hello. This is rare."

"Are you busy?" Neil asked. "I wondered if we could talk for a couple minutes."

Renee laughed. "I should stop betting against Andrew when it comes to you," she said, then explained when Neil frowned at her. "He told me you'd come see me but I didn't think you were ready yet. But to answer your original question: no, I'm not that busy. Do you mind talking as we walk?"

Neil didn't have another class for two hours, so he followed her on an easy stroll across campus. Between campus, Perimeter Road, and downtown was a grassy park referred to as the Green. If it had an official name Neil hadn't seen it on any brochures. He assumed Renee wanted to sprawl and soak up some sun like so many other students were doing, but she cut a path around the dozing co-eds toward the downtown shops.

"Did Andrew say why I wanted to talk to you?" Neil asked when they were halfway across the Green.

"He was a little vague on the details," Renee said.

"I asked you this once and you didn't really answer," Neil said. "Now can you tell me why Andrew likes you?"

"Last year Andrew took a few of us out to Eden's Twilight one at a time," Renee said. "You know now why Andrew invited Matt. He invited Dan to see if she was a woman worth following on the court. He asked me because he, like you, didn't buy into this front." She gestured at her face and rested her fingertips on her cross necklace. "He wanted the truth, so I told him."

"Andrew found out he and I have a lot in common." Renee glanced at Neil as they stopped at a crosswalk on Perimeter Road. "The only differences between us are luck and faith."

"And psychosis," Neil said.

Renee smiled. "Maybe not. I am a bad person trying very hard to be a good person, but I would not be trying at all if not for the outside interventions in my life. I grew up with my mother and her string of heavy-handed boyfriends."

She seemed unbothered by her words and turned a calm stare on the crosswalk as she spoke. "Maybe it is inevitable that I got into trouble myself. I started working as a lookout and runner for one of Detroit's gangs. It took me a couple years to work my way up to harder work. I did anything they asked me to and didn't care who I hurt."

"Fortunately for me, I was not as smart as I thought I was. When I was fifteen the police caught me, and my lawyer traded my testimony for a reduced sentence. My words got a lot of people in trouble, including my mother. My lawyer explained my home life so the court would understand my lack of positive role models. His findings sent both my mother and her then-lover to prison on assorted charges. They were beaten to death by angry members of the gang I helped put away."

"I'm sorry," Neil said, when in reality he was a little jealous. Both she and Wymack lost their parents to prison violence, but no one dared attack his father. It would solve a world of problems for Neil if a few inmates could just work up enough aggression and courage.

"I'm not," Renee said, jarring Neil from his thoughts. Renee started across the street but it took Neil a couple seconds before he could follow her. Renee smiled at him when he caught up. "I know I should be, but that's still something I'm working on. I know I was directly responsible for the circumstances that led to their murders, but to be honest I hated them. On top of that, without my mother's death I never would have ended up here."

"With my mother dead and my biological father in the wind, the courts had no choice but to release me into foster care after my year at a juvenile facility," Renee said. "I made life as difficult as I could for my foster families and jumped eight homes in two years. Stephanie Walker found out about me from one of my foster mothers at her high school reunion. She put in a request for me, pushed

until it was approved, and moved me to North Dakota as soon as it was finalized. She gave me a new name, a new faith, and a new chance at life."

Renee hadn't been exaggerating when she said she and Andrew were a lot alike. They had violent, unstable upbringings thanks to their mothers and spent time in both juvie and the foster system. Their paths split irrevocably after their respective adoptions. Renee let Stephanie shape her into a decent human being and atoned for her past brutality whereas Andrew murdered his mother the first chance he got. Neil finally understood why Renee wasn't afraid of Andrew.

"Then why don't you and Andrew work?" Neil asked.

"I'm sorry," Renee said. "Work how?"

"Why haven't you asked him out?"

The look on her face said it was the last question she'd expected from him. She bought herself time by motioning Neil into the next shop. Neil went in first but stepped aside so she could lead the way. The look she gave him on her way by was assessing, but she turned to the task at hand soon enough and rummaged through the trinkets on the closest shelf.

"What is all this about, if you don't mind my asking?" she asked. "You've never seemed interested before."

"I'm not," Neil said, but that didn't make sense considering he'd been the one to bring it up.

Neil grasped for a good way to explain. He didn't want to tell her he'd spent Friday night thinking about dying. He hadn't wanted to think about a future he didn't have, so he stood at the railing and thought about his teammates instead. It was a strange exercise, as fascinating as it was discomfoting. He wasn't used to worrying about anyone but himself and his mother, but he'd tried imagining the Foxes' lives a year or two down the road. He wondered what sort of strikers Kevin would recruit to replace him and how much fallout the Foxes would face after he gave himself over to the FBI.

But mostly he thought about them as the people he'd spent the evening with, the people he was getting to know almost against his will. They'd never be perfect, but they were going to be all right. They'd come to the Foxhole Court as fractured messes but they were fixing each other one semester at a time. Even Kevin was going to come out of this on top. He wasn't going to fade into obscurity like Tetsuji and Riko thought he would; he would ride the Foxes' resurgence to the top and reclaim his place in the spotlight.

The only one besides Neil who didn't have a way out was Andrew. Kevin and Nicky both thought they had the right solution for Andrew's problem, but Neil wasn't sure anymore which one of them he believed. But he couldn't tell Renee that, either, because he didn't want to explain why it was suddenly so

important. It wouldn't mean anything to her when she didn't know who he was and what Andrew had offered him.

"Never mind," he said.

He started to turn away, but Renee said, "I'm not Andrew's type, Neil. There's nothing between us."

"Allison said that," Neil said, searching Renee's face for the truth. "She told Seth not to worry about you two getting together. But the others are all waiting for something to happen. You have to know how many times they've bet on you. If you can say 'no' so easily to me, why haven't you set anyone else straight yet?"

"It's complicated," Renee said, "and we profit more from silence. Allison believed me when I said I wouldn't fall for Andrew. The others stopped listening when Andrew and I started talking more. I reward Allison's trust in me by stacking the odds in her favor on any bets about us. She and I split the proceeds. I put my winnings aside for our Christmas Adopt-a-Family project. Allison buys manicures with hers."

"How does Andrew benefit?" Neil asked. "Free entertainment watching everyone guess?"

"Peace of mind," Renee said after a moment's consideration.

"I don't understand."

Renee hesitated again. Neil watched as she rummaged through a collection of leather wallets. She held one up and turned it this way and that. "Andrew said you would have questions for me. I asked him what he wanted me to say if you came by, but he said he didn't care and didn't have time to play moderator. If he knew this was what you wanted to talk about I'll assume he knew this would come up."

Renee put the wallet back, let her fingers linger a few seconds longer as she debated, then turned to face Neil fully. "When I said I wasn't Andrew's type, I meant it. It's not about my looks or faith. It's that I'm a woman."

Neil heard her words but was slow to understand them. He blinked at her in confusion, blinked again when it clicked, and said a little too loudly, "Oh. Then Andrew and Kevin—"

Renee laughed and waved that off. "Oh, no. You'll meet Kevin's girlfriend later this year, I'm sure."

"You're lying." Neil stared at her. "Kevin doesn't have a girlfriend. He's under too much scrutiny from the press and his fans to hide that kind of thing."

Renee cased the store in a slow, easy look. This time of day there was only one other customer, and he was on the far side of the store from them. "They're not official, and Kevin knows better than to be indiscreet. Can you imagine what Coach Moriyama might do if a woman distracted Kevin from his game?"

"I'm sure it does not surprise you that she is a Court-ranked player. Kevin needs someone who can keep up with and challenge him. Fortunately she is also a Raven alumnus, so she knows the repercussions of getting caught with Kevin. Maybe they'll have more luck after we've settled things with the Ravens this year."

"Thea?" Neil asked, startled.

Renee smiled at how quickly he put it together. "Impressive."

It wasn't that hard to figure it out, even with her vague explanation. There were only two women on the Court's roster. One was a dealer from USC. The other, Theodora Muldani, was a backliner from Edgar Allan. Her ascension to the national team two years ago drew a lot of attention since she was the only player who'd turned down her initial invitation. Her official reason was she didn't want the Court schedule interfering with her fifth year at university. No one expected the national team to give her a second chance, but the Court's representative was waiting for her at her final championships game.

Thea would have been starting her fifth year with the Ravens when Kevin started his freshman year, but Kevin and Riko grew up at Evermore around the Raven line. Kevin would have known Thea her entire five-year career as a Raven. Neil wondered how long it took them to fall for each other and what Thea thought of Kevin's transfer to the Foxes. He was more curious how Kevin found room in his heart for someone else when he lived and breathed Exy. It seemed impossible that a man could be so devoted to more than one thing.

Maybe Nicky and Kevin were both right, then. Neil's thoughts spun back to Andrew, and he said, "No one else knows about Andrew's sexuality."

"As far as I know, you and I are the only ones," Renee confirmed. "Andrew told me last year when the others started talking about us. He didn't want me getting any ideas from their gossip, he said."

"But Aaron and Nicky," Neil protested. "I know they've only known him a couple years, but they're with him all the time. How could they not have figured it out by now?"

"I assume Andrew's medicine makes him a hard read for even them," Renee said. "More importantly, Andrew does not want them to know. He and Aaron aren't ready for a conversation this serious yet. They have too many other problems to work through first. And you know as well as I do Nicky can't keep a secret to save his life."

Yet, Renee had said, which meant Andrew intended on fixing things with his brother at some point. Neil didn't know if that was her optimism speaking or if she knew it as fact. He didn't know what she and Andrew talked about when they stood off by themselves. Thinking it was Exy strategies was laughable.

Imagining them having a serious conversation—as serious as a drugged Andrew could be, anyway—about Andrew's closeted sexuality was equally impossible.

"Then why can I know?" Neil asked.

"Perhaps he knows you won't use it against him," Renee said.

There was a gentle warning in her words, and Neil bristled despite himself. His teammates' relationships were interesting to observe from a distance but otherwise inconsequential. Neil didn't care about his teammates' sexualities because it had nothing to do with his survival. Andrew's sexuality was surprising, but it certainly wasn't ammunition to use against him.

It took a little work to keep the edge out of his voice. "If he doesn't care whether or not I know, he could have told me himself at Halloween when I asked him about you. He didn't have to send me all the way here."

"Maybe he thought it past time you and I got to know each other a little better." Renee studied Neil. "I am not the girl I once was, but the shade of my old life will always exist inside of me. That is what helps me connect with Andrew. I am hoping it will help me connect with you."

"I do not know your story," she continued before Neil could react. "If you've trusted Andrew with anything, he hasn't shared the details with me and he never will. But if you are as like us as we first predicted you to be, perhaps one day you can also come to see me as a friend. We're all here because we have problems, Neil. That doesn't mean all our problems are the same. Dan and Matt try to understand the things I've seen and done, but they will never fully succeed. Andrew understands me, and I him. It's comforting knowing someone else has been where we once were. If either Andrew or I can help you, please know we are here."

Neil didn't answer that; he couldn't. It was too much to think about and too much to consider. He wanted to ask her about the trial and what it was like giving testimony. He needed to know how the courts protected her and if it was worth it. If he went to the FBI in spring with proof to take his father down he'd at least like an idea of what he was getting into. That would open up far too many questions than he wanted to deal with today, though. He wasn't willing to trust her with even the half-truths he'd given Andrew.

Renee didn't look surprised or disappointed by his long silence. She gave him a minute to make up his mind, then nodded and changed the subject with an ease that left him reeling.

"Maybe now that I've sated your curiosity you can help me. I need a boy's opinion on gifts for Aaron and Andrew. For their birthday," she said at the blank look on Neil's face. "They didn't celebrate it last year, and Nicky says they haven't celebrated it since they moved in together, but hopefully this one is

different. They turn twenty on Saturday. That's something worth commemorating, isn't it?"

"I guess so," Neil said.

His half-hearted agreement was good enough for her, and she motioned to the shelf in front of her. "I'm thinking something practical they can use. What do you think?"

It took them two stores and almost half an hour of searching before Renee finally found what she wanted. By that point it was coming up quick on Renee's next class. Neil still had an hour to kill and he was only a couple minutes from Fox Tower, so he parted ways with Renee at Perimeter Road. She headed across the Green to campus and Neil went the other way to the athletes' dormitory. His room was blessedly empty. Neil dropped his backpack on the floor, sprawled face-down on Matt's couch, and let his thoughts run in curious circles over everything Renee had told him.

By the time he got up for class again, he still didn't know what to think.

Frantic thumping on the suite door startled Neil and Matt from their TV lunch on Saturday. Matt scrambled to find the remote where it'd fallen between the cushions, so Neil put his plate aside and hopped up to answer the door. The girls knew Matt kept the door unlocked if he was in the room, so Neil expected to find someone lost on their way to another team's room. Instead a wild-eyed Nicky was waiting in the hall.

"Oh thank God," Nicky said, reaching for Neil with both hands. "Help."

Matt finally found the remote and paused their movie. "What the hell? You all right?"

"I'm two seconds away from being dead," Nicky said. "Mom just called to wish Andrew and Aaron a happy birthday."

"And that's a bad thing?" Matt asked.

Nicky gaped at Matt, but surprise quickly washed away his disbelief. He rubbed the back of his neck in obvious discomfort. Neil expected him to laugh it off. The cousins' first response to personal problems was to close ranks against the upperclassmen. Nicky might not like it, but he'd done it time and time again throughout the season. It caught both Neil and Matt off-guard when Nicky actually answered.

"Uh, yeah," Nicky hedged. "We don't really talk to my family, you know? Dad hasn't said a word to me since he found out Erik's more than just my best friend. Mom calls on Christmas to see if I've returned to God and disconnects when I tell her no. I don't think Aaron's spoken to them since Aunt Tilda's

funeral, and Andrew avoids them like they're a contagious disease. He and Dad didn't hit it off too well when they met at juvie."

"It couldn't have gone that badly," Matt said. "I mean, your dad supported his early release, right?"

"Yeah, but." Nicky fidgeted.

"Why did she call, really?" Neil asked.

"To invite us home for Thanksgiving dinner."

"And?"

"And I hung up on her!" Nicky flailed at him. "What else was I supposed to do? I couldn't tell her no, could I?"

"You were supposed to say yes," Matt said. "What the hell, Nicky?"

"It's not that easy." Nicky sounded miserable. "Offer's contingent on Aaron and Andrew going, too. Mom made that clear. There's no way Andrew will agree."

"You never know until you try," Matt said.

"I don't think you understand how much Andrew hates my parents," Nicky said.

"So what am I supposed to do?" Neil asked.

"Be moral support and back-up," Nicky said. "If I go to Andrew with this, he'll either laugh me off or pretend he doesn't hear me. But he listens to you, right? I mean, you talked him into a team party. Maybe you can talk him into a family dinner somehow."

"I didn't talk him into anything," Neil pointed out. "I said it was the smart thing to do and he agreed. This is more complicated and I shouldn't have a say in it. I could tell him it's obviously important to you to patch things up with your parents, but you and I both know how he'll probably react to that."

Nicky looked crestfallen, but he rallied with a weak, "I grew up in that house, but Dad hasn't let me set foot in it since I came back out of the closet. I know they think I'm a heathen doomed to burn for eternity, and I know I should give up on them, but I can't. Maybe this call means they're coming around. I have to know. Please, Neil? I want my mom back. I miss her more than you know."

Neil swallowed hard against the burning knot in his throat. This wasn't his family. It wasn't his problem. It wasn't his mother. Neil's mother was ashes and bones buried in a California beach. She was gone forever. Neil would never hear her voice again and would never get another phone call from her. She'd never sit him down and explain why she'd run or apologize for hiding his connection to the Moriyamas. She'd never watch him play with the Foxes in semifinals. She wouldn't be there when he gave his testimony. She wouldn't be there when he died.

Neil's grief was a knife spinning circles in his stomach, tearing him to shreds from the inside out until he could barely breathe. He took a slow breath and counted his heartbeats on the exhale. Nicky waited, too desperate to press his luck further.

"Wait here," Neil finally said.

Nicky's expression was a whirlwind of surprise and hope. Neil couldn't stand the sight of it and he didn't want Nicky's premature gratitude. He slipped past Nicky into the hallway and went two doors down to the cousins' room. Nicky hadn't locked the suite door behind him, so Neil let himself in with a perfunctory knock.

Aaron was waiting on one of the beanbag chairs with a controller in his hand. Judging by the indent in the other chair and the still images on the TV, Nicky's phone call had interrupted their game. Kevin had a newspaper spread on his desk as he checked last night's scores around the nation. Andrew was sitting on the desk closest to the window. He'd taken the screen off months ago so he could smoke indoors.

"Oh, Neil!" Andrew wiggled his cigarette at Neil in greeting. "Hello."

"Can we talk?" Neil asked.

"Today's not a good day," Andrew said. "Try again tomorrow."

"I wouldn't crash your birthday party if it wasn't important."

Andrew grinned. "Sarcasm from Neil? Your repertoire of talents is ever-expanding."

"Two minutes," Neil said.

"So persistent."

Neil waited for Andrew to make up his mind. Andrew hummed around his cigarette as he thought. It took him almost a full minute before curiosity won out over his sheer need to be difficult. Andrew flicked his cigarette out the window, yanked the window closed, and hopped off his desk. Neil followed Andrew into the cousins' bedroom and tugged the door closed behind them. Andrew only continued a couple feet into the room before turning to face Neil.

"Tick tock," Andrew said. "You have my attention; now keep my interest."

"Nicky's mother called."

"Oops, time's up."

Neil put his arm out when Andrew stepped forward, but there was no way he could stop Andrew if Andrew really wanted to leave. Neil had seen how much Andrew pressed when the team did weights at the gym. More importantly than that, he'd seen Andrew practically pick Nicky up by his throat and move him when riled. The gesture was just a show. Andrew knew it, but he rocked to a stop anyway.

"Nicky's mother invited him home for Thanksgiving," Neil said.

"He said yes," Andrew said, not really a question. "Oh, Nicky, an optimist until the day he dies. You'd think he would know better by now, but he'll go and come back boo-hoo-hoo." Andrew mimed scrubbing away tears. "Their love has a price tag he can't pay. He won't give Erik up for them."

"They're not after Erik this time," Neil said. "They're bartering for you. Nicky can't go unless he brings you and Aaron with him."

"Problem solved." Andrew's smile was bright. "Denied. Maybe Abby will cook us a turkey instead. She did last year. She's a decent cook but can't bake to save her life. We'll have to bring a frozen pie again."

Neil refused to be distracted. "Why won't you go?"

"Why would I? Luther and I aren't friends."

"Last I checked, we're not your friends either," Neil said. "You still put up with us, so why won't you tolerate Luther? Nicky assumes it has to do with the way you met, but Luther's the one who got you out of juvie and back home with your mother, isn't he?"

"She was not my mother." Andrew waited a beat to make sure Neil understood and made a cutting gesture with his hand. "Cass, though, Cass? Cass would have been. She really wanted to be. Oh, you don't know. Here's a story for you, Neil. Listening? Cass wanted to keep me. She wanted to adopt me. Andrew Joseph Spear, she said. She collected all the paperwork but she wouldn't file without my consent. She thought I was old enough to choose."

"Spear," Neil echoed, startled. "Like—"

"Richard Spear," Andrew finished for him. "I told you all about him, yes? My last foster father."

"You mentioned him," Neil said slowly, stalling as he tried to process that bombshell. Richard Spear was the father Phil Higgins tried investigating in August. All Andrew said about him was that he was uninteresting and harmless. "What happened to make the adoption fall through, your arrest?"

"No, you have it backwards. I went to juvie because she wanted to adopt me. But she didn't give up on me. She thought a stable home could straighten me out, she said. Her biological son wanted to join the Marines after high school, so she even offered to reallocate part of his college fund to me. She wanted me to have a future. My own Stephanie Walker, of a sort."

Neil only recognized that name because he'd just talked to Renee. He nodded to show he was following. Andrew rocked onto the balls of his feet and reached for Neil. It was all Neil could do to not tense up when Andrew's hands wrapped around his neck. Andrew didn't hold tight enough to cut off his air but tapped his thumbs against Neil's throat in time to Neil's pulse.

"Luther would have let her have me if it was what I wanted. He knew Aaron's mother wanted nothing to do with me, but he wanted to make things right with me somehow. If Cass was 'right', he would fight on her behalf to get the adoption approved. Couldn't have that, could we?"

"Why not?" Neil asked, searching Andrew's expression. "What did Cass do to you?"

Andrew looked surprised. "Cass would never do anything to me."

"Then what went wrong?"

"That's a different story. This story is about Cass and Luther, isn't it? Luther said he could send me back to Cass. I gave him a secret to make sure he wouldn't."

"And he told someone," Neil guessed.

"No." Andrew tapped his fingers a little faster, an agitated rhythm completely at odds with the mocking smile on his lips. "That's too easy. These kinds of secrets are not given out lightly. You know that. We calculate collateral damage and escape routes. We plan and brace for the reaction and fallout. But Luther did not tell. He chose to not believe me at all. And that's a thousand times worse, you see."

"That depends on the secret," Neil said.

"True." Andrew let go of Neil and wheeled away. "Maybe it comes as a surprise to you, Neil, but I am not a very trusting person. If I tell a man the sky is blue and he tells me I am wrong, I am not inclined to give him a second chance. I see no reason to."

"So did Luther not believe you or did he say you were wrong?" Neil asked. "There's a significant difference between the two."

"Oh." Andrew half-turned to face him again. "Sometimes I forget you are sharper than you look."

Neil struggled with his memory, knowing the answer was right out of reach. He thought about Higgins' visit and Nicky's parents, and then Neil remembered sitting across from Andrew on a bench in the locker room to ask about Higgins' first phone call. He'd thought Andrew's parting words strange but he hadn't understood at the time. He wasn't sure he'd drawn the right conclusions now but it was worth a shot.

"He said it was a misunderstanding."

The way Andrew went so perfectly still, if only for a second, told Neil he was right.

"Shh," Andrew said, soft like he was reassuring a cornered animal. "Shh, don't say that. I hate the sound of that word. I warned you once so you'd know better than to use it again. Why would you risk it?"

"Andrew," Neil started.

"No."

Andrew didn't raise his voice, but he didn't have to for Neil to hear the warning in it. If Neil pushed the matter any further in the wrong direction Andrew would shut down and this conversation was over for good. Neil grasped at straws, looking for the right words to say to keep Andrew talking. Maybe Andrew was right and Nicky's parents would never accept him as he was, but Nicky needed to try.

"That was five years ago. Maybe he's sorry."

"You say that because you haven't met Luther," Andrew said.

"Can I?"

That was unexpected enough to get Andrew's undivided attention. "Oh? What? Neil, you wouldn't know what to do with a god-fearing minister. You can barely stand to be around Renee. There's no way you could last a sit-down with Luther. He'd end up exorcising you when you snapped."

"It could be entertaining," Neil said.

"It could be," Andrew allowed.

"Let's all go," Neil said. "Aaron will agree for Nicky's sake and Nicky can see if his parents have come around. There's no way you'll let Kevin that far out of your sights, so take him with you. I'll tag along so you can harass me instead of Luther. Imagine how uncomfortable Nicky's parents will be if they have to contend with the five of us."

"Or we could stay here."

"Not as interesting," Neil said.

"Appealing to my nonexistent attention span is a cheap trick," Andrew said.

"But is it effective?"

"You wish it was."

"Please?"

"I hate that word."

"Does your shrink know you have a grudge against half of the English language?" Neil asked, but Andrew only grinned. "I know you can't understand this because you've never had a real family, but Nicky has to give his parents another try. If you're lucky this dinner will be the breaking point. Nicky's got his hopes up thinking his mother's come around. If she lets him down again he might be ready to walk away for good."

Andrew hummed tunelessly as he thought. The longer he was silent, the surer Neil was that he'd failed. Finally Andrew reached for him again. This time he hooked his fingers in Neil's shirt collar instead of going for his throat.

"One last chance," he said. "That's all I'm going to give Nicky. But I won't spend Thanksgiving with them, and I won't play nice. Get Nicky to change the date and get your invitation. Okay?"

"Okay," Neil said.

"We're all going to regret this." Andrew let go of Neil with a smile. "Nicky most of all if his father winds up dead."

Neil hesitated, knowing he shouldn't ask, knowing he'd asked too much already. In the end he couldn't help it. "Did you really kill Aaron's mother?"

"That was a tragic accident. Didn't you read the police reports?" Andrew affected innocence but the twitch at the corner of his mouth gave him away. Andrew gave up the farce a couple seconds later and laughed. "Guess she hit him one time too many. I warned her not to lay a hand on him, but she didn't listen to me. She got what was coming to her. Does that frighten you, Neil?"

"My first memories are of people dying," Neil said. "I'm not afraid of you."

"That's why you're so interesting," Andrew said. "How aggravating."

He sounded amused, not annoyed, so Neil said, "I'll try to be more boring in the future."

"How considerate." Andrew motioned between their faces. "This is a secret given on credit, Neil. Remember it, okay? I'll ask you for something later. We're done talking today, so goodbye. Send my cowardly cousin back soon."

Andrew didn't follow when Neil left the bedroom. Neil expected to find Nicky lurking in the hall waiting for the results, but Nicky had gone into Neil's room to wait for his return. He was perched on the far end of the couch from Matt. Nicky smiled when Neil walked in but the expression didn't reach his eyes. He looked almost ill with nervous hope.

"Two questions," Neil said, crossing the room to stand in front of Nicky. "If Kevin and I promise to stay out of the way of your family business, can we tag along?" It wasn't the question Nicky expected. Surprise and confusion startled a little of the fear out of him. Neil waited for Nicky's uncertain nod before continuing. "Also, do you think your mother can change the date? Andrew refuses to see them on a major holiday."

"I guess so," Nicky said. "I'd have to call Mom back and ask but—wait. Andrew said yes? You're not serious."

Neil looked from him to Matt and back again. "That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

Nicky scrambled to his feet. "That's what I wanted, but I didn't really think you'd get it, especially not on the first try. I just knew you were my best shot at getting Andrew to listen. You're amazing, you know that?" He yanked Neil into

a fierce hug before Neil thought to dodge. "Oh, you just might be the best thing to happen to the Foxes."

"I doubt that."

"I don't." Nicky beamed as he let go of Neil. "How did you do it?"

Neil neatly excised ninety percent of the truth and said, "I asked."

"Yeah, right. Do you know what would have happened to me if I asked? Violence, Neil. Extreme and uncalled-for violence."

Neil shrugged. Nicky let it slide, maybe too happy to care how Neil won his cousin over. He dug his phone out of his pocket and gestured toward the door. "I'll call her back. Maybe we can head down next weekend. Sunday, I guess, since we'll be on a bus coming back from Florida all day Saturday. Sooner's better than later, right? I don't want to risk Andrew changing his mind."

"Good luck," Neil said.

Nicky's ear-to-ear smile was answer enough, and Nicky sailed out to make the call. Neil watched the door close behind him, then sent a questioning look at Matt. Matt was studying him with a curious intensity.

"Why are you so special?" Matt asked.

"I'm not," Neil said, confused.

"Andrew doesn't give ground to anybody. Why does he keep saying yes to you?"

"He's high," Neil said, twirling a finger near his temple. "He thinks it's funny."

Matt eyed him a bit longer, then shook his head and relaxed against the back of the couch again. Neil took the seat he'd given up earlier, and Matt turned the movie back on. They weren't much further into it when Neil's phone buzzed with a text from Nicky. Maria had agreed to the date and the extra guests. Half of the message was smiley faces and exclamation points.

Satisfaction was a quiet heat in Neil's chest, uncomfortable and unfamiliar. Neil brushed it aside, but in its wake was the cooler edge of unease. Neil was glad for Nicky, but he wasn't stupid. He was really only going so he could keep an eye on Andrew. Andrew's drugs kept him happy, but they didn't make him harmless. If Luther stepped out of line this weekend Andrew might hurt him. The courts would lock Andrew up and throw away the key, and the Foxes' season would screech to a sudden halt. Neil couldn't let that happen.

He just hoped he'd be fast enough if worse came to worst.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kevin was not at all interested in meeting Nicky's parents, but he was smart enough to know he didn't have a say in the matter. Kevin couldn't handle being alone, in part because he'd grown up attached to Riko's side and swarmed by the Ravens, and in part because he was scared to death of getting caught without protection. Luckily for all of them Kevin stopped sniping about the road trip when he realized he could get something out of it.

When Neil started playing Exy in Arizona, Coach Hernandez loaned Neil one of the school's extra racquets. It was a basic model, average net depth and with a light frame. Wymack provided Neil with two upgrades of the same model when he signed with the Foxhole Court. Light racquets were popular with strikers and most beginning players because they allowed for easier accuracy. If a striker only had a split-second to take the shot, he wanted a quick racquet he didn't have to think about.

Kevin thought light racquets were a complete waste of Neil's time. As soon as Neil passed all thirteen of Kevin's Raven drills, Kevin started talking about moving Neil to a heavy racquet. Heavies were more popular with defense, since they were all about force and speed. Few offense players bothered with them, either not wanting the extra weight when trying to outstep defense or unable to perfect their aim with such an unwieldy stick. When mastered, though, heavy racquets could be devastating.

Kevin used a heavy with the Ravens, but he'd switched to a light racquet after his injury. Riko still used one. Neil was leery of switching racquets this late in the season, since it was bound to have a serious adjustment period, but Kevin turned a deaf ear to his arguments. Months of relentless night practices and Kevin's harsh tutelage gave Neil a scary accuracy it would have taken him years to learn on his own. Now that he could aim in a hair-trigger glance, he needed a racquet that would put force behind his shots. It was time to add power to his speed, or so Kevin said.

The best place to find racquets in South Carolina was in Columbia at Exites. Larger sports stores around the state had sections for Exy gear, but Exites was the only store one hundred percent devoted to the sport. They handled everything from gear to custom uniforms to collectibles. Neil had been on their website from time to time, but seeing it in person sent a thrill down his spine. It was a four-storey shop on the far side of the capital from Eden's Twilight, and the parking lot was comfortably crowded. Neil wasn't sure what he liked more:

the thought of everything waiting for him inside those walls, or the many cars that proved Exy's popularity.

"This is stupid," Aaron said for the fourth or fifth time since they'd left campus. "We just fixed the line-up. Now you're going to screw us over again."

Kevin ignored him. He'd argued the first time Aaron protested, and he wouldn't waste his breath repeating himself. Neil was more tolerant of Aaron's frustration thanks to his own nerves, but he knew there was no changing Kevin's mind. He'd given Kevin control of his game and trusted Kevin to make the most of his potential. If Kevin thought he could handle this, Neil wouldn't let him down. It might mean working twice as hard as he had up until now, but he'd meet Kevin's expectations somehow.

"This is the best week for me to switch," Neil said as he followed Andrew out of the car. "We're up against JD on Friday. You guys can take them without any help from me."

As the Foxes rose in the rankings, JD Campbell University fell. The JD Tornados had always sat near the bottom in the southeastern district but now they held the unenviable role of last-place players. They'd won barely half their games so far this season. Kevin could outscore them with one hand behind his back. The only question was whether or not Andrew would find them interesting enough to guard his goal against. Chances were he'd be so bored by their performance he wouldn't even try.

JD was their last match in November, since next weekend they were off for Thanksgiving. There was one more game the first of December, and with that the Foxes' fall season was over. They had a week off to study for their finals, a week of exams none of them were looking forward to, and an Exy Christmas banquet December 16th. Thinking about it soured a little of Neil's good mood. It felt like he'd just met Wymack yesterday. Now the season was a blink from being over. The Foxes were guaranteed a spot in spring championships, so there'd be more games in January, but Neil couldn't bear thinking he was almost done.

He still didn't know where he was going to spend his two-week Christmas break. He was betting the cousins weren't going anywhere, since Kevin would be intolerable if they took him too far from the Foxhole Court. Hopefully Neil could stick around and get some practices in. He'd just have to figure out what excuse to give the team for not going home.

They passed a register on their way through the front door into Exites, and the cashier on duty spit out his coffee when he saw Kevin. Neil shied away from Kevin's too-recognizable face and began looking around the store. The first floor was mostly clothes, with fan material taking up the front half and workout

clothes in the back. Posters and displays showed local athletes modeling uniforms the store produced.

Neil rummaged through the fan gear for South Carolina's major teams. There were only two Class I schools in the state, Palmetto State and USC Columbia, but there were also three Class II teams and the major leagues team, the Columbia Dragons. Major leagues Exy played during the summer, saving fall and spring for the more-popular college and professional teams. Neil watched their games but didn't have any favorites. He saved all his love for the NCAA and national Court.

"Come on," Nicky said, nudging Neil and jerking his chin in Kevin's direction. "He's going to be a while."

Neil looked to see Kevin now talking to an older man with a nametag. He was dressed more professionally than the cashier, so Neil guessed he was the manager on duty. Neil glanced around in search of the security cameras. He wondered if the cashier hit a panic button to call the manager up front or if the man had seen Kevin's face on his computer screens in back. Either way the lightning-quick response made Neil's skin crawl. He nodded and followed Nicky to the stairs.

The second floor was mostly gear: court shoes, gear bags, and books. Revolving shelves with key chains, jewelry, and charms helped break up the sections. Aaron and Nicky went to investigate the bargain bins, but Andrew turned Neil to the next set of stairs.

"Quickly now," Andrew encouraged him. "Let's get this over with."

"That eager to get to Nicky's place?" Neil asked as he continued to the third floor.

"We aren't going to Nicky's place," Andrew said, shaking a head at Neil's ignorance. "It's his parents' house now, Neil. Nicky has no place there. Hasn't in years. But the sooner we are done playing around here, the sooner we can go home. Columbia is boring on Sundays. You understand, of course."

"Since I'm not affected by blue laws, it doesn't really matter to me," Neil said.

"No team spirit," Andrew mocked him. "Alas. Oh, look."

Neil didn't have to be told twice. The walls of the entire third floor were lined with racquets. Neil spent enough time looking up everything Exy on the internet that he knew how many different kinds of racquets were available. Seeing them on a website and seeing them in person were completely different experiences, and for a moment Neil stood frozen at the top of the stairs.

To the left of the stairwell was a register. The woman standing there was threading a racquet's net. She looked up at their arrival and chirped out a

greeting. Andrew waved her off without looking. Neil thought he might have answered but he was too distracted by the racquets to really pay attention. The sound of her voice got him moving, and he slowly made his way around the room.

They passed the goalkeepers' section first. Andrew kept his eyes forward but he reached out as they went and dragged his fingers over the racquets. Neil didn't miss it, but he didn't think Andrew would acknowledge it if he commented. He bit back every question he wanted to ask Andrew about his apathy and his upcoming sobriety. Curiosity helped shake him a little out of his daze, though, and he paid more attention to the signs. The racquets were arranged from heaviest to lightest, with the heavy racquets right after the goalkeepers' section.

There were fifteen choices hanging from hooks. Most of them were plain, though placards showed what designs and colors were available for each model. They were arranged by manufacturer, then by weight, length, and available net depths. Racquets had a few inches of leeway to account for players' different heights. Neil was stuck with the shortest racquets available. He had his mother to blame for that: the Hatfords had never been a tall bunch. He supposed he should be grateful he was at least taller than Andrew and Aaron were.

Still, knowing he needed a short racquet didn't help him narrow his choices much. Every racquet he picked up was an uncomfortable weight in his hands, and Neil hadn't been playing long enough to really understand the benefits of different net depths. He knew strikers tended to have deeper nets so they could carry the ball further, whereas dealers and defense had shallower nets for stealing and passing, but the incremental differences were a gray area of confusion. Neil picked up and put down every short racquet he could, stalling until Kevin showed up to tell him what to do.

"They don't feel right," he said.

"A tear for your discomfort," Andrew said, completely unsympathetic.

"And you said I have no team spirit," Neil muttered.

"Never claimed I did either." Andrew grinned and shrugged. "You're the fool who gave him your game. Reap what you sow or burn the field down, the choice is yours. Be smarter next time, would you?"

"I'm not the only one," Neil said, putting the last racquet back and looking over at Andrew. "He told me why he stayed. He told me what he promised you. So how are you any different from me if you're in it for Exy, too?"

"Oh, Neil, it's like this." Andrew leaned forward as if about to convey a secret and gestured between them. "He asks and you give—okay, okay, okay. He asks and I refuse, absolutely not. I'm waiting for him to give up. He has to walk away eventually."

"Do you really want him to? Haven't enough people walked away from you already because of your condition? He can't wait for you to be sober again. How many people can you say that about?"

"It is very self-serving excitement," Andrew said. "He wants something. He stands to gain, or so he thinks."

"So what happens if he's right? What happens if you wake up and you realize Exy really is exciting and worth your time? Will you lie just so you can keep refusing him, or will you give in and admit he's won?"

Andrew laughed. "I never took you for a dreamer. You are so strange sometimes."

"I saw the way you played against Edgar Allan," Neil said. "For a moment it looked like it meant something to you."

"Oh, Neil."

"That's not an answer."

"That wasn't a question," Andrew said. "It was a misguided accusation."

"Here's a real question: how have you survived this long when you're so violently self-destructive?"

Andrew cocked his head to one side in a question. Neil didn't know if Andrew was playing stupid to rile him or if Andrew really was oblivious. Either way it was frustrating. He wondered why no one else had caught on, or if people noticed and just didn't care enough to say it. Now that Neil saw it, though, he couldn't look past it. Anytime the Foxes mentioned Andrew's upcoming sobriety or Andrew's name popped up in write-ups on the team's performance at games, the focus was on what a danger he was. People talked about his trial and how it saved them from Andrew. No one said what they were doing to save Andrew from himself.

"You told me Cass would never hurt you and would have given you a good education, but you sabotaged your adoption. Officer Higgins came all the way here from the west coast to fix something from your past but you won't help him. You left juvie and killed Aaron's mother to protect him, but instead of fixing your relationship with him you keep him on a leash. You don't want Nicky's parents to hurt him, but you won't let him into your family either. Kevin promised to invest in you but you won't even try. So what is it? Are you afraid of your own happiness or do you honestly like being miserable all the time?"

"Neil, look," Andrew said, and pointed up at his own face. "Do I look miserable?"

Neil wanted to tear that smile off Andrew's face, but Andrew's obnoxious response wasn't entirely his fault. Neil was dealing with the smokescreen of Andrew's medication. Neither of them could change that, but knowing why

Andrew was being difficult didn't make him less frustrating to deal with. All Neil could do was keep his temper in check. If Andrew got a rise from him the conversation was over. That was what Andrew wanted, so Neil wouldn't give it to him.

"You look drugged within an inch of your life," Neil said, "and when you're not medicated you're drinking and dusting. When they finally take your medicine away, who are you going to hurt, really?"

Andrew laughed. "I'm remembering why I don't like you."

"I'm surprised you forgot."

"I didn't," Andrew said. "I just got distracted for a moment there. I told her it was a mistake to let you stay, but she didn't believe me. Now look. Oh, for once I don't even want to bother with the 'I told you so'. You ruin all my fun."

"Renee?" Neil guessed.

"Bee."

Neil's blood went cold. "What did you tell her about me?"

Andrew grinned at the look on Neil's face. "Doctor-patient confidentiality, Neil! But don't make such a scary face. I didn't tell her your sad little story. We just talked about you. Critical difference, yes? I told her you're more trouble than you're worth. She was looking forward to meeting you, but she won't tell me what she thinks of you. She can't, you see. But I know she likes you. Bee has a thing for lost causes."

"I am not a lost cause."

Denial was automatic and a waste of time. Andrew put his hand over Neil's mouth to shut him up and said, "Liar. But that's what makes you interesting. It's also what makes you dangerous. I should know better by now. Maybe I'm not as smart as I thought I was. Should I be disappointed or amused?"

The perfect retort burned Neil's tongue, but he kept quiet in case Andrew wasn't done rambling. The answer was there, right out of reach, close enough Neil could feel it, but too far for him to make sense of. Maybe Andrew felt it too, because even in his drugged haze he knew to shut up. The smile he flashed Neil mocked them both at that near-miss. He withdrew completely, leaving just the memory of his heartbeat against Neil's mouth, and spun away.

"I'll find Kevin. He's too slow."

Neil watched him go, then huffed in frustration and turned back toward the racquets.

Andrew didn't return, but Kevin showed up a minute later. He glanced over the placards and pulled down five sticks for Neil to try.

"There's a practice court upstairs," Kevin said. "Let's go."

The cashier grabbed a bucket of balls and a key and led them through the door behind the register. The fourth floor was divided into two small practice courts and a narrow walkway. The girl unlocked one of the courts, so Neil set the racquets aside and pulled on the spare gear hanging from hooks on the wall. The weighted vest provided by Exites went over his clothes and reminded him a little of the Kevlar vest his mother gave him in Europe. He shoved those thoughts aside and tugged on gloves and a helmet. Kevin set the racquets and balls inside the court while he worked, then shut Neil in alone for practice swings.

Neil thought the racquets unwieldy just holding them. Taking shots with them was worse. The racquets were four to five times heavier than the ones Wymack gave him. They sat different in his hands and dragged on their swings. Despite that, the sound the balls made as they ricocheted off the wall sent a dark curl of power through his veins. Every rebound was a small boom. Neil could only imagine what it'd sound like when he could put real speed behind his swings again. His shots would be missiles aimed at the goal, and he'd leave goalkeepers startled in his wake.

He cycled through the racquets a few times, giving himself a couple rounds to adjust and then figuring out which one felt best. They were all awkward for now, but the more he used them, the more he could guess at which ones to reject. One was just too big; he'd never get used to the feel of it. Two he scratched off after the third round. The last two he couldn't decide between, so he brought them out to Kevin. Kevin inspected them from head to butt, turning them this way and that and eyeing the slight curve of the heads.

Finally he showed one to the cashier. "We'll take this model."

Neil hung the gear up, collected balls and racquets, and waited for the girl to lock the court. They went back downstairs, and she had them stack the rejected racquets on a rack. She slid an order form across the counter to Neil. They needed to order the racquets in Palmetto colors. Exites would handle that and deliver them. Neil thought it was as easy as ticking a box and moving on, but the brand he'd gotten offered four different designs. Neil hesitated, then marked the simplest one and filled out the Foxhole Court's address.

"Do you have any in stock today?" Kevin asked while Neil wrote. "We need a plain practice stick in size three."

"We should," she said. She typed a couple commands into her computer, eyed the screen, and disappeared to the storage room. Neil was done before she returned. She scanned the racquet, then typed in the finalized numbers from Neil's form. Neil finally got a look at how much his racquets cost and almost choked on his next breath. He could get a ticket to England for the same amount.

"That can't be right," he said in French.

"If you want the best, you pay for the best," Kevin said, completely unconcerned.

"I don't need three, then," Neil said. "Tell her to put this one back."

"The colored racquets will take a week," Kevin said. "We don't have that long to waste. If Coach has a problem with the number he can take it up with me, but he should know how expensive I am by now. I will take you to the court tonight so you can warm up before tomorrow's practices."

Kevin handed over the team's p-card to pay and signed the receipt with a neat scrawl. The card and receipt went into his wallet to file with Wymack later. The practice racquet he handed to Neil. Knowing what it cost made it feel a hundred times heavier in Neil's hands. Kevin nodded at the cashier's cheerful farewell and steered Neil toward the stairs.

They found Aaron and Nicky on the ground floor. Andrew was smoking on the curb outside. Neil brought his racquet into the backseat of the car with him, not wanting such an expensive thing crammed into the trunk. Andrew had either forgotten their argument upstairs or had his attitude reset again by his medicine, because he knotted his fingers through the strings of Neil's new racquet and gave a curious tug. He said nothing, but he didn't have to. Nicky peppered Kevin with a dozen questions about the racquet as he drove them away from Exites. Neil thought it genuine curiosity at first, but the growing edge to Nicky's words was all nerves.

It wasn't far to Nicky's old house. The Hemmicks lived in a two-storey home in the suburbs of southern Columbia. Neil peered past Andrew out the window as Nicky parked at the curb. From the outside, the house looked perfect. The lawn was vibrant green and neatly trimmed, the cars in the driveway were new and clean, and the house was a pale blue with dark shutters. It looked like an ordinary middle-class home, which made the cousins' reactions all the more surreal. Not even Andrew had anything to say when Nicky killed the engine.

Nicky drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Maybe this was a mistake."

"Oh, now he says it," Andrew said, and got out of the car. "Too late."

Neil put his racquet aside and got out, but Andrew reached past him and snagged the stick as soon as Neil was out of the way. Andrew gave it an experimental twirl, judging the weight of it, then propped it against his shoulder and started for the other cars.

Nicky got out of the car like it was on fire. "Andrew, what are you doing?"

"He's got a really shiny car for a minister," Andrew said. "I'm going to humble it."

Nicky ran after him and pulled the racquet from his hands. Andrew could have held onto it, but he was seemingly more amused by the terrified look on Nicky's face. He laughed at Nicky's obvious distress and made an exaggerated gesture for Nicky to lead the way. Nicky handed the racquet to Neil.

Neil and Kevin hung back as they crossed the yard. Aaron and Andrew waited on the walkway, standing side by side for the first time Neil could remember. Nicky stood silent and still on the porch for almost a full minute before ringing the doorbell. As soon as he did he retreated to the edge of the porch to wait. Andrew flashed Neil a grin over his shoulder, and Neil only shook his head in response.

Maria Hemmick answered the door. She was taller than Neil expected her to be, but he could see the resemblance between her and Nicky in an instant. Nicky jokingly blamed her when Neil first commented on how different Nicky looked from his cousins. Andrew and Aaron were pale and light-haired, whereas Nicky inherited his Mexican mother's darker complexion. He had his mother's eyes and the same curve to his mouth. Nicky had never smiled like this, though, so polite and small it was barely welcoming.

"Why did you ring the doorbell?" she asked in lieu of hello.

"This isn't my house anymore," Nicky reminded her.

She pursed her lips but didn't argue. She stepped aside, so they moved out of the cold into the much warmer front hall. Maria closed the door behind them and turned to face her guests. Neil and Kevin were now the closest ones to her. There was no recognition in her stare when she considered them, but she nodded a greeting at them.

"You must be Kevin and Neil," she said. "I'm Maria."

Kevin put on one of his public-friendly smiles and said, "It's nice to meet you."

She looked to the twins next, but her gaze slipped past Aaron entirely. She smiled at Andrew and said, "Aaron, it's been a long time."

"Aaron," Aaron answered.

Maria looked from Andrew's smile to Aaron's guarded expression and back again. "Oh, yes, of course," she said, but she sounded uncertain.

"Andrew's been on medication for almost three years now, Mom," Nicky said, with a hint of impatience.

Andrew cleared things up for her with the brightest, most unfriendly smile his drugs allowed him. "Hello, Maria. How very, very nice to see you again, I'm sure. Very interesting, you letting us back in your house and all. I thought you were going to file a restraining order against me. What happened, did you lose your nerve?"

"Andrew," Nicky pleaded through clenched teeth.

Maria's cheeks flushed. "You can leave your coats here." A narrow door to her right was a closet with a dozen-odd spare hangers. Maria watched them hang their coats up, then beckoned for them to follow. "Right this way."

"Can't you even tell your own nephews—" Nicky started, but the rest of the question was forgotten as they stepped into the kitchen and spotted Nicky's father.

Luther Hemmick was a tall, rake-thin man with a severe face. He didn't have much hair left but he kept a pepper beard trimmed short and neat. Even across the room Neil could see the tense set to his shoulders. Luther wasn't looking forward to this reunion anymore than Nicky was. Neil hoped that Luther was uncomfortable because he intended to relax old prejudices.

Maria went straight to the stove to check on dinner, making herself busy and abandoning the conversation as quickly as she could. Luther didn't look at her but took his time inspecting his guests. His expression didn't change as he considered Neil and Kevin, and he didn't linger long on them.

Neil didn't think it his imagination that Luther stared longer at Andrew than he did his own son. It made him wonder if Luther suspected Andrew's involvement in his sister's death, and whether or not some part of Luther blamed him either way. Nicky said Andrew's release from juvie drove Tilda deeper into her depression and drugs. Maybe Luther regretted ever finding out Andrew existed.

Neil distracted himself by looking around the room, from the small crosses and biblical quotes hanging on the walls to the catalogue-perfect kitchen. The square table only had two chairs by it, but the back door was open. The screen door was closed, but Neil could see through it to a deck. A larger table was back there and already set to accommodate all of them.

"Nicky," Luther finally said. "Aaron, Andrew."

Nicky had gone mute, but Aaron said, "Hey, Uncle Luther."

Luther smiled, but it was faint. He looked at Neil and Kevin again. "I am Nicky's father. You may call me Luther. Welcome to my home."

"Thank you for having us," Kevin said.

"You can set that down in here," Luther said with a look at Neil's racquet. He waited until Neil propped it against the wall, then motioned to the back door. "Please get comfortable. Dinner will only be another minute."

Nicky took them to the back porch. It was enclosed with half walls and a thin mesh. Heat lamps were set at every corner. The mesh let some of the heat escape but also kept most of the November breeze out, so it was more comfortable out back than it was in the house.

The table had eight seats, three to each side and a seat at either end. Judging by the lacy handkerchief at one end, the Hemmicks would take the end seats and spread their guests out between them. Nicky took a middle seat on one side, keeping a chair between himself and either of his parents. Aaron sat between Nicky and Maria's chair. Kevin and Neil stuck Andrew between them on the other side where they could keep an eye on him, Neil closer to Luther and Kevin by Maria.

It took Luther and Maria three trips to bring out all the food. As soon as they were seated, they bowed their heads. Neil didn't realize what was happening until Luther started to pray. He tipped his head a little belatedly and sent Andrew a sideways glance. Andrew wasn't even pretending to pray, even if on his other side Kevin was politely playing along. Andrew had an arm hooked around the back of his chair and drummed the tines of his fork against the tabletop in awful counterpoint to Luther's words.

Luther had to be offended, but maybe he'd learned long ago not to beg respect from Andrew. When he finished, he straightened and began serving food from the closest platter. The others took that as a cue, but Neil had to wait on either Andrew or Luther to finish before he could get any food. Luther noticed his idleness and looked at him.

"Are you religious?"

"No," Neil said.

Luther gave him a minute to elaborate, but Neil gazed back in silence. Finally Luther frowned in disapproval and pressed, "Why not?"

"I'd rather not get into it," Neil said. "I don't want to start a fight."

"That's a first," Andrew said with a laugh. "You're usually so opinionated, too."

"I don't see how such a question constitutes as a fight," Luther said to Neil.

"Is that really the question you want to start with, Dad?" Nicky asked. "You don't want to ask how we've been or how we're doing at school or how the season is going? We had a game in Florida yesterday. We won, you know."

"Congratulations," Luther said automatically.

"Yeah, you sound like you mean it," Nicky said, but he sounded more sad than annoyed. An uncomfortable silence followed, but Nicky broke it with a half-hearted, "When did you repaint the kitchen?"

"Two years ago," Maria said. "The contractor goes to our church. It looks nice, doesn't it?" She waited for Nicky's quiet agreement, looked to Luther for inspiration, then said, "So what are you studying, Nicholas?"

Some small part of Neil had assumed Nicky was exaggerating how estranged his family was, but Nicky was in his sophomore year and his parents still didn't

know what he was majoring in. Neil didn't know if Maria was asking now because she was interested in getting to know her son again or if she was just trying to fill the silence. He hoped it was the former; the latter was too much to stomach. Neil's mother might have been awful and violent at times, but she was fiercely devoted to him. They were two halves of a miserable whole, inseparable co-conspirators.

"Marketing," Nicky said. "Erik's cousin works for a PR firm in Stuttgart. She thinks she can get me in after graduation if I make the right grades."

"You're going back to Germany?" Maria shot her husband a startled look.

Nicky's jaw tightened, but he looked his mother in the eye when he said, "Yes. Erik's career is there. I wouldn't ask him to leave it just for me, and I wouldn't want him to, anyway. I loved living in Germany. It's an amazing place. You should visit us sometime."

"Us," Maria said faintly. "You're still..."

She couldn't finish, so Nicky said, "Yes, we're still together. I came back to take care of Andrew and Aaron, not because things went sour with Erik. I love him, okay? I always have and I always will. When are you going to get that?"

"When will you accept that it is wrong?" Luther asked. "Homosexuality is—"

"Luther," Andrew said. That was all he said, but Luther sent him a wary glance.

"I love him," Nicky insisted. "Doesn't that mean anything to you? Why can't you be happy for us? Why can't you give him a chance?"

"We cannot condone sin," Maria said.

"You don't have to love the sin," Nicky said, "but you're supposed to forgive and love the sinner. Isn't that what faith is about?"

"Faith is following our Lord's creed," Luther said.

"But I can't be that black and white," Nicky said piteously. "I won't. Why did you call us down here if we're just going to have the same old fight again?"

Luther was unmoved by Nicky's heartbreak and said calmly, "Things have come to light recently that made us question our current situation. We have committed to repairing this family," he glanced at Maria, who nodded in happy encouragement, "but we understand it will be a long, uphill path. We brought you down here so we could decide on the first steps together."

"Enlighten us," Andrew said, leaning forward over his plate like he couldn't wait for the answer. "If the first step isn't tolerance, where does a pair of bigots begin in fixing a mess like this?"

Luther met Andrew's stare with a calm one of his own. "With reparations for past mistakes. That is why you are here."

"Oh, no," Andrew said. "I am only here because Neil whined at me until I agreed to come along. Leave me out of this."

Luther frowned. Across the table from him, Maria held up a calming hand and said, "Let's eat. This kind of conversation is too difficult on an empty stomach. We'll eat and try again, and then reward our efforts with dessert. There is pie in the oven. Apple, Nicholas. It used to be your favorite."

It was a meager peace offering considering the harsh words it interrupted, but Nicky was desperate for any glimmer of hope. He nodded and tucked into his dinner. Silence reigned over the table for a while before Aaron finally broke it. He asked about people and places Neil didn't recognize, likely people he'd known when Tilda first moved him here eight years ago. It was a neutral topic that was easy for Luther and Maria to keep up with, and it bought Nicky time to calm down.

Andrew got up toward the end of dinner and went inside. Luther pushed back his chair and followed to speak with Andrew in private. Neil heard the hum of their voices through the screen door but couldn't make out their words. He strained his ears, listening for the sounds of violence. He thought he should go play referee, but his presence would kill their conversation. Luther had said he wanted to atone for the past. If he was apologizing, Andrew needed to hear it whether he wanted to or not.

Emphasis on the not, Neil decided, because Andrew's voice was getting louder. Neil caught snatches of words, but Maria started speaking loudly to cover up the racket. Neil almost shushed her before he realized she was talking to Nicky about the season. Neil wanted to hear what Andrew was saying, but more than that he wanted Nicky to make things right with his mother. He kept quiet and kept his eyes on the back door. If Luther screamed in pain they'd hear it no matter how loud Nicky and Maria were.

Luther came back alone, looking worn and defeated but otherwise unharmed. Andrew didn't follow him. Luther took his seat again and turned his attention on Aaron. Neil waited, counting seconds and then minutes for Andrew's return. Andrew's medicine would soon throttle his temper and reset his bad mood back to apathy. Neil would wait it out, then figure out what answers he needed to trade Andrew for insight into that kitchen conversation.

Maria went inside to check the pie. She came back looking pleased. "Five minutes, I think."

Andrew still wasn't back. Neil thought for a second Andrew took the car and left them, but Neil had never seen Andrew drive while drugged. He couldn't; his medicine made him too restless and hyperaware to focus on the road. Then Neil thought of his racquet in the kitchen and Luther's expensive car in the driveway.

Everyone looked at him when he stood, so Neil said, "I'll clear the table."

"Kevin and I will help," Aaron said with a significant look at Nicky. "That'll give you guys a few minutes to talk without us."

Neil stacked plates as quickly as he could without breaking anything. Kevin had a free hand for the door, so he went in first, and Neil almost stepped on his heels in his hurry to follow. He looked for his racquet first and was relieved to find it right where he left it. On the heels of relief was confusion and alarm, because Andrew was nowhere in the kitchen.

"Neil," Nicky called as Aaron was letting the door swing closed behind him. Neil set his armload of dishes on the inside table and opened the back door. "Is Andrew, uh—" He rethought what he was going to say and switched to German. "Make sure Andrew isn't breaking anything valuable, would you?"

"That's rude, Nicholas," Maria said. "Please use a language everyone can understand."

"I'll find Andrew," Neil promised in English.

"There is no need to worry," Maria said before Neil could duck inside again. "In fact, I think it's promising he has been gone this long. He'll come back when he's finished speaking with Drake."

Neil's heart skipped a beat. "What?"

"This dinner was not originally our idea," Luther said. "One of Andrew's former foster brothers came to us for help. They parted on unfriendly terms years ago, and it's been so long since they last spoke he's afraid their relationship is irreparably damaged. It made us think of our own familial problems and we were inspired to reach out again."

Luther's voice was a buzz in Neil's head, overlaid with Higgins' insistent pleas for Andrew's help. The investigation into Richard Spear was a dead end, Higgins said. Richard wasn't the man Higgins wanted to charge. He wasn't the one the Spears' foster children were too afraid to implicate. Higgins had a new suspect in mind, but Andrew threw him out of South Carolina as soon as he heard Drake's name.

"Drake," Neil said. "Was his last name Spear? Was he Richard and Cass' son?"

Luther looked hesitant. "Andrew has spoken to you about him?"

Neil let the door slam closed behind him and bolted across the kitchen. Andrew had been gone a while. Either Drake was dead or Andrew was in serious trouble. Neil didn't know which one it was but he wasn't going to this showdown empty-handed. He was good at picking fights, but he rarely won them. That didn't mean he couldn't stack the odds in his favor. He grabbed Aaron for backup

because Aaron was closer than Kevin was and snatched his racquet on the way into the hall.

"What the hell?" Aaron asked, but Neil quieted him with a violent hiss.

He had to let go of Aaron at the stairs because he couldn't haul Aaron up behind him and hope for him to be quiet. He half-expected Aaron to leave again now that he was released, but he'd piqued Aaron's curiosity with his urgency. Neil went up the carpeted steps as quietly as he could. Aaron was near silent behind him. Neil guessed he'd spent enough time in this house to know which stairs creaked under a man's body weight.

Every door on the second floor was open except one, and Neil heard the distant thump of something hitting the wall. He tried the knob, found it locked, and darted to the next door down to see what kind of wood the doors were made of. It was plywood-overlaid fiberboard with a hollow interior, easy enough to kick through.

Aaron had a hand up to pound on the door, so Neil shoved his racquet at Aaron. Aaron grabbed hold of it instinctively. Neil took a half-second to brace himself and drove the heel of his foot into the door as close to the knob as he could. Wood splintered around his shoe and his heel almost got caught on the jagged edges when he yanked it free.

"Jesus fuck—" Aaron started, startled, but Neil gave the door another savage kick.

This time the door popped open. Neil stumbled inside. He needed two steps to get his balance back and he looked up at the fight they'd burst in on.

Drake said something. Neil didn't know what. He'd remember the words later, the angry demand to know what they were doing barging in like this. Right now Drake's voice was just a roar in Neil's ears, or maybe that sound was Neil's world crashing down around him. He didn't know.

He only had a second to take it in, but that second burned the awful details into him in a way he'd never forget. There was blood on Drake's face in jagged lines, injuries wrought by desperate fingernails. The heavy length of his body, tattooed and muscular, kept Andrew pinned to the mattress with its weight alone. An arm across the back of Andrew's neck forced his face ear-deep in a blood-splattered pillow. Drake's other hand was up at the headboard, squeezed so tight around Andrew's wrists Andrew's fingers were ghostly white and bloodless. Neil saw too much blood and too much skin. He knew what he was seeing, knew what this meant, but couldn't believe it yet. That didn't stop him from leaping at Drake.

Aaron was faster.

He barreled past Neil almost hard enough to take Neil off his feet. Drake looked like he could take any of them in a fight, even with his pants around his ankles, but he was too tangled in the sheets to get up fast enough. Aaron wasn't waiting for him to figure it out. He brought Neil's racquet up and around in an underhanded swing so hard and fast air whistled through the tight strings. The head caught Drake in his temple, crushing one eye in its socket and burying deep in his skull with a wet crunch.

Drake's blood sloshed from Aaron to the wall to the curtains pulled tightly closed over the nearby window. His body tumbled off the far side of the bed, dragging the sheets with it and hitting the ground with a meaty thud. The next crash was Neil's racquet slipping from Aaron's nerveless fingers to the floor. Neil couldn't look at him, couldn't look at Drake, couldn't look at anything or anyone but Andrew.

Andrew wore only his shirt as he lay facedown on the mattress. He was covered in blood and a hundred shadows that would darken to terrible bruises. He held onto the headboard like his hands were glued to it, and he was laughing. It was muffled through the pillow but Neil heard it; the sound of it had the entire world tilting underneath his feet. He wanted to cover his ears and block it out, but he didn't have time. The pounding of footsteps somewhere behind him said Kevin was running upstairs to investigate the commotion.

Neil dove forward and climbed onto the mattress at Andrew's side. He reached over him, snagged the edge of the sheets, and gave a fierce yank to free it from Drake's corpse. Neil only had the bloody sheet partway over Andrew's body before Kevin reached them. Neil didn't know how much Kevin saw. He couldn't look back to see Kevin's reaction, but the thud said Kevin recoiled from the sight in front of him and backed right into the doorframe.

A second later Kevin was gone again. Neil heard him race back downstairs so fast it was a miracle he didn't fall and break something. He was going to get Nicky and Luther, Neil knew. He was going to call the police. Knowing doctors would be here soon helped ease a little of the lump in Neil's throat, but his insides were still crumbling to dust.

"Hey," Neil said, or thought he said. He didn't recognize his own voice. "Andrew. Andrew, are you—"

He couldn't ask if Andrew was okay. He wasn't that cruel. He would beg Andrew to stop laughing if he could but every word he spoke threatened to set off his gag reflex. All he could do was hang on, fingers knotted in the sheet he'd gotten up to Andrew's shoulders.

"Got quiet all of a sudden," Andrew said, sounding surprised. He finally let go of the headboard and flexed his fingers as if working out a cramp. He planted

his hands against the mattress and tried pushing himself upright. Halfway there he went still and started laughing again. "Oh, oh, that's unpleasant. I am not a fan of this at all."

Neil could feel Andrew trembling through the sheet, but Andrew's body and mind were operating on two different wavelengths. Andrew's grin was wide and savage as he mocked his own pain. Neil wanted to tell him to hold still, but Andrew finally got himself upright. The sheet threatened to slip off his shoulders, so Neil wrapped it tighter around him. Andrew let him do it with a bemused look on his face. Blood was smeared and half-dried in a line down his cheek to his chin from a gash at his temple.

Andrew saw Neil's glance. "I think I'm concussed. Either that or this is a new side effect of my medication the doctors forgot to warn me about. If I throw up on you it is only half-intentional."

Neil thought he might lose the battle with his own stomach first.

The strangled noise Aaron made was his best attempt at Andrew's name. It was barely intelligible but it was enough. Andrew, who'd barely acknowledged Aaron's existence in the entire time Neil had known them, looked immediately to his brother. Andrew snaked a hand out from under the sheet and curled his fingers in a demand. Aaron clambered onto the bed and reached for Andrew. Andrew tried moving out of his way, but that was finally too much for his stomach. Neil helped push him forward when he started choking.

"Andrew," Aaron said, desperate and frightened. He held onto Andrew like he thought Andrew would disappear if he let go. "Andrew, I didn't—he—"

Andrew spat a couple times and gasped for breath. "Quiet, quiet. Quiet. Look at me," he said, but it took him a while longer before he could sit up and face Aaron again. He pressed a hand to Aaron's bloodied shirt. "It's everywhere. What did he do?"

"It's not mine," Aaron said. "It's not mine, it's—Andrew, he—"

Andrew touched Aaron's temple where he himself was injured as if he expected to find an identical injury there. "Did he touch you?"

"What did he—"

Andrew knotted his fingers in Aaron's hair and yanked to shut him up. "Answer me. I said, did he touch you?"

"No," Aaron said.

"I'm going to kill him," Andrew said.

"He's already dead," Neil said.

"That explains the silence," Andrew said, "but that's not who I meant. Look, we don't even have to go anywhere. He'll come right to us."

He meant Luther, Neil realized. There were footsteps on the stairs again, too many sets to be just Kevin. It sounded like Kevin had brought an entire army with him, but maybe some of that pounding was just Neil's heartbeat in his ears. Neil looked over his shoulder as Kevin and Nicky came through the doorway.

Nicky only needed a second to see all the blood, and he rushed for the bed with a horrified, "Oh my God."

"Don't," Neil said, holding out a hand to ward him off.

Neil didn't know if Nicky heard him or if he just realized there was no room for him to fit on the bed with them. He stopped as close to the bed as he could and reached for Andrew's face with both hands. Andrew tried tilting back out of his reach, but he was too nauseous and unsteady to move fast enough. Nicky cradled Andrew's face in his hands.

"Andrew, what happened?" Nicky asked, frantic. "Are you okay? Jesus, there's so much blood. Are you—"

"Nicky," Andrew said, "I need to talk to your father. You have two seconds to get out of the way."

How Andrew saw Luther's arrival with Nicky in his way, Neil wasn't sure, but Luther was standing frozen only a couple feet inside the bedroom door. Nicky looked from Andrew to the wrecked sheets to the bleeding body on the floor. When he saw the state Drake was in, his expression crumpled. The noise he made didn't sound human. Neil felt it like poison in his veins, but Andrew only laughed.

"One," Andrew said.

"Nicky," Neil said. "Get down."

Nicky let go and sank to his knees beside the bed. It gave Andrew an unobstructed view of Luther over his head. Andrew already knew Luther was there, but he feigned surprise at the sight of the other man. The look that washed that away a second later was almost delighted. Neil might have believed it if not for the fierce grip Andrew still had on his brother's hair.

"Oh, Luther," Andrew said. "Oh, good. You made it. Saves me the trouble of going downstairs to find you. Hey, as long as you're here, do you want to explain what Drake is doing here? I can't wait to hear it. I hope it's good."

"What in God's—" Luther started, voice hoarse.

"Oh, no," Andrew interrupted him. "No. Don't ask what. You know better. You know better," he said again, with heat. Andrew tilted forward as far as he dared. He started to sway, but Neil caught his shoulder to keep him from falling. "Looks like I was right about him after all. Or do you still think this is all a big misunderstanding? Go on, tell me again how I'm too unbalanced to understand normal brotherly affection and love. Tell me this is natural."

Nicky looked like he'd been sucker punched. Aaron's flinch was full body. Across the room Kevin was staring at Andrew like he'd seen a ghost. Andrew was oblivious to the effect his words had on any of them. He was smiling with vicious glee as he stared Luther down.

"Hey, Luther," Andrew said. "Speaking of misunderstandings, am I remembering this wrong, or didn't you promise me you would talk to Cass? You told me she wasn't going to foster any more children after me, but apparently she's had six more since I left juvie. Six, Luther. I'm no good at math but even I know that six is an awful lot higher than zero. How many do you think were in her house when Drake was home between deployments?"

"Now you let him into your house," Andrew said. "You put him under the same roof as your son, as my brother. After everything I did to keep them away from each other?" Andrew gave Aaron's hair another fierce tug, inadvertently yanking Aaron closer to him, and finally let go. "As soon as I get my balance back I am going to take you apart, Luther. This is the only warning you're going to get."

Aaron's face was white with fear and horror. "This has happened before."

He said it low, like he was afraid the words would make it real. Aaron stared at Andrew like he'd never seen Andrew before in his life. Andrew didn't bother returning the look, so Aaron finally dragged his attention to Luther's face.

"This has happened before, and you knew about it. You knew what he'd done and you brought him here anyway."

"Is that true?" Nicky asked, but he couldn't look away from Andrew to face his father.

Luther opened his mouth, then closed it again, expression bleak. Aaron only gave him a couple seconds to answer before snapping. "Get out of here," he said, and when Luther didn't move fast enough, screamed, "Get out of here!"

Andrew laughed as Luther retreated from the room. The door was too broken to close all the way, but Luther tugged it into place as best he could. Neil heard sirens in the distance. Andrew picked up on it a second later and glanced over his shoulder. He thought for a moment, then gave an expansive shrug and let go of Aaron. He peeled his armbands off one at a time and dropped them in Neil's lap.

He said something, but Neil didn't hear him. The pale shade of scarred skin was too familiar and too startling for him to not react. Neil grabbed hold of Andrew's wrist. He started to turn Andrew's arm over, sure he'd imagined things, but Andrew clamped his free hand down on Neil's forearm.

"Andrew," Neil started.

"Just so we're clear, I'll kill you."

The iron in his grip was at complete odds with the drugged smile on his face. Andrew wasn't bluffing. If Neil didn't let go fast enough Andrew would break his arm. Neil loosened his grip but spread his fingers as he did so. He felt the slight dip and bump of destroyed skin beneath his fingertips and felt his stomach drop. Andrew wrenched Neil's hand off his arm, but he did it in a way that kept his bared forearm turned toward himself.

"Get rid of those," Andrew said. "Pigs don't like it when people like me carry weapons."

Neil didn't have pockets deep enough to hide Andrew's discarded arm bands, so he leaned over and stuffed them between the box spring and the frame. He looked from Aaron to Nicky, but neither of them had noticed that exchange. Aaron was watching the door like he thought Luther might come back. Nicky was staring at Andrew's face, but his shuttered expression said he was a thousand miles away from all of this. They were Andrew's family but they were as oblivious as everyone else when it came to Andrew.

"Andrew," Neil said again.

"Do us a favor," Andrew said. "Let's no one talk for a while."

There was nothing else Neil could do but wait for the ambulance and police to arrive.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The emergency room at Richmond General Hospital was a crowded, roiling mess of resentment and sickness. The attendants at the desk tried regulating the mess as best they could, but there were too many people to be seen and nowhere near enough doctors. Neil was too far away to hear the attendants' words but he could hear their fraying patience in their tone. The strident protests and arguments of the would-be patients carried easier. Neil listened because he needed something to distract him from his thoughts.

Things had gone from bad to worse when Columbia's finest showed up at the Hemmicks' house. The first responders and paramedics arrived at almost the same time, but they were followed by two more sets of officers. Neil didn't know if they had nothing better to do on a Sunday night or if they'd come following the slip of Kevin Day's name over the police radio. Neil seriously doubted it took six cops to rule Drake's death as a justified case of self-defense. He wanted them to take statements, eyeball the obvious details of the gruesome scene, and shake Aaron's hand on their way out. The last time Neil saw Aaron, though, he was being led down the stairs in cuffs. Shortly afterward the police loaded an amused Andrew into the back of an ambulance and shipped him here.

Neil didn't know if this was sheer Fox bad luck, if he'd jinxed all of this by his very presence, or if rape and murder were always this complicated. He didn't know; he could barely think anymore. Instinct made him split up the group the only way he could. Kevin wanted to come to the hospital to wait on Andrew's release, but his face was too recognizable. The last thing any of them wanted tonight was to draw more attention to themselves. Neil sent him with Nicky to the station to wait on Aaron. He came here alone the second the police gave up getting anything out of him. He'd been here for almost forty minutes now. He was trying not to clock watch, but he couldn't help it. The crowd around him wasn't changing fast enough to be a proper distraction.

The man who walked through the sliding glass doors two minutes later was. Neil was on his feet before he knew he was moving. The sudden movement drew Wymack's attention, and Wymack stabbed a finger at the ground in front of him. Neil worked his way across the crowded room. Wymack barely waited for him to catch up before heading back outside. Neil hugged his coat tighter around himself and followed.

Wymack led him to a designated smoking section some twenty feet down the sidewalk. Neil looked at the plastic bag hanging off his elbow but forgot to ask

when Wymack pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. Neil held his hand out in silent request. Wymack arched an eyebrow at him and said, "Last I checked, you don't smoke."

"I don't," Neil said.

Wymack handed him the cigarette anyway and got another for himself. The wind was strong enough it took them work to get their cigarettes lit. Neil took a long drag to make sure the cigarette was actually burning, then cupped the glowing stick between his hands. The acrid smell of smoke, faint as it was on a night like this, should have been comforting. It wasn't.

"What are you doing here?" Neil asked.

"Kevin called me," Wymack said. "I brought Andrew some clean clothes."

Neil did the math in his head, but it didn't add up. Kevin hadn't used his phone in the bedroom, and they hadn't split up long enough ago for Wymack to make it here from Palmetto State. The only way Wymack could be standing here now was if Kevin called him when he first went downstairs to get Nicky. Knowing Kevin, Neil bet Wymack got the call before 911 did.

"They arrested Aaron," Neil said.

"I know," Wymack said.

"Why?"

"Someone died on the other end of his racquet."

"It wasn't his," Neil said. "It was mine. The police took it as evidence. Will they give it back or am I going to have to get a new one?"

Wymack exhaled smoke into the air between them. The wind ripped the cloud to shreds as quickly as it formed. Neil watched Wymack watch him, then turned his attention to his cigarette. He turned it over and over between his fingers. There was still dried blood beneath his fingernails. For a moment he thought it was his mother's, clinging stubbornly to his hands after all these years. He gave his cigarette a violent shake, dislodging those thoughts with the first clump of ash.

"Neil," Wymack said.

Neil knew that tone too well. "I'm fine."

"Give me that bullshit answer one more time and see what happens," Wymack said. "I stopped by the station on the way here and got a censored rundown of things. The police have labeled you as a hostile witness, you know. They said you wouldn't talk to them, not even to give them your name. They had to get that from Kevin."

"I'm fine," Neil said again. "I just don't like talking to cops."

"Then don't talk to them," Wymack said. "Talk to me."

"What do you want me to say?"

"The truth," Wymack said.

"No."

"Why not?"

Neil shook his head. He didn't know how to explain the fear eating a hollow knot in his chest. Something like this demanded complete honesty, and Neil had been lying since he was old enough to speak. He didn't know how to tell the truth now. If he tried, would it still be the truth, or would he poison the words by saying them aloud? Would it be instinctive to twist it? He wouldn't risk it. Andrew didn't deserve that.

"Coach, call Oakland," Neil said, because he needed to turn Wymack's questions to a safer target. "Higgins needs to know what happened tonight. You remember him?" he asked when Wymack frowned at him. "He called us at the start of the year when he was investigating Drake's father. I know he shifted the focus to Drake last month, but I don't know if he registered him as an official suspect in the system. If he didn't, the cops here won't know to notify him."

Wymack stared him down in silence for a minute, then pulled a card out of his wallet. Neil saw a glossy blue shield printed on the front and guessed it was from one of the officers handling this mess. He didn't plan on sticking around for this phone call, so he ground his cigarette out beneath one shoe.

"I'm going back inside," he said, and Wymack didn't stop him.

He went back into the emergency room to find his seat taken. There was standing room in a corner, though, so he put his back to the wall and turned his attention on the front desk again. Wymack showed up a couple minutes later, spoke briefly to the frazzled women at the desk, and handed them the plastic bag. One disappeared into the back with it, and Wymack came to wait with Neil. They said nothing else to each other but waited for Andrew to be released.

When Andrew finally stepped through the back doors, Neil half-wished they'd left him there. He was wearing the fresh clothes Wymack had brought him, but even the hooded sweatshirt couldn't hide the mess Drake made of his face. Worse than the bruises and cuts was the brilliant smile Andrew still wore. Neil saw it and wanted to be sick.

Wymack set off to intercept Andrew on his way to the door, so Neil followed after him. Andrew glanced over when he noticed their approach and laughed. "Coach, hello. I don't remember inviting you to this debacle."

"You didn't," Wymack said.

"Kevin," Andrew guessed. "A traitor to the end."

He sounded amused, not annoyed, and motioned for Wymack to lead the way. He spared Neil only the barest of glances as they followed Wymack into the night. Despite the crowd inside Wymack had gotten a decent parking spot

right around the corner of the building. Neil held back as they approached so Andrew could decide the seating arrangement. Andrew opened the passenger door but didn't get in. Instead he drummed his fingers on the door and considered his seat as if it was a great mystery.

Neil didn't understand the hesitation. Wymack did, and he said, "There's more room to stretch out in back."

"Oh, you are right," Andrew said, but he got in front anyway. Neil watched his knuckles go white on the door as he leveraged himself into the car, but it wasn't until Andrew laughed and said, "Ouch," that Neil understood how much pain Andrew was still in.

Neil got in the backseat and fastened his seatbelt with numb fingers. Wymack closed his door hard enough to shake the whole car and got the engine running. He didn't go anywhere, though, and Neil half-wondered if Wymack was going to interrogate Andrew right here in the parking lot.

Instead Wymack flicked Andrew an impatient look and an, "Any time now."

"Right, right," Andrew said. "Safety first."

Andrew yanked his buckle into place, and Wymack got them on the road. Neil expected them to head back to the station, but he started recognizing streets before long. Wymack was bringing them to the cousins' house. The thought of spending the night in Columbia was repulsive, but Neil didn't get a chance to protest. There was a car already parked in the driveway and Andrew recognized it even if Neil didn't.

"There is a really good explanation for this," Andrew said. "I can't wait to hear it."

"You know why she's here."

"I don't, Coach. This isn't her business."

"Don't even start," Wymack said as he pulled in behind the unfamiliar car. "I know you didn't honestly think you could keep this from her for long. But bringing her along tonight wasn't my idea, so don't give me that look. I didn't know Abby invited her until we were on the road."

"I hate all of you," Andrew said, too cheerfully, and he got out of the car.

Their arrival hadn't gone unnoticed, and the front door opened before they were halfway to it. It took Neil only a second to recognize Betsy Dobson in the doorway and he ground to a halt in the grass.

Andrew stopped, too, and threw out his arms as if expecting a hug. "Oh, Bee! What amazing timing. We were just talking about you. I've got other things to do right now but Neil said he would keep you company in my stead. You don't mind, do you? I didn't think you would."

"I mind," Neil said. "I have nothing to say to her."

"I'm sure you'll come up with something." Andrew grinned over his shoulder at Neil. "You always do, right? It doesn't have to be the truth, you know. Bee's not expecting honesty from you. I told her not to trust a single word you said. Or have you started playing the secrets game with her, too?"

"I said no."

Andrew turned to face him completely and stuffed his hands into the oversized front pocket of his sweatshirt. "You misunderstand," he said, with a knowing nod. "I wasn't asking, Neil. You helped create this mess. The least you could do is help clean it up. Where's your sense of responsibility?"

A knife wouldn't hurt this much. Andrew's words punched the breath out of Neil's lungs; he took a stumbling step back in a desperate bid for balance. He wanted to say this wasn't his fault, but they both knew it was. Andrew hadn't told him about Drake, but he'd said Luther betrayed his trust. Instead of listening to that, Neil sided with Nicky's hopeful grief. He hadn't invited Drake to South Carolina, but he'd delivered Andrew into his waiting arms.

Guilt was a relatively new emotion for Neil, something the Foxes were teaching him through prolonged exposure to them. Up until this point he'd felt it in uncomfortable, fleeting bursts. Now it was a fierce, all-consuming heat that made him want to cut his own stomach out. He didn't know if he was going to puke or scream. Neither one was acceptable, so he clenched his teeth as hard as he could. Meeting Andrew's eyes was almost impossible. Looking away would be unforgivable.

He reached through the acid in his chest and found the only words he could: "Where is yours?"

Andrew tipped his head to one side, feigning confusion. Maybe it wasn't an act. Maybe he didn't understand. Neil barely recognized his own voice through the gravel in it. Neil swallowed hard against his weakening gag reflex. Every breath he took cut him open on its way down but his voice sounded steady when he spoke again.

"Why didn't you tell Higgins?"

"Wouldn't have worked," Andrew said blithely. "Pig wasn't ready to hear it back then. He and Drake were friends, you see. They met when Drake went through the PAL program and hit it off somehow or other. I knew he wouldn't believe me, so I didn't waste my time trying."

"So you did nothing," Neil said. "You almost put a knife between Nicky's ribs when he flirted with me, but you didn't lift a finger to protect Cass's other children. You knew what Drake would do to them, but you didn't protect them."

"There weren't supposed to be other children," Andrew said.

"But there were," Neil reminded him, cold and fierce and awful.

Andrew laughed and pulled a hand free of his pocket. He wrapped his fingers around Neil's throat, not tight enough to cut off Neil's air but snug enough to be a warning. Neil saw Wymack shift in his peripheral vision but trusted the man to stay out of their way. Until Andrew actually hurt Neil Wymack would let them fight this out on their own terms. Neil kept his eyes on Andrew's face and pitched his voice low enough to cut Wymack and Betsy out of the conversation.

"I hope she was worth it."

Andrew tilted forward and said, "Oh, Neil. You are far too heavy to tread ice this thin."

"Is this how you stayed quiet?" Neil reached up and took hold of Andrew's wrist. He couldn't feel the scars through the cotton sleeve but he didn't need to. He knew they were there. Andrew knew what he was talking about, judging by how still he went. His smile didn't even flicker but Neil wasn't fooled. "Did you do this so you wouldn't tell her the truth about her son?"

"Maybe I did."

"What were you trying to do, outlast him?" Neil asked. "He was a graduating senior intent on enlisting, right? All you had to do was hold out until graduation and then she would adopt you. So what went wrong?"

Andrew's fingers slowly tightened until Neil couldn't breathe anymore. He refused to shake Andrew off. The tightness in his chest started as simple discomfort but spread until it felt like every bone in his chest would break beneath the pressure. Neil's control started to crumble, no matter how fiercely he clung to it, and he'd just shifted to throw Andrew back when Andrew finally loosened his grip.

Instead of letting go, Andrew slid his hand around back of Neil's neck and pulled him in close. He put his mouth at Neil's ear and lowered his voice, but Neil didn't have to see his face to know Andrew was still smiling. He could hear it.

"Drake deferred his enlistment," Andrew said. "He wanted to make the most of his last summer with his baby brother. He even asked Cass if we could invite Aaron up for a couple weeks so we could all meet. Cass left it up to me, but whenever she wasn't looking Drake tried talking me into it. He wanted to get both of us in the same place. He could imagine what we'd look like in bed together, he said. It'd be picture perfect."

Neil flinched. He'd pushed because he needed to see that horrible smile crack. He needed to know if Andrew was screaming behind the euphoria his drugs fed his veins. But Andrew wasn't, and Neil couldn't live with that. Andrew's medicine was too strong or his psychosis too twisted; either way,

tonight didn't mean anything to him. This was a setback Andrew could sidestep and ignore.

"Speaking of the other Minyard..." Andrew let go of Neil and grinned at Wymack. He raised his voice so Wymack could hear and asked, "He really did it, didn't he? Probably the most decisive thing he's ever managed. Where was that spine when his mother was beating him? It would have come in handy all those years. Someone ought to congratulate him."

"Aaron is under arrest," Betsy said. "Why don't you come inside so we can talk about it?"

Andrew turned a surprised look on her. "Are you still here, Bee?"

"For a few moments longer," Betsy said. "The milk's almost done heating. I picked some up on the way over so we could have some cocoa. I brought the entire canister of the dark chocolate hazelnut with me. If we start drinking it now, we could probably make ourselves sick off of it by midnight."

Neil couldn't believe her. Chocolate wasn't a fix-it; it wouldn't make any of this easier to stomach. Except a moment later Andrew dragged Neil's arm around where he could get a look at Neil's watch and said, "You think of everything, Bee. We'll be in soon."

Betsy nodded and went inside. When she was gone Andrew tried again to get his hand free. Neil still held fast. Andrew turned a look on him that was too amused to be exasperated.

"Better luck next time, Neil," he said. "I warned you once already, didn't I? I don't feel anything."

"Anymore," Neil said, barely a whisper.

The old scars up and down Andrew's wrists were evidence of how far Andrew had to fall to hit this point. Neil finally let go of him and let his hand fall limp to his side. Andrew gave an exaggerated shrug and spun on his heel. Neil watched him disappear through the doorway. He was aware, a second or minute or hour later, of Wymack's heavy stare on him.

"Neil," Wymack said.

"I'm fine," Neil said.

Wymack said nothing immediately, then, "Be fine inside where it's warmer."

Neil took a step forward, or meant to. The next thing he knew he was running: not at the house, but away.

He could still smell the blood on his shirt, even through his coat. He didn't know if it was his imagination, but the scent was so thick and sharp he could almost taste the metal tang of it. Every slap of his shoes on the pavement sounded like gunshots. He blinked and saw France, saw Greece, saw that long layover in Lebanon and short trip through Dubai. He remembered the rumbling

waves of the Pacific Ocean and his mother's fingers clawing at the air as she struggled for one last breath.

Guilt, grief, and pain were corrosive toxins in his veins, tearing him apart from the inside out. He let them, made them, because these memories were awful but they were things that made sense. That aching loss was all he knew and understood. If he lost sight of them all he had was the unfamiliar cruelty he'd witnessed tonight. He didn't know how to face this yet. He didn't know how to compartmentalize it into something he could tolerate. Maybe he'd figure it out tomorrow. Maybe he'd carry it with him until the Moriyamas killed him. Neil didn't know. He didn't want to know.

He ran until he couldn't breathe, but he never stopped hurting.

By the time he made it back the house was silent and dark. Neil didn't know how the others had divvied up the three bedrooms and he didn't want to see anyone else tonight. Luckily the living room was unoccupied. He eased the coffee table off to one side so he'd have enough room to stretch out and, having nothing to change into, only kicked his shoes off before curling up on the couch. He was half-sure his thoughts would keep him up all night, but exhaustion dragged him under before long.

The bang of a cabinet door warned him he wasn't alone. Neil startled awake and reached instinctively for his duffel bag. His wild grab came back empty, and his stomach bottomed out in the second it took his mind to wake up. He sat up on the couch and willed his heartbeat out of its frantic gallop. Neil scrubbed at his eyes, tired despite that adrenaline burst, and went to investigate the noise.

The kitchen light was off, but the dim florescent bulb over the stove was on. Wymack was fussing over the coffeemaker. If Wymack was up, it was half past four in the morning. Neil learned Wymack's morning schedule the hard way from a month on Wymack's couch. Apparently death wasn't enough cause to shake the routine.

Wymack finished setting up the grinds and set the coffee to brew. As he turned around he spotted Neil in the doorway. Neil waited for him to say something about how Neil ran out last night, but all Wymack said was, "Did you get any sleep?"

Neil didn't know what time he'd gotten back, so he said, "A couple hours, I think."

"If you can get more, do it," Wymack said. "It's going to be a long day, and I need everyone awake and coherent before Waterhouse gets here." At Neil's curious look, Wymack explained, "Andrew's lawyer. We're hoping he'll take Aaron's case. It should be an easy win for him."

"They shouldn't have arrested him."

"They're doing their jobs," Wymack said. "A man died last night, and until they have everything they need they have to hold him. Your testimony could speed the process up, you know. You're the only one besides Andrew and Aaron who was in that room when Drake died, and since Andrew won't talk either—"

"Has Luther confessed?"

"To what?"

"To setting them up," Neil said, heated. "He put Drake in that house knowing what Drake had done to Andrew the last time they were together. If he and Aaron both told the truth and the officers had working sets of eyes to see what that room looked like, they don't need anything else. If they're bogging things down because Andrew's history makes them prejudiced they should give the case to more objective people and stop wasting our time."

"Neil."

"Did you call the Oakland PD?" Neil asked.

"I don't have their number anymore," Wymack said. "I asked the locals to call them. I'll try to get in touch with Officer Higgins today to see if he's heard anything. Now stop stalling and go back to bed."

"I'm fine."

It was out before he could stop it. Wymack didn't have to say anything. The look on his face said enough. Neil fixed his stare on the coffeepot and tried not to fidget. Wymack turned away after what felt like a century and poured what little had brewed into his mug. He plucked it off the counter and started for the doorway. Neil stepped back into the hallway so Wymack could pass, but Wymack stopped in front of him.

"Neil," Wymack said, "between you and me, I don't think you've ever been fine."

Neil didn't have an answer for that, but he didn't need one. Wymack continued his routine by stepping out into the frigid morning for a walk. Neil watched the front door close behind him, then went back to the couch to wait. The longer he sat there, the more his thoughts started to fuzz at the edges as tiredness crept back in. Finally Neil sank onto his side once more and dozed off. He woke up briefly when Wymack returned but slipped under for a couple more hours' rest.

The next time Neil woke, it was to heavy footsteps on the stairs and Andrew's cheery voice. Neil missed the first half of the conversation, but he gathered from the rest that Andrew was explaining the dire breakfast situation in the house. They hadn't expected to stay in Columbia overnight, so the only groceries they had were the milk and cocoa powder Betsy supplied.

Neil rolled off the couch and went to the doorway. Andrew looked as wired and ready for the day as always. He was dressed in a heavy black turtleneck Neil didn't recognize, presumably a shirt he hadn't packed when he moved to the campus dormitory. The sleeves were too long on him, hanging almost to his knuckles, and easily hid his scarred arms. He couldn't hide the multicolored mess Drake made of his face, though. Drake hadn't won that fight easily.

Neil wasn't the only one who stirred at the noise Andrew was making. The others were drawn like moths to a poisonous flame. The twins' rooms were upstairs on opposite ends of the hall. Nicky's bedroom was downstairs past the stairwell, the room Neil had woken up in his first night in Columbia. That door was open now, and Nicky and Kevin stood in the doorway with Betsy behind them. Betsy didn't look rested, but she at least looked calm. Nicky and Kevin looked like the night had beat them up and left them for dead.

Abby was trying for a brave face as she followed Andrew downstairs, but Neil saw the strain in her smile. Andrew chattered on like he didn't notice. Neil knew he did; Andrew's drugs made him manic, not stupid. Andrew was enjoying making Abby squirm. Andrew lost his train of thought when he spotted Neil in the doorway, though, and he stopped at the base of the stairs to point.

"Oh, Neil is back. We thought perhaps you got lost."

"I'm never lost," Neil said.

"And never found," Andrew added with a sage nod. "All for the best, I'm sure. But good timing either way. This solves all our problems. Right, Bee?" Andrew looked over his shoulder down the hall and waggled a hand at her in come-hither. She gently eased Kevin and Nicky aside to get through. Andrew grinned at her approach and pointed at Neil again. "He knows where we left the car, and you know where the store is. Try to pick him up some clothes on the way back, would you? He's going to start smelling if we leave him too long."

"Did you want anything in particular for breakfast?" Betsy asked.

"No special requests," Andrew said. "You can ask the ghosts back there, but I don't think they have much of an opinion today. Maybe you're losing your touch, Bee. Oh, but here. Neil is going to need this."

Andrew patted at his pockets, searching, and found what he was looking for on the third try. Neil only saw a flash of it before Betsy took it. Betsy only made it a step in Neil's direction before Andrew snagged her shirt to stop her.

"Exites," Andrew said. "Kevin has the card."

Betsy went back down the hall to get the team's purchasing card from Kevin. Andrew clapped his hands at Neil to get his attention. "Don't forget my knives, okay? I'm going to want them. Goodbye."

Andrew tapped two fingers to his bruised temple in salute and headed into the kitchen. Betsy made it all the way to Neil's side before Neil realized he'd been volunteered to run errands with her. He started to protest, but the words stuck in his throat. Andrew's late-night accusation about Neil's hand in all this was still a fresh wound Neil wasn't ready to press. Neil sent a last look at Nicky and Kevin, then turned after Betsy and followed her into the cold.

Betsy had a GPS attached to her windshield where she could easily see the small screen. As soon as the device picked up the appropriate satellite she pressed a couple buttons and watched directions load. A somber British voice instructed her to head east. Betsy turned the volume down until it was barely audible and backed out of the driveway. Neil stared out the window and aimed to be invisible. The ruse didn't last long.

"David asked me to speak with you," Betsy said. "I know the setting isn't exactly conventional, but please know any conversation we have today will be accorded the same privacy and respect as a formal office visit."

"What is there to talk about?" Neil asked. "If I were you I'd be more concerned with Nicky. He came down here thinking he was going to fix his family, but now his entire family's fallen apart."

"He is lucky to have a friend like you worrying about him."

"I'm not his friend," Neil said. "I'm his teammate."

"Are you not his, or he not yours?" Betsy asked, and when Neil just looked at her, said, "They are distinctly different matters and it is possible to have one without the other. I'm sorry if I'm making assumptions, but it seems to me that he views you as a friend." When Neil didn't immediately respond, she said, "What about the rest of the team? Are they your friends?"

"What do I need friends for?" Neil asked. "I came here to play. That's what Coach's contract asked of me, so that's what I'm going to do. Is this really what you want to talk about?"

"I want to talk about last night, but I also want to talk about you. I want to make sure you have a support network that can get you through the next few weeks. If you don't want to talk about the latter, we can focus on the former. Can you tell me what happened?"

"How many times do you want to hear that story?" Neil asked. "I'm sure you got it from Nicky and Kevin. Coach probably told you what the police said. Maybe you even got answers from Andrew. I have nothing to add."

"Could you at least tell me why you brought a racquet into that room?"

"Do you own a gun?" Neil asked, and when Betsy shook her head, said, "Imagine you did. One night you wake up because you hear someone moving around in your house. You have the right to confront them and, not knowing

whether or not they're armed, are smart enough to bring your gun with you. If he attacks you and you fire on him, the police will call it justified self-defense. I don't have a gun, but I had a racquet."

"I understand what you're getting at, but no one else suspected Andrew was in any trouble," Betsy said. It wasn't really a question, so Neil didn't answer. When they stopped at the next red light, Betsy considered Neil in silence. Only when the light turned green again did she say, "There is a fine line between self-defense and premeditated murder here, Neil. Why did you bring the racquet upstairs?"

At length Neil grudgingly said, "I knew who Drake was."

"How? Did Andrew tell you about him?"

"He told me parts of the story, not enough," Neil said. "I knew the Oakland police were investigating the Spears and I knew Cass's son was a Marine. I can't take on a Marine in a fair fight. That's why I grabbed my racquet." Neil stared out the window and wished the conversation was already over. "I gave it to Aaron so I could break down the door, and I didn't have time to take it back."

"You stormed the room," Betsy said. "What did you see?"

"Drake attacking Andrew," Neil said. It was the truth, but it felt like a lie as it rolled off his tongue. Three words were a pathetic description of what he'd walked in on. "I was off-balance from kicking in the door, so Aaron was faster than I was. He caught Drake right here." He touched his head where his racquet had shattered Drake's skull. "It was a heavy, so it only took one hit. If Andrew gave you the p-card, that means the police are keeping my racquet, aren't they?"

"Would you want it back?" Betsy asked.

"Do you have any idea how much it cost?" Neil asked. "Yes, I want it back."

"It wouldn't bother you that it was used as a murder weapon?"

"It didn't kill anyone important."

"Interesting," Betsy said, but she didn't elaborate until she'd pulled into a department store parking lot. This early on a workday, it was easy to get a spot near the door. She took the key from the ignition, turned off her GPS, and looked at Neil. "Drake's crimes aside, he met a violent end only a few feet from you. It would be natural and completely understandable if you felt some sort of shock or grief."

The smart thing to do was lie, but every time Neil blinked he saw Andrew's white-knuckled grip on the headboard. He could still hear Andrew's laughter, muffled by the pillow. If he could reach inside his head and claw the memory out he would, but he couldn't. All he could do was lash out at Betsy. She wasn't the shrink who'd put Andrew on this medication two and a half years ago but she was the only one close enough to hit.

"I don't," Neil said flatly. "And you know what? Neither does Andrew."

He wanted her to defend herself. He wanted to see her try to justify any of this. His father's temper was hot in his veins, raging for an outlet. The only response he got, though, was a calm, "Did you ask him?"

"Did I ask him?" Neil repeated, disbelieving. "He said he can't feel. You saw him smiling last night. Did you hear him—" Neil gave a vicious jerk of his hand, willing himself to shut up before he said too much, and levered himself out of the car. He slammed the door behind himself, but of course Betsy was getting out on the other side. Neil attempted to cut her off with, "We're not talking about this."

"You can't choke back on everything forever," Betsy said. "You need an outlet, whether it's with me or David or your teammates."

"I don't need anyone."

"Would you at least like one of us to contact your parents?"

"No," Neil said, and started for the door.

Betsy followed but didn't push it, and they split up inside. Neil was the only one browsing the clothing aisles at this time of day, but an ancient woman was already keeping watch at the changing room. She paused in sorting out returns long enough to unlock one of the stalls for Neil. He listened for the lock to catch behind him, then shrugged out of his coat. He went still with both hands on his shirt when he saw his reflection.

Drake's blood looked almost black where it'd dried in splashes on his shirt. Neil thought it was Drake's blood, anyway. It could have just as easily been Andrew's. For a moment it smelled fresh: sharp and hot and sour.

A few months ago Wymack called them to say Seth was dead of an overdose. Neil told Andrew that night he didn't understand the drive behind suicide. Andrew shrugged off his interpretation of it. That casual dismissal masked a deeper understanding. Andrew said Seth's self-destructive behavior was Seth's only way out. Neil hadn't understood then because he always had a way out. There was always a back door to slip out, a bus to catch, a ferry to ride. It might be awful and terrifying, but it still gave him dim hope for survival. He couldn't imagine life without that comfort.

Neil turned one hand over to see his unmarred wrist. His body bore countless scars from his life on the run, but none of them were self-inflicted. Neil dragged his blunt fingernails down his arm, watched pale red lines bloom on his skin, and forcibly redirected his attention back to the task at hand.

It didn't take long to find an outfit that fit. Finding Betsy turned out to be harder, and he kept his distance from her while she finished picking out groceries. Her basket was full enough Neil knew she was shopping for more than

one meal. He almost asked how long she intended on staying in Columbia, but he didn't want to open up another conversation. He still had to deal with her for the next leg of the trip.

Betsy said nothing when they got in the car again, though, and took them to Exites. Neil went in alone with the team's p-card and bought a new practice stick. The price wasn't any easier to stomach today. Neil signed the receipt, stuffed his copy in his pocket with a mental note to apologize to Wymack for being so expensive, and brought the racquet out to the car. That left just one stop on their list.

After his childhood home in Baltimore, the Hemmicks' house was the last place in the world Neil wanted to be. Andrew's car was still parked at the curb, and Betsy pulled up behind it. She offered Neil a key, but Neil made no move to take it. His brain connected the pieces but refused to accept the final picture. Andrew wouldn't even let Aaron and Kevin drive his car.

"You do have a license, don't you?" Betsy asked.

Neil had a couple, but none had his current name on it. "Yes."

"Do you know the way back or will you follow?"

"You go ahead," Neil said, taking the key at last. "I have to get Andrew's knives."

"I'll wait here," Betsy said.

It was the answer Neil expected, if not the one he wanted, and he didn't waste time arguing with her. He crossed the lawn to the front door and pressed the doorbell. It took three tries before he finally heard movement on the other side of the door. Maria opened the door just wide enough for Neil to see half of her face. Neil didn't know if guilt made her defensive or if she expected some sort of violent retribution, but he didn't have the energy to deal with her stonewalling him. He hooked a hand around the door so she couldn't slam it without breaking his fingers and wedged his shoe into the crack as far as he could.

"Let me in," Neil said. "We left something here yesterday."

"I will get it for you," Maria said. "Tell me where to find it."

"In the bed you made for your own nephew," Neil said.

Maria flinched so hard she almost yanked the door shut. Before Neil had to fight his way in she let go of the knob and backed out of his way. She retreated well out of reach and wrapped her arms tight around her middle like she could squeeze herself into nothingness. Neil strode past her and went upstairs. Luther was nowhere in sight. Neil hoped he was behind bars somewhere.

He'd broken the bedroom door last night, and the arrival of techs and emergency workers had only worsened the damage. The door was ajar by several inches this morning, but someone had thought to tape a blanket to the

doorframe like a makeshift curtain. Neil yanked it down so Luther and Maria would have to fix it again and tossed it off to one side. The door groaned when he pushed it open, and he flicked on the light.

Neil wasn't a stranger to death and he wasn't fazed by the sight of blood, but one glimpse at the rumpled bed gave him pause. The sheets were gone, but the mattress was stained a blackish red where Drake had bled. The paint and window curtains were still splattered in places. Neil looked at the headboard like he'd see Andrew's fingerprints engraved in the wood and swallowed hard against a dizzying nausea. He breathed through his mouth as he crossed the room to the bed.

The mattress was askew from all the rough handling last night, but the box spring looked untouched. Neil hooked his hands under it and lifted it off the frame. Andrew's bands were right where Neil left them, balancing on the wooden slats. He picked them up and let the box spring fall. He managed one step back, then stopped to look at the mess again. He wasn't sure how long he stood there staring at the blood before he realized what he was doing. He had to go before Betsy came looking for him. He didn't want Betsy to see this; he didn't want her to start asking questions. Neil didn't have any answers. All he had was anger and regret.

He took the stairs down as quickly as he could without tripping. Maria wasn't in the hall, and Neil left the front door wide open behind him. He passed between the cars so Betsy could see the bands he carried and went to the driver's side door of Andrew's car. He got the lock undone, climbed in, and slammed the door behind him harder than he should have. He knew Betsy was waiting for him to make the first move so he adjusted the seat and mirrors as quickly as he could. He slid the key into the ignition, but his hand seized up before he could turn it.

Neil learned to drive in Europe when he was thirteen, but he'd never driven alone before. It'd always been him and his mother taking turns as they spent long nights on the road. Since her death he'd hitchhiked, walked, and gotten well-acquainted with the follies of American public transportation. Now here he was alone with the road stretched out before him and the steering wheel creaking under his clenched fingers.

He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth, trying not to smell blood and saltwater. Neil checked the other seats like he expected to find blood on them and twisted the key in the ignition almost hard enough to snap it.

Neil pulled away from the curb and led the way back to Andrew's house. He'd never driven in Columbia before, and this was only his second time at the Hemmicks' house, but he'd paid attention on the drive over. He still had to think

about it, but the bumper-to-bumper traffic gave him plenty of time to figure it out. He was grateful for the distraction. If he was reversing turns in his head, he wasn't thinking about bloodied mattresses and Andrew's inappropriate cheer.

An unfamiliar car was parked behind Wymack's. Neil assumed it was Waterhouse getting an early start on his day and his new case. Neil pulled into the driveway and let Betsy park behind him. Betsy looked like she could handle the groceries, so Neil grabbed his own things and got the door. He checked the living room first, found it empty, and continued to the kitchen. Abby and Wymack were sitting at the table.

Neil gave Wymack the receipt and card. "I can pay you back for one of them."

"I look like I need your money, wise guy?" Wymack asked.

The rustling of plastic bags heralded Betsy's arrival. The room felt a thousand times smaller with all three of them in there. Neil took a couple steps back from the table to give himself breathing room and asked, "The lawyer is here?"

"They both are," Wymack said, and looked to Betsy. "You mind explaining that?"

Betsy nodded but asked, "Where are Nicky and Kevin?"

"Nicky tried to hug Andrew and almost got himself staked with a kitchen knife," Wymack said. "Kevin was smart enough to get him out of here. Last I saw either of them, they were shut in Nicky's bedroom."

"Is he hurt?"

"David was right there, thank God," Abby said. "If he'd been a second slower..."

Betsy looked to Neil. "Do you mind checking on them? I just need a minute with David and Abby."

Neil put his racquet aside and went down the hall to change. His bloodied clothes went in the empty plastic bag and he buried them at the bottom of the bathroom trash can. He looked clean when he glanced at his reflection, but he still felt dirty. Neil checked his fingernails for blood, then leaned in close to the mirror and checked his roots. The latest round of dye was still holding up.

He had his hand on the knob when he heard Abby's startled outburst. He couldn't understand her words from this distance, but he understood the incredulous anger just fine. He put an ear to the door, but she was quick to lower her voice again.

Neil turned the knob as quietly as he could and eased the door open. He held his breath, waiting for the door to creak and give him away, but nothing came. As soon as he could fit he sneaked into the hall. Nicky's room was close enough

that Nicky and Kevin would have heard Abby's outrage, but Nicky's door stayed closed. There was no sound from upstairs, either. Neil took a few silent steps toward the kitchen.

It was obvious Abby was trying to keep her voice down, but her strident tone helped her words carry. "—kind of trauma with another is not going to solve anything. It'll only make things worse. I understand what you're getting at, but this isn't the way."

"This is the only ethical solution," Betsy said.

"You can't—"

"She can," Wymack said, cutting Abby off. Abby made a strangled noise as if she couldn't believe Wymack was siding against her. The kitchen went quiet for a tense moment before Wymack spoke again. "If you're sure this is the best option, I'm not going to stop you. I trust you to do what's right by my kids."

"I'm sorry," Betsy said. "I know what this means for your season."

"You worry about Andrew," Wymack said. "I'll worry about my season."

"Andrew won't agree to this," Abby said, a last-ditch effort to change their minds. "Going means leaving Kevin behind. They haven't had more than a campus between them since Andrew took Kevin under his wing. He's not going to change things now, especially not with Riko in our district."

"Andrew doesn't have to agree," Wymack said. "It's Betsy's call."

Neil had heard enough. He stepped into the kitchen doorway. Betsy had taken a seat at the table. Abby and Wymack were so focused on her they didn't notice Neil's arrival, but Betsy was facing the doorway and glanced up at his entrance. She didn't look at all surprised to find him eavesdropping on them.

"Where are you taking him?" Neil asked.

Abby jumped and flicked a guilty look his way. "Neil, I didn't hear you come in."

Neil ignored her and insisted, "Where are you taking him?"

"Easthaven Hospital," Betsy said. "I'm going to take Andrew off his medicine."

Neil felt the floor tilt beneath his feet. "What?"

"It's not official just yet," Betsy said. "I need Mr. Blackwell to sign off on it. He was the prosecuting attorney at Andrew's trial. He's here now with Mr. Waterhouse to evaluate the situation. I strongly doubt he'll contest this, so we should be able to commit Andrew to Easthaven by this afternoon."

"Commit him as in lock him up," Neil said.

"When Dr. Ellerby and Mr. Waterhouse wrote up the original agreement they did it in a way that would garner the least resistance from the prosecution. One of the terms Andrew agreed to was twenty-four-hour supervision during his

rehabilitation. Easthaven is one of the best hospitals in the state. He will be in good hands."

"But for how long?"

"Up in the air," Wymack said. "Andrew was scheduled for rehab in May so he'd be out of classes. It'll take time to get the drugs out of his system. Once his head's cleared the staff has to figure out the next step in his treatment, whether it's ongoing counseling or some new type of happy pill. Take Andrew's complete inability to cooperate into account and we're looking at maybe four, five weeks."

"If we get him back by New Year's it'll be a miracle," Abby said, with a hint of her former frustration. "You're forcing him through withdrawal and recovery at the same time."

"It's both or neither," Betsy said. "You know that."

"Do it," Neil said when Abby started to argue again.

His breathless command had all three of them looking at him, but Neil had eyes only for Betsy. He'd wanted to hurt her in the car for reinforcing the awful rules of Andrew's medicine. She hadn't defended herself because she knew she didn't need to. She knew just like he did how cruel it was to keep Andrew on his drugs, and she'd already reached out to the people who could help him.

Betsy's smile was small and approving. "I promise I'll try. Wish us luck?" She plucked a new chocolate bar off the counter and led Wymack and Abby upstairs.

Neil didn't really believe in luck, but he watched them go and hoped for it anyway.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nicky's bedroom door was unlocked, so Neil let himself in without knocking. Nicky and Kevin were on Andrew's bed, but they weren't speaking to each other. Kevin sat rigid and silent at the foot of the bed and Nicky was stretched out on his back down the middle. Neil looked from one haggard face to the other, then set his racquet off to one side and closed the door. Kevin's stare went immediately to the racquet. Nicky didn't notice, too busy staring at the ceiling.

Neil sat on the bed between them. It was pointless to ask if Nicky was all right; anyone with eyes could see he wasn't. The best he came up with was an insubstantial, "Hey."

"We shouldn't have come here," Nicky said, sounding as wretched as he looked. "I should have listened all those times Andrew told me to give up on them. If I had we wouldn't be here right now. Andrew wouldn't—" Nicky closed his eyes and sucked in a deep, unsteady breath. "What have I done?"

"You didn't do anything," Neil said. He searched for words, but the ones he found weren't his. They were Wymack's, shared with Neil to ease Neil's guilt over Seth's death. "You didn't know this was going to happen. None of us did. If we'd known, we wouldn't have come."

"Betsy said that, too, but do you really believe it?" Nicky asked. "Can you? We knew Andrew didn't want to come but we made him anyway. I should have just trusted him. I should have known it was something big if he could hold a grudge through all those drugs."

"This is your father's fault," Neil said. "He set Andrew up."

"With alcohol," Nicky said, with a broken laugh. "He told me and the police last night. He talked to Andrew knowing it was going to end with an argument. He promised Andrew alcohol as a peace offering. Drake's idea, see? Dad just had to tell Andrew the bottle was upstairs, and Drake and Andrew would have all the privacy they needed to 'work on their issues'." A savage edge crept into Nicky's voice as he mocked his father's words.

"There was no bottle," Neil guessed.

"There was. That's what Drake hit Andrew with. Son of a bitch." Nicky's face crumpled and he rolled onto his side to present Neil with his back. "I need to call Erik. I haven't told him yet. I don't know where to start."

"We'll give you space," Neil said, and eased off the bed.

Nicky didn't answer, but Neil wasn't waiting. He went back down the hall to the kitchen and was only a little surprised that Kevin followed. Kevin seized the

back of a table chair and stared into the distance. Neil waited to see if he'd say anything, then set about looking for their breakfast.

Betsy bought enough groceries for breakfast and lunch, nothing more. Either she was feeling optimistic or they really were going to be back on campus tonight. Neil hoped someone thought to call the registrar's office about their absence from class. Wymack must have called the other Foxes, too. Neil wondered if Wymack told them the entire story or if he just canceled practices for the day and promised an explanation for later. Matt knew they'd come down here to see Nicky's parents, which meant the girls knew. Likely they thought Andrew's violent streak had gotten the better of him in the reunion.

"We researched him," Kevin said at last, voice thick with some unknown emotion. It wasn't grief and wasn't quite guilt. "We looked before we offered him a spot on the line. We didn't see anything about this. No one knew."

"He didn't want anyone to," Neil said, unloading the breakfast groceries onto the counter. He was a passable cook at best, but luckily Betsy had gone for basic comfort food: biscuits, bacon, eggs, and two bulk-sized bags of cheese. Even Neil could handle that.

"But you knew."

"I knew Oakland PD was investigating," Neil said. "I didn't know why. But it doesn't make sense that Drake would come here. Higgins was here a month ago. Why wait so long, and why risk it? The police can track a cross-country plane ticket easy."

Kevin only shook his head, so Neil turned back to breakfast. He'd only finished a couple strips of bacon before a door banged open upstairs. Neil hurriedly moved the bacon off the pan and onto some paper towels. Thumping footsteps on the stairs were too quick and light to belong to any of the staff, but they weren't alone for long. It sounded like Andrew was bringing an entire crowd down with him.

"Kevin," Andrew called from out of sight.

Kevin nearly knocked the chair over in his hurry to answer. Neil watched from the doorway as Andrew stopped almost right up against Kevin. Andrew pat Kevin down for imaginary injuries and Kevin stood motionless until he was done. Neil looked from them to Betsy, who came to a rest at the base of the stairs. Wymack was on the stairs with two strangers behind him, and Abby was out of sight. Neil guessed she didn't want to be a part of this anymore.

"Still in one piece," Andrew said with a satisfied nod. "For how much longer, I wonder? This is a bad idea, Bee. You know that as well as I do."

"What's wrong?" Kevin asked.

"Oh, but you haven't heard." Andrew motioned for Kevin to lean closer but didn't lower his voice. "Time's up, off we go. She's going to get rid of this for us." He dragged a thumb across his manic smile and laughed. "Someone should warn the doctors what they're in for! They'll lock the door and throw away the keys by the time I'm done with them."

"Get rid of that," Kevin echoed, but it only took him a moment to catch on. He fixed Betsy with a stunned look. "It's too early. What do you think you're doing?"

"The right thing," Betsy said.

Andrew spun back toward Betsy, delighted by Kevin's reaction. "Look at that face, Bee. He wants me sober more than almost anyone does, but only if the timing's right. I warned you, didn't I? Who will take care of Kevin if I'm gone? I can't trust him wandering around here by himself, and Coach can't be with him all the time. Kevin's kind of a full-time job."

"We'll take care of it," Wymack said.

"Oh, come on, Coach," Andrew said. "You've got to do better than that. Try again; I'll wait here while you think of something more convincing to say."

"I'll watch him," Neil said.

Kevin turned to stare at him, and Andrew pushed Kevin out of the way so he could see Neil better. Neil had startled the smile off Andrew's face with that, but it was back in a heartbeat.

"You?" Andrew asked. That was all he said, but that one word said enough.

Neil didn't respond, content to wait Andrew out. It didn't take long. Andrew took a couple quick steps his direction and shoved Neil as hard as he could. Neil knew it was coming and tried to brace for it, but he still stumbled back a couple steps. One of the strangers started to speak, likely trying to call Andrew to order. Neil saw Wymack move in the corner of his eye, maybe waving the intervention off as unnecessary, but he didn't dare take his eyes off Andrew to check. When Andrew pushed him again Neil caught hold of his arms and pulled Andrew with him.

"Oh, Neil," Andrew said, and switched into German. "You and I both know you have a dreadful sense of humor, so this can't be a joke. What do you think you're saying? What are you trying to do?"

"Take responsibility," Neil said in German.

"Usually such a good liar," Andrew said, "but this time you aren't fooling anyone. Am I to believe you'll hold your ground if Riko comes at you? Maybe I'll come back and you won't be here anymore."

"If I was going to leave I would have done so at the banquet when Riko called me by my name," Neil said. "I won't lie and say I didn't think about it, but

I decided to stay. I trusted you more than I was scared of him. So trust me now if you can. I'm not going anywhere. I'll take care of Kevin until you return."

"Trust you." Andrew enunciated each word like he'd never heard them before. He laughed curled his fingers tight around Neil's chin. "You lie, and lie, and lie, and you think I'll trust you with his life?"

"Then don't trust 'Neil'," Neil said. "Trust me."

"Oh, but who are you? Do you have a name?"

"If you need one, call me Abram."

"Should I believe that?"

"I'm named after my father," Neil said. "Abram is my middle name; it's the name my mother used when she was trying to protect me from his work." It was the name he went by at his little league practices so the coach would actually let him play. It was strange hearing it aloud when no one had called Neil "Abram" in eight years. "Ask Kevin if you don't believe me. He would know."

"Maybe I will."

Neil waited, but Andrew didn't let go. With so many people watching them Neil couldn't lift his shirt. He did the next best thing and dragged one of Andrew's hands under the hem. He pressed Andrew's palm to the ugly scarring across his abdomen. Andrew's eyes dropped to Neil's shirt like he could see Neil's marred skin through the dark cotton.

"Do you understand?" Neil asked. "Nothing Riko does will make me leave him. We will both be here when you get back."

Andrew's fingers twitched against Neil's skin. "Someone lied to me. These ouches feel a little rough for a child on the run."

"The story I gave you was mostly true," Neil said. "I might have left out some critical details, but I know you're not really surprised by that. If we survive this year and you're still interested, you can ask me for them later. I think it's your turn in our secrets game, anyway."

Andrew pulled free and folded his arms over his chest. He drummed the fingers of one hand on his bicep as he thought. Finally he laughed and turned away. He went back to Kevin's side and grinned up at Kevin. Instead of asking about Neil's name, he said in English, "It'll have to do, won't it?"

Kevin looked like he'd swallowed a rock, but Andrew wasn't waiting for his answer. "Bee, I'll see if Nicky is still breathing. Then we can go, right? The sooner we start, the sooner we can get this mess over with."

"You could wait for Aaron," one of the lawyers said. Neil guessed that meant he was Waterhouse, the twin's attorney. "I'm on my way to get him now."

"No time for that," Andrew said. "He can take a number and wait."

He sailed down the hall to Nicky's bedroom. Betsy watched the door close behind him, then sent Neil a considering look. Neil looked at Kevin so he wouldn't look at her. Kevin was staring hard at Wymack as if waiting for Wymack to put an end to this. Wymack ignored him and saw the lawyers out.

"Aaron?" Neil asked when Wymack came back alone.

"Waterhouse thinks he can get Aaron released until trial on his recognizance," Wymack said. "Matt's mother offered to wire money for his bond if necessary. Waterhouse tried to meet with Aaron last night and let him know, but Aaron wouldn't see him. Hopefully hearing about all of this," he jerked his chin as if to indicate Andrew's upcoming departure, "will get him moving, but who knows when it comes to those two? Speaking of unpredictable assholes, when did that happen?"

"When did what?" Neil asked.

Wymack eyed him. "Forget it."

"I can't believe you're sending Andrew away," Kevin said, a little sharply.

"Technically I'm not," Wymack said. "Betsy is. And it doesn't really matter what you believe, because it's already settled."

"What about the season?" Kevin asked. "What about Riko?"

"What about Andrew? Attempt to think about someone and something else for just a moment there." Wymack waited a beat to make sure that accusation sunk in. "I know you're scared, but he needs this, Kevin. He's not any good to you until he gets his shit sorted, and he can't sort a damn thing when he's buzzing three miles off the ground. You know that."

Betsy waited a moment to see if Kevin would speak, then said, "I don't know how long it will take to get Andrew checked in, David. It's probably best if you don't wait for me."

"We could," Wymack said, but Betsy only shook her head. A door opening down the hall distracted Wymack and he scowled as Andrew returned. "When you said you were going to see if he was bleeding I assumed you were going to take time to explain this to him."

"You know what they say about people who assume, Coach." Andrew grinned and stuffed his hands into his jeans pockets. "He's not bleeding, so I told him I'd be back later and we could talk about it then. It's technically the truth, yes? Let Neil deal with the fallout if Nicky doesn't like it. Bee, we're going."

Wymack let them get all the way to the door before calling, "Andrew. Don't leave me alone with these morons for too long. I'm getting too old to deal with their drama."

"Oh, you and me both," Andrew said.

Betsy closed the door behind them. Neil could just make out the sound of her engine starting, and then it was quiet. Andrew was gone.

The silence that descended on the house was almost suffocating, but it didn't last long. Wymack dug his cigarettes out of his pocket and shook a stick into his hand. He had it halfway to his mouth before he paused and looked at Neil. When he held it out in offering, Neil didn't hesitate to take it. Wymack let him use the lighter first. Neil passed the cigarette from hand to hand, trying to scatter the thin trail of smoke as best he could.

"Look," Wymack said. "I know I've always told you all to take your personal problems up with Betsy or Abby. I've said it's not my place to get into anything outside the court. I hope you've figured out by now I'm just blowing hot air. I'm not real good at being a shoulder, but I do have a working set of ears."

"There's nothing to say," Neil said.

"Maybe not right now," Wymack said, "but that offer doesn't expire. Figure out what you two need to cope with this and let us know. We'll sit down with everyone tomorrow to see how to proceed from here, but you don't have to wait until then to speak up. That said, I have some calls I need to make. Are you good in here for a while?"

When Kevin said nothing, Neil said, "Yes, Coach."

Wymack went outside to make his calls in the cold. Neil looked at Kevin's bleak expression and debated checking on Nicky. He didn't have the energy to deal with Nicky's reaction, so he went to the kitchen instead. He set the cigarette down on the edge of the counter and went back to making breakfast. He got a few more rounds of bacon done before Kevin joined him and sat at the table.

"Riko is going to tear us apart," Kevin said.

"Maybe," Neil said.

Nicky showed up as Neil was taking the last strips off the pan. He looked in at them but left without a word. Neil listened to him move up and down the hall and guessed Nicky was looking for Andrew. He knew he was right when Nicky went upstairs. Nicky came back down again almost immediately with Abby not far behind him. He lingered in the doorway, phone still clenched in one fist like he'd forgotten he was carrying it, and looked from Kevin to Neil.

"Where is he?"

"Betsy committed him," Abby said. "She's taking him off his medicine."

"Oh, thank God," Nicky said, voice ragged.

The look on Abby's face said she still wasn't comfortable with this plan, but she wisely kept silent. Nicky trudged across the room and sank into one of the empty chairs. He dropped his phone on the table and buried his face in his hands. Abby slid into the seat beside him and wound an arm around his shoulders.

Nicky leaned against her but said nothing else. Abby rested her cheek against his hair and looked over Nicky's head at Neil. Neil turned away and tackled the eggs.

Wymack showed up a couple minutes later, and the five sat down to the most uncomfortable breakfast Neil had ever suffered through. Wymack's phone beeped at least thirty times in the time it took him to finish his food. Wymack read every message as it came in but didn't respond to any of them. Neil half-expected Abby to say something about the noise, but she let it slide like she didn't notice.

The hours between breakfast and Aaron's arrival felt like years, but finally Waterhouse showed up with Aaron in tow. The two of them sat down with Wymack and Betsy to discuss the parameters of Aaron's release. Neil, Nicky, and Kevin listened from out of sight in the hallway. Aaron was theirs until the trial, but this was a long way from being over. Waterhouse would maintain contact with him and send over any documents he needed signed, and Aaron would need to alert Waterhouse anytime he left the state, but other than that Waterhouse was optimistic.

When the couches creaked at the end of the meeting, Nicky and Kevin scattered. Neil stayed where he was until Wymack and Waterhouse passed, then stepped into the doorway to look in at Aaron. Abby was sitting on the couch by Aaron, but the gap between their bodies was telling. Aaron was leaning forward with his arms folded over his knees and his stare on the floor.

"Aaron," Abby said carefully, like she wasn't sure of the reaction.

"Go away," Aaron said.

Abby got up and left. She reached for Neil as if to turn Neil out into the hallway ahead of her, but Neil evaded her questing hand and went to Aaron. Abby waited, likely expecting Neil to get kicked out as well. When Aaron said nothing about Neil's presence, Neil looked at Abby. She shook her head and left them in peace. Neil watched to make sure she'd gone, then crouched to get a better look at Aaron's face.

"He's already gone, isn't he?" Aaron said.

"Yes," Neil said. "They tried to make him stay, but he wanted to be gone before you got back. He didn't want to talk to you."

"There's a change of pace." Aaron's mocking tone fell flat.

"Are you at all sorry?" Neil asked. "You took his family away from him."

If looks could kill, the one Aaron shot Neil should have flayed the skin from his bones. "That man was not his family."

"Technically, he was only a couple signatures away from being Andrew's legal brother. I didn't mean him, anyway. I meant Drake's parents, Cass and

Richard Spear," Neil said. "They were going to keep Andrew. Drake was an inconvenience Andrew was willing to live with in exchange."

"An inconvenience," Aaron echoed as he surged to his feet. "You fucking—"

"And now Drake is dead," Neil said. "Do you think Cass will ever forgive Andrew? It doesn't matter what Drake did to him. She won't be able to look at Andrew without knowing her son is dead because of him."

"I don't care." Aaron gave a savage jerk of his hand. "I don't care if Andrew never speaks to me again. I don't care about Cass or Drake or anyone. What Drake did—no. If I could bring him back from the dead and kill him again I would."

"Good," Neil said quietly. "So now you understand why Andrew killed your mother."

It was not at all what Aaron was expecting. He was so angry it took a couple seconds for the words to really register, and then he recoiled from Neil. "Why he—what? That isn't the same. He didn't do that for me."

"He told me he did," Neil said. "I didn't even have to ask him. He warned her to stop hitting you and she wouldn't. He had no choice but to get rid of her. Just like last night, right? Drake was hurting Andrew, and you made him stop."

"Except I lied," Neil said, getting to his feet. "Unlike you, he's not angry that you interfered. I just said that because I needed you to understand."

"You don't know anything," Aaron said.

"I know you've got a couple weeks to think about it," Neil said. "When Andrew comes back sober you're going to have to talk about this. You won't get anywhere if you start with Drake, so you might as well start with your mother. Now let's get out of this city."

They hadn't brought much with them, so there was nothing to pack except the scant remaining groceries. Neil waited on the porch while Nicky locked and checked the door, then said, "I can drive if you want to sit in back with Aaron."

"Andrew doesn't let," Nicky started, but stopped, belatedly remembering Andrew had given Neil his car key. Nicky still had to think about it, but a glance in Aaron's direction sealed things. "Yeah. Thanks."

Neil had the car key on his key ring by the time he crossed the yard. He unlocked the doors for the others and loaded his racquet into the trunk. Wymack and Abby were standing to either side of Wymack's car, waiting for the Foxes to get settled. Neil wordlessly got into the driver's seat and pulled the door closed. That was the cue they needed, apparently, because Wymack and Abby got into their car and started the engine. Neil pulled away from the house first, and Nicky offered subdued directions from the backseat until they were on the interstate. Then he went silent, and no one else spoke.

It was only an hour to campus, but it was one of the longest drives of Neil's life. He watched Wymack's car disappear from the rearview mirror outside of campus and continued onto Perimeter Road. He expected to feel some sort of relief when he spotted Fox Tower in the distance, but the dorm was where the others were. Neil didn't think he had the energy to deal with his teammates today. He was tempted to park and go for a run, but he'd promised Andrew he would stick with Kevin. That meant following Kevin and the cousins inside and upstairs.

Wymack or Abby must have called ahead, because the upperclassmen were waiting in the hallway when they got off the elevator on the third floor. Neil was a little surprised to see them there, considering how rocky things had always been between them and the twins, but even Allison was present. She looked more uncomfortable than broken up, but that was still more than he expected. He wasn't the only one caught off-guard, it seemed, because when he stopped to let the others go ahead of him they went still as well.

The two groups stared each other down in silence for a minute, neither faction quite sure how to proceed, and then Matt stepped to one side. Neil hadn't realized Katelyn was standing with them, as she'd been neatly hidden behind Matt's much-taller body. She looked as uncertain as she did agonized, as if she wasn't sure of her reception. She needn't have worried, because Aaron nearly pushed Nicky out of his way when he saw her.

As soon as he started for her, Katelyn ran down the hall to meet him. She threw her arms around him and pulled him close. Aaron held onto her like she was the only thing keeping him upright and let her pull his face into her shoulder. Neil heard her voice, but not what she was saying. It was muffled where she'd pressed her face to Aaron's neck and shirt. Aaron didn't answer, but Katelyn didn't let go.

Renee came down the hall next and gave Nicky a short, tight hug. "How are you?"

Nicky shook his head wordlessly. Renee wound an arm around his waist and propped herself against his side for support. She looked to Kevin next, but Kevin was looking at Aaron and Katelyn. She left him alone and looked at Neil. Her gaze was quick to drop from his face to the racquet he'd carried up from the car. From the way her stare lingered, Neil knew Wymack had told the upperclassmen what Aaron used to bash Drake's skull in.

"We should get out of the hall before people start heading to dinner," Neil said so she wouldn't say anything to him. "Nicky and Aaron don't need to deal with a crowd tonight."

Renee nodded and guided Nicky down the hall. She touched Katelyn's shoulder on her way by in a silent beckon to follow but didn't stop to wait on them. Dan and Matt went into the girls' room at their approach, but Allison waited in the hall with her hands on her hips. She studied her younger teammates' faces as they passed but said nothing to them. Neil paused in the doorway to check on Aaron. Katelyn was pulling him after her, so Neil went inside.

Allison was the last one in and she locked the door behind them. Neil stood off to one side in the living room so she could get past and watched everyone get settled. The coffee table was covered with liquor bottles and clean glasses. Dan poured drinks and Matt passed them out. When Matt held one out to Nicky, Nicky caught hold of Matt's wrist instead.

"Thank you," Nicky said, quiet but fervent. "I don't know why you did it, but—thanks."

"Mom said she still owed you guys," Matt said. "Coach wouldn't take her money when she offered it last year, so she figured this was just as good."

If Matt's mother thought posting Aaron's bail was an appropriate response to the cousins drugging Matt with speedballs, she had to be as dysfunctional as the Foxes themselves. Neil was grateful for her financial support, but he idly hoped he would never have to meet her.

Neil was the only one left standing. Dan glanced at him, seemed to realize he wasn't going to budge from the doorway anytime soon, and got on with it. "Look, I know we have our differences, and I know we haven't exactly had the easiest ride. But we're all Foxes. We're a team. What happens to one of us happens to all of us, and we're going to get each other through this. If there's anything you guys need, just let us know. Whether it's space, a drink, an ear—whatever. We're with you a hundred percent."

If it wasn't so terrible, it'd be brilliant. This was what Dan and Matt had been waiting for all semester: a catalyst to finally unite the team. Neil wanted to be proud of her for seizing the moment like this, except she sounded so sincere he doubted she realized what she was doing.

"I don't know if Coach told you, but it's all over the news." Matt looked from Nicky to Aaron. "People have been asking us about it."

"Looking for gossip," Aaron said, thick with derision.

"It's human nature," Allison said. "Might as well give them what they want."

"Fuck you."

"Enough," Dan said, with a warning look at Allison.

It was too late, because Aaron was already getting up again. Dan looked ready to protest, except Aaron still held fast to Katelyn's hand. Aaron might not

want their help, but he was smart enough to know he needed someone right now. The two left without a second glance back, and Katelyn tugged the door firmly closed behind them. Neil locked it in their wake and went back to the living room doorway. Nicky looked almost sick to his stomach as he stared at the drink in his hands. Kevin was staring at the far wall like it had all the answers.

Renee invited herself to the space Aaron had just abandoned and propped her shoulder against Nicky's. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I spent last night talking to Betsy and this morning talking to Erik," Nicky said. "I don't think I can talk about it anymore right now. But—later, maybe. Yes."

"Kevin?" Dan asked.

"She shouldn't have taken Andrew away," Kevin said in a low voice.

Nicky shot him appalled look. "You don't really think that."

"You've always been the biggest critic of his drugs," Dan said. "What changed?"

"The timing," Neil said. "There are two games left this season and we're pretty much a shoo-in for spring championships. If the ERC decides Andrew isn't part of our line-up anymore, we're beneath size regulations. They'll strike us from the roster and our year is over. You can bet Riko will be the first one we hear from if that happens. Kevin's afraid."

"Screw the season," Nicky said heatedly. "I'm sorry, but Andrew's my cousin, and I'll take him over championships any day. If Betsy actually left him on his medicine after what just happened I'd—" He couldn't make himself finish, but he gave an emphatic jerk of his hand.

"As if you feel any differently," Kevin sent Neil.

Neil fixed Kevin with a stony look. "Maybe if you'd stuck around a moment longer you'd understand why I don't care anymore. When you came upstairs, did you hear him laughing, Kevin? He was," he said, ignoring the way Nicky flinched and the quick look Dan shot Matt, "before Drake even hit the ground. So yes, even I would give up this season. And after everything he's done and every risk he's taken for you, you'd better feel the same."

"It's not that simple," Kevin started.

"Then simplify it," Neil cut in.

Kevin went quiet. A minute later, he started drinking in earnest. The others were quick to join him. Renee and Neil kept watch while their teammates tried to drink themselves blind over the next few hours. They had dinner delivered to the dorm even though none of them had much of an appetite. The deliveryman called Renee's phone when he made it to the front desk and Neil went downstairs with her to collect the bags. There were athletes coming and going in the lobby,

and Neil didn't miss the way conversations died when the Foxes were spotted. Luckily no one was stupid enough to bother them.

Renee waited until they were on the elevator again before asking, "And you, Neil? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Neil said, and Renee didn't push it.

Dinner took some of the edge off their teammates' drunkenness, but not for long. Neil watched as they passed out one at a time. He expected the girls to retire to their bedroom, but only Allison got up and left. Dan fell asleep curled against Matt on the couch, and Renee nodded off on the floor with Nicky and Kevin. Neil listened to their breathing even out, the last man standing, and finally went to the door. He sat in one of the corners there so he could have a wall at his back and still keep an eye on everyone. It wasn't exactly comfortable, sleeping with his knees hugged to his chest, but he buried his face in his arms and willed himself to stop thinking for the night.

Morning practices usually started at six at the campus gym for weights and cardio, but Wymack pushed it back to ten and called his team to the stadium instead. Neil drove because Nicky was in bad shape. Despite the few hours of extra rest, most of the Foxes had had enough to drink last night that they still looked bleary-eyed where they sat around the locker room. Aaron was conspicuously absent, but no one was surprised and Wymack didn't comment. Neil hadn't seen Aaron in the cousins' room that morning and assumed he was holed up with Katelyn somewhere.

"Let's talk about the season," Wymack said, because it was his job to keep them moving no matter what tragedy tried to set them back. "I spent most of yesterday talking to the Class I coaches about our situation, starting with Coach Rhemann."

Neil dimly recognized the name, but he was too tired to place it. The way the others perked up told him the man was important. Kevin, in particular, looked supremely interested to hear what came next.

"I've got a conference call with the ERC this afternoon to determine our status," Wymack said. "I don't know which way they're going to swing. Andrew's still enrolled as a student at Palmetto State. Easthaven and the registrar's office agreed this morning to let him finish the semester long-distance. That means he's still contracted with us, so we're within regs."

"This is a bit more drastic than having him benched with an injury, though. An injury is treatable and calculable. Andrew's current treatment isn't that black-and-white. But," Wymack continued, "Rhemann has taken our side. He offered to speak on our behalf if need be, and he's helped reach out to the others."

Neil finally recognized the name. James Rhemann was the head coach for the USC Trojans, one of the Big Three in NCAA Exy. USC didn't have Edgar Allan's flawless record, but the Trojans were known for their sportsmanship. They'd won the Day Spirit Award seven years straight and had yet to receive a single red-card: an impossible feat considering their long history and their ranking. It made sense Wymack would turn to them for help first.

"As of this morning, the vote across the Class I teams is almost unanimous," Wymack said. "They want us to finish the season."

"They—what?" Dan almost choked on it. "Why? They've never supported us before."

"Does it matter?" Matt asked. "If they'll fight the ERC for us, I'll take it."

"Maybe they're mocking us," Allison said. "We've knocked down too many teams in the southeast this year. They want us to play so we fail at last. They want to see us put back in our place. More fool them. We've still got Renee, and that's all we need."

"It's not a guarantee," Wymack said, holding up a hand to calm them. "The ERC has to listen, but they don't have to accept. I just wanted you to know there's still a chance for us. That means we have to bring it today like the news is already good, get me? So change out and get down to the court. I want one lap for every time you've ever said the NCAA's never had your back."

"Oh, Jesus," Nicky said. "We'll be running all day."

"Better get started, then," Wymack said. "Move out, maggots."

Despite that breezy command, Wymack stopped them after they'd run three miles' worth. They stretched out as a group, changed into their gear, and hit the court for drills. Wymack pushed hard until noon, then gave control to Dan and went to take the ERC's call. Knowing he was upstairs arguing for their right to finish the season was more than a little distracting, but Dan kept them moving so they couldn't dwell on it.

Wymack was gone for almost an hour. He banged on the court door when he made it back, signaling a stop to practice. Instead of waiting for them to leave the court, he joined them on it. The Foxes stood frozen, afraid to move, almost afraid to breathe. Wymack's poker face did nothing to help them.

Wymack stopped by Dan and beckoned his team over. Neil joined the huddle around him, stomach in his shoes. He'd meant what he told Kevin yesterday. He didn't want the season to end prematurely, and he definitely didn't want to miss out on championships, but committing Andrew was the right thing to do.

"Be here at six o'clock tomorrow morning," Wymack said. "We've got a game to win Friday."

Dan screamed and jumped him, and the other Foxes were quick to pile on. Neil could barely make out Wymack's indignant sputtering. Neil looked over at Kevin, who was hanging back like he didn't quite believe it. It didn't take Kevin long to notice the attention, and he glanced Neil's way. He looked like he was about to say something, but Nicky pounced on Neil and broke their staredown. Neil gave up on Kevin—for now—and let his teammates sweep him up into their celebration.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

On Wednesday morning Aaron showed up at practice. He didn't say a word to anyone, not even Wymack or Nicky, but he was there. He was at the dorm on time for the ride to afternoon practice as well, so Nicky made Neil drive again. It didn't help anything, since he and Aaron didn't speak to one another in the backseat, but Nicky seemed to expect that cold shoulder. That afternoon was when the upperclassmen finally noticed who was driving Andrew's car, and Matt was quick to ask about it.

"Nicky needs more time with Aaron," Neil said.

"When Andrew finds out you've stolen his car," Matt started, but left the rest of the threat unspoken.

"Andrew knows," Neil said. "He left me his key."

Matt stared at him, startled. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. When Neil frowned at him, Matt only shook his head. Neil let it go. That night he asked Matt to teach him how to fight. Matt looked surprised by the request but agreed, and they spent the rest of the evening figuring out when they could possibly meet up for lessons. Exy practices took up most of their free time and Neil had late night sessions with Kevin still. Luckily their schedules lined up twice a week between classes. Matt promised to get Neil a pair of gloves the next time he went out.

Thursday was almost an exact repeat of Wednesday, except when they went to the dining hall for dinner Katelyn joined them. Maybe Aaron warned Nicky ahead of time, because Nicky didn't so much as blink when she showed up with a tray. Kevin's reaction was a little more obvious, but he looked more calculating than disapproving. Katelyn seemed nervous at first, but she warmed up quickly and chatted almost nonstop through dinner. She was so enthusiastic about apparently everything in the world it was a little exhausting listening to her, but Aaron looked so alive in her presence Neil couldn't hold it against her.

Friday was the game. It should have been an easy win, but Andrew's absence and Neil's new racquet tilted the odds a little in JD's favor. The Foxes still won by a six-point margin, bumping their season record to eleven-two, and Katelyn was waiting for Aaron when he stepped off the court.

Maybe their embrace was what inspired Dan, because as soon as the Foxes were in the foyer she said, "We should celebrate."

Nicky didn't even hesitate. "Only if there're drinks involved."

The silence that followed was telling: Dan had said it, but she hadn't honestly expected the cousins to take her up on it. Fortunately for everyone, Renee was quick to rally. "We've got a couple bottles in our room. I think most of them are half-empty, but there should be enough to go around."

Aaron looked at Renee like she'd grown three heads. "We don't socialize with you."

"You do tonight," Matt said. "Tell Katelyn to come."

"She's probably going out with her friends tonight," Aaron said. "We're not —"

"The Vixens can come too," Dan said. When Allison shot her an incredulous look, Dan only shrugged. "What? I've been here for four years and I probably only know five of them by name. That's kind of sad, considering they've stuck by us this whole time. I don't know if we can fit the entire squad in our room, but..."

"The basement study rooms are big enough," Renee suggested when Dan trailed off. "I doubt anyone will be down there on a Friday night, so we can make as much noise as we like. You'll invite them, won't you, Aaron?"

"No," Aaron said, like he couldn't believe they were still talking about it.

"Okay, seriously," Matt said. "What do you have against us? Andrew I sort of understand. You, I can't figure out. What have we ever done to you?"

"Besides pay your bail," Nicky supplied helpfully. "Aaron, we're going."

Aaron opened his mouth, closed it again, and fixed Nicky with an annoyed look. "You're explaining this to Andrew when he gets back."

"Oh, hell no," Nicky said, and jerked a thumb at Neil. "I'mma leave that one to him. Thanks for taking one for the team, Neil. You're a real friend." Nicky grinned over at Neil, but his amusement didn't last. He seemed confused by whatever he saw on Neil's face and backpedaled with, "Don't worry, we'll send Renee along with you for backup. Last I checked Andrew only wins half their fights, so you might actually survive. Uh. Neil?"

He should just let it go, or at least leave it to think about later, but Neil couldn't resist. "Are we?" he asked, because hadn't Betsy said it just a few days ago? He hadn't understood it then and hadn't even tried, too angry and upset over everything else that was happening. Tonight it almost meant something, though what, Neil didn't know. Realizing Nicky couldn't follow his twisting train of thought, Neil forced himself to say, "Friends?"

It was like that one word punched all the joy out of Nicky, but the look that crossed Nicky's face next was too fast for Neil to decipher. Nicky's smile was back a second later, but it didn't reach his eyes. Neil might have apologized, except Nicky reached out and scrubbed a gloved hand through Neil's hair.

"You are going to be the absolute death of me," Nicky said. "Yeah, kid. We're friends. You're stuck with us, like it or not."

"If that's been settled," Wymack said from the doorway, "get your asses to the showers. You're dripping sweat all over my floor, you stink, and I have better things to do tonight than watch you powwow."

"Yes, Coach."

The Foxes split up to the changing rooms, but Neil carried the conversation with him to the shower. He stood under the spray and stared at his upturned palms. He wondered what it meant; he wondered if it could mean anything to someone like him. He had Riko right in front of him, his father's ghost behind him, and six months before Nathaniel laid "Neil Josten" to rest for good. Having friends wouldn't change anything.

But would it really hurt?

He didn't know. There was only one way to find out.

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Thanksgiving came and went. Matt went home to his mother, Dan went to see her stage sisters, and Allison went with Renee. The upperclassmen asked Neil only once if he was going home for the holidays. They didn't ask why he was staying, and Neil didn't waste time coming up with a lie. He spent the five-day weekend at Fox Tower with Nicky, Kevin, and Aaron. They spent half the time on the court and the other half lazing about the dorm room.

Thanksgiving was spent at Abby's house. Wymack showed up, of course, and they spent the morning drinking coffee and watching the parade on TV. As soon as it was over it was time to get to work. Abby divvied chores up between all of her guests and put Wymack to work in the kitchen with her.

Dinner was ready mid-afternoon. When Nicky asked Neil what his favorite dish was, Neil could have lied and referenced any of the stereotypical foods he knew were associated with Thanksgiving. Instead he practiced a little bit of honesty and admitted he'd never celebrated Thanksgiving before. Holidays weren't a priority in his family. Nicky, of course, reacted like it was the most tragic thing he'd ever heard.

Neil didn't understand the appeal. When Nicky saw his unimpressed face, he said, "It's not really about the food. It's about family. Not necessarily the one we were born with, but the one we chose. This one," Nicky emphasized, gesturing between them. "The people we trust to be part of our lives. The people we care about."

"I'm trying to eat here," Wymack said.

"Coach doesn't have a sentimental bone in his body," Nicky told Neil. "I don't know what Abby sees in him. He must be really good in—"

"Another word and you're on dish duty," Abby said, and Nicky wisely shut up.

In the end clean-up was a group effort, since they'd pretty much destroyed Abby's kitchen in an attempt to make all the requisite dishes. Afterward they collapsed anywhere they fit in the den. Neil didn't think he'd eat again for at least a month, but somehow the others had room for wine. Nicky, who'd never seen Neil willingly imbibe alcohol, was still optimistic enough to offer Neil his glass.

"Even on a holiday?" Nicky asked when Neil refused.

"He's underage," Abby said.

"So are Aaron and Kevin, but you're not stopping them," Nicky pointed out.

"I'm not encouraging them, either," Abby said.

Kevin had watched the exchange where he was sitting against the entertainment center. When Nicky sighed and subsided, Kevin spoke up in French. "I will watch you. If you want to drink tonight," he added when Neil looked at him. "I won't let you say something you'll regret."

"You'll be drunk inside an hour," Neil said. "Then who'll stop me?"

Kevin gave him a cool look. "I would stop drinking."

"Rude," Nicky said, sitting up and looking between them. "What did you just say? I can't understand you. That's not fair."

"Think about that the next time you use German at my practices," Wymack said.

"That's different," Nicky complained. "I only see that look on Neil's face when someone tries to do something nice for him, but we all know Kevin's as bratty as they come. What did you say, Kevin, and do I need to defend Neil's honor or what?"

Kevin didn't waste his breath responding. Neil answered, but he meant the words more for Kevin than he did Nicky: "I'm fine. Thank you, though."

Kevin accepted that with a shrug and went back to drinking. Nicky looked between them again, realized he wasn't going to get an explanation, and subsided with a put-upon sigh. The room sank into comfortable silence. When they left Neil was almost too sleepy to drive, but he got them back to the dorm in one piece. Nicky tried to get Neil to stay with them, since they had an open bunk in their room and he didn't want Neil alone on a holiday, but Neil went back to his room alone.

The suite felt too big with only him in it. He figured his perspective was skewed after spending all day with so many people. Luckily he was too tired to dwell on it. He fell asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Monday heralded the last week of their Exy season. The Foxes returned from their holiday break refreshed and ready to end the year on a triumphant note. They brought an almost savage energy to practices and burned themselves out against each other. Neil expected them to split up afterward and spend the evenings in their separate groups. Somehow they all ended up at the dining hall at the same time. Neil didn't know who orchestrated it. He didn't really care, because even though Aaron balked at the sight of the upperclassmen he didn't argue.

On Tuesday Katelyn tagged along, and on Wednesday they went downtown together as a large group: all eight remaining Foxes and four of the Vixens. There weren't a lot of places in the area that could accommodate a group that size, but their favorite local restaurant offered six-person booths across the aisle from each other. The cheerleaders were willing to split up two and two, but the Foxes' own seating arrangement was harder to figure out. The obvious solution was to follow the usual divide: upperclassmen in one booth and the cousins' lot in another.

Instead Neil and Kevin ended up with Allison and Renee, and Matt and Dan sat across the aisle with Aaron and Nicky. It wouldn't have been a problem, except somehow a cheerleader ended up between Kevin and Neil. Neil recognized Marissa from the night they played JD Campbell. He didn't remember much else about her, except that she was Katelyn's roommate, but judging by the brilliant smile on her face that was good enough for her.

Neil regretted talking to her almost immediately, because she hounded him the rest of dinner. Neil had grown up making small talk with a thousand strangers all over the world, but he was long out of practice. He spent all of his time with the Foxes now, and they'd outgrown those shallow conversations months ago. If Marissa would at least talk about Exy Neil could stomach it, but she bounced between every other possible topic in the world. Neil had taken the outside seat on the bench but he still felt trapped. Leaving the restaurant after dinner was such a relief it left Neil a little lightheaded.

The downtown shopping area was a long street branching off Perimeter Road near the Green. The Vixens had to cross the Green back to their on-campus dormitories, whereas the Foxes could follow the sidewalk down Perimeter toward Fox Tower. They stopped at the crosswalk to say their goodbyes and Katelyn made sure to give Aaron a kiss goodnight. Neil wasn't interested in watching, but when he turned away he found Marissa in his path again.

"I can give you my number," Marissa said.

Neil didn't remember asking for it at any point that night. "What for?"

It wasn't the response she was expecting, judging by the way her smile twitched. She was quick to rally, though, and she laid a hand on his arm. "I would like to get to know you better. I think we could have a lot of fun together, just the two of us. You're very interesting, Neil."

She wasn't the first to say that, but Neil wondered if Andrew's opinion of him would change when he was off his medication. Neil brushed that stray thought aside as irrelevant and unhelpful and focused on Marissa.

"I wouldn't call you," Neil said. "I socialize with the Foxes or not at all."

She stared at him for an endless minute, then said with a nonchalance he didn't believe at all, "If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

She went to pry Katelyn off of Aaron, and the Vixens crossed the street to campus.

"Harsh, Neil," Nicky said. "For someone who's usually so quiet you can be a real jerk sometimes. There's a way to let girls down gently, you know."

"Why?" Neil asked, but Nicky only heaved a pitying sigh. Neil shoved his hands deeper in his pockets and looked at Dan. "Do girls need kid-glove treatment? I thought they were tougher than that."

Dan's grin was approving. "Most of us are. Some of us are like boys, though, and have delicate egos."

"Hey," Matt protested.

"If Marissa isn't in the running for Christmas banquet, may I step in?" Renee asked. Nicky stared slack-jawed at her, but Renee didn't acknowledge his shock. She answered Neil's questioning look with a pretty smile and explained. "It seems my usual date is unavailable, but I'd prefer not to go alone. What do you think?"

Neil hadn't planned on bringing anyone, but he said, "Okay."

"First you steal Andrew's car, then you steal his girl..." Matt slipped a gloved hand into Dan's and looked at Neil. "Oh, and you've pretty much corrupted the rest of the monsters into hanging out with us outside of practice. Let me know if you need backup when you've got to explain all this to him."

"Thanks, but I can handle him," Neil said.

"We noticed," Dan said dryly, and tugged Matt with her down the sidewalk.

The rest of the Foxes fell in around them. They walked fast to beat the chill but were still half-frozen by the time they made it back to their dorm. They went their separate ways once they reached the third floor. Neil still had a couple hours before he was supposed to meet Kevin for practice, so he settled at his desk with his textbooks. Matt grabbed a beer from their fridge and tackled his own schoolwork.

"Can't believe it's almost over," Matt said after a couple minutes. "In some ways, I feel like this has been the longest semester ever, but at the same time, I don't know where the fall went. It's almost December, you know?"

"Yeah," Neil said, drawing circles over his outline. Friday was the first day of December and the last game of their fall season. The Foxes went to morning practices only next week, since Wymack wanted them to spend their afternoons studying. Neil and Kevin hadn't talked about it, but Neil assumed they'd still have their night practices.

"Shit, it's almost Christmas," Matt said, sounding almost wondering. "I still don't know what I'm getting Dan. But hey, speaking of Christmas, you figure out what you're doing for it yet?" Matt's chair creaked as Matt turned to look at him. "Are you going home or tagging along with the monsters?"

"I haven't decided," Neil said. "Tag along with them where?"

"If I remember right, last year Erik flew in from Germany and they partied it up in Columbia," Matt said. "That was before Kevin was here to chain them to the court, and before... well, before all this happened. I'm assuming they're not going to want to see Columbia again anytime soon. Maybe I'm wrong. You'd know better than I do."

"I don't know," Neil said. "They haven't mentioned it."

"Just don't spend it here, okay?" Matt asked. "If you don't have anywhere to go I'll drag you home with me. Mom's been wanting to meet the monsters, anyway, and her house is big enough to fit all of you. Just let me know."

Neil needed a moment to process that. "Thanks. I'll pass it along."

Matt nodded and went back to work. Neil turned back to his own assignment, but his thoughts had derailed too far for him to call them back. Instead he drew fox paws down the border of his paper until Kevin came for him.

Neil thought about Matt's offer the entire ride to the stadium, but he didn't bring it up. Kevin wasn't the right person to start with, though Neil figured he'd agree if there was a court close enough. Nicky would be the easiest person to convince, maybe. Neil could only imagine how Aaron would react, but since none of them had family it might be worth a shot. Neil was a little leery of meeting Matt's mother, but after Thanksgiving he was curious to see how normal people spent holidays.

As normal as the Foxes could be, rather.

"Focus," Kevin said impatiently, so Neil pushed it all aside for later.

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The southeastern district Christmas banquet was held at Breckenridge that year. Luckily it was scheduled late enough at night the Foxes could sleep off the previous night's end-of-semester party, but it still meant seven hours on the bus.

With the season two weeks behind them and exams finally out of the way, Neil had nothing to think about except Riko and Andrew. Andrew had been gone for five weeks now, and none of them had heard from him. Not even Betsy knew how he was doing, since she'd relinquished him to Easthaven's care. Neil tried not to dwell on it, but that was an impossible task, and he knew the Foxes were going to hear about it tonight. Riko, no doubt, would have something awful to say.

The Foxes were among the last to show up at Breckenridge's court. Kevin had slept most of the drive, since he'd had as much liquor as he did coffee that morning, but he woke up half an hour out from campus. He was silent as the grave for the remainder of the drive, but Neil looked back at him when they pulled up to the Jackals' stadium. Kevin was staring out his window at the other buses, and his violent flinch said he'd spotted the Ravens' ride.

Wymack shooed his Foxes and their dates off the bus and locked it behind them. When he turned around again he snapped his fingers at Kevin to get his attention. "Look at me."

Kevin dragged his blank stare to Wymack, and Wymack gestured between Neil and Matt. "You see these two? If I look your way tonight and you're not within five feet of at least one of them, I won't let you play a single damn game this spring. Get me? They're your shields. Use them. Use me, if you have to. Now give me a 'yes, Coach'."

"Mm," Kevin managed.

"Don't worry," Matt said. "He can't do anything with so many witnesses."

"He got to Neil at the last banquet," Allison said.

Kevin looked at Neil. Neil met his stare without hesitation and didn't let his nerves show on his face. They gathered their clothes from the undercarriage and followed a security guard inside. Neil changed in one of the bathroom stalls and considered his reflection afterward. The others were out of sight in the main room, so Neil leaned close to the mirror. He slid one contact out of the way for a moment, needing to see the chilly blue of his real eyes, and took strength in that.

He'd told Andrew he would stand with Kevin no matter what. He didn't intend to break that promise. "Neil" might be an easily-spooked runaway, and "Nathaniel" was a hunted young man, but "Abram" was the one shielded from and untouched by his father's bloody business. Neil would pull on every murder he'd seen and every endless, desperate night, and he'd face Riko unflinching. It was the least he could do. It was all he could do.

The court was decorated for Christmas. Poinsettia followed the walls all the way around, and a massive tree stood in one corner. Neil assumed it was fake, because there was no way they could have gotten a tree that size through the

door unless they'd brought it in pieces. Heavy blankets under the stand ensured it wouldn't scratch up the court floor, and small presents were piled under it. Neil wondered for a moment if they were fake as well or if they were the Jackals' gifts to each other, temporarily loaned out for decoration.

Whoever organized the seating chart was smart enough to keep the Foxes and Ravens away from each other this time. The Foxes sat down opposite the Wilkes-Meyers Hornets, and Neil ended up between Renee and Kevin. The Foxes and Hornets hadn't seen each other since late September. Neil half-expected aggression, since the Foxes had won that match, but with the season over the Hornets were laid-back and rowdy.

After all of the teams had arrived, Tetsuji Moriyama tapped on a cordless microphone to call them to attention. Someone cut the cheery Christmas music off and Tetsuji surveyed the collected teams with a stony expression.

"The season rankings have been decided," he said without preamble or inflection. It was old news by now—sportscasters and coaches had been adding up points all season—but everyone perked up to listen. "The following four teams have qualified to represent the southeastern district in spring championship games. I will list them in order of ranking, first to fourth. Edgar Allan, Palmetto State, Breckenridge, Belmonte."

He passed the microphone off to a more personable coach who offered enthusiastic congratulations and seasonal wishes. One of the Hornets didn't wait for him to be finished but leaned across the table and gestured at Kevin and Neil.

"How the hell did two of you beat Breckenridge?"

"It wasn't just two of us," Neil said.

The look she gave him said she wasn't impressed by that modesty. Neil shrugged and let it slide. He understood her skepticism, but he stood by his words.

Because Palmetto State and Breckenridge ended the season with the same twelve-two record, the ERC used their goals ratio as a tiebreaker. It was the same method they used in semifinals, which was why spring semis were considered a wild card round. The Foxes' points earned-lost ratio was simply better than the Jackals' was.

A large part of that could be accredited to their defense line, from their unyielding goalkeepers to their aggressive backliners, but the ratio also relied heavily on the strikers' performance. Somehow Neil and Kevin scored enough this season to one-up the Jackals. Neil didn't know how they'd done it but he didn't care. The Jackals came to Palmetto State in August with every intention of hurting both Seth and Kevin. Neil had loathed them ever since.

Placing second meant they didn't have to face the Jackals again, fortunately. Up until the semifinals, spring games ran in even and odd brackets. The odd-ranked teams would play on Friday nights, and the evens would play on Saturdays.

Nicky spoke up right on cue. "Thank god we're not playing the odds again. We might actually have a chance this year."

"We'll make it," Dan said. "We have to. We owe the Ravens a rematch."

The Hornets exchanged pitying looks but didn't comment. Caterers piled the tables high with food and the teams dug in. Dinner conversation was loud and excited. Kevin joined in if the conversation veered toward Exy, stayed out of it when it didn't, and kept sending furtive looks at the Ravens' table. Neil didn't speak unless spoken to and kept most of his attention on Kevin. He was halfway through dinner before he realized he had yet to speak to Renee.

"Sorry," he said.

Renee sent him a curious look. "Why?"

"I'm not trying to ignore you."

"It's all right if you do," Renee said. "Kevin needs you more than I do."

Neil nodded gratitude for her understanding. Renee smiled and struck up a conversation with the Hornets across from them. Neil finally let himself look across the room at the Ravens, the first time he'd sought them out since they first stepped onto the court. The Ravens were up to their usual tricks, it seemed: all of them had come single and in matching black outfits. The women wore identical garnet necklaces and the men wore blood-red ties. That was as festive as the Ravens got, Neil guessed.

Dinner gave way to games so they could digest, and then every table but one was carted off the court. The caterers returned laden with punch bowls and plastic cups. Pounding music replaced Christmas carols and the court became a dance floor. The teams broke apart to party. For most of them the season was over, and they obviously wanted to go out with a bang.

Aaron and Katelyn were the first to disappear into the crowd. Nicky hesitated, but he'd brought a date and wouldn't really be much good if Riko stirred up trouble, so Neil waved off his concern. When Nicky left, so did Allison, and Allison dragged Renee with her. Matt and Dan were the last to leave and they stuck to the outskirts of the crowd where they could keep an eye on Kevin and Neil. Neil was amused by their protective streak and wondered if they'd do the same if Andrew was still here. Somehow he doubted it.

Wymack didn't swing by this time to make them socialize, so Neil and Kevin kept away from the crowd. Kevin was in no mood to celebrate and Neil didn't want to be surrounded by so many people. He wouldn't see Riko coming and it'd

be too easy to lose sight of Kevin. Instead they guarded the drinks table and nursed their punch.

It took half an hour before Riko caught up to them, but he came like they both knew he would. Jean wasn't far behind him. Kevin froze with his cup at his lips when he spotted the pair. Neil stepped forward to put himself between Riko and Kevin. Riko smiled at that bravado, but it wasn't a happy expression. It was more the look of a psychotic child who'd found a small animal to torture: one-quarter pleased and three-quarters hungry.

"Your lack of survival instincts is supremely distressing," Riko said. "Take that look off your face before I carve it off."

Neil hadn't realized he was smiling too, a cruel look he'd inherited from his father. Neil lowered his cup so Riko could get a better look at it. "I would love to see you try. You think I'm afraid of your knife? I'm the Butcher's son."

"That's three strikes." Riko dragged a finger across his throat and rolled his head against his gesture. "I am disappointed in you, Kevin. You promised the master you would take care of this. Obviously you have not, and I am very curious as to why."

"He tried," Neil said. "It didn't take."

Riko pressed a thumb to Neil's cheekbone, in the same spot where the three had their numbered tattoos. "Do us all a favor and do not speak again. Your insolence has already cost you two teammates. You cannot even imagine what is coming next."

Hearing Riko confirm he'd orchestrated Seth's death made Neil sick with anger. Andrew and Kevin had said it, but Wymack had written it off as paranoia. Neil hadn't believed Andrew because he hadn't wanted to, but that what-if had followed him all semester.

Neil held up his free hand and showed Riko his steady fingers. "I'm shaking with fear."

"You should be," Riko said. "You think you can defy me because I am not your father, but you are forgetting one very important fact: I am the family your father was afraid of. And yes, Nathaniel, he was very afraid."

Neil lowered his hand and leaned close. "Not of you," he said, with fierce emphasis. "You're not part of that family, remember? You're the cast-off."

He hoped it would hit, but he didn't realize how deep it would cut. He'd never seen that look on Riko's face but he knew he'd signed his death warrant.

"Jean," Riko said without looking away from Neil, "take Kevin and leave us."

"Go see Matt," Neil said when Kevin hesitated.

"Now," Riko insisted.

Jean gave Riko a wide berth and seized Kevin's arm. Neil watched Jean drag Kevin away as fast as they could go without attracting too much attention. Dan and Matt noticed, of course, and moved to intercept them. Jean went still at their approach but held onto Kevin like his life depended on it. Matt started for Neil and Riko, but Kevin clapped a hand to his shoulder to stop him. When Matt roughly shrugged him off, Neil waved at Matt to keep back. The look on Matt's face said he didn't approve of this plan at all, but he kept his distance.

Neil dragged his attention back to Riko's face. "I think I hit a nerve."

Riko moved like lightning, smacking the cup from Neil's hand and catching hold of his wrist. He gave a brutal twist that sent knives up Neil's arm. Neil choked on a pained curse and grabbed Riko's arm to stop him. He couldn't pry Riko's hand off but if Riko turned his wrist another half-inch he'd break something. Every time Neil blinked he saw the white scars on Kevin's hands. It was all he could do to breathe around the panic beating at his lungs. He fought to keep his face calm and forced himself to meet Riko's eyes again.

"You wouldn't," Neil said. "Not in front of all these people."

"I do not care if they see," Riko said. "A dog who bites his master's hand deserves to be slaughtered. The location and audience are inconsequential."

"I am not a dog. I'm a Fox."

"You are nothing but what I tell you to be."

"We talked about your delusions."

"I warned you to learn your place."

"Let go of me, King."

"I am King," Riko agreed, "and you are going to spend Christmas at my castle. You're coming to Evermore for winter break. Don't," Riko said when Neil opened his mouth to argue, "push me again. I am the only thing keeping you alive."

"No, you're not," Neil said.

Riko stared at him for an endless minute, then smiled. Neil's stomach dropped at the sight of it; he knew what was coming before Riko opened his mouth but he refused to believe it. "You must be referring to that goalkeeper. You know which one I mean, I'm sure? The miniature one with the disgusting attitude who thinks he can take my things. That reminds me, I haven't seen him lately."

Riko looked over his shoulder as if expecting Andrew to materialize from thin air. He let go of Neil but Neil couldn't breathe, much less move to put space between them. Two teammates, Riko had said. Neil's insolence had cost him two teammates, but Seth was only one.

Riko turned back on Neil and wagged a finger as if just remembering. "Ah, but that's right. I heard they carted him away. Something about his brother fucking him brainless, yes? How scandalous. How traumatizing."

"Don't," Neil said.

Riko ignored him. "Drake was an interesting man, wasn't he? I should thank the police for leading me straight to him. I might not have discovered him otherwise. Did you know, Nathaniel? Oakland lawyers are some of the cheapest to buy off. It only took three phone calls to arrange the whole thing."

"You set Andrew up."

"That isn't even the best part." Riko smiled when Neil shook his head and continued. "Did you know I've bought one of the doctors at Easthaven, too? Unless you want these little therapy sessions of his to turn into therapeutic reenactments, you will be on a plane to West Virginia tomorrow morning. Jean will give your ticket to Kevin. Do you understand me?"

Neil didn't have words, so he answered with his fist. He didn't have a lot of room to swing but he made do and caught Riko right in his vulgar mouth. It knocked Riko back a step, giving Neil a little more space, and Neil caught him in the eye next. He lunged away from the table and slammed into Riko, but Riko was already moving to meet him. Neil crashed into the table so hard he sent it skidding out from behind him, and he and Riko both hit the floor. Neil jabbed and struck at any part of Riko he could find, only distantly aware of Riko's own vicious blows. Someone was yelling about a fight, or maybe that was his blood roaring in his ears.

Suddenly there were hands on him that weren't Riko's, and the two were being yanked apart. Neil held on as fiercely as he could; so did Riko. Riko pulled Neil close one last time before the crowd ripped them away from one another, long enough for him to say, "You just cost him something he didn't want to lose."

Then there were too many bodies between them. Neil recognized some of them: Matt first, then Jean, then a couple athletes whose faces he'd only seen through helmet visors. Neil's brain put names to faces where it could and summarily dismissed all of them as unimportant. None of them were Riko. He fought the crowd as best he could, trying to break through and get his hands on Riko again.

Somehow he made it close enough again to grab Riko's sleeve. "You even fucking think about touching him—"

Wymack came out of nowhere and hauled Neil off Riko like he weighed nothing at all. The space between them filled with coaches, and the excited hubbub died out almost instantaneously. For a moment the only sound was Neil's

ragged breathing as he stared around Wymack's body at Riko. The entire room was shaking, or maybe that was Neil trembling hard enough to bring the whole court down on top of them.

"What the hell is going on here?" Breckenridge's coach demanded. "This is a Christmas banquet. If you missed the memo, that's Christmas, as in make merry and goodwill to man. I want a goddamned explanation for this."

Neither Neil or Riko answered; they were too busy staring each other down. Jean had found his place behind Riko again and the tense look on his face was wary disapproval. Neil wanted a gun. He'd settle for Andrew's knives, but those were hidden under his pillow at Palmetto State. He dug his fingers into Wymack's arm hard enough he'd leave bruises for sure and smiled so hard it hurt.

"Yes," he said, because what else could he say? "I understand."

"Apology accepted," Riko said.

The coaches waited. When nothing else was forthcoming, one of them swept the crowd with a mean look. "The next person to start a fight here is getting written up and will sit out of the next five scheduled games, spring or fall. Do I make myself clear?" There was a chorused assent, and the coach flicked an annoyed look between Neil and Riko. "You two stay away from each other the rest of the night. Wymack, get him off the court until he's feeling civil."

"Neil wasn't fighting with himself," Wymack said, with steel in his voice. "If Coach Moriyama wants the Away side, I'll take the Home."

"Of course," Moriyama said, looking unmoved by the chaos. "Riko?"

They set off in one direction, so Wymack practically carried Neil the other. Neil knew Abby and the Foxes were following them off the court but he couldn't take his eyes off Riko to look at any of them. He lost sight of Riko when Wymack shoved him through the court door, but it wasn't until Wymack bodily planted him on one of the Home benches that Neil could look up at him. Wymack waved Katelyn and Nicky's date Thomas back onto the court with an impatient jerk of his hand, then rounded on Neil again.

"What the hell was that?"

"Coach?"

"Don't you dare 'Coach?' me, you malfunctioning retard."

"No, but really," Nicky said, looking wide-eyed at Neil. "What happened?"

"Neil hit Riko," Matt said. "It was beautiful."

"What?" Nicky squawked. "Not fair! I missed it! Go do it again. Or not," he added quickly when Wymack leveled a death glare at him. "You can't blame a guy for dreaming, right, Coach?"

"Shut up." Wymack returned his glower to Neil. "I'm waiting."

Neil felt his wrist and winced at the lingering pain. Abby slipped past Dan to get to him and sat at Neil's side. Neil let her take his hand and looked past Wymack at the court. "Riko bought off the prosecution." The words came slowly; they were so awful he thought he'd be violently ill just hearing them aloud again. "That's why Drake risked coming all the way here to see Andrew. Riko would get the charges dismissed if Drake would—" He gritted his teeth and shook his head, unable to finish.

He didn't have to say anything else. The music was still going, blasting through the speakers, but the silence between the Foxes was absolute.

Aaron was the first to get his voice back. "You're lying."

Neil sucked in a shaky breath and looked at Kevin. In French he asked, "Did you get it? My ticket?" Kevin stared at him and through him, too stunned to understand or respond. "Kevin, look at me."

"I'm going to kill him," Nicky said.

"No," Neil said, with a ferocity that had even Matt eyeing him warily. "We've got to break him first. If Exy is the only thing he cares about we're going to take it away from him. First we destroy his reputation, then we destroy him. I don't want us to lose a single game this spring. Can we do that?"

"Not a single damn game," Dan said in a hard voice.

Neil looked around at them, at the cold rage on their faces, and focused on Kevin. He tried again in French with an insistent, "Do you have my ticket?"

"You're not going," Kevin said. "Do you know what he'll do to you?"

"Do you know what he'll do to Andrew if I don't go?" Neil said. "I don't have a choice. I have to go. You have to trust me."

"He will break you."

"He wishes he knew how," Neil said. "Trust me. I promise I'll come back, and when I do I'll bring Andrew back with me. It's going to be fine. So do you have my ticket or don't you?"

Kevin pressed his lips into a hard, white line and looked away. "I have it."

When the strikers fell quiet, Dan looked at Wymack. "Let's go home, Coach."

The banquet was hours from being over, but it was too dangerous to stay any longer. The next time one of them saw Riko they'd try to break his neck. Wymack trusted Renee's self-control the most, so he sent her in search of the missing dates. As soon as Renee returned with Katelyn and Thomas the Foxes high-tailed it to the bus. They slowed to grab their bags from the locker room but not long enough to change. Wymack had them on the road in minutes.

The ride back to Palmetto was silent. They made it back in the dead of night, but despite the hour none of the Foxes could sleep. Wymack dropped the dates

off first, then took his team to Fox Tower. They rode the elevator up together. Kevin passed Neil a folded slip of paper as they stepped into the hallway. Neil didn't have to open it to know it was the confirmation for his flight.

Matt tried to bring Neil to the girls' room so they could finally talk about what happened, but Neil went next door. He kicked his shoes off to one side and pushed the window open. He tried to light a cigarette but his hands were shaking too badly. He ended up crawling into bed fully dressed. He checked the departure time so he'd know how early to set his alarm, then shoved the paper under his pillow with Andrew's bands. He pulled his blankets over his head to block out the room and willed himself to stop thinking.

When he finally slept, he dreamed of death and blood.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Neil woke to the sound of movement in the other room. Despite the late night, the Foxes were up and about by mid-morning. Today was the day the team cleared out for winter break, and most of them had long enough flights to sleep on. Allison, Renee, and Dan were flying out to Bismarck together around lunch time and would split up after they landed. Two hours after they were in the air the rest of the Foxes would be en route to LaGuardia.

Neil had passed Matt's invitation along the week before exams and let Nicky do most of the work from there. Nicky's original plans to go to Germany for Christmas derailed when Andrew got committed. He didn't want to get that far away from Aaron. Unfortunately Erik couldn't take enough time off to come to the States. That meant Matt was Nicky's only chance for a fun holiday.

None of the so-called monsters of the team were sure why Matt was being nice to them, but Nicky was too excited to spend New Year's in Times Square to really care. Wymack claimed to be happier than Nicky was about the arrangement, since their absence meant he could finally have some peace and quiet. Aaron had to get permission from his lawyer to leave the state, but they'd settled that easily enough.

How Neil was supposed to tell any of them his plans had changed, he didn't know. There was no way he could tell them the truth. None of them would let him go through with it. It was a small miracle Kevin was going along with this. Kevin knew more than any of them what Riko was capable of, so he knew what was waiting for Neil in West Virginia. Maybe he trusted Neil to hold his ground; more likely he knew what Riko would do to the Foxes if Neil refused. Neil didn't know and didn't care so long as Kevin kept his mouth shut.

Neil pushed his blankets aside and sat up. He lifted his pillow to get his phone but hesitated at the sight of Andrew's armbands. Nicky's voice in the other room jarred him from his thoughts. Neil dropped his pillow again, then realized he had a way out. He grabbed his phone, flipped it open, and put it to his ear. When Nicky pushed the bedroom door open without knocking, Neil struck up a conversation with no one at all.

"Yes, I saw it," Neil said, glancing at Nicky to acknowledge his entrance.

Nicky had his mouth open on a greeting but went quiet when he realized Neil was on the phone. Instead of leaving, Nicky got comfortable against the doorframe to wait him out. Neil had counted on Nicky's curiosity. In the months

since they first handed Neil this phone they'd never once seen him make a call on it. Neil signaled to Nicky that he was almost finished and half-turned away.

"What did you expect? You waited this long to figure it out. By now I've already made other plans. I—" Neil cut himself off, listened a moment, and bulled on. "But how long have you known he was coming? You could have said something. I don't know. I said I don't know. I'd have to—" Neil scrubbed a hand across his eyes as if the entire conversation was exhausting to deal with. "Okay. Goodbye."

He clicked his phone shut and dropped it off to one side.

For a minute, silence reigned. Then Nicky came into the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Neil sagged back against the wall as Nicky climbed halfway up the ladder to his bunk. Nicky folded his arms across Neil's pillow and stared at Neil.

"Everything okay there?" Nicky asked.

"I'm fine."

Nicky just looked at him. "We've known each other forever by now. At some point you're going to have to stop lying to my face. That didn't sound fine and you don't look fine. So what's really going on?"

"My uncle's flying to Arizona for Christmas," Neil said.

"Good thing? Bad thing?"

"Both?" Neil shrugged against the wall. "He's a good guy, but he's usually smart enough to avoid my parents. I haven't seen him in years, and he's never come over on a holiday. Something must be up. I just don't know what. I don't know if..." Neil trailed off and gestured helplessly. "I promised myself I'd never go home again, but."

"But you want to see him again," Nicky concluded.

"It doesn't matter," Neil said. "I told Andrew I'd stay with Kevin."

"But Kevin's going to be with us," Nicky said, "and we're going to be with Matt and Matt's mom. The four of us can keep an eye on him if you need some time with your family. You need money for a ticket?"

"I already have one," Neil said, and held up his folded itinerary. "Mom emailed it to me a couple days ago. I just didn't want to deal with it before the banquet."

"You're hopeless," Nicky said. "If you want to go, go. You've done more than enough for us this semester, Neil. At some point you've got to think about yourself. Watch," he said when Neil shook his head. "I'm going to go tell the others, and they'll all tell you to go home. You'll see."

"But—" Neil said, but Nicky was already gone.

Neil swallowed the rest of his argument. It wasn't a fight he wanted or needed to win, anyway. For a moment he pitied Nicky for being so gullible, but Neil took no satisfaction in what he'd just done. He unfolded the itinerary and studied it with a sinking feeling in his stomach. In two hours he'd be on a flight to Charleston, West Virginia, and he wasn't scheduled to come back until the night of New Year's Eve. That was two weeks alone with the Ravens.

The suite door banged as Nicky went back to his room to consult with Aaron and Kevin. When Matt walked into the bedroom a couple seconds later Neil was expecting him.

"What are we going to do with you?" Matt asked.

"Sorry," Neil said.

"What for?" Matt waved that off. "When's your flight?"

"Eleven-ten, if I go."

"You're going. I'll give you a lift to the airport."

Neil grimaced at him but got out of bed at last. He wasn't hungry but he made himself eat some instant oatmeal and toast. Nicky returned to say he'd told all of the Foxes what was going on. Apparently they all wanted Neil on that plane. Neil nodded and said nothing, and Nicky left him in peace to get ready.

Neil showered and dug his duffel bag out of the bottom drawer of his dresser. He had it half-packed when he realized the bag was too small. For eight years he'd never owned more than what could fit in a carry-on. In the past half-year here his possessions had doubled in number. Even when his bag was full there were things in his drawers. Neil was at once confused and heartened, and he pressed a hand to his folded shirts. It was proof he was coming back, something he hadn't had since he was a child.

The quiet tap of a footstep warned him he wasn't alone, and Neil looked up at Kevin.

"Can I give you something to take with you?" Neil asked. "Will you promise to keep it safe? I don't want to leave it here, but I can't bring it with me." When Kevin nodded, Neil unlocked his safe and pulled his binder out. It took everything he had in him to hand it to Kevin. Even when Kevin took hold of it, Neil held fast to one end. "Don't open it."

"I don't want to know," Kevin said.

Neil let go, and Kevin tucked it under one arm. Neil pushed his safe closed and put it back where it belonged.

"Neil," Kevin said when Neil got to his feet.

"I'm coming back," Neil said, more for his sake than Kevin's. "You promised you'd finish this year with me. I'm holding you to that."

He slung his bag over his shoulder and slipped past Kevin out of the room. Matt was unplugging all of his electronics when the strikers showed up.

"Ready?" Matt asked.

"Yes," Neil lied.

Matt grabbed his keys and they left. They stopped by the girls' room first, where Neil was subjected to holiday hugs and well-wishes. Aaron settled for a nod when they checked in with the cousins next, but Nicky gave Neil a bone-popping squeeze.

"You packed your charger, right?" Nicky asked. "I expect you to text me everyday."

"I packed it," Neil said, but he doubted Riko would let him use his phone.

He left Kevin with the others to finish getting ready and followed Matt down to the truck. There was room at Neil's feet for his bag. Matt turned the key in the ignition and cut his radio off a half-second too late to save Neil's eardrums. Neil tried not to feel ill when the campus disappeared behind them but didn't quite succeed.

"When's your return flight?" Matt asked.

"New Year's," Neil said, "but I might come back early, depending on how things go."

"You bail early enough you should come join us," Matt said. "Mom can have your ticket changed."

"Thank you," Neil said. "I'll let you know."

Matt left him at the curb at Upstate Regional Airport. Neil watched him slide back into traffic, then turned to face the entrance. It was dizzying being here again. He and his mother never went through the same airport twice. He tightened his grip on his bag and went through the sliding glass doors.

The airport was busy this summer, but this close to Christmas it was downright chaos inside. Neil let himself get lost in the hubbub. He was just another face in the crowd, anonymous and unimportant. His airline had self-service check-in, so Neil scanned the barcode printed on his itinerary. His ticket and boarding pass popped out the slot at the bottom, and Neil headed for the security checkpoint. His bag made it through the scanners before he did. Neil toed into his shoes on the other side, grabbed his bag, and headed for his gate.

Most of the seats were taken, so Neil stood against a pillar to wait. He watched the crowd so he wouldn't watch the clock blinking at his gate. He'd half-expected to see more classmates here, but maybe they'd high-tailed it out of town yesterday. The airport was a sea of unfamiliar faces. Neil was alone.

He'd been around the Foxes for so long he'd forgotten what it was like to have breathing space. He should have been grateful to have a couple moments

by himself before this nightmare started, but Neil was left feeling out of sorts. He buried his hand in his pocket and wrapped his fingers around his phone. If he flipped it open, his call history would still only show one name, but his message box was so full it emptied itself out on a semi-regular basis. He thought about reading through them for courage, but he couldn't make himself do it.

The gate attendant's voice on the overhead speakers startled him from his thoughts. "Passengers for flight 12 to Charleston, we will begin boarding soon. Please report to gate D23 and wait to be called."

Neil's seat was right behind the business-class section. He had the window seat, much to his displeasure, but the space under the seat in front of him was just big enough for his bag. He pushed the duffel into place with his shoes and tried not to feel trapped by his seatmate. Attendants squeezed up and down the aisles, trying to get everyone settled as quickly as possible.

When everyone was finally seated and the overhead compartments were snapped shut, the attendants launched into a spiel about safety. Neil glanced at the emergency exit door but wasn't as tempted as he thought he might be.

Facing Riko like this went against everything his mother taught him. He'd been raised to run, to sacrifice everything and everyone to ensure his own survival. His mother had never given him ground to stand on. Maybe that was why he hadn't been strong enough to save her in the end. A jumble of lies had nothing to fight for. But Neil Josten was a Fox. Andrew called this home; Nicky called him family. Neil wasn't going to lose any of it. If two weeks with Riko was the price to keep his team safe, Neil would pay it.

Somehow those thoughts made the flight easier. Neil even managed to doze through part of it, but he woke when they landed.

Jean was waiting for him in Arrivals. He watched Neil's approach with a cool look on his face, and there was an edge in his voice when he said, "You shouldn't have come here."

"Let's go," Neil said.

The ride was silent, but the first sight of Castle Evermore had Neil's blood humming in recognition. Evermore looked more like a monument than a stadium, and its jet-black paint job made it even more imposing. It was half-again as big as the Foxhole Court. Neil doubted the Ravens could fill every seat at every game, but the US Court likely sold out within hours of posting their matches. Neil could only imagine what game nights sounded like inside.

Jean stopped at a gate and reached out his window to type in a code. The gate swung open with a quiet squeal and Jean drove into the barricaded parking lot. A line of cars was already parked at the curb. Neil wished he was surprised that they were all identical. Even the custom license plates were only a couple digits

off from each other. Neil stared hard at them until he thought he figured out the sequence. The EA had to be Edgar Allan, and the numbers following were class years and jersey numbers.

"This isn't a team," Neil said. "It's a cult."

"Get out," Jean said, and parked in the open spot his teammates left for him.

Neil grabbed his bag and climbed out. Jean walked him to the door and put in another numbered password. The light over the keypad flashed green, so Jean tugged open the door. Instead of going in, he looked back at Neil.

"Take a look at the sky. You won't see it again until you leave."

"I've seen it," Neil said.

Jean's smile mocked that bit of defiance and he gestured for Neil to precede him. The door had opened to a stairwell going down. Everything was painted black. The only light and color was a red tube of light down the middle of the ceiling. It wasn't quite bright enough. When Jean slammed the door behind them Neil almost tripped down the stairs. He put a hand to the wall for balance and slowed down. At his back, Jean didn't rush him.

He counted steps, wanting to know how deep they were going, and made it to twenty-six before the stairs dead-ended at another door. Jean reached past him to put in a third password, and Neil stepped into the Ravens' living quarters.

"Welcome to the Nest," Jean said.

"Cult," Neil said again.

Jean ignored that and took him on a tour. This space was originally built to house visiting teams, but Coach Moriyama gave it to his Ravens instead. If the Ravens weren't in class or on the court, they were supposed to be down here. At first glance, it wasn't a bad setup. The Nest was spacious and well-stocked. Neil passed two full-sized kitchens, a lounge complete with a bar and pool table, and three dens with TVs. A long hall connected the social quarters to a weights room, and another hall took them to the dormitory.

A sign on the wall indicated Black Hall was to the left and Red Hall to the right. Neil looked both ways but honestly couldn't tell them apart. It wasn't worth asking about, so he followed Jean into Black. All of the bedroom doors were open, so Neil peeked in as they passed. The bedrooms were almost as big as the suite Neil shared with Matt and each one was outfitted with only two beds.

The Nest had the potential to be everything a college athlete could want—except for the low ceilings and the dark decor. Color was fleeting, and usually showed up only in shades of red. Everything else was black, from the furniture to the sheets to the towels draped over desk chairs to dry. The shadows were sucking the air out of the room and Neil was suddenly keenly aware of the

weight of the stadium overhead. Neil wasn't claustrophobic, but he thought two weeks down here might change that.

"Here," Jean said, and motioned for Neil to follow him into the last room. "This is where you will be staying. You should be in Red with the rest of us, but the master has made a special allowance. He knows you require Riko's personal attention."

"I'm not rooming with that sociopath."

"If only you had a say in the matter."

"Whose place am I taking?" Neil asked, because both sides of the room were already decorated.

Jean stopped by one of the nightstands and gestured for Neil to come closer. "Look and see."

Neil moved up alongside him and regretted it almost immediately. Postcards of faraway cities both foreign and domestic were taped to the walls. Beneath each one were scraps of paper. Kevin's now-familiar scrawl listed dates and explanations for the travels. Most of them were games. Some indicated photo shoots and interviews. Books lined the shelves built into the headboard and Neil knew from skimming the spines they were Kevin's. Kevin was majoring in history for reasons Neil couldn't understand; these dry titles were the sorts of things he would find fascinating.

It gave Neil chills to see his space preserved like this. It was like Kevin had gone out on an errand, not that he'd transferred to another team entirely.

"Riko's in denial," Neil said. "Someone should tell him Kevin isn't coming back."

"You don't know anything," Jean said. "Put your things down and let's go."

Jean didn't wait for him but left. Neil dropped his duffel on Kevin's bed, spared a wary glance for Riko's side of the room, and caught up with Jean down the hall. A flight of stairs took them up one floor to the Ravens' locker room. Jean didn't give Neil time to look around but pushed him through a back door into the inner court. They came out right near the Home benches.

It was the Sunday before Christmas and the Ravens were on the court in full gear. Two line-ups were playing a rather brutal scrimmage while the remaining nine Ravens watched. Heads turned as Jean stepped up alongside the armored nine, and the Ravens looked past Jean at Neil. Their expressions ranged from cold disinterest to open hostility. Neil wasn't expecting a warm welcome, so he kept his attention on the court.

It wasn't long before a buzzer sounded and called an end to the match. Riko's team won by a three-point margin. The two line-ups met at half-court to critique each other's performances. The subs joined them to share what they'd noticed

from the outside. The huddle lasted a good fifteen minutes, but finally the Ravens clacked sticks and filed off the court.

Riko pulled his helmet off as he stepped through the court door. "Luke, close down the scoreboard. Martin, get the lights. I have a guest to tend to, so take an early lunch. The master will be by shortly to check progress, so have your papers ready for him. Afternoon practice will start at the usual time."

The Ravens moved like a black river around Jean and Neil. Riko stopped in front of Neil to consider him, but summarily dismissed him in favor of Jean. "Show him his things. I will deal with him when I am showered."

Jean inclined his head and held the door for Riko. Riko went one way, so Jean and Neil went another. Jean brought Neil into the changing room and opened an oversized locker on the end. Neil obediently looked inside. The locker was packed with Raven gear. It wasn't until Jean shoved the jersey at him that Neil understood, because the name emblazoned on the back was JOSTEN.

"I'm only here for two weeks," Neil said. "Why did he have those printed?"

"Do not play stupid," Jean said. "Kevin would have told you by now that you are transferring this summer."

"He mentioned it. I told him I wouldn't do it. Didn't he pass that along?" Neil tossed the jersey off to one side.

Jean snatched it from the air before it could hit the ground and flicked a livid look at him. "Try not to get us both killed on your first day, you ignorant child."

"Us?" Neil asked.

"Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you," Jean said, thrusting the jersey at him again. Neil refused to take it, so Jean caught hold of his coat with his free hand and yanked Neil close. "You lost the right to be an individual when you stepped into the Nest. The consequences of your actions are no longer yours alone to bear. Ravens operate on a pair-based system, which means from now until you leave I am the only ally you have.

"My success is your success," Jean said. "Your failure is my failure. You are to go nowhere unless I am with you. If you break this rule we will both suffer greatly for it. Do you understand? They want us to fail. They want to take starting line-up from me. I will not let you jeopardize my rank."

"I have some bad news for you," Neil said. "I can't outscore Raven strikers."

"It is not them you need to outplay," Jean said. "You are not a striker anymore. You never should have been one in the first place. The master is moving you to defense where you belong. He will want to know why you abandoned your position. I hope you have a good explanation for him."

"It wasn't my idea," Neil said. "Coach Hernandez had a full defense line. It was offense or nothing at all and I just wanted to play."

Neil told Hernandez he'd never touched a racquet before because he couldn't give Hernandez the names of his past coaches and teams. When Neil was recruited to the Millport Dingoes, though, it wasn't his eight-year absence from Exy that made him so clumsy on the court. It was that Neil played little leagues as a backliner. He'd had to learn the game all over again from scratch. In the beginning Neil hated it, because he figured strikers were glory-hounds who sought the spotlight. As Neil got more comfortable with the position, though, he fell in love.

"It was a bad idea," Jean said. "Now you have to unlearn all of your bad habits. Now try on your gear so we know it fits."

"Not in front of you," Neil said.

"That modesty will be the first thing we break you of," Jean said. "There is no room for privacy in the Nest."

"I can't believe you put up with this," Neil said. "At least Kevin ran. What's your excuse?"

"I am a Moreau," Jean said, as if Neil was being stupid on purpose. "My family has belonged to the Moriyamas since before they came to the United States. There is nowhere else for me to go, just as there is no place for you but here. Kevin is not like us; he is valuable but he is not property in the same sense. He escaped because he had family to run to."

"Andrew?" Neil guessed.

"I said family, you hard-of-hearing imbecile," Jean said. "His father. Your coach."

It took a moment to sink in. When it clicked Neil recoiled from Jean in shock. "What?"

He knew, logically, that Kevin had to have a father. Kayleigh Day hadn't gotten herself pregnant, after all. But she'd never given up the name of Kevin's father, no matter how hard the press pushed. If the rumors were right that space was blank on Kevin's birth certificate. She'd named Tetsuji her son's godfather, though, which was how Kevin ended up at Evermore after Kayleigh died.

"You're lying," Neil said.

"Why else would Kevin run to such a dreadful team?"

"But he never—and Coach hasn't—"

"Figures he's still too much of a coward to say anything about it." Jean gave a derisive flick of his hand. "If you don't believe me, look for yourself. The last time I saw his mother's letter it was tucked inside one of those boring books of his. He's read it so many times he might have worn the words off the pages by now, but it is worth a shot."

"If he knew, why did he stay?" Neil demanded. "He should have gone to Coach when his mother died."

"We found out only a few years ago," Jean said. "We found the letter in the master's house purely by accident. Kevin stole it, but he never intended to act on the discovery. He knew going meant losing all of this. It wasn't worth it." Jean gestured around at the locker room. "Once he lost this, of course, there was no reason to stay."

"You are all insane," Neil said.

"Says the runaway who joined a Class I team," Jean said. "Says the man who came here today when he should have run. You are no better than the rest of us. Now are you going to try on your gear or am I going to have to force it on you?"

Neil thought about it, then took the jersey. Jean folded his arms over his chest and took a couple steps back. Neil turned the jersey over in his hands to look at his name. The white letters were surrounded by a faint red outline. The number beneath it wasn't his.

"I can't even keep my ten?" Neil asked.

"Unimportant Ravens wear double-digits," Jean said. "Riko's inner circle does not. This number suits you better. Did you know? In Japanese, 'four' and 'death' sound the same. It is appropriate that the Butcher's son should wear this number."

Neil shook his head but gave up arguing. He dropped the jersey in his locker again, steeled his nerves, and undid the buttons on his coat. He yanked the zipper undone next and shrugged out of his coat. He peeled his shirt over his head next and pretended not to notice the intent look Jean raked across his scarred front. Neil toed out of his shoes, pushed them out of his way with a foot, and yanked his jeans off. He put the Raven uniform on piece by piece as fast as he could. It fit him better than he expected it to, but Neil felt choked by it.

"Good," Jean said. "Now put it back. You won't need it until afternoon practice."

Neil stripped it all off and put it back. He'd just fastened the last button on his coat when the door opened. Neil had his back to it, but he didn't miss the way Jean blanched. Neil looked back to see Tetsuji and Riko in the doorway. Tetsuji had brought an ornate walking cane with him. Neil had never seen him with it before and hoped that meant Tetsuji was suffering some sort of injury or illness.

Riko let his uncle enter the room first and locked the door behind them. Neil spared a moment to wonder who installed locks on a changing room door, but he pushed that thought away as quick as he could. He couldn't afford to be distracted when facing this man.

Tetsuji crossed the room to stand before him. "Nathaniel Wesninski," he said, like he found every syllable wanting. "Kneel."

Neil hid his hands in his pockets so he could clench them into fists. "No."

He thought Jean said his name, but it was barely louder than a breath of air. Neil didn't look back at him. He didn't think it was his imagination that Riko took a half-step back to put more space between himself and his uncle. A man who could keep even Riko in line wasn't a man to challenge so carelessly, but Neil had no choice.

"You will kneel," Tetsuji said.

Neil had a feeling he was going to regret this for the rest of his very short life, but he smiled and said, "Make me."

He saw the cane come up, but it was too fast for him to dodge. It caught him in the face across his cheek and the side of his mouth. Neil stumbled under the force of the blow and crashed into the lockers. He didn't feel it; he couldn't feel anything but the fire eating through his skull. A sour flash across his tongue might have been blood but Neil's mouth was too numb for him to be sure. He brought a hand up instinctively to check his skull for fractures, but Tetsuji's cane caught him in the ribs next. Then his shoulder, and his arm, until Neil had no choice but to ball up and protect himself.

Tetsuji didn't stop beating him until he finally passed out.

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The Ravens' afternoon practice ran for four hours, and Neil was in no shape for any of it. He'd been unconscious through the two hours the Ravens took for lunch; he only woke when Jean dumped a pitcher of icy water over his head. Neil was too delirious and sore to get changed out, so Jean had to force most of the gear onto him. Neil struggled, but Jean dug cruel fingers into Neil's fresh bruises to stop him. Jean had to haul Neil up to the court. It wasn't until Jean shoved a racquet into his hands that Neil truly realized that yes, he was expected to play.

They put him on as a backliner, and Neil failed spectacularly. He hadn't played defense in almost nine years and he was in too bad of shape to keep up with Riko. Every time Riko made it past him, Riko hit Neil with his racquet. Exy armor was meant to guard against fast-moving balls and body-checks, not malicious blows from heavy racquets. By an hour into practice Neil was stumbling over his own feet.

Every time Neil fell, though, Jean was there to pull him off the ground. Jean had nothing to say to Neil about his poor performance, neither encouragement nor harsh words. Maybe he didn't have the breath for it anymore. They were in

this together, just like Jean warned Neil. Every time the other team scored they were both punished.

The rest of the Ravens were completely unsympathetic, even toward one of their own. This was how the team worked, and they accepted it unquestioningly. These five years might be a vicious nightmare, but world fame and seven-digit salaries waited for them on the other side of the graduation stage. They'd be set for the rest of their lives. As far as the Ravens were concerned, it was a worthwhile trade.

Because of their pathetic performance, Jean and Neil were tasked with shutting the court down afterward. That meant sweeping and polishing the court floor, then straightening up the mess the Ravens made of the locker room. By the time they were finally able to shower Neil could barely move. He didn't even care that the Ravens' shower room lacked stalls. He knelt on the tiled floor under the spray and let the heat ease some of the pain from his shattered body. Neil flexed his swollen fingers to make sure they were in working order. They moved, but he couldn't feel them.

"You should have run," Jean said, too exhausted and sore to be hateful anymore.

"I grew up on pain," Neil said. "Two weeks of this won't mean a thing."

"Three," Jean said.

Neil looked at him. "I only agreed to two. I'm leaving on New Year's Eve."

Jean closed his eyes and tilted his head further under the spray. "You ignorant child. This is the Ravens' Nest. We go by our time, not yours. We run on sixteen-hour days. You'll see."

Neil was too tired to deal with his dramatics, so he focused on washing up. He dressed in the loosest clothes he'd packed and trailed Jean to the kitchen. He barely tasted any of the food he put in his mouth, but he needed his strength. Jean put their plates in the dishwasher and brought Neil to Black Hall.

Riko was waiting for them in their bedroom. Neil didn't see him until he was already inside, and by then it was too late. Jean locked the door behind him and leaned against it. Neil considered fighting him, but he didn't have the energy and there was nowhere to go. He went to his bed like he didn't care he was trapped in here with them and sat on the edge of the mattress. He looked at the books and thought of Kayleigh's letter, thought of Jean and Kevin putting up with this day after day, year after year.

Riko got up from his bed, and Neil looked at him. Riko was smiling, and the look made Neil sick to his stomach. His father had looked at him with loathing and fury. He'd never looked like this, like Neil's blood would be the highlight of

his day. The Butcher was a vicious killer with a hair-trigger temper, but he thrived on death and fear, not pain and submission.

"Keep away from me," Neil said.

Riko pulled a switchblade from his pocket and flicked it open. "I thought you weren't afraid of my knives, Nathaniel. Was that a lie to make yourself feel better?"

Riko sat sideways on the mattress beside Neil. He looked at Neil like he was imagining skinning Neil alive and feeding Neil the bloody scraps. His expression said he was getting off on the fantasy. Neil didn't flinch when Riko put the tip of the blade to Neil's lips, but it was a near thing. Jean moved up alongside them, but Neil didn't dare take his eyes off Riko to look at him.

"I am going to love hurting you," Riko said, "like I loved hurting Kevin."

"You are one seriously fucked-up individual," Neil said.

Riko slipped the knife into Neil's mouth and pushed, hard enough to break the skin at the corner of Neil's mouth but not deep enough to do any real damage. "Shut up and lie down," Riko said. "We don't have a lot of time, and I promised the master to have you in line before night practice."

"I hate you," Neil said around the blade.

"Lie down," Riko said again, "and put your hands on the headboard."

Neil stretched out on his back and reached over his head. Jean caught his hands to guide them to the right place. Neil felt wood under his fingertips and grabbed hold. Jean let go of him only to snap cold metal over his wrists. Neil tried to look but the knife in his mouth wouldn't let him move. Riko felt him tense, though, and withdrew his blade. Neil looked up and regretted it immediately. Metal cuffs locked his hands to the headboard. He yanked his arms as hard as he could, nearly skinning his wrists in the effort, but the headboard didn't even creak.

"Who is your King, Nathaniel?" Riko asked.

Neil spat in his face.

Riko froze, then slowly reached up to touch the glob on his cheek. He eyed his slick fingers for a moment, needing to see the mess to believe it, and then seized Neil's face in an iron grip. He pried Neil's mouth open and spat in it. A hand over Neil's mouth kept him from coughing it back up. Jean climbed onto the bed and sat on his legs before Neil could knee Riko in the back. Riko pressed the knife to Neil's chest and slipped the edge under his skin.

"I'm going to make this as terrible as I know how," Riko promised him. "When it's too much for you, don't hesitate to cry."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Passengers for flight 227 to Las Vegas, please report to Gate A19. Boarding will begin momentarily."

Neil didn't remember falling asleep, but he blinked blearily awake and stared at the florescent lights overhead. Cold glass rattled against his shoulders and hair where he sat propped against a window. He heard the muted roar of a jet engine as it hurtled down the runway. The glass stilled before the noise faded. He rubbed his eyes with gloved hands and regretted it immediately. The gloves hid his bandages but did nothing for the pain. He made his hands into fists, hissing through his teeth at how much it hurt. Satisfied his fingers were all accounted for, he dropped his gloved hands to his lap.

"Passengers for flight 1522 to Atlanta, please be advised: there has been a gate change. We will now board this flight from Gate A16. I repeat: flight 1522 to Atlanta, Georgia will now board from Gate A16. Please report to your new gate immediately for an expeditious departure."

The announcement came on again a couple seconds later, this time in Spanish. For a moment Neil was baffled that it wasn't in French. He'd spent so much time with Jean he'd forgotten any other language existed. Jean was technically forbidden to use French, since Riko couldn't understand it, but he'd whispered it to Neil when Riko wasn't close enough to hear. Jean would mock him for his current confusion, except Jean wasn't here. Neil looked at the seat beside his and saw only his duffel. Jean was nowhere in sight.

He was at an airport, so Jean must be on the other side of the security checkpoint. Neil would have to go back and tell him he'd slept through his flight. When he looked around for a sign to Departures, though, he recognized the tacky furnishings of Upstate Regional Airport.

Upstate was in South Carolina, but Neil didn't remember leaving West Virginia. He didn't even remember leaving Castle Evermore. Neil gripped the armrests of his chair to ease himself upright and looked over his shoulder. It was dark out; night had fallen and he hadn't even noticed. He pawed at his uncooperative memory, then let it slide. It didn't matter how he'd gotten here so long as he was here.

Getting here was only half the battle. The other half was getting to his feet. Neil held his breath as he painstakingly hoisted himself out of the chair. For a moment he was sure his legs would give out from under him. Somehow they held. It hurt to clench his hand around his duffel bag's strap but he held on

anyway. He couldn't feel the weight of it against his hip. He needed to know it was there with him.

He trudged for Arrivals. It should have been a short walk, but he moved with the speed and grace of someone six times his age. Every inch of him felt like it'd gone through a meat grinder. He made it as far as baggage claim before he realized he had nowhere to go and no way of getting there. Neil stared stupidly at the conveyer belts, then limped to the wall. He followed it around until he found an outlet. His hands screamed in pain as he rummaged through his duffel, but he finally found his phone. It was dead, of course. It probably died two—three?—weeks ago. Neil plugged it in and waited.

When it had enough juice to turn on, it immediately started loading every missed message from his vacation. Neil tried thumbing through his contacts, but the alerts kept popping up to interrupt his progress. He gave up and watched names flash by. Unsurprisingly most of the texts were from Nicky. Even Aaron and Allison's names came up. The only name missing was Andrew's.

At last his phone had downloaded everything from the server, and Neil could get into his contacts list. Neil saw Andrew's name first, then Kevin's, and finally hit the third speed dial Andrew programmed into his phone.

Wymack answered on the fourth ring. "You have a good reason to be bothering me on a holiday?"

"I didn't know who else to call," Neil said. He barely recognized his own voice. The last time he'd spoken he'd been screaming; apparently his vocal cords still hadn't recovered. Neil pressed his forehead to the wall and tried to breathe. He couldn't remember when breathing wasn't a chore.

"Neil?" All the gruff posturing left Wymack's voice; that sharp edge was all alarm. "Are you all right?"

Neil smiled. It felt like it tore his face open. "No. No, I'm not. I know it's kind of sudden, but can you come get me? I'm at the airport."

"Wait right there," Wymack said. "I'm on my way."

Neil nodded, knowing Wymack couldn't see it, and hung up. He didn't have the strength to stay standing, so he knelt and set a timer on his phone for fifteen minutes. When it went off, he yanked the charger from the wall and carried his bag outside. He sat on the curb with his feet in the gutter, ignoring the way irate drivers honked warnings at him. Neil was so out of it he didn't realize Wymack had pulled up to the curb a short ways down until a heavy hand wrapped around his arm.

"Up," Wymack said. "We're getting out of here."

Neil twisted his hand in Wymack's sleeve and let Wymack haul him to his feet. Wymack got the passenger door open for him and watched as Neil climbed

in. When Neil was safely tucked inside Wymack slammed the door and went around to the driver's side. Neil steeled himself for questions, but Wymack said nothing to him. Neil watched the airport disappear, watched signs blur outside the window, and let his eyes close.

When he opened them again, he was flat on his back on Wymack's couch. Wymack had dragged his desk chair into the living room to keep watch over him. A bottle of scotch sat almost empty on the coffee table between them. The lid was on but Neil could still smell it. Neil pushed himself up, wincing the entire way, and returned Wymack's guarded expression with one of his own.

"I'm sorry."

"He sounds like Neil," Wymack said, "but he doesn't look like him. I'll take your explanation from the top and without a side order of bullshit, thanks."

Neil looked at him, not understanding. The answer was there, just out of reach, a flash of blue and panic and shattered glass. Neil clawed desperately at his memory, but his body caught on before his mind did. He reached up to touch his hair, and Neil remembered. Dread was acid in his veins, eating him alive from the inside out, and Neil lurched to his feet.

"No," he said, but it was too late to change things.

Wymack got up when Neil stumbled for the door, but he didn't try to stop him. Neil threw the bathroom door open and cut the light on. The face waiting for him on the mirror was horrible enough to take his legs out from under him. Neil scrabbled at the sink as he crumpled to his knees but wasn't strong enough to hold himself up.

Neil had dyed his hair brown from time to time, but never this shade, never anywhere near this shade. This was his natural color, and those were his real eyes, and this was his father's face. The bandages and bruises weren't enough to disguise the man he'd seen in the mirror. Neil thought he'd throw up but he was too weak to manage it.

"Breathe," Wymack said.

Neil didn't realize he'd stopped until Wymack's fist on his back pounded the air back into his lungs. He clawed at the cabinet door and choked on the first breath he managed. He had to grit his teeth against a cry he didn't dare voice. It was too late to tell Wymack not to look. It was too late for Wymack to pretend he hadn't seen. Wymack didn't know who he was looking at but that didn't matter.

The click of a lighter pulled him back right before he went over that edge, and Neil took the cigarette Wymack offered him. He cradled it close and breathed in as deep as he could. It hurt to breathe but he did it anyway. Each successive breath pulled hard at his stitches and the bandages taped to his skin.

He pressed his free hand to his coat, trying to feel the gauze through thick wool. He finally inhaled so deep he choked on it. He coughed so hard he thought he'd break something, but on the tail-end of his coughing he was laughing.

It sounded twisted and wrong in this suffocating space, but Neil couldn't stop. He bit his hand to muffle the sound, but it didn't help. Hysteria was one hard blink away from taking over.

"Neil," Wymack said. "I need you to talk to me."

"I think I pulled my stitches," Neil said. "I feel blood."

"Where?" Wymack asked.

"Everywhere?" Neil guessed, and tried undoing his coat buttons one-handed.

Wymack pushed Neil's hand out of the way. Neil let Wymack fight with the buttons and zipper, but it took both of them to get Neil's coat off. Neil caught the fingertip of one glove in his teeth and tugged, only to wince at the way his cheek twinged. Wymack noticed the expression and reached for Neil's face. Neil hadn't realized he had bandages on his face until Wymack pried gauze and tape off.

Wymack went so still Neil thought he'd turned to stone. "Neil, the fuck is on your face?"

Neil wrested his glove free and touched bare fingers to his skin. He didn't feel anything, so he caught at the sink and tried to get to his feet. Wymack let him try once on his own, then got up and hauled Neil upright. Neil wasn't ready to see his reflection again. He was less ready to see the "4" tattooed on his left cheekbone.

Wymack wasn't expecting his violent reaction. That was the only reason Neil succeeded in throwing him out of the bathroom. Neil dove past him and ran for the kitchen. By the time Wymack caught up with him he'd already pulled a knife from the wooden block on Wymack's counter. Wymack seized his wrist before Neil could take the knife to his own face. Neil fought like a caged beast, but Wymack slammed his hand down on the counter until Neil lost his grip. Neil scrambled for the knife, but Wymack dragged Neil to the floor with him. He got both arms around Neil and held on tight, and there was nothing Neil could do but exhaust himself trying to get free.

"Hey," Wymack said at his ear, sharp and insistent. "Hey. It's all right."

It'd never been all right. It'd come close in fleeting patches, in stolen moments with his teammates and in their last-second wins, but it'd always been overshadowed by this awful truth. Every time Neil blinked he remembered a little more of his Christmas vacation. Every time he moved he felt Riko's hands and blades and fire on his skin. He'd let Riko take him apart time and time again because it was the only way to survive, because bending should have kept him from breaking, but Neil didn't know if he could pull himself back together one

more time. He wasn't strong enough for this. He never had been. His mother had held him up but she was gone now.

"Neil," Wymack said.

Neil, Wymack called him, even when he looked like this, even with his father's face and his father's eyes and the Moriyamas' number on his face. Neil, Wymack called him, and more than anything Neil wanted it to be true. He stopped fighting to get free; the hands that had been trying to wrench Wymack's arms off him now held on for dear life.

"Help me," he said through gritted teeth.

"Let me," Wymack shot back, so Neil closed his eyes. Wymack said nothing else until Neil's labored breathing finally smoothed out. "What the fuck happened? Last I heard you were spending Christmas with your uncle."

"I lied," Neil said. "Andrew's coming back to us on Tuesday, all right? If Easthaven hasn't called Betsy yet to arrange his ride they will soon."

"They called yesterday," Wymack said. "What does Andrew have to do with this?"

"Everything that matters," Neil said.

"That's not an answer."

"I'm sorry."

"Shut up," Wymack said, so Neil subsided. They sat in silence for a couple minutes more before Wymack said, "Can I let go of you and trust you to behave, or are you going to try and cut your face off again? I want to check on your stitches."

"I'll behave," Neil said.

"Forgive me if I don't trust you," Wymack said, but he let go.

They got back to their feet. Wymack meant it when he said he didn't trust Neil, because he took Neil back to the living room and out of eyesight of the knives. Wymack gestured at Neil to shed his shirt, but Neil couldn't move well enough to get it off. Wymack eyed him for a moment, then left to get his cooking scissors. He brandished them at Neil in a question, and Neil nodded. He held perfectly still while Wymack cut his shirt off of him.

Wymack didn't say anything about the scars. He didn't say anything about how many bandages Neil had wrapped around his chest and abdomen or how many bruises showed around the gauze. He just checked Neil over with a clinical eye and poked at every line of stitches for weaknesses. Neil stood silent and still and let him work. He'd ripped threads loose on his side, down near his waist, but that gash was almost healed anyway. Wymack pushed at Neil's skin to see if it would bleed and came back with clean fingers.

Wymack peeled off blood-crusting bandages and dropped them on the coffee table. He surveyed the damage, then left. Neil heard a drawer snick open and closed, and the faucet cut on for a couple seconds. Wymack came back with a wet wash cloth and a small first aid kit. Neil tried to take the cloth from him, but he couldn't close his fingers tight enough to hold onto it. Wymack pushed his hand out of the way and scrubbed dried blood from Neil's skin. It hurt, but Neil gritted his teeth and stayed silent.

It made him think of long nights on the road, of catching his breath in safe houses all around the world. For a moment Neil remembered how his mother's fingers felt on his skin. He remembered the bite of needles moving in and out as she threaded his broken body back together. The new heat crawling up his throat to prick at his eyes was grief. Neil blinked it away as hard as he could.

"One day we're going to talk about this," Wymack said in a low voice.

"After finals," Neil said without looking at him. "After we beat the Ravens. Then I'll tell you whatever you want to know. I'll even tell you the truth."

"I'll believe that when I see it."

Wymack carried the dirty bandages and washcloth out of the room. Neil sank onto the couch and looked at Wymack's bottle of scotch. Wymack's empty glass sat off to one side. It took no work to fill it and less to knock it back. The heat was familiar, as was the harsh aftertaste.

"I thought you didn't drink," Wymack said from the doorway.

"I don't," Neil said, "unless I have to. We used alcohol as anesthetics because we couldn't risk going to the hospital." The words burned his lips more than the whisky did. Neil put the glass down and let his fingers linger on the rim. He didn't let go until he was sure his hand wasn't trembling, and then he traced the ugliest of his scars with his index finger. "Too many questions. Too much lost time. It was safer to drink away the pain."

He clenched his hand and lowered it to his lap. "Is that enough, Coach? It's a truth on credit to hold you until spring."

"Yes," Wymack said. "It's enough for now."

Wymack wrapped up Neil's wounds with fresh bandages, then reclaimed his chair. The pair sat in silence, Wymack watching Neil and Neil studying his hands. Neil fought with his uncooperative memory, trying to recall his stay at Evermore. When the most important piece clicked into place Neil could finally breathe.

"I didn't sign it," Neil said, looking up from his hands. He lifted his fingers to his face. He couldn't feel his tattoo, but he'd seen Kevin's often enough that he knew exactly where it was. "He gave me a contract but I wouldn't sign it. He couldn't make me. This doesn't mean anything. I'm still a Fox."

"Of course you are," Wymack said.

Neil nodded and looked at the clock. It was five 'til midnight. "Are we going to watch the ball drop? I want to make a wish."

"You make wishes on shooting stars," Wymack said. "New Year's is for resolutions."

"That's okay too," Neil said.

Wymack dug his remote out from under a couch cushion and turned on the TV. Noise and music filled the room. Cameras panned across the crowd as a band performed on stage. Neil searched the crowd for his teammates' faces, knowing he wouldn't see them but needing to look anyway.

He checked his phone, found the battery blinking critically low, and opened his messages box anyway. He didn't read them. He didn't have time and the battery wouldn't last long enough. He had enough power to compose a group message, though, so he tapped out a simple "Happy New Year" to the Foxes. Betsy had told them Andrew's phone was confiscated for the duration of his stay at Easthaven, but Neil added his number anyway and pressed SEND.

The response was almost immediate. By the time the midnight countdown started on the screen, by the time Neil looked up and watched the flashing ball start its descent, he'd already heard back from his entire team, most of them in caps-lock and with extraneous exclamation marks. He'd ignored them through Christmas but they seemed excited to hear from him now. He was their family. They were his. They were worth every cut and bruise and scream.

Neil watched the ball hit bottom. It was January. It was a new year. It was two days until Andrew's release, eleven days until the first championships match, and four months until Finals.

Facing the Foxes on the court this spring would be the last mistake Riko ever made.

This series will conclude in THE KING'S MEN

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For more information on the Foxes and Exy, visit the author online at courtingmadness.blogspot.com.

EXY: RULES AND REGULATIONS

--Basics--

Exy is played in two forty-five minute halves with a fifteen minute halftime break.

An Exy court is 60 yards wide x 100 yards long x 10 yards tall (in meters, roughly 55 x 91 x 9). It is completely enclosed by a half-inch thick plexiglass wall: primarily for rebounds and passing, but also to protect the audience from being struck by the ball. Both Home and Away have doors to allow players on and off that bolt on the outside. These doors must not be open when the ball is in play.

The court is divided into fourths by three lines: first-court (near the Home goal), half-court, and far-court (near the Away goal). Penalty shots are taken from marked spots halfway between first-court/far-court and the Home/Away goal, respectively.

The Exy goals are on either end of the court. The actual goal is a 3 x 7 yard (2.7 x 6.4 meter) section on the wall outlined by a bold line. The goalkeeper's territory is the 3 x 7 area on the ground directly in front of the goal, also marked by a line. Players are not allowed to cross the goal line. The boxed-in area of the goal wall is laden with sensors. When a ball strikes inside the goal the wall will light up red. A ball that hits the goal's border itself does not count. Each goal counts as one point.

The objective of the game is to out-score one's opponents.

--The Teams--

There are four positions: striker, dealer, backliner, and goalkeeper.

- The striker is offense and plays to score

- Strikers start the game on the half-court line. The strikers on the serving team start on the inside; strikers for the defending team are on the outside.

- The dealer serves and is thereafter the middleman; dealers have the option to specialize as offense or defense and can play as an extra striker or backliner depending on how the game is going

- Dealers start on the first/far-court lines.

- The backliner is defense and protects the goal
- Backliners start on the first/far-court lines.
- The goalkeeper guards the goal

Six players per team are allowed on the court at a time. Generally speaking, this allows for two strikers, a dealer, two backliners, and the goalkeeper. The goalkeeper is an optional position, however; a manager may sacrifice the goal for an extra player under certain circumstances.

The minimum size for an NCAA team is currently nine players. In theory this allows for six on-court players and a sub for each position save goalkeeper. After recent events this rule is under review and posited to increase to twelve.

--Equipment--

-Racquet

-- Net depth varies by position. Dealers have the deepest nets so they can more easily carry the ball between offense and defense. Striker racquets are a bit shallower, still allowing them time to line up a perfect shot. Backliner racquets have just a little give, as backliners are strongly discouraged from carrying the ball; the longer a ball is near the goal the higher the chance an opposing striker can take possession of it. Goalkeeper racquets are flat. They are also the largest of the racquets, with a head that measures 1.5 x 2 feet.

- Goalkeeper racquets are also the longest allowed on court, with a shaft that tops out at 4 feet. Racquets for every other position have a range of 30-45 inches based on player height and preference. Racquet weights are also negotiable, as are the materials allowed in the construction. Generally speaking, offense racquets are made of aluminum (for lighter carry and more control), and heavy defense racquets are made of wood (for more power and force in challenges).

Ball

-- Roughly the size of a fist and weighted for rebounds

Helmet

-- Required to be worn on the court at all times unless instructed otherwise by an official or unless the game is not in session. A visor goes in front of the eyes to allow a protected but unobstructed view of the court; grating protects the face from the nose down.

Armor

-- Chest and shoulder padding, neck guard, shin guards, arm guards, and armored gloves to protect the players' fingers. Optional: bandannas to keep hair

out of one's face, armor to wear over one's thighs under one's shorts, and mouth guards (to prevent accidental injury during collisions)

--Some Basic Rules--

1. Off-sides is in effect on Exy courts. Meaning: an offense player who does not have possession of the ball, or who is moving to take possession of the ball, must have an opposing defense player between him or herself and the opposing goalkeeper at all times. This prevents strikers from waiting near the goal to score. The penalty for off-sides is loss of possession and a reset to the half-court line.

2. Body checks are allowed against players who have reasonable possession of the ball: that is, who currently have it, who have just relinquished it, or who are within a moment of receiving it. The player who currently has possession of the ball may body-check any other player with no restrictions. A faulty body check results in loss of possession and a reset to the next-closest court line.

3. Any other form of fighting is prohibited and will result in a card. The severity decides whether the card is yellow or red; it also determines whether a team deserves a penalty shot or a simple loss in possession. Games are restarted from where play was halted; the exact spot will be decided on by the residing referee. No other player may stand within ten feet of the dealer during a mid-play serve.

4. "Stick checks" are allowed only between racquets. A player who strikes another player's body with his or her racquet will be carded and the opposing team will receive a penalty shot. This includes using one's racquet to trip another player. A stick check against another player's helmet is an immediate red card and earns the wounded team a penalty shot on goal.

5. Balls may only be carried for 10 steps, at which point they must be passed. Acceptable passes are to a teammate, to oneself via a rebound, or a shot on goal.

6. One yellow card is a warning. Two result in the player sitting out the remainder of the game. A player who is red-carded is immediately expelled from the ongoing game and must sit out of the next one as well.

7. Exy games for youths and high schoolers require four referees at minimum. From the NCAA level upward six are required, three to either side of the court.

8. Goalkeepers are the only players allowed to touch the ball with their hands. Players cannot catch, kick, or otherwise interfere with the ball unless using their racquets. Violation of this is a stop-play and switch of possession.