Under a Bad Sign (or Five Months in a Fishbowl)
by ChartreuseChanteuse

Summary

All Bo and Luke Duke have ever talked about wanting was a life on the NASCAR Circuit. What's a boy to do once all his dreams have come true?

Notes

There are a lot of things I don't own. (Like the Dukes of Hazzard.) Like a solid knowledge of NASCAR. I did a ton of research but not necessarily in the right order. This led to discrepancies and plain old mistakes. I could fix them, I suppose, but I don't want to. Once I started to see the story unfolding this way, I didn't want to change it.

The NASCAR schedule that I used for this story is the 2010 schedule. (It was a convenient find.) However, this means that a couple of the tracks mentioned in here did not exist in 1982/1983. If you ignore this fact, the story will be that much more enjoyable. Another thing you might want to overlook is that qualifiers are nothing like what I describe here. Sometimes the research was a bit behind the writing. *Cough, cough*
Green, unnatural, almost neon and receding into the distance until it was close to being a dot. From there it hit the first turn and Luke figured it was about time he stopped watching, started listening and paying attention to his job. Damn hard thing to do, to just watch Bo all but disappear like that, but then again, maybe that was one of those things he had to get used to: gazing down the endless stripe of gray at his cousin's wavering exhaust as he drove away.

At least, he consoled himself as he paced across the asphalt, it wasn't hot. Not the weighted, choking humidity that flattened Bo's hair and spirits all at once, made it hard to know whether that moisture on the boy's face represented hard work or homesickness. Blistering sun bubbling into afternoon clouds that did nothing to alleviate the misery, and then there was thunder. Close and low, with lightning snaking all around, and they'd had to abandon the furniture right there in the truck (what of it they hadn't already dragged inside anyway) but then it was rented furniture in a rented truck, belonging to no one and everyone who had ever sat or slept on it before, and it seemed pretty likely that lying in its half-unpacked state was probably not the worst thing that had ever happened to it.

Hiding out from the storm in a low, level, row house like two city boys that had never been caught outside when the sky opened up, but these clouds were somehow lower, more menacing, bolts coming out of them faster and in more directions than an Appalachian storm. This, right here, was flat, hot Florida and no way to find shelter except to duck inside.

But that was only their base camp, a place they hadn't seen in the week that had passed since they dragged the last lamp in and stood it in the corner next to the couch. Just like home and nothing at all like home, because putting some light next to the most comfortable seat in a place didn't make it a farmhouse. It was still nothing more than a glorified apartment with concrete floors under ugly blue carpet, with two bedrooms and a corner that might be mistaken for a kitchen, what with how it had a stove and refrigerator in it. Unpacked, set up, Carnival of Thrills poster on Bo's wall like a memory so special the boy would never manage to let go of it, but it turned out they wouldn't reside there, not really. The road, the one thing both Duke boys had always loved, and that was where they were meant to live now. In an RV, up Interstate 95, past palms and through loblolly pine, over lakes and under hardwoods, crushed in by cities and drivers so desperate to get onto or off the road that they'd play a bizarre sort of chicken with a trailer. Past houses clumping together like a penned herd of sheep with hardly a breath of air between them, until finally there was no more room, and they had to be built on top of each other, concrete and glass, reaching for the sky. And at last, creeping up some turnpike or other where there were more exits than straightaway, Bo pointing out the window to what the map proclaimed to be New York City, Luke reckoned maybe he halfway understood Yankees for the first time in his life. If he'd grown up with nothing but gray concrete below and brown smog above, he'd be halfway crazy, too. Full of greed and invading the south for her trees and hills, for her sweet air and the freedom of running over her soft grasses only to dive into the clean waters of her ponds. Reckoned that if he hadn't been born a Southerner, it would be his life's goal to become one.

"Lukas?" in his ear, because Bo had reached the backstretch now, and they had jobs, both of them. Paying jobs and that meant obligations every bit as much as it did income to send home to Jesse and just maybe provide them with a few comforts of their own.
"How's she feel?" seemed a better thing to say than admitting how his mind had been wandering over bitter little thoughts that were all about where they'd been and not where they were right now. Living their dream, his before it was even Bo's, nurtured and grown into a full-fledged fantasy before it got handed over to his kid cousin. Who took care of it even better than he had, loved it with all his heart, watered, fed and tended it until he found a way to make it real.

"Good," came Bo's answer, and maybe, just maybe that was the only answer the boy had ever known to the words how's she feel. Made Luke smirk with Duke pride at everything he'd taught the little blonde boy who was so eager to learn.

A few more pacing steps across oil-stained asphalt and here came Bo, around the fourth turn and heading up the front stretch. Just him for now, with Mikey and Jay taking their own test laps out of sync with the 'rookie.' Which was how they thought of Bo, and maybe he was new to smooth-paved and relatively safe roads to race on, but that boy – he'd show them eventually, just how new to racing he wasn't. Luke had no doubt about that.

"All right," he instructed as the drone of Bo's engine approached, passed, dropped in pitch as he headed for that first turn again. "Catch Mikey."

Who would do everything in his power to keep from being caught, but it would all be in fun, a sweating, grinning, giggling challenge between two boys climbing the ranks. Not as safe as bouncing over the old airstrip in an equal match with Luke, but about as close as things could get out here on the circuit. Mikey had that half a season's experience on the big tracks; this here was the Duke boy's first trip around the real thing. And Bo was about half a lap behind, so Luke figured the odds were pretty even.

At least it wasn't hot – cool breeze at the back of his neck mocking him for wishing for it, then shivering when it came – and at least it wasn't ugly. Not since that stretch that started somewhere in Virginia and didn't let up until halfway through Connecticut (which he'd only halfway been able to get a good look at, because somehow it figured that if Bo got to drive the car, Luke had to drive the rig over the most cramped and crowded stretch of road in the whole country), it hadn't been ugly. Just beyond the simple oval of the New Hampshire International Speedway, there were hills, round ones, with trees. Just starting with their first yellows and oranges and it was dang pretty. Never figured on the north having anything close to this.

Beautiful maybe, or it would be in a month or so, but they'd be – well he hadn't memorized the schedule yet, but it seemed to his memory like probably the west somewhere. Warmer than this and dryer, maybe a lot less like home. Because take away the briskness of the air and this could be Georgia or North Carolina. And of all the scouts to finally figure out that Bo was worth snapping up, it would have to be Doug from the LaMatt team, based down in Florida. Hell, he'd rather be based just about anywhere, even all the way up here in New Hampshire, than down there in Daytona.

"Watch it, Bo," he found himself muttering, watching that ugly lime-colored streak flash up the front stretch with a matching streak of yellow close behind. Drafting and not really; more like getting ready to get underneath Bo, and that was just—

It was a test, was what it was. From a senior driver, one with near as many years of racing experience as Bo had experience breathing, and it wasn't anything Luke wanted to watch. Except he did, needed to see Bo survive that first or second turn, wherever Jay decided to make that halfway dirty move, and he couldn't. No way to see it from down here, out here, not next to Bo in the passenger seat and shouting commands with his own hands ready to take the wheel if need be.

Had to settle for pacing, faster, more like a march, like those days on Parris Island when he'd been
sentenced to hours on his feet and moving. Nothing he'd liked then, but it got burned into him, right through the soles in his boots and up the muscles in his legs; that military pace. Must look funny because it never failed to catch Jesse's eye or Daisy's when he paced the south forty, and there he was getting odd little looks from the rest of the guys. His crew, they were supposed to work for him, not eyeball him like that, but he couldn't spare more than a glare in their direction, because Bo was somewhere out of his sight. Moving at high speed in an unfamiliar car, way the hell up north where the track was cold and paved and nothing like the surfaces his cousin was used to racing on, with a threat on his tail – and Luke couldn't see him. No time to bark orders about the boys in the pit minding their own damned business, not when he had to call, "Bo? You with me?" into the headset clamped in front of his face.

A giggle, and that wasn't an answer. Or maybe it was, it meant Bo was still breathing, and then there was the fact that there hadn't been any bloodcurdling screeches, no crash and no flames. Yet, but he still couldn't see, had reached the end of their section of the pit and had to turn around now to the continued glances and smirks from the rest of them, and dang it all, he was going to have to give them something to do. Go and find me a left-handed crescent wrench boys, and I don't want to see your faces again until you've got one. But he couldn't, his lips had much more important things to be saying.

Like: "Bo! Answer me," but he didn't have to go that far, what with how his cousin knew better than to keep his silence.

"I'm here," came the answer, and Luke could hear that breathless grin. The brat was having fun, fun while his cousin, his pit crew chief, his protector, was going halfway nuts with not knowing what he was up to.

Back into sight then, green behind yellow now, drafting on Jay, and that wasn't smart.

"I said catch Mikey, Bo." Because Jay was the LaMatt star, the king of this particular road, and the last thing the man wanted was a whippersnapper on his tail, proving his own skills to be just about equal.

"Yes, sir," Bo answered, that same chipper tone like he didn't know how he was tempting a bigger and badder dog to just go ahead and take a big ol' bite out of his hide. And the boy slipped out of the groove and off of Jay's tail like it was what he planned to do all along.

Maybe ten passes from one end of the pit to the other, and he called Bo in from where he was playing what amounted to nothing more than a game of tag with Mikey. Boy came without having to be told twice, careening into the pits like they were just that much extended track, never slowing until he screeched to a halt just inches from Luke. The rest of the crew stumbled back over hydraulic lines and into tires, and Luke reckoned that served them right for thinking they knew even one thing about working with Bo Duke. Hell, they'd only known the boy for a week, didn't have the first clue about how there was no standing still, no just waiting around calmly, not when his cousin was behind the wheel.

Grin through the faceplate of his helmet as Luke shoved at the netting covering his window. Out of his restraints already, helmet tossed onto the seat next to him, halfway up onto the doorframe and Luke reckoned he'd best brace himself to be climbed on. A Bo Duke hug and the guys around them wouldn't begin to know what make of it. Drivers didn't generally have a real inclination to go grabbing hold of their pit crew chiefs, at least not over a few practice laps. Winning the Winston Cup itself, now that would merit glee. Out of a driver that wasn't Bo, didn't have more forward energy than a freight train flying across barren plains.

"All right, Bo," he had to mutter, had to slap the boy on the back and all but shove him off, back
into his own skin, because these boys out here, they wouldn't understand. "How'd she feel?"

"Fine, just fine," came the drooling grin of a response, and it wasn't what Luke wanted to hear.

"Balance okay? Any drag?"

"Nope," Bo informed him. "You want to drive her?"

But they weren't two country boys sharing the love of one car, not here. They were driver and pit crew chief, and Luke had no business climbing through the window of this here car. It would take awhile, maybe weeks, for Bo to figure out where they were and what it meant to be here. This wasn't exactly a place where it was all right to go crashing through a fence, so long as you rebuilt it before sunset.

"Nah," was all he said though, no need to go giving his cousin lectures about appropriate behavior, not when he was all teeth and glowing eyes and… sweat. "You go in and get yourself cooled off. Lots of liquids," because the boy would never realize how much water he was losing just sitting in a car, but Luke reckoned it was more than what he'd have lost if he was out in the fields harvesting. (But he wasn't, neither of them were, they'd left that little task to their city-boy cousins, and he reckoned he ought to call Jesse and apologize about that – tomorrow, maybe the next day.) "Me and the boys," Luke's real charges, because here he wasn't supposed to be responsible for Bo, not once he got out of the car, "are gonna go over this thing from bumper to bumper. Come back in a half hour and take her out again."

Because tomorrow morning things would get serious real fast, driving for qualification against a whole track worth of Jays, most of which would be even more motivated than LaMatt's star driver to see Bo go skidding off the track. And assuming his cousin survived that, there'd be a real race come afternoon.

Post race pit crew meetings, and he wasn't supposed to give a damn about them.

"It's just a place for them to take half the credit for doing a quarter of the work," Jay had informed him. Meant it, too, and that was just – cynical, maybe. Worthy of a head shake and no more, because Jay had a relatively decent chance to take the Winston Cup this year, and Bo reckoned he'd rather watch the man drive than listen to him talk.

"Come on," Mikey prompted from a lot closer. "They'll catch up." Because team LaMatt was headed out to the casino with every intention of losing more money than any of them actually had in their wallets.

Gambling's a vice, Jesse nagged in his head, but that didn't stop him. Any more than the fact that Mikey was clean, dressed, wet hair combed back out of his face – as a contrast to Bo's barely stripped out of his coveralls, t-shirt and shorts clinging tight to his skin and sweaty hair dripping into his eyes – stopped him. (Though he reckoned that if he anticipated having any fun tonight he really ought to get into the shower first, and then maybe into his tightest jeans, the ones the pretty little fillies couldn't peel their eyes away from.) It wasn't even the fact that Luke had at least an hour before he could get free, between the meeting and supervising the preparation of Bo's car for transport, that stopped him.

"I'll be along directly," Bo assured the other drivers with a smile. "Y'all just go ahead. If I don't give you a head start, there ain't no way y'all will manage to get any of the girls."

Jay wasn't terribly impressed (but then he never was, not until he'd had his first few drinks and
then, *then* he managed to wonder aloud how it was that the Duke boys found themselves in the company of all the pretty girls), and Mikey offered a shrug; he'd tried. "I'll save you a seat," he promised, which only went to show he hadn't exactly been listening. Duke boys had better things to do than sit at the bar. "Don't take too long."

Too long, well, yeah. It might, and the boys might be a few sheets to the wind by then. Safe place to do it here at the Dover International Speedway where the RVs were clumped together on the infield by team, and the casino/bar/restaurant was a safe stroll across the track. Another half hour and most of the spectators would be gone, all except the biggest die-hards and the groupie girls. Only his second race on the circuit, and already Bo knew the habits of the pretty little things who came to watch, and just maybe to find out whether the guys were half as fast off the track as they were on it. Quick to lift their glasses, that was for sure, and after that time got funny, skipping then dragging as the girls got prettier, but they may or may not have gotten exactly what they wanted.

It wasn't that he was waiting for Luke, not really. When it came to the extracurricular activities, he was every bit the master of his own fate. But – there it was, happening again. Little jiggle of the clipboard on Luke's knee as he doled out an assignment to Earl, something about strut mounts and shock absorbers and the flatbed that the Monte Carlo would be loaded onto. And the roadie's head was nodding, right hand scribbling down some note or other about making sure the car was securely strapped, while Luke's body stayed perfectly still. Rigid, even, but then there was that clipboard. Wobbling around on his unmoving knee, because old Luke, he was far too cool to let his leg bounce up and down, even if he did have excess nervous energy to dispel.

Bo figured that knew well enough what it meant, how somewhere in his cousin's right boot, there was a toe tapping. Little muscles contracting where no one could see them, but Luke was sprung so tight, every muscle bigger than the last and all linked together with sinew, so even if his knee didn't move, the clipboard did.

Something was under Luke's skin, something more than the muscle there, and Bo had himself a pretty good idea what it was.

Went and caught himself a shower anyway, because when the talk was done (and that would still go on for a few minutes yet) Luke wouldn't be free until he watched whatever regimen he was prescribing for the car get properly performed. And, Bo reckoned, ordered the touch up paint.

Clean, finally, respectable in his jeans and unadorned t-shirt, nothing to announce him as a member of the LaMatt team. Reckoned those groupies out there didn't need to know exactly which car he'd been driving (horrid shade of green and just covered with Mountain Dew logos – soda so disgustingly sweet even he didn't much care for it, and he had an avowed love for sugar) only that he'd been on the track. Hair combed out and he was ready. Just about, anyway – had to find Luke first.

Which turned out to be easy – too easy really, just crossing paths in the cinderblock clubhouse, his cousin mentally somewhere else, fingers making clear parts in his hair as he passed from here to there.

"Luke," he had to say, that was if he wanted the man's attention, wanted to avoid getting accidentally walked into instead.

Blue eyes, spooked for a second. All these years later and it was still too easy to startle the Marine that still lurked in there somewhere. Or maybe by now that was just Luke, slipping inside of his own head sometimes, so in love with being smart that he spent plenty of time nurturing that brain of his, and surprised when someone reminded him that there was a bigger world out here.
"Hey, Bo. What're you doing still here?" Because it was a known and proven fact that Bo Duke had never been late for a beer or a chance to find a girl and a semi-private corner to get her into in his life.

"Waiting for you."

Luke started to smirk at him, at the foolishness of missing out on an hour of fun, or maybe it was at the urge not to be alone. But somewhere before that upper lip managed to tighten down into a full curl, it all softened.

"What's up, Bo?" Gentle, concerned, the kind of thing that always turned him into a little kid again. He didn't like it, didn't want his chin to dip like that, tried to resist the irresistible, but it was a fool's effort.

"I reckon I could have done better." Because the middle of the pack – well that was never been a place that he and Luke had been satisfied to finish. First or a close second, that's where they'd always ended up, unless, of course, they'd done a wild flip or two off the course altogether – but those were rare and generally related to the sudden and explosive loss of a tire. Mediocre endings to races, those just didn't happen to the Dukes.

Snort and smirk. "You done fine, Bo." Sure he did, and that's why that clipboard (that seemed to have gone missing somewhere along the line; Luke's hands were empty now) bobbed around so visibly on his cousin's knee. "You ain't in Choctaw, you know."

No, he was in Delaware, ought to be thrilled. Driving on tracks he'd only ever seen on Cooter's grainy television screen, rabbit ears stretching out as far as they could reach just to bring in that much of a fuzzy picture. Except in the familiar echoing corner of the garage, the town's boys crowded around that one small screen hollering and complaining and talking a good line about how much better they could do out there, the track seemed that much smaller. More manageable, and with that top view of cars doing laps he could always see the trouble before it happened. Totally different angle to be peering out the windshield at the back end of a Mustang driven by a pro that was jealously guarding his few inches of the track.

"That fourth turn," he didn't like the way it was banked. Made his stomach clench on every lap, made his body lean left like he could keep the car level that way.

"Wasn't nobody's friend, Bo. They was all taking that one like it was a grease slick." Hands on his shoulders now, Luke's eyes right there staring into his. So intense, so present; it was always hard to remember at times like these that the man could be distant, too.

"Didn't everybody have as much trouble with it as I did."

Smile then, the real thing. Like he hadn't seen from Luke since – well it had been a long time, anyway. Sometimes he reckoned that everything between him and Luke had changed on a dime that day a couple years back when he followed after Diane Benson, took to sleeping in her trailer instead of his room back at the farm. It was only a couple of days that he was enamored of her and the life she gave all appearances of offering, but it felt like more. Long enough, maybe, to forever change everything between him and his family.

And then, once in a great big while, he'd get a hopeful sign like this right here – Luke's smile – reminding him that he'd always been a dramatic moron. Nothing had changed and everything was fine. Even if he was standing in a mostly empty clubhouse, some five hundred miles from home, his cousin's hands wearing grooves in his muscles while he whispered sad little confessions of only having half the skills and talent that Luke gave him credit for.
"You ain't supposed to be winning, Bo. Not yet. You start winning now and you'd be jumping rank, making a mess of things." Yeah, he knew that. Sort of, he understood how there were senior members of his own team that were supposed to win first. Helping them do it, riding in on their coattails, that was his job. It had all been carefully laid out for him in that first meeting, down there in Daytona. The only time he'd ever met one of the owners; Bill Matthews up at the front of the room, reminding them all that they were a team. No fighting, no pushing or shoving, they all worked together to make sure that Jay had the best shot at every cup. And if Mikey and Bo wanted to come in second and third, that would be fine, just fine.

But he hadn't even ranked in the top ten. His face must have shown that line of thought, because his shoulders got tugged on then. Quick look both ways and then it was a hug, muscled arms up over his shoulders, pulling him down so Luke didn't have to be on his toes. Wide hand in his hair, rubbing at the back of his neck like his cousin only ever did when they were small, when he'd hit the dirt hard and cut some part of himself open, when he needed to be calmed down long enough for Luke to figure out how to fix whatever got broken.

"What's the damage?" Seemed a reasonable enough question to him, but it prompted a funny little sound out of Luke's throat, got him to rock back out of the hug so he could look at Bo with his head cocked to the side and his eyebrows meeting in the middle. "To the car," he clarified, though he didn't feel he needed to. That fourth turn – it took something out of him, but above and beyond that it took something out of his fender, too, when he made contact with one of the Bud Moore team's cars. It wasn't like his cousin could have missed that little miscalculation.

Silly smirk from Luke, who let him go then. Mostly, anyway, just a right hand gripping his bicep and turning him toward the section of hallway that would lead them out of here. "Just some body damage. Since when have you worried about a dent or two?"

_Since I saw that clipboard, bobbing up and down like it had a mind of its own. Yeah, okay, it was a stupid thing to worry about. "Since the car ain't ours," sounded a heck of a lot more logical._

_Snicker, then Luke's shoulder bumping against his as they strolled down the concrete hallway, past banners from past years' races, toward the late afternoon sunshine radiating through the glass doors. "It ain't our car, so we ain't got to pay for it, neither. Come on, I'll buy you a beer." Because for once the Duke boys had money and no place in particular that they had to spend it._

Another gust of wind. Dust kicking around the pit, little needles stinging against his skin. Caught in the hairs of his arms, and it gave every impression of being the desert. Except it wasn't; hell, they wouldn't see the real thing for another month and a half.

Funny to be worrying about wind in the pit, a place where the air was rarely still nor even breathable. Nasty little spot to be most times, reeking of fuel and burnt rubber, nothing at all like tinkering with the General under the shade of an oak, with birds over his shoulders chirping their approval of his decisions regarding the air filter and the fuel pump. Funny how his farm boy's daydreams about being in this very location left out all the realities. Of asphalt replacing grass, of choking fumes instead of sweet Georgia mountain air, of sand particles boring their way into his skin with every gust of hot wind.

"Come on, Bo," he hollered his encouragement, because that was part of the deal, too. No quiet afternoons spent passing one screwdriver between them – transferring grease and sweat in equal measure, but that never mattered because they were of the same blood to begin with – no, this here was blaring, glaring, hot and screaming, but there Bo went, toxic green car holding the lead against red.
Different track, longer by half than either New Hampshire or Dover had been. Tri-oval, sexy-looking thing that matched up with any layout they'd ever seen in any of his car magazines. Damn fast, too, and Bo was all but floating above it, insisting on his right to qualify for the upcoming race. Seemed like whatever that little crisis of confidence was back in Delaware, it gotten itself out of Bo's system.

Legs tired and the crew still thought it was awfully funny how he paced, but they left him to it. He laid down the law for them back in New Hampshire, about how they needed to worry a lot harder about being at the top of their refueling and tire-changing game than they did about whether their chief liked to take a stroll every now and then. They'd thought they were clever, reckoned on little puddles of oil conveniently dribbled around the pit would make him slip and slide, but not a one of them had ever spent time riding on the hood of a stock car while it bumped over dirt roads at high speed with a revenuer on their tails, and none of them had the first idea what it meant to keep their balance when the footing got slick. It was a lazy man's revenge, letting them skid around in the mess of their own making, certainly nothing his enterprising ancestors would approve of. But it worked, and he reckoned he had enough to do keeping Bo in line, so if it kept the rest of the brats in his command from testing him, he could be content to let them punish themselves.

"Luke," came back into his ear, Bo simultaneously too close and too far away. "I ain't liking the way she's handling." No, on second thought, just plain too far away. The pit crew chief had nothing on the spotter in moments like this. Made Luke wish for that top view that would let him see that Bo was all right, even when he was on the backstretch. "Picked up a shimmy on the last few laps."

Oh. Nice of Bo to tell him so soon. There went that green flash around the fourth turn then angling across the stretch in front of the pits, and it turned out that seeing made no difference. Couldn't tell just how serious the trouble might be from that quick of a pass.

"Can you hold it together?" No, he wouldn't want to be the spotter, stuck up there at the top of the stands, calling out positions and conditions, but not having any control whatsoever over the way events unfolded. If he couldn't be at Bo's side, slamming the car into gear and hollering warnings, if he couldn't feel the nature of the shimmy under his own backside, then at least he could be here, calling the shots.

"I can try."

Nope, not good enough.

"Bring her in to me," he commanded, or maybe it was more like sighed. Somewhere between the two, probably, an order mixed with regret. Followed by, "D'Onfrio, Gillis, get ready to check them rear tires. Heller, you get after that spoiler." All the easiest options to deal with, at least mid-race.

"Luke," Bo tested, but—

"Bo." Steady voice, brooking no argument. There were more important concerns than momentary sorrows.

"Yes, sir." Because Bo had been raised right; Luke was his elder, and even if he didn't like it, he'd be forced to obey.

He understood, knew exactly what all of Bo's reservations were. Too late in the heat to pit, too close to the last flag, but at the speed his cousin was driving a shimmy could turn into a car flipping trunk over bumper faster than any of them could say flying flameball. And if Bo could only promise to try to hold her together – no way. "It's one race, Bo," he consoled as the Monte Carlo slowed out of the pack and made its way up the pit road.
But he knew that part, too. How Bo was young, untested. At least as far as NASCAR was concerned; all those years of making mincemeat out of dirt track drivers meant nothing here.

"Yeah," came the resigned answer, halfway to heartbroken. Because there was always that underlying threat of being kicked down to the Nationwide Series, being demoted to an up-and-comer instead of running in the big time. Not driving on 'real' circuit, more like NASCAR's equivalent to the pee wee league. The kind of thing Jay kept needling the younger guys about, but Luke didn't figure it was anything more than a little bit of hazing, initiation and welcome to the circuit from a half bitter driver in his final years. Bill Matthews sure as hell hadn't ever mentioned any such thing; not when he met with Luke after the scouting report that made the team want Bo in the first place, not when the time came to sign the contracts, not when the rules got laid out in the initial team meeting down in Daytona.

And then Bo was there in front of him, head down, refusing a drink, just raring to get back out on the track when all that was holding him back was the jack and the air gun – well that and the fact that for a few seconds there, he had no back tires. Luke pulled out the mirror himself, checking underneath to see whether the car needed a wedge adjustment, and—uh oh. "Bring that spoiler up, boys." The tires, well, they wouldn't help, but they wouldn't hurt and they were just about changed anyway. "Bo." Fingers tugging against the netting in the window, and his cousin got the hint. Unsnapped the fasteners from the inside, leaving Luke with a free hand to cover the microphone on his headset. Wasn't anyone but the two Duke boys and the spotter supposed to be able to hear each other over those airwaves, but he'd spent a lifetime in Hazzard, where operators eavesdropped on phone calls, and CB transmissions were fodder for lawmen of all sorts. And he reckoned that no one else but him and his cousin needed to know the kind of disadvantage Bo would be at for the rest of the heat. "Your sway bar," he counseled. "Must've got knocked out of whack somewhere." Too much torsion, and of course the driver would wind up feeling that as shimmy. "You just go out and finish," because not finishing at all would look very bad, would look like copping out, and Bo didn't need that particular monkey on his back. It was enough that Jay was constantly riding him; he didn't need the rest of the senior circuit drivers snickering about a boy too scared of his car to at least try to see a qualifier through. "But you take it easy out there. Don't even try to corner tight. You hear me?"

"Yeah." Defeated. Luke couldn't see his eyes through the face shield, and he didn't need to. A smack to the back of the boy's helmet was about as close as he could come to sympathy at the moment. Back out of the window, the netting snapped into place and as soon as the last lug nut got tightened, he waved Bo back out onto the track.

So they'd have to sit tomorrow's race out. Hell, they'd come onto the circuit too late in the season to be amass enough points to much matter anyway. One race at a time, and any win would do. Just, they weren't going to get one this time.

Which gave them the next day off, or at least most of it. Oh, they'd have to make an appearance at the race itself, cheer on the rest of their team. But the morning practice runs would belong to the boys who'd actually qualified, as would the pre-race inspections and photos. Hell, they didn't have to be back here until at least four tomorrow, and Luke figured out how they ought to take full advantage of that.

Because the races, they'd take care of themselves. There'd be another one in a week, and the car would be all but rebuilt by that time. Whatever the failure had been today, it would be rectified beyond even being a consideration by the next time his cousin got into the car.

What was at risk was this whole other thing that had been mounting silently in Bo for the last three weeks. The annoyance at having to duck his head to get through the low doors of the RV, the cot
that was too short and too hard in all the wrong places, the pillow-punching frustration with which he found himself easily awakened by the noise of neighbors. Homesickness, pure and simple, and if the boy gave in to it, if he decided that roosters (and older cousins, really) were the only thing he wanted waking him up, and let that thought chase him all the way back to Hazzard, there would be a lifetime of regrets. (And the fact that Luke's cot was too narrow, that he had a knot on his thigh from where the kitchen table kept catching him, not to mention an occasionally racing heart from the crack-of-dawn garbage trucks emptying the dumpsters filled with soda cans and potato chip bags, well, that didn't much matter. Luke knew homesickness and he knew how to survive it.)

Years and decades of wondering what if, thinking about the trophies he hadn't stayed long enough to win.

So he formed a stupid plan, hardly worthy of the name Luke Duke, made hastily in the post-qualifying heat moments as his cousin washed away the stench of not quite making the cut, then changed into street clothes. A few minutes with the vendor that sold soft drinks to the pit teams, a simple question or two. And by the next morning when the lack of space between the Duke boys and the next nearest RV (or maybe it was the one beyond that) woke them up farm early, it didn't seem like a bad idea.

Creaking and rocking, he pulled the RV that he and Bo shared out from the middle of all but identical ones to the left and the right, zig-zagging through the narrow gaps and alleyways between them and the access road. Out of the limits of the Speedway, quick hop along the interstate before getting off onto a dusty road to nowhere. Or at least that was the impression it gave, but it didn't take long to find the river, and soon enough, the bank Curtis had mentioned, rope swing and all. Not quite skinny-dipping, because it was the Little Turkey River, not Hazzard Pond, and there was no telling who might show up. But swimming all the same, or what passed for it, even if it was closer to water fights, wearing old cutoff jeans to protect their virtue. It wasn't much, wasn't even close to the kind of trouble they could get up to at home. But on this day, because here came Bo's giggle and silly smile, it was enough.

"Get up, Bo." There was, of course, only one answer to that, and that was to roll over and take his pillow with him. Except the light was in the wrong place and the bed was too wide. "Bo," Luke's voice was too far away, and there wasn't even the slightest smell of sausage cooking. Or eggs. Or even coffee, and there really ought to have been coffee.

"Why?" he asked his pillow, not entirely sure what sort of answer he expected it to give him. About the sun coming in from the wrong angle or Luke striding closer, getting ready to nudge or shove at him and he didn't want to get up. Or maybe the question was for Daisy, about why there was no breakfast being made, even if he had figured out by now that she had to be a good two thousand miles away from here. From this hotel, since it was a west coast race and for those the LaMatt team had to fly instead of driving, their RVs heading back east under the fingers of the roadies, Earl, Wyatt and Bryan. Because before they knew it they'd have to turn around and fly right back to North Carolina. They needed the time on each track to get to know the ins and outs, couldn't waste three or four days driving from one side of the country to the other.

"Church," Luke answered, and it was just about funny. Well nigh onto funny, anyway, would have been all the way funny if he didn't seem so dang serious about it. Half into the too-bright room, but not all the way, because when Mollie-Sue booked the hotel for the team, she reckoned that drivers and pit crew chiefs all got their own spaces. Lower ranking crew members shared, but apparently it would be too strange for the Duke boys, who'd never much had the luxury of privacy or space, to bunk in the same room. Because ranks couldn't be crossed and the big boys shouldn't be crowded. Or something – maybe Luke just forgot to ask (maybe Bo would ask next time). At least they wound up adjacent, and two keys were issued to each of them, so they'd each taken a copy of the
other's. On some kind of honor system, he'd figured, like the kind they had about the General, where the first one to get a girl in there was entitled to privacy. Even if the other one had designs on getting their girl in there, even if the other one had no chance at getting a girl in there and just plain wanted to go home. If he'd known Luke was going to come barging in at the crack of dawn, he never would have given him the means. "Come on, you already got three more hours of sleep than usual."

Not true, not even partly true, and Luke ought to know that. Last night was – weird. It stayed hot long after the sun went down; like a fire dancing over the dry mountains that surrounded them, it was entrancing. Felt like midday, almost impossible to believe how many hours passed while the whole bunch of them – drivers, crew, heck, even some guys from the Bud Moore team were there – wasted the night together. It was supposed to be dinner and a beer, but then there was the patio, with its amber lights and its crazy colorful mosaics, and there were the guys. Jay, for once being halfway decent, smiling from time to time and even managing to say a few good things about him and Mikey. Of course, that was probably because he reckoned on spooking old Carl Green, the Bud Moore team driver who took the race in Kansas, and who was favored on the California Speedway long track, with its low banks and wide turns. A fool's errand, Green was too cool to let another tale-telling driver make him nervous. Or too generous, maybe, both him and Petey Willis, the other Bud Moore driver at the table. The two of them were friendly, warm, even encouraging when it came to the younger guys kicking back amongst them.

Listening to the experience amassed around them, stories of races he and Luke had considered themselves lucky to catch on the radio or television, made the time fly by. Sun-baked land holding them in its warm embrace and it seemed strange that Enos could have spent two years out here. And on top of that a shame that he'd left only a month ago, moving back east just as the Duke boys came west. Strange night filled with nostalgic thoughts, and they hadn't gotten back here to the hotel until three. It couldn't be more than – well the sun was up, he'd figured that much out – eight now. Nine at the latest. Too many beers in the immediate past and not a single coffee on the horizon.

"You found a Methodist church out here?" Came out as more of a whine than disbelief, but that wasn't his fault. Not when there was a bass drum banging around in his head.

Snicker, and undoubtedly a superior smirk was settling itself across Luke's face. That was fine – Bo would just go on looking at the pillow slung over his head. "I figure there's a Methodist church in every town, Bo."

Yeah, probably true. His question wasn't so much about that, but whether Luke spent the night looking through the phone book until he figured out where the nearest one was.

Sigh then, and anything close to amusement was gone from Luke's face. He didn't have to look to know, but he pushed the pillowcase up enough to see anyway. "You ain't got to go if you don't want to, Bo. But I am." And Jesse would want you to, too.

"I didn't say I wouldn't." But he supposed Luke had a pretty good reason to assume he had. "Just," settle down, he wanted to say, and hardly knew why. Heck, his cousin was just being his surly self, somewhere between delivering orders and offering leniency. But there was something antsy to the feel of his words and stance this morning. Or maybe that was just the weariness of Bo's own eyes, playing tricks on him. "Give me a minute."

Luke nodded, didn't move. Waiting. Arms not yet folded across his chest, but they would be in a minute.

"Dang, you're dressed," came to him as an awkward realization. Luke in dress pants, light blue
cotton shirt, hair wet and slicked down. Brown as a berry from mid-days spent in the pit, while Bo faded whiter each afternoon in his coveralls, and outside of those, a protective pod of steel. Chasing other steel pods around in tight circles, and it was all he'd ever really wanted to do with his life. Just seemed a shame that he couldn't work on his tan while he was at it.

And there stood Luke, toe-tappingly patient, every bit the little boy he hadn't looked like since Aunt Lavinia passed and Jesse gave up on making his oldest into the angel she'd always wanted him to be. Sort of lost, maybe a little bit lonely. Empty, more like, hollow. The orphan boy making do with the relatives the good Lord had seen fit to leave alive.

"I don't reckon they wear jeans to church out here, Bo. Look," and there the arms went, across his chest and he was all but pouting. "Are you gonna get up or what?"

So he pushed against the bed until he was closer to upright than not. Mostly sitting, just leaning most of his weight on the one arm braced behind him. "I'm up," he pointed out, just in case Luke couldn't tell. His cousin didn't exactly look impressed, probably needed a better demonstration. "Ah, Luke," was just a distraction while he figured out disentangling his feet from the sheet. "You got any idea how long it's been since we had that much to drink?"

No change in the man's posture, just a raised eyebrow that explained quite tidily how Luke wasn't hung over at all, and there was no we that had imbibed a few to many. Or maybe just pointed out how Luke could hold all that liquor and more, and if Bo didn't know his own limits by now, maybe he shouldn't be drinking at all. Or – well it made clear that Bo ought to be glad it was Luke looking at him that way, not their uncle. Because Jesse would have thrown cold water on him by now just to make him move a little faster.

"All right," he agreed to what hadn't been said. Feet found the floor, legs found their muscles, body managing to rise to a full stand.

And that changed everything. Made Luke, now gazing up at him, appear less frustrated and more harassed, made him small and sad and—

Bo hugged him. Couldn't explain it if he wanted to, so he ignored all the questions Luke's rigid body asked him. About whether he'd had more to drink than his cousin knew about, if he was still drunk, and even if he was, what exactly he thought he was doing. Waited until it was just stupid for the man to be fighting it, waited even a few seconds more than that until finally, Luke gave in and hugged him back.

"Morning, cuz," he muttered, no real clarity about why he did it. He and Luke woke up side by side most days, they both knew what time of day it was, and they didn't have to go saying it to each other. But even stranger than the words was the way he whispered, close to Luke's ear, the same as if he was telling a secret, like the sun wasn't blaring through the window, like they could keep the dawning of a new day just between the two of them.

"Yeah, Bo," wasn't anything like agreeing to keep the secret, maybe more like acknowledging the impossibility of such a notion. "If you hurry up," Luke added, pushing away from him and swatting him across the gut. Gentle, though, because a hung over man couldn't be trusted not to take such a gesture badly, very badly, the kind of find-a-mop, start-scrubbing-now badly that neither of them wanted to deal with. "We can get breakfast."

Yes, Bo could have taken that badly, too. But he didn't, smiled instead. Coffee, and if he was really lucky, maybe those greasy sausages his stomach was secretly hankering for.
It was a fine, fine day. The kind that could make a man resent all the good things that had happened to him, all the ways that the world had conspired to try to make him happy. Good fortune, determination and talent had landed him and his cousin exactly where they'd always figured on wanting to be. Which, right about now, was no more than four hours from home; three if they'd had the General. But they didn't, and it wouldn't matter anyway, because what they did have was their jobs to do.

Jesse and Daisy had them, too. Jobs, that was, work, and nothing easy, either. Harvest, and it had been another stroke of luck for the Duke boys that Jesse's cousins' boys were doing a whole lot of nothing with their lives, and their fathers reckoned it wouldn't hurt them any to help out the family that stayed behind in Hazzard. Providence, just looking after two farm boys dreaming after the NASCAR circuit and removing anything that resembled obstacles from their way.

Except harvest wasn't an obstacle, it was an important part of the cycle of life and death. It was a means of respecting the land and the Lord above, really, of understanding nature in all of her kindness and cruelty. It was what days like today were made for, with overcast skies and a cool breeze giving a man respite even as he worked his fingers to the bone.

And all of it – the work, the connection to the earth and sun, even the fine day – belonged to Coy and Vance now. As to Luke, he had to contend with machine and manmade surfaces, and also a niggling wish that the clouds would spawn a storm, closing the track and delaying the race for a day or two so that maybe he and Bo could slip home. Just for a day, to stand in the cornfields and let the rainwater wash over them as the stalks left little nicks on their fingers.

"How's she feel, Bo?" Funny how fast they'd become old hands at this. Seemed like forever ago that he'd said those same words, halfway amused at the double entendre behind them. Now it was just routine to ask.

"All right," came the less-than-enthused answer. "I mean, she's steady, holding to the ground just fine. She's just sluggish." And Bo never had liked a girl that couldn't keep up with the staggering pace he set. (Yeah, even inside his own head that one wasn't particularly funny.)

"Bring her in." Because Luke hadn't tinkered too hard with her since the California Speedway, with its low-banked turns. This here was a totally different track, in a cooler and much more humid atmosphere. And as much as Bo always reckoned practice laps were all about him getting used to the track, well, the car had a little something to do with the success or failure of the driver. (He might be a little bit bitter.) Sure, it was his cousin's name up there on the giant, glowing leaderboard, but there were plenty of people who had to keep their feet solidly on the ground in order to make sure that the boy had half a chance of winning the race. (Bitter, and he didn't know why. Except it was a fine day and just maybe he didn't want to be here.)

Lime green car pulling to a stop in front of him, sweaty cousin yanking himself out the window. Luke braced himself for a tantrum, reckoned he could feel it coming on same as he could always smell a thunderstorm even before the anvil clouds made their way over the mountains to the west. Long body dropping out of the car, helmet off, hair hastily shaken out of his eyes, and it should have taken only a few seconds for those legs to cross over the asphalt between them, for that finger to come to a point, for those gums to start flapping about how he needed more time on the track and less in the pit if he was ever going to—

Curl at the corner of Bo's lip wasn't anything like anger. More like frustration, maybe a touch of dejection. "I can't explain it, Luke. She's just – dragging out there."

"All right." And he'd already had his chin jutted in anticipation of a standoff, too. Had to change his body language and tone of voice all in a split second, but if Bo noticed, he didn't say. Didn't
complain about how Luke always expected the worst out of him, and this time it would have been a perfectly legitimate gripe, too. "We'll go after the tires first. And check that wedge, Gillis. We got time, Bo." Lots of time, really. The whole morning would go this way, tinkering with this and that to find speed wherever it was hiding, in the car's frame, tires, and even in the driver. Then the afternoon would disappear to qualifiers, the evening to a few beers with the guys and then early bed so they could start all over again tomorrow morning with the race. Another week in another town, a fine day and nothing to do but spend it on the track. He ought to have been happier about all that – but more importantly Bo ought to have been happier. "We'll figure it out."

"Yeah," should have been agreement, but it wasn't. More like defeat, and they hadn't even fully tested the car yet, much less lost the race.

"Bo." What's the matter? But he didn't have to ask, he already knew. Just exactly how close to home they were, and how they might just as well still be in California for all the good it was going to do them. The border between North Carolina and Georgia was impenetrable by Dukes on either side, and for once it had nothing to do with probation or Boss Hogg (who might even be a sight for sore eyes at this point). It was all about growing up, having jobs and being responsible in carrying them out. "Come on, let's take a look at the engine." Distraction, it was about all he had to offer his cousin. "Check them cylinder heads."

Took a little nudge on his cousin's coverall clad shoulder, took staring down crew members who figured that it was just crazy to ever let a NASCAR driver anywhere near the inner workings of his own car, took handing Bo a crescent wrench and then strongly suggesting that he use it, but it worked. Well enough anyway. Kept his crew and cousin both occupied for awhile, gave him time to think.

About rules (NASCAR had plenty of those) and ingenuity (Luke had plenty of that). About the cooler, heavier air of an eastern mid-October afternoon, and aerodynamics. And about how to walk the fine line between what was allowed and what he could dream up, and how to give Bo a totally fair advantage.

"D'Onofrio, lower that spoiler about six inches." That would decrease the drag, anyway, even if it did put Bo at a little more risk for loose turns. All left turns, really, it was a simple oval track. With high banks, but he didn't want the car to need more than the bottom third of any curve. So he left Bo to the engine and went after the fender himself. Nothing in the books about flaring it just a little, a tiny bit of asymmetry to make the tires like the left hand curvature of the track. Didn't take hardly any time at all, really. "You find anything up there, Bo?" he hollered as he edged up toward the hood again, still squatting down so his eye would be even with the fender, checking out curvature that his adjustment made. There was still room to flare that fender a bit more if he needed to, but he'd only do it if Bo didn't like the way the car cornered.

"Nope," was his cousin's abrupt answer. Still testy, but Luke figured that might get better real soon. "Just cleaning out the intake valves."

"All right, well," Luke said as he stood, then took the two strides to stand shoulder to shoulder with the pouting man. "As soon as you're done with that, you take her out again."

"I'm done now," Bo informed him, handing the crescent wrench back to him and sticking out a hand for a rag. Boy never had figured out how he ought to make sure he knew where the nearest rag was even before he got his hands dirty, was always looking to Luke to have one at the ready for him. And today it seemed best not to nag him about thinking ahead, just to hand over what he needed before those greasy fingers got themselves wiped across the backside of those coveralls. Ugly, just as toxic a shade of green as the car, and that surely wasn't Bo's color, but it didn't matter.
They were owned by Team LaMatt, not Bo Duke, and it wouldn't be wise to go making a mess of
them. Luke reckoned he could convince the crew out of blabbing to the boss about how Bo wasn't
exactly a union mechanic and there he was under the hood of a team car. The launderer – well
heck, Luke didn't even know who cleaned their coveralls, so there'd be no talking that person into
not ratting out a couple of rule-bending Duke boys.

"All right, get out there then. And Bo," he warned. "She's going to want to lean left. Feel her out
real good before you go getting her up to speed."

That fine line, the same one he'd spent years of his lifetime walking, between legal and right,
morality and intelligence. What he'd done to the car was perfectly within the bounds of the
NASCAR rulebook, and yet deviously clever all the same. It let Bo get around the track faster,
pushed the field that much harder. Qualifiers were nothing more than a formality, the race went
that much faster for how Bo was able to inject the other drivers with his speed. He didn't win, but
Jay did, and if the rookie Duke in the Mountain Dew car was a half a length behind and managed
to get his name listed second on the board, that was more than anyone expected of him.

Everything moved faster then. The post race interview (and it really was a shame that Jesse never
did allow a television in his house, wouldn't get a chance to see Bo's grinning face up close and
personal as he answered one or two questions that got directed at him), clean up and preparation of
the car to be trucked to the next race, the party afterward, the flow of beer. The girls were faster,
too, as was the sick feeling from too much celebrating. The hangover came along pretty quick, and
then there was the next morning, packing and getting ready to move on.

All of it sped up to double time, and that was what a lowered spoiler and flared fender could do for
a man. But what did it matter, what was it all worth, when at the end of the day, he and Bo couldn't
go home? No matter how fast they drove, they'd still be out on one track that was indistinguishable
from the next, doing laps that felt awfully familiar. Luke knew of no tricks he could pull or lines he
could walk that would lead to someplace better, happier, more like Hazzard.
A rest, sort of. A few days to themselves, mostly, and a chance to relax in their new house. Such as it was, didn't hardly feel like a whole house, what with how it was attached to a long row of identical houses. Still, Mollie-Sue called it a house and so he supposed that was what it was, even if it wasn't like anything Hazzard would have had. Luke mumbled something about the barracks, but Bo didn't figure it was that bad. After all, the doors here were tall enough for a man to bring his head inside with him, the bathroom big enough to use without bumping his knees on the door. Downright spacious, bordering on empty. At least when it came to his bedroom, which he kept entering with a wide arc so he wouldn't bark his shins on Luke's bed. Which was, of course, in the next room, and he was a just a fool unable to kick the habits of a lifetime.

There was, of course, a catch to this little interlude between one jaunt on the road and the next. Meetings and appointments – the team nutritionist, the physician, the strength coach. Luke had his own people that he had to spend time with, which had more to do with learning the latest in mechanics than his health, because a pit crew chief didn't have to be in top physical condition. Though his cousin was, with powerful muscle running the length of his body, even if team LaMatt didn't ask him to be. But then, that was the way it always had been – Luke was always smarter than he had to be, stronger, and just a bit more daring. Overqualified, and if he could do more with his life, could challenge himself to bigger and better things, he never bothered with that. Left him surly, smug, snide – and apparently perfectly happy to be that way.

Oh, and he was exactly that way for just about the whole four day respite. When Bo discovered the wonders of television (which weren't all that wonderful after all, just different to have one in the middle of their house, not to mention a reasonable reception) Luke just about glowered at the notion. Shook his head and sighed, walked decidedly away from the novelty, and if his cousin hadn't been so opposed, Bo would have gotten bored with it a lot faster than he did. After all, there were no races to watch, the serial shows were mostly inane, and there wasn't much by way of sports now that the World Series was over. But something about Luke's refusal to join him in watching made it feel like sort of a forbidden pleasure, the kind of thing he hadn't experienced since he first figured out how to get girls out to Hazzard Pond and then convince them to change into their altogether.

"You boys need anything?" That was Mollie-Sue, checking on them as they stood around in the LaMatt offices, waiting for the monthly meeting of the entire team. Seemed like that was the main reason for these few supposed days off from the road, actually, to come in here and listen to Bill Matthews remind them of their goals and strategies. Not that Bo minded, when it came right down to it. To hear some of the guys from other teams talk, there were far worse owners than LaMatt. And there was corroborating evidence in the unsmiling, disconcerting, close-packed men who sat in box seats, glaring down at the proceedings. Sometimes a win wasn't even enough to bring them out of their uptight stances. Fortunately, Bill Matthews mostly left them to themselves, and no one on the team, aside from Jay who'd been around for awhile, had even met Mike LaRue.

"No thanks, Ma'am." Good old Luke, answering for them both without bothering to consult him. So what if his cousin was right, so what if Bo didn't have the first inclination to refute him. So what if he really didn't really mind, actually.

He turned his smile on, cranked up his charm, and sat on the edge of the woman's desk. She had no
title than he knew of; she was just introduced to him as Mollie-Sue-if-you-need-anything-ask-her. She also wasn’t from the south, and that part stood out the minute she opened her mouth. Yankee-tough tongue, but underneath that odd dialect, she was as sweet as the day was long. According to Mikey, her name was made up in some kind of an attempt to fit in with the men she worked with, at least the "Sue" part. Mikey couldn't swear about the origins of her first name, and whether it might just have come from her parents after all.

"Bo Duke," she said, and it was in the tone of a scolding schoolmarm. She could pass for one, too, with her short, graying hair and very tidy, proper clothing. "Aren't you supposed to be in the conference room?"

"Well, sure, Mollie-Sue, but I got a few minutes." Or at least he figured he did; though Luke had gone inside, there were still some other guys wandering around out here. "And there ain't nobody I'd rather spend them with than you." A wink, and he smiled a little harder.

If he'd stayed behind, Luke would be rolling his eyes now, then pulling Bo aside to ask just what he hoped to gain by flirting with the team's – whatever Mollie-Sue was. And that was exactly what was all wrong with the way his cousin thought about things, because Luke would never use his charms unless he was trying to bamboozle someone – whether it was a girl that he was trying to get on her back, or Boss Hogg that he was trying to snooker some information out of. The man never did figure out being nice just for the sake of making another person happy, smiling because it made people smile right back at you.

"You look mighty pretty today, Mollie-Sue." And sometimes the pleasant things he said were just the truth. Mollie-Sue was pretty with that high blush on her cheeks, lips trying not to smile, but they were curled at the corners anyway.

"You just get in there, Bo Duke, and take your sweet talking tongue with you." Oh sure, she had a job to do, and some part of it included looking after wayward drivers who were late for meetings. So she had to feign sternness, but underneath that façade, Bo could see how his few gentle words had made her day. Luke could learn a thing or two. If he was of a mind to, but mostly he seemed more interested in gloowering at Bo as he snuck quietly into the meeting that was really only now being called to order. He wasn't late, but there'd be no convincing Luke of that.

And the meeting was boring anyway, in that same endless way school always had been. Ought to have been more fun (it was about cars after all, and what had he used to escape useless literature classes anyway, except daydreams of cars), ought to have made him feel like he'd finally gotten where he'd spent his lifetime going. Except it didn't, it held him back, pointed out again how they were all a team, how well Jay was doing this year, and how it was up to all of them to see that their star driver got himself a few more points and, God willing, he might just wind up with the whole shebang. The Winston Cup, and so what if Bo and Luke had joined the team late in the season? So what if he had no real chance of winning the cup himself? Why did that mean he had to lay back and let someone else win?

Elbow in his ribs; a missive from Luke. Pay attention, Bo, but there was nothing new in this little pep talk, and he didn't reckon there was going to be a quiz at the end of it, either. (And if there was, Luke might as well stop pretending that he would hold back from letting Bo cheat off his paper.)

He nodded anyway, because he didn't need a welt on his ribcage to have to explain to the doctor when he went for his final stress test this afternoon. Cocked his ear in the general direction of the front of the room, nodded every now and then, and bit his tongue. It was just a meeting, after all. It had nothing at all to do with what happened when he got behind the wheel of the car. (And he reckoned that if he told himself that enough times, he might just come to believe it.)
Just as the school day always had (eventually) the meeting-cum-pep talk managed to come to an end. On a fist-pumping high for Jay, who had gotten to hear over and over again how he was the best hope for a cup that LaMatt had ever had – and with a sigh for Bo. A smile because it was required of him, and a high five for the reigning king of the team, but he'd heard the words he'd tried to tune out. About how Mikey Tillman and Bo Duke were both doing an amazing job in their rookie year, playing a supporting role and helping to ensure that the team's star had the best chance at every race.

"Bo," that was Luke, and he was about to get a lecture. On something or other he'd done or not done, on not being a good enough listener or a sufficiently generous teammate, or—it didn't matter what the subject was. Bo was sick of it already. So he turned to face his cousin, because he'd been spoken to, and it was only polite to meet someone's eyes before you told them to bug off. Sucked in his gut, too, and puffed out his chest, because he always figured it was best to remind his cousin that he was the taller one now, not just some little kid that would flinch the minute one of those powerful arms got cocked back, before the swing even came.

Odd look there on Luke's face, like he wasn't expecting this fight. Head tipped to the side just a little bit, like he was trying to figure it out, then a headshake.

"I gotta go see the doc," Bo hissed out from between gritted teeth. All the angrier because Luke wasn't mad at him, didn't plan on starting a fight or lecturing him in front of the whole team like he was a naughty child that had thrown a temper tantrum on the meeting room floor.

"All right," Luke answered, eyebrow asking all the questions his mouth wouldn't. Because they were in a public place, and Luke would never embarrass him like that – no, he'd leave it to Bo to go right ahead and embarrass himself. "I'll be at the Speedway."

Which had to stand in for making plans, they were too much at odds in that moment for Luke to say meet me there, we'll talk then. Angry and poised on the edge of a fight that had nothing to do with anything his cousin had said or done, and still Luke stood steady under his glare, silently offering him comfort for whatever was hurting him. Made him feel like a heel, and he didn't like that, preferred the energy of a moment ago when he actually thought his cousin might provoke him into battle.

"Kay," came out sounding every bit the brat he was acting like.

And he figured, as he coughed for the stethoscope and trotted on the treadmill, he knew how to make it up to Luke. So as soon as he'd been told one last time to be sure to keep up his weight training and to consider dietary supplements, he talked Mikey into dropping him off at the Speedway with a pit stop along the way. Trotted through the tunnel under the track with that baking hot bucket of fried chicken under his arm, reckoned that even if it wasn't as good as Daisy's, Luke'd find a way to get it past his smirking lips, and even if he claimed not to much enjoy it, Bo would know better.

Got himself surprised when he came up on the pit side of the track to see that toxic green car that he'd grown used to, even if it wasn't half of what the General was, humping around the track at a pretty good clip. There was a second shock waiting for him when it pulled into the pit and Luke dragged himself out of it.

"Dang small window," seemed like it was about the best his cousin could come up with by way of greeting as he pulled that horrid green helmet off his head and tossed it onto the seat. "What's that?"

"This," oh, right, he still had some extremely hot chicken searing the inside of his arm. Funny how
it got forgotten when he saw his cousin out there on the track. "Is lunch. Or dinner. Or a snack," or a peace offering, "or whatever you want it to be. What was you doing driving?" Because that was more important than the third degree burns on his arm (and if he was totally honest, the cardboard bucket was conducting less heat with each passing minute). Seemed an awful lot to his memory like Luke had taken him aside on one of their first days on the circuit, and very carefully explained to him how pit crew chiefs did not take practice laps in race cars.

"I been driving since you was still using training wheels on your bicycle." Clever, clever little liar Luke was. Reaching out for the chicken, too, and Bo wasn't so sure he wanted to hand it over after that smug little bit of misinformation.

"I ain't never used no training wheels, and you know it." Withholding the chicken seemed his only recourse.

"You sure about that?" Luke asked with a smirk, making a wild grab for the bucket like it was nothing more than a basketball and that he was going to steal and dribble down court.

"Luke!" he complained, because if they weren't careful about this, there'd be a mess of food lying in the oil stains left behind from year after year of races on this here track. A place with a whole lot of history and Bo was looking forward to driving the oval himself. Interesting that Luke had gotten to do it first.

"All right, come on," was the compromise, Luke gesturing with his hand for Bo to walk ahead as they headed into the garage, where his cousin held the door for him and a mercifully cool gust of air greeted him as they stepped inside. They found themselves an ugly plastic table and dragged a couple of chairs from over by the windows. Sat down and without so much as a napkin or whisper of grace between them, set to attacking the food that was lunch, dinner and a snack. "I was testing out," Luke explained, not quite bothering to swallow before he started talking. Uncommon thing, usually saved for camping trips when the rarely seen Neanderthal side of his cousin came out.

"Some new modifications I made on the angles of the spoiler and the fenders. So long as it's just me on the track, I figure it's all right if I take her out and tell me. She's got good speed, but I ain't sure how she'd handle in a draft. You know her better than I do."

"Luke," he answered with what he hoped was a twinkle in his eye. "You ain't never said no truer words. If there's a she – anywhere between here and California – I know her better than you."

Twisted little unamused smirk on Luke's face as he stood up from the flimsy table, made a quick grab for Bo's shirt and used it as a makeshift napkin.

A protest of "Luke!" did nothing but bring a more genuine little grin to the man's face.

"You forgot the soft drinks, Bo." And tried to walk away, over toward the soda machine, hands digging into his pockets for change. Leaving Bo to do what needed to be done – two steps and a grab, and it was somewhere between a tackle and a hug, but mostly it was a chance to make sure Luke's shirt was as messy as his own. When he was satisfied with his handiwork, he slung one arm around his cousin and ushered him along to the soda machines. After all, he needed to make sure Luke didn't go getting them any of that horrendous Mountain Dew.
Hard to decide, sometimes, which experience was stranger: rest days in Florida with molasses-thick afternoons just dragging slowly forward until the equally heavy nights both invited and deterred sleep, or the road where everything moved by in the flash of a stock car. Green blurs of days, but then there were the nights.

Odd to emerge from the heavy, stagnant air of their rest period into the thunderous clamor of the circuit again, though Bo seemed to take to the road better this time. Or maybe he'd never really had any problem with the road itself, what with how he lounged in the passenger's seat, singing loud, yodeling versions whatever they could pick up on the radio, mostly country. A little older, some of it, and it had Bo vying with Johnny Cash for who could better mangle the lower range of the human voice.

Mostly it was fine, they could make a duet of it and he'd nudge Bo to take the higher harmonies where his voice was more suited, but sometimes hauling a rig through traffic on switchback highways with the late afternoon sun throwing a brutal orange glare across everything from the windshield to the asphalt in front of them, he got enough. Sometimes he snapped and pointed out in no uncertain terms how Bo's singing was sharp, or too loud, or just not wanted right now, and then his cousin would huff and make his way to the back of the RV to lie down on his cot. A nap, when clearly it was Luke who was cranky enough to need one. Yeah, Bo didn't seem to mind the traveling part at all.

The race though, it would be interesting to see how Bo handled that. He'd gotten himself a taste of what it could be like in Charlotte, the feel of doing well. But his placement still depended entirely on Jay's – at least in the race itself. The boy had turned himself loose in his qualifying heat today, putting full test to the modifications the two of them had made to the aerodynamics of the car. Seemed like they must have gotten it mostly right – first, there was Bo's qualifying time to consider, which had been one of the fastest of the day, but more importantly there was that smile as he bounced out of the car, that sweaty hug he'd doled out not only to Luke, but to Earl, too, just because the roadie was standing nearby. Marched his ugly green-clad self right out of the pit, into the garage, and beyond the scope of Luke's responsibility, without that grin ever wavering.

It was a line that his cousin casually crossed without awareness of what it meant. As long as Bo was in the car, he was the entirety of Luke's focus. Exhausting, but then it always had been – wearing himself out taking care of Bo Duke was probably the job with which he had the most experience and greatest skill. But it was only a portion of what he had to do here. As soon as Bo got himself separated from the car, all of Luke's attention had to be on the crew of men working under him. Team Duke had to take a backseat to Team LaMatt with its motley assembly of men that were supposedly working toward a single goal. Aside from Earl, who'd been a teamster so long he hardly recognized himself as part of a union and who never, ever gave a minute's grief or pulled rank on anyone, the crew was a rough bunch. Aggressive, driven, and if that was what made them good at what they did, it also made them hell to manage. Especially when some of them reckoned that Luke was some Johnny-come-lately, jumping rank and taking a position they were better qualified for. And that might have been true, if the driver they were crewing for was anyone other than Bo Duke.

And that was the days. Nights, things got a hell of a lot trickier.
Martinsville had a tiny track nestled in hills not all that different from what ran west of Hazzard. The place had a ton of history, had tight turns and close races. But it didn't have the same kind convenient complex that a lot of the newer speedways had. Going out meant catching a ride into town with Mikey, who dragged his Jeep Cherokee behind his RV everywhere they went. The General, he was too dignified to be relegated to that kind of humiliation, so he and Bo had left him back home with their kin, but on nights like this, when the Duke boys were beholden to whoever had wheels and could take them places, he wished they'd had the foresight to trade cars with Daisy for the time being.

Funny how, even in towns like Martinsville where they had to go out on the town to find their liquid diversion for the night, all the NASCAR boys seemed to end up at the same place. Tables commandeered and presided over while the pit rat groupies, wearing as little as the chilly Halloween night would allow, twisted and turned through the maze, looking for just the one good old boy that would take them back to their trailer, off to a hotel, or if they were really indiscriminate, into a dark alley, and give them a wild ride that they could go back to their sad little lives and brag to all their friends about.

Bo wasn't in the car, so he wasn't Luke's responsibility. If the shiny things that pranced in front of his eyes caught his attention, there was no reason he needed his big cousin telling him what he shouldn't be doing. Luke figured that about a half hour into the night, he was likely to lose track of the blonde girl-magnet for awhile. What he didn't reckon on was that it would be because Bo slid from one table to the next, just like the girls did. Away from where his LaMatt teammates were sitting and over to join the Bud Moore crew. Or, in particular, Carl Green.

Luke could understand it, a little bit. Like the part where it wasn't necessarily a ton of fun to sit with his own team and be hazed by Jay. The senior driver was something of a jackass, for sure, but at least he was an honest one. Long in the tooth and guarding his last few chances at glory, and if that meant he talked down to whippersnappers that might just have more raw talent than he did, on the whole his tactics were up front and obvious.

But that Bud Moore team was sneaky, with the possible exception of Petey Willis who was more mature than most, lugging his wife and nearly grown kids around with him on the road whenever he could. Kept old Petey in most nights, left the rest of his team out there like renegades. Kept Carl off any kind of leash at all, and there Bo was, just eating him up like he was Daisy's gooseberry pie.

And Carl, he was a charmer, patting the youngest, most naïve member of the LaMatt team on the back, pointing out how what a fine job he'd done out there today. Massaging an ego that was already plenty loose and easy, buttering up old Bo like he was corn on the cob. Maybe talking him into taking his own stab at the trophy tomorrow – without both Mikey and Bo protecting him, Jay would stand much less of a chance of winning, narrowing the field of experienced drivers. Or, more likely, old Carl was just doing a bit of private investigation, milking little strategy secrets out of the least experienced member of the team.

Bo wasn't in the car, he wasn't Luke's responsibility. A pit chief had to watch over his crew, even when they were off duty. Because that's where real secrets could slip through the cracks between one team and another. But his boys, for all that they were otherwise pains in his backside, were smart enough to stick to their own company. Or maybe just lacking in social graces whatsoever, because even the groupies gave that burping, farting, uncombed and not particularly clean group of men a wide berth. Too bad, because D'Onofrio could be a looker if he'd bother with a shower now and then.

He watched quietly, because he trusted Bo. Mostly, anyway. He knew his cousin would never
deliberately give away any of his own driving techniques nor any of Luke's modifications to the car. But the boy was so naïve, so deliberately innocent, that there was no way to bank on him recognizing a trick question when he heard one. So Luke stayed put, halfway involved in the conversation between Mikey and Jay about which of the pit rats they'd seen in other cities, and which were simply local girls trolling their home waters for the big fish. Minded his own damned business until he saw Carl Green slap Bo's shoulder blade. Friendly thing, followed by one of his kid cousin's long arms slinging itself across the other driver's slightly pudgy shoulders, and that was it. The boy was either a fool or drunk, and whichever turned out to be more true in the end, Luke was taking him out of here. Now.

"Come on, Bo," was maybe a bit less than proper etiquette. (And he didn't even properly remember crossing the room to get here.) "Hi Carl," he figured would be sufficient enough for Aunt Lavinia would forgive him his lack of manners. Formalities taken care of, his eyes snapped back to Bo. "Cousin," he warned. *Don't make me embarrass you.*

Not that Bo wasn't already firmly convinced that he had been humiliated. "Excuse me, Carl," he said, steady as he could manage, but it didn't fool anyone. And that, right there, was the long and short of it. Bo Duke was too danged earnest to pull the wool over anyone's eyes, even when he was trying with all his might to do just that. "I'll be right back, as soon as my excitable cousin, there," and he wasn't even halfway convincing about which one of them was more than a touch agitated, "tells me something that's got to be very important."

Very important indeed. It took everything in him not to grab Bo by the arm and drag him out of the bar, across town and back to their RV. And if he'd done that much, there was no saying that he wouldn't have started the rig up, taken it out on the highway, and driven the two of them home, where he might just have invited Jesse to have at Bo with his strap.

"Just," he said, as the cold air of the night hit him smack across the face when the two of them stepped out into the dirt of the parking lot, "stick to the girls, Bo."

Quizzical look on his cousin's face, would be cute, except for the sneer that never left his lips. Oh, if Bo could see himself in the mirror when he was angry, he'd find a better ways of expressing his wrath. Pretty face all distorted: cheeks flushed, eyes squinted down and just a little too wet to bother trying to act so tough. "What in the world is wrong with you, Luke Duke?"

"Ain't nothing wrong with me." Which explained perfectly the fact that his heart was racing, and his fists were clenching hard enough that fingernails were biting into the flesh of his palms. "I ain't the one palling around with the competition."

"So wait," got punctuated with a jabbing finger and a smirk. They really ought to have walked a few steps further, out of the glow thrown by the light fixture over the door. Of course, it was only three steps to the next shaft of light beaming from the street light out front, and this wasn't the Boar's Nest. They didn't know how safe it would be to go out back and have this noisy little fight. "You're jealous of Carl Green?" Such a high pitched note of disbelief in Bo's voice.

"I ain't," nope, there was nothing wrong with him, that was why his teeth were clenched and his hands were planting themselves firmly on his hips. "Jealous of no one." His chest puffed and his chin came up, because he was fine, just fine, and there was nothing wrong with him. "Look around, Bo. You see anyone else in there cozying up to someone from another team?"

That blonde brain over there couldn't wrap itself around the notion of caution or danger, and clearly had no idea why Bo shouldn't spent time with anyone he damn well pleased. "Well, shoot, Luke. You and me both sat with Carl and Petey Willis only a few weeks ago. Why would you be worrying about me doing it now?"
"Because I don't trust Carl Green," was equally true, and slightly less likely to turn this thing into a genuine brawl. Because they both knew those words that Luke didn't say, and they both knew that Bo preferred to believe that he could take care of himself just fine. Even if he couldn't.

"Hell, Luke, you don't trust nobody." Proud little tip to Bo's head, because he'd figured something out. "No, I take that back. You don't trust me. You ain't never trusted me. You didn't trust me about Diane—"

"I was right about Diane," Luke reminded him.

"That don't matter none." Of course it didn't. It never had mattered to Bo how the woman was only using him all along, but it mattered to Luke. Mattered so much that two years later he was still willing to wring his cousin's neck over it. "All that matters is that you figure I can't be trusted to spend time out of your sight. Unless it's with some pit rat."

No, not even then, really. Or he could trust Bo with a girl he picked up out of nowhere, but it wouldn't make him happy to watch his cousin do it.

"I trust you fine, Bo." He did, so long as the people his cousin spent time with weren't clever or crafty or most likely trading on the earnestness of the youngster in front of him. "It's Carl I don't trust."

"Say that a little louder, Luke. I don't think he quite heard—"

"I don't care who hears me say it. That man is—" a snake, Luke would have said, except suddenly there really was someone that might have overheard them. Mikey, who must have slipped quietly out of the bar at some point. Seconds of awkward silence while he and Bo continued to stare each other down, Mikey pushing his bangs off his forehead, before nervously running his hand through the shorter hair at the back of his head.

"Hi guys," their teammate finally interrupted the absence of words passing between them. "I was just—I know it's early, but I was going to go back to the track." Where their RVs were parked in the camp just up the hill above the speedway, nestled between shedding oaks and maples whose falling leaves smelled an awful lot like home. "We got a race tomorrow after all." Of course, the one who needed that quiet little stab of guilt was Jay. After all, the outcome of tomorrow for both of the young drivers standing here in this dingy little parking lot depended on the team star's performance.

Luke sighed, his head dropped. He knew how this went. Any minute now Mikey was going to work his way around to offering them a ride. He could insist that Bo accept it and come back to the RV with him, which would only guarantee that his cousin marching right back inside to plop himself down back into the heart of the Bud Moore team, as close to Carl as he could reasonably get himself. Or Luke could shrug his shoulders and let Bo decide for himself – which would also send him back inside to Carl. It wasn't a winnable war.

"You guys coming back with me?" And that was Mikey, finally getting around to what he'd come out here for.

Luke's eyes wandered the length of Bo's rigid body, his shoulders still back, head held at that same proud angle. Settled on the boy's perfect, angelic face, and waited. Three ticks in his head, then four, and Bo – Bo had never given in after five. If he held out that long he was going to stand firm at stubborn.
And when Luke figured there was nothing to do but turn away and leave Bo to his own devices, finally then, that head came down. Heavy breath that carried more meaning than a sigh, but Bo gave.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get going."

Tense, edgy, quiet, too quiet. Sometimes, anyway, in those in-between spaces spanning one thing and another. When he was in that ugly green hunk of tin, doing laps around that crazy-tight oval in the Martinsville 500, cars crushing in on him from all directions and nothing to do but hold his ground, Luke was there in his ear, calmly reassuring, quietly encouraging. It was almost like having his cousin right there next to him in the passenger seat, taking every risk alongside him, trusting Bo to keep them both alive. And that was during the afternoon of the day after the fight they never did quite have. Oh, they came close, Bo's muscles just begging his brain for the chance to swing, but it never quite made it that far. Mikey's interruption or Bo's self control, or maybe it was the way Luke stood there, body hard as rock, but those blue eyes were soft, even as they argued, even after he went for the jugular and brought up Diane. His cousin had never found a way not to hate her, not to look like he'd dredge up all the violence in his soul if she ever dared show her face again. But last night, Luke's eyes hadn't squinted down, they'd stayed open. Honest, maybe. It was hard to hit a man who looked at you that way.

The race had been fun, once he got comfortable with the tight quarters, and if he hadn't placed he'd at least done respectable. And then there had been that taut, proud little smile on Luke's face as he brought the car back to the garage. A slap on the back and, "Great job, cousin," and Bo might have figured everything would be all right between them, but it wasn't. Most of the drive to Talladega had been awkward, near silent. It was like his cousin was two different people – the voice in his ear, that was the boy he grew up with. This silent man, this was who had come home from that hitch in the Marines.

"Luke," he said when he'd had enough, when he reckoned it was time to put those two halves of his cousin back together again. He was sick of the Interstate, twin stripes of gray feeding out endlessly in front of them, tired of watching Luke's hands as they vibrated against the steering wheel. And then, suddenly, he was done with looking out the window as they approached Chattanooga. Felt like just inches from home, from Hazzard where Daisy would throw her arms around him and tell him not to worry about Luke's gruff ways, that their cousin was a fool sometimes, but he'd come around. The farmhouse where Jesse would pull both of his boys into his arms at once and hold them there until they managed to each sling an arm around the other – but there was no chance of the two of them going there. Not today, not until – well hell, he didn't have the first idea when the Duke boys would see the beautiful weeds and dust of a landscape that they'd taken for granted all of their lives. "The way I see it, you wasn't necessarily wrong about Carl Green."

That brought those piecing blue eyes to him, but only for a second. Luke had to watch the road after all. Besides, it didn't loosen his cousin's tongue from its decidedly still state.

"I mean, he might not have had good intentions." Still more silence and it didn't make sense, any more than Luke's face staying open after a mention of Diane had two nights before. There were ways to make his cousin fight, and Bo reckoned he knew most of them. Could be that there were one or two yet to be discovered, but those could wait – forever – as far as Bo was concerned. Because he knew how to provoke a battle when he wanted one, and most of the time he didn't. It was just that Luke should have wanted to fight him as they stood there in front of Hurley's Uptown Bar in Martinsville, but those hands hand never quite turned into genuine fists. Bo didn't have the first idea what to do with that. "But that night, he was doing all the talking. He was just telling stories, was all." About men Bo had only read about, and old Carl there, he'd raced alongside them,
then gone out for drinks after. And it sounded like they hadn't much worried about whose team they were supposed to be on, not when happy hour started. Maybe Luke had a point, and maybe the both of them needed to be careful what they said outside the circles of team LaMatt. "If he was asking questions or anything, I wouldn't have answered them."

"He's smarter than that," wasn't much, but it was words. A few or them, muttered quietly, but Luke was talking. It beat silence. "He ain't gonna ask, he's just gonna flatter you until you slip up and say something."

Flatter. Well, hell, it wasn't flattery that he got from Carl, it was respect. And it seemed like someone ought to respect the way he'd come from a local dirt track and made himself a contender after only one month on the circuit. He sure wasn't going to wait forever for Luke to get around to respecting him (but then there was that proud little smile…). "Everyone who thinks I got some skill behind the wheel ain't trying to flatter me, Luke. Or get nothing from me. Maybe they just appreciate good driving when they see it." (…that look on Luke's face when he pulled into the pit, and the way he'd slapped him on the back…)

"Maybe," Luck conceded. (…that smile just for him, that voice in his ear assuring him he could find his way through the tight maze of cars around him.) "They might. Just—" A pause of second, maybe two, tops. But it felt like eternity when Bo was teetering there on the fine and tipping line between guilt and anger. Trying to make up his mind which to be while the conflicting things that Luke had always been zipped through his mind faster than the cars flying by on the other side of the highway.

Once, and only once, his cousin had come close to forbidding him to do something. Don't go off with Diane, don't let her talk you into things you wouldn't otherwise do. Luke hadn't said the words, but his attitude had spoken for him. The way his eyes rolled at the very thought of the woman, the way his muscles tensed when Bo moved toward her anyway. Luke's stalwart refusal to believe that maybe someone could love him, could say Bo was about the best man she'd ever met, and dismiss Luke in the same breath. Don't do it there in the tight lines around Luke's eyes, and about as far as it got the two of them was into a fistfight, and then to Bo moving into Diane's RV with her. A command not to fraternize with Carl Green now and – well, if Luke didn't want Bo running off with the other driver, moving into his rig with him and leaving his cousin behind, about the only person that wanted it less was Bo. If an ultimatum got issued in the next few seconds, Bo didn't have the first idea what his plan of action would be.


"All right," Bo agreed.

There was more, so much more, that his cousin could have said, must have wanted to say. About why Carl shouldn't be trusted and exactly what he could be up to. The schemes that a man could pull in order to go breeching the bonds of a team. But Luke bit his tongue, lapsed back into silence. And, Bo reckoned, it could be that keeping those thoughts to himself was the best choice after all.

Not that his promises to be alert when it came to Carl Green much mattered anyway. By the time they got to Talladega, he was tired. The speedway was vast and the amenities a short walk from here to there, but the road, or maybe it was not-fighting with Luke (because that had taken more energy than a knock-down drag-out brawl would have) had taken something out of him. When the offer came to go out and explore the Alabama honeys, the Duke boys demurred. "All the more for you," Bo had explained to Mikey. A great big sacrifice, letting the other junior driver, who had neither Bo's stature nor his looks, get first crack at the girls.

"It ain't as much fun without you," Mikey complained, but that was all right. As soon as he hit the
bars, Mikey would forget all about one Bo Duke.

The race was the important thing, anyway. After that tight little track in Martinsville, the Alabama International Motor Speedway felt like an open country road, with nothing to hold him back except the grass and the limitations of the car. With the blue sky above, the grass to his left, cheering crowds to his right, and Luke's voice in his ear, reminding him that he could handle whatever the other drivers threw his way, he qualified effortlessly. And in the race itself, though he emerged from it overheated, dehydrated, and just plain tired, he did fine, just fine. That was what Luke told him as he sat at his side, handing him glass after glass of cold water, waving off members of his pit crew as they tried to tell him this or that about readying the car to be trucked to the next track. Oh, he hadn't won this race any more than he had any other thus far. But as long as Luke thought he'd done fine, that was enough.

"He's sick. He don't want no visitors."

"Oh, all right," was Mikey's sheepish answer to that, eyes slightly lowered and hair flopping into them. Looked like a little boy, had that same stoop-shouldered stance to him that Enos had never outgrown either. "I just figured he might want some company." Because Mikey knew that Bo was sick, hell, the whole team did. Most of them were smart enough to give the Dukes' RV a wide berth in the hopes that whatever germs it contained would stay locked inside. "I get bored when I'm sick."

Made Luke sigh, made him realize just how much he sounded like Jesse caught in protective-mama-bear mode. "He's sicker than that. Sleeping, mostly."

"Well, I brought him some soup, too." Ah, so that was what that Styrofoam cup was. Luke would have figured it for Mikey's coffee, but in a snap it turned into a bit of generosity from a friend. The other junior driver on the team was a good kid, a sweet drop in a big old pot of bitter, and Luke really ought to be more patient with him.

"He ain't been eating a whole lot, but maybe he'll want it later."

"You're gonna have to heat it up anyways. It got cold between the diner and here." Which meant there'd been some kind of a stop off somewhere, most likely the local pub. At least Luke didn't have to worry about who Bo was hanging around with, not when he was flat on his back in bed, sweating out his chills. "Tell him I hope he feels better."

He took the cup Mikey was offering, lifting the lid and sniffing the contents. Chicken noodle, and no doubt that was what this boy's mother made for him whenever he got sick. A bit oily for the current circumstances, but the thought was a good one. "Smells real good, Mikey. Thanks."

"I figured – you boys are always talking about how your cousin Daisy is such a great cook, and I thought maybe he'd want something like she'd make." All right so the boy was thoughtful and he was kind, but he really did need to run along now. It wasn't a sunny Saturday afternoon off from school, and Bo wasn't going to come out and play no matter how long Mikey stood on their stoop. Or, more accurately, the small patch of dirt in front of the RV's tin door. "Well. See you in Phoenix, I guess."

"Yep, see you," Luke agreed, then closed the door between them.

Phoenix, which was a good two days drive away, and he and Bo were going to get a late start. Because the fool had taken sick somewhere between Talladega and Ft. Worth, and then he'd gone and insisted he was fine to race anyway. Luke had nevertheless dragged him off to the team doctor,
who said it was nothing that a little rest wouldn't cure. And Bo had seemed to be just about fine for the qualifiers. A little extra energetic, maybe, but he put that down to having been cooped up for the previous day, when Luke had forced him to take it easy.

Come race day, Bo thought he was really clever, figured he'd hide the fact that he felt like hell. Drove for more than three hours in the Texas heat, insisting he was just fine. By the time he came rolling down the pit road after all the excitement was done and he'd trailed Jay by four cars, the boy had spiked himself quite the fever. Which meant that for the second race in a row Luke found himself ignoring his duties to the crew in favor of tending to his cousin. Should have paid better attention in Talladega, should have made Bo go off to see the doc back then, when his cousin was too tired to want to go out. But he hadn't because it was all tangled up in that argument over Carl Green. Turned out the boy was just getting sick.

He was busy looking for a place to cram the soup into their tiny refrigerator when he heard the shuffling footsteps, Bo dragging his sock feet out of the bedroom and halfway up the narrow hall.

"What're you doing up?" he hollered, a mistake, because even as full as it was, the refrigerator was an echo chamber. Besides, the place wasn't so big he had to yell.

"You ain't brought me no bedpan," Bo explained as he trudged into the bathroom. Didn't bother with closing the door, either. Luke got the soup situated behind the pickles. Pickles – might as well throw those out. They weren't exactly rife with nutritional value, and they were only there to adorn hamburgers, which weren't the healthiest cut of beef in the first place.

He waited until the most obvious noises of his cousin relieving himself passed, then headed into the tight hallway himself. "I ain't gonna bring you no bedpan neither." It wasn't like he hadn't heard Bo making use of the bathroom before, it wasn't like they'd ever thought a lot about sharing the cramped space of the bathroom on the farm. It was just that he wasn't used to hearing what Bo was up to while he was standing in the kitchen, handling food. Seemed wrong to have the two activities taking place in such close proximity.

"Who was you talking to?" Elbow banging against the wall, meant Bo was done and trying to pull up his cotton pajama pants. Boy still hadn't figured out how small the bathroom was, or even how small the whole RV was, and that his gestures needed to be about half their normal size in here.

"Mikey. He brought you some soup."

"Ain't hungry." And those words right there, even before Luke took into account the deeply graveled sound of the voice saying them, went to show just how sick the boy was.

"Come here," he said, though he didn't have to. Bo was only a half step away and unless he wanted to spend the rest of his life in the bathroom, he'd have to come closer. Cheeks flushed, hair greasy and sweaty, and way too much of it for how hot Bo had to be. Had to push it back to get to that forehead, and Bo stood still to let him do it. No worries about how much of a mess those blonde curls were and that was even stronger indicator of illness than the lack of interest in food. "You're still plenty warm. You sure you don't want to see the doc again?"

Headshake then, either to say no or to get Luke's hand off him, but the movement made him stumble. "Luke," he whined, like it wasn't his own dang fault that he'd gone moving too quickly and gotten himself dizzy. Both hands firm on the boy's shoulders, holding him still and upright. Sad, deep blue eyes, squinted against the light coming in from the windshield up front, and that was just pathetic. It was downright dingy in here and still too bright for Bo. "I just want to sleep."

"Ain't nobody stopping you from that." Though he did stand there in the hallway a moment longer,
just making sure Bo was steady on his feet before letting him go.

"Luke," got whined at him again. Because misery genuinely did love company in this case, and Bo didn't want to head back off to the bedroom alone. Heck, it probably wasn't Bo's full bladder that woke him in the first place, but Luke's absence from his side.

"All right, I'm coming. Soon as I make you some tea." It was the one thing Bo would agree to drink. Lots of liquids, the doc had said, and Luke would have preferred to be giving him orange juice, but his cousin said it was too thick and lumpy. Tea, at least, was warm and seemed to soothe his throat a little. And keep him warm, which Bo insisted he needed, but Luke figured probably wasn't doing the boy a ton of good. Not when it was going to be well over eighty again, and their RV didn't exactly retain cool air particularly well.

Shuffling feet still behind him as he headed to the kitchen, and Bo must've been feeling worse, what with how he was clinging close. "Bed's the other way, cousin," he tried, but it was pointless. Seemed like all his life was made up of moments like this, where he wished for eight arms like those gods he'd seen in Buddhist Temples of Saigon. Two to hold Bo down with, another to put over his mouth to stop the hollering (because there was no way his cousin would tolerate what those first two arms were doing in silence), one to make tea, another to slip some moonshine into it so the boy would settle down, two more to offer to Rosco for the cuffing (what with there being moonshine involved), and one just maybe to drive the boy to the hospital. If he'd go, but he wouldn't. "Tell you what we are gonna do, though," he said, got a mumble of confusion from behind him. But he figured that if the line between his thoughts and the words that actually made it out of his mouth wasn't clear or distinct, it wasn't like the fevered man behind him could really say anything about the sense he wasn't making. "Soon as the rest of the team pulls out of here, we're going to find us a hotel room." Where he could keep the space cool and order tea from room service and where Bo could roll over in the bed without worrying about hitting the floor.

"No, Luke, we can't. We got to go with the team." One long illogical whine.

"Bo—if you ain't gonna lay down, sit, would you?" Because the kitchen was too small to begin with, and he didn't need a six-and-a-half foot, heat-radiating, complaining toddler following him around it. "Here," he added, plunking the bottle of aspirins down onto the table from where he'd grabbed them off the counter. "It's been a few hours, take a couple."

"Luke," drawn out until he reckoned that instead of curing the boy, he should just kill him. Oh sure, he'd have to kill himself right after, because it wasn't like Jesse would let him live after killing Bo anyway, but it would probably be worth it. In heaven, he figured, there would be muzzles at the ready to stick over the mouth of anyone who whined like that.

And then he sighed and pulled a plastic cup out of the cabinet overhead and filled it with water. Gently – because he knew how miserable a fever like Bo's could feel, and how every noise could just grate against that misery until it was full out wretchedness – he put it down in front of Bo. "It'll help the headache, cuz."

He watched his cousin choke down an aspirin, trusted him to go ahead and take the other one unattended. Filled a measuring cup with more water and dumped it into the HotShot. At least, if they had to share such a tiny space, it came with small appliances too, like the one that he was using which took up no space at all but heated a cup of water in about a minute. Between that and the food processor, he and Bo managed decent meals about half the time. Maybe he'd get Jesse a food processor for Christmas, though he wouldn't be home to see the old man open it.

The mug of hot, steeping tea settled in front of Bo, he took the other seat at the flimsy little table. "We'll catch up with the team, cuz. We'll just be a day or two behind." Three tops, if the pathetic
man in front of him, blowing across the steam at the top of the tea then coughing pitifully, needed
that long. It was a two day drive, but with a little bit of determination, he and Bo could handle it in
one.

And when they got there, there'd be a certain kind of hell to pay for leaving the car in the care of
Earl. Who had offered to help, and Luke accepted, even if the letter of the older man's contract
stated that his responsibility for the car was supposed to end the second it rolled off the flatbed and
touched the ground. He'd be lucky not to find his whole crew in a state of mutiny.

"A day or two—" might have been an argument, might have been agreement, he'd never know,
because another weak cough interrupted it.

"Drink," Luke ordered. Used his best commanding officer voice, which just made Bo wince, then
glower at him. "Listen, Bo, you ain't driving nothing, especially not no race car," at ridiculous
speeds in the searing heat, "until that fever comes down. So you just finish your tea and go lay
down." Oh, sure, Luke was going to have to go back to that tiny bedroom with him and stay there
until the fool fell asleep, but that shouldn't take too long. And as soon as that happened, he could
get this rig rolling to somewhere on the western outskirts of Fort Worth, where they'd still be
plenty close to the hospital if Bo's sick little heart set itself on needing the emergency room, but
they'd be out of the center of the city so that when they did get moving again, it would be all
interstate miles. He'd find them a quiet hotel that looked nice enough to have room service, and
then he'd carry Bo in if he had to, and put him in a real bed.

For now there was nothing to do but put his hand against Bo's cheek. "You're hot, boy." Or maybe
he'd make his cousin take a cool shower first, clean him up and try to bring that temperature down.
"Come on," because he could wait all day for that tea to get finished and it wasn't going to happen.
More than half of it seemed to have gotten swallowed anyway. "Back to bed with you."

It took longer than he would have hoped for Bo to finally achieve something of a restful state, but
within an hour he'd pulled up stakes and had them on the road. Found a new-looking Holiday Inn
with its green sign and roof, the same design they'd seen in every part of the country they'd
crossed. Funny how only two months ago they were nothing more than plowboys pinned down to
one small corner of Georgia, seeing nothing but the same stretch of dirt road out their windshield
and the same red and white lights in their rearview mirror, day after day. And now they took for
granted seeing a new town each week, and the most familiar thing he could find out here on this
stretch of road was a hotel with a recognizable sign.

The fight was gone out of Bo; he came inside easily enough and collapsed on the bed nearest the
door. Left it to Luke to pull off the boots that he'd only put on to walk across the parking lot, and to
strip him back out of the shirt he'd put on for modesty's sake. Pulled the blankets up around
himself, though Luke thought it might just be better for him to sleep without them.

Luke waited for his cousin to achieve unconsciousness, and then he called Jesse.

"Duke residence!"

"Coy?" he guessed; the voice was too high to be Vance's. Strange for either of those boys to be
answering the phone at the farm as if it was their own.

"Yeah?"

"It's Luke. Listen—"

"Luke! Well ain't that something, Luke Duke, the famous NASCAR star, calling little old me." Oh,
that boy was so amused by himself. Silly giggles and if Luke could have reached that far he would have smacked him.

"Listen," he tried again, but he didn't have to.

"Luke? Is that my boy?" Jesse in the background, probably waddling as fast as he could to the phone.

"Yeah, Uncle Jesse," and that grated against his nerves too. For no good reason, really, because everyone from Enos to Cooter called the man Uncle Jesse. Except they weren't standing in the Duke farmhouse when they did it, sleeping in his and Bo's beds, sitting in his and Bo's chairs at the kitchen table, doing his and Bo's chores—"It's Luke. You want to talk to him?"

"Do I want to talk to him. You just give me that phone, boy!" That was better, mostly. Would have been improved by the old man threatening to tan Coy's hide.

"See ya, Luke!" was Coy signing off, and not a minute too soon.

Then, "Luke?" it was Jesse. Just about knocked the wind out of him, made his throat clench and his words come that much harder.

"Uncle Jesse. Bo's sick." Fool way to start a conversation, but there was something to hearing Jesse's voice that made him a little boy in trouble all over again, looking for help from the one man that would never steer him wrong.

"How sick?" And of course, now Jesse was worried.

"Not," he answered and his hand automatically went through his own hair, same feeling as he used to get when he was small enough for Jesse to pat his head. "Not that bad. Just the flu or something. But we're staying in Fort Worth for now. I just figured I ought to tell you, in case we don't make the Phoenix race." Because even if there would never be a television allowed in Jesse Duke's house, Luke reckoned that his kin was keeping tabs on the NASCAR races anyway, and they'd be listening to hear Bo's standing.

"Now, Luke, don't you worry. Bo's a strong boy. You just give him a day or so and he'll be just fine."

"Yeah," he answered.

Must not have sounded convinced. "Luke, you know that boy well as I do. He spikes a high fever and looks like death warmed over, but he bounces back quick enough. Just let him sleep it off."

"Yes sir," he agreed. Because, more than anything, he wanted the old man to be right. And all the rationality in his soul agreed that he'd seen Bo looking like this and worse, and he'd never much worried about it before. But then again, he hadn't been alone with his kid cousin when he got this sick, hadn't ever been so far from anything like home when he'd taken care of Bo before.

"And Luke, see to it that you rest, too. You don't need to go making yourself as sick as he is."

"All right. I'll call you when he's better."

"Call me anytime you want to, boy." Hard to say what that was. Guilt or reassurance, but he'd have plenty of time to chew on it. At least until tomorrow morning, because he didn't figure he would be leaving this room until at least then. Could be another day after that. "Take care now."
"You too." And then his uncle was gone, and it was just him and Bo again. Sweaty man curled onto his side like he was trying to conserve heat when actually he was burning up. Luke sat on the edge of the bed Bo had chosen, and felt his cousin's skin again – still hot. He kicked off his own boots and laid down on the other side of the bed, back of his hand coming to rest on that flushed cheek and neck. Slight shift to get more comfortable, and he fell asleep like that, feeling the heat radiating from Bo's skin, and under that the steady throb of his pulse.

"You want me to drive for awhile?" Something about the wide, flat steering wheel of the rig under Luke's loosely curled hands looked wrong. A tautness to his shoulders maybe, as they absorbed the bumps.

But those eyes, they were all Luke being his normal sarcastic self. Always seemed like scorn ought not to come in such a pretty, blue package. "You've been sick, Bo."

Yes, he had. And even on that day – was it the third? He was pretty sure it was the third day when he lost track of hours at a time, and could hardly remember where he was (but Luke was at his side, he always knew that, even when he wasn't able to make sense of anything else), and even then he would have been plenty capable of driving. He might not have known his own name, but put a steering wheel in his hands and a gas pedal under his foot, and he'd know precisely how to use them.

"I just figured you might want a break." Because they'd been humping it pretty good, and there was still plenty of nothing that they had to get across before Phoenix. It was just as well that they were on the express course, considering how flat and dry the scenery was, and now that the sun was dipping toward the horizon with nothing but the low lying dust of the region to deflect it before it found its way directly into Luke's eyes, his cousin looked—"You look tired."

Got himself smirked at for that and, "I ain't even gonna tell you what you look like."

Which was fine, just fine. Bo knew exactly what he looked like, and it he ever forgot there was that big old side view mirror bouncing out there on the far side of his window to remind him. He knew he was clean, showered and dressed for the first time in days. He knew his color was coming back and that his hair was combed, even if he had gone and gotten most of it cut off. Shorter than it had been since he was twelve or so, but it had made perfect sense at the time. It was the breaking fever that had done it. Days of being cold, and it all switched on a dime. Like a flash of lightning, it was like lying in the desert in the unrelenting sun, feeling his skin burn red and his traitorous blood begin to boil, it was like feeling his cells dying off, one by one. No matter how much Luke wiped as his face with that cool cloth, and how many gallons of cold water and orange juice he got forced to drink, there was no relief. Even that cold bath they'd tried had failed, because his skin had gone and told tall tales on him. Pimpling up into bumps that would make even a fool believe that he was cold, and Luke wasn't anything like a fool. Then his body betrayed him with a shiver and it was "Out, Bo," and back to bed for him.

But those hours passed and his body settled down. His skin stopped burning and his ears quit ringing, and the sweat no longer dripped into his eyes. He drank a cup of water because he wanted to, then started wondering where solid foods were. He figured out that he'd rather wear jeans than pajamas, and got tired of being filthy. He took a shower, scrubbed the sickness away from himself, watched it roll down the drain. Got out feeling human for the first time in days, then tried to run a comb through the knots in his hair. It wasn't so much that the comb got caught in his hair as that the knots swallowed the comb. Pulling and tugging, because it was just hair, just a piece of plastic, and there was no reason both of those things shouldn't just obey whatever commands Bo gave them. His scalp hurt, his forehead beaded up with sweat again, and that was it. Oh, he disentangled
the comb from his curls first. And as soon as he'd done that, he announced to Luke how he was going to see the hotel barber, whoever that might be, and get his hair cut off.

"Wait until you feel better," Luke had counseled oh-so-sensibly, but he didn't know. He hadn't been the one in that bed, sweating away a fever that had no place to go because it was trapped in that heavy mop of hair. Didn't know that Bo could feel the heat rising in him again, and all he wanted was relief. "In Phoenix, Bo. We'll hit the road early – two days, tops." But it wasn't Luke's hair and it wasn't Luke's head and it wasn't Luke's brain that had gotten pickled with fever. No amount of logic would talk him out of it, so Bo went and did it.

It wasn't all that bad, really. Just shorter than he would've chosen if the air had been cooler, or his head had been clearer. Sure, it curled more now that there was less of it, but it was out of his eyes, off his forehead, and leaving his scalp a little more vulnerable to a breeze. But that was the point, anyway. To catch a cool gust of air from time to time.

It'll grow back, he wanted to tell Luke, though he couldn't be sure why. It was his head, his face that looked too wide or too long, or whatever it was that Luke was trying to tell him. At least, he'd thought when the barber held the mirror up to show him what it looked like (and it wasn't like he could say just kidding, put it back on now from the back, I won't be seeing anyone I know for awhile). The guys from the team and even the big drivers on the track, the ones he'd admired since he was too young to pronounce their names correctly, they didn't matter. They'd no doubt ask him if he'd run afoul of a rabid lawn mower or a confused badger, but they weren't friends or family, and if he'd grown up admiring some of them, he hadn't grown up loving any of them. Not like Daisy and Jesse, and even Enos and Cooter.

But there was Luke. Who had told him to wait until he felt better, who hadn't laughed or tsked or shown any reaction at all when his half bald, sheepish cousin made his way back to the room they'd rented, who had waited until this moment to point out exactly how stupid he looked.

"Fine," he snapped. Turned his attention to the road in front of them, had himself about a thirty degree range of where he was willing to look. Too far left and he'd see Luke, too far right and he'd catch a glimpse of his stupid hair in that oversized mirror.

Silence. His cousin was looking at him, assessing maybe. Studying and Bo didn't want to be scrutinized.

"Bo." Calm, rational, calling him an idiot without even halfway trying. "I wasn't—did you think I was talking about your hair?"

Well, duh. But he was too old to say that now. "You gonna try to tell me you wasn't?"

"I ain't just gonna try. Cuz," look at me. Luke wouldn't ever say that to him, but he didn't have to. They'd both grown up with Jesse and Lavinia Duke. Eye contact was expected unless a boy wanted a whipping. And even if a boy wanted a whipping, he was supposed to meet the eyes of his executioner first. So he did, he looked, figured he'd be facing down that flat-lipped, squint eyed glare that told him to stop acting like such a baby. Got an earnest face instead. "It ain't nothing to worry over. You remember what I came back from the service looking like." Yes. A tennis ball. A five o'clock shadow covering the whole of Luke's head. "You remember how funny you thought it was." Yes, and no. It was scary, as much as anything. No hair to speak of and Luke looked tiny. Took him awhile to realize it wasn't the hair, wasn't Luke shrinking (though he had needed to gain a few pounds) but that Bo had grown. After that, yeah, Luke's high and tight military haircut was funny. Dang funny, and he felt his lips curling again now at the memory. Because not a man under the age of thirty-five would have been caught dead with as little hair as Luke had. "Yeah, well, remember how
quick it grew back, all right?"

"Not fast enough," Bo reminded him. Not fast enough for either of them.

"Plenty fast. I wasn't talking about your hair, anyways. It's fine, it ain't no less pretty than it ever was." Smirk of tolerance about the vanity of pretty cousins, but that was fine. If Luke had Bo's looks, he'd guard them carefully, too. "I was talking about how you still look like you belong in a coffin."

"I'm fine." But he wasn't. He was rash, quick to anger. Still overheated, and there was an ache at the back of his neck that wouldn't let go.

"Yeah," his charming cousin agreed. "I can tell. Listen, make us a couple of sandwiches then go in the back and lie down. If we don't stop for dinner, I can get us there by midnight. Just don't make nothing messy."

He wasn't necessarily excited about having been both nominated and elected to performing kitchen duties without his knowledge or consent, but he followed the suggestion anyway. Did such a fine job of both parts that Luke was satiated and he was sound asleep when they got to Phoenix. Didn't wake up until the next morning when his noisy cousin went digging into their tiny closet in search of clean clothes, and though he felt like he could sleep for half the day, Bo got up instead. They were days behind, with only the morning to learn the track before qualifiers in the afternoon. And, Bo had figured out somewhere back around Charlotte or so, it took both of them working together to get the lay of any speedway: Luke to figure out the math of it, and him to work out the feel. Half driving, half standing around and watching Luke work, and they didn't have but a fraction of the time they usually did to do those things.

Didn't help that it was a strange track, nestled into the hills with an extra curve between turns two and three along the backstretch, which had never been his favorite part of any course. Almost no banking to the turns, either. But the challenges he encountered in driving presented nothing in comparison to what Luke was dealing with in the pit. Not that any outsider would notice, but his cousin had that quiet, commanding tone to his voice and those well-defined, finger-width parts through his hair that told Bo the story of a man harassed by his own crew. Not that there was any evidence other than those subtle changes in Luke – the boys played nice whenever Bo was around.

"Look," Luke instructed him when the sun was just about straight overhead. "Just qualify. We'll get the car set so's you shouldn't have any trouble with that. But don't pull nothing fancy."

Well. That was like telling the sun not to shine on a cloudless summer day. Fancy moves were what kept a car on the track instead of spinning off into the infield, or worse, the walls. "All right," he agreed anyway, reading between the lines about how there just wasn't enough time left to figure out the optimal fender to spoiler ratio to give him maximum speed and control.

"We'll get it by tomorrow," was the promise.

And it wasn't as bad as Luke must've feared. Sure, the car didn't handle exactly like it had in Charlotte or Talladega, but she hopped along fine. Got him a reasonably good position for the start, and that was all he needed. Heck, his job was to stick to Jay's tail anyway, or to let Jay stick to his until the senior driver was ready to make his move.

"What?" Luke asked him, when he showed up in the pits, clean and dressed, and done for the day. No good job, Bo or we'll show them tomorrow, just what. And it wasn't even said with that cool politeness his cousin used on strangers, it was straight out barked at him.
"I was just gonna wait for you." Or maybe ask how long you'd be, maybe offer to help.


Seemed strange to want to protest, to insist that he was perfectly capable of deciding for himself what to do, when all Luke was doing was sending him off to have a good time with the guys – and the girls. And he'd be a fool to stay here, where nothing was pleasant and he wasn't wanted, so instead of the complaint that wanted to come out of his mouth, he settled for a frown, then, "Yeah, Mikey, wait up."

He had no plans to stay out long, but Mikey was so glad to see him, and that was before some of the other guys, men he'd hardly said hello to, got to asking what had happened to him (including pointed questions about harrowing encounters with buzz saws, which he did his best to laugh off as easily as his cousin had once smirked about his military haircut), and then there was that easy money he'd never had before, burning a hole in his pocket. By the time he got home it was well after dark, and Luke was sitting on what passed for their couch, wrapped in a blanket.

"Hey," Bo greeted. "You sick?"

"I'm fine," was the abrupt answer, followed by Luke pulling back when Bo tried to touch his face or forehead to judge for himself just how fine Luke was.

"Did you eat?" And how long were you down in the garage, tinkering with the car? But he knew better than to push too hard.

"I said, I'm fine." Indeed, he did say that, and it didn't answer the half of Bo's questions. A sigh then, and, "How's Mikey?" tried to more pleasant, tried to be a tidy little change of subject. Because nothing could make old stubborn over there do a damned thing he didn't want to. "He seemed lonely when you was sick."

Yeah, and he still seemed lonely, and that wasn't what Bo wanted to talk about. But sometimes you just had to humor Luke, if only so he'd calm down and let himself be touched.

"Still lonely, I guess. We probably ought to have him over for dinner sometime." Which was a perfectly normal thing to have said at home where Daisy would make fried chicken so moist it'd just about slip off the bone, Jesse would welcome the stranger with a bear hug, and they'd sit out at the picnic table where the breezes were cool and the air sweet. Here, the idea was just so much foolishness, when their tiny excuse for a kitchen table could barely fit the two Duke boys, and no room for even the smallest of guests. "Petey Willis retired."


"Yeah, I guess he did it right after the Texas race. Something about his family wanting him home more, or his kids needing him. Jay thinks it was because he didn't have enough points to even try for the cup, but Carl says—"

"You spent time with Carl Green?"

Yes, he did, and if Luke had a problem with it, he should've come out too. Or let Bo stay with him, because the idiot had clearly spent too much time out there in the desert dry air without hydrating himself, and that was only one of the things that might be wrong with him. There was also that nasty little bout with the flu that he was most likely due for.

"I spent time with everyone, Luke. Carl didn't ask me no questions and I didn't volunteer no information." He sighed, did his best to calm down but, "Either you trust me or you don't."
Red, that was the color of Luke's eyes, and Bo knew he hadn't been crying or had an allergic day in his life. "I trust you," with a shaken head like he was annoyed with himself, or Bo, or both. And it didn't matter who he was angry at; that kind of quick movement was a means of self-punishing, at least if he was coming down with what Bo had. Nothing quite like the feeling that your brain has shrunk up to the size of a baseball and is banging around against the bone of your skull.

It was only instinct that made him reach out towards Luke's forehead again; it was only obstinacy that made the man duck away from him.

"Dang it, Luke! Let me feel your forehead, would you?" Sometimes it took a temper tantrum to set the fool straight.

"Fine," Luke announced, pretty much as Bo figured he would. Sat perfectly still and no doubt willed his body to be cool to the touch. Except it wasn't, his skin was warm. But then Luke had always radiated heat, that's why Bo used to crawl into his bed with him when nights turned brisk and he was young enough to get away with it. Hard to say whether what he was feeling now was normal-warm or above-average-warm so he moved his hand down to Luke's cheek, but it was the same as the forehead, and neither part of his cousin was giving away any state secrets. "Happy now?"


For more than twenty years Jesse had raised them, and somehow he knew what wayward things they got up to when he wasn't looking, had an instinctive awareness of the moment a germ took root in either of them. Man had perfect pitch when it came to his boys, never missed a beat, and managed, somehow, to keep even Luke pinned down to a bed when he needed rest.

And Luke, he'd inherited some part of that gene of Jesse's, attuning himself to that same frequency that told him not only when Bo was sick, but what to do about it. It wasn't fair how none of that particular skill had come Bo's way, not when Jesse wasn't here, and Luke was either sick or he wasn't, and it didn't much matter which way that went, because he had no intentions of letting Bo take care of him.

"Just worry about the race tomorrow, Bo. I'll worry about everything else."

He huffed, he frowned, he felt his shoulders sag in frustration. "After the race, you gonna let me feel your forehead again?" It was a stupid question, but he didn't know what else to ask for.

"After that, we can start heading back to Florida. We'll both rest up when we get there, all right?"

So he worried about the race, and after a fitful night's sleep Luke rose bleary-eyed but otherwise his normal self. His voice was steady in Bo's ear, his anchor in the wild seas of blue, green, and red cars, until he found that yellow one, the one he was supposed to usher to the front of the pack. Stuck to that bumper like glue, except when he had to weave to keep anyone else from getting too close. Last laps, and old Jay was looking to get himself some more points toward the big trophy with Bo on his tail, when Mikey made a move. Nothing too aggressive, mostly a polite question. "Mind if I have this dance?"

And what the hell, Bo wasn't allowed to win anyway. Mikey had put in more time, paid more dues, put up with more crap from the team star. Bo let him have second.

And that was what it came down to, at the end of the day. One man on team Duke was sick and refusing to let himself be cared for in any way, and the other one had thrown a race he could have won. Yeah, it was time to go back to the closest thing they had to a home right now, and lick their
wounds.
"He won't say, but yeah, I think so."

See, now Bo should never even pretend like he was capable of being stealthy or sly. Out there on the kitchen phone with Jesse, acting like he could whisper, but quiet just wasn't in his nature. Too big, too loud, too blonde, too pretty, there was no keeping Bo under wraps. He just jumped right out and announced himself.

"He ain't listening to me, anyways." Now that was an interesting thing to catch himself overhearing. Because he had to admit, right in that moment he seemed to be listening to Bo just fine. Sure, he was in a different room, one wall away from the tattling brat, and supposedly reading the newspaper. But if he had to be honest (and he did; after all that was Jesse Duke at the other end of that phone line) he was listening to Bo. "Yeah, okay." Clunk of plastic against wood, and it didn't take a genius to know what was coming next. "Luke, Uncle Jesse wants to talk to you."

He figured the glower that he aimed at Bo was probably better than any words he might have chosen to come out with. Besides, the old-timer on the other end of that phone line had some keen hearing when he was of a mind to, and the last thing Luke needed was to hand over some more ammunition to the man who was already taking aim at him with intent to fire off one of his finest lectures.

"Hey, Uncle Jesse," he said instead, once he'd picked up the handset. Promised himself that no matter what got said, he’d keep his tone neutral, because the walls had ears. He ought to know, he’d just been listening through them himself.

"Luke?" *(Is that you, boy?)* They’d had a phone in the old farmhouse since at least nineteen fifty-seven, because Lavinia used to tell the story of Bo's father calling to say Essy Mae was in labor, and just maybe he could use a hand over here. In Hatchapee, and Jesse had broken all the speeding laws that had existed at the time to get there and help bring that oversized baby into the world. A quarter of a century, at least, their uncle had been using the phone, and he still managed to make it sound like it was some kind of a foreign instrument, a deceitful trickster of a machine that could manufacture Luke's voice all on it's own.

"Yeah, Uncle Jesse, it's me." Because reassuring the man would ensure that they got to the lecture part of this conversation all the faster.

"Well, boy, how are you?" And that, right there, was going to be the crux of the matter. Bo had most likely insisted that he was sick, and now he was going to have to convince Jesse that a little bit of exhaustion was nothing to get excited about. Not when he'd been working ridiculous hours and then driving across the country. If he'd coughed a few times and slept in a morning or two, he reckoned he was entitled.

"I'm fine," he declared, with no room for argument.

And he didn't get any, which was surprising, what with Jesse Duke not requiring any extra space or loopholes upon which to formulate his lectures.

"That's good, Luke, real good. You boys been doing real fine on the circuit." Sure they were, if you
could call helping another man to win real fine. "I'm right proud of you."

And he was a kid again, bringing home report card grades that he hadn't earned the honest way. He'd felt perfectly justified in his choices – it wasn't his fault that old Mr. Phillips gave the exact same test year after year, and that Cooter Davenport had been entirely willing to tell him exactly what the questions would be – until Jesse smiled at him, and announced how pleased he was so have such a smart nephew. He'd had a miserable afternoon, then gone ahead and confessed before supper. Because it wouldn't have been a proper meal if Luke hadn't stood through it, furtively rubbing at his sore backside.

But there was nothing to confess now. They were playing by the rules, give or take, doing what they were employed to do. So, "Hey, where's Daisy? I ain't spoke to her in a month of Sundays," he asked, because he didn't really want to talk about NASCAR right now, not on their few days off from it.

"She went into town with the boys to—Luke," his uncle interrupted himself, like he'd just realized the blasphemy that had escaped his lips. Him and Bo – they were the boys. Who Daisy must be in town with, that was Coy and Vance, and they were not the boys. They were loaner cousins doing a good deed because they had been bumming around, up to nothing useful for awhile, and their fathers figured a little Georgia fresh air would do them good. The same kind of good it used to do when they were nothing more than a pair of brats come to learn how to fetch eggs and milk a goat, then get high praise from Uncle Jesse and Aunt Lavinia for doing a quarter of the work that any real farm boy would.

A giant sigh, because Jesse knew what he'd said, who he'd said it to, and there was no explaining it away or taking it back. "What are your plans for Thanksgiving?" Untidy little subject change.

"We got meetings and training sessions tomorrow and Friday. We ain't got no time to get away." No chance to go home and be Jesse's boys.

"That don't mean you can't celebrate. You got a turkey?" No, somewhere between running a pit crew and driving across mile after mile of flat nothingness, he hadn't had time to dig up his bow and hunt one down.

"No, we ain't," he confessed. Didn't figure all the smart answers there dancing on his tongue would do well to get spoken out loud.

Another big sigh, this one making a show of being patient with fools that didn't seem to know that a turkey was a mandatory meal in late November, even if a man had to go to an antiseptic grocery store, lit up with fluorescent lights, and full of bright packages of food utterly lacking in nutrition in order to get one. "I know," his long-suffering old uncle began. "You got experience with being away from home for holidays. Overseas and eating whatever passed for food and could be cooked in a mess tent," sure, and back then he'd always figured that his next holiday would be spent at home. Just had to survive, make sure he stayed alive and then he could be back with his family in the too small and drafty kitchen, saying grace and oohing and aahing over everything on the table, even the foods he didn't like. Home was always there just beyond his reach, but he figured he'd get there someday. Now – he had no idea when he'd see that old table with the shim under the leg at one end, and if he did, whether it would be home or just the place he grew up. "And I know you don't need no traditions like turkey and pumpkin pie." Great, next he was going to be told to pick up a pie out of the frozen food section, and eating that would be worse than ignoring the holiday all together. "But your cousin, he ain't never been away from home before. Not for any length of time, and never when there was a holiday. You got to do right by him."

"All right," he agreed. He'd go to the store and buy a turkey, a pie, what the heck, all the
trimmings. He didn't have the first idea how to properly cook any of it, but he'd learn. Because Jesse wanted him to do right by his cousin, so the old man wouldn't feel guilty when he sat down to his own meal with Daisy and the boys.

Headache, he had a headache, but he wasn't sick. He was just – angry or guilty or both all tied up into one. It wasn't fair to go getting upset with his family for replacing him and Bo, not when they'd been the ones to run off and chase their dream. They'd left Jesse high and dry, and what was he supposed to do? Let the corn rot on the stalk instead of seeking out help from a pair of sturdy, healthy boys?

"And Luke," interrupted his dark, dejected little thoughts. "I know you're used to taking care of Bo. You been doing it all your life, and you're good at it." Sure, he was good at it. So good, in fact, that their uncle figured that didn't either of them need a guardian or a real home anymore. They'd been cut loose and sent off to live their own lives, because he was so damned good at taking care of Bo. "But you've got to let up every once in awhile. You need to take a break, and Bo needs you to take a break. It ain't all about what he needs, sometimes it's about what you need, too. You got to let him take care of you once in awhile."

Oh, sure, he was supposed to let Bo tend to his needs and take care of him. If only Jesse had the slightest idea of what a ridiculously dangerous notion that was.
It's been an exciting year. That was what Bill Matthews kept stressing at team meetings. How well the LaMatt team was doing, how old Jay actually had himself a decent chance to win the whole thing. One more race to go, boys, make it your best. Because any of the top four contenders could take the Winston Cup this year, and wouldn't it be something if that fine hunk of metal came down to Daytona to sit in the front office of LaMatt headquarters. And if Jay took the trophy, it would be on home soil.

Sort of. Florida soil anyway, which was a heck of a lot sandier than what he and Luke had spent their lives tilling. Way the heck down in Homestead, where swamp and sea met and it was no wonder that the air was more liquid than gas. But the track had felt good under his wheels when he qualified, and Luke's spoiler and fender flare combination always seemed to work best in the humid southeast anyway.

"Lot of people up there." Him and Mikey, standing at the wall together, waiting for the formalities to complete themselves, for the speedway to be inspected and their cars to meet requirements, for the four leaders to get interviewed by the sportscasters, for the garage band that was entertaining the crowd to finish their set and get kicked out of the infield. One last race in a series that had no more bearing on the two men standing there soaking up the crowd's energy than any back country road race would have at home. Worthy of betting a round of beers over, maybe, but neither of them would earn anything worthwhile by way of points or purses or even name recognition.

"It's been an exciting year," Bo found himself saying, doing his best Bill Matthews impression. Considered capping it off with a khee-khee, but Mikey wouldn't understand the reference and Luke, who would have, was a good football field away, standing with the car through inspection.

"One more race to go, boys, make it your best," Mikey echoed, and it was good to know that Bo wasn't the only one who was less than excited to be on the receiving end of pep talks that reinforced how good he was at coming in second, or third or even last, so long as he didn't take first away from Jay.

And Mikey didn't know the half of his frustration, didn't have the first idea how high Bo's hopes had soared when he and Luke had been called into a private meeting with Matthews. He'd had it all figured, how the owner had been watching him and seen how quickly he took to the track, admired his skills and wanted to turn him loose to be the star in the upcoming year. Just two months away from a fresh start and the 1983 season, which Bo knew would be his. Exhibitions starting in late January, and he'd get to warm up nice and easy before mounting a clean sweep of the major races, beginning with Mobile. Just one little meeting away from coming into his own.

"You're a fine driver, Bo, a fine driver." They weren't the first words out of the owner's mouth, but close enough. After all, it had only been politeness that made the man offer them a drink first. "I wasn't sure how you'd take to the speedways when all of your experience was in derbies and dirt track races. But you've done an excellent job of supporting Jay." And that was where his stomach started to sink.

"Luke," had come along a little later, after Matthews was done reinforcing just how good Bo was at playing second banana to the star. "I know that some of your cousin's success is attributable to you." A mess of fancy words that constituted nothing more than a tiny pat on the back for the man
who'd always been Bo's equal partner. In everything, even the things that Bo had no right to lay claim on, like building the General's engine. About all he'd done in those days was to stand over Luke's shoulder and watch, lending brute strength when it was needed, and an extra hand when two weren't enough, yet his cousin always gave him equal credit for the outcome. "But you've got to be careful, boy. I've had two union complaints on you."

Both, of course, filed by anonymous members of the pit crew. Brave bastards that they were, they hadn't bothered to face the accused or even complain directly to the crew chief himself. No, they'd gone and snuck slips of paper under the boss's door, or maybe made anonymous phone calls or just possibly Matthews knew exactly who the complainers were and wouldn't reveal their names to the Dukes for fear of some kind of revenge (and maybe that was just about the smartest thing the owner had done all day). "One, that you let a non-union mechanic work on the car," which was not accompanied by a meaningful look at Bo, and that meant that only half the story had been told. The part that got left out was that Bo hadn't really done anything of consequence, nothing that any shade tree mechanic couldn't have done, and no harm had come to either the car or the crew as a result of it. "And two, that you left Earl Price to see to not only the transport of the car, but also the preparation for loading onto the truck, and that's not his job, it's yours." Transporting the car to Phoenix—well, Bo didn't remember a whole lot about that. Heck, he could only recall about half of the race in Texas, and his next genuinely lucid thought had him running off to get his hair cut off a few days later. (Except that in between there had been the feeling of Luke, close and warm, his voice low, calm, reassuring as he encouraged Bo to *sleep, just sleep. You'll feel better when you wake up, cuz.*

"Now, I understand that your cousin was ill, and I guess I can figure out how it came to pass that you left Earl in charge. I don't mind that you did, really, but I can't be having union complaints. If we're found liable, we get fined, and we get watched pretty darn carefully for awhile after that. So, no more union complaints, understand?" Patronizing little lecture, followed by a condescending smile. Oh, LaMatt's owners might not have been as hands-on as some of the other guys, and they might not have been yellers or pacers, but they had their ways of threatening.

And trying to menace Luke Duke, well that was just a fool's errand. Unless you were Uncle Jesse, that kind of approach would likely get you quietly—dangerously quietly—put in your place, and then, if you were lucky, you'd see his back getting smaller in the distance as his fists clenched at his sides. And if Luke was going to walk out of here today, Bo stood ready to go with him. The northern Georgia dirt track circuit had plenty of good drivers in it and Bo could see himself competing with them just—

"Yes, sir," Luke said, and it was the last response Bo would have expected. Military, almost, his cousin taking orders like he must've early in his career with the Marines. Bo looked at him, half expecting his right hand to come up in a salute, back straight and heels clicked together, but there was nothing like that. Just his cousin in jeans and plaid, letting himself be chastised, and then—

Such a small thing, no one else would ever have recognized it. In fact, Bill Matthews might even have mistaken it for some sort of an uneasy swallow, but it wasn't that. It was that wicked curl at the corner of Luke's lip, the one that announced that he might give every outward indication of obeying authority, but beneath all surface appearances, there were bad thoughts forming in his brain. Awful, dangerous and somewhat crazy ideas, and it was like his high-school-aged cousin returned from the past. The boy Jesse had whipped raw more times than any of them could count and still couldn't beat any sense into, the fool that got the both of them into and out of the kind of trouble that ought to have landed them in jail more times than it actually did. There in the curl of a lip, and in the next second, gone. And Luke was promising that there'd be no union trouble.

There had been no talking to him about it afterwards, not really. Sure, Bo had brought it up,
suggested that didn't neither of them need to be working for Bill Matthews if that was the way it was going to be. But his cousin had just looked at him like he was crazy. "It's his car, Bo, and his money. He's got a right to run things as he sees fit." Perfectly reasonable words, but Bo knew that look he'd seen on his cousin's face while the stood there in Matthews' office, and he figured that it might be best for everyone if they did just quit the circuit.

Except that, trouble-making smirk or not, Luke seemed like he was just going to behave according to team and union rules. They'd settled right back into routine the minute they pulled the rig out of Daytona and headed down here, and everything in the pit was being done strictly according to rules. Which was half of why Bo was out here, nowhere near the car. He wouldn't touch the dang thing until it was time to climb in through the window and crank the engine.

And while Bo stayed out of the pit, Mike Larue's niece hung close to the crew. LaMatt's other owner had apparently halfway retired down in Miami a couple of years earlier, and if he didn't take an active interest in the team anymore, he at least attended the Homestead race that was practically in his own back yard. And brought the family, like it was some kind of a Sunday picnic after church, the kind where everyone within a twenty mile radius showed up. The Dukes had met Larue for the first time at qualifiers. Quick introduction to the lanky man, tall enough to see the top of even Bo's head. Long body and there was no way to imagine him curled into the seat of a stock car, though apparently he'd been a pretty hot prospect back in the fifties. Now he was a handsome old man with a shock of silver hair and a friendly grin. Laid back, and apparently retirement was treating him well. When the first qualifying heat started, he disappeared up into the stands and his box seats, but some of the younger generation of Larues stayed behind, curious like cats, entranced by the inner workings of NASCAR. Or maybe they were just high caliber pit rats. That one in the garage now, same tall and slender build as her uncle, Terry or Sherry with all that blonde hair hanging down to her butt, and big green eyes fixed on Luke's backside, that one right there was most definitely a pit rat on a mission.

"Sometimes," Mikey said, pulling him back to the conversation at the wall. "I think about quitting and going home." Which would be Mississippi for Mikey, where he had a mother and a couple little brothers. Bo had seen a family picture of the whole lot of them, a bunch of buck-toothed brats. Same silly smile spread across four faces, the boys all dressed in cowboy outfits. Mikey said it had been taken some Christmas, years back, after his father left, but before he got old enough to start earning for the family himself. He'd left school early to work as a mechanic, and driving borrowed cars against other local kids. Led to a job as a tire changer on the circuit, and eventually Team LaMatt had snapped him up and given him a car of his own to drive.

"What would you do if you was there?" Crazy thought, that the boy next to him would pine for an Mississippi life of being a mechanic when he could be here instead.

Mikey shrugged. "Don't know. Probably get me a job at one of the garages in town again. Mostly I'd be close to my family. Willie's getting old enough that he's hard for my mom to handle alone. And Dave, he ain't exactly helping. It ain't easy raising kids all by yourself."

"Your mom needs a whip," Bo counseled. "Our Uncle Jesse raised the three of us without no help, and he done a real good job. Even on Luke," which was a joke and not. Because Luke had given the old man the hardest time of the three of them, but for the most part, he was their uncle's right hand now. Or had been, before they left home. "And if we ever got out of line, there was always the strap to bring us right back to where we was supposed to be."

Big hazel eyes, then they squinted down with skepticism. "He really whip you?"

"You bet." Chin up with pride, and he wasn't sure whether it was for his uncle, for showing the
strength to whip them, or for himself for having inspired and then withstood so many whippings. "Well, me and Luke, not Daisy. But then she never done much to deserve a whipping, but me and Luke," mostly Luke really, or it seemed that way to his memory. At least once a week Jesse's broad finger would point off in the general direction of the barn, and Luke would go marching out to his doom like he didn't have a care in the world. Insolent, stubborn, and he'd come back quiet but twice as mad. And the next time someone poked at him and his temper was unleashed, it would be that much worse. Hard to remember when the cycle stopped, but that little curl to his cousin's lip back there in Matthews' office – that was childhood Luke all over again. No one to be messed with. "We took our share of hits."

"My ma would never do that. About the worst she'd do is send us to bed without supper." Which just went to prove that Mikey wasn't raised on a farm. A good meal at night, no matter what rotten deeds had been gotten up to in the day, because a farm boy had to rise early and work before breakfast. There was no way Jesse and Lavinia wouldn't feed them, even if they had to eat standing up because those kitchen chairs were hard and hit a boy's backside and legs in all the wrong places. "She don't believe in hitting."

"Yeah, well, our Uncle Jesse wouldn't have done it if we didn't deserve it." Mostly, anyway. Maybe there were a few times when he resented it, when he thought things got a little rougher than they should have. Mostly that was with Luke, though, and it wasn't like his cousin ever complained about taking beatings. Seemed like each one was just another badge of honor to him. "And look how great we turned out."

Mikey laughed, and Bo smiled back at him. "Maybe you can get home for awhile on the off season," he consoled. Missing family – Bo could understand that, and sometimes it was enough to make him want to walk away from the circuit too. But a little homesickness wasn't worth giving up a lifetime's worth of dreams for. "You go home for a week, help your Ma out, whip your brothers for her, and come back here ready to race."

A laugh, hard. More like a bark, and Mikey wasn't so much smiling as sneering now. "Our contracts don't leave no room for getting home on the off-season. Ain't you read yours?"

"Yeah." Or, well, Luke had. Bo hadn't bothered; there wasn't any point in both him and his cousin losing an afternoon to digging through a boring bunch of words, poring over every clause and looking for the objectionable parts. Seeking out the sections where it stated that the Duke boys would be taken advantage of, and if Luke couldn't find it, it wasn't there. His older cousin signed, so Bo did, too. "But I figure – it's a month and a half, right? There's got to be a week you can get away."

"Nope," Mikey declared, no question or second thoughts about it. "The only one with a contract that lets him get away for awhile," sardonic little twist to his friend's face, and as much as the boy tried to look hard and knowing, he still had the appearance of a lost little boy. "Is Jay."

Yeah, that just about figured. The only one who could win was Jay, the only one who could march around his pit mouthing off to the union guys was Jay, the only one who could go home—

"Hey Bo," followed by a quick whistle. Luke, summoning him and it must be about time to get ready for the last race of the season. Much as he was getting enough of doing laps to help another man win, he was looking forward to this. Luke's voice in his ear, encouraging, pointing out obstacles, making suggestions and spurring him on. In those moments his cousin was close, open, truly present in ways that he hadn't been since those days in Fort Worth, when Bo could barely keep his eyes open for a minute at a time, and Luke's hand had been pushing his sweaty hair out of his face.
"See you at the finish line," he called to Mikey as he turned to trot over to his own pit, where he was wanted.

The sun beat down.

He'd read that, shoot, he couldn't even guess how many times. In books since his earliest days of dealing with print, from school assignments to the things he picked out for himself. Probably the Bible included those words somewhere between the begats and the commandments; Jesse would know. Always seemed a stupid set of words, dramatic and silly.

But down here, there was no question about it. The sun could beat a man down. There was the hot and there was the wet, and then there was the sun, just blaring relentlessly down on him, all but knocking him off his feet, and it was the first of December. Should have been chilly, he should have wanted a jacket instead of having the powerful urge to rip his shirt off. (Oh, but Miss Terry there in the shade of the garage, she would just love it if he did that. Hotter even that the sun, he could feel the burn of her eyes on his hind end.) Should have been bumping over dusty roads, fighting with Daisy over whether it was too early to start Christmas shopping. (It was.) But here he was, skin searing, eyes squinting, head aching with the heat.

"Watch it, Bo!" and holding his breath. Because it was the kind of race where anything could happen, where wild things were threatening to take place, because there were four men all in contention for everything this whole season had been about.

Spotter, his foot. Or some other, more valuable (getting stared at right now by a blonde girl who was barely old enough to know what she was doing back there) part of him. A piece of fender flying up from a moment of contact between Cale Yarborough and Donnie Allen, and old Freddy up there didn't call it in. Or didn't see it, seemed like Luke was the one who always saw things first. Freddy was worse than useless, shouting over the headset at all the wrong times, startling both pit crew chief and driver, passing on useless information. The way Luke had it worked out, they didn't need someone up there on the grandstand telling them things they could see perfectly well from the ground. But Freddy was a union man, and he'd made a promise not to mess with those guys.

The promise he hadn't made, but that should have been much more important, had to do with messing with little Miss Terry Larue. Who wasn't so little, really. Past the age of consent, surely; he'd put her at nineteen. Long and lean, and soft in all the right places, and for whatever reason she'd looked right through Bo and seen him. He never quite understood it, never had learned to expect it, but sometimes it worked out that way. Maybe girls like Terry liked brunettes, maybe they liked his build. Maybe they thought he was a blue-eyed angel, but he wasn't. And Terry was dangerous, very dangerous.

Bo had stood there next to him in Bill Matthews' office, every muscle tensed like he got on Saturday nights in the Boar's Nest when some of the riffraff got to talking dirty about Daisy. Ready to fight, whether for his own right to win a race, or Luke's pride when it came to how he ran the pit. Hot headed boy, just dying to throw angry words or fists at their boss, but where he missed the boat was that Matthews was right. Cars were money, and Mountain Dew, Budweiser, Chevy and Shady's BBQ Grill weren't exactly dying to back losers. LaMatt had a chance at taking the whole thing with Jay, and if that was how the team owners wanted to run their business, well they were perfectly within their rights to do things their way. As to the union complaints, there was no fighting them. Luke had responsibilities which he'd shirked. It wasn't Matthews' fault that the man didn't understand that family came first, always. And there was no way the team owner could have guessed that, even within the confines of family, Bo's needs were always more important to Luke than anything else.
Regrets, Bo would have been wracked by them if Luke'd given in and given him the signal that Matthews was the enemy and worth fighting. Sure, in the moment that pressure-cooker in his kid cousin's arteries would have been relieved, and he would have gotten the chance to tell Matthews exactly how he felt about him. A minute of revenge in trade for a lifetime's dreams, and Luke wouldn't be a part of that. Because Jay would retire one day, and it would be Bo's chance at stardom. And if Luke had to go back to acting like the lowest ranked enlisted man, he'd do it – for Bo. So he'd said his yes-sirs, offered his cousin a tiny smirk that let him know that the war wasn't lost, and gotten the hell out of Matthews' office.

It was the last dozen laps of the last race of the season, and with any luck Jay Goodwin would hang up his hat at the end of it, turning Bo loose to show the world what he was made of.

"Back off, Bo, back off!" Again, he was beating the spotter at his own job.

"I see it." A little wobble to Jay's car, which Bo had been drafting on, but he pulled himself out of line just in time. A puff of smoke, a sideways skid, and Jay at least had the good grace to get himself off the asphalt and into the grass of the infield before his engine sparkled and blew. Flurry of motion to his right, men running with fire extinguishers, but that was none of his concern.

"Go, Bo, go!" Because there were no reins on the boy now, nothing to hold him back from whatever he could manage. Sixth in the field and not a whole lot of time to make up ground, but Bo was sure as hell going to try.

The name Duke echoed through the grandstand as that ugly green car made its move past one car, then another two. The crowd loved an underdog, or maybe just got excited that what had looked like one kind of race had turned into another in the puff of smoke of a simple blown engine.

"Get under him, Bo, you've got room," Luke hollered, but he didn't need to, his cousin was already halfway done following the instructions before the words were out of Luke's mouth. "Watch your tail now, watch your tail!" Because old Cale Yarborough, he might have been to Hazzard once, might have thought Bo and Luke Duke were a couple of fine country boys who had helped him out of a jam, but he sure as heck wasn't going to let Bo take over second place from him without a fight.

"I got him, I got him," came back to him in an excited rush, but it was a battle. Took all of Bo's maneuverability and a whole heck of a lot of time to keep Cale behind him, and in the end he ran out of track. Darrell Waltrip took both the race and the Winston Cup, but when the final standings were posted, Bo Duke posted a second place finish in the Homestead 400.

The finish was exciting, and the crowd's reaction was just more fuel to the fire in him, but what really mattered was when his cousin came barreling down the pit road, skidding into one of those hair-width stops right in front of the crew, then yanked himself out of the window, wrapping his sweaty body around Luke. Two racing hearts beating as one, and any thoughts of Jay Goodwin, Bill Matthews, Mike Larue and his horny little niece Terry were wiped from his mind. Bo Duke had been turned loose on the track and he and Luke had some celebrating to do.

Days marched to a military beat, with him and Mikey doing endless practice drills. Against each other, against up-and-coming drivers from the region, against retired men who just wanted to play a game or two of bumper tag. Against everyone except for Jay Goodwin, whose contract, true to Mikey's word, gave him four weeks of vacation.

And in between the long hours in the car, practicing on a green track, a wet track, in the groove and out, rubbing each other and drafting, on marbles, with the wedge too loose then too stiff, there was
the strength training. Weight lifting and push ups, and then they'd get sent out to jog on the pit road, up and back down.

It was during those enforced runs that he saw some of how Luke's days went. Just a glimpse here and there of his cousin putting his crew through crazy exercises: removing lug nuts without the benefit of the air gun, using a jack then piano bars and brute strength to lift the car, slinging one then two gas cans over their shoulders and sprinting the length of the pit, applying duct tape and bear bond to various surfaces of the car, all while Luke gave orders at about the pitch and tone of a drill sergeant. Calm one – his older cousin wasn't ever about screaming – but firm. Jumping over the wall and back like it was nothing more than a picket fence, and that's how the pit crew chief led his own brand of strength training.

When the rhythmic days got done, the nights dragged on in the sultry heat. Which, what with how the end of the year was approaching, wasn't half what it was when they first moved down here in September, but there was still that shock value. No cold northern wind, just the strange rattle of palm fronds rubbing up against each other in a gentle breeze.

The Duke boys attacked the Daytona night scene with every bit as much gusto as they went after their daily drills at work – more actually, at least when the comparison was made to the way Bo went about his daily jog. Which was somewhat lackadaisically, when it came right down to it; somehow, without Rosco trotting along behind him, sputtering something about freeze, freeze, he lacked motivation to put in his best effort. But a cold beer and a sweating woman, now that right there was an exercise Bo could get behind. One hundred percent of his energy went into having a good time, which would be an admirable and amazing feat, if only Luke wasn't putting one hundred ten percent of his effort into the very same thing.

Church was the one thing he insisted on. Not for Bo, necessarily, but for himself. Bleary eyed from whatever he'd gotten up to the night before, he'd rise at dawn anyway. Stretch his muscles, paradoxically tight from lack of use the day before, shower and shave. Then he'd throw on yesterday's clothes, take his coffee out onto the little brick stoop that passed for a porch, and watch the day get off to its slow start. Most of the time he'd stroll down to the corner and get himself a newspaper, but some days he justcocked his ear and listened for familiar sounds. A bird recognizing sunrise, then waking her whole neighborhood by announcing it, the rustle of leaves on the few hardwood trees of the neighborhood, and, on rare Sundays, the thudding sound of his cousin managing to get himself out of bed and into the kitchen.

Down here, church wasn't the same burden it always felt like in Hazzard. Sermons weren't keeping him from better things, and the gossiping ladies who gathered in the vestibule afterward never, ever complained about the wild ways of those Duke boys. Every one of the frustrations of attending church back home got removed and all that was left behind was the familiarity of the routine, when to sit and when to stand, the doxology and the Lord's Prayer. Things he'd done since he was knee high to a grasshopper, and back home they got taken for granted. Here, they felt like bread to a starving man.

If Bo wasn't interested in coming along, that was fine with him, really. He'd take that little yellow car that LaMatt provided them with for the off-season and zip across town by himself. His cousin seemed to find driving all day and carousing all night to be a familiar enough schedule without having to haul himself out of bed on Sunday and get himself properly dressed. And besides, Bo never had been one to stray too far from the ways of the Lord anyway. Heck, without Luke there leading him astray, the boy might just have grown up to be the angel he'd always looked like. Church was made for men like Luke, whose thoughts went to dark places where they didn't belong.
Like Terry Larue. Who belonged down there in Miami, but somehow had finagled her way along to Daytona on a mission with her uncle.

"Well," Mollie-Sue had informed him on the sly. "Bill got to complaining about how he's the one running this place, and every year it's Mike that gets to go to the banquet." Up in New York City, strange place to hold the end-of-year NASCAR celebration – for winners only, of course. "And since Jay managed to rank second over all this year, Bill made a pitch for why he ought to get to go." Leaving Larue to come up to the LaMatt offices for a few days to run the operation. Which was foolishness in itself; it wasn't like the team needed babysitting. They'd managed a whole season on the road without either owner watching over them and they sure as heck didn't need Mike Larue making sure they showed up on time and did each and every one of their prescribed calisthenics.

But he'd come, and Terry'd been a part of that package. Showing up nights at the Washington Tavern, the evening haven for the LaMatt team's boys. Wearing less than Daisy did in the heat of summer, flipping her hair and gyrating her hips to whatever came out of the jukebox. And running her hands over parts of Luke where they didn't belong.

She'd be the best possible revenge on Matthews, Larue, and a system that held both Duke boys in check, preventing them from accomplishing what they were capable of. One night out by the dumpster or in the back seat of that little yellow car and it would be one big screw you to men that were just so dang used to wielding power that they didn't even recognize anymore when they were hurting their own men. He could manage it, he could take all of ten minutes to undo this whole mess that he and Bo had gotten themselves into. They'd be fired immediately, kicked out of their house (such as it was) and sent home without even enough money to pay bus fare. It would be liberating; it would break Bo's heart. But that wasn't why he didn't do it.

When it came right down to it, he made no move on Terry Larue because he couldn't find within himself even the slightest bit of interest in the girl.

So he went to church instead.

"You're a fine girl. I just don't figure I'm any good for you." That was Luke, letting the little filly down easy. Which seemed to be taking all of his energy, at least the being nice about it part was. It was obvious to Bo, if not anyone else in the crowd at the Tavern, that his cousin could not stand the young lady. Didn't want her arms around his neck, didn't want the way she'd pressed all her softest parts up against what should have been Luke's hardest.

Maybe the tomcat was finally finding its way out of Luke. Jesse'd always sworn it would happen one day, that just like the old man himself, his boys would stop drooling over everything in a skirt and start honing their tastes. Bo had figured it for a myth, the kind of story elders made up to keep youngsters roughly in line. But maybe it explained what was happening to his oldest cousin.

Which would be a tragedy, in its own way. Because old Luke had gone and gotten dang serious sometime over the last few years. And when they'd finally hit the circuit, the place where men worked hard, but played even harder, his cousin had gone and grown up just about all the way. Stopped having fun and put all of his energy into doing his job right. If he gave up chasing skirts now – well the transformation would be complete. Luke would be an adult, reliable as Miz Tisdale with her insistence that they take a number and provide identification before she'd hand over their mail, boring as Mr. Rhuebottom, who spent day after day just sitting behind a counter watching his inventory get bought up, one quart of milk or box of matches at a time.

It would be a shame if Luke joined the ranks of the adults – but Bo wouldn't be sorry to see the last
of Terry Larue, not at all.

He'd never figured on missing Boss Hogg. He'd known how hard it would be to leave Daisy and Jesse behind, and it even just about broke his heart to walk away from the General. But Boss and Rosco – he'd silently said good riddance to them back in September as he and Bo got driven across the county line en route to the airport to come down here. And he'd never looked back, not at that little section of his hometown, anyway. Tree-lined streets and picket fences masking corruption and greed and—

They were universal vices, when it came right down to it. Not that the circuit – or even his bosses – were exactly corrupt. But they didn't play straight either, and greedy – Boss had nothing on the greed of men that lived in mansions and played on the beaches of Florida while younger guys sweated and toiled, and sometimes risked their lives to earn their riches for them. It was all, of course, strictly on the up and up, and it wasn't anything that didn't happen all over the world, every day. It just stuck in Luke's craw, how neither of the honchos that called the shots spent any time at all on the front lines and never had. They were just men with enough money to buy their way into a sport they loved, and then make even more profit off of it. They'd make Boss go green with envy.

And Boss and Rosco, they had their merits. They took absolutely peaceful sunshine days and injected them with a whole mess of adrenaline. If their methods put strain on the heart, they also gave a man respite from his own thoughts. Plotting silly defenses against ridiculous schemes served as mental push ups – kept the muscle strong without taxing it.

He didn't want to say he missed Boss and Rosco. But he wouldn't mind unrobbing a bank or returning some misappropriated funds to the orphanage, not if it would soothe his brain out of the relentless circles it had been doing since they'd left Hazzard behind.

A wink, and Luke was gone. Hand on the brazen little blonde's back, escorting her all gentleman-like out of the Tavern. Sometimes it worked that way, those beautiful eyes of his cousin's drawing a girl in before she could notice Bo's smile. And then there were the ones who thought old Luke would make a fine knight in shining armor, what with all those strong muscles that could just snatch up a girl and carry her away from all this. (Away – out of fairness Prince Charming ought to announce right up front that as far as he planned to take the girl was to the nearest grove of trees or shadowed alley.)

If he'd known that they'd suddenly entered a flashback to some five years ago when they picked up and dropped girls like so many pieces of fool's gold, if he'd known the game was afoot, he would have donned his smile sooner, wielded it as his own banner against those eyes, and made it a real competition. Instead, he'd figured it was another night out where they stayed together, played at flirting with and teasing the girls, and never quite got around to seeing anything through.

Then again, it had been months since their earliest days on the circuit, when they'd first discovered pit rats and tried out one or two apiece. Maybe three or four – at least that was him. Luke, well, he'd quit earlier, and maybe, just maybe by now his body was asking for things his brain didn't want. Bo reckoned he could understand that, so he turned his attentions to the redhead at the next table – Balloons, he automatically nicknamed her, because of her lovely, perky, round breasts. She was willing enough, and he didn't mind if he did help himself to her.

He didn't mind, didn't mind. Was fine with Luke spending the early evenings staying late after their mandatory hours were done, driving the track in the guise of getting the car's aerodynamics just right. Decided that maybe his cousin was right about how he'd be best out there by himself, where Bill Matthews wouldn't go complaining that he was breaking some union rule or other by racing
against his own cousin. So he made a habit of heading home alone to watch some television, and coming back a couple of hours later, well after the natural light had left the sky. Always found Luke ready, waiting for him, and they went out.

So old horny could find himself another girl. Bo didn't mind, had no complaints. None at all. He just figured that there ought to be early morning chores at home, and maybe even Uncle Jesse with a whip. Or Rosco, at the ready to shoot the chandelier then arrest an unruly Duke boy. Cooter maybe, to help him carry his cousin home if he had a few too many (girls or drinks, hardly mattered).

Hard to believe that less than a week ago he was mourning Luke's youth, when right about now the boy was acting like an overgrown teenager.

Each day he got a little more insistent with himself about priorities. There was work and there was play, and he had both of those just about mastered. But somewhere in between or maybe outside of those, there were the truly important things.

"Cuz, we got to get presents for Jesse and Daisy." And Coy and Vance, really, though he didn't have the first idea what he wanted to give them. Except maybe sheets, blankets, quilts, so they wouldn't be all curled up in his and Bo's, and maybe, just maybe, a tin can of a car, like a little VW Rabbit or Ford Fiesta, so they wouldn't drive the General. But that was bitter, that was mean, that was no way to be thinking about their kin. Not when Christmas was only a week away.

A shrug from Bo. Not highly motivated, not that boy. "You staying late tonight?"

Well, he could. He had some thoughts about new ways of taping the grille to keep the air from catching in the louvers and creating drag. But there was always tomorrow or the next day for that. Besides, it was going on dark and if Bo was even halfway willing to head off to the store tonight, he should take advantage of that. "Nah, let's go."

Not that he had the first idea what to give his kin, but there was a mall on the edge of town, so he and Bo squeezed themselves into that yellow car, and headed in that direction.

"Daisy's easy," were the kind of words that would get any stranger punched, but this here was Bo, responding to his verbalized doubts about what they ought to look for by way of presents. "Clothes."

A snort, but then Luke couldn't think of a more appropriate answer. "Yeah, but what kind? That girl – she's picky." Sure, she owned more different outfits than the rest of the Dukes combined (and maybe even more than the collective population of the entirety of her home county) but she didn't choose lightly and she never left anything alone. Always sewing bows and ribbons where none had ever been before, and Luke would say it was silly, but when all was said and done, Daisy was the most beautiful girl in all of Hazzard.

"Just," Bo said, as he steered into the entrance and started the mad scramble for a parking space. Cars and people everywhere, half of them in shorts, and it sure as hell didn't much feel like Christmas. "Leave it to me."

So he did, he left navigating the parking lot, selecting which department store to shop in and choosing presents for both Daisy and Jesse to Bo. Not two minutes into their little spree, that blonde charm had attracted a salesgirl that was more than willing to track down a dress coat that would fit their uncle better than the one that no longer buttoned across his chest. Bo was demonstrating Jesse's size by holding out his arms – figured, the boy had done more than his share
of hugging the old timer, he'd know exactly how much arm it took to hold on – by the time Luke wandered off.

It was Sears, he'd seen their logo painted across the hood of more than one car on the circuit. And he knew there were better parts to this store than the clothing sections, so he followed signs past the toys, through the electronics, and over to the tools, passing brightly decorated plastic fir trees all along the way. He couldn't think of a single thing that would motivate him less to embark on this stupid little mission than the silly carols getting piped through the tinny sound system.

A little roaming through the aisles, and he'd found a socket wrench for Vance, a tire gauge for Coy. Maybe the message wasn't subtle; could be that he didn't want it to be. *Take care of the General*, and he could only hope those boys weren't driving him into the ground like he and Bo would've been.

Took awhile to wander back to where the little slip of a salesgirl, who couldn't have been legal to drink (or do other things) yet, was showing his cousin an ugly brownish tan thing. Might have been a shirt, might have been for Daisy. All he could tell for sure was that there was no chance of it fitting Bo, even if the sweet little thing was holding it up to that broad chest, taking glee in smoothing it there while Bo's grin lit up her world.

"You about done?" he interrupted. After all they didn't need to spend the whole night here in this place where parents dragged their screaming children away from toy cars and dolls just so they could come back later and buy them in secret.

"What do you think, Luke?" his manly cousin asked, turning to face him with a girl's fringed shirt still plastered to his chest.

"I think you're done," he pronounced. "He bothering you, ma'am?" he asked the cheery and wonderfully helpful, but probably out later than she should be on a school night, salesgirl.

"Oh, no," and her cheeks flushed pink, looking so pretty against her pale skin.

"You sure? Because I could call his parole officer and get his probation revoked." Most likely. For all he knew, Boss didn't want the two of them back in Hazzard. By now he might just be referring to Coy and Vance as "the boys" and chasing them around town quite gleefully. (And maybe they just needed to buy the junk in their hands and get someplace where he could have himself a beer or six to clear the miserable thoughts out of his head.)

But when he posed the idea to Bo, it got turned down in favor of heading to what passed for home these days. The logic seemed to be that they'd been going out nightly for a couple of weeks now, and maybe it would be nice to just relax for a change. Interesting notion, since he'd always figured that they went to the bar to relax, but fine. Home it was, and ham and cheese sandwiches, because they didn't have much of anything else. Bo settled in front of the television, shoving bits of bread and meat down his throat with both hands, and washing it down with that red juice he liked so much that was nothing more than sugared water. Luke figured that if they weren't going to eat together, properly seated at the kitchen table like Jesse had taught them, he might as well take his sandwich outside where the air was fresh. He grabbed himself a can of beer on the way out.

Thought of fireflies, and it shouldn't have made any sense. Dead of winter and the bugs ought to have been long gone. And for all he knew, they were; there certainly wasn't anything biting right now. But the temperature was more like late spring when the farmyard would turn into a series of dancing points of light, dizzying as they passed.

The sky should have been his respite, the stars standing in for lost fireflies, but this wasn't Hazzard.
Wasn't the countryside at all, too much pavement and for some reason, all of it had to be lit up, from streets to parking lots. The speedway, even at this time of year when it wasn't open for any business except training, threw a pool of light to the east. There was the sliver of moon making its way slowly across the span of the artificial glow, and then there was Polaris and Sirius. That was all he could make out, and it wasn't enough, not half enough, to navigate by.

Creaking springs behind him, and he had to shuffle over a little bit to let the door open fully.

"Thought you was watching T.V."

No more than a single footstep, and Bo was flopping down next to him. One arm slung across his shoulders, just like that, while the other sneaky little hand grabbed Luke's half-full beer away from him and finished it in two big swallows.

"Got bored," was the answer as Bo sat there contentedly with him, looking out at the nothing where there should be bugs and stars.

It was the quiet that woke him, the utter absence of noise. Long ago he'd learned to ignore the rooster, though somewhere deep in his subconscious he still waited to hear the crowing each morning. If only because it was a marker in his mind as to how long it would be before things that couldn't be ignored, like Luke's shoving hands or growling voice, made sure his feet found the floor sooner than later.

But this morning there was too much light forcing its way through the pink skin of his eyelids, and there hadn't been the slightest peep from his cousin. Made him remember those years when it fell to Jesse to come grumbling into the bedroom making mild threats about boys who'd better get up now if they didn't want their breeches warmed, those days when he wanted to throw his blankets over his head and refuse to get up because he already knew that day wouldn't have Luke anywhere in it. Those Marine years, and even if he was currently trying to convince himself that he was still half asleep, Bo knew those days were long gone. Luke had come home relatively safe and reasonably sane. They'd built the car of their dreams, then spent the next five years putting some wild miles on it, the kind of thing no odometer could keep track of. Challenges stacked on top of dares until they outgrew Hazzard all together, and hit the NASCAR circuit.

He knew exactly where he was – their silly little house in a row of identical houses, where Luke's bed was further away from him than it had ever been. A totally different room, with its own four walls and a door, and Bo couldn't figure out the need for that. But it was what had been rented for them by Mollie-Sue, who probably grew up in a ten-room mansion up north. Most likely had all the things Daisy had always dreamed after, like a parlor and her own sitting room, not to mention a full bath off to the side, but the Duke boys didn't need any such thing. One room between them was plenty. Except apparently his independent cousin didn't see it that way, what with how he went into his own bedroom each night and shut the door behind him.

Didn't matter, Bo's inner alarm clock was still set to Luke, and the simple sound of tiptoeing footsteps or a hanger scraping across the wooden dowel that ran the length of his closet had the same effect as that graveled voice in his ear reminding him how he couldn't sleep all day.

Except this morning, apparently, he could. If he wanted to, which he didn't. What he wanted was to know where Luke was, and whether he'd slipped away sometime in the night.

Couldn't entirely account for that last thought, because his cousin was crafty but not sneaky, at least not when it came to family. He'd never disappear without announcing – loudly, most likely, because it would only happen under some kind of angry duress – that he was going. And yet there
was this nagging feeling that the man was halfway gone already. Like, without the little receiver in Bo's ear as he navigated a maze of cars to the tune of that familiar voice doling out quiet support, his cousin was far removed from him. Without illness or races to keep him close, Luke was out there in his own world, drifting.

But he wasn't. When the sheets finally let themselves be peeled away from his body, when his eyes managed to drag themselves to fully open, when his feet found carpet and his hand had run itself through what was left of his hair, when he stood and took the three long strides to his bedroom door and opened it, there was Luke.

His first thought – and it was the wrong one, had to be stifled before it could be said aloud – was that the man didn't have the first idea how to decorate. Because there was a tree, suddenly dominating most of their living room. Big thing, sort of sad looking, like it might rather be standing in a forest someplace a lot cooler than this, but it was the right kind. Douglas fir, smelled nice enough and took up the whole corner where the lamp usually stood. The couch was shoved over a few feet, too, and there was no telling how on earth his cousin had managed to move furniture, drag in a tree and set it up without Bo's knowledge. Sure he'd been sleeping, but Luke – he always knew where Luke was, or thought he did.

And on that mysteriously appearing tree there were lights. Tons of glowing bulbs in primary colors, perfectly distributed, and balanced by tinsel. Ornaments were few but brightly glinting, matching the colors of the lights with near perfection. There was more; the brilliance of the display didn't end where in the same place as the greenery did, but made its way out into the whole room. Tinsel drooped from the curtain rod that hung over their front windows, and another sting of lights, carefully stretched and tacked into place, ran the rims of the frames. Ornaments dangled, one apiece, from each blade of the ceiling fan and—

Luke didn't know a dang thing about decorating. Bo's mouth widened into a grin all the same because the man had tried – oh, he'd tried. It was beautiful and wonderful and terribly wrong all at the same time.

"Merry Christmas, Bo." He thought, as he pulled Luke up from where he'd been sitting on the floor in the middle of it all, of how much work had gone into it. Promised himself he'd keep his oversized mouth shut as he hugged his cousin hard, felt those tired arms come up around his shoulders and hug him back. All night Luke must have stayed up making everything perfect. Ridiculously perfect, and it would seem that Luke ought to know better than him, even, what Christmas was supposed to look like. A mess, tangled wires everywhere, ornaments collected over the generations of Dukes, enough to just about make the tree fall over, and they got hung wherever they landed. Tinsel, well that was the stuff of fantasy to Duke kids, really. Something seen in houses belonging folks like the Hoggs, the Rhuebottoms, the Taylors and the Halpers, where there was enough money for foolish extravagance. What Luke had created here was the perfect image of a Christmas tree, lifted right out of a glossy children's book. It wasn't real. Not like home would have been.

"Thank you," he managed to say, because it was the thought that counted. Let Luke go then, mostly. Kept his hands on his shoulders, looked into those exhausted blue eyes. "It's only Christmas Eve, though."

Silly smirk from Luke and then, "I ain't taking it all down." Headshake, and he got smacked on the arm, some kind of signal that it was time to head into the kitchen for breakfast. "Not if I got to put it all up again for tomorrow." It might have been an admission of how much work went into it all.

"You just sit," Bo counseled, because he had to use the bathroom before he could do anything else.
And if he headed in there without saying anything, Luke would be halfway through making breakfast by the time he got back out. And, "I'll get breakfast together in a minute," Bo wanted to take care of that.

Patience, he'd never had a ton of it, but he waited. At least until breakfast had been cooked and eaten, and Luke was nursing his second cup of coffee for the morning. "Cousin," he asked, because he couldn't find a lick of patience left anywhere in his soul. "Did you stay up all night doing that?"

A shrug. "It ain't like we have to work today anyways." No, they didn't. That little fact didn't make Luke's eyes any less red and rubbed looking, didn't make his shoulders any less slumped, didn't make that yawn that Luke was stifling any less necessary.

He had the unaccountable urge to cup the man's unshaven cheek in his hand. Like Jesse used to do when they were little and had faced desperately dark days of tangles with teachers and bullies at school, like Luke had last month when Bo was fevered and incapable of talking sense. But trying that kind of thing on the man in front of him would be taking his life into his hands. Even Daisy probably wouldn't get away with it, not now that their oldest cousin was all grown up. So he picked up the milky spoon sitting there on the table in front of him, dirty and a little bit sticky from the sugary cereal he'd just eaten. Stared into it, saw his own smeared, upside down reflection, distorted and not half as pretty as he usually looked.

"The way I see it, I figure you're trying to keep me from being homesick."

Another noncommittal shrug from his cousin. If he thought the man would go, he'd send old communicative there off to bed for a few hours and try this conversation again later. He supposed his best bet would be if Luke spent enough time sitting on their slightly askew couch to drift off all on his own.

"You ain't got to do that, Luke. What you done in there, it's maybe the best present you ever gave me." And that probably should have been said up front, because it was the most important part. No one had put that much effort into doing something just for him, not since the day Jesse and Lavinia took over where his parents were forced to leave off, and he'd been too young to understand that gesture at the time. "But you ain't got to stop me from missing home. Or Jesse and Daisy." Deep swallow then, because his voice was going to catch in his throat if he didn't watch it. And if that happened, Luke would stay up for a whole week building a duplicate of the General in their living room. And setting life-sized dolls that vaguely resembled their kin in the front seat so Bo would have everything he could ever want, right there in front of him. But it would be the same kind of too-perfect, un-Hazzard-like sort of display that the Christmas decorations were. "If I want to miss Hazzard, you got to let me."

Grandest piece of illogic his cousin had ever uttered, and Bo was known to come out with some beauties. Elliptical conclusions drawn from truncated information, and the boy had said some silly things in his time, but this one was the tops. If I want to be homesick, just let me.

Maybe he didn't want Bo bushwhacking through the same thoughts he dealt with every day, questions of why they were here and what they hoped to accomplish. Petty, jealous little mental jabs at Coy and Vance just for existing, flashes of anger at Jesse for little slips like calling the two of them his boys, and he reckoned he didn't want Bo feeling that way, too. Doubts, second and third thoughts, frustrations about how NASCAR was supposed to have given them the freedom to do what they loved best, but all it seemed to manage was tying them down. It was one thing for Luke to mull through those concerns day after day, but if Bo got to seeing things the same way, well, he didn't know what would keep them here. And it was—
It had only been a fraction of a season. Just two months and small change worth of days that they’d raced. This here, the training and the experimenting, it didn’t count. It was just hoops to jump through before Bo could get himself back out on the speedway again, showing the world what he was made of. This time around he’d be able to ditch his rookie stripe, and with any luck, the team owners would figure out that the young Duke boy was their best bet for winning what they’d lost this year. But he and Bo would have to last another four weeks before any of that could happen, and he wasn’t sure they could manage it if they were both going to be letting their brains corkscrew around thoughts of Hazzard.

And there went Bo, declaring how he was entitled to homesickness if he wanted it, and Luke supposed it was one of those inalienable rights – the privilege of self-pity. So when the short day faded to darkness, he took his cousin off to the candlelight service at church, because that was Duke tradition, the kind of thing that would remind the boy of home. Listened to the story of the baby in the manger and let himself be blessed, lit his candle and sang when the organ played. And when the two of them crammed themselves into that low riding yellow car and drove back to their poor excuse for a home, when Bo turned on all the strings of lights that had made up the better part of a night's work for him, when they sat on the couch and Bo started humming hymns, it was all right. It wasn't bad, really, to indulge in singing those same songs they'd sung every year at this same time, to remember times Lavinia sang the soprano line, to think about that one year when Boss had shown up with a guilty face and an armload of presents. And when Bo's voice cracked, and there was nothing to do but wrap an arm around him, when the tears started and that blonde head dropped to Luke's shoulder, when the hair, shorter now but just as soft as it ever had been, started tickling against Luke's cheek, when his arms automatically tightened around his kid cousin and mumbled words that meant nothing much at all slipped from his lips, it wasn't the end of the world.

Even if it might have felt like it at the time.
On the Cusp III: Crash

Christmas to New Year's Eve 1982

Two days. And for one of them, Luke had been exhausted enough that it hardly counted, but what the heck. A tiny, two-day reprieve in the middle of weeks of feeling his cousin slip away from him, but for that forty-eight hour period, he'd had Luke. Sticking close and settling down from the crazy rhythm of work-drive-drink-crash, get up and work-drive-drink again the next day. Christmas dinner, his gift to Luke in the form of a fully prepared ham, baked potatoes and even those cranberry things his cousin liked so much (and Bo couldn't figure out his fascination for). Plus unspiked eggnog, sprinkled with cinnamon like Daisy would have served it. Funny how, this year when they could have afforded all the things they'd lusted after and never gotten on past Christmases, the two of them had settled instead for giving each other the kind of thing that couldn't be sworn to be of any monetary value.

It had worked, his cousin had relished the meal in a way Bo hadn't seen him do since those earliest days when he was back from the service, looking half-starved. By the time dinner was over and they'd called their kin to wish them the greatest of blessings, Luke looked rested, relaxed, maybe even slightly contented. It gave a man hope.

Until the next day, Sunday. Should probably have started with church, but they'd just been there two nights ago, and didn't either of them see the point in rushing out to go again. Which meant that they didn't bother to dress until noon, and within two hours of that major event in the day, Luke was driving them over to the Washington Tavern. Attempts to talk him out of it just about got Bo left behind to spend the rest of the day on his own, so he shut up and went along.

Could have been that he should have dragged his cousin up to Hazzard. Even if they only had the one day off (because Christmas had the gall to fall on a Saturday), even if the only form of transportation between here and there was the ugly, pale yellow Sebring that had been loaned to them by LaMatt, and they weren't supposed to put that kind of mileage on it. Luke wasn't homesick, Bo was reasonably sure of that, but it wouldn't have hurt to get his cousin in close proximity with the man who had raised them. Who would force truth from his oldest charge about what he'd been up to lately (well, Uncle Jesse, mostly beer and girls, then more beer, and sometimes whiskey too, even if it don't hold a candle to yours) and more importantly, why. Because it didn't make sense, how Bo was forced to be the responsible one these days, staying sober enough to drive them both home, mostly leaving the girl-chasing to Luke. He didn't like it and he was about dang sick of it.

But saying something about it only meant hours alone on the couch, watching television and waiting for his errant cousin to make his own way home. Drunk, more often than not, and that part was amazing right there, because the man could hold his liquor, right up until the point that he couldn't anymore. And he could drive, too, would probably make it home safe most nights, but that right there wasn't a chance worth taking.

Work, at least, usually kept the man slightly in check, made him slow down in his attempts to drown himself. Just enough that he'd be able to rise in the morning, grumble about how there wasn't enough coffee in the world, take himself a shower that washed away most of the stench of a night spent in a bar (or in an alley or the back seat of a car with a perfume-wearing local girl who had grand designs on becoming a pit rat) then stumble off to the speedway. Whatever hangover
he'd earned didn't seem to slow him down through the rigorous physical challenges of the day, and by night he was ready to start all over again.

It was like riding shotgun on the worst plan his cousin had ever made. A bumpier ride than even those high school years had been, when his cousin first took to sampling the shine and spending late nights out on the pond with girls, because back then there'd been Jesse's strap to keep him halfway in line. It hadn't been pleasant to watch, and more than once Bo had questioned the purpose of it all – using violence to try to make Luke calm down – but now he could halfway understand it. If he'd had half the strength of Jesse he would have picked up his own belt and swung it once or twice just to get his cousin's attention with the nonverbal announcement: *you're scaring me.*

But his belt stayed clasped around his hips, and his mouth stayed mostly shut, because when it came right down to it, Bo didn't have any moral ground to stand on. It wasn't like he had stayed sober and celibate for his whole life either, and when he'd overindulged, Luke had been right there to pick up his slack and protect him against Jesse's wrath. Luke, at least, was working just as hard as he ever had, and no one but Bo was the wiser about how he shouldn't have been able to. So he let it go and waited for his cousin to outgrow this little phase – again.

Until Thursday night, anyway. On the cusp of another three day weekend, and again Bo was weighing the costs of shoving his cousin into the passenger seat of their loaner car and dragging him up to Hazzard (which amounted, in his estimation, to a bloody nose, a split lip and, once the brawl was over, if he managed to convince Luke to get into the car anyway and take it for the five hundred mile drive, a paternalistic lecture then dismissal from the team when they got back down here), but in the end, he just went out with him. Watched him flirt with the college girls spending their winter break in Daytona, saw how he put away the better part of a pitcher of beer. Sat back with Mikey and talked about the season's prospects, laughed with Gillis from the pit crew about a black eye the gasser had somehow given himself while running one of Luke's crazy obstacle courses with a full and heavy gas tank on his back.

"I guess I just ain't as smooth as you Duke boys," the sunburned redhead laughed. "Don't have half the moves," and he wasn't talking about in the pit, either, not with how he was looking over at Luke, who was wiping the wine from the corner of some sweet young thing's mouth, first with the stroke of a thumb, then with his own lips.

Bo tried to see his cousin through the eyes of the other LaMatt men in the bar, because none of them seemed in the least concerned about the older Duke boy's behavior. Maybe it was because they didn't halfway know Luke, maybe it was because they hadn't seen how he tore up Hazzard in his youth, maybe it was because there was nothing wrong with what was going on over there and Bo was just overreacting. He liked that last one, tried to settle on it. Engaged Mikey in a debate over pick up races in Mississippi versus Hazzard (and came to the conclusion that his co-junior-driver might as well have come up through the powder puff league), lost track of Luke, had some fun.

Past midnight, and he hadn't seen his cousin for maybe an hour (because the man had no doubt slipped out the back with the untidy wine-drinker) when Gillis suddenly showed up again at the table, sweating, breathing heavily. "Duke," he panted. "Best you go outside. Your cousin's done found himself some trouble."

Blur of lights, sound of bone hitting on wood, someone (most likely him) hollering Luke's name. Air smelling more of brackish water than cigarette smoke, and he was outside, scanning the dim parking lot for—and there it was. Luke staring down a some guy that had a few inches on him, not muscular but wiry, and most likely he had swung first, what with how there was that familiar
gesture of his cousin wiping a sleeve across his lower lip. Spitting, standing up off the car he'd been leaning against. Showing the fool his full strength, and in a second there was going to be some bloody violence. Might be fine, might just turn into the kind of parking lot brawl that he and Luke had cut their teeth on, but then again, it could be a lot worse than that. One of the fine people who was standing on the periphery of what was about to turn ugly could call the police, and the men in blue who showed up on the scene weren't likely to be Cletus and Rosco.

"Hey," he hollered, as he ran, no, more like hobbled, to the corner of the lot where the two men were squaring off like a pair of roosters in the same henhouse. Pain in his knee, stupid table got in his way when Luke needed him, and he reckoned the dang thing just should have gotten out of his way faster. "Hey," again, louder this time.

Heads turning – and the skinny guy moved faster. Turned to assess him, the looked back to find Luke slowly craning his neck to find the source of the voice. Guy took a cheap shot at the slow-moving, clearly inebriated Duke boy. Weak swing that only grazed his cheek, and made to run, but just because he was drunk didn't mean Luke lacked for reflexes. Hit the other man back – hard – before Bo could get there to stop him, watched as the tough guy stumbled off, pinching his nose and hollering something about how this wasn't over.

But it was. Now that the immediate need for adrenaline had passed, Luke's feet, or maybe it was his knees, betrayed him. Nothing so uncoordinated as a stumble – even blind drunk his cousin was more agile than that. Just a slight waver, but it was enough to proclaim to any Duke (and quite possibly a Davenport) that one Luke Duke had drunk himself beyond comprehension. That and the fact that the other guy, who should have been leveled – flat on his back and begging for mercy – had already scampered out of the pool of light, and Luke hadn't even bothered to trace his movement with those normally alert blue eyes of his.

"Idiot," came out of his mouth when he finally got close enough to his cousin to touch, and there was no telling who he meant it for. "Luke," was a little more deliberate, an attempt to make the man in front of him focus as Bo caught his face with his hands, trying to turn it into the light for a better look at the damage.

Got shoved for his efforts, off and away, and if his cousin might not have been terribly steady on his feet, he was still plenty strong. "Leave me alone," might or might not have been what the man grumbled at him, but Luke didn't halfway mean it. Not with how he wound up leaning on Bo's shoulder at the end of the whole staggering movement.

"You all right?" he asked though he knew Luke wasn't. Or he knew this wasn't Luke, more like. Because even the jerk of a boy his cousin had once been had never displayed this mess of contradictions, not in public, and not even in private. But there was blood at the corner of his lip, same as there had been wine on the college girl's earlier, and Bo's main goal was to get it wiped off, and get a good look at the damage underneath.

"Fine," his cousin answered, but he wasn't, not by a long shot.

"Let me see your face, then," was logical, really. If the man was fine his had no reason to go hiding whatever injuries he might have.

Luke wiped across his own lip again, smearing the blood around and revealing a split there. Not pretty, but nowhere near life threatening, and Bo reckoned he'd best let it be, for now.

"Hey," suddenly there at his side; Mikey. "You all right?"

"Fine," Luke repeated, and it sounded good, sounded prefectly normal if you didn't hear the
vacancy in it, if you didn't know that Luke ought to be spitting mad right now.

"Man, that was some hit you gave him, Luke!" Nothing but admiration in their friend's voice, and yeah, that was some hit. Not the half of what Luke was capable of, in fact it just about took his cousin right off his own two feet. "You showed him, man!"

It was time to get out of here, or maybe that time had passed a couple of hours ago.

"Listen, Mikey, we'll catch you later," by which he meant Monday at the earliest. The Duke boys were done carousing for the week, at least if Bo had any say in it. And if Luke seemed to think he didn't, tried to overrule the flash decision made under the weight of his cousin's body leaning into his right side in the sweaty night of a dingy parking lot, well he'd just have to get their uncle down here with his fire and brimstone, not to mention a broad strap. "It's time we went home, all right?"

Seemed all right with Mikey, and maybe even with Luke. At least his cousin didn't see fit to fight him over getting led to their loaner car, even if he did have trouble folding himself into it. Still, this part could have gone much, much worse than him driving his half-slumped cousin out of a parking lot where Mikey was waving gleefully after them.

"Luke," he snapped, because it was enough. The distance between them, the drinking, the girls, all of it was about as much as he could stand. "What the hell was that about?"

Snort, hand waving through the air only to drop in his cousin's lap again. "Girl," was all he said, and it was enough. Every bit of the last three weeks was enough.

Ten minute drive to their living quarters (he was tired of thinking of it as home, it wasn't anything more than too many walls on too little land) and the man next to him was already closer to unconscious than alert when he pulled the car up to the curb out front.

"Come on, cousin," he urged, turning the car off. "Don't go to sleep on me now." Because it was a tested and proven fact that he could not lift the man, wouldn't be able to drag or even budge him if Luke was passed out. Too damned heavy, nothing but muscle, and no give anywhere in him.

And the man was mighty close to that impossible state, the semi-conscious body of his cousin threatening to go limp on him when he got around to the passenger side of the car and tried to give him a hand up.

"Oh, Lukas," he grunted. "You ain't going to make this easy, are you?" Not easy at all, but he managed to get an arm around that muscled back, and put some of his own strength into the effort to lift his cousin. Didn't work, but it brought some alertness back into Luke, whose eyes struggled to focus on him. He half expected a fight, to get shoved away and told to leave sleeping drunks lie, but it didn't happen that way. All he got was looked at, studied, more like, those brilliant blue eyes locking on his without rolling or squinting or glaring for the first time in what felt like years. Pleas, the kinds of words Luke would never say out loud, were in that look. Help me, maybe. I'm drowning.

"All right," Bo answered what hadn't been said. "On three, okay?" A nod, or something like it, but those eyes never moved or changed, as if Bo was the only thing keeping him in the world of consciousness. So he counted his three, meeting that stare all the way, then lifted as his cousin fought to stand out of that too-small car he'd been cramped into. Banged into the roof, which neither of them had taken a moment to look at and judge the location of relative to those mussed curls, on his way to his feet. "Watch your head," Bo reminded him, too late.

And apparently that was the funniest thing he'd ever said, if Luke's cackle was any indication.
Head thrown back and laughing like he hadn't in years, and "Shh, shh," Bo warned, because there was no expanse of farm around them to swallow up the noise before it could get heard, and the folks who lived around here no doubt had little patience for their audibly wasted NASCAR neighbors. "Shh, Luke. Settle down."

More effort than he would have thought to get his cousin to put one foot in front of the other, but after the longest fifty paces he'd ever walked, he managed to get Luke from the car to his bedroom. Left the man to get himself undressed as he went back to close and lock the front door behind them. This wasn't Hazzard and leaving the house wide open would most likely lead to worse situations than finding a goat in their kitchen, merrily gnawing on the ancient chairs that were about the only heirlooms the Duke kids could expect to inherit. By the time he made it back to Luke, the man was sprawled out across his bed, mumbling, and just as clothed as he had been when Bo left him.

"Cousin," he suggested without gentleness, because his patience was worn right down to the nub. Not that the anger that was trying to boil up in his belly would do any good. It would be hours before his cousin was sober again, and if there was one thing a younger version of Luke had taught him, it was that there was no point in trying to argue with a drunk. "Roll over." And that there was the other thing he'd learned long ago – that a drunk man left to his own devices would always wind up on his back. His cousin, by fortune either good or bad, never was one to toss his cookies, but that didn't mean this couldn't be the first time. "And get undressed."

Which led to the clumsiest combination of movements Bo had ever seen the man make, made him fumble and flop, but the end result was Luke on his side, holding his stripped-off belt out into the air like he didn't have the first idea what to do with it. So Bo took the band of leather from his cousin's hands, considered the pain that wielding such a thing as a weapon or in punishment could cause, and recognized that he'd never have the heart to do it, nor to invite Jesse to do it either. Luke could, like it or not, get away with what he'd done tonight a dozen more times, and Bo would never hurt him, or leave his side.

So he pulled off his cousin's boots, unbuttoned his shirt for him, and figured that between those things and the belt, Luke was close enough to being undressed. Shucked his own jeans, settled down in his shorts on the edge of the bed, mumbling, and just as clothed as he had been when Bo left him.

"Not if I can help it, cousin," he mumbled as he shifted position until his back was against the headboard, and his hand rested easily on his cousin's head as he felt Luke's breath, in-out, in-out, tickling against the short hairs of his leg. Hours later, had to have been because his back was stiff from the awkward position in which he'd drifted off to sleep, he was drawn back toward consciousness by the shift of springs beneath him. Automatic, the way his hand stroked through Luke's hair. Had to be simple instinct, because he never fully woke up, never opened his eyes. "Shh," he muttered in some faint hope that the bed would stop moving and he could go back to sleep. Didn't work.

"Bo?" was too lucid, bordering on annoyed.

"Go back to sleep, cuz," he tried, but his efforts were doomed to spectacular failure.
"What the hell—" was the complaint, followed by a certain amount of thrashing as Luke fought against the loose shirt tangling around him, pinning one of his arms. "Get lost, Bo."

"It's all right," he tried to soothe, tried to remind the man through the gentleness of his voice that there was no enemy here, no one to fight against, but Luke was adamant.

"Get away from me, Bo. Get out of my bed and just," feeble shove at him from a still half-drunk man who was being outsmarted by his own shirt. "Go."


"Out, Bo!"

It was new territory. No matter what lines he'd ever crossed, or how much he'd made Luke want to kill him, there'd never been any real kind of away that his cousin could send him. Everything they had ever owned or been was on the same side of one bedroom door. Until NASCAR.

But there was no arguing with a drunk man, and in this case, even stone cold sober Luke wouldn't listen that particular bit of logic. So, "Promise me you'll stay off your back," he said as he found his feet.

"All the way out, Bo," was Luke not giving any ground, ducking out of even the smallest compromise.

It had been hours; his internal clock said the sun would be up soon. It was safe to leave his cousin to sleep the rest of his drunk off alone. So he went, but not far. Closed the door to Luke's bedroom behind him then sat down right outside, back against the frame, foot braced on the jamb opposite. There was no way his cousin could get out without tripping over him.

Took more hours passing before he was jolted out of a half sleep by the heavy sound of unbalanced footsteps. Up, he wanted to be standing for this, and that meant grasping the doorknob to hoist himself by. Halfway there when it tried to twist in his hand, and for a second it was a struggle between Duke cousins for control of the position of the door. On his feet finally (though the left one was asleep) and he let go so his cousin could open up what stood between them.

"Bo, get out of my way," got snarled at him.

Good morning to you, too. But sarcasm wouldn't get them anywhere, hadn't ever in all the years he'd put up with it coming from the passenger side of the car or across the kitchen table or the other side of the wall dividing Maudine's stall from the rest of the barn.

"Not until you tell me what your problem is, first," he demanded. All bravado, because if Luke refused to answer, he didn't have a plan B.

"I got to go to the bathroom," came the brilliant answer. "Which ain't so unusual that I'd exactly call it a problem." Smart, so brilliant, and so dang funny that Bo forgot to laugh. (However the raw attempt at snide wit proved that his cousin was fully sober, at least.) "Best you step aside."

"I ain't going nowhere," sounded brave, sounded like he meant it. "Until you say why you've been acting like a love-starved teenager with a nonstop hard on." The words weren't new, he'd said each and every one of them somewhere in his past. Just maybe not within the confines of his own family. Sounded stupid, belonged in a long-lost locker room, whispered in the moments before the whistle blew and they were due out in the gym to shoot baskets or run circles.

But as ridiculous as he sounded, he didn't figure on those flat, angry lips curling up at the corners.
Air escaping from Luke's nose, and that right there was his cousin calling him an idiot without ever opening his mouth. Nothing he was in any mood to put up with.

Movement, he must have started it, must have been the entirety of the force behind it. Luke, pinned to the open door under Bo's hands, still smirking at him. Hung over and slow, but even under those conditions, Bo shouldn't have been able to manage the upper hand so easily. Insult to injury, Luke was letting him win. Pathetic baby cousin who couldn't even manage half-dirty words or a decent wrestling match, so big old Luke went limp under his hands.

"Damn it!" His tongue clearly hadn't learned anything from the last words that came past it. Still trying to sound tough and strong when any minute now it was going to give in and cry uncle. And then maybe just plain cry. "What the hell is wrong with you, Luke!"

"Ain't nothing—"

Oh, but it was something. And he wasn't in the mood for a bunch of crap about what it wasn't. He shoved a little harder, chest to chest and his knee finding that tender spot in his cousin's muscular thigh, digging in.

Blur, speed, and then his back was against the opposite wall with a thud, breath coming out of his lungs and stars in front of his eyes from where his head hit plaster.

"Luke!" his complaint, but it was weak in the face of the strength of the arms holding him back, keeping him upright, and refusing to let him go.

"You figure you can handle it, Bo?"

No idea what his cousin could be talking about, but he nodded anyway.

Another smirk, and Luke was going to try to walk away again, so Bo grabbed him by the wrists, refused to let go.

Closer, it brought his cousin right up tight to him, suddenly in his face, and still coming. Lips on his, hard. Hands pinning his arms to the wall, body leaning into his. Fighting, Luke was struggling for control or dominance or – something. Crazy game his cousin was playing, some desperate attempt to shut Bo up, most likely. Shock or exhaustion, Bo went limp, stopped pushing for freedom even when Luke let go of one of his wrists, and it was then that Luke's mouth opened, his tongue finding Bo's. Took that long for the younger man to recognize that this wasn't a tactic or a scheme, it wasn't avoidance or deceit. This right here, the violent need of it, the force of unstoppable energy, the electricity and insanity of it all – with the quiet counterpoint of a thumb stroking against his cheekbone, so gently that the feeling nearly lost itself in the rest of what was happening – this was real.

And then it stopped, with the same sucking ferocity with which it all began, and Luke's body was two steps away from him. Back of his hand wiping across his mouth, crazy blue of those eyes staring into his, heavy breathing.

"That," Luke explained, as if it were perfectly logical, as if it made any kind of sense at all. "Is what's wrong with me."

And then turned around and stalked off to the bathroom, quiet click of the door closing and locking behind him.

Oh. Oooohhh.
Capricorn: Stubborn as a Goat

December 1982 – January 1983

He was a coward. A fool too, and that part had happened first, but more importantly he had a yellow stripe right down his belly. The kind of thing that couldn't be washed off, though he'd sat there in the tub, knees spread and head hanging down between them long enough that the water from the shower had gone cold. Or cool, really, because without being fed by mountain streams, whatever reservoir their water came from never could quite achieve genuine frigidity. Hair dripping into his eyes, shirt soaked tight against his skin, jeans heavy with water because he hadn't seen fit to bother with undressing before climbing into the safety of the tub and turning the water on to something approaching full blast. Washing away the dueling smells of cigarettes and the perfume that little Kelly had left on him in the clinging moments spent pinning her against the back wall of the Washington Tavern, while she'd squealed into his chest, her fingernails raking at his arms. Or maybe it was the cologne of her boyfriend, who'd returned from walking off the argument the two of them had apparently gotten into earlier in the evening. Showed up just in time to find her necking with Luke in the parking lot as the both of them considered a second go at what they'd just finished not ten minutes earlier. Nasty words, some pushing and shoving, and right about when everything was considering getting interesting, there came Bo. Though that particular disruption might just have been for the best; by that time so much alcohol was coursing through his bloodstream that he might not have been able to see through to completion any part of what was trying to happen.

Maybe he was trying to wash away the last of the scotch whiskey as it sweated out of his pores, trying to drown the hangover, but there was no hope for that. Off color, dirty dishwater-looking stuff he'd drunk, and it was the closest thing the Tavern had to the alcohol he'd been weaned and raised on, but it lacked the healing powers of Jesse's moonshine. If anything it had made him sicker, caused cramping and clenching in his gut, given him a fever that couldn't be broken, made him lose track of all sense and judgment until he'd gone ahead and kissed Bo.

Kissed Bo, and about the best way he could figure out how to handle what he'd done was to climb into the shower fully clothed and punish himself with the sting of water pelting into his skin. But it hadn't worked – the water didn't come fast or hard enough, wasn't deep enough to drown in, only held the power to weight him down until he was sitting in the inch-deep puddle formed in the curvature of the porcelain. Letting the drops splash harmlessly off of his head and shoulders, the slump of his back and his knees that were jutted up into the air. He'd wanted to be cleansed, killed and reborn, and all that he'd managed was wet.

A shiver, his body complaining of abuse, and a lot of nerve it had feeling sorry for itself when it was what had betrayed him in the first place. Mashing the long frame of his cousin up against the wall of his bedroom, pressing into the soft and hard of it, soaking up the warmth, leaning into the give of it, smelling, feeling and tasting, and it was the only damned thing that had felt right since
that first day he'd watched Bo drive away from him in that ugly green car at high speed.

Another chill, so he mopped his wet hair back away from his bleary eyes, reached up and found the knob that controlled the flow of water. Tried turning up the hot that last tiny notch, but that didn't improve anything, just increased the flow of cool water raining down on him, so he gave up and turned both of the knobs to the off position. Sat a minute longer, body shaking as he watched the little bit of puddling at the bottom of the tub flow away, saw a couple of drops make their way down the fringed strings that had worked loose at the hem of his jeans. A hand on each side of the tub, and he forced himself to standing. Shoved the curtain back, and there was the mirror.

Covered the whole wall on the opposite side of the bathroom, gave him a fine view of a disaster of a man, soaked to the bone and shivering. Drowned rat with hair plastered down and dripping into his red eyes, slumped shoulders with exposed chest below, where his shirt was slopped open, and he could see every one of his ribs. Jeans hanging low from his hips, and this here wasn't the farm boy his Uncle Jesse had raised, it was a wretched excuse for a grown man, a fool, a hung-over coward.

On the far side of that mirrored wall was Bo's bedroom. When they'd moved into the place Luke'd chosen the back bedroom, the one that was further from the heart of the house. That decision might have been about letting Bo be close to the bathroom and kitchen, might have been some desire to rope himself off into his own corner. Might have been that moving day was too hot to think, humidity so heavy that all they could bring themselves to do was walk from truck to house with yet one more piece of furniture on their backs until the rain came and halted even that mind-numbing activity. Didn't matter, not anymore, not when there was nothing but a mirror and thin slab of plaster between him and the reality that he'd tried with all of his strength to hold at bay.

He reckoned, if Bo wanted to, he'd have to let the man feel his forehead again. Stand still and let him poke around to see if he could find the fever, the contusion or maybe even the tumor that could have caused this mess.

But first he had to get out of the bathroom, and thanks to his own genius, he could either drip his way from one end of the house to the other, or he could strip out of his wet clothes and wrap a towel around his waist. Either way, it would be a mad dash, and if he'd had any brains he would have waited until they were in some hotel to lose his mind. Kissing his cousin (not the female one, either) then stepping into the shower fully clothed and at least if they'd been somewhere out on the road there'd be a robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door.

He settled for peeling the wet clothes off his skin anyway, slicking them off his goose-bumped body, then dropping them into the sink. Wringing and mashing at them until they could be hung over the shower curtain rod without dripping puddles onto the floor, then finally then he dug a towel out from the cabinet underneath to dry himself off with. Tied it around his waist because in all his life he'd shared more with Bo than anyone. From childhood baths in that old metal tub in the kitchen to a bedroom, and there'd never been anyplace to hide himself before. Why a stupid kiss would make him skulk across his own living quarters, shadow to shadow, around the kitchen counter and past the backside of the Christmas tree, he couldn't imagine. Took that route from the bathroom to his bedroom anyway, got all the way there with the door closed behind him before he realized that it was too quiet. His cousin wasn't lying in wait, looking to catch him streaking from one end of the house to the other. Hell, the boy had spent the whole night awake, taking care of his dang-fool of a drunken kin. Most likely he was passed out in his own bed.

But a search of the house, once Luke had made himself reasonably decent, didn't turn up his cousin.
A walk, maybe. It's what Luke would have done, more like a run. And undoubtedly, in an hour or two, when he got tired and hot, Bo would make his way home with the same kind of ridiculous knowledge that Luke kept having to figure out, over and over – that the mess of his life wouldn't disappear just because he tried to walk away from it. Coffee, he figured, would make it easier to face each other, would give Bo the necessary energy to land the punch he'd need to deliver, would give Luke the fortitude to stand up and take the hit. So he set it to brewing, then headed for the front door. Might be best to catch his cousin before he found his way back into the house. The grass made for a softer landing place, and the outdoors decreased the odds that the two of them would break something that didn't belong to them. The lawn might be the best location for this fight.

Except Luke never made it that far. Door open, and there, sitting sideways and blocking the entirety of the exit, was Bo. All right, seemed like whatever else, the two of them were at least thinking on the same wavelength when it came to where to do battle, just like they always had. Except Bo didn't get up and start hollering, no finger pointing at his chest or declarations about how their Uncle Jesse would tan his hide for what he'd done this morning. Just sat there, trying to hide his face under his hair, but there wasn't enough of the blonde fluff for that anymore. Left him open and vulnerable, let Luke see the misery there on his face.

"Hey," he greeted quietly, because he had nothing else, no tricks up his sleeve or plans to put into action. Nothing but explanations and the truth to offer, and no amount of that was going to make either of them feel any better. "What're you doing here?"

"The way I figure it," Bo said, squinting up at him. Yeah, it was too bright out here, too easy to see every detail each other's faces. Like the circles there under those pretty eyes, and Bo had no business looking that old. "This is the part where you try to leave. But I ain't getting out of your way, and if you try to walk over me, I ain't gonna be responsible for any bruises you get from whatever I got to do to keep you here."

Second thoughts, he was just full of them this morning. This time it had to do with where they were and how many witnesses they didn't need to what was about to come.

"Come back inside, Bo."

Skeptical look, like the boy reckoned he was being tricked. But when it came right down to it, Luke didn't have two good brain cells to rub together, probably couldn't manage to pull any wool over Bo's eyes, even if he tried.

"Come on, I ain't going nowhere until my head quits banging around anyways." And his gut stopped cramping up with the urge to expel the nothing left on his stomach, so it could be a couple of days yet. Or maybe he was exaggerating, but then again, it had been a lot of years since he'd drunk himself that far under the table, and he wasn't a kid anymore. His powers of recuperation weren't what they'd once been.

He offered a hand down, felt the warmth of his cousin as he took it, used it to stand, and just kept on hanging on to it. Seemed Bo didn't trust him to stay put until they were safe on the inside of their front door, though once the tongue clicked into the groove, his hand got dropped like it had suddenly burned hot against the soft skin of his cousin's palm.

Which was fine, it gave Luke all ten fingers with which to pour two cups of coffee, then carry them into the living room where Bo was curled into himself on the couch, pouting.

"How long, Luke?" came out when he tried to hand one cup of coffee over to the man. Got ignored
with a raised eyebrow that seemed to claim he was stalling, still holding back. Leave it to Bo to decide that the worst injury he'd been caused would be not having detailed prior knowledge of the poison things that insisted in boiling through Luke's blood. He set the cup down on the table that was roughly in front of his cousin, and retreated to the far corner with a sigh.

How long had he wanted Bo that way? He could say it started with the moment that woman (who had a name, but his brain refused to think of it) from the Carnival of Thrills swayed the boy with her snide words, getting Bo to just about parrot back at her about how maybe she had just found herself a real man. That answer would have held at least a kernel of the truth, maybe more, because it could have been in that moment of vertigo that engulfed him when he realized that Bo was going to follow wherever the conniving woman chose to lead, but it probably wasn't. After all, that sudden rage surging up through him had to have come from somewhere, been built upon some foundation that he had never known was there until it bubbled over.

Or he could say it started the day they left Hazzard for the circuit, because until that time the feeling had stayed exactly where he wanted it to be: in check. Took walking away from everything else familiar in their lives, looking only to each other to see reflections of where they'd been and who they were for him to start losing control.

Or he could tell the whole truth. "I don't know." That same bushy blond eyebrow gave no quarter on that one, pointed out how he was a coward. And he lacked a worthwhile argument against that accusation, having figured out the exact same thing sometime when he was sitting under the chill of a cold stream of water. "A long time, I guess."

Luke watched his cousin take that in, try to swallow it whole with the rest of what he'd learned this morning. Apparently it didn't go down easy; the boy looked like he had a serious case of indigestion.

"And how long," the next question began, as Luke braced himself for it. He expected Bo had a right to ask anything he wanted to, and he reckoned he'd do his best to answer. But that didn't mean he was going to like any part of it. "Before you try to run off? Do I got to sit outside your bedroom door every night?"

Well, he supposed Bo could do that, if it made him feel better. Wouldn't matter, couldn't keep Luke contained, what with how the house had windows and all. And maybe that would be the best course of action, to put some distance between him and Bo. Except he'd never leave his cousin alone on the circuit.

"I ain't," he said, and took a sip of his coffee. Funny how he'd forgotten it was even there the second Bo started asking him questions. Cooler now than he liked it, but it was bitter and black, and maybe it fit his mood just fine. "Going anywhere you don't want me to, Bo. If you want me to stay here, I will." Another sip of coffee, a little more strength gained. "But when you change your mind about that, well, you just let me know."

It wasn't anything he'd heard before, though he figured maybe Jesse had, back in the days when his uncle and cousin went to battle on a daily basis about the older boy's temper and attitude. Luke was nervous, sort of insecure, waiting to be sent away. Or maybe it was the hangover, the light shining through the windows too brightly and the steady beat that had to be banging around under those dark, wet curls.

"Luke. I'm not ever going to want you to leave. It was what he wanted to say, but in this moment, after so many things he'd figured were rock solid had already turned into sucking quicksand that threatened to suffocate him, he couldn't swear it was true. So he said nothing, let the echo of his
cousin's name die from the air, and just sat there, elbows propped on his knees. Tried looking at
the carpet underneath his feet, then there was a rustle, and he had to lift his eyes to be sure Luke
was still standing there. Assurances aside, he was pretty sure his cousin posed a flight risk. But he
hadn't gone anywhere, he was just plowing his fingers through all that wet hair, making an awful
mess of the stuff. "Promise me you ain't gonna act crazy no more." Silly, half proud, half ashamed
look on that drawn and tired face. "No more drinking that much, no fighting, no girls."

It was a lot to ask, he supposed, on top of the demand about not leaving. He wasn't promising
anything in return, just soliciting the things he wanted. But he was seasick from this tidal wave that
had crashed into his life, holding onto whatever flotsam he could find. If he really got his way,
everything would calm back down to a clean, clear, glassy surface that neither bumped nor dipped,
and out from the current mess would emerge normalcy. Life as he'd always known it, and if he
couldn't have that (oh, he couldn't have that. Even if Luke took back everything he'd done and said
it would still be there, a voice from the back of his head reminding him that what he'd experienced
against the wall of Luke's bedroom, that was real) at least he needed some time. Some peace, a
chance to think, to figure out how to live with his cousin and the knowledge of what he wanted.

He hadn't minded the kiss. All by itself it was fine, though it could have tasted better than stale
breath and cheap liquor. It was the weight of the awareness that accompanied the kiss that he
staggered under, but then he figured that Luke had been lugging that burden around by himself long
enough. Bo was willing carry his half of the load, but there were conditions. Like his cousin
sticking around until he figured out how to manage it, and acting like a reasonably mature man
(given that he was a Duke and might never figure out growing up all the way) while Bo worked
everything through.

"I ain't exactly up to going out tonight anyways." For New Year's Eve, and it would be strange, he
supposed, that they'd been out just about every other night this week, but they'd miss the one
celebration that the whole of the country would be participating in.

"Or tomorrow, Luke." Or ever, but he couldn't ask for that. Not when they would be going out on
the road again in a month or so, not when they had friends that expected them to join in the evening
activities. "Not until you calm down." Felt funny to say, must've sounded equally as silly to Luke,
based on that tiny smirk over there. Proved his cousin still had a sense of humor, and also, thanks
to the slight twist of his mouth, revealed that he still had a swollen lower lip.

He stood up then, approached his skittish cousin. Grabbed hold of his chin to get a better angle on
that injury, turned his face toward the light.

"You hurt anywhere else?" Seemed like he should have gotten around to that question earlier. It
would have been the first thought on Luke's mind – how bad off Bo was and whether there was
damage somewhere he hadn't thought to look yet.

"I ain't even hurt there," oh, of course he wasn't. "Bo! What are you doing?"

Getting ready to kiss you. Or thinking about it. But he didn't say that, just licked his lips.

"Why?" Luke asked even if the words hadn't ever been said, twisting away from the grip of Bo's
hand.

"I was just going to try it out," he confessed, had to. The Dukes had never had anything much they
could count on, other than the truth between them. "To see."

"It ain't an experiment, Bo. Not like some kind of adventure you can try out and if you don't like it
you can just go back to where you were." Big sigh. "Don't," Luke just about begged. "Just don't."
And then he was gone, but not far. Just into his room behind a closed door.

Bo stretched out as best he could on the length of couch. A nap, they probably both needed one, and he had every plan in the world of going ahead and taking one. Right here, in the middle of the living room, because although Luke had promised not to leave, there was no such thing as watching him too carefully.

It was a new year. Ought to feel fresh, wide open, full of possibility. Sure, it wasn't more than a few seconds old now, but it ought to hold the promise of a bright new season on NASCAR, one without any rules constraining them, at least not yet.

But it didn't, all it had in it so far was this awkward thing between him and Bo. Too wide to get over, around or through, and finally Luke understood that old saying about trying to ignore the elephant in the room. Fat as Boss Hogg, squeezing them each to their own corner, keeping mostly quiet while they mulled over what this year could bring. And sure, Bo said he didn't want him to go, but that was only because he hadn't taken into account how February would put them back out onto the road, cramped into a tiny RV with no more than a foot between where Bo slept and where he did.

He'd stayed home tonight; they both had. It was what had been asked of him, a fair enough request, and in truth, his body wanted the rest anyway. Sitting still, even if it meant watching the television, looking into a box that was full of oddly-dressed idiots in another city, screaming over the fact that the second hand had ticked around the clock yet one more time. Him and Bo on opposite ends of the couch, quietly laughing at the foolishness of some of the things people considered entertainment, most likely both picturing the Boar's Nest equivalent. Cheap wine substituting for champagne, more of it winding up soaked into hair and clothes and coating the floor than getting drunk up, Boss Hogg in the corner smiling around his cigar, because he figured that the more of it got wasted getting dumped on his constituents' heads, the more of it they'd have to buy for the purposes of inebriating themselves. Daisy running around with a mop, waving the handle at anyone who threatened to pour wine down her front (no one ever did, though every male that wasn't related to her must have thought about it) and trying to clean up the mess, Enos frantically trying to keep order with simple shouts of "Y'all, y'all!"

Foolish to pine after things that could never be gotten back, like a life with his parents, quiet moments with Aunt Lavinia, or their moonshining career. Or even counting down to midnight with his own glass of rotgut wine lifted in the air in a toast, before accidentally pouring it over Bo's head, watching the purple drops run out of the blonde mop and down his face while that wicked grin formed below, telegraphing the fact that the next thing Luke was about to feel would be the chill of cold liquid dripping down his own back.

"Happy New Year, cuz," Bo offered quietly from his own corner of the couch, reaching a long arm across to squeeze his shoulder. Funny how he used to be able to stand perfectly still and let his cousin douse him with wine, but tonight a simple brush of fingers against the cloth of his shirt made his muscles tense up without bothering to consult his brain for reasons. "Damn it, Luke!" hollered Bo's hair trigger temper, made all the more sensitive by the fact that his only sad excuse for sleep in the last day had consisted of a few hours caught on this same too-short and lumpy couch. "Are you going to flinch every time I touch you now?"

Maybe.

Saturday, endless Saturday. Funny how he used to spend all week praying for this day when he was a kid. Extra chores in the morning, sure. But he'd rather spend a morning mending a fence than
sitting in a classroom, especially if it entitled him to an afternoon of fishing. After his school years, the day of the week mattered less to him, but there were always those Saturday nights of juking. It was the only time in the week when just about the whole adult population of the town would get together for the sole purpose of having fun.

Here on the circuit, more often than not, Saturdays meant races, the day flying by in a roar of yellow-blue-red blurs of laps past stands filled with people who'd traveled miles and hours, some of them days, just to see what fifty men in cars could do. Exciting afternoons that almost, but not quite, rivaled the fun he used to have on those fishing trips as a boy.

But this Saturday (the day after Luke kissed him), right in the middle of the second long weekend in a row (and the day after Luke kissed him), had just about nothing going for it. Just him and Luke, two men trapped within the same four walls, trying their damnedest not to run into each other. And trying not to admit (on this day after Luke kissed him, gentle hand cupping his face) that they were trying not to run into each other.

Luke at the kitchen table, reading something. Or pretending to, because there had been no pages rustling or turning, no movement of any kind other than the coffee mug getting lifted up then put back down. Bo in front of the television, watching cartoons that he'd only ever seen back in the days when the Hazzard Theater played double features (which took place years prior to this day after Luke kissed him, pressed up against him, touched him with equal parts of desire and tenderness).

"I'm bored," he mumbled, with no real intention for it to be heard. Maybe he'd figured he was telling Elmer Fudd, explaining his predicament to a line drawing of a man that was too stupid to successfully hunt a rabbit with a rifle. Bored, Elmer, and I don't have the first idea what to do about it. And I can't ask for help from old Luke over there because – because things is a bit awkward between us right now, what with how he kissed me. But see, that ain't all, because ever since he done that, with just about his whole body rubbing up against mine, he won't let me touch him. Not even by mistake.

"What do you want to do?" Rude cousin, interrupting his confession to Elmer. He rolled his eyes up from where they'd been going blurry from watching the television so hard, and shrugged his shoulders.

It was New Year's Day. Everything from movie houses to grocery stores was closed. Which wasn't anything new, couldn't be blamed on Florida or NASCAR or even sneak attack kisses from cousins. What had they ever done on New Year's Day? Slept off the night before, started a blaze in the fireplace, flipped open the old photo albums and gone through figuring out which of the black and white images was his dad, which were Luke and Daisy's folks, and then looking at the baby photos. Funny how Jesse could unfailingly tell them which of the round, bald blobs was which. "That's you, Bo! Just look at that smile," which was a toothless as the one in the next photo to the right. "Well, that handsome fella there is Luke, you can tell by the eyes," which were a fine shade of gray, indistinguishable from the gray of his shirt and his face. Daisy, at least, was distinctive with that little bow plastered to her head where her hair was supposed to be. "Such a pretty baby – we always knew you was gonna be a looker, Daisy!" Which made the girl smile and pat her uncle on the head, but anyone could see that all the babies in those old photos were ugly little things. Then again, on the next page there were pictures of toddlers and little kids, and by then they'd gotten cute. Daisy with her dolly (that Bo might or might not have drowned in the creek one day), Luke on his tricycle. Bo on all fours pushing an old wooden train that he couldn't even remember having, and then there were the formal portraits. Shot after shot of three kids, and always, always, from the time he was too little to sit up by himself until that one photo near the end of the album, in which the three of them stood in front of the newly completed General, Luke had an arm around
him.

*How did you love me back then?* Made him wish they actually had that album of crumbling photos here now, so he could point to each stage of their lives. *Did it happen when we was that age, Luke? Or did it come along later than that?* But his cousin didn't like to be poked at or prodded, wouldn't give him any more of an answer than he did yesterday – *I don't know* – until he was good and ready to. Which would be the second Tuesday of never, most likely.

"Come on, Bo," broke him out of his television-and-memory induced trance, made him aware that Luke was on his feet, walking toward him. "Get up."

"Why?" He didn't whine it, but it was a close call. He should probably blame it on the cartoons turning him into a kid again. If Luke mentioned it, which he didn't seem inclined to.

"Just get up and dig up some old shorts."

Because, apparently, they were going to the beach. Towels and regular clothes in the trunk of their loaner car, cut-off jeans on their backsides and boots on their feet, they must have looked a ridiculous sight, but that had never held them back from anything before. Luke took the wheel to get them across town, following signs that read "To Beaches." Everyone and their grandmother came to Florida to experience the pristine sand and blue-green water, and he and Luke had officially been residents of the state for more than three months before they ever bothered to try going there.

It was… interesting. Smell of dead things, sands shifting under his feet and making him work harder than he'd ever had to just to walk from here to there, roaring sound of water in constant motion.

"You ain't never been to the ocean," was a sudden, brilliant observation on Luke's part. "Have you?"

Last he knew Hazzard had no coastline along any of its borders, so, "No," he answered. And he'd never really thought about how Luke must've seen this kind of beach at some point or other, between boot camp on Parris Island and leaves from duty in Vietnam. But of course, like everything else, Luke had more experience with this than Bo.

"You ever," he blurted without thinking. "Been with another man?" But it was a burning question, one so intimidating and important and just downright frightening to ask, that he'd never even let himself think it until it got said.

The ocean wasn't a quiet, calm thing, not like Hazzard Pond which just sat there and silently minded its own business. The sea roared and hissed and disapproved of how he'd just about shouted the words, but he and Luke were extraordinarily alone here. Apparently everyone else had something better to do than to walk along the beach on a New Year's morning.

Big sigh from the man at his left. Hand through his hair, eyes looking at the ever-moving horizon in front of them. "No, I ain't. It ain't – It ain't ever been like that, Bo. I ain't," that was Luke, struggling for (or maybe against) words to say, talking all about what things *weren't*, never what they were. "That way, Bo. It's just you, all right?"

All right? Maybe it was, and maybe it wasn't. Maybe he liked that it wasn't ever anyone but him. Even if he half wanted to ask, *why me?* Because things were easier, more fun, before Luke felt this way about him. Or before he knew Luke felt this way about him, which left him wondering how long ago things had stopped being fun for Luke.
Towels got dropped to the ground, the biggest one spread out over the sand. Luke plopped himself down then, and started yanking on his left boot. Apparently the difficult decision of which vacant square of sand to settle on had been made without any consultation necessary. And that was fine, because he couldn't swear he had any kind of a strong opinion on it.

Bo flopped next to him, pulling off his own footwear in record time. Halfway back to his feet and, "Last one in has to make dinner tonight," he proclaimed.

Hand on his arm, staying his forward momentum, and it was normal, so familiar to be held back this way. "Watch yourself," and that was perfectly ordinary, too, "in that water. It's kind of like swimming upstream in rapids. Don't let it carry you away."

And then they were running, jumping, splashing. Cold, nothing like the sunwarmed ponds of a Hazzard summer, but it didn't matter. He was with Luke and it was a plain old, boring, average, ordinary day.

Blonde hair and blue lips. It wasn't Bo's best look. Besides, he was panting and the ocean was no place to be when you were tired.

Luke dragged himself out of the water and stumbled through the sand, knowing Bo would follow, the same as he always had. It had been Rosco's lament, and Jesse's before that, that whatever trouble Luke started, Bo would be there right behind him, tangling himself up in it, too. At least, he wanted to point out to both of those scolding older men now, he also follows me to safety.

But he wouldn't have the wind to say all of that if he tried. Between taking a beating from the water (Bo, at least, could float over the top of some of the bigger waves, while Luke was forced to stand his ground and let them take their best shot at him) and trudging through the soft sand, he'd lost his breath. So he just flopped down on the towel he'd spread earlier, rolled over on his back, and stared at the sky, waiting for his lungs to stop burning. And his lips, too, covered in salt and that split in the bottom one from Thursday night's fistfight wasn't exactly thrilled about this latest assault on it.

A few seconds later and his cousin was falling down next to him, dripping cold water as he came, huffing and puffing his own complaints about how he'd never been so tired from just a little bit of swimming in his whole life. Yeah, well. He'd been warned that the ocean played rough.

"Thirsty," Bo declared, and he had a point. They really ought to have brought some water with them.

"I think there's a water fountain," he answered, pointing roughly in the direction of a concrete structure that seemed to serve as a changing house. "Up there." Far away, too far to bother, even if it was less than a football field away.

The complete collapse of Bo's body, resting on his stomach and closing his eyes, seemed to agree with his assessment of the distance. "Later," his cousin vowed. Yeah, he could get behind that idea.

When the sky got too bright or too boring to look at anymore, he closed his eyes. Let his mind drift to the sound of waves washing, in-out, in-out. Peaceful for the first time in months, and he rested.

Got brought back to the here and now by fingers on his face, then a kiss. The weight of Bo, resting on his chest now, and he let it happen. Just lips on lips, strangely still for a ten count, then they were gone, though the hand stayed put. He opened his eyes then, found Bo's looking back at him from not ten inches away.
"Why?" he asked.

"Because you want me to." And that, apparently, was the best that Bo could come up with.

Luke took in a deep breath, let it out. Lifted the hand that wasn't trapped by the way Bo's body was sprawled halfway across his, ran it through blonde curls, sticky with sea water. He figured it couldn't be easy on the boy, the way he kept getting rejected when he was only trying to help, so he let him down as easy as he could.

"That ain't a good enough reason, Bo." Flat lips, a nod. Bo already knew that.

Or he didn't. "You came to NASCAR because I wanted you to," he declared, no doubt at all in that statement, though they'd never discussed it.

"That's different."

"How?" Head cocked to the side, quizzical look on his face, and it was cute. Like a puppy trying to decide where that crazy ball he'd just been playing with had gotten off to this time.

"NASCAR – I always wanted to go. Maybe that wanting wasn't as strong by the time we got the offer, but it wasn't something... foreign to me. It wasn't something I'd never considered doing before in my life."

Bo mulled this over from where he was still perched on Luke's chest. Both odd and perfectly normal for him to be there. There'd never been any real boundaries between the two of them before, and if they'd never been in quite this position before, they'd come close.

"It ain't like turnips, Bo. You ain't got to taste it just because it's on your plate, and you ain't got to try to get used to it just because Daisy's gonna serve it again next week. You don't try to feel that way about someone. Either you want to be with them or you don't." It was the kind of thing Luke ought to know. He'd thought it through, and then thought it through again. He'd looked at it up and down, from one end to the other. He'd tried, Lord knew how hard he'd tried, to make himself feel that way about a half a dozen girls as a distraction from what he really wanted. It hadn't worked. "It's my problem, cuz. It ain't yours."

Thoughtful frown, and he ran his hand through that blonde mess again so Bo would understand the he was being loved, not rejected. "Ain't you always said that if one of us has a problem, we both got a problem?"

Yeah, those words might have come out of his mouth a long time ago, when Bo's arms were a lot shorter, and his punch a lot weaker. It had been about dealing with bigger boys, the kind that figured fun consisted of picking fights with the smaller ones. It was how Luke had offered to protect his cousin, always. And what he was doing right now, this was just another way of protecting Bo.

"Not this time, cousin. You ain't done nothing to deserve this kind of problem." And even if he had, nothing he could have done would have been worthy of the sentence of trying to be with someone he didn't want in that way.

He ruffled those curls one last time before nudging Bo off of him. "Come on, let's go get some water." After which they should hit the waves again, because when he was playing in the surf, Bo wasn't trying to be anything but the fun-loving boy he'd always been.

Luke (and this wasn't the first time he'd come to this conclusion, still, it seemed to be a new
realization each time he stumbled over it again) wasn't half as smart as he thought he was. Not that there was any telling him that. Because if there was anyone who was fully convinced that Luke was the smartest man around, it was – well, Luke.

First of all, Luke wasn't turnips. He was – maybe he was hamburger or steak, something descended from a side of beef, not a vegetable. But even if Luke was a turnip, how would Bo know whether or not he liked turnips if he didn't try one? (He didn't like turnips.) He could go his whole life never bothering to taste the vegetable because of its color or the fact that it grew underground, but what if one day he got over those objections and just put one in his mouth? What if, when he tried just the tiniest sample, he liked it, and what if that made him want to try a little more? (Turnips were bitter, nasty things that he'd never have any interest in taking more than one bite of.) Or maybe if he tried them roasted or covered in spices, deep fried, or slathered in mustard? Might, just might like them, if he gave it an honest go. (He'd never like turnips.)

The kiss, he hadn't minded it. Hadn't found it objectionable or repugnant, not bitter (which just went to prove Luke wasn't a turnip) or bland. It was just – he didn't have time to know what it really was, it was like sampling a tiny nibble of a full meal. No way to judge it good or bad on such a small example. For all he knew, it was closer to French fried potatoes than turnips.

Lunch. Too much hunger in his belly and he couldn't think straight. He'd eat, but Luke wasn't home from church yet. Where the boy had no doubt gone to bow his head before the Lord and ask Him to please, please, if you don't mind and it wouldn't get in the way of answering bigger, more important prayers, make that desire in his heart go away.

Sunday, which meant tomorrow was Monday. Back to work for two Duke boys, in the thick of men who would ask why they hadn't come out for New Year's Eve, and would they be at the Tavern tonight? Sure, Luke had promised not to go drinking himself to oblivion anymore and not to run off (and Bo must have made up his mind to believe him him, what with how he'd let the man head off to church alone), but as soon as other people got involved in their lives, the pressures would mount again. Besides, the longer he left Luke be, the more vegetables Luke could come up with to compare himself to, the more he'd convince himself that Bo should never consider tasting them.

It was just another one of those things that old stubborn wanted to handle on his own, to sneak off into some dark corner somewhere and try to fix without anyone's help. His cousin had always been that way, right from the time he'd been all of maybe ten, trying to put the head of the hoe back onto the handle. The finer details had gotten lost in a couple of decades or so ago, but as Bo recalled, there was a fit of temper, there was a skinny but strong, dark-headed boy using the wrong tool to hack at a rock with all his might, and there was a little blonde boy watching with a certain amount of trepidation from the barn doors. Could be it was him that sent his older cousin off in that kind of a rage, probably with some kind of taunt or other, because Luke never had liked to be laughed at. There was a sickening sound of metal on stone, over and over, and then it stopped. A moment of numb shock as Luke stared at the remnants of what had once been a tool, then set to putting it back together. He tried jamming the head back onto the handle, but it wouldn't stay put for even half of a swing. His next brilliant effort had him tearing a strip from his own shirt, then fitting it between collar and handle to provide greater friction (and if Aunt Lavinia would holler at him for the torn clothes, that was probably a better fate than getting whipped by Jesse for willfully destroying a tool). By the time their uncle found him, the boy had moved beyond banging nails into the thing to searching out a socket for the power drill so he could maybe screw the head back on. Their guardian showed up just in time to save his bit from getting ground to dust; it was made for wood, and Luke was about to use it on the metal collar that was meant to wrap around the handle.

Neither Duke boy got a whipping that day, but they did get a lecture that pointed out the wisdom of
seeking help when things got broken, because trying to fix them alone could lead to torn shirts and broken drill bits if they were lucky, and holes in parts of their bodies where no holes belonged, if they weren't. But Luke hadn't learned a damned thing from the whole experience. Except, maybe, to be a little more discreet when improperly using their uncle's drill.

Some years after that, when Luke was off trying to fix Vietnam by himself, there was another memory. Must have gone to show how innocent he was, the kind of sheltered life he'd lived in Luke's shadow, that it took until his third year in high school to learn that there were men who liked other men. Or loved them, he supposed, or what was it Luke had said yesterday when Bo asked that dangerous question about his cousin and other men? *I ain't like that,* but in his high school boy's locker room days, Bo had learned that some men were. Like that, and it was, if his peers whispering and snickering about it in hidden corners were accurate in their information, a curse worse than impotence. At least men who couldn't, didn't, unlike miserable fools who would do it with another man.

Seemed like the stuff of legends and tall tales to him. By that time he'd already figured out how a boy and a girl fit together, where tabs and slots went to make a complete puzzle with no parts left over, and there was just no way two men could do that same thing. But his pals in the locker room, they'd insisted little facts like that didn't matter, not when two men wanted each other like that. They just had to… get creative.

Made him wonder now, in the safety of his own kitchen nearly a decade later, how many of those boys who'd acted so disgusted and put off had ever tried anything with another man. Seemed some of them knew an awful lot about such things. If anyone had, it was probably the ones who'd acted the most revolted by the notion.

All these years later, Bo reckoned he no longer thought that the idea of two men together was a fable of some sort, and he figured it probably happened more often than he'd ever known about. But the picture in his mind of exactly how – it still wasn't wholly clear and he didn't know whether he was ready to look at it any more closely, not yet.

So Luke was in church, most likely praying to be released from the terrible burden of wanting his male cousin that way, and Bo supposed that if he had any smarts, he'd be joining his cousin in that prayer. Except he wasn't sure he wanted such a wish to get granted, not unless he could go back in time too, and forget that kiss of Luke's. It wasn't, he found himself thinking, the worst thing in the world to know his cousin wanted him like that. So he sent up a brief prayer instead that he'd figure out how to handle it.

"You staying?" was just Bo being polite, making sure his cousin didn't want to ride home with him. Routine, maybe, or their new one anyway. Because Luke still liked to spend a couple of hours alone with a racecar and the track, taking test laps, learning the aerodynamics of each of the different models. Monte Carlos had a nice low profile but the lack of curvature to the rear window created drag – unless it was compensated by lowering the spoiler, flaring the fenders and taping the grille. The Impala had some fine moves, but was too heavy and the only way Luke could see to fix that would be to strip away the steel frame and replace it with fiberglass, one possible result of which would be to get the driver killed. The Pontiac Grand Prix was a pretty little thing, but he wouldn't want Bo driving her without some kind of modification to the nose to create more downforce.

It was all a grand experiment in accomplishing nothing at all. There was no reason to expect that his cousin would be spending time in anything other than the same seasick-green car he'd driven in for the end of the 1982 season, eating the exhaust of a more senior driver. But it made for a fine
distraction, going in fast circles in the artificial light of a night speedway, just him and another thirty or so imaginary cars, and every single night he came in first.

He allotted two hours to this pointless little activity each night, that much and no more because Bo would get to worrying if he kept at it for longer than that. So he'd have whatever car he'd tested that night parked and under a tarp by seven, when his cousin returned for him, and they'd figure out dinner.

Thursday night, and he'd only followed exactly this same pattern for the last three nights, so he would have expected Bo to get the hang of it by now. I won't go out and get drunk, and I won't leave until you ask me to (and when that time came he reckoned he'd have to switch places with Vance, because there was no way he'd leave Bo behind without another Duke to look after him – but he didn't even want to think about that, not yet) so all he had left was a couple of hours to himself to mull over the mess he'd made less than a week ago when he'd been fool enough to kiss Bo.

"For awhile," he muttered with a shrug.

Bo's eyes studying his, and the man was thinking about it again. About what he could do to fix a broken situation, and there was nothing. Compassion in the depths of those eyes, and Luke hated it, as close a relation to pity as it was.

"You go on," he ordered, reaching out his left hand tap a light punch on Bo's shoulder anyway. Because not touching him seemed to be worse than offering a token pat here and there.

A nod of acceptance, followed by, "I was thinking." Yeah, that was the problem right there. Bo was thinking and it didn't suit him, didn't suit either of them, when it came right down to it. "Maybe I'll leave the car with you, and catch a ride home with Mikey."

"Sounds fine to me." It really did. Those two boys needed to spend more time together, to bond and learn to trust each other. Vance, when the time came for Luke to trade duties with him, was too aloof for Bo. All right as a sometime summer visitor, and Bo liked him okay, but he'd never spend the kind of time with Bo that Luke did. He'd look after the blonde well enough, keep him out of trouble on and off the track, but providing true companionship just wasn't in his skill set. "Have fun," was Luke acknowledging what Bo wouldn't admit – that he was going out for a drink or two with the guys. Which Luke as forbidden from, and that was fine. He didn't figure he wanted to spend any real time in a bar where he was expected to get drunk and pick up girls, when he had no real desire to do either. But they had, both of them, been asked why they'd stopped coming out with the gang enough times that it was getting awkward. Bo was saving both of their reputations, and Luke reckoned that was a good idea. "I'll see you later."

It was a near-violent revelation, but maybe that was because it came when he was already tired. Flat on his back in bed, begging his own brain for the sleep that his body needed. Thinking of Sweet Tilly, because she was the first car he had ever loved. Some people counted sheep; Bo Duke counted cars.

Sweet was the right name for that old girl. Smooth riding even over the craziest of terrain, holding to the road at high speed, and built like a tank. She was a lovely lady, and it was a sad day when Jesse retired her.

But she was too heavy to jump. Sure, she could hop a ditch or catch some air over that old railroad bridge on Hightop Road; still, when it came right down to it, she was a ground vehicle, not made for flying. Which meant Bo hadn't really taken to the air until the General. He and Luke, on the run
from Rosco and suddenly the Alcovy River had loomed in front of them. Full speed, and there had been hollering in his ear from the passenger seat but there was no time for one of Luke's plans, no room for second thoughts. There was just the General and the bank of the river, and then there was nothing below them and only blue sky above. Flying.

Sleep started to laugh at him then, with a high-pitched girl's giggle. But he couldn't pay that silly sound any mind, not with how he'd just been run over by a Mack truck of a realization and all.

He'd never tried to jump the General. He hadn't bothered sampling a leap in small nibbles, or tasted just the tiniest bit of flying over a ditch in hopes that he wouldn't find it too sour to enjoy. He'd never thought about getting the car airborne, in fact, that would be the first way to get killed – him and Luke both. By trying to jump instead of rushing forward with full commitment to the momentum and direction in which they were already going.

More girly giggles in his brain, and he was glad that sleep was enjoying itself at his expense. It left him with a little time to think, to plot. To figure out a loose plan, but not to ponder on it too much, because thinking, like gravity, would bind him to the earth. And he was going to need to fly, or believe he could, in order to pull this off.

Eventually that laughter in his head mellowed, settled, let up. Turned into the hum of a lullaby, and he rested. Not much and not well, but he did manage to sleep. Enough, anyway, that he could still outdrive Mikey during the cornering drills, but physical training, that was ugly. Muscles pulling (silly little titter in his head reminding him of how good a little sleep would feel) in resistance against the weights they were meant to lift, tripping over his own feet when he was supposed to be running. Of course, that part was made worse by his proximity to Luke, jogging up and down the pit road, barely spitting distance away from his perfectly coordinated cousin. Never missed a dang step, old Luke didn't, but when his eye met Bo's and watched him flag, saw him stumble then right himself, he smiled. First one of those in a while, and it made that giddy giggle of lost sleep that kept bouncing around his head shut up. Flying – it might get him killed, but it was worth the risk for that smile.

It wasn't much of a plan, really. One that got him driven home by Mikey at the end of the workday, with a single quick stop along the way. And after that it left him sitting in a half-dark living room, curtains drawn and Christmas lights (which they really ought to have put away somewhere by now, though neither of them had shown any real motivation to actually do it) throwing a small, but warm glow. Right hand restlessly tracing the seam of his own jeans (all right, that hadn't been part of the plan, it was one of those things that just happened) while sweet giggles chimed from somewhere in the folds of his brain, chuckling about how a nap would feel awfully nice right now, certainly better than all this sitting and not thinking.

That charming sound might have lulled him off for a bit, either that or boredom made him lose track of time. Whichever came closer to the truth, the front door was opened and closed again before he figured it out, hands pushing against mushy cushion and working harder than he reckoned they should have had to, to shove himself to a stand. By that time Luke had made the short journey into the living room, head tipped to the side, tiny colored bulbs revealing the way his eyebrows knit together in the middle.

"What are you doing here, cuz?" Sounded like concern, had all the earmarks of a long conversation, and Bo didn't have time for one of those. "I figured you was going—" So he jumped. Didn't think about it, didn't try to do it. Didn't calculate his speed or the angle of their bodies, didn't worry about whether the ground beneath them was solid or shaky. Just put his hands on two muscled shoulders and pushed until Luke's back was up against the first solid surface – a wall. Good, that would hold them up.
Kissing started then, the kind he poured every part of himself into. Wild and strong, powerful and dizzying, the sort of thing he'd never quite done before. Oh sure, he'd used his lips to get what he wanted in the past, gone through something like these same motions. He'd driven girls to exactly the place he wanted them to go, be he'd never gone so far as jumping.

Paid little mind to the slight shove from Luke; it was a feeble attempt on his cousin's part to keep them safely on the ground, but Bo wouldn't have it. Countered the effort with a cyclone of a kiss, hands kneading on those powerful upper arms, not so much pinning as holding them there. Ignoring the way his heart rabbitted around in his ribcage, begging for more air than the shallow breaths he was managing to suck in through his nose, he pressed his body tighter against the one in front of him. Echoing insanity of a beat coming from his cousin's chest, and that was good. Meant that even if Luke was tempted to throw an arm over his eyes, refuse to look and complain that there was no reason they had to do anything half this crazy, he was along for the jump, too.

Had to breathe, had to rest if only for a minute, so he broke the kiss with a pant, let his forehead drop to rest against the wall. Heard his cousin's gasps in his ear, then, "Bo."

No, he was not going to talk or think about this, it wasn't about testing the width of the span or the height of the arc, solving geometry problems and being cautious. If he had to suffocate in order to fly, it was a small price to pay. Back to kissing.

Tricky, tricky, the effort to get his cousin airborne. Trying to find that thing in Luke that would make him let go, forget where he was and who he was with, stop thinking and just do – all without ever allowing their lips to come apart, without letting the man breathe well enough to protest. Started by letting go of one shoulder and trying to explore Luke's chest, just one hand, backs of fingers, and that seemed all right. Might even have been good, the way it freed Luke's arm, allowed his hand to come up and rest lightly on Bo's jawbone, tentative stroke there. It was nice, it was gentle – and things couldn't stay that way. He tried to undo the top button of Luke's shirt, got shoved for that.

"Bo!"

Right back to it, off the horse and back on before his cousin knew what hit him. His hands on Luke's wrists this time, holding him back from any shoving, his whole body crushing up against the muscled power in front of him. Kissing again, holding nothing back, hips pushing together, grinding, rubbing until the body under his gave up the fight. Some of it anyway, not so much shoving him off as pushing back up against him. Sweat trickling down the back of his neck, standing out on his skin and making his palms slippery. Now or never.

He let go of Luke's left wrist then, moved faster than either of them expected, his body pulling back to make room, but his lips never gave up the territory they'd already claimed. Right hand gripping onto cotton and pulling with no mind to the damage he might do – sometimes fences got reduced to splinters in the name of a good jump. Heard a tear, ignored it in favor of finding skin. Hot, sweating skin, arching away from his touch but there was no place to go, not with a wall behind, so Bo's hand found flesh, explored, rubbed and stroked. Hair where no girl would ever have any, but he wasn't thinking, wasn't trying, so he couldn't go worrying about that. He was flying, his hand moving over dancing muscle, down, down—

Movement, sudden and near-violent, proving that Luke had been holding back, keeping his strength in check until now. Pathetic little sound, somewhere between a cry and a moan, like something inside of him had broken. Not his heart, that was still pounding against Bo's as they traveled. Short distance, or maybe Bo just misjudged it, maybe he didn't know where they were going until they stumbled over the Christmas tree, ripping off half the lights, and his back smacked
into the opposite wall.

Not quite held there, though – hands off his shoulders now that there was no more need to shove, taking hold low, around his waist, looking for the hem of his shirt, finding belly underneath, and the kiss had to break. Bo needed air – someone had to breathe now that Luke was starting to fly. Because it was going to take a major feat of strength to keep him suspended – above thought and objections and responsibility to his baby cousin.

Big hands under his shirt now, dragging up over the sensitive skin of his stomach then ribs, and it was distracting. The kind of thing he'd normally let himself indulge in for awhile, but he couldn't this time. Ordered his own fingers to wander instead, opposite direction, down past belly button, short hairs there, and he rubbed against the grain of them. Got an instant reaction from that, one of Luke's arms wrapping up and around his shoulders to drag him down for a kiss. Deep breath, and he let himself be pulled to where he was wanted.

Fiddling blindly, and there was a belt buckle. Worked it, even as the kiss turned sweet, Luke's hand in his hair, thumb stroking. Reckoned the next time could be gentle if it wanted to, could be the equivalent of walking barefoot in soft grass, holding hands. Jumping wasn't calm and it wasn't harmonious, but it was about the most gratifying feeling he'd ever had, when he landed safely on the other side.

"Bo," was the groan that ended the tender moment, coincided with him finding his way inside of Luke's shorts, stroking.

"Bed," he answered, even if it wasn't entirely logical outside his own head. "Come on."

Got kissed again first, messy thing that was trying to make up its mind between staying right here, shoving each other up against walls, or heading somewhere more comfortable and accommodating. Considered the options for all of a minute, and then they were moving. Stumbling, tripping, pulling the last of the wires off the tree and the plug out of the wall. Darkness then except for the distant glow from the front entrance light that his cousin must have turned on when he came in. Saving grace, let them find their way into Luke's bedroom, shucking shirts along the way. Went after his own belt and the button on his jeans before either of them could think about what he was doing and the meaning behind it. Because this flight depended on no one's brain getting too terribly engaged.

Out of his jeans (mostly, they clung to one foot and followed after him like a lonely puppy asking for attention) and getting shoved onto the bed on his back. Hands, lips, everywhere all at once, trying to figure out where they left off when the boys were upright and in another part of the house. Found new places to roam, Luke's lips on his neck, sampling different bits of skin until he found one that made Bo's voice start making nonsense sounds all on its own, his own fingers kneading at his cousin's shoulders, back, then finally, his rear end. Setting a pace with his hands that Luke's hips automatically followed, rubbing, grinding their bodies together, but the angle was imperfect.

Besides, he couldn't go losing track of this thing, no matter how good his cousin's body felt against his hands, now matter how overwhelming those lips on his neck were. So he worked his way back to where they really had been a few minutes ago, hand between their bodies, finding Luke, stroking.

"Bo," was nearly a whimper then, almost tearful, before the man let his right hand slip down Bo's chest to return the favor. Picked up the pace, breath coming in pants, huffing against the wet spot on his neck, his cousin getting serious, as if he really thought this would be enough.

It wasn't a step, not even a hop, it had to be a jump, and until Luke got to the apex of the arc, then landed safely on the other side, all this progress would be for nothing.
Free hand fishing around, reaching and stretching, and he should have foreseen this little problem. Somehow he'd thought he'd be able to see, or that he'd have a better position (oh, but he was going to like being exactly where he was in a minute), or barring either of those things, his long reach would save the day.

Had to hurry, he was getting close – they both were. Unless he found what he wanted or called a momentary halt, it would be too late, too late and he couldn't be sure he'd get a second chance.

One desperate sweep of his hand and there it was, plastic container. Already open, safety seal removed hours ago. It was the pit stop he'd forced Mikey to make, then had to invent an excuse for. Admitted he and Luke had spent most of New Year's Day at the beach, swore he wanted to go back this weekend, but the one thing the Duke boys lacked for such an adventure was sun tan oil. A faded shade of the truth, nothing he could get away with at home, but most likely even Jesse would agree that the real purpose of the oil he'd bought shouldn't be admitted to out loud. Not even to Luke, so he just tipped the bottle one-handed, squeezed a glob out, dropped the container wherever it fell. Carefully brought his precious, slippery cargo down the length of their bodies, then swapped out his left hand for his right. Spreading oil, slick grip made everything move all the faster, made a small cry come out of Luke.

"Come on," he said, because neither of them needed to be thinking about this. "Come on," again, using his hand to guide Luke to where he wanted him to be.

"Bo," was begging, was fighting, was trying to be responsible or think, was looking for permission to do neither.

"Come on," one more time, then he slipped his right hand from where it had gotten trapped uselessly between them, up Luke's spine to the back of his neck, pulling himself up or his cousin down. A kiss; all of his faith, all of his energy, all of his love into that kiss. Dizzying, somewhere on the edge of mindless and, "Do it," he commanded.

"Bo," came the complaint one more time, you're pushing me too far, I can't be accountable for what I do.

"Come on," he encouraged a final time, because he'd led this man to the edge of the ravine. Now it was up to him to make the leap.

One more kiss, deep, slow, apologizing and promising gentleness all at once, and then, finally, his cousin pulled back. Positioned himself, lifted Bo's legs onto his arms, and pushed.

Quick, shallow breaths, counterpoint to Luke's heavy panting as he worked his way in. Slow, careful how he went, but the man was taking a leap of faith, and earlier tonight Bo had made himself a resolution to catch him on the other side. Relaxed as best he could, and let his cousin work out the rest.

Pause, Luke waiting, like he always had, for his kid cousin to catch up. "Okay?" he asked, and it was worried, nervous. Like he hadn't waited long enough, had rushed Bo, let him get hurt and the end result of that would be a whipping from Jesse.

Bo's hands, free now that he was neither having to push nor pull at his cousin, came up to cup both of Luke's cheeks. Pulled him closer, craned his own neck up from where his head had been approximately resting on the pillow. Quick kiss, one that gave his cousin permission to move.

Slow at first, but building, his hand wrapped around Bo and stroking to the same rhythm. Moans and whimpers, kisses wherever they fell, sweat and heat and there, right there. Tears, he thought,
wetter than sweat, and that would fit with the sounds, a cry from Luke, and then nothing but flying through the air, with no interest in ever coming back down to land on the ground.

Somehow, and he had no idea what the process had been or why the man in his arms had worked his way through it, Bo had figured out how to love him back. It was so ridiculously improbable, so completely beyond the realm of what could happen, so stupid and foolish and crazy and—

Tanned hides from here to Hazzard and back, secrets and shadows and things they could never say out loud or in public, gestures they'd have to keep in check, but none of it mattered. Because Bo was an idiot, a complete and utter moron, impulsive, thoughtless, rash, lacking entirely in wisdom and good sense and— he'd figured out how to love Luke back.

Against the force of his own nature, the little boy in him that appreciated pretty things, like to touch softness, and taste sweetness, Bo had managed to love Luke, who was hard, sour, average. Against the force of Luke's more formidable nature, the one that insisted on preventing his baby cousin from following him into dark, dangerous, desperate places, the boy had found a way to override resistance, and create love.

Blonde head pillowed on his chest, dozing. Content as a baby under a warm blanket and a thumb in its mouth, that was — and always had been, in a way — Bo. Taking what he wanted, even if Luke hadn't had any desire to give it to him, never more than inches away from a fistfight or temper tantrum, and it didn't — not any of it — matter. Bo had figured out how to love him back, and whatever the boy wanted, for the rest of his life, Luke would find a way to give him. The sun? No problem, Luke would hold his breath against the lack of oxygen and bite his lip against the scorching burns just to lay the fire, the glow and glitter of it, at Bo's feet.

His fingers, absently stroking through sweat-wet blonde curls, his lips kissing forehead.

"You ready to go again already?" mumbled, head tipping under his hand, distant light from the far end of their house picking up glints in those eyes looking up at him.

Giggles, Luke could swear he heard them in his own head, had every desire to let them out into the room with them, to let them bounce off the walls, the ceiling, and the blinds on the window, to curl themselves around the bed and rock it gently until the two boys wrapped around each other in the middle of it fell asleep. Didn't, slipped his hand over Bo's mouth instead.

"Hush," he said. Because yeah, he could find within himself the motivation to go again, but he could also relax and just hold onto the precious gift he'd already been given tonight.

Got his palm licked for his efforts, wiped it off on the nearest thing his could find — sweaty shoulder where a little more moisture would hardly matter.

"Luke," and just from the sound of it, he figured he ought to have left his hand where it was, no matter how much spit Bo's tongue slathered over it. "You ain't nothing like turnips. You're more like — a tomato. A carrot. A cucumber?"

Food. Dinner, they probably ought to get up and make some. It was late and neither of them had eaten since lunch, though they'd certainly done plenty to exert themselves. Instead, he pulled on the sheet from where it was resting around their hips, up and over Bo's head.

"Go to sleep," he counseled, because he wasn't ready, not half ready, to give up the close warmth of the body nestled against his.
Something – something strange. A mood, a tone. Little smirks of superiority, small clumps of men who’d never had more than two words to say to each other, bunching together. It was—

"Hey, did you hear?"

—enough to make a man jumpy, make the hair on his arms prick up, make him look both ways and up and down for trouble. To hone his ears for distant sirens, to ready his legs to sprint. And Bo's legs, well, they were tired. New muscles found because they'd been pulled out of shape and Tony, the newest torturer-in-the-form-of-a-weight-trainer that had started at LaMatt along with the New Year, didn't think it was terribly cute how he was trying to get out of doing lower body training. (*I got plenty of calisthenics last night, thanks. Did my stretches, too.*)

It wasn't a day when he wanted that particular type of adrenaline running through his system, the kind that screamed in his head about how he had to just drop the evidence and run, because it was too late to protect the still or its contents from the revenuer's axe. It was much more the sort of day when he wanted to stay in bed, and barring that, to be near Luke. To smile over toward the passenger side of the car and get smirked at as a response, to do his sit ups while Luke held his feet for him, to stop at the pit during his run just to sling an arm across those familiar shoulders and offer a wink. To stick close and look into those insanely blue eyes so the man would know, without the kinds of doubts him mind was known to throw up then chew over, that what had happened last night wasn't anything like pity or foolishness or a little cousin following where the older one led. It was love. (Fueled, perhaps, by concern and compassion, but what were those, if not corollaries of love?)

The only problem with his fantasy about a perfect day, full of shared moments and close quarters, was that there were other men here. Ones that wouldn't be particularly impressed by what the Duke boys had chosen to do instead of going out and chasing skirts last night.

Seemed, at moments, like maybe they already knew. (Which was ridiculous, impossible, utter nonsense. There was no way in hell Luke would have told them, wouldn't even have given the slightest hint through his face or body language. And Bo – well, he was doing his dangedest not to smile too much or too broadly. Because he understood, suddenly, what it had been like for Luke to want him – for however long it had been, and he figured he was going to have to pin the man down on the answer to that – and at the same time to know the consequences of consummating such a thing. The way he saw it, his cousin had been through hell, expecting rejection for the way he felt to come from all quarters, even Bo.) Small gatherings, here and there from which men emerged with smirks on their faces and there was nothing he could do about it, except keep on walking when he was supposed to be running, just keep moving forward.

"Bo – did you hear?" That was Mikey, trotting up from behind him. Looking both ways, either for eavesdroppers or just maybe to see whether Tony wasn't going to come after them with a horsewhip, before settling to walk next to him.

No, he hadn't. The rumors of those vulgar Duke boys hadn't made it all the way to his ears yet. He wondered if they'd made it to Luke's.

"About Jay?"

That made his head come around fast. "Did he retire?" Because that was what Luke had promised him would happen eventually, sometime back when he got to somewhat loudly wondering why he kept helping another man win races that he could have taken away from anyone on the speedway.

"Better than that," Mikey assured him, though there was nothing involving Jay Goodwin that Bo could imagine would be better than him announcing his retirement. (Though he was prepared to be
crazy about whatever it was that his friend was about to articulate, because it had nothing to do with those sinful Duke boys.) "He done jumped ship. To Melling."

Well. Give the man a month off and just look at how loyal he was in return. Sneaking off to Harry Melling's team where he'd get to drive Fords instead of Chevys, while some other rookies protected his back end. Which meant that—

"Don't you see?" Mikey was grinning at him. "This means we ain't got to help him win no more."

Better than that, it would give him a chance to beat the pants off the former LaMatt hotshot. Even if he lost to the whole damn rest of the field, Bo couldn't wait to make Jay Goodwin eat his dust.

Funny how his muscles stopped being sore, how his body turned weightless as the pit road flew by under his running legs. Funny how he felt no pain of any sort as he hurdled the pit wall and kept on running without missing a step. Funny how Luke was there, right there where Bo wanted him to be, grinning. Amazing how his cousin accepted the hug when it came, even if they were within sight of dozens of men, even if it was most likely inappropriate to express glee at the loss of LaMatt's star driver. Accepted the hug, then nudged him away, turned him around and swatted him on the backside.

"Get back out there, Bo."

It was astonishing, when it came down to it, that they made it home first. Just inside the door and it wasn't even fully shut yet before Bo was wrapped around him. Whole length of his body finding parts of Luke to cling to, and by the time the slam echoed across the kitchen, it got matched by the thud of Luke's back hitting the wall.

And it wasn't that he didn't appreciate the sentiment, he did. He just figured that Bo should save his speed for the track and let tonight be slower, gentler than the way yesterday had gone. But then, that had been the way his thoughts wandered through the first half of the day, before the news about Jay's defection had spread like wildfire from one end of the speedway to the other, before Bo's sweaty body had bound over the pit wall and into his arms. Before he'd gotten freed from the prison of protecting another man's back bumper. Self-control – well, he'd be cruel to ask it from the man in his arms on a night like tonight.

All the same, he'd seen that hobbling gait that plagued his cousin through the day (even if it did seem to let up just long enough for a spectacular leap over the pit wall), and he figured that bouncing around in the barely cushioned seat of the Monte Carlo couldn't have been too pleasant either. So he dug his left hand out from where it had gotten trapped between them, slid it slowly over chest and shoulder, felt heartbeat and sweat, and skin when he got beyond the collar of that t-shirt, found chin and jawbone, quietly explored those for a minute until the kiss changed, blonde head tipping, the result less hyper and more earnest. Luke's hand in his hair then, tangling gently, stroking, soothing.

Slowed things down, made them come to a lazy stop, Bo's face inches from him now. "What?" sounded slightly testy, bordering on annoyed. "You gonna start telling me how I shouldn't be doing this, and it ain't like turnips again?"

No, that hadn't been in the plan at all. Maybe it should have been, maybe he ought to have been worrying over how long this thing between them could last and what would happen when Bo got his next shot at a pretty little pit rat. And maybe he'd start thinking that way tomorrow, or next week, or just maybe it could keep until they hit the road again. Tonight, his only thought had been about gratefulness to the man in front of him for forcibly giving him something he never would
have taken all on his own. That, and there was the momentary consideration that they should probably eat, first. They never did get around to dinner last night, and Bo's diet, which was supposed to be high in protein, seemed to mostly consist of cereal and milk for the past couple of days.

But there was no room for the steak they ought to grill up, not when Bo was pouting, bordering on angry, and just waiting to get rejected again. So he smiled, straightened up from where he'd been shoved into the wall, used the hand in Bo's hair to pull him down again. Quiet kiss, like a country stroll, no purpose or goal in mind. Just a meeting in the middle, somewhere between reckless need and sullen pout, there was this.

Bo caught on quick, but then he wasn't half as dumb as he pretended to be. All gee shucks when it suited his purpose, but when there was something to be gained, whether it was cookies or kisses, the man suddenly became a genius.

"Oh," he muttered, somewhere between this kiss and the next one, and Luke rewarded this brilliant realization by running his hand (the one that wasn't still making a mess of that blonde fluff that wasn't half as short as Bo thought it was, still plenty of end left to curl around his fingers and keep them there) up the length of belly, chest, shoulder in front of him, dragging shirt all the way.

But there was only a matter of time before the small space that Luke had opened up between them got closed, Bo pulling him closer, wrapping a long arm all the way around his back, fingers dipping into the back pocket of his jeans for something to hold onto. And if it wasn't quite what Luke had in mind, it wasn't so bad to be smothered by Bo. After all, he'd developed a few survival techniques over the years of growing up with the boy. Slight pull on that blonde hair, nothing that would cause any pain or leave permanent scarring, but there it was – he had all of Bo's attention now.

"Couch," he suggested, because if they weren't going to get around to eating, they had no business in the kitchen.

"Bed," Bo answered, because he always had to go that one step further, past good idea and well nigh onto foolish.

"Couch," Luke insisted. Last night was all grab and shove, wall then bed. And it had been fine, it had been great. It was what it took, when it came right down to it, to get them through their first night together. But this here wasn't going to be a first anything; they weren't horny fifteen year olds, with more hormone than brain.

"Floor," Bo countered, as if it wasn't his ass Luke was trying to protect, to be gentle with.

And if the brat wanted to play rough, well, there were all kinds of rough they could play. Like the way he slapped both hands against those broad shoulders, shoved the man back. Twisted him around so he was pushing from behind and, "Watch your tail, Bo," he murmured close to the boy's ear. Propelling him toward the couch at reasonably high speed. "He's going to try to get under you."


Stumbling, tripping toward the couch. "Debris on the track," Luke warned. "Watch yourself." Too late, he wasn't any better than their useless spotter, calling hazards after they'd already been crashed into. Christmas tree, and they really needed to take that sad thing down, all dry needles and drooping tinsel that it was. Not to mention how it caused a two-car crash in their own living room, momentum sending Bo sprawling over the arm of the couch to land on the cushioned seat, while Luke slammed to the floor on all fours. Left knee – really ought to take a look at it, but—
"See, I told you floor," was Bo, sitting up from where he landed with all intentions of coming down onto the carpet. But Luke had done them both a favor, had tested out the floor and discovered it was hard, so he moved first, pushing Bo back into the softness of the couch.

"Yeah, but you were wrong."

It was cheating, really, to kiss Bo right then, when he undoubtedly had some sort of a retort just hanging there on the tip of his tongue, but then there didn't seem to be any complaints when it got licked away. Not to mention how there weren't any real objections to how he climbed, sore knee and all, onto the cushions with Bo. Not enough room for two, at least not until they shifted, switched, twisted, shuffled. Luke on top, held firmly there by both of Bo's arms, while he used his own to keep most of his weight from crushing the air out of the body below his. It would be a real shame to go killing the man now, when he'd finally gotten Bo where he wanted him.

Nothing to do but kiss, so he did. Lips first, but pulling away when it tried to get too deep, too serious too early. Cheek next, jawbone, ear. Little wiggle under him so he stayed there awhile, but it wasn't enough. Neck, sucking and licking, because that resulted in panting breaths.

Got tricky then, because where he wanted to go was covered in shirt. Should have insisted on fewer clothes (except he'd wanted to slow things down, not speed them up) or more spacious quarters (even if it was him that shoved them here in the first place). Now it was all down to ingenuity and determination. Nuzzling the cotton as far out of the way as possible, then tongue slipping under the neck to find that soft skin between collarbone and shoulder. Salty taste of the day's sweat, but he didn't mind that, not when there was a moan, close to his ear, and a body shifting under his. Gave him the upper hand and some precious seconds to sit most of the way up, to free his hands long enough to push against the hem of that blue t-shirt, to bare some belly, then bend to kiss it.

"Ah," and a hiss sounded almost like pain, but it wasn't. Not with how there was a hand in his hair, oh-so-helpfully guiding him down to do it again. Breastbone, where he could feel the skin suck taut under his lips, down in increments, watching muscles twitch with each touch. Hands around that slender waist, thumbs stroking and that only added to the sensitivity. Lips down, down, until they were just above belt and jeans, then they were rolling.

Floor under his back with a breath-stealing thud, Bo grinning above him.

"I said floor," was the smug reminder, as the brat took full advantage of his newly gained position on top. Opening Luke's shirt button by button, hands stroking, butterfly-light, against the skin they were slowly exposing. Lips curling as Luke's flesh bumped up with chills.

"You said bed," he pointed out logically. So what if his voice was a bit strained, a little higher than normal.

"We'll get there," Bo answered, bending down to kiss him.

And they did, somewhere after the shirts got lost and the belts got opened, but before the jeans hit the floor. After hands and tongues had explored previously untouched territory, and while they could still manage to halfway stand up, at least enough to take the seven steps into Luke's bedroom. Took some wrestling, the kind Luke might never have figured on doing, to get Bo where he was wanted, to reach for the suntan oil and fill the room with the smell of coconuts. To spread it on Bo and offer himself, to figure out how to do it this way. But Bo was an avid learner, and Luke made himself a patient teacher and together they worked it out. Not half as wild as last night's acrobatics, all push and shove with a wall at his back, but he figured, when it came right down to it, that it was better to slow down. To feel each moment, to savor every touch. And when Bo let out a cry that sounded almost like his name, he reckoned dinner was overrated. Pulled the hardworking
boy down to rest against his chest, and within minutes they were both asleep.

Hot, sweat wet, heavy. Sun burning down on his back and he swung the – pickaxe, based on the heft of it. Digging a hole in the driest, rockiest corner of the property, for propagation. Odd, because it felt like harvest, not planting season. Early summer interrupting spring, he supposed, and that would happen in the year Jesse decided to plant where only rocks had ever seen fit to grow before. Though he couldn't swear he remembered the decision itself being made, nor the wisdom behind it, nor when they had plenty of tilled soil on the south forty. But the heat had stolen his clear thoughts and his strength. Same hole he'd been hacking at for hours, and it never got any deeper or wider, just hands-over-head-swinging-down-thud-echoing-up-his-arms, then stand back up and do it again. Slick slipping grip and he was going to lose the tool, but he lost his footing first. Down, falling, over the edge of some ravine or cliff, tumbling, waiting for the bone cracking crunch of smashing into the bottom. Except he was safe; Luke had him, was wrapped around him, protecting him against hard surfaces and whippings and kicking mules and...

Hand on the back of his neck, in his hair, lips on his forehead. For one unaccountable minute it was Lavinia rousing him from his sleep, and then, as it always had been, it was Luke.

"Nightmare?" he was whispering, low and reassuring.

"Maybe," Bo answered, because he couldn't be entirely certain. There had been uncomfortable, out-of-control parts of his dream, but overall, it hadn't earned the name nightmare. Not with the soil of home in it, not with Luke there wrapped around him. "Not sure."

Second morning in a row of waking up sprawled across that bony chest, and it might just be that it was too hot by far, even if it was January, to be cuddling up to Luke this way. Though his breath, half-laughed out, created a cool breeze through Bo's hair.

"How can you not know if it was a nightmare or not?" But the arms held him fast, safe and sweaty, against a steady heartbeat.

"Because… I was falling, and I couldn't get a grip on nothing to stop myself, you know?"

Another thing that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. Indulgent one, accompanied by that hand in his hair, stroking, soothing. "I got something of an idea, the way you was wiggling around."

"Yeah, okay. So I was falling and that part was like a nightmare. But I was in Hazzard, so that part was good. And – then you was there," holding onto me, and that part must've been real, his cousin helping him to fight against the gravity that wanted to claim him. "So I stopped being scared."

Quiet little murmur from the man under him. Unintelligible, familiar, the kind of thing he'd heard in moments after dirt had been brushed from his skinned knees, revealing droplets of blood, when a horse had thrown him but he'd turned out to be unbroken, when he'd rolled a car, then crawled out dizzy and disoriented. I'm right here, maybe. You're safe with me.

He settled into the calm of Luke, closed his eyes again, but sleeping was done for the night. "Still dark," he complained. "Still early."

"Yeah, well," it was interesting to hear Luke's voice conducted straight into his ear through that lumpy rib cage. A stretch underneath him, one of the arms that had been around him sacrificed to the motion. "We fell asleep early. And I reckon Uncle Jesse would tan our hides," oh, at least their hides, if he got on a real tear he might just tan all their internal organs, too. "If we didn't make sure to have us a good old farm breakfast this morning. With sausage and ham." And eggs and hash
browns, and even grits, but those things went without saying.

And if Bo reckoned it wasn't their eating habits that would make the old-timer want to whip them, he figured the better part of having a reasonably happy day meant forgetting how little Jesse would approve of what had made them skip a healthy dinner last night.

So, "After that, we got to go the beach," he said instead of dwelling on uncomfortable thoughts.

"Oh?" came the amused answer, shuffling movement, Luke's chin dipping to try to see him. Pointless, it was too dark to make out anything but tiny specks of light in the moisture of those eyes. "We got to?"

Small shrug, because for all this talk that loosely revolved around the notion of them getting out of bed, he wasn't really ready to move yet. "I told Mikey we was." Little sound of confusion, asking him what their friend had to do with anything, or maybe wondering why Mikey knew where they were going before even Luke did. "I had to tell him something," he explained. "When I made him stop at that little store on Ninth Street so's I could get the suntan oil. I said we was going to the beach this weekend, same as we did last weekend." And Luke knew as well as he did, "Now we got to do it, so's it won't be a lie."

"You gonna get a tan at the beach?" was the next amused little question.

Maybe. He'd gotten some last week, even if it was strange to see his skin darken in the dead of winter. Not much, he still wasn't the match for Luke's arms, which had spent the whole fall under the open skies as he paced the pit. "You're the one that needs some more tan," he pointed out. "You got dark arms and a white chest." Which never would have happened at home, where their shirts came off on hot and sunny days. "You got to get rid of that farmer's tan."

Snort, which was some acknowledgement on Luke's part that he was slightly, just barely, maybe an infinitesimal bit humorous. "I ain't worried about it. I ain't half as vain as you."

Yeah, well. Luke never did put stock in important things, like how he looked. Showing up for Saturday night juiking without his hair properly combed, wearing the same shirt he'd had on for a full day of working the fields. No wonder he always had to settle for Bo's leftovers, the girls that weren't half as cute or nearly as—

"Luke," came out as a sigh. "Mikey's been asking why we ain't been out this week. He wants—he asked…"

"Why don't you go out with him, then?" sounded perfectly indulgent, no concerns of what might happen after a few drinks in a bar half filled with perfectly willing girls.

"I ain't going without you," he said with conviction. Because the worrying would come in time. If he wasn't right there watching, and couldn't see with his own two eyes that Bo wasn't about to wander off with some girl, well, Luke's brain would start to thinking. And chewing on things, obsessing and ruminating. It was what his cousin did best, and if it helped him come up with crazy schemes to get them into and out of trouble, it would also have him imagining the worst when it came to nights out in bars without him.

"Then we'll both go." Yeah, he liked that idea even less. He'd watched how the man had plowed through the field of females for the better part of a month.

Breath in, big huffing sigh back out. "Maybe next week." Because when all else failed, he found that procrastination worked best. Another seven days to work out how to handle themselves in
"How're you going to explain that to Mikey?" In a minute this quiet little scene was going to come to an end. So he lifted his head up, felt the cool air start to dry the sweat that hung on his face from resting up against Luke's skin. Kissed the scruffy chin in front of him, let his hand find the soft skin of a cheek.

"Tell him you're scared of running into the guy you was fighting last week?" That right there ought to ensure that he got shoved to the floor with record speed.

Except it just made Luke snicker at him. "He wouldn't believe you." Yeah, their friend had gotten a good look at what Luke could do in a fight, had gone wide-eyed with admiration over it. Probably thought the older boy could lick the entire state of Florida. Besides, there was that little Duke clause that followed them everywhere they went, about being honest.

And his humor left him – it wasn't funny, any of it, after all. "What have you been telling people?" Because Luke's team, they had to be asking questions, too.

"I ain't. I just – look at them." Yeah, and the questioning would stop after one of those stares his cousin could unleash. The kind that half called you stupid for asking and half threatened that it was none of your business in the first place, but if you wanted to get involved, well Luke wouldn't mind deckung you for your curiosity.

"Well then," he concluded. "I won't tell Mikey nothing except that we'll go out next week." Sounded perfectly reasonable to his ear, got him laughed at by Luke, got him shoved at until they both sat up, naked and sweaty, and started figuring out getting decent and getting fed.

And to save their honest Duke honor, or maybe because they both wanted to anyway, they did head out to the beach. Though they didn't have it to themselves like last time, there was still plenty of sand between them and their neighbors. Not safe enough to climb on top of Luke and press their lips together like he had tried to last week, but in the cold water, where the foam hid them, he stole a few quiet kisses all the same.

The off-season – the work part of it anyway – had been centered on him and his team, without Bo. No races to divide his attention between seeing to the men under him and supporting his driver. It had been good for them, him and the team both, to have this time together. They'd bonded, found common ground, figured out they were supposed to be on the same side of this thing. Probably helped that without Jay coming back, they – all of them – stood a better chance of being on the winning team. (And maybe it hadn't hurt that the crew had seen their boss acting like a drunken fool, and figured out he was as big an idiot as any of the rest of them were.)

Bo had his own off-season routine of driving drills, but the pit crew chiefs weren't a part of that activity. The boys drove in the relative silence of their own little cockpits, drafting on each other, playing some intentional bumper tag, skidding over wet surfaces and pulling other dangerous stunts under the supervision of trainers. It was the kind of thing that would make him anxious and edgy, he supposed, if he didn't know that Bo could handle whatever came at him, so long as he had an accelerator under his foot and a steering wheel in his hands.

What did have him thinking twice was how the two ends were about to have to meet in the middle again: his responsibility to his crew and his duty to take care of his driver. And that would be a complicated enough procedure, even if one of the two things he had to watch over hadn't been Bo.

From the time primary care-taking duties for his male cousin had gotten handed over to him when
he was hardly old enough to look after himself, more than a fair share of Luke's conscious hours had been focused on attending to Bo. The boy had gotten quite accustomed to that, had thrived on it, really. And since the two of them had taken to sharing one bed just over a week ago, he'd quickly adjusted to having Luke's full attention when he was semi- and unconscious, too.

The trick, of course, was going to be letting his cousin go at the end of each race. Watching him get out of the car and walk away, and now that the boy was about to start winning, it was going to be near impossible. Because a genuinely gleeful Bo had twice the libido of an averagely cheerful Bo, and all that energy was going to have to go – somewhere. Out to the bar with the guys, at least that had been the 1982 season strategy. Drivers all out as soon as the duties of smiling for the media were done, and a few hours later the pit crew would show up. Ensured that the drivers got first crack at the pits rats, left the dregs to the crew, which simply enforced rank. It was the way things were, everyone knew it and no one bothered to fight against it.

And Luke figured it was inevitable. There were bars, there were girls, there was that pretty face and excitable body of Bo's. Eventually all would meet somewhere; though the two of them been studiously putting that moment off into the nebulous future, one fine day, Bo would rediscover the true benefits of being a NASCAR driver.

And, the way he saw it, he wouldn't hold his cousin to anything. What he'd chosen to do – Luke would have figured it went against Bo's nature. The boy had been admiring girls with his wide eyes, smiling mouth, and hormonal body since about the age of thirteen, but he'd never taken a second's pause to assess a man, not unless he was trying to figure out how hard a punch the guy might be able to throw.

Yet somehow, the boy had taken to sex with Luke with the same kind of aggression that he took to driving from the first time he got behind the wheel. And that part could be attributed to love – of sex, of Luke. But in the end, he reckoned that tiger would have to find his own stripes again. Bo would, someday soon enough, need to get back with girls.

And, Luke promised himself silently and fervently, he wasn't going to insist on rights he didn't have. The last week had been a gift, a late Christmas present from his cousin to him. When that gift got broken and worn out from overuse, he swore he wasn't going to hold Bo accountable. He was going to kiss it goodbye with grace, then make a private call to the farm, summoning Vance to Daytona to take his place.

He was a Duke, he kept his promises, even if they were only to himself. But on that day when, having won his first NASCAR trophy, Bo wandered off to the bar with the rest of the drivers while Luke stayed behind and saw to his crew and the car, he couldn't swear with his whole heart that he'd be happy to let his cousin go.

"Try it again, Freddy." So for now, he was controlling what he could. His crew, their tools.

"Testing one, two." Came over the headset in that slow, thick voice. Maybe it wasn't that their spotter was near-sighted. Maybe he'd eaten too much molasses over the length of his slothful life, leaving his tongue sticky and slow to report what he'd seen.

Didn't matter, Luke's little bit of engineering had worked. What Freddy had now was a one-way link into Luke's ear only. Which meant that he could report what he saw just as slowly as he always had, exactly the way his union contract stipulated he should, but only to his pit crew chief. Bo wouldn't be startled by broadcasts that came even as he was navigating around the debris that he or Luke had already seen. And more importantly, Freddy wouldn't be able to hear conversations between chief and driver. The channel on which he and his cousin communicated would be closed.
Okay thanks, Freddy, we're good.

"You about ready?" He was fidgeting, shifting his weight back and forth, and he didn't mean to be. Never wise to look nervous in front of Luke. It kicked that overused brain into high gear, made him wonder at the causes. Made him assume the worst, which either led to a fistfight or protectiveness, and neither of those would serve them well tonight. Which, they'd agreed, would mark the first night of drinking and otherwise rabble rousing for the Duke boys since Luke's drunken scene a couple of weeks back. Here it was, the end of the last afternoon of the workweek, and they'd figured they were about out of honest reasons they could give for skipping out on the fun. Besides, as much as they'd needed the quiet moments of the last week to learn each other in new ways, they were Duke boys. They needed to go out and play, to get dirty, to find trouble.

"You go on," was the answer he got. Which was not what they had agreed on, did not match with what they discussed. It was Luke being a weasel, a rat, a sneaky bastard and changing plans on him at the last minute.

"Luke," but there'd been something to his tone. Not dismissive, more like – well, he didn't know really. Just – off. Not right, not sure of itself. "It's Friday." And they had to do something.

A sigh, and Luke was putting something away or just plain fiddling around. In carts full of tools that Bo wasn't allowed to touch, because he wasn't a union man. But if he could go into those forbidden stores of tools, he was pretty sure that he'd find them in perfect order, regardless of how Luke was doing a whole lot of pretending to tidy them, or fix them, or whatever it was he wanted Bo to believe he was doing. It was all just a fine, fine ruse that kept his cousin from looking at him and really acknowledging his presence. "I'll be along in a while," the answer finally came.

Everything in him wanted to push Luke, to shove at him and demand that he quit whatever game he was playing, but he didn't. He just stood his ground, and if he wasn't entirely patient he reckoned he might be the only one who knew that. Waited silently, or nearly so, listening to the distant sounds of other LaMatt employees' cars starting, voices calling goodnights and see you laters to each other. Kept his tongue, and most of his body, though his arms insisted on folding themselves across his chest to keep themselves from reaching out to jostle Luke, still.

Saw the sigh, saw the hand go through that mess of dark hair, saw how his cousin stood and stiffened his back before turning his head to finally look at him. Halfway.

"What," is the matter, Luke? Might have been a perfectly reasonable question for any other man. Or might have gotten answered if it was anybody other than Bo doing the asking. But the pattern of their lives dictated that those particular words would shut Luke up tighter than a clam. "Do you got to finish up here? I'll help."

But pretending he believed in the fairy tales that his cousin was not quite telling, about how he was far too busy for a drink, got Bo an even worse reaction. Shoulders slumping, head dropping, eyes on the pavement. Whatever the reason (and Bo reckoned that he both knew and understood his cousin's motives), Luke did not want to go out to the Washington Tavern.

"Nothing," was the quiet admission that sounded like a broken heart.

So maybe they weren't ready to give up their quiet evenings together after all, maybe spending time in the company of nosy co-workers where they'd have to laugh off jibes, and wink back at pretty little fillies, and never, ever touch each other was too much for them yet. Maybe Luke didn't have the vocabulary that it would take to say I don't want to go out drinking and carousing – he was, after all, a Duke. Too prideful, by far, to admit he wasn't ready for anything.
"All right." Which Luke might not have expected, because in his own head there was nothing acceptable about walking away from a night of good fun, but it really was all right with Bo. He had no strong desires to put up with most of the guys they would have seen that night anyway, even if he did feel a little bit bad about Mikey. "Come on," he said offering his hand.

"Bo," had that tone of Luke calling him an idiot, but that was just a façade. An act his cousin was putting on, and it wasn't even halfway convincing, not with how much gravel there was in that voice.

"Just come on," he said, because the fool was just so dang stubborn. He'd stand there all night, pretending there wasn't someone right behind him, with their hand reaching out to help, if Bo would let him. But he wouldn't, so he took two steps forward, grabbed hold of Luke and wove their fingers together, then started marching them across the infield. In silence, of course, because the man at his side would never ask where they were headed, not with it being an admission that he didn't already know. Over to the chain link fence by the officials' offices, flipping up the latch and opening the gate.

"Bo," because Luke had just worked it out. Tone caught somewhere between scolding and pride, but there was no question that the latter would win out.

"Got one in particular that you like?"

Luke chose the Dodge, of course, yanking the dust cover off, running his hands along the contour like a lover's caress.

"You drive," Bo suggested, slipping into the passenger window. A pace car, one of the few vehicles on the property that was forbidden to them both. But it had a passenger seat, accommodating both Dukes like none of the racing cars could.

"Ain't got no keys," Luke lamented though Bo noticed it didn't slow him down one bit from slipping through the driver's side window.

Nothing to do but cock his head to the side, looking down his nose at his cousin until Luke shrugged, grinned and hotwired the car.

"Now," Bo commanded, "show me what you can do." Which might not have been the smartest invitation he ever offered, because the things Luke was capable of behind the wheel of a powerful car could make a man's head spin. And his body, and his stomach. Could make him giggle helplessly as the vehicle around him squealed its complaints of abuse, could make him reach for the dashboard as if it was a lifeline. Could make him wait for the crazy momentum to stop, then crawl halfway into Luke's lap and kiss him with a matching wild fervor, and senseless passion, could make him hold on like he'd never let go.
On the Cusp IV: Flying

Late January 1983

It was, when it came right down to it, Bo's dream that won out. Against the forces that tried to hold them both in some sort of suspended animation, minutes and hours spent mostly in his bed. That and the knowledge that as much as they both clearly liked the activities that they could get up to behind closed doors, those alone were not sufficient. Not enough by far, for two country boys used to a fast-moving life of hard work.

So even after that pitiful little moan, and although Bo's clever hands cleaved to him, his lips finding a sensitive part of Luke's neck to fasten on, he kept on nudging, pushing, shoving until they were both closer to sitting than not. "Save it for the track," was an excellent suggestion, the sort of fine advice that would be paid for in pints of moonshine back home.

But here, it was worthless. "I got plenty for the track and you both," was Bo's version of wisdom. See if you feel that way after, he wanted to answer, couldn't. No distractions for the boy, not on race day.

"It's just an exhibition," and a grin, fingers passing over the wet spot he'd left on Luke's neck. More likely a red spot, and considering the fact that he was going to have to hit the pit in official uniform, that open-throated short-sleeved shirt, he ought to harbor some resentment against that little gift Bo had given him. Couldn't find the ire within himself, so he smirked instead.

"Jaded," he pointed out. "So soon, too. Wasn't half a year ago you would have given your eye teeth just to be in the stands to watch today's race." Which was just about as sunshine-light and fresh-air-easy a race as Bo was making it out to be. Nothing but a tiny trophy, the likes of which got handed out on fair days back home for best peach pie and biggest pig, to be won or lost today. But it was also the boy's first day as a senior driver on the team. No rookie stripe, no higher ranked teammate to assist, just Bo, a perfectly balanced car, an oval of hot asphalt, and a few obstacles in the form of other drivers to get around. Duke heaven, and Luke would be damned if his lively cousin was going to burn down even a watt of that energy in the bed this morning. "Breakfast," he insisted instead, swatting the sliver of backside that showed above the sagging waistline of those nearly worn out cotton pajama bottoms.

Fuzzy eyebrow, curl of lip pointing out to him how much fun was theirs for the having if only Luke's hand would take a more gentle, perhaps caressing approach, but the promise of warm food was enough to motivate him to his feet.

"I got first shower," Bo called, as if it was home, where being second or third to get under the stream of water could be a genuinely frigid experience. Acting like he thought he'd get fought on it, as if Luke wouldn't give him freely anything he ever asked for. "Unless you want to come with me." On his feet, stepping over the threshold between bedroom and living room, on the ragged edge of decent with the dragging hem of those pants and no shirt to cover what was less than an inch from showing. Rat's nest of a blonde mop on his head, face a striped mess of pink and red from where it was pressed into Luke's pillow for the better part of the night. Turning, chin over shoulder, to wink one blue eye at him in invitation, and it was such a cute picture that Luke almost had to laugh. Didn't, fighting would drain as much strength as sex, or maybe double the amount considering that rolling on the floor trading punches – skin on skin, slick sweat working up between them, breath heaving and sobbing out of their throats in moans – would undoubtedly wind
"Go on," he nudged instead, toes digging into carpet as he stood, going in search of where yesterday's greasy jeans fell when they tripped their way in here last night. Some fine day, he thought, they would manage to make it all the way into the house, across the open areas and into the privacy of this room that faced away from the street and was darkened by drawn blinds anyway, before tearing the clothes off each other. "Bo," came out without him even thinking it. Could have added strength to the command about getting out of here, to moving on with his day, but it didn't. Must have been the tiny catch to it, the way he gasped in a breath after, like sucking the dew-wet morning air down into his lungs would mash the sound – and the meaning behind the sound – of his cousin's name back down so deep into him that it would never come out again.

Questions, pointed things, ran across that smooth, boyishly beautiful face. Less sideburn now than there used to be before that fatefully hot day when the boy had gone off to an unskilled hotel butcher of a barber, and the resulting look was achingly young.

But the pink of those lips stayed closed, even as two long strides brought him closer, long fingers snagging around the back of Luke's neck to pull their foreheads together. Gentle press of lips on his, then the wheedling began. "It's morning," fingers sliding up into his hair. "It ain't like I ain't already halfway there."

Bo was born blonde and beautiful, and halfway there. He was going to have to try harder than that.

"I could use my hand," was the next brilliant line of reasoning. "Or you could come with me. Ain't gonna matter which way we go about it, it's gonna happen."

"If it don't matter," Luke answered, right back into those lips that hadn't gone more than a hair's breadth away from his. Ended the thought with a quick shrug of his right shoulder under the weight of where Bo's arm was resting across it. Just go ahead and use your hand. Or—

"Luke." Fingers pulling on the back of his neck again, another kiss. "Come with me." It didn't bother to beg or to play games, it was honest and earnest. Against his greater wisdom, Luke went.

Kissing under a warm stream and, "This ain't gonna help neither of us get clean, Bo." Careless shrug, fingers kneading at his shoulders in an unintentional mockery of a lathering, scrubbing motion, then Luke was getting pulled into another kiss, deeper, asking more of him, begging him to give up on noble notions. For five minutes, or until the water stopped playing nice and started spraying cooler than they'd want.

His tongue replacing soap, lapping at neck, sucking the water away to find the taste of Bo underneath. Deep moan sending vibrations through him, and no matter how much appreciation those long fingers stoking up and down his back showed, he couldn't stay there. Broken blood vessels, his calling card left behind, couldn't wind up anywhere above the line of where those horrid green coveralls would rest. Knob of a shoulder, safe enough, but those heavy puffs of breath from Bo's mouth slowed and evened out when he spent more than a few seconds there, so it was time to move on. Chest, all bone and muscle, tempting tiny nips from his teeth, eliciting hissed curses, but nails raked him in return – surprised, maybe, but Bo didn't mind. Thumbs slicking down, paving a watery path for lips and tongue, past ribcage and over stomach, and before either of them could find two thoughts to put together, he was on his knees. Hands showing Bo's hips where they had to stay if there was even the smallest prayer that this was going to work, then his tongue licked up the length of Bo. Salty sweat, not so bad, nothing in comparison to the way that blonde head rolled back, resting against the ugly blue tile with the moldy grout, body going limp except for fingers lightly mopping through wet curls, halfway shading Luke's eyes from the water that wanted to spray into them, wordlessly begging him not to stop now. Eyes tightly closed now,
thought suspended in exchange for the feel of the tautness of his cousin's stomach in-out, in-out in search of a deep breath, he did what Bo wanted, but would never ask for.

Nothing he would ever have let his wildest, most deeply foolish thoughts even wander toward considering. But it wasn't half as terrible as his brain would have protested and fervently insisted it would be, not when the sounds of Bo's unchecked moans and hisses echoed off porcelain and tile, metal fixtures and plastic shower curtain, to fill his ears, his head, his consciousness. Got surprised, and he shouldn't have, when halfway there flipped over to all the way there. Turned and spat the evidence, watched it mix with water and angle toward the drain as Bo's legs started to fold underneath him. Down, down, back slipping easily along on the river of water as it sluiced down the wall, and finally he came to rest, bent knees straddled over where Luke was kneeling, arms resting loosely on his shoulders. Luke hugged him then, held him close and if his breath hitched up in echoing resonance with Bo's, there was no one with working brain cells to realize it. Soothing hands, slipping up and back down the slippery spine of his cousin's curved back, Luke held him until the shaking stopped.


Who, lessons learned through his careful upbringing in places a heck of a lot more holy than this desecrated bathroom reminded him, got betrayed by a kiss.

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There wasn't a ton to do, when it came right down to it. Just share private airspace, while he muttered quiet encouragement into Bo's ear. The speed, banking, and cutthroat competition of the big time were no longer new to the boy – he'd thrown off his rookie stripe with the kind of aplomb that only Bo Duke could, charging around the track like he owned it.

Of course, the big boys hadn't bothered with this one. Darrell Waltrip, Bobby Allison, Richard Petty, they had no need to get their heart rates up for a piddling little exhibition race, especially not the first of the season. Too busy up in the Carolinas, all of them, doing finger exercises. Lifting a mug of beer from table to mouth and back was a nationally accepted off-season exercise. Luke had it on good authority.

Even Jay Goodwin apparently deemed himself too special for this race. Probably doing his arm stretches right now, patting himself on the back for disentangling himself from his LaMatt contract. A few months of experience and a whole lot of slow thinking had finally brought Luke to the brilliant conclusion that this was why his bosses had chosen this unrelenting sweatbox of a location to be the team's home base – so its drivers would have no excuse for not participating in each and every exhibition race.

Which was, in theory, just fine with Luke. Racing was what they'd bothered leaving home in order to do. He just didn't figure he was quite ready to let go of the private nook he and Bo had carved out of the off-season for themselves.

"You got Carl Green trying to make a move on the outside," he warned.

Bo's rolling laugh was a warm sound in his ear. "That ain't nothing to worry about."

No, it wasn't. It was no more than a pitiful excuse to converse, to close his eyes for a minute and picture the inside of the General Lee, to see the right profile of his cousin's face as he grinned away whatever the day's troubles were trying to amount to, to turn around in his seat and see lights behind, white-red-white-red as they spun on Rosco's roof rack, to smell freshly turned dirt crossed with car exhaust, to feel the cool breeze of rain-washed air as it flooded through the open window.
"Mikey's behind him," was another sad little justification to hear his cousin laugh again.

"Ain't neither of them going to get close to me," Bo vowed, and of course, it was an absolutely accurate assessment. Three more times Luke lost sight of him around the backstretch, and after each he emerged around the third turn with tight cornering that left no room for anyone to get around him. If they'd even been close, but they weren't. In the end, Bo won that tiny trophy effortlessly.

The whole crew was there to greet him when Bo skidded to a stop in front of the pit, but it was Luke that he grabbed into a tight hug.

"We're going out tonight," were hot words in his ear, close enough to tickle. "Both of us," Bo added as he pulled away far enough to look him in the eyes. "Together. We got traditions when it comes to winning."

Yeah, they did. Most of them included the semi-privacy of drooping willow branches on the bank of Hazzard Pond with a girl apiece.

"We're gonna live up to them," Bo promised him,

He was, apparently, going to get escorted to the Washington Tavern. By none other than Bo Duke himself, who had waited around after the silly award ceremony, until the ticking car had cooled off enough for Luke and his powerhouse team to check it from stem to stern for any sort of wear or damage. Had sat far enough from the activity of the pit that even the sneakiest, most bitter crew member (and Luke honestly couldn't figure any of his men for the complainer, made him wonder who it was) couldn't say he had his hands in the wrong things, quietly smiling to himself. Clapped his hands together in uncontrolled excitement when the dustcover got pulled over the car (and that right there might have been the most painful sound Luke's ears had ever heard), ghosted the hallways of the garage while his pit crew chief scrubbed the grit of the day's work off his skin and changed into his familiar jeans and button down shirt. It was like dressing for a funeral; his and Bo's. Nothing like that day they'd spent sprinting across the breadth of their dusty county looking for clothes before tumbling into their own wake wearing nothing more than scraps that covered their most vulnerable areas – this was closer to the real thing. And he'd forgotten his dress blacks.

"Ready?" bubbled happily into his ear, arm slung around his shoulders when he stepped out of the locker room. Hooded blue eyes glancing up and down the hallway, as if there could be another person in such an echo-chamber of a space without them knowing it, then a kiss. To his jaw, not his lips, and it didn't matter. (Jesus was betrayed with a kiss.) He let his hand muss that perfectly combed blonde hair, grinned back at the frown Bo tried and failed to level at him.

"Let's go," he agreed. Because he'd been granted leeway on top of grace time, nights and days of two energetic boys rarely wearing more than skin, enthusiastically exploring each other until exhaustion dragged them under, and they slept. Together, Bo in his bed, sprawled across his body like he had no idea how heavy he was. And it was more than he'd had a right to hope for. When the boy got his long-enough-denied opportunity to rediscover the giddy pleasures of lean legs and soft skin, warm breasts and long hair, well, Luke was going to be a man about it. He just reckoned it would be easier to take if he thought it would happen in some long off future instead of this otherwise perfect night. A little shove to move them both forward because standing in this building, listening to each other breathe was not going to provide him with any kind of a real reprieve from the inevitable.

"There they are," greeted them in Gillis's half-inebriated voice when they finally strolled through
the swinging doors to what had become their favorite watering hole this side of Hazzard. Luke understood he owed old Gillis a debt of gratitude for his interference on that pre-New Year's Eve night when he'd come close to knocking the sense out of a complete stranger before nearly face-planting himself into the parking lot. A pat on the back, he figured, was enough to make them even.

"Nice driving," Mikey congratulated somewhere around the time that Gillis showed off the intelligence he'd gained at the bottom of a few beers by asking which of the girls Luke reckoned on spending some time with tonight.

"Now that your cousin ain't got you grounded no more," he added, and the man didn't have half a clue how close to accurate he was.

"Me and Luke's got traditions when it comes to wins," Bo interrupted. "And the first one is that he gets the first round of drinks."

"Too late for that," Gillis mumbled, though Luke reckoned he wouldn't turn down any mug that happened to get placed under his nose.

"You sure?" he asked Bo at the same time as Mikey chimed in his approval of the idea.

"Duke," came from behind them, but Bo didn't bother to turn toward the voice before nodding his consent to the plan to behave as they always had, as if this was a local win on the dirt track, where their celebration would be nestled amongst family and friends.

"It's your head," was Luke's mildly amused assessment.

"Duke, you lucky son of a bitch," was the man who would not be ignored, though at least they now knew who Carl Green was talking to. Luke gave the man the eyebrow, silently informing him that precisely who Bo was the son of wasn't exactly any of his business. But his cousin just laughed, easy and loud, like only a winner had earned to right to, while using one long arm to shove Luke toward the bar.

"Get a pitcher," Mikey called. "It'll be cheaper," but the man had no idea what he was talking about. None of the men around them had the tiniest spark of knowledge about anything important.

"I am lucky," Bo was saying somewhere behind him. "Ain't everyone got the same talent I do." Made Luke look back over his shoulder even as he waved four fingers at the bartender. Figured a fistfight could break out any minute now, but if Bo agreed with that estimation there was no sign of it in the way he casually sat down, draping one of his long legs across the chair next to him. Wordlessly saving it for Luke, and leaving a smirking Carl Green to continue standing next to the LaMatt group, with no invitation to join them. "Or half as good a pit crew chief." That, right there, was gratuitous. But it wasn't like Luke was going to bother arguing against the point.

"Eight dollars," the bartender interrupted, placing the first of four frothing mugs on the glossy wood grain surface between them.

"I ain't worried about your talent," Carl laughed back. "I know you got plenty, but you ain't the only one." It was affable, but then the other driver always had been. Flattering, almost, though patronizing probably put a finer point on it. "As to pit crew chiefs," Luke was too busy studiously digging a ten-spot out of his wallet to see whether he got glanced at or not, but he reckoned he could feel the burn of a pair of narrowed brown eyes on his back. "Dime a dozen. I'll get a new one soon enough."
Luke waved off his change as a tip, then balanced two mugs in each hand as he wound his way around other patrons and back the few steps to their table. "Here you go," he said, putting the mugs in his right hand into the middle of the table, then handing one from his left to his cousin. Denim blue covered leg slipped off the fourth chair at the table and it got nudged at Luke, *sit down* the silent command.

"To the first race of the season," Luke started, as he slipped into his seat. Got the here, here's as he raised his mug, watched the other three come to meet in the middle of the table. "And to the winner." A quick clink, then all the mugs got pulled back to meet lips. All but Luke's, because this right here was the tradition Bo had invited, all but begged for. As everyone else sipped, the older Duke cousin tipped his mug over Bo's head. Choking laughter, then Mikey followed suit, and that, right there, was why Luke had so carefully asked whether Bo was really sure. It was one thing to do this in the Boar's Nest, where it was expected, where every patron in the place, young or old, tall or short, friend or enemy, knew their rights. There were few people in that place that would dare to spill a beer over one Duke's head, not unless they intended to incur the wrath of the other, so they just watched the little winning ceremony from a safe distance and cheered their approval.

Mikey's beer could be let go, but when Carl Green, who was not invited to take part in any family ritual that the Dukes had ever invented, with the possible exception of the barroom brawl, had the gall to tip out what was left in his bottle, Luke reckoned it was time to teach the man a thing or two. Muscles in his legs tensing as he started to slide his chair back, and then he was imprisoned in long arms, wet shirt getting pressed against his own, Bo's beer-soaked hair getting shaken out like a muddy dog's, even as he held Luke close.

So this was why Bo wanted traditions held to – so he could share. So Luke's hair could be half as sticky as his cousin's, so his clothes would stink of hops and barley for the rest of the night so that – and his cousin held him fast for this part, though he couldn't have anticipated that it would have been coming – Gillis could douse them both at once.

Mikey had been right. A pitcher would have been smarter, would have gotten its whole self spilled on Bo at once with none left over for his cousin.

"I love you," Bo whispered as cold liquid dripped toward his eyes and down his back. (A kiss, Jesus got betrayed that way.)

A joke, that was what the hug had to look like, so he shoved Bo back, smirked his intention for revenge, and mussed that sticky blonde mop. Regretted it instantly – the boy was ridiculously cute with his hair sticking out in every direction like that. He sighed and sat back, waiting for the girls to start flocking to the table. "Here," he said handing Mikey another ten, this one slightly soggy from the drops still dripping out of his hair as he'd fished it out of his wallet. "Get us another round. And this one," stern as a schoolteacher, "goes in your bellies, not over anyone's head."

A snort from Carl, and thankfully the man must've gotten something of the hint about how little he was wanted here, because he moved on.

Leaving Luke to slouch in his chair and wait for the real entertainment to begin. Which would soon feature his cousin flashing his perfect white teeth at something about five and half feet tall, with curves that started just under her chin and didn't quit until somewhere slightly north of her high heels. A wink, a dance, a kiss (which was how Jesus got betrayed) and a disappearing act, which would leave him to work out getting a ride home from Mikey.

"So, Mikey," went the stage whisper from Bo, "want to get laid tonight?" Followed by the conspiratorial wink, and so much for being graceful about things. If Bo was going to flirt with Mikey, there was going to be a Duke war, right here in the middle of a crowd of half-drunk
NASCAR workers. "Pick out one you like, and me and Luke will try to hook you up with her."

Oh. Luke raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

"Call it charity," Bo answered with a grin.

Turned out to be a relatively fun, if nearly unending game. Took both Dukes working together using all their flirting skills to the benefit of one less fortunate, laboring without a pause or break until about one in the morning to see the acne scarred, greasy-haired, slightly lonely, but genuinely deserving boy off with a relatively sober and attractive girl. After which it was apparent that they had earned a rest, so they escaped with their reputations reasonably intact, and headed home where they stumbled, exhausted and only mildly buzzed, into the same shower they'd started the day in. No acrobatics this time, just some quiet kissing until the beer was washed off, the water had gone cool, and their eyes were dangerously close to closed. Off to Luke's bed where they clung close to each other's soft, freshly scrubbed skin, and fell asleep.
It had, when it came right down to it, taken him too long to figure out. Luke in front of him, under him, surrounding him. Mouth gaping in a head tipped pant, legs spread and wrapped around him, arms wide and waiting for him but—

*Hold onto this thought, hold onto this thought…*

Bo had always been an anomaly. Sex clouded men's minds, made them fools for the want of more, took them blissfully away from thought and responsibility. It was a known and well-studied fact, one that got frequently discussed in places from which women were banned, or had no interest in going. A lifelong if informal experiment in which he and Luke had both spent many blissful hours as willing participants. Sex, for the male of the species, was akin to senselessness. All in favor say *aye*, and case closed.

Except, and it was a big except as far as he was concerned, for Bo. Who would get these brief and glowing epiphanies just before his head filled with static and his eyes closed as his body's energies were spent. The trick was to hold onto the tiniest thread of the thought so he could reconstruct it on the other side.

His cousin would never believe him about how his brain worked better during sex. Luke's mind finally let go of most thought somewhere after his sweat glands got fully engaged (which came slightly after his vocal chords loosened up but before his head tipped back with sounds that mimicked agony, oh, but they weren't) letting Bo's hands slip easily from one tender part of him to the next. The total loss of thought – well, that most likely didn't happen until the rhythm of his body was in full swing, swaying to a music he'd never otherwise let himself make. And once the merciful relief of an unthinking Luke began, it lasted well nigh onto the point where he'd been sprawled flat on his back, sinking deeply into mattress or carpet (or grass – Bo had an urge to know what Luke was like on the dew wet ground, musky smell of earth mixing with the spicy scent of sex) until his ragged breath settled and steadied, became white noise instead of hiccupping gasps. And Luke was a smart guy; if there was any doubt about that notion, he'd be sure to clear it up at the first opportunity with endless demonstrations of his brilliance. Which only went to prove, apparently, that if an intelligent man lost track of his thoughts during sex, surely a less intellectually gifted man could not have anything close to a useful insight just before he came. But Bo did.

Sometimes, and this was one of those times. Or had been, he remembered somewhere around the hazy sensation of figure eights being languidly drawn on his back.

"Love you, Luke," he murmured into the sweat-soaked lack of space between them as a means of keeping himself awake long enough to find that thread of a thought again, to unravel it across his lethargic mind then follow it through to its clear meaning.

Kiss on the top of his head, his thumb sliding pointlessly against smooth belly skin. Luke never echoed the sentiment in words, but that wasn't the notion Bo had stumbled over earlier. It wasn't an important thing at all, not when Luke held him like this (but there was something to that) not when his every major decision over the past half dozen years or so had been wrapped up in what was best for Bo (there was something in that, too).
Car driving by on the street outside of this little house of theirs, radio loud enough that the Eagles could be clearly heard even here in the muffled confines of the room furthest to the back. Made him think of singing with Luke, the warm whiskey sound of that baritone in his right ear, harmonizing through never ending medleys, songs of love and loss. Made him realize that somewhere between Hazzard and here, his cousin's singing voice had gone mute.

And then the grinding gears in his head meshed, gained momentum and direction, even as Luke's finger stroked the length of his spine with intentions of putting him to sleep.

It was an interesting realization to have had when he was wrapped up in Luke, open arms and legs curling around his body protectively, lips parted to kiss him again, but there it was. His cousin was closed off from him, keeping whatever niggling little thoughts that ran infinite laps around that dark head of his to himself. And if there was ever a man whose brain worked overtime (except, of course in those moments after his skin ran slick with sweat, his mouth telling wordless tales) it was Luke's. The man was thinking things – no, stewing over them, because that's what his older cousin did – that he wasn't sharing, and that right there spelled lurking danger. Besides, he reckoned that certain entitlements came as side benefits to the way he'd spent every night since just after the New Year with his left ear pressed to that reassuring heartbeat.

What's on your mind? The words tickled on his tongue, trying to trick his sleepy brain into letting them out into the open air, but he wasn't that kind of fool. He was a totally different kind of fool, the kind who would take up with a man that would buck and fight against those words like they were poison being forced past his lips. Soft mattress, hard to get any leverage from it, but his left hand wasn't about to give up so easily, just kept shoving until his cheek separated, one fraction of an inch at a time, from the skin it had been stuck to. Halfway sitting, right fingers brushing butterfly-light over belly, and a grudging little snicker escaped Luke's lips.

"Come on," Bo whispered into the thick air between them. Vise-like grip suddenly catching his wrist, putting an abrupt end to the gentle tickling motion of them.

"What?" got grumbled from the pillow, which Luke's mussed head clearly had no intention of leaving behind.

"Just come," he urged, using the grip Luke had on him to tug against the resistance, but he was a fool. It was a lot easier for the prone man, whose hands were stronger anyway, to pull him back down. Encircled again, and it was something like being cuddled by a boa constrictor. "It's early," he explained, even if it wasn't. Not by farm boy standards anyway, but they didn't live on a farm anymore. There were no crack-of-dawn, get-them-done-or-suffer-the-consequences chores to be done here, just breakfast whenever they got their slow-moving (though well exercised and usually pretty ravenous) selves out to the kitchen, and then, because training had been cut by half with the beginning of exhibition season, find some pointless way to spend what few hours remained of the morning. They wouldn't need to crawl under the blanket of sleep for hours now, if they didn't want to.

Tension in the muscles surrounding him then. "What was you thinking of doing?"

"Just come on," he insisted, got nowhere fast, not with the dead weight of his two-hundred pound cousin holding him here. "Trust me, Lukas," wasn't a lot to ask, really. And it was the crux of this whole thing, anyway.

"Do I got to get dressed?" tried to be casual, just words tossed carelessly into the room like dirty socks at the end of the day.

"You got to wear more than you are now," which was nothing at all, unless he wanted to declare
Bo's body the equivalent of clothing. Maybe he did, and maybe most nights that would be just fine with him, but not this night.

"How much more?" It wasn't lighthearted banter, wasn't Hazzard games carried south in their duffle bags, along with their meager belongings. This was some kind of a test, one that was easier to fail than to pass, and he hadn't studied, hadn't even attended one class all year.

"Enough so's Mrs. Levitt," who lived two doors down and walked her little rat of a dog around this time of night, "don't call the cops on you."

"Do I got to take a shower?" God, that there was some serious distraction. Showers with Luke, where the warm water and sweet smell of shampoo sometimes made the man lose his mind and start touching Bo in ways that he never got touched on dry land. They didn't get under the spray together often, but when they did, he stood a pretty fair chance of winding up sitting on the porcelain, trying to catch his breath while on the receiving end of a naughty grin from Luke.

But he didn't reckon that this was a backhanded offer of shower sex. And even if it was, Bo planned to take himself a rain check. Or two, because he loved showers with Luke. But the way he saw it, it wasn't him that needed to be distracted tonight.

"You ain't got to be clean," though he was fully aware that there wasn't the even the tiniest chance his cousin would step out their front door without at least running a wet washcloth over himself. "Come on," was getting dangerously close to begging. And if he let his voice wheedle, if the slightest bit of complaint could be detected in his demeanor, this whole thing would backfire on him. On his guard, in protective mode, watching out for anything that might upset his baby cousin, and there'd be no getting the man to tell him even the minutest thing if that happened.

*I promise it won't hurt* – words he could never say, because it wasn't the kind of vow he could swear to keep. The things that could cause Luke pain he might never understand, even if they spent a thousand ink-black nights cuddled as close as they were right now.

Fortunately, he didn't have to swear to any guarantees; Luke's clasping hold on both him and whatever resistance he had to getting up slowly released, and he sat up. Rubbed a hand across his dark eyebrows and, "This better be good," he muttered.

Yeah, Bo could second that notion. And couldn't swear he'd be able to deliver.

Old jeans, soft, nearly worn through, Luke had taken seriously his need not to dress properly, though Bo was close enough to right about how he'd never go out without doing some cleaning up. When he was satisfied with himself, they squeezed themselves into the low-riding car they'd never spared any love for, and Bo guided them toward the Speedway's glowing halo of lights while Luke studiously ignored their destination. Pretended not to notice where they had gotten themselves to, so it fell to Bo to press that little round button on the remote that was clipped to Luke's visor and open the gate for them, then click it again to ensure it clanked securely behind them. Overland toward that sectioned-off patch of ground just south of the squat cinderblock building where the officials spent the better part of the races, out of their loaner car and through the fence line. His cousin might never have acknowledged the destination, but he slid inside the chain links anyway, selected the Dodge, and let his fingers do a little magic until the engine was revving.

Sweeping laps, slow at first, but each time he cruised up the front stretch his foot mashed a little more firmly against the accelerator. No fancy moves, just solid, steady driving. Luke was good in a whole different way than Bo was, than anyone else he'd ever seen on the track. Not flamboyant or attention-seeking, the man just spilled over with confidence in his ability to hold to the road. Funny how Bo could feel the gravity on the turns like he never did when it was him behind the wheel.
Fingers, that little and that much, seeking out the length of Luke's hair, making themselves at home tangling there, letting his eyes relax enough that the lights created hundreds of little prisms reflecting off the windshield in front of him, and soon, he figured, Luke would reveal himself. For now there was just this simple comfort of being together.

Must've looked too content, too comfortable in his slouched position, letting his mind drift and his hand do its own affectionate thing. Had to have seemed slothful or just plain peaceful, and there wasn't a Duke alive that could leave another Duke to the calm of his own drifting mind. A shift, a spin, a gut wrenching skid, and if his left hand never quite left Luke's body, his right fished blindly for the dashboard or the windshield, maybe the door handle – anything solid to hold onto while the rest of the world reeled.

Just as suddenly stopped, perfectly safely and with a wicked grin from Luke.

And there it was, the near deafening answer screaming from that smiling face, even if those lips never said a word.

He waited for his stomach to find its natural place below his lungs and above his intestines, and settle back in there from where it had tried to jump out his mouth. Waited some more until he had good reason to assume his voice would come out in something of its normal register. Sat in the idling car and when he had no more excuses for waiting, he gave in.

"You miss home, don't you cuz." Wasn't a question; if it had been it could have been refuted. Argued against and denied with a smirk, but Bo never would have believed a lying word of it, not when his twenty-twenty eyes could see for themselves how natural the man looked behind the wheel of a Dodge, making its tires and engine squeal for mercy.

"Some," came the answer like an admission of guilt. Luke's eyes nowhere he could meet them; maybe his oh-so-practical cousin was looking at the rainbow colors of lights on windshield, too.

Hand back to running itself through dark curls for no other reason than Luke was letting him do it.

"What do you miss most?" barely a whisper, no more than a few decibels louder than the hum of the engine vibrating up through the seats.

"Sunrises."

Hell. He couldn't have picked something easy like barbecued ribs or square dances. Things Bo could find down here, if he committed himself to doing a reasonable amount of research and a little work.

"We could stay up for this morning's sunrise," he suggested, though he knew that what they'd see wouldn't be the half of the swirls of pink and orange dancing on seas of deep blue and purple that could greet an early Appalachian riser. And a camper would get the added benefit of the circle of black branches stretching in their best attempt to grab the setting moon. "On the beach."

A nod from Luke, the pace car finally nudging forward in some sort of wordless agreement that it was time for it to go back to its fenced-in home for the night, and leave the Duke boys to their own devices.

Back to the same spot they'd come on sunny days to play in the surf. Not so much of a game this time, they walked the waterline, hand in hand, watching the moon dance on the ever-moving surface of blues and blacks. Splashes leaving damp calling cards on the hems of their jeans, and they didn't slow down or worry about it, even if it was kind of chilly to be out here with no sun to
warm their skin. Walking endlessly to nowhere in particular, then turning back to walk equally as far the other way.

Luke missed home, and one little Florida sunrise wasn't going to change that fact. The man was quietly hurting over what they'd given up to come here, and all Bo could think to offer him was a night spent awake, waiting for a new day to dawn.

And though they were supposedly out here for Luke, to give him a chance to see the slightest dim reflection of the brilliant colors he had left behind, somehow, in the wordless stroke of a thumb against Bo's palm, it felt an awful lot like Luke was comforting him.

Silly sunshine grin – so bright he might ought to shade his eyes – glowing from underneath that old baseball cap that must have gotten thrown on as a lazy man's equivalent to combing his hair. Closing the front door with his foot while a long arm dropped the round, foil-wrapped package in front of Luke, and he was the same sneaky-clever boy he'd ever been.

Slipping out of bed with a deceitful little kiss, soft brush of lips on his cheek and, "Be right back. Shh," had followed when he opened an eye to watch Bo disentangling himself from the sheet, from Luke's hold on him. "Go back to sleep."

As if there was half a chance of that, but it was cute how his gangly cousin was trying, with an utter absence of coordination, to tiptoe his way out of the room, so Luke closed his eye to accommodate the fantasy that Bo was just that graceful.

But right back took one minute, then two, and then there was the telltale vibration across the whole of the house (and probably the answering reverberation through the neighboring houses, too) that announced a slammed door, which just went to prove that years on the lam from Rosco had not quieted or calmed the energy with which Bo attacked the world. Squealing wheels and Luke could just about smell the burn of rubber against the asphalt in front of their house and see the smoking tires; if he cared about the car or the road or the neighborhood he would be spending his time formulating a lecture about proper behavior that would be worthy of an old-timer with a strap hanging in his bedroom closet. Instead he found himself pondering the meaning of the sort of right back that required a car as he shoved his hair away from his eyes, sat up and hunted up a reasonably clean pair of blue jeans. Wearing only those, he stumbled off to the kitchen in search of coffee, while he waited for right back to turn into right now.

Scratched at his hair, ought to take a shower. Ought to do a lot of things and Bo had better stop whatever lollygagging he was doing and get back to this early-morning sunshine bright kitchen, because they had places to be. A race, and even if it was an exhibition it wasn't anything to go tossing aside like yesterday's—

And right about then, the door banged open and the grinning fool himself was there, offering Luke that shiny parcel that he slid across the varnished top of their rented table. A present, apparently, that he was meant to open with the care he afforded items found under the tree at Christmas. Which just about entitled him to ripping the foil to shreds.

"Pie?" he asked, did his best to mimic surprise, even if there was nothing else it could possibly have been. Let his eyebrow drift high in his best approximation of the disapproval of an old man who would insist on a better breakfast for his boys.

"Blueberry. It's Saturday." Bo pointed out. A day of free passes: out of school, out of hard labor unless it was planting or harvest, out of proper meals. Mornings down at the garage and—
"It ain't a donut," he pointed out, attempting to hold onto the gruff, scolding ways that marked this here pie as forbidden food. (Because what they weren't supposed get up to was always several times more fun that what they had permission to do.)

"But this is beer," was Bo's logic, as he shoved clinking bottles around in the refrigerator.

"Bo," and that was genuine disapproval right there, no longer a game. "Save it for after." Because didn't either of them need to be drinking anything that would leave them light on their feet, not when they had a race today.

"We're going out after," had an edge to it, the kind of tone that demanded a promise or suggested a fistfight as an alternative. No need to save the beer, we'll have plenty at the Tavern. In between the pit rats. But what made it to the table was milk, so he supposed he ought to count it as a victory. Each day he didn't have to call one of his cousins back in Hazzard with a frantic plan for switching places was a good one; he just hated the notion that he could be dialing that phone no more than twenty-four hours from now. "Because I'm going to win."

"You reckon?" tried to be light and easy as Luke stood up, leaving his coffee and the pie behind in his search for a clean knife, forks and plates. Someone really needed to do some dishes around here, but there wouldn't be time this morning. Once they got done sucking down the hearty breakfast Bo had brought them, then washing away the evidence of last night's sins in the shower, they'd have to head off to the speedway for some practice runs. The race itself, then out to celebrate and – hell on it. Vance could do the damned dishes when he got here.

(But that was a sour little thought, and right there in the middle of the table was a sugary pie, made all the sweeter by the intent behind it. To replace the pastries they normally got treated to on a weekly basis by their maternal cousin who couldn't help wanting to stuff the men in her life to the gills with baked goods. Brought into their too-bright Florida kitchen make them both miss home less, and he should take a leaf out of the blonde's book – just stop worrying about the future and enjoy the now. Which included blueberries and sugar and—)

Bo frowning at the use of utensils. Boy must've figured to eat with his hands, or maybe lick his breakfast straight out of aluminum pie pan, like a goat. Luke hated to ruin the boy's whole morning, so after he cut himself a healthy slice, he shoved the rest over to his right without bothering to hand over a plate or the knife.

Silly smile as Bo broke off a crumb of crust, sampling it like fine wine, a tiny taste at a time. "Ain't quite as good as Daisy's," he pronounced.

"I'm sure she'd be glad to hear that." And they really did need to call her, so he vowed himself a call to the farm tomorrow no matter where Bo ended up sleeping tonight.

A long finger ran along the side where Luke had lifted out his slice until it was slathered in blue-black goo. Lifted up towards those pink lips and if a fat dollop of sticky mess splattered onto Bo's jeans, he didn't even notice as he slurped what was left into his mouth. Blue toothed grin, and apparently Bo approved of this here breakfast.

Which was good, more than that, it was important. That the boy found himself some pleasure down here, away from home. Because if the two of them survived tonight, and the weekends that followed, they'd be heading back out on the road. Long miles of nothing but blacktop, followed by small spaces and tiny beds, strange towns where they knew no one and nothing, limited to the company of the same group of men, and a whole passel of new women, week after week. The road, even if Luke had already been poring over maps, planning routes and picturing the trees whistling by the side of the RV in a steady blur, would be where it all fell apart. Unless, somehow, he could
keep them both from missing what they had given up.

Pie, if it made Bo happy, made him happy too. So he offered up a smile to those wide blue eyes that were assessing him, and kissed those sweet blueberry lips.

He would have thought this part would have gotten easier for Luke, that last weekend's post-race celebration would have taught the man something. Like maybe that he could – they both could – go out and have fun without anyone expecting the older Duke boy to act like a drunken asshole. But the solidness of that wall up against his back begged to differ, used its hard reality to point out how the man shoving him up against it wasn't any more at ease than he'd been since before this thing between them started.

It wasn't even that he minded the way Luke's mouth claimed him with a ferocity that might just leave a split in his lip, or even the half-moon indentations that were most likely decorating his shoulders from the way Luke's nails dug in and released, dug in and released with each kneading motion of his powerful hands. He might even have liked some of the frenzy, the way the man wasn't satisfied with just kissing lips, how he needed to nip his way down the whiteness of Bo's neck, and soon enough those teeth might even go after his shirt in a reckless attempt to tear it off. It was the kind of crazy-wild that Luke had always been, once he got broken away from all the restraints of how he was raised and shook off the military man inside of him that reckoned it was his job to save the world from itself. It was like sliding down the loose dirt of a steep hillside on nothing more than a boot heel – moving fast and loose, and as long as no boulder cropped up to stop the momentum, it was a stomach-dropping good time of a ride.

But it would come to a crashing halt soon. Because the fact that Bo was willing to be shoved, to be manhandled, to be wanted so much that the man doing the pushing lost track of all the rules that bound him to gentle behavior, didn't matter worth a pitcher of spit.

The very first thing Luke did, after Bo broke his heart by choosing Diane over him, smashing a fist into his chin then storming off the farm, after he'd been smug and nasty and stayed away for two days, after own his heart had been broken in return by the realization that he'd hurt his cousin for no good reason, after they'd made up and jumped the General over (and he swore that, for the rest of his life, if anyone said the words thirty-two parked cars, he wouldn't be responsible for the violence it would unleash in him) the heap of wrecks, after they'd found privacy – the first thing Luke did was to tenderly grip his chin and turn his face from side to side. (Then, he had already been loved by then. But for how long before that time?) Spent what felt like seconds onto minutes and maybe even more than that, looking for any sign that he'd been really hurt or permanently scarred by the way Luke had hit him back. And even more than two years later he'd swear that sometimes his face was still getting scrutinized for any remnant damage that Luke could find. Unless he was willing to spend the next decade or two reassuring his cousin that any bruises made on him tonight were not life threatening, he had to change the direction in which this was going.

Attempted to meet the tightly wound corkscrew of Luke's desire with calm and patience, brought a hand up to cup his cheek, thumb gently stroking, but it was all lost in the ferocity of what had already been begun between them.

"Luke," he tried to say, but it got swallowed along with sense and reason. He wanted to protest his innocence, but it would sound like so many empty objections unless he could figure out what that tongue, those hands, the body pressed up against his had seen as his transgression.

Just a victory celebration like so many others, though they'd skipped the traditional beer-toast-over-the-head. Daytona wasn't Hazzard, for all they knew that kind of ceremony could end in alcohol being slung from one end of the bar to the other. Besides, it was just an exhibition race, the
second one in a row that Bo had taken easily. There had been reason to publicly celebrate the first; making a raucous party of the second would be overkill, bragging, rubbing the wrong guys' noses in their own losses, and it was too early to be doing that when the season hadn't even begun. Besides, he'd only insisted on it last week to loosen Luke up, which he'd figured to be a one-time effort.

Sure, Carl Green had been loitering around, congratulating him on his win while unsubtly gritting his teeth (and Bo reckoned he and Luke had better prepare themselves for a rather thorough official inspection of the car before the next race, just judging from the shade of green Carl's face had gone and the harassment that was likely to be the result), and Luke couldn't stand the guy. Bo knew that, figured he'd taken care of any concern surrounding that by giving the man the cold shoulder. Yeah, it hadn't entirely worked, old Carl had taken to buttering up Mikey instead, had pulled a chair up to their table without waiting for an invitation, and made himself right at home. But Bo had studiously ignored him, had shared a silly smirk with Luke over the man's unfortunate lack of manners.

He hadn't touched his cousin, he didn't think. It was hard to remember; slinging an arm around some part of Luke was a habit as old as he was. Sure, he knew he ought to curtail that habit now, considering how the men they worked with would see to it that two Duke boys disappeared off the circuit if they knew what went on between them – heck, they might even make sure the Dukes disappeared off the face of the planet if they figured they could get away with it. After years of hiding, even from Bo, the dark secret of what he wanted, it seemed obvious enough that Luke had a deep need for none of their peers to go working anything out.

"I didn't even," he sputtered when Luke's thumbs worked under the neck of his t-shirt, stretching it out of shape so his nipping teeth could get better access. Look at a girl was the intended end of that sentence, but his breath got sucked in too fast when the effort to get under his shirt ended, and Luke's teeth found nipple right through the cotton. Good thing, too, it gave him a minute to rediscover his own honesty. Because he'd looked at girls, hell, he'd always looked at girls. Smooth movements, graceful gestures from dainty little fingers to pointed toes, thick eyelashes and long necks, curves and softness and – girls were like puppies, he might always like to pet them, but he'd never expect them to make him feel anything more than lighthearted affection, nothing close to the heart stopping intensity of the way he loved Luke. "Touch no one," was a more accurate statement.

And too much, too much by far, with how it came out as something approaching a whine. Didn't mean for it to, wasn't his fault that the aggression being directed at his chest had left a stinging point of pain behind just before he'd uttered the words.

Hands shaking where they had been holding him down a second ago, and in a second they were going to release him completely. Desperate grab then, both of his hands holding onto Luke's face and neck, trying to force eye contact.

"Oh no you don't," he tried, but it was pointless. Uncle Jesse, from up in Hazzard and Aunt Lavinia from even further up, were already nagging somewhere in that dark head of his cousin's. About being gentle, not letting his temper get the better of him and lead to grievous harm being done to his little cousins.

"Bo," came out like he'd just taken a whipping, like his backside and his pride had both been lashed away until they were raw, droplets of life's blood leaking out of them. "Might be for the best if," deep swallow, and his cousin was getting ready to pull the rest of himself away, to go hide behind solid walls and closed doors, "you slept in your own bed tonight."

"Bullshit," came out before he could think better of it, and he was getting a mental whipping from
their guardians, too. Difference was, he didn't give a damn.

Equal, for the better part of his life, his goal had been to make himself Luke's peer in every way, and he'd utterly failed. Sure, he could shoot an arrow as straight as his cousin, had become almost his match in a fistfight (but was nowhere close in a boxing ring), had even surpassed his older cousin in height and driving skills. But nothing he'd done had ever made them all the way even or anything close to a matched set. Which had worked to his advantage more often than not, just like it was about to right now.

Hands slapping down from Luke's face to grab his powerful biceps, to shake him then plow him backwards into the living room. Past where the Christmas tree used to stand and up against the door to his own bedroom. Rattling complaint against the jamb, and he wondered that they'd never bothered to figure out how thin the walls might be, how many of these moments, both rough and gentle, could be heard in parallel living rooms. He figured their neighbors would just have to turn up their TV sets; he sure as hell wasn't going to start worrying about their sensitive ears now.

"You ain't," he hissed, letting go of arms just to find a different handhold, this time on Luke's chest. Funny how the man didn't take advantage of that brief moment when there was no force holding him firm to the hard surface behind him.

"He doesn't really want you to go off to your own bed," was a relief of a thought. He wants you here or he'd be throwing you off now, guiding you with all of his force to be separate from him, hollering about how you'd best do what he says. "Telling me where to sleep." He wants you in his arms as badly as you want to be there.

But for all that they both knew what Luke wanted there was still stubborn resistance to be overcome. With a kiss starting as rough as what Luke had been doling out, with hands ripping at his shirt until the buttons popped, revealing chest. With a hand tangling in dark curls, pulling until his head tipped back and the short, prickly hairs growing under that scarred chin stood out on end, tongue lapping at them. Didn't do much for him, other than scrape against his taste buds, but it made a puff of air escape his cousin's mouth, made him suck in another one with a quiet hiss. It was a start, but not half enough, so he licked and kissed his way down to shoulder, nudging the thin cotton shirt out of his way as he went. Left little spots of moisture across chest and down to belly, his mouth never pausing in its progress, even when his right hand gave up its hold on Luke to find the cool metal of a doorknob and turn it.

Tumbling, tripping when what had been holding them up swung wide. Luke catching his elbow to keep him upright, to ensure that their shift movement was together, that a misplaced foot didn't cause them to stumble in opposite directions. Kept their momentum equal until the backs of Luke's legs hit bed, and they dropped heavily into the soft mattress. Helpful hand gripping at the back of his shirts, yanking until his knee found purchase in the mattress, until by a combination of hauling and shoving, he had himself straddled over Luke's prone form. Picked up where he left off, kissing at ribs and belly, his hands, now that they didn't have to pretend at holding a resistant man down, stroking over chest, thumbs finding sensitive spots that made Luke's breath hitch. Fingers suddenly under the hem of Bo's t-shirt, inching it up his chest, but he couldn't pay them any real mind. Found a tender spot just north of bellybutton and sucked.

Little vocalizations, his shirt riding higher as Luke's nails scraped lightly against his skin, not hard enough to leave even a momentary mark. He moved down to the south side of belly button, licking and sucking, and there was a whole lot of movement all at once. Muscles under his lips tightening down as Luke sat up enough to get a good grip on his t-shirt, yanking, pulling until Bo had to give up his territory on Luke's belly long enough to let the cloth get pulled over his head. Momentum from that which his cheat of a cousin took advantage of, gripping around his arms to pull him up for a kiss. Sweeter sort of thing than they'd managed to share yet tonight, Luke's thumb making lazy sweeps across the back of his neck. Apologizing, maybe, for what had happened in the kitchen, and
there couldn't be any of that. Not when, as Bo well knew, it would only lead to a thorough search of his body for signs of injury, first now, then again in an hour, one more time in the morning, and at least once daily for the rest of his life. So he pulled away, and went back to where he'd just been, sucking on Luke's belly until the man was just this side of senseless.

Belt buckle under his hands, took him longer than he would have liked to unhook it, but as long as his tongue kept up its ministrations on the sensitive spot it had found, Luke's hand stayed in his hair, not pulling or tugging, just quietly encouraging what he was doing. Which was good, gave him time to unbutton and unzip, to palm against the bulge there.

"Bo," was a request. Fingers looking for a better grip, trying to pull him up where he could be kissed and loved, but he had other, stupider, crazier ideas. Shoved against underwear and jeans all at once until the were far enough down that they might as well not be there at all, and then before either of them could have second thoughts, he took Luke into his mouth.

Little cries then as the man beneath him fought himself – for what he wanted but didn't figure he had a right to, for the strength to be the better man he imagined himself to be. To stay still enough not to force Bo to more than he was ready for, and he surely did appreciate that.

Whimpers and moans, a last ditch tug on his hair in a vain attempt to get Bo off him before he lost control, but that, right there, was the crux of this whole thing. If Luke got what he wanted in this moment, maintained his dominance over the situation, Bo might as well go off to his own room right now. So he stayed where he was, sped up his rhythm, and the result shouldn't have been a surprise, but it still was. No place to spit (and now he knew why Luke did this in the shower) so he forced himself to swallow even if he thought he might be sick. Didn't matter if he gagged a little bit, the man under him was in another world right now. So he got control of himself, then crawled up to lay himself over Luke's sweating body.

"I love you, Luke," came out like a curse. The man had wanted him first; seemed unfair that Bo had to work this hard to keep him.

Then again, it was Luke, and there was no reason to expect that sex with the man would be any easier than anything else he'd ever done with him.

Weak nod, messy kiss near his ear.

"Go to sleep," he growled. Because it wasn't comfortable, still wearing his jeans and sprawled belly over hard belly, not when he'd had no release himself.

Took longer than he might have hoped, but shorter than he'd honestly expected, for the man under him to give in to slumber. Then, finally, he rolled off, stripped out of his own jeans, and took himself in hand. Didn't take but a few strokes and he was spent. Wiped his hand on his own recently shucked jeans and crawled back into bed with Luke. The things he did for the damn man.

He sighed, kissed somewhere into the mess of dark curls, soaked up the warmth of Luke's body, and fell asleep.

Damn it, he'd wanted to be the one who told Bo about the rumor that had breezed along the pit road, gusting into each little section before moving on. He'd figured on grabbing the boy as soon as he'd finished standing over D'Onofrio, micro-managing tire changes down to the angle at which the man held the air gun, the minute his cousin stopped playing bumper tag with Mikey. But somewhere between their morning of running drills and their afternoon of relative freedom, both of the LaMatt cars skidded to a screeching halt, and their drivers started climbing the grandstand
stairs en route to the skyboxes. Driver's meeting, and Luke was getting dang sick of the fact that this wasn't Hazzard. At home he could have hopped the wall, sprinted the width of the track and called Bo back down to him before the boy climbed high enough to be beyond hearing range. Not that he would have needed to – in Hazzard he would have been recognized as a driver himself and summoned into the self-same meetings that Bo attended.

But though the weather had turned reasonably cool for the last few days, the air was nowhere near as sweet here as it was back home, and both Duke boys were a heck of a lot less free than they'd been when they were confined within the boundaries of Hazzard. Besides, he had other things he was meant to be attending to than Bo's potential heartbreak or imminent temper tantrum. So instead of watching over his young cousin, he turned his attentions back to a man that was older than him, had spent more time on the circuit and really ought to have mastered his craft by now.

"Try holding it this way," Luke counseled, and D'Onofrio seemed genuinely gleeful at the results.

"Damn," the changer whispered under his breath. "That don't take half the effort, neither." Maybe it wasn't the man's fault. Luke couldn't swear that team LaMatt cared to train any of its pit crew members. Mostly the owners seemed to like to sit up on high (in something of a literal sense today when apparently they'd commandeered the skyboxes) and call shots without any sense of repercussions or consequences. Then they'd go home to their mansions and watch the results of their efforts from the comfort of their own couches. In a way it was like being in the military all over again.

And, about a half an hour later, there was a wounded soldier marching up the pit road, blonde hair reflecting Florida sunshine. Still carrying the proud swagger of a man who knew his rank and his value to the platoon, but Bo had been injured all the same.

"I reckon," he called out to his crew, "I can handle putting her to bed." The car they'd been using for their drills, that was, the approximate twin of the one Bo had spent the better part of the morning doing laps in. "If y'all want to take off." Fifteen minutes early, and whoever the complainer about broken rules had been back in the fall, he could be relatively certain they wouldn't go reporting him to management for this. So long as the paycheck paid union wages, the men didn't seem to mind getting off a few minutes before the union clock dictated that they should. Which meant that by the time Bo stormed into the pit there were just the straggling Heller and Lyons, who were so busy telling each other tall tales that they still had several feet of cable to coil before they could move on to the Tavern and a much more conducive lie-fabricating atmosphere.

Just the slightest flick of his eyes, and Bo knew to find himself a seat while his pit boss pretended to give a damn about his job. Last of his lollygagging men shooed off so Luke could finish cleaning up after them, then roll the car into its bay in the garage. When he got back to the pit, he found his cousin pacing off his frustration. Defiant blue eyes meeting his, and if there were tears cloaked in that look, they were the angry sort.

"Come on," he said, leading the way into the other side of the building, the part where human needs got taken care of. Like showers and rest rooms, and places to congregate. There were also hallways and cul-de-sacs, corners where a tiny sliver of privacy could be found, and he reckoned he needed to find one of those relatively quickly, before Bo exploded in public. Turned a corner to the backside of what was a currently closed snack bar, nudged Bo into the corner with the deeper shadows, and waited. Long fingers grabbing onto the mesh of a cage that kept ravenous men from breaking into the snack bar in search of cheap, non-nutritious junk, and knotting into a fist there.

"Carl Green done left Bud Moore," came hissing out of Bo's mouth.

"I know," he admitted, though until now it had been more of a rumor than a genuine fact.
His cousin didn't seem to notice he'd been spoken to. "And LaMatt done snapped him up. So's they could have a big name driver on the team."

Which might just have gone to show what kind of fools he and Bo had signed up with. It was called silly season for a reason, he supposed, with this kind of shakeup most likely to happen right about now. But LaMatt was going beyond silly and well nigh on toward stupid, staking their future with Carl Green.

"They say he can bring in the big sponsors."

"He's been around awhile," wasn't supposed to be providing explanations or making excuses for Bill Matthews' decision. It was just the only fact Luke could find to grab onto. "I guess he's had time to make some connections."

"Yeah well," Bo snapped. "He ain't been around long enough to figure out how to drive."

A proud little smirk made its way across Luke's face. The boy in front of him was a smug brat, a swaggering fool, an arrogant idiot, and he was right. Carl Green wasn't fit to eat Bo Duke's dust. For starts, the man had lousy timing, both in the way he handled his car and the way he managed his professional choices.

Or maybe it was just that Luke was a jerk. Saturday night's nasty scene where he'd pushed Bo up against the wall of their kitchen for no reason other than jealousy over things the man hadn't even done, and if that hadn't been stupid enough, he figured the best solution to the problem was to send him off to his own room. Rejection, there was no other way for the boy to take what had happened, even if that wasn't what it had been about at all. (Or maybe it had been about exactly that, about breaking things off with Bo before he could be beaten to that particular punch. He had moments where he cursed himself for a fool for treating the boy that way – and maybe it didn't matter what the truth of it was. The end result had been his cousin, who had worked so damned hard at loving him when he didn't halfway deserve it, being something close to broken-hearted.) And the five days since hadn't been enough time for Luke to really make it up to him.

"And just like that he's the senior driver that I'm supposed to—" hand letting go of the cage, only to cock itself back and slap the metal there in frustration. Made an interesting echoing shudder of springs bouncing up against each other, made Bo's face scrunch up as he shook his hand out from the sting of what he'd just done. Made Luke glance around them in quick confirmation that there was no one nearby before he took that hand in his, thumb stroking against palm to soothe away any remnant pain.

"You going to do it?" Hand race after race over to an inferior driver – especially one like Carl who wouldn't have a chance at winning the Winston Cup even if he was allowed to add last season's points to whatever he earned this year. The man was washed up, without ever having gotten dirty in the first place.

And now, finally, Bo was seeing him for what he was. A sneaky bastard that would use anyone to get a little extra money in his wallet and a slightly sweeter deal for himself. Luke ought to be happy about the greater wisdom gained from this little experience. Except he wasn't, because those eyes of his cousin's were trying so damned hard to look angry, and all they were achieving was sad.

"I'm going to kick his tail," Bo vowed. Made Luke smile at him again. One more glance around him at the lack of witnesses anywhere to be found, then he pressed a quick kiss to those defiant lips.

"Come on," he urged, tugging on the hand in his. Home, even if it was early afternoon, where Bo
"You really figure," Luke was asking from where he was on his back in the grass. Sort of grass, closer to the real thing than most of what could be found in the region. What covered the tiny patch of ground in front of where they lived was a lot closer to weed, coarse and wide and nothing he’d want to go barefoot (or if he got his way, bare backed) in. This here wasn't exactly what he'd call grass either, maybe closer to moss. Tiny blades, spongy feel, clearly imported from some other part of the country. Smelled of wet earth instead of detritus mingling with grains of sand, though he figured he and Luke were probably the first people to bother getting their noses this close to what covered the infield of the Daytona Speedway. "Getting fired is the best way to go?"

"I figure getting you on the grass is the best way to go," he answered, kissing away silly objections from overly talkative cousins. A finger dragging along angular cheekbone, and Luke opened his mouth for him. Exploration of places they'd been plenty of times now that somehow seemed worth investigating further, each and every day. Warmth of muscled legs nestling loosely against his hips as he crouched there on all fours, his torso, heaving with deep breaths, hovering just above Luke's. Hand tracing down jaw now, blazing a trail for his lips to follow. He had learned to love the little curves of his cousin's face and neck, providing little nooks of soft sensitivity hidden away in the hard muscle and bone of the rest of that well-toned body. "I figure," he said as he went on the hunt for a new spot that would make Luke's breath saw raggedly out of his mouth. "We'd stand a better chance of getting fired for stealing the pace car."

Snort from Luke. "We stand a reasonable chance of jail time for stealing the pace car." He'd complain about spoilsport cousins excepting the worst, but he couldn't. What they'd been doing amounted to a crime which – even if it fell under the Hazzard rules of borrowing – they could wind up doing some time for, seeing as the car didn't belong to their bosses, but to the Speedway. Which LaMatt employees had open access to, thanks to a rental agreement, and that friendly relationship would go whistling up a hollow tree the second it became known that the Duke boys had been helping themselves to more than the track.

So, to be technical, fired and imprisoned, both.

For rolling around on the ground together, fine sprigs of grass covered in tiny dewdrops like unshed tears curling up through the gaps between his fingers and getting caught in Luke's hair, they'd probably get—

"They catch us doing this," which was an impossible thing. The Dukes had come to this place at an hour when the world – with the exception of two former farm boys – was nestled into its warm and soft beds. The perimeter of the place had been driven at high speed enough times to make them both dizzy; they knew full well that they were alone, and the only way for anyone else to have gotten in was through that groaning and clanking gate. Between there and where they were sprawled, him nuzzling around the edge of Luke's ear while the man tried to swallow the moans and hisses that this little activity would manage to eventually elicit, stood one ill-gotten pace car, shielding them from the glaring lights that arched over the top of the grandstand. "We're dead."

Which may or may not have been an exaggeration, but that didn't matter. "Ain't nobody going to catch us," he promised in a puffing whisper straight into Luke's ear that made the man's hips rock up off the ground, grinding into him as their belt buckles clinked together. Quiet enough that that tiny sound echoed back off the side panels of the car at them, and there was no way they could get surprised here.

Luke must've agreed, though he'd never say so out loud; his hand found the back of Bo's neck, pulling him down into a kiss that a man could drown in. Sinking like a stone, Bo's body dipped and
swayed, belly first, shoulders and hips following, until all of it rubbed up against Luke.

Kiss broken with a sudden flurry of movement that found Bo on his back with the grass tickling up against the tiny hairs on his bare arms where the sleeves of his t-shirt didn't cover. Luke was lying on his side next to him, warm hand stroking over the dip of his belly.

"Last chance, Bo," he warned from where his head was propped up on his other arm, his eyes traveling over the length of Bo's prone body. Appreciating – exactly what, Bo didn't know and it didn't much matter, either. Hand running lower and lower over his belly until it rested over his belt buckle. "You don't want to do this, say so."

As if Luke had started this, had done the work to get it this far. Man and his damn sense of responsibility, and it was enough to make Bo—

Kiss on his neck, showing Luke's preference for which way the decision should go. Damn hard to stay mad at a man who could make every part of him squirm with excitement, from his hair down to his toenails – but no one could say he didn't try. At least until Luke's tongue found that tender place where neck met shoulder, lips following quite merrily along after.

"You," he gasped, every effort to make it sound annoyed, and it might have worked, too, if his left hand hadn't just woven into the hair at the nape of Luke's neck, holding him right where he was for another few nips and kisses. "Trying to save my virtue?"

"No," came grumbling out as a vibration against skin already made sensitive by the attention Luke had been giving it. One leg slung over both of his, feeling for all the world like a claim of ownership, while a hand worked open the buckle of his belt. "I'm trying to save my ass."

Well, good luck with that. For all of Luke's intentions to take control of this, it was Bo's daydreams, Bo's efforts, and Bo's engineering that got them here. And it was Bo's pocket that had the little bottle of suntan oil in it.

Fingers out of Luke's hair, could be a couple stands came with it though that hadn't been his intention. "Sorry," he mumbled, before bringing his palm to his lips, making a noisy spectacle of kissing it then slapping it down onto Luke's backside. Squeeze just because his hand was already there and he liked the feel of that particular set of muscles under his palm.

"What," the question came past gritted teeth, but at least the lazy confidence about exactly how this was going to end up was gone from his attitude. "Was that for?"

"Just kissing your ass goodbye," Bo grinned up at him. Another squeeze, a kiss to Luke's jaw as an apology that he didn't really mean, and the game was on. Hand on his belt working at double speed while the other one came out from where it had been propping up Luke's head to pin his shoulder. Didn't bother him a bit if Luke wanted to waste his energy that way, so long as his own hand still had a firm hold of one of Luke's fleshier parts. Kneading, setting a rhythm that hips followed whether they intended to or not.

And right in the middle of a perfectly romantic night, a wrestling match broke out. Tumbling under the full beam of the overhead lights – and he didn't mind that part at all, not with how it let him see Luke grin with the effort to prove himself stronger – but they couldn't stay there. Not with how Bo had deeply thought out designs on where it should end up, so he shoved against Luke's shoulder with one hand, and slipped the other under the belt of his jeans to grab a little more firmly the part that he'd been enjoying a minute ago. Wasn't his fault the man was built so straight and skinny that no pair of pants ever did fit tight to him. Though apparently Luke didn't see it that way, considering how he was the momentum behind their next roll.
Kissing him senseless, Bo reckoned, was the only way to stop this thing from the pointless circles it was running in. They came to rest, finally, back in the shadow cast by the car, grass stained shirts twisted and shoved, wrenched up enough to find skin underneath. Hands exploring now instead of pushing, because even if he was on his back again, Bo's kisses were potent things. Could put even the strongest of competitors under the table, or under his spell.

Soft sweep of thumb across his belly, dipping lower, and it was getting time that the jeans got out of their way, so he set to working on Luke's. Had the belt open and his hand inside, under the fabric of those thin shorts his cousin wore every day. Soft skin over hard muscle, and any case Luke might have made about not liking Bo's hand on his backside got lost in a rumble that would have been a moan from any other man. Firm grip there reminding Luke exactly whose idea this was anyway.

Man never could let himself be out-thought (or even to relax and enjoy someone else doing the thinking for even a second), had to fight to be first with everything, his hand inside Bo's jeans, cupping, stroking.

"Luke," he mumbled his way out of the kiss, getting complaints from parts of himself south of the border as he nudged at the body over his. His brain was after him to turn this thing around to what it was supposed to be, to stop letting Luke take credit or responsibility or whatever it was he wanted to think of it as, for every single thing they did. But his body felt fine, just fine and well nigh onto great, exactly where it was.

"Mmm?" came from where Luke had simply readjusted to nibbling on his earlobe.

Really, his body reminded him, he was just perfect where he was. With the possible exception of the fact that there were two sets of jeans between him and what he wanted.

"I love you," he said, which neither his brain nor his body completely approved of, mostly because they hadn't been given prior knowledge of this plan. Still, it seemed to work in its own way, made Luke's tongue click quietly against his teeth, made the hand that had been in his pants come up to cup his cheek, made sweet kisses start where everything had been push and grab a few seconds ago. Gave him room to fish the oil out of his jeans with one hand while the other explored the sway of Luke's back, the curvature without which the two of them wouldn't fit so tightly together.

Pause in the kiss, just eyes then, looking into his. Weighing, no doubt, the burden of what he wanted against the consequences for taking it, and Bo was about dang sick of that. It was just a thin disguise for repeating the patterns of their youth, when accountability fell onto Luke for anything either one of them did. Or not fell – didn't just drop heavily in response to the irresistible pull of gravity. And didn't get shoved – Jesse wasn't that unfair. Luke grabbed hold of that responsibility in a death grip, sassed Jesse and presented his backside for the whipping, no matter which of the Duke boys had been the naughty one on any given day.

It might have seemed like paradise to the kid he was back then, that he could run loose and free, get himself stuck in whatever kind of quicksand he could find over the vast territory that he roamed, and Luke would get him out. Sure, he'd get an earful about how he could have gotten himself killed and he really needed to start looking out for himself one of these days, but when he got home, breath still heaving out of his lungs, hair, ears, shirt, jeans and shoes overflowing with tiny white grains that left a trail behind him, he'd get sent off for a bath, while Luke headed out to the barn with Jesse. Never felt wrong or unfair, because he knew that was exactly how each and every one of them wanted it: Jesse needed someone to whip who wouldn't break his heart with pained sobs, Bo wanted someone else to take his lumps for him, and Luke – Luke wanted Bo all for his own. No one else was allowed to touch him, not even kin.
But the payback for all those carefree years had come home to roost over the past few weeks. It was the same as trying to make a river flow uphill, getting his cousin to understand that Bo was capable of making up his own mind, could start things all on his own, and that everything he did was not simply a game of follow-the-leader. Sure, Luke had kissed first, had gotten the idea of kissing long before such an odd little thought would ever have crossed Bo's mind. But what had followed, every bit of what they had done since – well if anyone deserved an A for both effort and outcome, it was Bo.

"Now get your pants off," he commanded because he was tired of struggling, tired of worrying, tired of thinking when really, there were vastly better things they could be doing.

Got a snicker, but there must have been enough authority (or maybe it was more like urgency) in his voice that he got obeyed. Got helped out of his own jeans, too, and if some part of his brain reckoned he ought to protest against that, his body had no complaints about how Luke's hands stroked against his tingling skin, the way those eyes took their time sweeping up his body and admiring every part of him. Besides, it let him keep hold of the tanning oil.

Used his free hand to pull Luke back up to him, one last sweet little kiss, then he popped the flip top on the oil, poured it onto his hand. Spread it on himself, but stayed on his back. A compromise between him and the man on top of him, between his brain and his body. Watched the light change over the lines and curves of that face as Luke slid down onto him, saw the moment of pain, and started stroking Luke right then. Helped him find a rhythm, bent his knees and pushed his feet against the ground. Greedy, like a starving man, wanting more, faster – it was a racetrack, after all. Watched through squinted eyes to see that face, usually deeply lined with thought, relax, mouth open. Heard the cry and thought then, right then, might be the only moment when he had complete control over what happened between them. And lost track of the thought the second it entered his head.

Next coherent moment featured Luke resting on his chest while Bo held him like he'd never get to if he hadn't worn the poor boy out. They really needed to get up off this square of grass, ought to put away the pace car and slink home to showers. But all of that could wait a minute or ten while his cousin rested against him, and let himself be loved.

Bo never quite had mastered standing still. And that alone made it a good idea that the boy had never spent any time in the military, before even taking into account the fact that he could have gotten killed or, maybe worse, seen men die. With any luck his inability to manage standing at attention would have had him in the compound doing endless pushups while the rest of the platoon slogged through jungle and rice paddy, crawled on their stomachs under sniper fire, dragged their wounded brothers to relative safety only to helplessly watch as they bled out.

Dark, dark thoughts, but getting summoned to explain his actions to superior officers could take the blame for that. The mission got completed without casualties was never a good enough reason for the improvising he'd done in the field; instead of commendations it got him relegated to digging shit-holes, shirtless and food for insects in the wilting heat and humidity, taking a pull on his canteen every few minutes until it was empty and he'd have to stagger over to supply for more. The men in his company, most of them anyway, were generally on his side and didn't hassle over giving him a break when it came to letting him have a little extra of what ought to have been rationed. Best shit-hole digger in the whole battalion was what he got called on more than one occasion, and that right there was a moniker he could take pride in. After all he'd had a lifetime of training in the form of digging post-holes. And, funny thing, he'd get sent out on the next mission anyway, even if he was such an unpredictable free-lancer that he had to be worn ragged by extra work. Because it seemed his superiors liked how no one died on a mission with Duke. (Until
someone did, but that was later, after he'd earned himself a few chevrons and the accountability to go with it. Funny how he always did better when primary responsibility for success didn't rest on his shoulders.)

He reckoned he and Bo might just get themselves assigned to whatever Bill Matthews could come up with as a feeble equivalent to the kind of torture the Corps could dole out. It shouldn't be much of anything, maybe the equivalent of a couple of licks from Jesse's strap. A sting, some embarrassment, and unless the two of them chose to make a big deal out of it, it would be over.

However, "Beauregard Duke," was just a bad start, the kind of opening that could only lead to bad endings.

"That's just Bo," came the correction like clockwork, his cousin most likely inwardly cursing the day he'd been saddled with that name that was blazoned across all his school documents, driver's license, probation papers and the contract he'd signed with LaMatt. Public record, and anyone who wanted to could learn the younger Duke boy's full name. But no one, not even Luke, had permission to use it.

"Bo Duke," had won himself another exhibition race. In all honesty, it shouldn't have come as a surprise to anyone, should have been as obvious as the moon chasing the sun across the sky that he would. "You're quite the driver," like a pat on the head and the offer of a cookie. Be a good little boy and go sit quietly now, the kind of thing a lot of well-meaning older folk used to try on Bo – a little flattery, a little bribery, and a lot of hope that the whirling dervish of a little blonde boy would behave appropriately. Fools. "And one day you could be good enough to lead this team. But not yet."

Which was a bald-faced lie and there wasn't anyone in the room that didn't know it, considering it was just the three of them. Now if they'd brought some other sap in here, maybe one who was blind or brainless, or had the misfortune to never have witnessed a NASCAR race (or was an equal liar, like Jay Goodwin or Carl Green), there just might have been someone who would buy into the crap that was flowing out of Bill Matthews' mouth.

Mollie-Sue, sitting primly at her desk just beyond the closed door, wouldn't have believed a word of it.

"You boys," she'd whispered quietly when they'd arrived in the outer office, "are in trouble." Sweet of her to warn them, even if there'd never been any doubt in their minds as to why they'd been summoned here. On a Monday morning, first work day after the exhibition race that was supposed to be thrown in favor of helping Carl Green win. Which was a laughable notion, considering that there'd been two cars between Bo and Carl by the time they crossed the finish line. No amount of support from team LaMatt could have made the supposedly senior driver win.

"Ma'am, there ain't been a day in our lives when we wasn't in trouble," was Bo's bravado not quite managing to mask the way he was edgy, jittery looking for an excuse to expend some energy. A temper tantrum or a brawl, either one would relieve that pressure-cooker building in his cousin, and both would succeed in getting him fired.

"You?" was Mollie-Sue's incredulous response, the same one as every older woman who had looked at his cousin and seen only blonde hair, blue eyes and a beautiful smile. "I don't believe it for a minute." Of course she didn't.

"Shoot Ma'am," Luke informed her. "He gets arrested and hauled off to jail at least once a week back home." And she believed that even less.
"It's his fault," Bo countered. "I wouldn't get into half the things I do if it wasn't for old Luke there." Which was hardly true. Reality went more along the lines of Luke getting him out of trouble. All the same, that seemed a touch more believable to Mollie-Sue. "Besides, it ain't hardly every week. Shoot, the law back home can't barely catch us but once a month, not when I'm behind the wheel."

"Now that I believe," Mollie-Sue affirmed. Quieter then, more furtive, "You're the best driver we've ever had, Bo. Don't let him," gesture toward the office, "tell you different." Small smile of encouragement, and before they could even properly return it, Bill Matthews summoned them behind closed doors.

Where he wasn't, to his credit, claiming that Bo was anything but a good driver. Just not an obedient one, and Luke would like to wish the man luck in the endeavor to get Bo Duke to drive any other way than he felt like driving. Years of suggesting that no, that gully didn't really need to be jumped, just because there was something of a natural ramp at the edge had gotten Luke exactly nowhere. (Except over the gully in question. At high speed.)

"Now I know you've got that winning spirit in you. Wouldn't have hired you if you didn't," ran the gist of Matthews' paternalistic lecture. "And I know what it's like to get the taste of winning; you don't want to give it up. That's why you've got to put your own interests aside and back up Carl Green. Because he's our best chance of winning this year." Yet another lie. Except the man in front of them actually seemed to believe it. "You're young, Bo. You'll have your time in a few years or so – when you're seasoned." And their boss was a fool if he actually thought more experience on a NASCAR track would improve on his cousin's raw talent as a driver. The suddenly appearing sign with the words Bridge Out on it, somewhere between where Bo was and where he was headed, did more to increase the boy's skills than ten years of eating the exhaust of an inferior driver like Carl Green ever could.

"Luke," and this was the part where he was supposed to shift on his feet like Bo had been, to look nervous or worried, and he'd never much given Jesse that satisfaction, nor any drill instructor, so why would he start changing his ways with skinny old Bill Matthews? He leveled a stare at the man. The kind that only tempted bigger trouble, but he reckoned he could handle it, decided that if their boss had room to criticize Duke boy's performance it was Luke's. "It's your job to keep your driver focused. He's going to want to do all sorts of crazy things out there on the track." As if Bill Matthews would have the first idea what it felt like to race, to see the tiny cracks and slivers of possibilities opening and closing in the sideways movement of the cars all around, to find your gap and slide through it easy until there was nothing but daylight in front. "You have to keep him on track with regard to the overall goal."

Which, in this case, was supposed to be helping another driver win, and Luke would never facilitate that; never had. In all the races they'd been through since September, his whole focus had been on keeping Bo alive out there, and giving him the best edge he could in order to manage whatever the boy wanted to accomplish in any given moment. If that radiant, captivating, tender and sunshine-warm heart of his cousin's desired victory, Luke was going to see that he got it.

"I expect you boys to work together. You're a team." And that right there was about to put a stop to this thing. Bo was going to lose his cool and give the man a piece of his mind about the very meaning of team. "Now I know you're dying to give me all the reasons that you did what you did, going against orders like that, but I don't want to hear them."

Bo never did get to sign up for a tour of duty in the Marines like he wanted to, and Luke had no regrets about his role in preventing what he knew would have been a disastrous mistake. All those images of violence so permanently imprinted in his mind did not need to infect the gentleness, the
downright charm and lovability of his cousin's personality. Still, Luke might have silently wished, for this one moment only, that military discipline had been a part of Bo's experience.

Just shut up, he thought as firmly as he could. Hated the words his mind had chosen, stuck to them anyway, even if they were rougher than his intent. Just shut up, and he prayed that the two Duke boys were on the same wavelength today. Just shut up; he didn't do more than think it, didn't try to convey it with his eyes or his face or even the tiniest of hand gestures, because he didn't want Matthews to get any satisfaction out of his attempts at humiliation. Just shut up, and maybe it wasn't even Bo he wanted to aim those words at.

"Because if I let you tell me why, I'm going to want to fire you, and you've both got too much potential for me to really want that to happen. So you boys just go now, and think about what it is you want. If it's to keep your jobs here, you'll do the right thing come Thursday." The next and last exhibition race before the season started in earnest.

"Why, thank you, sir," Bo's smiling face answered, while Luke tried to control his own smirk. Because if the gratitude wasn't entirely as genuine as it sounded to those unaccustomed to Bo Duke sarcasm, there was no reason that their boss needed to know that. Yet.

"You're welcome," was unsure of itself, lost in working out how a man could get himself so cheerily thanked for being an ass. Made Luke's smile turn just this side of genuine while he held back a laugh. Tilted his head toward the door in silent signal that it was time to go, and that, right there, might have been the one thing the three men in the room could agree on – the Dukes needed to walk out of there right now.

Door closed behind them and they flirted with Mollie-Sue on their way out of the building, because she'd been sweet enough to worry about them. All the way to the ugly, yellow loaner car that they'd not wasted even a minute's love on, before Bo's smile went hard-edged, bitter, a little closer to a grimace.

"What now?" he asked, and it was interesting how he'd slid into to passenger side of the car. Maybe neither of them trusted that Bo's foot hadn't turned to lead in a chemical reaction when the rest of him got weighted down by that little lecture of Matthews'. Or it might just be that Luke was supposed to be older and wiser, to know what they should do and where they ought to be aiming themselves in order to do it.

"We get dinner," he pronounced, and it wasn't wise, wasn't anything close to a real solution. It was practical enough, it wouldn't hurt them, and that was about the best he could do for now. A couple of greasy hamburgers, and what the hell, he splurged on fries, too. Because Bo liked them and he didn't mind having a few either, even if their uncle wouldn't approve of how they used the dashboard of a car for their table and the knees of their jeans for napkins.

Besides, it passed the time. Food got in the way of any words Bo might have wanted him to say, any brilliant plans the boy might have yearned for him to detail. We'll wait on the topside of Cedar Cliff and when Bill Matthews drives by I'll jump onto the roof of his car and... yeah, that would amount to assault, vandalism, and probably a half dozen other charges tacked on by the Volusia County Police. Besides, flat-as-a-pancake Florida didn't have anything so three-dimensional as a cliff to leap off of nor very many hardwood trees to climb as a substitute. Just sand and concrete and ugly pastel colored buildings, and then there were the palm trees. He'd never spared a moment's love for the damnable things, not since the day they landed here in September, but tonight, as the last of the light faded, they clawed at the sky the same as they used to in the jungle on the other side of the world.

Maybe part of him was ready to get out of here, whether it was to hit the road in their little RV or to
stick out his thumb and hitch ride after ride until he found the mountains of home. But he didn't figure it made any sense to go flaunting that side of himself in front of his cousin right now.

Because even if he was Luke, older cousin and provider of answers to all questions, when it came right down to it, this decision was Bo's. And there was no way it would be made in the cramped confines of a car lent to them by an employer that neither of them could stand the thought of right now.

Dark enough to need headlights now, so he shoved the debris from their meal over to Bo's side of the car and pulled out of the lot. Sad little sigh in his right ear, and the silence would come to an end soon, but he reckoned the roads around here had become familiar enough that he could talk and drive, both.

"What if we went to a different team? The guys on Bud Moore seemed happy enough."

Or not. Carl Green had jumped ship after all, and Petey Willis had retired mid-season. But until those things happened, they hadn't exactly complained a lot. All the same, it didn't matter.

"We got a contract, Bo." He signaled a left and drove up the east side of the railroad tracks, past low lying businesses, security lights glowing dimly in their empty interiors.

"So did Jay. Carl must've, too." And any number of other ship-jumpers out there, but that didn't have any bearing on their situation. Not in the face of the blunt realities of being a Duke.

"You ready to face Uncle Jesse if we break that contract?" Although that might not be the worst confession they'd have to make to the old man, it alone would get them sent to the barn and told to drop their drawers. Which would make it all the more interesting when they got around to admitting to their second sin. "Besides, you got the first idea who we should talk to at Bud Moore? Or any of the other teams?"

Empty parking lot and he counted that as a good sign while he chose a spot at random to leave their car. No lights other than what little the moon could spare to shine down on two boys as they got out of their car and headed for the beach. The towel under Luke's arm was already sandy from previous trips to this location, and had gotten designated as the rough equivalent to the blanket they used to leave in the General for lucky nights at Hazzard Pond.

"Who did Carl talk to? The owner, I guess."

"Nah, Bo." He was trying to be gentle, to say what Bill Matthews had said but not in the same way. It wasn't an easy task, not when he reckoned it was a fine line with threats of fistfights lurking right on either edge of it. "He talked to his agent." The towel got spread across a barren patch of sand, but neither of them seemed to be sitting. Felt like a wise choice, to hunker low and close for this discussion. For privacy, sure, but they already had an abundance of that here – what was more important now was that they needed to be too close to hit each other hard enough to hurt, if it came to that. But getting down there onto the towel, that was somehow impossible. Maybe they'd have to deck each other after all. "Once you make a name for yourself, you get someone else to do your negotiating for you. If you was to call Bud Moore, or if I was, they'd laugh us right off the phone, and then they'd turn around and call Bill Matthews to inform him about a pair of disloyal Dukes. We ain't got no one or nothing to protect us, Bo."

"Well how the hell am I supposed to make a name for myself if I ain't allowed to win?"

Or maybe getting them down onto the ground was as easy as anything he'd ever done with Bo. When it came right down to it, people thought nothing of strolling away from what was theirs for
the taking. Make it hard for them to get, and they'd suddenly find themselves with a pretty serious hankering for what seemed worthless only seconds ago. Which was how Luke came to be sprawled out on his back, taking up just about the whole length of the towel he'd carried out here, no room left over for Bo. Eyes fixed on the quarter of a moon, and waiting. Didn't take more than a few seconds for his cousin to drop to all fours, but instead of nudging Luke over as he'd done for most of their lives, he just crawled up over his body, and collapsed most of his weight there. Laid his head on Luke's shoulder within easy reach of fingers that were itching to tangle in blonde curls.

"The way I see it, we got three choices." Two of which would lead to the same place by divergent paths, and that just went to highlight the constrictively tight limitations under which they had to maneuver. "One: we can go back in there tomorrow and tell him we quit." Shifting weight on top of him, pointy elbow digging into his bicep and if Bo didn't like the idea, he could just say so. But he settled again, so Luke went on. "Two: we can ignore what he said. You just go out there and drive like you and I both know you can, and blow all them other drivers right of the track." That one got him a soft stroke of fingers against his cheek. "And Matthews'll fire us right after you pick up the trophy." And a bone-deep sigh. "And three: do what he says and work our way slowly into having name recognition and some power, and then we can choose our own future."

"How long would that take?" Good question, and even if he knew the answer to that one, there'd be a hundred more to follow it. How much of the fire in me would get snuffed out by subverting my will and my talent? When I finally got name recognition, would it be a good thing or bad? Power – would I wield it benevolently or would I be such a miserable fool by then that I'd be no better than a Carl Green or a Jay Goodwin?

A small part of Luke might have wanted to go home. The greater part of him might have figured that Hazzard would be instantaneous end to the nights like this, with the light, the warmth, the brilliance of Bo wrapped in his arms. And all of him might have somehow growth loathe to leave behind this little bubble of happiness he'd found in an otherwise too-flat, too-hot, too-crowded, too-ugly state that he couldn't even think of one positive descriptor for.

But none of that was important.

"How much do you want to drive the NASCAR circuit, Bo?" Because there was only one person that was going to decide their next move, and it wasn't Luke. Bo's head came up then, chin poking into the middle of Luke's breastbone. Two tiny points of light, the moon shining in those deep blue eyes, and that was about all the detail they could see of each other, but it was enough, apparently, to satisfy Bo.

"It's about the only thing I've ever wanted to do," came out like the kind of confession brought out by the threat of a whip.


Complete collapse then, body gone utterly limp, air expelled in a huff, and it was a silent decision. To stay on the circuit, to follow the rules made by a man they didn't like in order to play a supporting role to a man they didn't respect.

"I love you," wasn't anything in comparison to what Bo was giving up to in order to stay on the circuit. But it was the only thing Luke could give him.

It wasn't half as oppressive as it had been the last time they did this, not nearly as disjointed. They had some experience now; it wasn't all bravado and excitement masking homesickness. It was just plain packing. Maybe it wasn't fun, but it didn't warrant that squared-off, arms-folded, half-
disgusted response from Luke either.

Sure, they'd gotten the same RV as last season with that kitchen table that liked to grab at Luke's leg and leave an ever-growing welt there. Yeah, they were squeezing their duffels into a too-small closet, and restocking the cabinets with ugly plastic dishes that wouldn't clatter and chip when Luke took them through the potholed parking lots on the outskirts of the speedways. They were cramming too much into too little, and leaving behind a house that neither of them bore any fondness for, one they didn't love even a quarter as much as the one back in Hazzard, and Luke was acting like - like he hadn't acted, but might should have, when they left Hazzard. Like it was causing him some sort of deep, internal pain to go on the road.

"Bo." And somehow Bo's idiocy was the root cause of all that pain. "If you pile them things up like that, they're only going to fall over." So he rolled his impatient eyes up to stare into that flat lipped, frustrated face of Luke's, waited for the man who was so fond of staring at nothing to get around to looking at him.

"Then I reckon you can put them away as you see fit," he answered back. Instead of standing there doing nothing more than grousing about how wrong I'm doing everything went without saying. They were just pots anyway, if they fell they'd clang together and make a hell of a noise and it would be music to Bo's ears over the nonsense Luke was spouting. Lifted an eyebrow and waited for yet another gem to fall from his cousin's lips, and when it didn't happen, he turned on his heel and slammed back out of the RV and into the house.

What the hell did they need on the road anyway? What felt like endless strolling from one end of this house of theirs to another, and he could swear that he needed any of it. Or that if they forgot any of it, he'd care. There were stores where they were going, there were restaurants in case they ran out of food or dishes or interest in cooking. And sure, Uncle Jesse would call it wasteful and Daisy would frown about their city ways, but they weren't living tidy lives anymore, they were simply surviving from here to there.

The road, and when he stopped staring at the walls trying to figure out packing, when he let his eyes blur and his mind wander, he could see it. Median strip fading off to a point on the horizon, width of asphalt in front of them, trees and flowers to either side. And where all the lines met, almost like the city of Oz at the end of Dorothy's yellow brick road, there was a speedway. Filled from side to side and top to bottom with little towheaded kids like he'd once been, and their fathers or grandfathers or uncles who had brought them there. There were bigger boys, too independent to admit they'd been brought by a guardian, too, and little girls in pigtails who held their ears and squealed with delight as cars flashed by, engines screaming with the effort. At the end of each stretch of highway, there was his own childhood and Luke's too; there was home. They didn't need clothes and toiletries and two tablespoons apiece to get there, sometimes he figured they didn't even need a NASCAR contract. All they needed was each other and a regulation-passing set of wheels.

And winter clothes. Not on this next trip, maybe, but sometime. Or at least he knew they didn't need to leave them hanging here in Florida closets, where they'd go forever unused. If they were in the RV at least they'd stand half a chance of getting worn now and again.

Hangers, heavy with denim and woolen clothing, digging into the flesh of his palms, and he was hit by the first tiny pangs of regret about how he'd slammed out of the RV, what with how a closed door stood between him and putting his burdens down. Parked there at the curb in front of their house-attached-to-other-houses, and the righteous fit he wanted to pitch at Luke for annoying him to the point of booby-trapping his own future efforts just had to get swallowed down. Mostly – he did kick the door in some sort of universal signal that he wanted it opened, whether by Luke's hand
or by sheer violence.

Didn't quite go his preferred way when it came right down to it – head-shaking, smirking cousin banged it open for him, quick enough that he had to stumble off of the metal step there before he could enter, lowering a glower of his own. At Luke, at the kitchen, the hallway, the tiny living space, the bedroom, the closet. At the dowel there that was too small, that bowed slightly under the weight of what he dropped onto it. Back to glowering at the living space, the hallway, the kitchen, and Luke. Who had the utter brilliance to say, "You forgot the measuring cup."

A smile then, the kind Jesse used to give to Lavinia when he got accused of sloppy eating habits and crumbs in his beard. Kissed his damned cousin, too, and muttered, "Thank you, dear," same as he'd heard his uncle answer throughout his early childhood before strutting right back out of that tin can.

Two more armloads of pointless crap, and it was the trip with the sleeping bags that did him in. Reminiscing about starlit nights following on long days of the hunt, singing as the campfire burned down and the beer cans emptied themselves, and when those memories got blown to the four corners of the RV by Luke's snort of derision, Bo was done.

"What? What did I forget this time?" Funny how Luke always complained of doing more than his fair share of the work when it was Bo that was doing all the running from one door to the other while his superior cousin spent a minute here or there shoving at the things – most of them relatively heavy – that Bo brought him, but otherwise just standing there with a sour look on his face. "Your left-handed bread knife? Or maybe it was your favorite pair of underwear?"

Tolerant sigh, a lifetime of listening to it, as familiar as spring wind through mountain pines, and he knew all the unspoken words it contained. About little cousins with big tempers and the tantrums that the whole family had to put up with because of it. As if standing in the middle of an RV, making voiceless complaints and frustrated gestures wasn't its own brand of bad behavior.

"You ain't forgot nothing, Bo."

"Guess I must have brought it in wrong then." Carried it under the wrong arm, put it down the wrong way, looked at it wrong once he'd gotten it there.

"Bo," was no more nor less annoyed than it had been a minute ago. Frustrated, irritated, and maybe it was just normal Luke, the same cousin he'd known all his life. Or maybe it was a man working himself into a fit, the kind that ended in weeks of drinking himself stupid enough to either forget Bo – or kiss him.

"What, Luke, what? Just get it over with, just say whatever it is you got to say." Because they had to be on the road come tomorrow, they didn't have the time or the space for whatever crisis Luke was going to build himself up to.

"Maybe," came out with a different voice; not the patronizing tone of day-to-day Luke, not the frustration of a minute ago. It was – not a sound he'd heard a lot of, hard to place at first. "It would be for the best if," hesitant, that was part of it, but not all, not by country miles. It ached, somewhere below its surface, it festered and burned and stung. "We called home." Sure, they could, probably should. Their kin ought to know that they would be out of touch for weeks at a time again like they had been in the fall. And it was nothing to – well Luke wasn't crying, wasn't anything close to crying, but the image that settled in his brain involved tears all the same. "What if," rasping, maybe that was the sound, "me and Vance switched places?"

"What the hell are you talking about, cousin?" All that anger that was missing from Luke had
found a home in his chest, and it was a fiery, singeing thing that came spitting out of his mouth without any sort of chance to get screened or filtered. "What the hell—" violent was what it was, had him shoving his cousin against what served as a kitchen counter. Wasn't anything he wanted to do, not as familiar as it felt. Not when exactly this same set of muscles had performed precisely these same actions not even two months ago, starting something – something his cousin was about to deny. Or dismiss as nothing important, nothing worth packing into this here RV and taking out on the road with them. The measuring cup, well there was no managing without that, but this thing between him and Luke, it was supposed to be dumped right here on the dirty curb on the side of a road in the middle of a city that neither of them gave half a damn about.

"If we called early enough, he could get down here right quick." Of course he could, he was a Duke and he'd drive the General, and none of that meant anything at all. "You two could be on your way with plenty of time to spare, and I could go home."

"You want to go home, we go home together," Bo sneered. Didn't like it, didn't want to feel this way, hated that his cousin would even begin to think that Vance would be a reasonable substitute, that Bo would want anyone but Luke on the circuit with him.

"Bo," was reasonable, rational, and way too damned calm, really, even if the words were still grating out of him. Luke was – after all they'd been through, all the effort it had taken to get them here, and even if here wasn't much of anywhere at all it was better than where they'd been before – leaving him. "You said you wanted to stay on the circuit."

"No I didn't," spit flying from his mouth and he had about as much control over that as he did over his words. "I said I wanted us to stay on the circuit." Had an urge to shake Luke; let him go instead. Watched him run a hand through his hair, saw those eyes focus off into the distance again. Blue like gems, precious things and even before he'd ever been touched by Luke, held onto for real, he'd figured those valuable eyes to belong to him. Never thought about it until unasked questions got answered, how the unspoiled purity of those eyes fixed on him more often than on anyone or anything else, how they lingered there, waiting for him to smile or frown, to say something so silly and stupid it would even force a moment of amusement out of Luke.

"I just figure," same ground up voice abrading its way out of that tight throat. "It's NASCAR, cuz. It's the road and it's a time when you should be you." Which didn't make any sense, didn't have any supporting logic, made it hard to fight against. Luke's negative little way of seeing things always had some basis in reality, always provided a jumping off point for Bo's rebuttal. Just about all he had in this moment was a balled right fist, and he'd use it if Luke would give him half a reason. "You don't need me there," was even less logical than the rest of it. Luke was his pit crew chief, his guidance through the tangled maze of cars, his best friend, his definition of fun, his connection to his Duke roots, his cousin and – as far as he'd understood – his lover. "In your way. Bo," and Luke wasn't crying, he wasn't, but it was the closest he'd seen the man come to it, this side of Aunt Lavinia's passing. "You wasn't made for this."

"I wasn't made for—" He was still chewing on that part, on all of it, really. Trust his mouth to start talking before his brain was done thinking. "What wasn't I made for?" But he knew.

This. This, in the absence of an interpreter, without the benefit of his cousin's usual clear-spoken ways, going on a loose hand gesture alone, a motion connecting the two of them in a way that Luke's voice would not, seemed to refer to the things that had cropped up between them in the last couple of months. Love, Bo would have called it, and he reckoned that if he could hold the man in front of him at gunpoint and force honesty out of him (except old Luke there would probably just take the bullet instead of giving in to uttering words he wasn't entirely ready to say) his cousin would agree.
And Luke had decided he wasn't made for it.

"You ain't never—you like girls, Bo."

Wasn't made for loving Luke, he liked girls. Made his brain trip over thoughts of what he was made for, because he couldn't ever swear he'd ever thought real hard about it; if he'd wanted to do something he'd just—done it. Made for, well his body was made for reaching for the plates off the top shelves of the kitchen that even Jesse couldn't get to, his foot was made to depress an accelerator, his hands to grip a steering wheel, his ears to hear the whine of engine and his backside to feel the vibrations of the road so his hands and feet would know what to do and when. His shoulders were not built for narrow passageways or small furniture, but they seemed fine for digging irrigation trenches and hauling bags of sugar to still sites. His brain was built for anything that didn't involve sitting behind a desk and staring at a blackboard, and his heart—he his heart was made to love.

Quiet night just over two years ago, the shadows of the back porch, him nestled between the laundry rack and the old washtub, his back against whitewashed boards. There were no crickets to keep him company; a rain-soaked cold snap the week before had seen to that. That night had been relatively warm though, enough so that he was in nothing more than a pair of sweat pants hanging low on his hips and protecting him against the splinters that the old porch stood ready to dole out. Arms folded over his bent knees and he'd been counting—something. Could have been stars or leaves that were just barely hanging to the trees before a fall wind could rip them off and send them floating toward the ground. Might have been the ticks on a clock until Luke recognized him for missing in action, and came on the hunt for him. Seemed to his memory like that last part came along somewhere under the five minute mark.

"The way I see it," Luke had said, skipping past hello and is this seat taken and anything that might have given Bo the opportunity to say he wasn't welcome in this same cramped space. Sitting across from him, because Bo hadn't left any room on either side. "You was looking for someone to love."

"I was an idiot," he'd mumbled back, trying to short circuit the discussion. He had it figured that if he went ahead and announced what Luke was working his way around to saying, his cousin would leave him alone. Or—

Not alone, never alone, he had no wish to be alone or he wouldn't have come here where Luke could find him after less than twenty-five steps worth of searching. But silent, maybe. Quiet and just there. Which was always too much to ask of his cousin, self-appointed solver of problems that he was.

"You ain't an idiot," and he could remember precisely how annoying he'd found it that while Luke's words said one thing, his tone implied the exact opposite. "You're just—Bo." Pause there and at the time he'd assumed it was because Luke was trying to carefully formulate words to explain just how big a fool Bo really was. Now he reckoned that his ear just didn't know how to listen for signs that Luke's love for him was deeper and wider than his cousin figured it was supposed to be. "Be careful, is all I'm saying. You—you ain't got to love every girl so hard that one or the other of your hearts gets broke."

The memory got a little fuzzier there. He knew that at some point he'd stood up and groused about how he didn't want to talk about it anymore, that Luke had grabbed his hand and told him to settle down. Somehow or other it hadn't turned back into the fight it wanted to be—over Diane, the Carnival, the damned pile of cars. Maybe they'd left enough bruises and welts on each other already, maybe Luke had actually managed to calm him down, he couldn't swear how it had happened. All he knew for sure was that what had wanted to be him storming off in a huff turned
into Luke holding him as he fought tears. *(He loved you then, enough to comfort you on the loss of another love…)*

His heart was made to love, and Luke knew it almost better than he did. Who it was made to love…

"Luke." Well old Luke there had decided he was meant to love a girl. Probably figured him to be married, with a husky, dark-haired boy and a tiny blonde girl, living in a house in town. Like Boss's maybe, with a white fence around it and a fresh coat of paint on the porch every year. Two sensible cars and a nice little beagle pup to raise alongside the kids. "It ain't," and he was crowding in on his cousin again. Backing him up against the flimsy counter in a sad little kitchen, and it didn't take but about half a step to do it. "Up to you to decide what I was made for."

"Bo," was the objection and complaint, the warning, because his cousin didn't like corners or tight spaces, didn't like to be forced into any place he didn't already have designs on going to. Strange thing about Luke was, he never did figure out how he was always doing the exact thing he hated in others. Telling people who they ought to be and what they'd better do, and why they should follow the path that one Luke Duke had selected for them.

Hands on shoulder muscles to keep his cousin where he was, to prevent him from bending himself over backwards to get away from him. "Luke," he said, and there was something of a temptation to shake the man, to use violence to jerk loose some sanity. "Stop telling me who I am." But that was what Jesse used to do, and it never worked. Luke just went on being irascible Luke, going out in search of trouble, and if there was none there, creating some of his own. And slowly, one emotion at a time, shutting down access to his heart. So if Bo's hands might have wanted to shove, they had a stronger compulsion to hug. Tight, the kind of thing that would take all of his cousin's effort to escape from. "I ain't never going to love no girl like I love you."

A snort and he was about to get called a fool. But he wasn't listening. "I ain't never gonna love no girl like I love you, Luke." The words were coming then, the hands shoving against him. Something about how he didn't know what he was talking about and, "I ain't never going to love no girl like I love you," was still true no matter what was being said back. Questions of whether he'd thought this through, did he have a plan for handling nights on the road when the other guys would expect them to go out, to pick up girls? (Of course he hadn't thought about that – it wasn't worth thinking about. It was the kind of thing that got dealt with when it came up. There was no point in planning for it.) The hands weren't pushing against him anymore, but they weren't exactly holding onto him, either. "I ain't never gonna love no girl like I love you." Did he have the first idea what he was giving up, what he was getting in return? A life in the shadows and was he listening to a damned thing that Luke was saying? Bo? "Luke, I ain't never gonna love no girl like I love you." Deep sigh, and had he considered what their kin would say if they knew? What would happen to his NASCAR career if any of their peers or the press figured it out? "I ain't never gonna love nothing, no girl, no career, nobody, like I love you."

"Damn it, Bo," was Luke cracking, giving in enough to wrap arms around him. Holding on while they both pretended that he was breathing normally, that his heart wasn't throbbing up against Bo's.

"Don't make me fight you on this no more, Luke," he begged, and damn if his voice didn't wobble a little there at the end. It wasn't like he enjoyed shoving his cousin up against walls, cornering him, forcing him to give up whatever demons lurked inside him. If they were going to go pinning each other to hard surfaces, he'd just as soon it was all in fun. "I love you and I ain't got no intentions of stopping, all right?"

Silent nod against his shoulder, and he reckoned this thing that had once been a hug and was now
no more than two men clinging desperately to one another needed to come to an end.

"What say," Luke mumbled, and he must've been reading Bo's mind because he leaned back from where they were still holding onto each other. Not far, just enough to look Bo in the eyes. Twinkle in the brilliance of that crazy blue, and if there was a touch more moisture in there than usual and the rims were tinged a little bit red, well, Bo's were no better. "You lock that door and we christen this place."

"Here?" He always did hate when his voice jumped up into its prepubescent range, but it wasn't his fault that Luke had just made a completely preposterous suggestion. Tin can walls, and just beyond those, the curb in front of what passed for their house, connected to a series of identical houses. Street on the other side and if it wasn't exactly busy, it wouldn't be deserted in the middle of the day either.

"You wanna do it when we're camped out on the grounds of a speedway, with Mikey's trailer about three feet away?" On the one side, and no doubt Carl Green's would be on the other. Not that it mattered. They'd be christening the RV in both places and all over the country if he had any say in it.

"I ain't brought the oil over yet." Which only went to show that maybe Luke had about half a point about his packing skills.

"Just lock the door," Luke said, nudging him off in that direction. But he couldn't go yet, had to watch what his cousin was up to, rummaging around in the tiny cupboards. Bottle of corn oil produced, eyebrow raised. "Ain't you got that door locked yet, Bo?"
"I'm coming in, cuz." He didn't like the sound of that, wasn't comfortable with the way it wasn't anything like a question.

"What's wrong?" Because the Monte Carlo looked like it was holding to the track just fine, was gassed, spoiler up, tires fresh and balanced – hell, Bo looked great out there.

"Just," was slightly frustrated. A request for trust or maybe the boy was annoyed that he had to say anything at all, what with how Luke was supposed to read his mind. "Be ready for me to pit. And don't bring no one with you over the wall."

Put him even less at ease to get that instruction. They were, of course, on a closed channel, without even Freddy able to hear what they said to each other. But a lifetime of Hazzard would make a man cautious, with revenuers jamming CB signals and operators listening in on phone calls, so he bit his tongue, hopped the wall and held out his right hand to stay any followers. Stood there, feeling every bit like an adolescent waiting on his guardian to pick him up after a school dance.

Mobile, so far, had not been their friend, so it would only make sense if the car was misbehaving. The RV had done its share of causing trouble, somewhere in the void of baked nothingness after Pensacola, with swamp to the left and sand to the right, and nothing but one stranded vehicle in between. Sure, he'd been able to do some shade tree mechanics on the timing belt, enough to get them to the next whistle stop of a town that had a halfway stocked garage next to the faded blue post office. Shouldn't have held them up as much as it did, wouldn't have if the resident mechanic kept half the inventory that Cooter did.

"Well," old Jimmy had said, chewing at one greasy nail as he thumbed through an older catalogue with smudged and torn pages. "I could get you one from Airstream. Might could get here it in three days or so." Which might have been a fine answer to have given any resident of this sleepy town, but he and Bo had places to be, and time trials less than twenty-four hours in the future.

Took some ingenuity, while Jimmy had stood over him, chewing loudly in his ear and – thankfully – spitting in the other direction, green coveralls hanging as loose as the wrinkled skin on his rail-thin body, humming his amazement at a crazy whippersnapper who clearly didn't know better than to try something this fool-stupid. Took patience, took brute strength to manipulate a timing belt made for an Econoline van, to stretch and force it until it fit an old Airstream RV. But what it mostly took was time. A good couple of hours of it, at the end of which he’d ruined his shirt and torn up his hands, but that was all right. With him anyway; Bo hadn't been exactly at ease about it.

"You're a danged fool," was the thanks he had been given for getting the RV running again with nothing more than the wrong sized belt, his brains and the power of his arm muscles. "Look at you." Tsking and pointing fingers and he had found himself banished to the sink in their tiny bathroom to scrub grease out of raw nicks and cuts on his palms and fingers while his cousin filled the entirety of the doorframe. "You ain't driving neither," had made no sense at all. An RV wasn't a stock car, didn't require precision or perfection, didn't matter whether his grip on the wheel was loose or white-knuckled.

"Bo." It had been pretty clear he needed to get control of this molehill before it turned into a mountain. "It ain't nothing worse than a paper cut." After all, sometimes those stung and burned,
bled and otherwise made nuisances of themselves, but they were hardly lethal.

Two of them crammed into space not large enough for one, then his fingers got grabbed, bent back so his cousin could get a better look. Drops of blood seeping out through the shallow cuts there, and peaks had started to pop up all around them.

"You ain't driving, Luke." Mountains jutting up to the left and right and if he wasn't careful he'd end up with his arms swaddled in gauze up to his elbows.

"I'm fine. You ain't never worried when it was corn stalks that was chewing up my hands." Or, to be more accurate, when Bo had left him to the heavy work of the harvest while he leaned on the handle of his scythe, jawing about the fad of rising hemlines on skirts in the Boar's Nest or the upcoming cross-country rally.

Hands on his shoulders and if they were surrounded by mountains that should be mere molehills, he reckoned he missed the slopes and cliffs of home anyway. "That was then, Luke. This is now." It was Bo being protective; it was cute, and Luke reckoned he could put up with it. He had let Bo hug him then, had tolerated the too-tight space of tin walls and arms around him, had announced that the keys were in the ignition and given up the battle because he reckoned his cousin needed him to. But, "Why don't you just go lay down," had been taking it too far, so he'd shoved at the body clinging to his, pointed toward the front of the vehicle and laughed. Made Bo giggle in response, maybe with some mild recognition at the foolishness of what he'd tried to do, maybe because the fastest way to make his cousin smile was to be the one to smile first.

Only about forty miles left to get to the Alabama Speedway, and with Bo behind the wheel it had gone quickly, but it was full dark and hours late when they had pulled into the confines of the race track. "No room at the inn," had been the smirking comment by the poor sap that had been stationed at the entrance to the infield campgrounds.

"Listen," Bo had growled, more tired than threatening, but it might have been that Luke was the only one who could recognize that. "We're on the LaMatt team. I'm a driver," which had failed the make the kid swoon, even if he couldn't have been much out of high school and must've been a huge fan of NASCAR in order to be doing such a thankless job for no more than minimum wage. Left Bo to dig around in the various messy compartments of the console in front of them to search for his all-access badge and identification, but the kid waved it off before either one of them could even begin to do a proper search of the messy nest of junk that was brightly lit up by the glaring lights of the stadium.

"If you can get her back there," the boy said, and then had the good grace to flush when he remembered he was talking to a fine specimen of a NASCAR driver, "you can see if you can find anyplace to put her. I ain't been on the premises; I just got told to tell everyone it was full."

"Thanks," Luke had answered, since Bo had seemed to still be half caught in a pout. About not being recognized or the too-tight quarters of the Alabama Speedway infield, or maybe it was still Luke's beat up fingers and palms that had gotten him down.

The boy never had enjoyed driving the big vehicles the way he loved a car. "Show him what you can do, Bo." Left those words quiet, just between two Dukes, like a raised eyebrow in the face of a revenuer. *Remember who you are, maybe, or don't let Pimples there get under your skin.*

It had been fun, in its own warped way, to weave through the small openings here and there, none of which presented themselves as reasonable camping spots, what with how they were the only way in and out of this maze. Winding their way back, they'd eventually come snout-to-snout with Mikey's RV, then the glowing reflection of the man's eyes as he sat on the steps talking to Earl.
Which, of course, meant that even the ugly green car, hauled on a flatbed, had managed to beat them here.

And next to Mikey's rig there was another one, halfway recognizable, though it had been repainted since the Dukes had last camped out next to it. Parked on the diagonal and taking up more than its share of the allotted space in the reserved section of the infield, stood the team leader's trailer.

"Carl Green," Luke muttered quietly through his smiled greeting at friends and colleagues. Reliable, gentle Earl and sweet-tempered, lonely Mikey had nothing to do with their current situation.

"Is a bastard," Bo had answered back, tone surprisingly vehement.

"Hey," had been Mikey, leaning into their open window without invitation but that was just the boy's version of southern hospitality. Crowding in too close in his search for companionship, even if it was the company of surly souls. "You guys finally made it! You get lost?"

"No we didn't get lost," his charming cousin had snapped. Then again it had been a rough day.

"We lost a timing belt," he'd hollered across, overtop of whatever Bo's frustrated tongue might have wanted to come out with next. "Where's Carl?"

"Out," their fellow driver answered. "There's a go-go bar just off the interstate. A bunch of the guys went, but I figured we'd go someplace quieter. Then I stated thinking you wouldn't make it," he added with a sigh. Then he'd finally gotten around to making the only point the Dukes were interested in: "You ain't going to get him to move his RV, Luke. I already tried."

"Selfish cuss," Earl agreed from where he'd taken up residence hanging onto the passenger side mirror.

"But listen," Mikey interjected in his hyper little way. The boy had genuinely missed them. "I got a couple of friends over in the west campgrounds just outside the grandstand ring. It's pretty quiet over there and you can park next to them, so that when it gets crowded tomorrow, at least you'll know your neighbors. They're great guys I grew up with. Skip and Vern. Find them and set up camp, then bring them back with you so we can all go out together."

Bo had sputtered something that might have been a rejection of Mikey's suggestion, both to give up on staying with the rest of the drivers and the part about having a good time tonight. Probably planned to blame the latter on minor lacerations to Luke's hands (can't go out because my cousin's got a couple of boo-boos and should probably go straight to bed) but he got interrupted.

"All right, guys, we'll be back in an hour or so," he'd overruled, tolerating a glare. "Come on," he'd more quietly counseled his gloomy cousin. "It'll be nice and quiet there tonight, at least. And by tomorrow, if you want, we'll figure out how to get ourselves over here."

Must've been the right choice; Bo gave in. The west camping area turned out to be dark and near-silent, Vern and Skip easy to find and friendly. Without a whole lot of coaxing on Luke's part, Bo managed to get himself interested in making himself pretty and going out. If the result wasn't a riproaring good time, it was at least a pleasant night amongst old and new friends, in a city that felt more like home than any they'd experienced since the fall.

Back in the RV, sleeping had been fitful, with Bo just about throwing himself out of his tiny bunk. No real room in either bed to squeeze two Duke boys, and shoving the two of them together felt too risky in a flimsy tin can with nothing more than lacy curtains on windows that were mighty close
to eye-level from the outside. But they weren't more than a reasonable arm's reach apart, so he ran one hand through mussed blonde hair until the boy settled and slept.

Not enough, though. Bo woke up in a mood as dark as the cloudy skies, heavy as the rain that threatened to fall from them.

"It's gonna set us back a day," he'd groused, blue eyes tracing the uneven patterns of white and gray that hung thickly on the far side of the windshield of their mobile home. As if it mattered whether qualifiers happened that day or the next, when the Dukes had no better place to be.

"It ain't raining yet," he consoled. "Come on, have some breakfast."

The day had turned out better than it started, allowing for all the time trials to get completed before the afternoon was even half gone.

"You ain't got to worry about no one but yourself today," Luke had muttered into his headset just before the flag dropped. "Have fun."

Seemed to work, at least for the twenty-five laps of his heat. Boy went out there and held his part of the track, didn't let anyone near him. Came out of his car with a smile like he hadn't sported since the hour they'd pulled out of Daytona.

And his good behavior got rewarded with afternoon flying lessons from Mikey's friends, who dug ultralight aircraft out of the storage bin in their camper, unfolded and assembled them. Gave the Duke boys a crash course in how to handle them, then left them to have at it. "Just don't go getting yourselves hurt," the red-headed Vern had grinned good naturedly. "We don't want no reputation for injuring NASCAR drivers. Even if they are Mikey's competition." Just went to show the purity of boys who'd never been on the circuit, the way they seemed to believe that either of LaMatt's junior drivers were in any position to compete with each other. Envious for a moment, he had found himself wishing for his own more innocent days when he'd believed that it was always the best driver who won. "Now go on," and they'd been turned loose for an hour or so.

Got themselves an aerial view of Mobile Bay that would otherwise have been lost to them, gave them the privacy of the skies. "I could do this all day," Bo had declared into the intercom between them. "If we had these back home… can you imagine Rosco? Climbing trees to try to get to us…"

Back home. Just the thought of Hazzard had weighed them both down, heavy gravity dragging the two of them back to earth, back to cloudy-dark moods and grumpy, grousing dispositions.

And it hadn't improved overnight, not when dinner had been macaroni and cheese, not when Bo had made him present his hands for inspection and tsked over remnant redness there. "Shouldn't have let you fly," he'd muttered, as if he could have put a stop to it, as if he really would have wanted to go up there alone or miss out on the opportunity.

But their gloomy outlooks and strained patience had hit an all-time low this morning, after a near-silent breakfast and a harassed morning of last-minute fine-tuning of the car. Rock bottom had come after inspection and just a few minutes before they needed to move to race position.

"Hey there, Duke," had been Carl Green's greeting, could have been meant for either of them. "Think you can manage not to show up late for the race?" It was the kind of hilarity that Luke would expect from the man, which was to say not even mildly amusing. He could only hope Bo would manage not to laugh so hard he ended up decking the man by mistake. "See if you can keep your car together long enough to make it to the finish line, all right?"
He'd taken a step closer to his cousin then, figuring he would either wind up holding him back or joining him on the attack, though Bo just stood his ground, chin up. "Car's in fine shape, Carl," he'd muttered.

"Bo'll be there in plenty of time to whip your tail, Carl," Luke had added through gritted teeth.

"Really?" had passed for pure amazement. "Well that's fine, real fine. I'm just looking forward to seeing what your little Beauregard can do."

It made perfect sense that every one of his muscles tensed then, expecting as he was to have to restrain his cousin against dismantling the man piece by piece.

"Bye Carl," delivered with a smile was the best warning he could give. Get lost before the whole bunch of us winds up having to present ourselves, bloodied and bruised, in front of our bosses. Only for a minute, just long enough to get ourselves fired.

Got smirked back at, got a fine view of the man's back as he moseyed out of the Dukes' pit and toward his own. Got sorely tempted to attack and tackle the man from behind. Got stopped by his need to look at Bo's face, to see how close his cousin was to violence. Got surprised by the smile there.

"I'm going to kick his tail, Luke," had been the furtive promise.

"Cuz," he'd tried, though he'd seen in the odd relaxation of Bo's features that his efforts were futile. "Is it worth it if it makes you lose your ride on the circuit?" It's about the only thing I've ever wanted his cousin had confessed just under a week ago, while the weight of his body had crushed Luke deeply into the sand and the Atlantic had roared its ignorance of two boys and the painful decisions they'd made.

"I don't need the circuit," had come out with utter certainty. "I got you. All I need now is to beat the tar out of Carl Green."

And Luke had figured that the boy had about two hundred laps, maybe three, before he'd really have to make up his mind about that. Circles to drive while his brain did its own loops of thinking through how much this one little victory really meant to him when their entire NASCAR career hung in the balance.

The boy hadn't wavered, not yet, and he was already about a fifth of the way through the race. And finally pulling in for that pit stop he'd unexpectedly announced a half a minute ago. Yanking off his gloves and fighting with the netting in his window all at once, and it looked like his impetuous cousin had gone and made the only decision worse than winning. The way he was yanking his too-long body out of the car confirmed it. Bo was quitting, right here and now, mid-race. For no reason Luke could figure, really. He'd led, unthreatened, for the majority of his time cruising the asphalt so far.

Helmet off, and before Luke could tell him to cool off, to dig down deeper than his anger to find some prudence and really think about what he was doing, Bo was yanking at Luke's headset, pulling it off and taking some hair with it. "Sorry," got mumbled at him, then the helmet was handed over. "Put it on, Luke. Hurry up," followed when he didn't move fast enough for his cousin's liking. "Get in," came next, along with Bo holding the netting back for him.

"Bo," he complained reasonably, utterly, completely rationally. Level-headed, he was making perfect sense in contrast to the excitability of Bo.
"Luke, best you get in there and buckled before you lose my lead. You do that and I'm going to regret this."

This? What the hell was this?

(This was, quite simply, Bo sharing his finest hour, his biggest victory, his greatest joy, with Luke. He knew it instinctively, even as his logic began the argument of why it was the most foolish move the man could make. Get in the damned car, was his heart overruling his head. And hold onto your cousin's lead.)

"You sure?" he asked, because there would be no going back if they did this. Not when Bo was healthy and fit, and in no need of a substitute driver. But it was too late, he was already cramming the helmet onto his head, and lifting his right leg into the door.

Bo's answer came in the form of a shove, of quickly buckled restraints, and gloves getting tossed in after him before the netting got snapped back into place. One quick look up to see that wide grin, and he slammed his foot down onto the accelerator.

"I love you, Luke," came straight into his ear from the tiny speaker embedded in the already sweat-soaked foam that was pressed tightly up against his head. "Now get lost. I don't want to see you back here until your tank's ticking mighty close toward empty. And put on them dang gloves so I ain't got to go worrying about you opening up none of them cuts on your hands." Silence, but not for long. Audible grin in his voice and, "Have fun, cousin," Bo instructed.
"Quit looking at it." But Luke didn't mean that. Tiny curl at the edge of his lip, flash of blue at the corner of his eye, and if he wasn't so busy guiding their RV, jury-rigged timing belt and all, at a healthy speed down a relatively busy interstate, Luke would have been staring at it, too. He'd certainly done his share of looking at it back when it had been handed over to them, though it had still been somewhat naked then. What, after all, was a trophy without engraved names?

The win itself had been without any sort of wild maneuvers or unnecessary drama. Sure, there'd been some rubbing going on behind him, drivers trying to nudge each other out of the way here and there. But he never felt any pressure, no heat other than what the car's engine generated; the victory itself was little more than the same sort of coasting glide of cruising over flatlands that he had been able to achieve in an ultralight.

After which he took his life in his hands, he supposed, by not cruising straight to victory lane like any good sport of a winner was meant to. Yanked the car around to circle back the wrong way up the pit road, which no one had any business being on anyway. Hard to figure out which pit was his from this direction; that was until his crew barreled over the wall, Luke first.

"Showoff," came his cousin's voice into his earpiece, but there was a grin mixed into the tone.

"I just figured," he answered back into the private airspace between them, one that was about to be crushed in upon by the crew, the officials, the other drivers, the press. "You're older. You might need a ride up to victory lane."

"That's what you thought, huh?" But Luke wasn't too proud, didn't insist on his own two feet as the best way between here and there. He'd ripped off his headset, tossed it back into the pit, then torn away the netting and jumped onto the doorframe of the car. Right hand through the opening, and he helped steer the car, trunk weighted down with the densely muscled bodies of Gillis and D'Onofrio, back around toward where the celebration awaited them. And if their fingers got tangled together in those few moments of sharing one steering wheel, and the gesture came dangerously close to two Duke boys holding hands, didn't either of them seem in the mood to complain about it.

Hours lost to celebration, to fine champagne in his hair instead of beer, while he stood in front of one ugly green Monte Carlo and had his photo taken with a Mountain Dew in one hand, and Luke held fast under the other. It was the way they'd stood after every victory they'd shared in the past, and he didn't reckon that a little sex between them ought to change that. Not when—

"My cousin Luke here, he gets half the credit. More than that, because not only is he my pit crew chief, but as my backup driver, he drove half the race."

"Not half," Luke had protested, and he figured he could leave the mathematical calculations of exact percentages to that dark head of his cousin's. He didn't care exactly what the ratio was of his sweat to Luke's that was soaked into the seat of the Monte Carlo, all that mattered was that it took both of them to win.

Hours spent under the glare of cameras, talking into microphones, smiling just one more time, trying to make it all as genuine as it would have been if it had been the Hazzard Derby or the Cedar City Outlaw All Star race. Almost managed, with Luke there under his arm, but there was no proud
twinkle in anyone's eye that he met, not like Jesse would have had, and the girls that brought him the trophy then chastely kissed his cheeks, well, they didn't have half the warmth of Daisy. There was no Cooter to slap his back just hard enough to reveal the tiniest bit of jealousy, no Boss to throw his cigar to the ground in disgust while Rosco cringed and apologized for, somehow or other, failing to prevent the Dukes from winning again. In short, it was a glorious afternoon-turned-evening, where the pink light of the setting sun glistened with the bright flashes of cameras, there was champagne and laughter, girls wearing tight shirts soaked down close against their skin by the alcohol flying through the air, a trophy half his own height in his hands, and all he wanted was to go home. Real home, where the rooster would crow at a merciless hour no matter how late they'd stayed out the night before, where Luke would smirk at his mussed head when he dragged himself out of bed, Jesse would scold and Daisy would kiss him and promise a fine breakfast as soon as he managed to go out there and collect her some eggs.

"You're young, you're a fresh face on the circuit. You got any advice for a young boy who wants to be where you are now?" But apparently he had more important things to do than daydream about places he'd left behind. Like being a proper role model for America's youth, and answering a toothy reporter's endless questions.

"Listen your elders and obey them," he answered. Got him a smirk and a shove from Luke, but it was true enough. Mostly, anyway. He didn't figure that any kids watching him on the television right now needed to know about days in the old caves when they really ought to have been in classes, or nights of skinny-dipping with cheerleaders in Hazzard Pond. He reckoned it wouldn't do even one of those aspiring NASCAR drivers a lick of harm to be getting advice about how to be well-behaved, over those things Luke probably wanted him to cop to. Like driving for years before he was of legal age, and hotwiring cars in order to do so. They might be part of the training process, too, but Bo would be danged if he would be the one who led a kid to those activities. "Eat right," he added to more snickers in his ear, "and stay in school."

And that, folks, was a wrap.

"Good job," Luke had whispered in his ear. "Heck, they would have kept us here all night if you hadn't bored them to death."

"Luke," he had snapped, because he could. Because the gracious drivers who'd come to congratulate him had wandered off long ago, followed a few minutes later by the pit crew, who got bored when the cameras switched over from the wide angle view that included everyone to focusing tightly on his face. Because the wielders of those cameras were busy winding up the cables they'd dragged across asphalt and grass to get up close to him, and the interviewers had wandered off complaining about how late afternoon light was picking up all the flaws in their skin. "You figure I should have told said kids should sass their uncles and get themselves whipped at least once a week? You really reckon the world would be a better place if it was filled with kids like you?"

"I'm just saying," got accompanied by a grunt as his cousin bent to lift the trophy from where he'd stood it on the ground for the last round of interviews. Shoved it into the car, then pulled himself onto the doorframe. "It's awfully wholesome advice coming from a man covered with champagne. Hop on," he added with a smile, one that remembered full well where they were and what they'd accomplished today. "Got to get the car back to Earl, then we can go off and celebrate proper. Unless you're going to be too busy minding your elders." Chin tipped low, blue eyes looking up at him through dark lashes.

"I ain't got no elders worth minding. Not here, anyways," he murmured back, pulling himself up onto the hood so Luke could drive them, granny-style, back to the pit.
"Sorry, buddy," Luke hollered to their roadie when they brought him the car to load onto the flatbed, but Earl just grinned at them.

"I ain't had to work this late in a long time. You boys – you done give this old man one heck of a thrill. I didn't figure to be on the winning team maybe ever again." Hugs all around and for a second it had almost, but not quite, felt like being caught in Uncle Jesse's arms. "Now get out of here and have a good time."

Not yet. Oh he had grand designs on a good time, and it would only be a few more steps past their next stop until they found the tangle of men who would take turns congratulating and griping at them for their win. "Trophy shop first," he'd announced, because a nude trophy, with no victors' names to proclaim, was just a pathetic thing. "And," he'd muttered to Luke, "both our names are going on it."

There might have been some mumbled protestations from his cousin, but they'd been quiet enough that he reckoned it was safe to ignore them.

And that silly attempt at hiding a smirk now, as they were making their way east on I-10, that just went to prove the wisdom in making sure that Luke's name got inscribed there alongside his on the front of their trophy, even if the engraver had made all sorts of faces at the request to put it there.

"How's your lip?" he remembered to ask, seeing the way that just a tiny trace of a smile had made his cousin lift a hand off the rig's steering wheel to wipe at it again.

"Fine," and of course it was, which was why Bo didn't bother to ask after that discolored cheek above it.

Two hours, the engraver in the trophy shop had told them. Be back in two hours and not a minute later, because we close up the second I get done with this thing. Saturday night, and stuck in a shop waiting for race-winners to finish with their celebratory rituals and manage to get themselves up here to have their trophies personalized. Yeah, Bo could sympathize with cranky behavior regarding that. All the same, he had felt compelled to stop the grumblings about having to put two different first names on the trophy.

"They're short," he'd pointed out. "Fewer letters than my whole first name would have been."

"Oh yeah?" their disgruntled engraver had answered back. "And what's that?"

"Never you mind," he'd mumbled while Luke laughed. "Come on," he'd complained. "Boys are already out there." At the Speedway Saloon, not two football fields away, right there in the Fanzone of the complex.

Debauchery had been in full swing when they showed up, men half-drunk, women half-clothed, and bartenders half-frustrated, half-amused at the antics. He and Luke had settled in with their friends easily enough, even if Mikey was mildly sore at them for breaking the rules that they all were supposed to live under.

"Don't get me wrong," their friend had amended. "I ain't mad, just jealous. Wish I had the gall to do that." The whole discussion had been something of an education to Skip and Vern, who assumed that every driver out there the freedom to win at will.

"I just figured you wasn't good enough," Skip had teased, and there'd been some game laughter, but that right there might have hit a little close to the bone. Mikey – he was a fine driver, but Bo reckoned a few more years of eating Carl's dust might make him a heck of a lot better. It wasn't
that the LaMatt method of utilizing junior drivers to support their team leader was a bad one, it was simply that they'd chosen the wrong man to lead the team.

And there old Carl had been, showing up about an hour into the cozy little celebration, just hankering for trouble.

"Ah girls," had been the way the man had announced his presence, the start of a battle waiting to happen. "Don't bother with these boys." Spoken towards the pit rats that hung on the periphery of the table that contained most of the LaMatt Team, including a couple of Carl Green's crew members. "They ain't got none left over for you, not with how they spent it all on the track today."

"Well hey, Carl," Bo had answered back, and maybe he had come to regret it since. "Don't worry about him, girls, he done used all his up years and years ago."

"Bo," had been Luke, complaining into his ear, trying to talk him out of whatever mess Carl wanted to pull them into.

"Yeah, Beauregard," had only gone to prove that a fight was inevitable. "Listen to your cousin. You ain't nothing without him." And that right there had gotten his cousin to his feet, even if old Luke hadn't spoken a single word. "In fact girls," had been sneered, when really the man should have been running by now. If Bo had been left to fight him, he might have gotten a bruised solar plexus. But now he'd gotten the older Duke boy riled, and men often didn't get up off the floor after the boxer in Luke took a serious swipe at them. "They ain't got nothing left for you, because they done used it up on each other."

It was kindness, when it came right down to it, that made Bo hit him first. The shared Duke knowledge that there was no ganging up, two-on-one, on any combatant that just one of them could take, and that they stood a better chance of staying out of jail if it was Bo who got to fight Carl. But it was inevitable that other men would join in on both sides (including, he was pretty sure, Jay Goodwin, and he had no idea whose side of the fight that man had been on), that partners would get passed around, that Luke would get in a few uppercuts of his own on Carl before this thing was over.

It was the bouncer, however, that had left his marks on the older Duke cousin. It never had been easy to pull Luke out of a fight once he got in; old Rosco could testify to that as well as anyone. There was the Marine in Luke, who had been trained to never give up a hand-to-hand struggle without subduing his opponent, no matter how badly he got hurt in the process. Add to that the underlying threat of what Carl might or might not have known about them, plus an oldest child's natural protectiveness, and there was no way a simple 'break it up, boys' was going to put an end to what had been unleashed in his cousin.

Took a few hits and Bo dragging him out by the arm for the fight to come out of Luke, for him to walk away dabbing at his lip. Took all of Bo's restraint not to hit or hug the man in public, but to hustle him to the relative privacy of the outdoors and get as good a look at him as the darkness and their friends, close on their heels, would allow. "Damn it, Luke," he'd whispered. "I love you. You got to be more careful."

Which had made his cousin laugh so heartily that by the time the other junior driver and his two friends caught up to them, they gave all the appearance of two boys who'd enjoyed being on the winning end of a fight. Mikey's whoop just confirmed for the rest of the group, lagging behind, that what was taking place halfway between the bar and the trophy shop was perfectly normal.

"Well," Mikey had said, "it was nice working with you."
"Even Mikey reckons we ain't got no jobs once we get back to Daytona," he said now, turning his attention away from the trophy that was rattling around, probably leaving dents in the kitchen table with every bump in the road that Luke hit. Which was some kind of justice, he figured, for the grudge the table seemed to bear against the older Duke, and the welts it frequently left on his thigh.

Daytona, and that would have been their destination no matter what had happened in Mobile, what with next Saturday's race being the 500 there. And yet it bore all the earmarks that surrendering themselves for arrest to the law of Hazzard would have.

"The way I see it, we might have gotten off with just a lecture for me doing some of the driving, and they could have given us one more chance to do right on the track. But I don't reckon they're going to look too kindly on you attacking the team leader."

"Oh, fine, blame me. I only did it so's you wouldn't kill him." See if he went out of his way to keep his cousin on this side of prison bars again.

"Well, Bill Matthews might not be real impressed by it," Luke answered with that same casual shrug that never had much cared if Bo was getting riled. "But I was."

Warmth in his face and in his heart, and, "You reckon," he asked. "We could stop for awhile somewheres around here and really celebrate this thing?" Because the second the trophy had gotten properly engraved, they'd picked it up, then taken it straight to the RV that was still parked in the west lot. No discussion had been necessary – Luke had slid directly into the driver's seat and cranked the engine to get them the hell out of there. It had been fun conquering Mobile in all the various ways that they had, but they really had no further business there.

"If we push through, we should be home by four in the morning," was a logical, reasoned answer, and totally unacceptable.

"Too late," he answered back.

"What, you turning into a pumpkin at midnight?" Clever, clever.

"No." Because Luke might have congratulated himself for being the funniest man around, but he wasn't, not by a long shot. "I reckon that you're old and by the time we get home, you're going to want to go to bed."

Raised eyebrow for that and, "Where, exactly, did you reckon on stopping?"

"Anywhere. I reckon at this hour we'd have the beach all to ourselves." There had been plenty of signs dotting the side of the road, standing ready to direct them toward the gulf beaches. Or, if Luke was going to get picky about sand and where it might end up, he wouldn't mind staying in the RV, so long as it was parked in a deserted area. "Come on," might have sounded desperate. "It's been days," definitely did.

Got him a smile, sad little edge to it, but it was agreement enough. "All right, but we got to get rolling again early. And we also got to stop somewheres and get presents for Jesse and Daisy."

Because it just wouldn't be polite to have been gone five months chasing a dream until they got fired for achieving it, then to come home empty handed. They'd better at least find one of those fine pieces of clothing that proclaimed Someone went to Florida and all I got was this lousy t-shirt, so Jesse could use it to clean grease off the tractor engine.

Maybe it was thoughts like that, maybe it was Luke's age or that split in his lip, or it might just have been that there'd been days of being together and hardly touching, but what was supposed to
be a wild celebration turned out to be a lot more like two boys lying on pushed-together cots, kissing. In the bedroom of an RV parked in darkest corner of an abandoned parking lot while the gulf waters shushed gently on the other side of a tin wall, Luke's hands making slow circles on his back, remnant scabs from his run-in with the timing belt tickling against the soft skin there. Felt good, just letting himself be held.

"Maybe we should sleep first," sounded like some kind of a concession in his own ears, though Luke didn't snicker at him or provide reminders about which of them had suggested that the other was too old to stay up and celebrate. He just shifted his weight to accommodate the two rickety beds underneath them that weren't half as sturdy as the one back in Daytona that they'd shared for the better part of two months, then pulled Bo to rest against him.

It had taken him some time, thought processes scrambled as they were by the effort first to work out being with Luke, then staying with him, to recognize exactly how affectionate his cousin really was. Sure, it still took tiring the man out beyond the point of comprehension to get him to settle to being held and loved, but that hardly mattered, what with how Luke was perfectly willing to be the one doing the holding. Kiss to his forehead now, hands still stroking, warm and gentle. The thud of Luke's heart under his ear and he ought to be asleep in seconds.

Except, "How," was a nagging question in his mind, "do you reckon we'll work out sleeping arrangements back at the farm?" Because they couldn't push those beds together.

"I reckon Coy and Vance are entitled to our room," came back in that rumbling voice of Luke's that was so much more fun to listen to when it got conducted straight into his ear as he rested on the man's chest. "They're guests."

"You really think they're gonna stay?" It hadn't even crossed his mind that they would. They were just – loaner cousins, really, come to fill the gap that Bo and Luke left behind. He'd expected they'd disappear as conveniently as they'd arrived.

"I figure a man would have to be a fool to leave Hazzard." It was supposed to be a joke, maybe. Some kind of self-deprecation for two boys who'd walked away from their home like it was nothing more than a town, some buildings, a set of laws, and annual taxes. But it was more than that, it was a way of life, one they'd spent their entire lives building and being a part of. "I don't reckon there's any place else they got to go, Bo. They was sent to Uncle Jesse to help out, but also because they wasn't doing much of anything else." And if there was one family member that could give aimless boys work and a steadying hand, it was old Jesse. All the kids of their generation, no matter how distantly related, had been sent to spend time here and there at the old homestead under the supervision of the clan's oldest and wisest member. Only he, Luke and Daisy had been lucky enough to stay.

"So where will we sleep?" Must've sounded whiny; Luke's hand came off his back to stroke through his hair.

"The porch, I reckon. Remember how we used to sleep out there in summers back when we was little?" When Lavinia was alive, and the sun would beat down on the roof of the house all day, defeating any efforts on her part to get a cross-breeze blowing through the house from the shady side, she'd kick them all out to the picnic table for a simple dinner and then send the kids off to sleep on the porch just outside the kitchen. It's cooler there, she'd announce, and then she'd stay on the old swing with them singing songs from a long lost childhood of her own until they dropped off, one by one. Sometime in the night she must have crept inside, because he didn't remember either of their guardians staying out there with them, though they were both up and smiling by the time three mussed-headed children made their way into the kitchen at first light.
"It's February, not July," he pointed out.

A sigh, his head drifted up and back downward with the motion of it, similar rhythm to the water’s ebb and flow on the other side of their thin walls. "The loft is warmer," Luke acknowledged.

In the barn? "With the animals?"

"Maybe," Luke interrupted, shoving him over until he was on his back, pressed into the bed under the weight of the body above his, "we should have sex first."

He might have protested about how this seemed an awful lot like a distraction to him, except for the kiss. Powerful as Luke had always been, strong and safe and – convincing. Same as the man talking a revenuer into setting foot into his own trap, there went Luke's tongue, lips, fingers and hips, persuading him into doing exactly what his cousin wanted.

And, he reckoned as the rough drag of hands reached that sensitive spot on his inner thigh, the man had himself a point. There would be plenty of time for sleeping, thinking, talking and worrying about their future – later. Much later.

"Love you," he mumbled into the tiny gap between this kiss and the next.

"Look there, Bo." He knew it, or at least his gut had. Mostly, it had been churning for a couple of hours and he could have blamed that on the fast food breakfast that had been his little indulgence for Bo, except he'd stuck to coffee himself. If anyone's belly ought to have been on edge it was Bo's, after the number of unrecognizable, but highly greasy things (because there was just no better way to refer to them) he'd eaten. But his cousin had himself a stomach of steel, and a taste for all the least nutritious items on any menu, and Luke had figured to treat him to what he wanted.

Because the boy had most likely given up his life's dream in a single day, because he's shared what ought to have been his solo shining hour with Luke, but maybe most of all because he'd managed to let himself get called Beauregard – twice – by a man he hated, without killing anyone. Sure, the second time around had led to a fight, but it hadn't been half as bloody as anyone who'd grown up with his kid cousin would expect.

And maybe there'd been this part of him that figured that continued distraction was the best plan. If he couldn't have sex with the boy all day long, he could keep him occupied with a junk food breakfast, encourage him to spend quality time with his trophy (which had borne witness to absolutely every action the two of them had undertaken since the moment they'd picked it up from the engraver), and force him to shop for gifts for their kin, even if the final selection got left to Luke. All this distraction had slowed them down on their progress toward that strip of houses they'd called home for the past several months.

"What do you reckon that's all about?" came out of his cousin, sounding every bit as ridiculous as a question about why a revenuer would be standing on the trail to an active still site, shotgun raised. When all it was, really, was Mollie-Sue sitting on their front porch.

A shrug, he figured, was an obvious enough answer, the kind that ought to deflect any follow-up questions. He was a bit busy at the moment to give a properly thought out response anyway, what with how he had to manage to parallel park an RV.

"She ain't carrying nothing pink."

"What?" Leave it to pretty boy to expect flowers from a girl, carnations or roses most likely. Something to make him feel special because after all, he had won a race. (And Luke reckoned that
all that talk about how the Duke boys shared the victory fifty-fifty would go out the window the second Miss Mollie-Sue swooned over one blonde egotist. Even if she was old enough to have raised him herself.) And if he was going to get all disappointed because there was no girl with pink flowers at the end of this road trip, well—

"You know, she ain't got no pink slip." Which took his mind down a very strange road, the kind of detour that only Bo Duke could send him on. For a second or two, no more, and then his brain was back and he was having trouble figuring out how to breathe around the laughter that was escaping from his throat. So much for parallel parking; in a second he was going to wind up accidentally rolling the rig right on up and over Mollie-Sue's Chevy Camaro that sat there at the curb.

"Those ain't literal," he managed to get out before that strange laughter-paralysis overtook him again.

Miffed, annoyed glower, and he really did need to get control of himself before Bo wound up decking him. "How the hell do you know? You ain't never got one, have you?"

No, he didn't suppose he had. Hazzard High had grudgingly dismissed him with a diploma, Uncle Sam had let him go with honors, and Jesse had left him with a pink hind end many a time, but no one had ever bothered to fire him before. Nor, to his knowledge, had any Duke ever lost a job, what with never really officially ever having one. Other than that time Boss had tried to fire Daisy, but there was nothing official about that, no written evidence on paper pink or otherwise. He and Bo were breaking new ground with this one; Uncle Jesse would be so proud. Once he got done tanning their hides, and then there would be the fun part of going up to the old graveyard and telling their parents what a credit they were to the Duke line.

He managed, somehow, to get the rig reasonably aligned with the curb, and Bo was out like a shot before Luke could get the thing shut down and even begin to open his own door.

"Hey, beautiful, what're you doing here?" Flirting without thought. Or maybe it was deeply thoughtful, maybe it was revenge for the way Luke had enjoyed a little too heartily the suggestion that she'd be carrying a little something pink as a gift from their bosses. Then again, most likely it was just Bo being Bo, a man with an itching need to know why. It was the relentless refrain of their childhood: why is the sky blue, why does Uncle Jesse come home smelling like medicine half the time then sleep through the middle of the day, why is the sheriff banging on the door? And why is Mollie-Sue here, could it be to tell us to vacate the premises, to announce a LaMatt lawsuit for breach of contract? (Or maybe those last thoughts were Luke being Luke; maybe Bo was just glad to see the only reasonably likable staff member from LaMatt.)

"Hi," was about all the woman could get out before she was caught up in those too-long arms. Like getting covered in dog-slobber, that was how he used to think about those hugs. Affectionate, yes, and full of the very best of intentions, too. Just sort of big and wet and only halfway welcome. And Mollie-Sue had that look on her face now, the one that wondered how on earth she'd found herself here, and what would be the best way to extricate herself.

She'd never get the chance to be worn down by that kind of affection, to be trained, or maybe groomed to the point where it felt natural, where it was as important as the sun rising each morning to find herself some time in Bo Duke's arms. And that, honestly, was the best outcome for everyone concerned. So he nudged Bo aside, and stuck out his hand. Shook hers, and that, Bo Duke, was a proper example of how to greet a lady.

"Nice to see you again, Ma'am," capped it off, and then Mollie-Sue had to go and ruin it all with a giggle.
"You boys," she said. "You're just so cute." It was sweet, it was patronizing, it was grandmotherly, and his cousin couldn't have cared less. It was a compliment, and the smile he gave in response more than paid her back. "Congratulations," she added, quietly.

"I don't reckon Bill Matthews sent you here to tell us that," Luke pointed out as he jingled the keys in his hand. One was to the RV, another for the yellow loaner car, and the last one would open the door in front of them. And he ought to do it, too, ought to invite the woman who'd sat there on the hard concrete with the sun glaring into her eyes for who knew how long inside. Waiting for them to come home so she could relieve him of those keys, no doubt. Heck, she could have them, could take the whole ring right now if she wanted to, and he wouldn't care. There wasn't a single personal key on the chain, not with how they didn't ever bother to lock doors at the farm, and if they did they'd have to call a locksmith to get them back into the house anyway, because whatever keys there might once have been to the doors there had been lost by previous generations of Dukes. As to the General, as far as he knew those ignition keys were tucked right into the pockets of Jesse's cousin's boys. And Luke was willing to give up his bed to his cousins, reckoned it didn't much matter if he slept on the splintering porch or the stinking barn, but the General – that car was his and Bo's, and he was getting that damned thing back the minute he set foot on the farm again.

"Mr. Matthews didn't send me here at all." Well, that changed things quite a bit, and maybe he had misread her reaction to Bo's hug. Perhaps she, like so many before her, couldn't resist Duke men even if they were a bit young for her. "Although I am supposed to call you tomorrow and tell you that he'd like to see you in his office at noon."

"Well, thanks for delivering the message all personal-like," Bo answered, his smile never changing a bit. That was, not until chivalry hit him like a Mack truck. And bounced him into Luke. "Cousin, why ain't you opened the door yet?" Well, because I wasn't entirely sure that it was our door to open. But there was no point in saying that out loud, especially since Bo wasn't exactly waiting for him to answer. "Poor Mollie-Sue here needs to come inside and have herself a cold drink." Which was an ambitious offer, considering he couldn't swear they had anything more than tap water to give her. In a dirty glass, most likely.

"No, it's all right. You boys must be tired from your win and all that driving," and the other things they'd done, which couldn't be mentioned. "Mostly I came by to tell you to be home tonight. Your cousin Coy is going to call you."

"Coy?" he asked, but it got drowned out.

"Is everything all right?" Bo always did have a habit of out-shouting anyone near him, sucking all the calm out of a situation and injecting it with anxiety. "Something happen to our Uncle Jesse?"

Mollie-Sue smiled. "Coy told me y'all would probably jump down my throat before I could explain. He says everyone in Hazzard is just fine. He just wants to talk to you."

"Luke," still loud, barely holding onto the ragged edge of control. "We got to go call him, right now." So much for inviting the nice lady inside for a little refreshment.

"He also warned me you'd want to do that," Mollie-Sue said, one surprisingly large hand grasping Bo's forearm to stay him. Dangerous sort of a move when the boy was in a state. Or it would have been, if she'd been male. Instinct to settle down, to keep himself from swinging a fist or shoving against the shoulder of a woman was pretty strong in Dukes, Jesse'd seen to that long ago. "Don't. He told me to say that there was 'no reason to get the old man riled.' Exactly like that, he said, and he promised me it would make you calm down."

Well, he couldn't speak for Bo, but calm wasn't the precise word he would have used for how it
made him feel about the message. Amused, that came closer.

"Thank you, Ma'am," he managed, even if a snicker might have been closer to the front of his mouth. "You sure we can't invite you in?"

"With you boys?" Imaginary shock, all over her face. "Why, just think of how people would talk." And though her face relaxed back into something approximating a smile, Luke reckoned there might just have been something a little sad and resigned around the edges of it. "You boys did a fine job in Mobile," she said. "Where's your trophy?"

"Oh, right," Bo answered, suddenly remembering the thing that he'd kept jealously by his side, like a lover at risk for straying, and trotting back to the RV to get it.

"He's been dying to show it to someone," confided Luke. "Other than Mikey, that is. And I don't reckon we should bring it with us when we come to the office tomorrow."

A sigh. "I suppose not. Luke," she said quietly into the very short span of seconds before Bo would be noisily back with them. "It don't matter what Bill says tomorrow. You boys have probably been the best infusion of energy for this team in years. Between your mechanics and his driving, the rest of the boys on the team have learned plenty."

Well, that was nice, he supposed. Except he and Bo didn't exactly have a grand mission in life to become teachers. They were doers and winners and that trophy, gleaming brightly enough in the afternoon sun to blind a man, was proof of that.

"It's pretty," Mollie-Sue admired appreciatively.

"Look," Bo said, a proud six-year-old showing off a fair ribbon for being first to cross the finish line in the three-legged race all over again. "It's got our names on it and everything." Except back then, the little boy had been dead weight that Luke had mostly dragged from one end of the square to the other, complaining all the way that the ropes that bound them were too tight and cutting off his circulation. This trophy right here, the win, them being on the circuit in the first place, was all Bo's doing, even if he'd been generous enough to share it.

Mollie-Sue seemed to find herself caught between patting Bo on the head (though she might have needed a step ladder to do it) and laughing at the overzealous puppy in the boy. "So it does," she managed to get out.

"You sure you wouldn't like to come in for a drink or something," Luke offered, because this awkward moment had to come to an end. She needed to leave them, and if it took a drink to make her do it, he'd give her whatever he could find, but he was gambling on her taking the hint.

"Oh, no thank you Luke. It's time I was going anyway," she'd take that hint and run with it, because she wanted to leave them to themselves every bit as much as they wanted to be left. She'd come to be generous, to warn them, gently, that they were about to be called on the carpet, and to deliver a message that she could as easily have left on a note taped to their door. "See you boys later. And," with a quick kiss to Bo's cheek, because who could resist the grinning blonde boy, anyway? "Congratulations again."

Shoulder to shoulder, the Duke boys stood in what passed for their yard, waving their goodbyes as though they were a family member come for Christmas and about to head out over ridges and flatlands to a distant home, not to be seen again until next year. A goodbye fit for an ending, but this wasn't, when it came down to it, nearly that tidy. There was still tomorrow to get through, when Mollie-Sue would be just one thin wall away from where Bill Matthews would be doing his
best to either humble or humiliate one pair of Duke boys.

Bo's arm dropped casually across his shoulders as Mollie-Sue pulled away from the curb. "What say," he asked, "we go to the beach?"

They had an RV to unpack, a house to move back into, if only for a day. Dirty clothes outnumbered the clean ones, and they really ought to have been cleaning up the house since he reckoned they were going to get kicked out of it in the next day or so. The beach would be crowded with vacationers and spectators arriving early for next week's race. And then there was the whole concern of what manner of trouble Coy had managed to get himself into that he needed their help, and wanted to keep it secret from Jesse.

But really, all his cousin was asking for was reprieve. A moment, between last night's brawl in Mobile, and tomorrow's dismissal from the NASCAR life, to just enjoy themselves.

"If you can find some shorts in that mess you call a bedroom, I reckon we can go," he answered.

"Aunt Bessie?" It wasn't that he'd never heard the name before, that he hadn't been aware of having a relative by that name. It wasn't even like he didn't remember the way she, along with Uncle Albert, came crashing down on them during the summer of – 1967, he thought it was – when some storm or other had taken off a portion of their roof. Back when he still young enough that dressing for company, then being forced to sit a spell and listen to the old folks catch up with one another had been almost more than he could stand. Luke had been better behaved than him, of course, had participated in the conversation and gotten himself invited to stay inside after a fidgeting Bo and Daisy got turned loose to go out and play, but not get dirty. Seemed like he groused at his big cousin afterward, making a serious case for how he'd been abandoned all day long for the likes of adults, then gotten scolded about how family was more important than playing outside anyway. Luke pretending to be Jesse, which must have stated somewhere around that same year, because he remembered the betrayal of it, the sting and the tears that followed, could still feel the breath sawing in and out of his throat as he announced that he was family, too, then ran off. Seemed like the hour or two he spent hiding also led to him getting his Sunday clothes dirty after all, but he didn't get whipped. Somehow or other Luke did, though. Which hadn't made things between them any easier for awhile, but eventually he'd figured out how to sit still with their adult company for slightly longer periods, and then how to pull Luke away with him when he just couldn't stand being a gentleman for another second.

So yeah, he knew he had an Aunt Bessie and an Uncle Albert. Maybe he'd just willfully put them out of his mind.

"How are we related to them again?" he asked now, because he never had understood why it was Hazzard that they'd come to for refuge when they lived all the way down in Waycross.

"I ain't the family historian," was Luke's answer, but it came with a smile, got followed by a hand tangling in his hair. They were in just about his favorite position, sprawled out across the bed with his head resting against that bony chest of his cousin's. Shouldn't have been comfortable, not after a lifetime of soft pillows, but there was warmth, there was a heartbeat, and there were the arms that held him fast. "But the way I figure it, Bessie is one of Jesse's cousins, so she ain't technically our aunt. More like some kind of cousin somehow removed or something. And Uncle Albert is her husband." Well he knew that. "Coy and Vance – I think she really is their aunt, though."

"And what's her problem?" He had to ask, since Luke had taken Coy's phone call. Of course he had, because if something had to be kept from Jesse it required planning, and that meant tapping into his cousin's brilliant brain. Though Bo might should have warned Coy that old Luke could get
them into trouble a heap faster than he could get them back out.

*Tsk* from above him, some kind of chastisement for the phrasing of the question, and he hadn't meant to be disrespectful. It was just that he only knew about half the story, just pieces of what Coy had been trying to ask of them.

"Ain't nothing wrong with her," came out like scolding. "Uncle Albert – he's sick. It don't sound good, whatever it is. Coy reckon to go help her out on their farm until he's better, and leave Vance with Jesse."

Cotton, he thought, was what Bessie and Albert grew. He knew they'd always stuck to legal crops and products; that branch of the family had left their north Georgia roots and moonshiner heritage behind more than a generation back. Big farm and hard labor, and he didn't reckon she had much help from her own scrawny kids.

"Did you tell him we ought to be back up there by the end of the week?" The end of tomorrow was more likely, really. "And there ain't no reason him and Vance can't both go?"

Another tsk. "We don't know that, Bo. Not yet."

"Sure we do," he answered back, shrugging as best he could in the cramped, close space between them. "The way I see it, we got to go into Bill Matthews' office tomorrow, then resign before he can fire us." Eyes up then, to meet Luke's, to catch that proud little smile on his cousin's face. The one that always congratulated him, however secretly, on doing exactly the *wrong* thing.

"What if," got interrupted by a hand running through his hair, a kiss to his forehead. "What Matthews wants to say to you tomorrow is that he's sorry and he wants you to lead the team from now on?"

Well. That would just be a shame, would be frustrating, irritating and more than a little annoying. To hear how their boss finally figured it out, and it would be too late. Sure, he put up with four years of being held back and forced to do what authority figures demanded of him in high school, but in those days there'd been moonshine running to keep him sane nights so that he could put up with the days. And Hazzard still had its ways of keeping Duke boys in check, but the plot of land in the southwest corner of the county was theirs, the house that stood upon it built by ancestors far enough back to belong to Coy and Vance as well as him, Luke and Daisy. It was worth whatever they had to tolerate for the sweet mornings when the air was still cool, the afternoons of getting lost and found on roads old enough to be half grown over with weeds and saplings, the evenings of watching the red sun dip below the mountain ridges to the west.

"I reckon we'd best be quick about what we have to say, then," he assessed. "Before he gets a chance to tell me anything at all." Because he wouldn't want to know what Matthews had to say, either way. He didn't need the man to tell him what kind of a driver he was; he already knew, had known since somewhere around the time he turned fourteen and considered himself a veteran of the roads. Sure, he might have been younger than a lot of the other drivers out there, and Matthews could rank him based on age and NASCAR experience alone, could just keep on considering him a junior driver. Or he could see what was right in front of him, plain as the exceedingly plain nose on his face, and figure out that Bo ought to be his lead driver. Wouldn't matter which way it went, not when the Duke boys were going home.

"You sure?"

He swatted Luke then, not hard enough to hurt, and it was a kinder thing than that other urge he had, to bite him. Just the back of his hand smacking into solid shoulder bone and muscle, and he
reckoned he got the worst of that deal anyway.

He was just – Luke was strong and protective, warm and safe and deceptively gentle. He loved the man, and most of the time he liked him, too. But there were moments when he could look at his cousin and see a person that was doomed to make himself miserable with all his second thoughts, the kind that never shut up until they had provoked third thoughts and, often enough, fourths.

Whereas it was easy enough, if you set your mind to it, to simply make a decision then move forward with it. To declare outright what you wanted and let the chips fall where they were going to, because nine times out of ten they'd land exactly where you needed them to.

"I done said it, didn't I?" he snapped back, and then he sighed. Stroked his hand over the bare skin he'd just punished for the thoughts of the brain underneath, kissed precisely nowhere important, just the spot closest to his lips. "I reckon I want to be in Hazzard more than I care about the circuit, even if I won every race."

"The 500 is this weekend," he got reminded, but it wasn't important. It was just one of those races he'd talked about all his life, same as some guys talked about playing professional baseball. It would have been interesting to have had the experience, but it would be better to see the hills of home.

"And Carolina comes after that," which had always been the race Luke lusted after. "I don't reckon you're all bent out of shape about passing that up, are you?"

Heavy breath, powerful enough that his upper body hitched a ride up and back down on it. Made him shuffle a little bit so his weight wouldn't be quite so crushing. "What part of home do you figure you've missed most?"

"Well, I miss Boar's Nest fights," he offered.

"And Rosco shooting the ceiling at least once a month," Luke countered.

"Then chasing us halfway around the county."

"And into the pond," got followed by a laugh, and another ride on Luke's powerful torso. Maybe his cousin genuinely didn't mind being crushed into the bed; maybe he was strong enough to tolerate the discomfort without complaint. "Camping," his cousin added, "and how when we put our bows down for the night, the deer come right up close." Enough to eat out of their hands sometimes, like some kind of a peace treaty had been drawn between them and the animals.

"Finding a new stream to jump," Bo put in, and it never had mattered to him whether they were in a car or on horseback when they came to that rise from which to launch themselves.

A snort from Luke, because jumps weren't fun to him. Mostly. Or he wouldn't admit when they were, he'd just hide behind his own arm and act all put out about them. Unless, of course, he was driving, in which case a jump became a strict necessity. "Bartering with Cooter for parts to the General, after you make one of them jumps." And that part was best left to his older cousin, who could connive his way into a free carburetor with a six pack of beer and a dozen donuts thrown in for good measure.

"Jesse and Daisy." Because everything else could be forgotten, if not in one year, certainly in ten. But a lifetime wouldn't be enough to get over missing their closest kin.

"Yeah," Luke agreed. Silence then, like a church in mid-prayer, with an equal amount of stillness. All except one finger, Luke's. Stroking up and down, up and down, over the smooth skin of Bo's
shoulder. Deep breath, in-out, and the man was working himself up to—something smaller than
the hung over kiss that had announced a deeper feeling for his male cousin, not half the size of
suggesting that Bo might prefer to have Vance as his pit crew chief. Tiny as it might have been, it
was worth steeling himself for, what with the kind of state his cousin could get himself into. "They
ain't—Bo, is this," kiss to his forehead to convey what words wouldn't quite do justice to. There
just wasn't any right way to say it: having sex rang of nonchalance and a lack of commitment,
loving each other wasn't saying anything new, being together was a cop out that felt like shame.
"Worth it, if it means—"

"Yes," he interrupted, because he didn't need to hear the rest, even if Luke was bound and
determined to say it anyway.

"Jesse and Daisy, they ain't gonna take easy to it."

And, of course, they would have to be told. There wasn't any way around it that Bo could figure,
not when he didn't reckon he was willing to give up his nightly perch on Luke's chest.

"They'll… find their way to peace with it. Eventually." At least he thought so, and it wasn't worth
worrying over until they got home anyway. "So don't you go thinking how I need to find me a
girlfriend and forget about you."

"All right," was a Duke vow, as far as Bo was concerned. Unbreakable.

"Now we just got to work out telling them." And, truth be told, he didn't have the first idea how to
go about it.

"I'll think of something," Luke assured him. And that, he reckoned, was all he needed to know. He
closed his eyes, let all of his muscles relax heavily onto his cousin's chest, and felt his mind begin
to drift to pleasant places where springs howled with nature's rebirth, summers smelled of clover
and wild scallions, and fall burned brightly with its bounty.

"Your smile," interrupted what was trying to be sleep.

He could ignore it, could snooze the words away. "Hmm?" he found himself mumbling instead.

"What I miss most about being home. Your smile."

Which was a pretty flagrant exaggeration. He'd smiled plenty—right here in Daytona, where he'd
fallen in love with Luke, and out on the road where he'd won his first major race on the circuit. But
he had something of an idea what Luke meant; he missed his cousin's easy grin just as much and he
reckoned he was counting down the hours and minutes to the opportunity to see it again.

So he kissed what he could find—underside of Luke's chin he supposed, then settled against the
body under his. Arms around him protectively and he slept. Tomorrow would be a long day.

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