Ready to Take a Chance Again

by Grinder1833

Summary

Seventeen year old Noah Mayer has been on the run with his mom, Charlene, for the past 4 years. They've been hiding from Noah's father, Colonel Winston Mayer, who physically abused them for years. As they are fleeing to the another town to hide in they find themselves stranded on a dirt road outside the town of Oakdale, IL. Emma Snyder takes the pair in and a closeted Noah finds himself smitten with Emma's grandson, Luke.

Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own these characters. They are the property of "As the World Turns" and P & G.

A/N: This story was written as a response to the following plotbunny:

What if Charlene Mayer hadn't left Noah at the age of 3? Instead Noah was raised by a loving mother, who risked everything to go on the run with Noah and to escape from Winston when finally due to a twist of fate their travels bring them to Oakdale, IL.

A/N: The canon of "As the World Turns" through 9/2006 applies to this fic.
This story is the same one that appears on my LiveJournal. I've tried to fix the typos and have shortened some of the chapters which is why this version has 76 instead of the original 43. Other than that, nothing major was changed in the story.
Chapter 1

October 2006

Not again. Charlene Mayer couldn’t bear the thought of having to pack up and leave the life she had built with her seventeen year old son, Noah, behind once again. They’d been living in East Tawas, Michigan for the past six months. This was the longest that they’d been in any one place in the past four years, but it was over. She hated having to do this to Noah. It wasn’t fair. Unfortunately her son had learned at an early age that life definitely wasn’t fair.

This wasn’t the life she wanted for Noah. Charlene had envisioned Noah growing up with lots of friends, graduating high school, and then attending college. She wanted him to find love and be loved by someone else besides her. Charlene’s heart just broke knowing that none of these things had happened to her son—at least not yet.

She packed her suitcase—the same suitcase she’d hastily packed four years ago when she took Noah and ran—ran from her abusive husband, the highly respected and decorated Colonel Winston Mayer of the United States Army. The man always had a bit of a temper but as the years passed it had gotten more volatile. His harsh words had yielded to a slap across the face and then regular beatings. She had endured his abuse because she had felt so helpless and trapped. Winston had managed to strip away every ounce of self esteem she had. Her husband was very well connected and would make sure that she never saw Noah again if she tried to divorce him.

But then Winston turned his wrath toward their son—whipping him with his belt just because he forgot to make his bed. She had tried to defend him and he turned the belt on her. And when Noah’s new bicycle had been stolen from the junior high school, Winston had beaten their son so badly he’d left Noah hospitalized with a concussion. However, the medical reports read that Noah had sustained his injury from falling from his bike because he hadn’t been wearing a helmet.

The sobering reality that Winston could easily kill either of them made her act quickly. As Noah had lain in the hospital recovering, Charlene planned their escape. She’d get her baby far, far away from that monster and never, ever let him hurt Noah again.

Charlene had gotten the call that Noah was ready to be released from the hospital while Winston was at work. She quickly packed clothes and basic necessities for the both of them, but not too much as to tip off Winston she’d left. Charlene stopped off at the bank to fetch some fake documents that she had paid for with money she had managed to stash away without Winston knowing. She had gotten the documents for them just in case she got the courage to leave Winston and take Noah with her. The safety deposit box at a bank across town was procured when the beatings intensified with the hope that one day there might be a window of opportunity to run way.

After she picked up their new identities, Charlene signed Noah out of the hospital and they fled. They stopped briefly when they crossed into Kansas so they could sell the car and buy a new one—something the Colonel couldn’t trace.

And they haven’t stopped running since that fateful morning. They’ve lived in nine states—soon to be ten. Each state had offered the promise of a new life, but so far it hadn’t happened.

Would she ever be able to give Noah the safe home he deserved?

“Hey, Mom,” Noah said, breezing into their motel room, welcoming her with a blast of cool, northern Michigan air. “Tips today weren’t so great.” He shrugged off his tattered coat. “I swear we
live and die by the tourists. You can’t live with them and you can’t live without them.”

When they’d arrived in the small tourist hamlet on Lake Huron, they both secured jobs. Since being on the run Charlene learned how to barter for things such as a place to live or food. She was currently working as a maid at the Bambi Motel in exchange for a room. It was a far cry from her old career as a high school English teacher, which Winston had made her quit once she had gotten pregnant with Noah.

But that was so long ago.

Noah—bless his heart—has been working since the age of thirteen. Charlene had managed to convince people he was sixteen. Noah’s accelerated age was easier to pull off after he hit a growth spurt. He’d done everything from being a towel boy at a car wash to working as a clerk at a small Mom and Pop video store, which Charlene knew had been his favorite job. Unfortunately, they hadn’t been able to stay in that town long, so he had little time to enjoy it.

Noah was currently working at Genii’s, which was a small restaurant that served locals and tourists alike. He started out bussing tables for the dinner shift but once tourist season hit full swing he’d been waiting tables for the breakfast and lunch shifts. Throughout the summer Noah managed to bring in a nice sum of money—good enough to keep them afloat. Now summer was over and the number of tourists faded as beach season gave way to leaf peeking.

“Well, it looks like we’re going to have to live without them,” Charlene said. “We need to leave. Today.”

Panic flashed in his sapphire eyes. “What happened?”

“I ran into someone who once served under your father while I was at the Village Chocolatier,” she explained.

“Did he recognize you?” Noah asked, sitting next to her on the edge of one of the beds.

“He thought he did, but I assured him that he was mistaken.”

“Did he buy it?”

Charlene thought back to the encounter. The man, Captain Edward Orlanski (at least he’d been a Captain six years ago), had served under her husband while they were stationed at Ft. Bragg. He’d been to their house for dinner a couple of times so he’d met her and Noah. When he asked if she was Mrs. Winston Mayer, she had politely informed him in her best fake southern accent that he must have had her confused with someone else. He seemed to have believed her. And for all he knew Charlene Mayer was still happily married to Winston because that’s how they’d left the base when Winston transferred from Ft. Bragg.

However, she couldn’t risk being wrong. She refused to gamble with Noah’s life. Long ago she learned better to be safe rather than very sorry.

“Yes, I’m pretty sure that he did,” Charlene said, rubbing Noah’s back, “but you know we can’t afford to take that chance. I’m sorry to have to make you move again, string bean.”

Noah had earned the nickname ‘string bean’ when he shot up four inches three summers ago. Her little boy wasn’t so little anymore. He was six feet tall and still growing. Noah still seemed to be adjusting to his long, lanky body and at times it was like watching a colt find his legs. Charlene knew her son was going to grow up to be a beautiful stallion even if he couldn’t see himself that way.
Noah shrugged and sighed, “It’s no big deal. The winter weather here was probably going to suck anyway. The locals said that they get a lot of snow and the winters can be pretty tough.”

Charlene’s eyes misted. Ever since they fled from their home in Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri, Noah rarely complained about their circumstances. He was forever finding the positives in their life—a regular Pollyanna.

She hugged him, squeezing him so tightly that she thought she might crack his ribs. “You get to pick the next state we go to,” she said, fighting to keep the tears out of her voice.

“We haven’t been to Illinois yet—setting for countless John Hughes films.”

She smiled as she smoothed Noah’s hair. Even though he was going to be eighteen in a few weeks, Noah still welcomed her hugs and motherly affection. “I can’t promise you the posh neighborhoods from Ferris Bueller’s Day Off or Pretty in Pink, but I’m sure we can definitely find a nice town to call home.”

“I’m not worried,” Noah said. He got up from the bed and marched over to the TV where they had hooked up the inexpensive DVD player they had splurged on over a year ago. This was the one item that was dearest to him. It was his escape.

Charlene made sure that their small DVD collection was packed. She placed the box next to the DVD player so Noah could take them out to the car. “Neither am I,” she said, putting a brave front.

Moves to new cities always frightened her. Each time they had to start all over—new names, a new background story, a new life. Then they had to find a place to live and jobs. Hopefully they’d be lucky enough not to raise any suspicion.

“Are you going to tell the Shaffels that we’re leaving?” Noah asked, stuffing a faded pair of jeans into a duffle bag.

Guilt washed over Charlene. She hated this part of their life, leaving behind people that had been good to them. “We can’t,” she sighed. “It’s best that they don’t know anything—same with your employers.”

Noah nodded his head sadly. “I understand. We don’t want to put anyone in danger.”

“I’m sorry, Noah. I know you really liked it here.”

“I might like Illinois better,” he said, snatching the keys for the car off the table.

“But it’s always hard leaving friends behind,” she replied carefully fishing for information. Her son was always pretty tight lipped about his personal life. While she wanted him to be careful, she also wanted him to have friends because it she hated the thought of him being so lonely.

Noah shrugged. “There really wasn’t anyone special.”

“No one?” she gently pressed. “Not even a secret girlfriend.”

“No,” Noah chuckled, quickly heading for the door. “There wasn’t a secret girlfriend. I’m going to go take care of the car.”

Pursing her lips, Charlene stared after Noah. His response didn’t surprise her at all. Her gut instinct was telling her that they may never be a girlfriend, because Noah may be gay. She’d recently found a couple of issues of Men’s Health stashed in the bathroom. She had a sneaking suspicion that he
wasn’t interested in the articles because Noah was hardly a fitness freak Noah was special, even as a little boy. He was sensitive, kind—different from the other kids his age. And he’d never shown even the slightest interest in girls.

Winston had probably picked up on this too. That’s why he forced Noah to learn how to fire a gun, took him hunting and fishing, and tried forcing him (unsuccessfully) to play sports. Her husband was always trying to make a man out of Noah, telling him he needed to be strong. And if he knew he was gay…

Winston would kill him. Charlene was sure of it, which was another reason why she had to run away with Noah. She couldn’t risk it.

Unlike the Colonel, Charlene didn’t care if Noah was gay. She thought Noah was perfect regardless of whom he chose to love. She just wanted him to find someone to love and love him back one day. After much debate, she decided that she wouldn’t say anything to Noah; instead she’d allow him to come out to her when he was ready. Hopefully, she was making the right decision.

Charlene sighed as she padded into the bathroom to pack up their toiletries while Noah loaded the car. She put the bathroom items into her suitcase before doing a final sweep of the room, making sure that they didn’t leave anything behind, especially something that could leave a clue as to their true identities or where they may be headed to next.

She was going to miss this room even though it was small, covered in wood paneling and had beds with older mattresses, a musty bathroom with a limited hot water supply, and smelled mildly of mothballs. It was a far cry from a room at the Four Seasons in New York, but it had been home. They’d been there long enough for her to start to fantasize that maybe—just maybe—they could put down some real roots.

But it wasn’t meant to be.

Noah poked his head inside of room. “Mom, are you almost ready?”

“Sure, I’ll be right there,” she said, fighting to keep the sadness out of her voice.

“Did you want me to take your suitcase?”

“No, I’ve got it. Thank you,” Charlene replied. “Go ahead and wait in the car. I’ll be right out.” She lifted the suitcase off the bed and was met with a sharp pain shooting through her pelvic area. “Ouch…ouch…” she hissed, sinking onto the floor, fighting to maintain her composure. Noah couldn’t see how much pain she was in. He’d worry. And right now they didn’t have time for worry.

This wasn’t the first time she’d felt this pain. She’d been experiencing it since they’d arrived in East Tawas and it has been slowly getting worse. There also had been some spotting too. Charlene had dismissed this, hoping that maybe she was just starting to go through the early stages of menopause. It was probably nothing. It had to be nothing.

They couldn’t afford for it to be anything else. So far Noah didn’t have a clue that she’d been having any issues. But if it was something more serious she needed to make sure that their next stop was someplace they could stay for awhile just in case the worst happened. Hopefully, it wouldn’t come to that.

Taking a deep breath, she hauled herself to her feet and grabbed the suitcase, once again leaving a home behind. Noah was sitting in the passenger’s side of their 1994 black Chevy Cavalier, studying the atlas. He’d become an expert navigator over the years. There was no doubt that he already had a
route mapped out to the city of his choice.

Charlene put her suitcase in the trunk and then slipped into the driver’s seat. “Which way are we heading, string bean?” she asked, managing to keep the pain she was still experiencing out of her voice.

“We’re going to take US 23 to Standish. Then we’ll get on I-75 and head south from there,” Noah said, putting the atlas on the floor in front of him.

“Our new adventure begins now,” Charlene said, backing the car out of its parking space. “Are we all set?”

“The CD is loaded and ready to go.”

They had a ritual for every time they left for a new city. As they embarked on a new adventure, Charlene had to sing her favorite song from her favorite movie—Barry Manilow’s *Ready to Take a Chance Again* from the 1978 Goldie Hawn/Chevy Chase film *Foul Play*. She’d seen the movie when she was sixteen and has seen it countless times since. One of her prized possessions was her DVD copy of the film, which she constantly quoted with Noah.

Actually, Charlene loved all movies. It was a passion that she had passed down to her son. Noah had more of a fondness for the classic black and whites while Charlene favored movies from the ’70s and ’80s. During one long car trip, after much coaxing, she got him to admit that he wanted to be a film director. After his admission, Charlene made it a point to seek out film books for him when their budget allowed. She was determined to do everything in her power to help Noah achieve his dream.

“You remind me I live in a shell. Safe from the past, and doing okay, but not very well,” she sang a bit off key at the top of her lungs. “No jolts, no surprises—come on, Noah, sing with me!”


“Come on. It’s fun!” she insisted. “My life goes along as it should, it's all very nice, but not very good…”

Then Noah finally joined her for the chorus (he could always be counted on for the chorus). “And I'm ready to take a chance again…” They sang the rest of the song together and when it ended Charlene turned the volume down.

“We need to come up with new names,” she reminded him. “I was thinking of going back to Gloria. It’s my favorite, you know.” Gloria was the heroine’s name in *Foul Play* so she had a soft spot for the name.

“Yes, I know,” Noah groaned. “But I don’t want to be Tony. I’d really like to just be Noah for once—please.”

Charlene hated when her son begged, especially about being able to use his own name. Noah should be able to use it. That’s what normal kids his age did. However, because of some bad choices on her part, Noah couldn’t. “I’m sorry, but you can’t. We can’t use our real names.”

“But it’s been years,” Noah whined.

“My encounter today should be a reminder that it doesn’t matter,” she reminded her son. “We have to stay sharp.”

“Yeah, yeah—‘beware of the dwarf’ and all that jazz.”
“Right, kiddo.” She grinned.

“Can’t I at least come up with a new name then? I was thinking something like Alex,” Noah suggested. “I’ve had my fill with names from movies of the ‘70s.”

“I wish you could.” Charlene sighed. “But I don’t have the money to purchase a new fake ID for you. We have to stick with what we have.” It seemed like she had to say ‘no’ to Noah way more than she could say ‘yes’ to him. And a name seemed like something so little to ask for, but in their case it was a huge request—something that could mean life or death. She tried to lighten the mood a bit. “Hey, there was nothing wrong with Luke, Curt, or Tony,” she teased. “Luke went on to be a great Jedi knight, Curt became a writer, and Tony was a great detective who got the girl in the end.”

“I just want to be a regular kid.”

“You’re anything but a regular kid, Noah, you’re special,” she said, casting a sidelong glance at her son, who was staring out the passenger’s side window. “Great things are going to happen to you.”

Noah sighed. “I hope so.”

She reached over, ruffling his dark hair. “I know so,” she said. “So who’s it going to be? I’ll let you pick. I don’t have to be Gloria if you really don’t want to be Tony this time around.”

“I dunno. Why do we have to choose now? Can’t we just wait until we get to Galesburg?” He had chosen a city in Illinois called Galesburg, which was in western Illinois. He had told her that it sounded safe. And, as always, it was subject to change if they got there and it didn’t feel right.

“Why the wait?”

Noah shrugged, glancing out the passenger’s side window. “Why the big rush? Don’t we have like eight hours of driving ahead of us?”

Charlene took a deep breath to keep herself from losing her cool, which she didn’t want to do since they did have a long trip ahead of them as Noah had so aptly pointed out. They had both been through a lot not only the past four years but their entire lives. Living with Colonel Winston Mayer had been hell. And she should have gotten Noah out of there a lot sooner than she had.

“Okay,” she relented. “I expect an answer out of you as soon as we cross the city limits, young man.”

They stopped off for gas and dinner as soon as they crossed the Indiana state line. Dinner consisted of burgers and fries off of McDonald’s dollar menu because Charlene wanted to save as much money as they could. There was no telling how long it would take them to find jobs in Galesburg.

Noah volunteered to drive the rest of the way. He had gotten his license when they were living in Wisconsin. With Noah at the wheel, Charlene allowed herself to drift off to sleep. She popped her last two Motrin at dinner, but they weren’t doing anything to elevate the pain. Hopefully, sleep would help and she’d feel as good as new when she woke up.

Charlene didn’t know how long she was asleep, but when she woke the pain was still sharp as ever. It had never lasted this long before, which was making her worry but she couldn’t let her son see it. She peered out into the darkness, seeing nothing but trees and grassy meadows. “Noah honey, where are we?” she asked through gritted teeth.
“I decided to take a detour so I could check out America’s Heartland,” Noah replied. “We just passed Oakdale, Illinois.”

Charlene usually loved it when he took little side trips like this, but not now—not when she was in such excruciating pain. “How far do you think we are from Galesburg?”

“ Probably about an hour,” Noah replied.

Charlene was almost certain she wouldn’t make it that long. She needed more painkillers—now. “Do you think you can turn around and head back to Oakdale?” she asked.

“Why? Is something wrong?” panic quickly seeped into Noah’s voice.

“I’m just feeling a little under the weather,” she fibbed so Noah wouldn’t be alarmed. “I wanted to go back to the drug store and get some medicine.”

“Okay. I’ll just turn around right here,” Noah said, slowing the car down. “We should get back to town in about ten or fifteen minutes. Do you think you can make it that long?”

Charlene placed her hand on his arm. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

Noah was pushing it as fast as he could on a dirt road but then the car began to cough and sputter. One by one the warning lights on the dashboard illuminated until it was all lit up like a Christmas tree. Finally the car stalled.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

“Noah, language!”

“Sorry, Mom, but this is no time for the damn car to die! You’re sick!” he exclaimed. He turned the key, but instead of the engine roaring to life, all they heard was a clicking sound. “It’s not starting. Why isn’t it starting?” Noah demanded.

“I’m going to be okay,” she reassured him. “Don’t worry.”

“Can you get the flashlight out of the glove box, Mom? I can try to see if I can figure out what’s wrong with the car.”

Charlene handed him the flashlight, which he tested before getting out of the car. “Damn,” he muttered when it didn’t turn on. “The batteries must be dead.” He threw the flashlight into the backseat.

“It’s okay, Noah,” she lied as to not further upset her son. “I’m feeling a lot better.”

“I’ll go find help, Mom,” Noah told her. “I think we passed a farm not too far back.”

Under different circumstances, Charlene would have protested, fearing something bad would happen to Noah in the darkness. But she was confident that they’d covered their tracks well. And they were in the middle of nowhere. They were safe—at least for the time being. “Okay. I’ll be right here.”

“I won’t be long,” he promised.

Charlene nodded. “I’m not going anywhere, string bean.”

Noah gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and then he let himself out of the car. Charlene’s stomach twisted into knots as she watched her son jog away from the car.
Please let him find good people out there that can help him, she silently prayed.
Chapter 2

Noah jogged down the dirt road toward the road they’d passed about a half mile back, praying that he hadn’t imagined seeing a farmhouse down it. His mother needed help. There was something wrong with her because she wouldn’t have asked him to turn around unless it was serious. Now that he was really thinking about it she did look rather pale and she hadn’t been talking before she had fallen asleep, which wasn’t like her at all.

Oh no…this could be really bad…

There…he saw it…an old white farmhouse with a few lights on inside.

Please let someone be awake, he silently prayed as he approached the front door.

He found the doorbell and rang it, shifting his weight as he waited for someone to answer the door. After what seemed like an eternity, a short, older, plump woman with kind eyes appeared.

“May I help you?” she tentatively asked.

“I’m so sorry to bother you, ma’am,” Noah quickly sputtered. “I’m traveling with my mother and our car broke down…”

“Where is your mother?” she asked, looking past him.

“She’s with the car because she’s not feeling well,” Noah explained, trying to keep the anxiety out of his voice. “We were headed to town so I could get some medicine for her.”

The lady regarded him for a moment. “I can call my son who lives nearby to come out and get your mother. I have a grandson who is good with cars so he can probably take a look at it tomorrow.”

Noah’s first instinct was to say politely refuse her offer because his mother had always warned him about being wary of strangers. However, it was pretty late. The chances of a garage being open were slim to none so this seemed like their best option.

“Okay.” Noah nodded. “Do you think your son might be able to drive us into town?”

Hopefully, there would still be a drug store open. His mother needed medicine. He had to take care of her. And if there wasn’t a drug store open, he’d have to find another way. Noah wouldn’t let his mother suffer—even if it meant using all of their money and going to the hospital.

“If your mother is ill, she shouldn’t travel,” she replied. “Why don’t you come in?” She stepped aside so that Noah could enter the house. “What’s your name, young man?”

“It’s Noah,” he blurted out without even thinking. Once the words were out of his mouth he wanted to reach up in the air and snatch them back. He’d made a fatal error—one that he couldn’t take back. Hadn’t his mother just told him that he could not use his real name because it was still too dangerous? Suddenly he felt very lightheaded and nauseous.

Oh…shit…oh…shit…

“Noah,” she said, extending her hand. “I’m Emma Snyder. It’s nice to meet you. Now come…I’ve got some cookies in the kitchen that you’re more than welcome to.” She led him through the living
room, which was covered with flowered wallpaper and decorated with older furniture and into a spacious eat-in kitchen. “Please sit down while I call my son.”

Noah was a bit dazed as he slumped into one of the wooden chairs at the large kitchen table. He took a few deep breaths to try to calm himself, but it didn’t do too much good. Nervously, he chewed on his thumbnail as he tried not to worry about his mother, who was still alone in their broken down car. Hopefully, she wouldn’t be stuck out there too much longer. And he prayed that she would understand his mistake—that he hadn’t deliberately disobeyed her.

“Hi, Holden, sorry to bother you at this hour but I need a favor…I’ve got a young man here whose car broke down. He said that he’s traveling with his mother who’s ill. She’s still with the car…I was hoping that you could come over and get him and then go pick up his mother….I thought maybe Aaron could take a look at the car tomorrow…Great, see you soon.” Emma hung up the phone and turned to Noah. “My son, Holden, is on his way over here.”

“Maybe I should go back and wait by the car.”

“He’ll be here very soon,” Emma assured him, “and then you can show him where the car broke down.”

“Okay, I’m just worried about my mother,” he sighed, his foot anxiously tapping against the wood floor.

“It’ll be okay. She’ll get the medicine she needs,” Emma said, bustling over to the island that separated the dining area from the refrigerator and kitchen sink. “Now let me get you those cookies I promised you. Do you like oatmeal chocolate chip?”

“Yes, ma’am, that would be great,” he replied, perking up a bit at the prospect of something sweet in his belly. Noah couldn’t remember the last time he had homemade cookies—or a homemade meal for that matter. But that wasn’t his mother’s fault. If she could cook for him, she would. The last few places they’ve lived just hadn’t allowed for it. The best they could do was a hot plate that they had used to warm up canned soup or Spaghetti-Os—not exactly gourmet fare but it kept their stomachs full during some hard times.

Emma placed a plate of cookies in front of him. “Would you like a glass of milk to go with them?”

Noah grinned. “That would really hit the spot, ma’am.”

Mrs. Snyder reminded him of the grandmothers he saw in the movies—warm and loving, always offering fresh baked goods. He bet that Thanksgiving and Christmas on this farm would be something right out of a Capra film. For a moment he allowed himself to fantasize what it would be like to be a member of the family huddled around the large kitchen table during the holidays. He bet it was covered with all kinds of wonderful food and everyone spoke at once—lots of laughter, teasing, stories, and love. A perfect scene.

Emma poured a glass of milk and handed it to Noah. “Have you and your mother been traveling long?”

“For about eight hours,” Noah replied, taking a large sip of the ice cold milk.

“That is quite awhile. Where were you coming from?”

“Northern Michigan—a small resort town called East Tawas.” The words were barely out of his mouth when Noah realized that he’d committed another huge error. One of his mother’s rules was never tell people where they’ve been. And he messed that one up too. It was just one fuck up after
another tonight. Noah was almost afraid to open his mouth again because surely he’d just stick his foot right back into it.

Hopefully, he didn’t screw things up too badly. Mrs. Snyder seemed like a kind, honest woman. His gut instinct told him that she was someone he could trust. Noah hated having to lie to her in the first place, especially since she was being so helpful.

“Is that on one of the Great Lakes?”

“Yes, Lake Huron. It was beautiful there.”

“What brings you to Illinois?” Mrs. Snyder asked, sitting in the chair across from him.

Before Noah could answer, a ruggedly handsome, middle aged man with blue eyes and messy short brown sauntered into the kitchen through the back door. “Where’s our wayward traveler?”

Noah immediately stood up. “Hi, I’m Noah,” he said, extending his hand toward the man who gave him a quick once over.

He took it, shaking his hand firmly. “Holden Snyder,” he replied. “Let’s go rescue your mother.”

“That would be great,” Noah replied, hoping that he passed Mr. Snyder’s approval.

“Holden, you can bring them back here,” Emma said. “If Noah’s mother is sick, I want to make sure she gets some rest.”

“Are you sure about that, Mama?” Holden asked.

Noah could tell that he was trying to keep his tone light for his sake but he could see the doubt in Holden’s eyes. He didn’t blame him for not immediately trusting some kid claiming to have a sick mother in a broken down car.

“Yes, dear. I have plenty of room for them here,” Emma decided. “I won’t send a sick woman to a motel in the middle of the night. Now hurry back.”

“All right. Come on, Noah.” Holden was already headed out the door.

Noah followed closely on his heels. “I’m really sorry to drag you out in the so late, sir,” he said as they approached Holden’s midnight blue Ford F-150.

“Vehicles never break down at a good time,” Holden sighed. He opened the driver’s side door and got in. “What exactly happened?”

Noah slid into the passenger’s side of the truck, fastening his seatbelt. “The engine started to sputtered and then all of the dashboard lights came on. Then it just died.”

Shaking his head, Holden started the truck. “That doesn’t sound good.”

Noah squeezed his eyes shut. What would they do if the car couldn’t be fixed? They didn’t have enough money for a new one. What if there was something seriously wrong with his mother? They had no insurance. He wasn’t even sure of how much money they had because his mother kept track of their finances because she didn’t want him to worry. She said he was too young to shoulder that kind of burden.

Mom was always trying to protect him.
Now it was his turn to take care of her. He would make sure that the car got fixed. He would get her medicine—make sure she got better.

And he also needed to find a way to tell her about his slip-ups. She was going to be so angry with him…

“Which way? Noah…which way?” Holden repeated a bit louder.

“Oh!” Noah snapped out of his reverie. “I’m sorry…to the right…just down the road…about a half mile.”

Holden glanced over at him. “Don’t worry. I’m sure everything is going to work out.”

Noah forced a weak smile. “It’s just that…my mother never gets sick and now our car…”

“Don’t borrow trouble,” Holden said, turning onto the old country road. “Just focus on one thing at a time.”

“If only it were that easy,” Noah muttered.

“Where were you headed?”

Noah shifted nervously, not wanting to answer before speaking to his mother since they hadn’t had a chance to decide on their cover story. And he didn’t want to add another fuck up to the list. “Oh…there’s our car,” he said, pointing out the window.

Holden slowed the truck down, parking it right behind the car. Noah barely waited for it to come to a complete stop before he unfastened his seatbelt and opened the door, hopping out and racing over to the car. Holden was right behind him with a flashlight trained on the car, lighting the way.

“Mom!” Noah exclaimed, opening the passenger’s side door and finding her huddled in the seat with her legs drawn up to her chest. Her face looked incredibly pale—something right out of Dracula. She was definitely a lot worse than it had been when he’d left her. “Oh my god,” he gasped.

“I see you brought help,” she said, smiling weakly.

“Holden Snyder,” he said, stepping up next to Noah. “I think I might need to get you to the hospital.”

“Oh no!” she protested. “I don’t need to go to the hospital. I’m not that bad off. Do you have a cell phone I could borrow so I can call a tow truck for the car and a taxi to take us to a motel?”

“Mr. Snyder has offered to drive us back to the farm I found,” Noah explained. “It’s owned by his mother. She said that we can stay there for the night.”

“We couldn’t intrude,” Charlene quickly replied. “Surely, there has to be a motel in town that we can stay at and then tomorrow we can call a tow truck for the car.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Holden insisted. “Mama would have my hide if I sent you two to the Wagon Wheel which can be a bit shady. And my son, Aaron, can look at the car tomorrow morning so there’s no need to call a tow truck quite yet.”

“I don’t know,” Charlene hesitated.

“Mom, please, you really need to get some medicine,” Noah said.
“Okay,” she replied, “if you insist…”

“I do…Mrs…”

“Ms…” she cast a quick glance at Noah to see if he had given them a last name. He subtly shook his head no. “Carlson. Gloria Carlson.”

Noah wasn’t surprised that since she had to make the decision for them she’d pick Gloria, which was her favorite. Once they got settled into their new place in Galesburg, he’d have to set up the DVD player so they could watch *Foul Play*. His mom needed a good dose of her favorite movie.

That is if she didn’t kill him first.

He needed to get her alone so he could tell her about his mistakes—explain that he’d been so frantic with worry that he spoke without thinking first.

“Noah, why don’t you help your mother into the truck while I get your bags?” Holden suggested. “Is there a trunk release over on the driver’s side of the car?”

“Yes, sir,” Noah replied.

As Holden strolled around to the other side of the car, Charlene gaped at him, utterly shocked. “You didn’t,” she quietly hissed as Noah helped her to her feet.

“Sorry,” Noah muttered. “I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, Noah,” she muttered, clutching her abdomen. At this point it was difficult to distinguish if the pain in her eyes from was her illness or from his betrayal.

“The Snyders seem like really good people,” Noah tried to reassure her as they approached Holden’s pickup. “I met his mother and she seems really sweet. I think we can trust them.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It’s only for one night,” Noah reminded her, opening the door. “You need medicine and a place to rest. I should go help Mr. Snyder with our stuff. Please don’t hate me.” He jogged away before his mother could respond.

“I would think we should probably try to transfer the boxes from the backseat into the trunk,” Holden said as he set Noah’s duffle bag next to the suitcases on the side of the road.

“That’s a good idea.”

Once they had everything moved, Noah made sure that the car was locked and then headed back to the truck with Holden.

“We decided to put all of your boxes into the trunk of the car for safekeeping,” Holden informed Charlene once he slid behind the wheel of the pickup. “This road is usually pretty deserted, but I figured you wouldn’t want to take a chance since it looks like you might be in the process of moving. Is that the case?”

Noah decided to keep his mouth shut because he had screwed up enough for one night.

“Yes,” Charlene replied, staring out the windshield.

“Where are you headed?” Holden asked as he started up the truck.
“Des Moines,” she replied without missing a beat.

Noah wasn’t surprised she lied because she was only doing it to protect them. She was always thinking about them. His mother never made any mistakes. Unlike him.

“Are you feeling any better, Mom?” Noah asked.

“No really. I hope Mrs. Snyder has some Motrin or else I may have to trouble Holden for a ride into town,” Charlene said, flashing a somewhat pleading look at their savior.

“Mama has a medicine cabinet full of every pain reliever under the sun as well as cold remedies, cough medicine—you name it. I think she could put the local pharmacy out of business,” Holden assured her. “She’ll take good care of you.”

“Are you sure this is okay?” she asked.

Holden smiled. “She’s known for taking in folks. The Snyder farm has been home to many people over the years.”

*Please let the Snyders be able to help us*, he silently prayed.

“What’s in Des Moines?” Holden asked as he steered the pickup slowly down the dirt road. “Is Noah going to be attending college there?”

*College.*

Noah’s stomach twisted in knots. College was a dream that seem so far away—just like becoming a film director. He didn’t even have a high school diploma.

“No, sir,” Noah replied. “I’m not going to college right now.” Maybe not ever…

“Are you still in high school?”

“Noah graduated this year,” Charlene quickly replied. “He decided to take a year off.”

Holden nodded. “I figured that you were close to my son, Luke’s age. He’s a senior in high school right now. I’m pretty sure he’s planning on staying here and attending Oakdale University. I think my wife would have a fit if he wanted to go away—he’s her first born—her baby.”

Charlene placed her hand on Noah’s leg. “I can understand that.” She smiled weakly. “I know I’d miss Noah if he ever went away.”

“Don’t worry,” Noah assured her. “I’m not going anywhere anytime soon.”

Holden pulled the truck into the driveway and cut the engine. Noah opened the passenger’s side door, helping his mother out of the truck.

“This is really something,” she marveled once she got out.

Indeed it was. Noah hadn’t had a chance to get a good look at the property since he’d been so concerned about getting to his mother. The white farmhouse was accompanied by a large red barn, birch trees, and off in the distance, if Noah wasn’t mistaken, he thought he could see a large pond shimmering in the moonlight.

“It really is a slice of heaven,” Holden said, unloading their luggage from the bed of his pickup truck. He handed Noah one of the suitcases as well as the duffle bag. “Come on, let’s get you settled in.”
Noah and Charlene followed Holden through the screen porch and into the kitchen of the farmhouse. Inside, Emma was sitting at the kitchen table waiting for them with a plate of cookies, a pie, and a coffee cake spread out on the table.

“Hello, there,” she said, standing and smiling warmly. “I’m Emma Snyder.”

“Hi. I’m Gloria Carlson,” Charlene greeted her. “I can’t thank you enough for your hospitality.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Emma replied. “Your son said that you’re not feeling well. Can I get you anything?”

“If you have some Motrin that would be great,” Charlene replied.

“I’ll be right back,” Emma said. She disappeared inside what looked like a small bathroom and returned with a couple of pills and a small plastic cup of water. “Would you like a cup of tea with some honey?”

“You don’t have to go through all of that trouble,” Charlene said, taking the pills and cup from her. Emma waved her hand dismissively. “Really it’s no trouble at all,” she said, heading for the stove. “I was going to make myself a cup.”

Charlene sat down at the kitchen table. “How can I refuse then?”

“I called Aaron after you called me. He said that he’d take a look at the car in the morning. Maybe he’ll convince Luke to help him.”

“I’d love to see my grandson.” Emma smiled. “I haven’t seen Luke too often since school has started. And if Aaron didn’t live here I probably never see him…as it is I hardly see him with the odd hours he keeps tending bar at the Lakeview.”

“What a night,” a dark haired, middle-aged man groaned as he sauntered through the back door. “I think there must be a full moon out tonight.”

Holden glanced at the man, smirking. “Did you haul in a lot of crazies, Jack?”

The man slipped off his jacket, revealing a gun in a shoulder holster. Noah had to bite his lip in order to stifle the gasp that would have escaped his lips. And beside him he could see his mother stiffen. Since their escape from Ft. Leonard Wood they had made it a point to avoid the police at all costs, always fearing that they would side with the Colonel because he was so well respected in the Army.

“Yes,” Jack sighed. “The drunk tank was almost at capacity. But I got a break on the Oliver case I’ve been working on so there was a bright spot to my night.” Then he turned and noticed Noah and Charlene sitting at the kitchen table. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that you had company, Aunt Emma.”

“This is my nephew, Jack Snyder,” Emma said. “He’s a detective with the Oakdale Police Department. Jack, this is Gloria and her son, Noah. They were passing by when their car broke down.”

“Aaron said that he’d take a look at it in the morning,” Holden added. “They’re going to be Mama’s guests for the night.”

Jack marched over to the kitchen table, extending his hand. “It’s nice to meet both of you,” he said. “You’re in very good hands.”
“Nice to meet you too,” Charlene said, shaking his hand.

“Hi,” Noah squeaked. He’d never been so close to detective before. He prayed that he wouldn’t ask them any questions.

“I’m going to head home before Lily starts to worry,” Holden announced.

“Give her my love and be sure to give my newest grandbaby a big kiss for me,” Emma replied, giving her son a hug. “Goodnight, Holden.”

“Goodnight, Mama…Jack.” He turned to Noah and Charlene. “Goodnight. Take care.”

“Thank you!” Charlene and Noah called after him.

“Jack, why don’t you join us for some pie and coffee cake?” Emma suggested. “I think you need to unwind a little after your rough day.”

“Sounds good,” Jack said, said sauntering over to the refrigerator and poured himself a glass of milk.

“Can I get you another glass of milk, Noah?” Emma called.

“Yes, please,” Noah replied.

“So are you from out of town?” Jack asked as he handed the carton of milk to Emma. He wandered over to the kitchen table and sat down.

“Yes, we’re from Indiana,” Charlene replied.

“But we’ve been living in East Tawas, Michigan,” Noah quickly added so that his mother’s story wouldn’t contradict what he had told Emma earlier. Underneath the table his mother gave him a subtle nudge with her foot to warn him to shut his mouth before he said too much.

“What brings you to Oakdale?” Jack asked, cutting a piece of pie.

“Our car broke down,” Charlene answered.

Jack nodded. “Right. Holden mentioned that. Where are you headed?”

“Des Moines.”

Noah tried very hard not to fidget nervously in his seat. Suddenly, he felt like he was in one of those old film noir movies where he was in the police interrogation room with a bright light shining on his face while he was being questioned. He didn’t know how his mom could remain so calm.

“Here’s your milk,” Emma said, placing the glass in front of Noah.

Noah forced a smile onto his face. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Are you going there for business or pleasure?” Jack asked.

“Jack,” Emma interrupted him, “our guests have had a long, stressful night. Poor Gloria isn’t feeling well on top of it all. I think you can ease up on the questions. You haven’t even right them their rights.” She added with a bit of a laugh.

“Sorry,” Jack laughed, “occupational hazard. I didn’t mean to go all cop on you.”
Charlene smiled stiffly. “It’s quite all right.”

“There’s a bed waiting for you in the spare room, Gloria,” Emma said as she returned to the stove just as the kettle began to whistle. “And, Noah, I have the sofa in the parlor all made up for you.” She breezed across the room and placed the steaming mug of tea in front of Charlene and then sat down next to her.

“I’m going to hit the hay,” Jack announced, rising from his chair. “I’m really sorry about the interrogation. I didn’t mean any harm.”

“It’s really okay,” Charlene assured him.

“Aunt Emma, I’m working the early shift so I won’t be around for breakfast.”

“Goodnight, dear.”

“Goodnight everyone.”

“Goodnight,” Noah and Charlene called after him as he headed toward the stairs.

After Jack had left the room, Emma turned to Charlene. “Do you have a fever or sore throat?”

“No, just really bad cramps,” Charlene replied as she clutched her stomach.

“Menstrual?”

Noah could feel his cheeks beginning to burn. Quickly, he ducked his head, hoping that his embarrassment would go unnoticed by the women in the room. He really wished he didn’t have to be present while the women talked about “female problems”.

His father had given him “the talk” when his was twelve, telling him that all about urges men have when it comes to sexual relations with women. It had been horrifying because Noah had been utterly clueless as to what these ‘urges’ could possibly be. But the Colonel told him in detail all about ‘sexual intercourse’ and how to be prepared when the time came to have sexual relations with a girl. His father had harped on the fact that it was his “duty” as a man to be able to please a woman. That was the one constant during “the talk”—it was about how his sexuality related to women…females…girls.

But Noah didn’t think about girls that way. It frightened him because he knew that was how should be feeling about girls. All the other boys he went to school with seemed to feel that way. When Robbie Kellerman had passed around his father’s Playboy all of the boys had ogled the playmates’ breasts and other attributes but Noah had to fake his enthusiasm because he felt absolutely nothing. Noah had been convinced he was a freak.

His father had also told him about the evils of masturbation. Touching his penis was wrong—deviant, absolutely forbidden. However, that hadn’t stopped Noah from trying the illicit act. He had managed to do it a few times in the shower because it felt really—really good. The good feelings were accompanied with images of boys, young men—shirtless and sweaty—now that’s what got Noah all hot and bothered.

And it scared him shitless. Because if his father thought touching himself was wrong…well…thinking of boys…

Noah knew he could never ever let his father even suspect he had those kinds of thoughts. Not if he valued his life.
After they’d gone on the run his mom had given him a less horrifying sex talk. She told him all about safe sex, waiting to find someone you love—there was never any mention of ‘duty’. Also, much to his embarrassment she brought up the subject of masturbation, which made him wonder if she knew about his shower activities. She had assured him that it was perfectly healthy and normal to pleasure yourself—just as long as it didn’t happen 24/7. Noah felt a lot better after his talk with his mother but there were still some lingering questions that he just couldn’t voice aloud.

But Noah couldn’t tell his mother how he was attracted to boys—how he wet dreams are filled with longing to have another boy touch him, kiss him, suck his cock—how every time he pleased himself his thoughts were of men—never women—not even once. He wished he could confide in his mother. He could about everything else. It was them against the world. And it was because of that very fact he couldn’t.

Noah wasn’t positive she’d react badly to the revelation that he liked boys, but he couldn’t risk it. His mother was all he had in the world. He couldn’t survive without her. So Noah had decided to try a different approach.

When Noah was sixteen he kissed a girl while they were living in Minnesota, hoping that maybe—just maybe those other feelings were just a phase. The kiss definitely wasn’t anything out of the movies. There weren’t any fireworks or stars or a huge orchestral score. He didn’t really see what all of the fuss was about. Maybe he did it wrong. So he waited a year and tried it again—still nothing.

Noah knew deep in his heart that he was gay, but it didn’t mean that he had to do anything about it. He’d keep it a secret—forever.

“Yes, they’re just really bad this time around,” Charlene sighed.

Noah picked at his cookie. This was way too much information. Maybe he should excuse himself and go to bed…

“Did you want a couple of more Motrin?” Emma asked.

“I think I should be okay.”

“Please let me know if you change your mind.”

“I will,” she said, then she turned to Noah and ruffled his hair. “Sorry to embarrass you with all of this girl talk, string bean.”

*She didn’t just say that!*?

“Mom!” Noah just wanted to crawl underneath the table.

Charlene and Emma chuckled while Noah tried to get his skin tone to return to normal. Hearing his mother laugh made him feel good even if it was at his expense because it meant she couldn’t be feeling too badly.

“I hope your car troubles won’t delay you too long,” Emma said, taking a sip of her tea. “I’m sure you’re anxious to get to your destination.”

“We were hoping to be in Des Moines by tomorrow,” Charlene replied, “but fate seems to have another plan.”

“Do you have family there?”
Charlene shook her head. “No…just going for a change of scenery.”

Noah decided that he better speak up before his mother contradicted anything he had already told Emma. “Since we’d been living in such a small town all summer we thought something bigger would be nice,” he explained. “This is our last hurrah together before I start college next year.”

“So it’s just you and Noah then?” Emma asked.

Charlene gripped her mug. “Yes, my husband died when Noah was ten. He was killed in a hunting accident.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that.”

Noah wished his father was really dead then he could be Noah Mayer again. Then his mother could resume her teaching career and they wouldn’t have to keep running and lying. And, most importantly, his mom could find a man to love and take care of her they way she deserved to be.

Charlene smiled weakly. “We’ve done a pretty good job getting by,” she said, reaching over and taking Noah’s hand. “The important thing is that Noah and I still have each other.”

“Yes, it is,” Emma agreed.

Charlene stifled a yawn. “I think I’m about ready to call it a night,” she murmured.

Emma gathered the dirty cups and dishes from the table. “I’ll show you where you’ll be staying,” she said, placing them in the sink. She pointed through the archway that Noah had entered into the kitchen through earlier. “Noah, your sofa is right through there.”

“Thanks,” Noah said, grabbing his duffle bag.

“Goodnight, string bean,” Charlene murmured, hugging him tightly. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Mom,” he said. “Thank you, Mrs. Snyder.”

“Goodnight, Noah. Sweet dreams.”

“The guest room is the first door on the right,” Emma told Charlene as Noah sauntered into the parlor.

Behind him the lights from the kitchen dimmed as Emma and his mother ventured upstairs. The sofa was all made up with sheets, a pillow and a blanket. While the couch was smaller than any of the motel room beds he’s slept in over the past four years, it looked so warm and inviting—just downright homey.

A lump formed in his throat as he stripped out of his clothes. He hadn’t realized just how homesick he’s been until this moment. Sure, home was always with his mother but he longed for a real house for them to share. Noah hated that she had to give that up because of him.

He pulled on his old black sweats and gray Old Navy t-shirt and slid under the covers, which were soft and smelled Downy fresh. Something else he missed—the smell of clean. Not Laundromat clean—home clean, fresh from the dryer, hung on the clothesline clean.

Stop it. This isn’t making it any easier, Noah chastised himself.

And it wasn’t going to be easy to leave this place. Although, they’d only been here an hour or so, Noah liked it here. The Snyders were good people. He trusted them. He didn’t want to go to
Galesburg once their car was fixed. Something in his gut was telling him that this was the place they needed to be.

Could he convince his mom?

Probably not.

Noah lay awake still plagued with guilt for potentially putting them in danger. He hadn’t been able to tell his mother how sorry he was for screwing up earlier. For four years they’d been so careful and in one night he could have thrown it all away. He needed to try to make it right.

Noah carefully slipped out from underneath the blankets, creeping out of the parlor and through the kitchen. He opened the door that led to the stairs with a creek. It was dark so he felt his way up the stairs as he slowly ascended them, hoping not to wake the Snyders.

The first door on the right—that was what Mrs. Snyder had said.

Noah eased the door open to the room. “Mom?” he whispered, praying this was the right room.

“Noah?”

“Can I come in?” he asked in a tiny voice.

As a small child he’d never been allowed in his parents’ bedroom. Once when Noah was about six, there was a particularly severe thunderstorm—to this day he couldn’t remember ever hearing thunder so loud or seeing lightening so bright. He was so terrified that he’d broken the rule, dashing into his parents’ bedroom and climbing into the bed between his mother and father.

The Colonel had immediately woken up, hauling him out of bed with a firm whack on the behind. His mother had come to his room to try to comfort him but she had been berated by his father for babying him. Noah needed to learn how to be a man and face his fears. Noah had been left alone in the dark to brave out the awful storm. Noah remembered staying awake that entire night huddled on the floor in the corner of his bedroom.

“Sure.”

Noah stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. His mother turned on the bedside lamp as he made his way over to the bed.

“What is it?” she asked, blinking up at him.

Seeing his mother, still looking a bit frail coupled with everything else that’s been weighing on his heart got to Noah. His eyes filled with tears. He bit his lip as to prevent them from spilling.

His mom scooted over, patting the mattress. “Sit down, string bean.”

“I’m so…so…sorry, Mom,” Noah croaked as the tears he’d been fighting to hold back trickled down his cheeks. “I didn’t mean to give Mrs. Snyder my real name. Honestly, I didn’t. I’d never put us in danger. It just slipped out. I was so worried about you that I wasn’t thinking straight…”

Charlene reached up, stroked his hair. “Oh, Noah, I know you’d never intentionally put us in harm’s way,” she replied. “It just really threw me. Of course, I wish you wouldn’t have done it, but at least you didn’t give our real last name.”

“No, but I did tell Mrs. Snyder we were coming from East Tawas,” Noah muttered, casting his teary
eyes downward.

“Fortunately for us, Gloria and Noah never lived in East Tawas so we should be all right.”

“If anything were to happen to you because of me…”

Charlene sat up, pulling Noah into a hug. “Noah, don’t,” she said, embracing him tightly. “You made a mistake. You’re not perfect. Neither of us is.”

“But even today you said that we needed to stay sharp,” Noah sniffed.

“Yes,” she conceded, “but we’ve been on the run for four years—something like this was bound to happen. The good news is we’re going to be on our way as soon as the car is fixed. Chances are the Snyders are never even going to remember us.”

Nodding and wiping his eyes, Noah pulled away from his mother. “They seem like nice people though.”

Charlene smiled. “Yes, they do.”

“I really liked it here.”

“But we can’t stay. It’s too risky.”

Noah folded his arms across his chest. “Because I messed everything up. I ruined what could have been a good thing,” Noah said as a fresh set of tears glided down his cheeks. “You must hate me. We might have been happy here…”

“Noah honey,” she said soothingly as she brushed the tears away with her thumb. I could never hate you—never.”

Noah hung his head down, staring at his lap. He wasn’t so sure about that. If she knew he were gay, she might just change her mind. He wouldn’t be her sweet string bean. No, he’d be some vile pervert—a deviant.

She titled his chin so that he was forced to look her in the eyes. “I mean it,” she said a bit more forcefully. “I love you, Noah. Now, you need to stop beating yourself up for this mistake. We’re going to have a big day ahead of us. Once the car is fixed, we need to get to Galesburg which is probably about an hour away and then get settled in there.”

“Are you feeling better?” Noah asked hopefully.

“Much,” she replied. “And I’ll feel even better after a good night’s sleep. So will you—now scoot.”

“Goodnight,” Noah said, standing up.

“Goodnight. Don’t worry. Everything will be better in the morning.”

As Noah let himself out of the bedroom, he prayed that his mother was right.

********

Noah was awakened the next morning by the aroma of bacon, pancakes and eggs wafting into the parlor. He could hear soft murmurs coming from the kitchen. His stomach angrily growled as he hoisted himself off the sofa. He was definitely ready for breakfast.
“Good morning, sunshine,” Charlene greeted him.

“Morning,” Noah mumbled, still trying to wake up. A cup of coffee always helped along the process so he hoped the Emma had a pot brewing.

“Good morning, Noah,” Emma said, smiling. “Would you like orange juice, milk, coffee, or tea?”

Noah immediately perked up. “Coffee please.”

“How do you take it?”

“Black.”

Emma chucked, “Just the opposite of my Luke. He loads it up with sugar and cream. I tease him that he takes all of the coffee taste out of it.” She poured Noah a mug of coffee and handed it to him. “Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes.”

Noah sat down at the kitchen table with his mother. “How do you feel?”

“Much better,” she replied.

Hopefully, she was telling the truth. She didn’t look as pale as she had the night before so that was definitely a good sign. Maybe it was just “female problems”.

Emma placed a plate of pancakes and bacon on the table. “Please, dig in,” she instructed. “Aaron has already headed out to look at the car.”

“I should probably be there too,” Noah said, starting to get up.

“Eat first,” Emma said, marching toward the stove. “He’ll be just fine. He said he was going to get Luke to help him. You can join them once you’ve had a good breakfast and shower.”

“This is delicious, Emma,” Charlene said, taking a bite of the pancakes.

“There’s plenty more where that came from,” she said, putting a plate of scrambled eggs and toast on the table and then she sat down, joining them.

Noah was too busy eating to talk. He hadn’t had a breakfast this good since they’d left Ft. Leonard Wood. His mother was an amazing cook but since going on the run she hadn’t been able to prepare him a breakfast like this. When he was little she’d make him chocolate chip pancakes and use cookie cutters to make them into different shapes for him until the Colonel forbade it. He had said she was treating him like an infant.

Noah hated that man—for countless reasons.

After Noah was thoroughly stuffed with pancakes, eggs, bacon, and toast made from homemade bread, he took a shower in the upstairs bathroom. Although he would have loved to have lingered underneath the hot spray, he knew he needed to go help Emma’s grandchildren with the car even though he didn’t know jack shit about car repair.

Noah toweled off and quickly dressed in his faded jeans and tattered navy blue University of Michigan sweatshirt. When he came downstairs, Charlene and Emma were doing the dishes and chatting like old friends, which made Noah grin. It was nice seeing his mother relaxed after such a stressful night.

“I’m going to head out to see how the car repairs are coming along,” Noah announced.
Emma turned toward him, dish rag in hand. “I can call Holden and he can run you over there,” she suggested.

“That won’t be necessary,” he replied. “I can walk. It’s really not far.”

Charlene smiled. “Hopefully you’ll return with good news.”

“Hopefully.”

A beautiful fall day awaited Noah when he stepped outside - the air was a bit crisp but the sun was shining and there was a hint of the aroma of burning leaves in the air. As Noah trekked down the driveway, he could hear the neighing of horses coming from the barn and birds chirping from the tress. Closing his eyes, Noah savored these sights and smells of the farm because he’d need them to get through the old motel rooms that were in his future.

When he finally made it to the old country road that the car had conked out on, he could see the old Cavalier in the distance with the hood up and two bodies crouched over it—one blonde, one with brown hair. Noah picked up his pace, anxious to see what was going on.

As he approached the car he could hear the two young men discussing the repairs.

“What kind of idiot never changes the oil on his car?” the blonde asked.

“This kind of idiot,” Noah sheepishly admitted.

Startled, the blonde looked up at him and Noah’s heart stopped.

*He’s beautiful*

Big, dark, chocolate brown eyes, flecked with gold, long lashes, perfect nose, pink bowed lips, and flawless skin that was covered with dirt and grease not to mention a nice toned, athletic body and dark blonde hair parted to the side that hung down over his forehead.

*Oh…wow…*

Noah had to force himself to breathe. And to speak. “Hi, Noah Carlson,” he said, extending his hand toward him.
Chapter 3

Seventeen year old Luke Snyder didn’t like to wake up early. And he especially didn’t like getting woken up early on a Saturday morning. But his older brother, Aaron, didn’t care because he came over from the farm, dragging him out of bed with the lame excuse that he needed Luke’s help looking at some broken down car near Grandma Emma’s farmhouse.

All Luke had wanted to do was stay buried underneath the covers—just block out the world for as long as possible. Senior year of high school was supposed to be the end all be all of your high school existence. Well…unless you were gay. He hadn’t planned on coming out to his entire school—just his best friend, Kevin Davis, whom he’d been hopelessly in love with…

Luke’s stomach churned like Mt. Saint Helen’s getting ready to erupt. Such bad memories. He hadn’t meant to fall in love with Kevin—it kinda just happened. Spending day after day with his charismatic, blonde hair, blue-eyed, All-American good looking, best friend had just led to those feelings. They’d been inseparable—watching movies in Luke’s grandmother’s pool house, shooting hoops at his parents’ house, and hanging out in his bedroom horsing around.

But as Luke struggled with his sexuality, he looked for a way to escape and Kevin was right there offering him what seemed like the perfect solution. Alcohol. Luke had used it as his favorite means of escape whether it was trying to deny the fact he was gay or block out his parents’ failing marriage. Luke drank to hide. And even after he’d almost died from a kidney infection he’d picked up in Mexico (long story that he’d rather forget) which ultimately resulted in his need for a transplant, he still hadn’t stopped drinking. Luke had a serious self-destructive streak which the alcohol had fueled big time.

Being gay terrified Luke so much that he pretended to date Jade (before he’d learned she was his cousin). Another bad idea on his part. Finally, unable to handle the burden of lying any longer, he decided to come out to his parents. His dad had been accepting. His mother—not so much.

And then his bio-dad Damian Grimaldi slinked into town. Things quickly went from bad to worse. Damian had assured Luke he was on his side but unbeknownst to him, Damian was planning on sending him to Echo Lake, which was a camp that specialized in straightening gay kids out. His bio-dad was also trying to convince his mother to go along with it. Luke had been under the impression that it was his mother’s idea and Damian had allowed Luke to believe it as well so he could continue to be the ‘good guy’ in his son’s eyes.

When Ross Kreeger from Echo Lake had come to take him away, Luke had freaked out. He fought with his mother at the top of the stairs, pushing her away from him because he was so upset. His mother had lost her footing, tumbling to the bottom. Luke’s actions had put his pregnant mother in a coma for a couple of months.

Even though she and his new baby brother, Ethan, were fine now, Luke still shuddered at the thought of what could have been. His mother had told him when she had woken from the coma how sorry she was for the way she’d behaved when he’d come out. Together they were working to overcome their guilt and put the past behind them and start fresh. Luke was relieved to have his mom on his side again.

Damian had returned to Malta after Luke had discovered all of his lies. Besides the Echo Lake debacle, his bio-dad had also pretended to be dying so Luke would return to Malta with him. The reality was that Damian only wanted Luke’s inheritance so he could pay of some unsavory business associates that were after him. Luke never wanted to see that bastard again. He was still so angry at
himself for trusting Damian in the first place. But he’d never make that mistake again. As far as he was concerned Damian Grimaldi was dead to him. Holden Snyder was his one and only father.

Luke shook off the memories as he stepped out of the shower. He definitely was having the year from hell. His summer had been capped off when he’d decided to come out to Kevin while a group of kids from school had gone camping for the weekend up at Raven Lake.

Colossal mistake.

Kevin had called him a freak. But things had gotten even more horrendous when Jade had opened her big mouth, spilling the beans to Kevin that Luke was in love with him. Of course Kevin had wigged out, threatening to beat him up. Then Kevin got drunk and went boating with friends, calling him a faggot in front of everyone while Luke stood on the dock watching them.

Luke had felt so alone.

Before he had a chance to feel too sorry for him, Kevin was in the water, drowning. Luke couldn’t let him die—no matter how hurt and angry he was at him, so he saved Kevin using mouth to mouth. When Kevin had regained consciousness at the hospital they seemed to have made peace with each other.

Boy had he ever been wrong.

“Hey, I don’t have all day!” Aaron called. “Come on!”

Groaning, Luke emerged from the bathroom to find his older brother pacing in his bedroom. “I’m moving as fast as I can,” Luke grumbled as he searched for his sneakers. Once he found them, he sat on the edge of his bed and put them on.

“I guess I can cut you a little slack since it is a Saturday,” Aaron relented. “Here—I grabbed you some toast from Gram’s house.”

Luke took it from him. “Thanks,” he replied, snatching his gray hoodie off the back of his desk chair. “And why the hell are you dragging me out of bed on a Saturday anyway?”

“Gram took in a lady and her teenage son whose car broke down last night on Sutters’ road,” Aaron replied, heading out of Luke’s bedroom. “They’ll be staying at the farm until the car is fixed. Dad gave me a call last night to see if I could take a look at it since she kinda volunteered me for the job which really is no big deal since she’s letting me stay there rent free.”

Good god almighty! What was with his family? There was nice and then there was just being a bunch of pushovers. “Why the hell does Grandma have to take in every damn stray? Aren’t there any tow trucks or hotels in Oakdale? People take advantage of her!” he ranted, following Aaron down the stairs as he pulled his gray hoodie over his green and yellow striped polo.

Aaron paused at the top of the stairs. “You really did wake up in a foul mood.”

“Fuck you.”

“Luke,” Aaron sighed, “our grandmother is a fine Christian woman. You could learn a lot from her, you know. There’s something to be said about being kind and helping out people in need.”

“What if they’re con artists?”

“I highly doubt Dad would have left a couple of grifters with Grandma.”
“I suppose you’re right,” Luke relented. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Awww. I’m hurt that you don’t want to spend time with me!”

“I can’t believe that I let you drag me out of bed,” Luke muttered.

“I wasn’t going to take ‘no’ for an answer,” Aaron informed him. “You can’t lay around all day feeling sorry for yourself.”

“It’s eight o’clock in the morning!” Luke spat. “Who said I’m feeling sorry for myself? You have no idea what is going on in my life.”

“I’ve heard rumblings. This is a small town. And we’re Snyders, remember?”

Great. This is just what Luke needed. “Has Dad said anything?” he asked, munching on a piece of toast.

“Just that you dropped out of cross country this year and you’re spending a lot of time by yourself,” Aaron replied as they reached the bottom of the staircase.

“I figured that the guys on the cross country team wouldn’t want a fag in the locker room,” Luke said, brushing past his older brother.

“Is that the impression you’ve been given?” Aaron asked, following after him.

“Kevin Davis—remember him—my former best friend?”

“Yeah, I remember him.”

“Kevin made it a point, after I so graciously saved his life at Raven Lake to make it clear, that he didn’t want anything to do with the fag once we got back to school,” Luke explained as they stepped out onto the front porch. “And most of the other sheep that attend Oakdale High School have gone right along with him. Some days I’m ignored. Others not so much—whether it’s taunting or more. Maddie’s basically all I’ve got.”

“Damn, Luke,” Aaron muttered, gaping at him. “Do Dad and Lily know just how bad it is?”

Luke shrugged. “I dunno. And even if they did what are they gonna do?”

“They could talk to the principal.”

“Oh hell no!” Luke exclaimed. “I will not have my parents fighting my battles for me. I don’t want them to think that poor gay Luke can’t make it through his senior year of high school. They’re already dealing with enough. Mom has finally recovered from the coma and they have Ethan to take care of—not to mention Faith and Natalie who have been without a mother for a couple of months thanks to me. No way. And you better not say anything to them, Aaron!”

Aaron draped his arm around Luke’s shoulders. “Don’t worry, little bro, I won’t say anything. But I am going to keep my eyes open and if I see things starting to get out of control I will step in.”

“I promise not to start drinking again. I’m through with that,” Luke assured him. One thing he would not do was put his family through the horrors of his problems with alcohol. He’d find another way to deal with the pain.

“You’re still going to play basketball this year, aren’t you?”

“Luke, basketball is your favorite sport,” Aaron quickly reminded him as they approached Aaron’s black Dodge Ram pickup truck. “You’ve been playing it since you’ve been old enough to dribble a ball.”

Luke shrugged as he slid into the passenger’s seat. “Maybe that’s a good reason to stop.”

“Stop trying to bullshit me,” Aaron said, casting a sidelong look at him.

“Fine. I’m sure my teammates probably don’t want a gay guy in the locker room so instead of getting a bunch of grief I figured I’d just save them the trouble,” Luke said, staring out the window. He didn’t want Aaron to see the pain in his eyes. Basketball was his favorite sport and the thought of not playing it his senior year hurt—a lot. His teammates were like brothers to him. They’d been through many hard fought battles through the years. And Luke couldn’t bear it if they’d rejected him, which was a strong possibility with Kevin leading the anti Luke Snyder brigade.

“You’ve been teammates with some of those guys for how long?”

“Since the seventh grade.”

“And you’ve been gay for how long?”

“My whole life, Aaron,” Luke grumbled. “It’s not like one day I woke up and decided that I’d be gay.”

“Easy there, killer,” Aaron replied. “I was just trying to make that point that you’ve known these guys for quite awhile and you’ve been gay the entire time…”


“Does it?” Aaron pressed. “You don’t know for sure. When are tryouts?”

“Next month.”

“Good,” Aaron said as he parked the truck in front of the broken down car. “Now promise me that you’ll really think about it. I just don’t want you to make a hasty decision that you’ll regret.”

“Anything else I need to promise while we’re at it?” Luke asked sarcastically as he let himself out of the pickup. Who would’ve thought that Aaron would be worse than his parents?

“Not right know but I’ll let you know if that changes.”

“Lucky me.”

“Can you grab the jumper cables?” Aaron asked as he pulled the toolbox out of the bed of the truck. “I figured we can try to jump it and go from there.”

Luke was happy that Aaron was dropping his ‘Save Luke’ campaign and focusing on the car, which looked like it deserved to be towed to the junkyard instead of being fixed.

Aaron set the toolbox down by the car. “Here,” he said, tossing him the keys to the car. “Pop the hood and start it when I say so.”

“You mean they actually locked this thing?” Luke asked, giving the old black Chevy Cavalier a good once over.
“Not everyone gets a brand new convertible Mustang handed to them on their sixteenth birthday,” Aaron replied, snatching the jumper cables out of Luke’s hand. “You can be such a snob sometimes.” He shook his head as he returned to the truck so he could release the hood on it.

Ouch. That stung a bit. He couldn’t help it if he came from a family with money. But he didn’t think he was some spoiled trust fund baby. He didn’t dress in the latest designer fashions. And he knew how to put in an honest day’s work. God knows he’s mucked out enough stables at Grandma Emma’s farm.

“You gotta admit this car has seen better days,” Luke replied.

“Yeah, but the old girl might have some life left in her,” Aaron said, propping open the hood of his pickup. “I hope for the owner’s sake that she does.”

Luke sat in the Cavalier, watching as Aaron got the car ready for the jump. A wave of guilt washed through him. If this was indeed someone’s only car, he hoped that his brother could fix it because he’d hate to see someone without a vehicle. He shouldn’t project his crappy mood onto someone else’s life.

Dammit. He should be happy. It was the weekend. He was free of Kevin and his minions for two whole days. Luke needed to enjoy it, not spend the time dreading Monday.


Luke turned the key but all he got was a click. He tried it again and—nothing. Shit. He poked his head out the window. “No go!”

“I was afraid of that!”


“A few. I’m going to move the truck out of the way so I can get better access to everything under the hood,” Aaron explained as he unhooked the jumper cables.

Luke had hoped it was just a dead battery so he could go to the farm and escape on horseback for awhile. He always felt better when he could take his horse out for a ride. But no such luck. It took everything in his power not to utter some sarcastic remark. He needed to try to keep his attitude in check or else Aaron was liable to smack him.

“Oh, God,” Aaron said, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s see what’s wrong with this old girl.”

Luke stood by Aaron’s side watching while his brother fiddled with various parts of the car. Occasionally, he’d ask Luke to go try to start the car but he’d always get the same result.

Nothing.

Aaron handed Luke a screwdriver. “Here…make yourself useful. Unscrew the housing for the air filter and check it out for me.”

Thanks to Holden, Luke knew the basics about cars—change the oil every 3,000 miles, rotate the tires every 5,000, keep them properly inflated, etc. So when he pulled out a blackened air filter he knew it was bad. Very bad.

“Yuck,” he said, holding it up for Aaron to see.
“That definitely needs to be changed.”

“You think?” Luke couldn’t help himself, sometimes the snark was just out of his mouth before he could do a thing about it.

“Why don’t you check the oil while you’re at it, Mr. Goodwrench?” Aaron suggested.

“Aye…aye, Captain.”

“Damn,” Aaron muttered, setting down his screwdriver. “It’s the alternator. That’s not a cheap fix.”

Luke withdrew the dipstick only to find it clumped with what looked like tar at the very end.

“You’re not going to believe this,” he said.

“What?”

“Take a look at this.”

Aaron peered over at the dipstick Luke was holding. “Holy shit. I bet the engine is fried. It doesn’t look like the oil has ever been changed.”

“What kind of idiot never changes the oil on his car?” Luke asked positively flabbergasted.

“This kind of idiot,” a male voice sheepishly admitted.

*Shit. The owner of the car wasn’t supposed to hear that comment.*

Luke glanced up and was met with the most intense blue eyes he’d ever seen. They belonged to a tall, slim young man who had to be around his age with dark hair and a slightly large nose that was on an incredibly handsome face.

A downright gorgeous face of a most likely incredibly straight man.

*Don’t even go there, Snyder.*

“Hi, Noah Carlson,” he said, extending his hand toward him.

“Sorry. I’d shake your hand but I’m all full of the grease and grime looking at your broken down car,” Luke muttered.

*There…much better.*

“Luke,” Aaron chastised him. “You have to excuse my younger brother. He gets a bit bitchy when you drag him out of bed early on the weekend. I’m Aaron Snyder and this ill mannered, grouch next to me is Luke Snyder.”

“I can’t thank you enough for working on the car,” Noah quickly said. “I know there are probably other things you’d rather be doing on a Saturday morning.”


“It’s really not a problem,” Aaron said extra loudly. “But I’m afraid I have some bad news.”

“Oh?” Noah’s eye widened.

“The alternator is shot, you need a new air filter, and I’m afraid there’s a pretty good chance that the
engine might be shot,” Aaron explained with the care of a surgeon delivering some very bad news. “Has the oil ever been changed on this car?”

“Ahhh…no,” Noah stammered, turning a very dark shade of crimson. “Is that what made the car break down?”

Luke was about to let another zinger fly but then he noticed how devastated Noah was and he just couldn’t do it. The poor guy looked like a scared little kid who’d just been told that his puppy had died. Luke couldn’t kick someone when they were feeling that low—no matter how bad he was feeling.

“How long have you had the car?” Luke asked. Maybe this guy just got it and it was some other asshole’s fault.

“Four years.”

Even Aaron blanched. “Fuck. I hate to say this but you’re going to need a new car,” he explained. “The cost to fix it would be more than it’s worth at this point.”

“It’s my fault,” Noah’s voice faltered. “I ruined our car.” He turned away from them, wrapping his arms around his chest.


“I…I…don’t have a father,” came an unsteady voice. “It’s just me and my mom.” Noah sniffed and then turned back toward them. “We were heading to Des Moines—moving there actually—and now…”

Great. Now Luke really felt like shit. “I’m sorry,” Luke quickly apologized. “I had no idea. If I didn’t have my dad, I probably would have done the same thing.”

“No, only an idiot would do that.”

Luke was really coming across like a complete asshole. This poor guy didn’t need his shit right now. “I shouldn’t have said that,” Luke said.

“I think I have a chain in the back of the truck,” Aaron said. “We can probably tow the car back to the farm for now. I can give Ed Novak from the junkyard a call. He might give you some money for the car for parts. I’ve done some business with him the past so it’s worth a shot.”

“You’ve already done so much,” Noah murmured, chewing on his lip.

Aaron was already getting the chain from the back of his truck. “Trust me. I’ve made my fair share of mistakes,” he chuckled. “So if I can do anything to ease the blow I’ll be glad help.”

Luke knew all about mistakes too. Hadn’t he just gotten done making a laundry list of his own? “Where should we try to hook this?” he asked Aaron.

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Noah stared at the broken down old Cavalier as Aaron unhooked it from his pickup truck. He was still stunned that the car couldn’t be fixed. This was a nightmare. The car had ferried them from state to state—town to town for four years and now it was no more. They were trapped now. And it was
all his fault.

His mother was going to be so disappointed in him. It was one thing messing up his name last night. But this—this was a whole other level of fucking up. He’d taken away their only lifeline.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m surprised she lasted as this long,” Aaron said, patting him on the shoulder.

“It doesn’t,” Noah muttered.

Aaron pulled out his cell phone. “I’m going to give Ed a call. Hopefully, I’ll have a little bit of good news for you. Luke, why don’t you take Noah inside?”

“Come on,” Luke said, shuffling toward the screen porch. “I guess it’s time to tell your mom the news.”

Noah stuffed his hands inside the front pockets of his jeans. “Lucky me.”

Luke glanced back at him, flashing a weak smile. “Maybe it won’t be so bad.”

“Maybe,” Noah quietly replied.

Luke marched through the screen door, leading Noah through the porch and into the farmhouse where Charlene and Emma were sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee and chatting. His mother glanced up at him and smiled, which made his heart drop into his stomach. He was going to spoil everything.

“Hello, boys,” Emma greeted them. “Gloria, this fine young man here is my grandson, Luke.”


Noah hung back while Luke strolled over and shook his mother’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you,” Luke said to her.

“Thank you for looking at the car,” she said. “What’s the verdict? Can we get on our way soon?”

“It’s not good,” Noah replied, nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Aaron said that the car is toast,” Luke jumped in. “It needs a new alternator and the engine is totally fried as well.”

“It’s my fault,” Noah admitted, wishing it were anything but the truth. He was used to seeing disappointment in his father’s eyes because no matter what he did he could never please that man. Noah hated letting his mother down. And yet here he was doing it again.

His mother stared at him, completely puzzled. “How can that be? You have to be mistaken.”

Noah shook his head. “It is. I never changed the oil which ruined the engine—it’s all my fault.” He could feel the tears stinging in his eyes. Dammit. He didn’t want to cry in front of Emma and Luke.

Noah quickly turned on his heel and dashed out of the house, passing Aaron on his way out. The tears were flowing freely as he ran away from the farmhouse. He wasn’t sure where he was heading until he reached the pond. Underneath a large maple tree was an old picnic table. Noah hopped up onto it, burying his head in his hands wishing he could just disappear.

Noah wasn’t sure how long he was out there when he heard his mother’s gentle voice. “Hey, string
He didn’t answer. Instead, he kept his face hidden in his hands, not wanting to look at her. All he has done in the past twenty-four hours was let her down. She must be wondering what happened to the responsible man she thought she had for a son.

Noah could feel the picnic table shift a bit as his mother sat down next to him. “I spoke to Aaron. He seems like a nice young man,” she told him. “Luke too. He explained everything that had gone wrong with the car. But he also told me that the junkyard is willing to buy the car for parts for a hundred dollars so it won’t be a total loss.”

Noah glanced up at her. “I fucked everything up.”

“What have I told you about using that kind of language?” she chastised him.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, “but it’s the truth. We’re trapped here now, aren’t we?”

His mother slowly nodded. “We won’t be able to buy a new car.”

“I ruined everything!” Noah cried. “First my name…then I messed up by telling Mrs. Snyder where we came from—and now the car…”

“Noah, please.” Charlene put her hands on his shoulders, trying to calm him.

“I’m supposed to be a man. I’m supposed to take care of you,” Noah insisted.

“You just stop it right now with this ‘I’m supposed to be a man’ nonsense,” Charlene commanded. “You’re starting to sound like your father and that man knew nothing. I’m the adult here. I should be taking care of you.”

“You have been,” Noah sniffed. “You’ve kept us safe for the past four years.”

His mom draped her arm around his shoulders. “And I’m going to keep you safe now.”

Noah wanted to believe her. But they had no car, practically no money, and no place to live. “What are we going to do now?” he wondered aloud.

“I don’t know,” Charlene quietly admitted.

And for the first time in four years, Noah was terrified.
Charlene’s mind was reeling. Their car—their *lifeline*—was no more. They were trapped in Oakdale, IL—more precisely on this farm. They only had three hundred dollars (counting the money they’d be receiving from the junkyard), a hotplate, some old photographs, books, their clothing, fake IDs, ten DVDs, and a DVD player. All of Noah’s clothes besides his socks and underwear were either from Goodwill or the Salvation Army.

They had nothing.

But she needed to be strong for Noah, who was blaming himself for their predicament. Charlene didn’t hold him responsible for the car because when it came right down to it she was still the adult. Noah had been acting two years older ever since they’d gone on the run so he tended to forget that he was really only seventeen years old—still a boy who needed to be taken care of. He shouldn’t be so focused on looking after her and shouldering all of their responsibilities.

Noah had been forced to grow up the day he was released from the hospital after Winston had given him the concussion. In some ways he was an adult but in others he was still that thirteen year old boy. Charlene needed to take care of that boy now. He needed to feel safe and loved.

“The car was the one thing we couldn’t afford to lose,” Noah said, wrapping his arms around his chest, slowly rocking himself.

“I know,” she sighed. “We’re definitely in a tight spot now, but we’ll find a way through it. I guess the first thing we have to do is have the car towed to the junkyard so we can get the hundred dollars Aaron said his contact there would buy it for.”

“I guess we’re lucky it’s worth something,” Noah relented.

Charlene nodded, forcing herself to see the positives and hoping that Noah would too. “Holden mentioned the Wagon Wheel Motel—we’ll have to see if someone can give us a ride there,” she said quickly formulating their Plan B. “Hopefully, they’ll have a room to rent on a weekly basis at a reasonable rate. Let’s pray it’s located within walking distance to town so we can find jobs.”

“I’m going to have a hard time finding a job,” Noah quietly admitted.

“Why’s that?”

“Thanks to me we don’t have an ID to match my name.”

That’s right. Charlene bit her lip. There had to be a way around it.

*Think…think…think…*

“Maybe the motel would let you clean rooms in exchange for our room like I did at the motel in East Tawas,” she finally said. “And if they don’t go for it we’ll find another way. One problem at a time, okay?”

“Okay,” Noah replied, but he didn’t sound too convinced.

She wrapped her arm around him, pulling him close to her. “Didn’t you say that you liked it here?”

“Yeah, but I’d never wanted us to be trapped.”
“Me neither,” she agreed, giving him a loving squeeze, “but maybe we’re supposed to be here. Sometimes fate has a funny way of working out.”

“Like when Tony and Gloria met at that party at the beginning of the movie, but she thought he was a bore and then fate interceded bringing them together when he was one the police officers who showed up at her apartment after break in?” Noah suggested.

Charlene grinned, loving it when he quoted or referenced her favorite movie. “Exactly like that, string bean.”

“Maybe your Tony is waiting for you here,” Noah said, resting his head against her shoulder. “It would be nice for you to find someone to love you.”

“I’m still legally married to your father,” she reminded him. “And I’m not looking for romance. But I wouldn’t mind seeing you find someone that makes you happy.” Charlene purposely didn’t say ‘girl’, hoping that Noah would finally feel comfortable enough to come out to her.

“I’m not looking for romance either,” he said, staring out across the pond.

“I hope my relationship with your father hasn’t soured you on love altogether,” she said, lightly touching his hair. “There are good people out there. I know there is someone out there for you.”

Noah nodded, but didn’t say anything. Why wouldn’t he just confide in her? She could always broach the subject with him, but this definitely wouldn’t be the right time. What if Noah wasn’t gay after all? What if she was misreading all of the signals? But her gut was saying she wasn’t though.

“Promise me, honey, that you’ll never forget how special you are,” she said quietly as she continued to stroke his hair.

“Only if you promise me the same,” he countered, glancing at her. “I heard some of the awful things Dad said to you. I hope you didn’t believe any of it.”

“I’m sorry you were subjected to it. You shouldn’t have had to grow up like that.” Charlene inwardly cringed, wondering just what ‘awful’ things Noah heard Winston say to say to her because the list was long and degrading. She had tried her best to keep Noah sheltered from Winston’s verbal abuse but it hadn’t always worked.

Charlene prayed the scars he’d inflicted on their son both verbal and physical weren’t permanent. Even if just one were—she’d never ever forgive herself.

“Mom, you had to wait for the right time to get us out of there,” Noah reminded her. “I’m afraid to think of what would have happened if we would have tried running away earlier.”

“I just want to keep you safe, Noah,” Charlene told him. “I don’t care if you’re seven or seventeen.” She took a deep breath. “Now I need to go talk to Emma so we can start making arrangements.”

Noah slid off the picnic table. “I’ll make sure that I get everything out of the car while you talk to Mrs. Snyder.” He held out his hand, helping Charlene get down from the table.

“Good idea,” she agreed, feeling a somewhat better than Noah’s spirits seemed to have been lifted a little. Hopefully, he was done blaming himself for their predicament.

Together they walked back toward the farmhouse ready to conquer the newest challenge that had been handed to them. Once again, it was them against the world.
Emma Snyder knew she was a truly blessed woman. Even though her beloved husband, Harvey, had been taken from her way too early, she still had her health as well as her children and grandchildren. And she had managed to hold on to the family farm through the roughest of times. Family and faith had always been her saving graces. Both had saved her when she thought she might lose everything.

She loved it when the farm was full of people. That’s why she didn’t mind that Jack and Aaron were occupying two of her empty bedrooms. Her motto was ‘there’s always room for one more’. It seemed like there was always someone coming and going from her farm these days.

Aaron had left shortly after Noah made his dramatic exit, saying he had picked up an early shift at the Lakeview. Keeping up with him was next to impossible these days. Both he and Jack kept such odd hours it was almost like Emma lived alone. But still, she wouldn’t have it any other way.

She also enjoyed feeding her broad as well as giving them shelter. So the sight of Luke finishing up the leftover pancakes and eggs she’d heated up for him made her smile. Emma hadn’t seen her grandson much since school started. She was still wrapping her head around the fact that Luke was gay and that Holden had kept the news from her for so long because he’d feared her reaction. Just because she went to church didn’t mean she thought homosexuality was a sin. She believed that God created everyone in his image and he’d never create anyone he deemed vile or deviant.

If only everyone in her congregation could share her viewpoint. Or the rest of the world for that matter…

Nonetheless, Emma still loved Luke just the same as she had before Holden had shared the news of Luke’s sexual orientation. The only thing that worried her was how society would treat her precious grandson. She just wanted him to be happy. And lately when she saw Luke he seemed anything but. Luke’s sarcastic streak seemed to be working overtime.

“How’s school going?” she asked him.


“Your father said that you’re no longer running cross country.”

“Didn’t feel like it,” Luke grumbled, shoveling a forkful of eggs into his mouth.

Emma pursed her lips. This wasn’t the Luke she was used to. He was usually talking a mile a minute, making it hard for her to get a word in edgewise. And all of the sunshine seemed to have gone out of his eyes. She prayed that it would return real soon.

“Aaron was telling me before he left that your visitors are still here,” Holden declared as he sauntered into the kitchen.

“Yup, the car is toast,” Luke said, leaning back in his chair.

“It’s really awful,” Emma sighed. “Poor Noah blames himself.”

Her heart went out to poor Gloria and Noah—especially Noah at this point. The boy obviously blamed himself for their troubles. Hopefully, his mother will be able to convince him otherwise. The Carlsons seemed like good people. She hated to see such nice people hurting.

But there was something about them that she couldn’t quite put her finger on. Maybe it was the
underlying sadness that seemed to be in Gloria’s eyes or the way Noah’s clothes didn’t seem to quite fit him right. They were obviously old and worn—most likely from thrift shops. And the boy had scarfed down his breakfast like he hadn’t eaten a decent meal in ages.

Gloria and Noah had definitely fallen upon hard times.

Emma made a silent vow as a good Christian woman that she’d do everything in her power to help them. She wouldn’t just turn them out onto the street—especially not when Gloria was still ill. Her house guest had made a good show this morning of acting as if she were feeling better, but her gingerly movements hadn’t gone unnoticed by her. Whether it was menstrual cramps or something more serious—Gloria still seemed to be suffering.

“Why would he blame himself?” Holden asked, pouring himself a cup of coffee. With his steaming mug in hand, he joined them at the kitchen table.

“Because he never changed the oil in the car,” Luke readily supplied. “Aaron thinks that’s why the engine is fried.”

“The boy is just a mess,” Emma said, wringing her hands. “He ran out of here so upset and Gloria went after him. I’m going to tell her that they can stay here for awhile.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Holden asked warily. “They’re complete strangers.”

“I think they might have fallen on hard times,” she replied. “If I can help them, I will.”

“I highly doubt they’re ax murderers, Dad,” Luke added.

“No,” Holden conceded, “but still, it’s always a good idea to air on side of caution.”

“My mind is made up,” Emma insisted. “I will not turn a sick woman and her son out into the street.” She stood up, a bit restless from worrying so she decided to make a pitcher of ice tea. As she was heading toward the island Noah and Gloria crept through the door. The first thing she noticed was that Noah’s eyes look red—probably from crying. The poor boy.

Gloria had her hand, resting on his arm in a protective manner. “Sorry for such a dramatic exit there,” she said, chuckling slightly. “It’s been a stressful twenty-four hours as you might have imagined.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” Emma reassured her.

“I’m sorry I ran out earlier,” Noah said shyly. “That was really rude of me.”

Emma smiled, placing her hand on his bicep. “Oh dear, it’s quite all right. No one would ever blame you for being upset after receiving such bad news.”

“Can I borrow your phone so I can call a tow truck?” Gloria asked. “And maybe could we trouble you for a ride into town? I’d like to start car shopping as soon as possible. We should also get checked into a motel for the night too.”

“I can give you a ride into town,” Holden volunteered.

“Thank you,” Gloria graciously replied. “Noah, could you please go out to the car and unload our stuff?”

“Luke and I will help you out,” Holden suggested, rising from his chair.

“Thank you, sir,” Noah said, smiling weakly.
Luke rolled his eyes but kept his mouth shut as he stood up, taking his empty plate over to the sink. He followed his father and Noah out the door. Emma hoped that a bit of fresh air might lift her grandson’s spirits.

“I should go upstairs and pack,” Gloria said, opening the door that led to the staircase. “Thanks again for your hospitality.”

As the door banged shut behind Gloria all Emma could think about was Noah’s tear stained face. She glanced out the kitchen window and saw Holden and the boys unloading what looked like all of Gloria and Noah’s possessions from the broken down car.

Every fiber of Emma’s being screamed that this wasn’t a simple move for the Carlsons. They were most likely homeless—too proud to ask for help. And that could just be the tip of the iceberg so to speak. She needed to get to the bottom of it if she could. Emma would let Gloria call a tow truck for the car but they weren’t going anywhere. Not if she could help it.

Emma entered the guest room just as Gloria was zipping up her suitcase which was sitting on the bed. She noticed Gloria wince slightly as she straightened to her full height. “Gloria,” Emma said quietly, stepping into the room.

“I’m all packed,” she said her voice a bit too cheery. “We’ll be out of your hair just as soon as I call that tow truck.”

“There’s no rush,” Emma assured her, smiling warmly. She sat down on the bed and patted the space next to her. “Join me for a minute.”

Emma suspected Gloria was a proud woman—a lot like herself. And she just wasn’t going to accept an offer to stay at the farm. Gloria wouldn’t want her to know just how bad off they were—not that Emma would blame her. Sometimes asking for help was quite difficult. It was even harder trusting strangers so she needed Gloria to know that she could trust her and the rest of her family.

“We should really get going. There’s so much to do…”

“Please. I insist.”

“Okay.” Gloria sat next to her on the mattress nervously folding her hands on her lap.

Emma reached over gently touching Gloria’s arm. “Dear, I know how difficult it can be raising a child on your own,” she began. “When my Harvey died in a car accident I was completely lost. I had four young children at home and no means to take care of them. I was terrified. How was I going to take care of my babies and keep this farm running? Harvey’s life insurance policy would only get me so far. My oldest had moved away and sent money when he could but it was still very difficult. And my other daughter ran away when she was thirteen but that’s another story all together.”

“Oh, Emma…”

“I had to ask a lot of my kids,” she continued. “We had to make sacrifices—forgo new for used. They had to grow up a lot quicker than I would have liked.”

“It must have been very difficult for you,” Gloria murmured.

“Yes, there were nights I’d lay awake wondering how on earth I’d make it through the next day,” Emma admitted. “I couldn’t bring myself to ask for help. I thought it would be a sign of weakness.”

“But you had children and the farm,” Gloria said, reaching for Emma’s hands. “No one would have
expected you to handle it all on your own.”

Good. She was hoping Gloria would see it that way. Emma’s eyes met hers. “That’s right but I didn’t see it that way at first. Finally it just got to be too much, and I allowed others to help me. It was a godsend. I realized that no one pitied me or my children. They just wanted to help us because they cared.” Gloria nodded and Emma continued ever so carefully, “Sweetie, you and Noah are homeless, aren’t you?”

Gloria gasped but then her eyes immediately filled with tears and Emma’s suspicions were confirmed. Oh those poor dears. “Yes, we have nothing,” her voice cracked before she was overcome with sobs.

Emma gathered Gloria into her arms, holding her tightly. “It’s all right,” Emma quickly reassured her. “You don’t have to handle this by yourself anymore.” She caressed her back, hoping to soothe her. “It’s going to be okay. You and Noah are welcome to stay here for as long as you’d like.”

Gloria pulled away, wiping her eyes. “I don’t want to impose. You already have your nephew and grandson living here.”

“There’s a cabin on the far side of the property by the pump house,” Emma told her. “Years ago farm hands lived in it when I farmed the land but it’s been empty for awhile. It has two small bedrooms and will need a lot of TLC but you and Noah are welcome to it.”

“We couldn’t…”

“Why not?” Emma countered. “It’s just sitting empty. All I have to do is call the electric company and have the power turned on. The appliances might need to be repaired and some of the furniture might need to be replaced but I’m sure we wouldn’t have any problem getting that taken care of. You and Noah need a place to live.”

“Can Noah someone do odd jobs around here to help pay for us staying there?” Gloria asked.

That was a good idea. This way it wouldn’t be a complete handout. She was sure they could come to some sort of an agreement. Emma thought for a moment. “Holden is a horse breeder. He runs the business from here. I suppose he could always use an extra hand with the horses,” she said. “And I can also use extra help around here too. Jack and Aaron are never around and Holden has his own family to attend to. We can keep Noah very busy. He’ll earn your room and board here. I can promise you that.”

“Thank you.” Gloria smiled through her tears.

“May I ask how long you’ve been homeless?” Emma asked.

Gloria bit her lip, hesitating and glancing away from her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry,” she quickly apologized, silently cursing herself for possibly pushing Gloria a bit too far. The last thing she wanted to do was scare her off—not when she was so close to opening up to her. Emma had a feeling that Gloria really needed someone to confide in.

“No,” she said, meeting Emma’s eyes again. “I think it might be good to finally be able to talk to someone. It’s been so long since I’ve had a friend.”

Emma snatched Gloria’s hand off her lap, grasping it in hers. “Well…you’ve got a friend right here.”

Gloria gave it a squeeze and then spoke. “We’ve been living in the car for about a month,” she
quietly explained as her eyes dropped to her lap. “Everything fell apart when my husband, Stanley, was in the hunting accident. It left him in a coma for about a year before he finally passed. By that time the medical bills had bankrupted us and even his life insurance policy couldn’t save us. We ended up losing our house—it was just awful. I felt like such a failure. I sunk into such a depression that I couldn’t even work. I lost my teaching job at the high school and poor Noah was forced to grow up way too quickly.”

“Do you have any other family?” Emma asked.

Gloria shook her head. “No, it’s just the two of us. When I finally pulled myself out of my funk, I couldn’t find a decent job. Noah’s been working as long as he’s been able—never complaining about it. Not even when I pulled him out of school and home schooled him so he could work more. Sometimes I feel like I’ve ruined his life…” she sniffed.

“Oh no,” Emma reassured her. “Don’t think that. I can see how close the two of you are. Noah thinks the world of you.”

“I just wish the past few years could have been more normal for him,” she admitted, blinking through her tears. “He’s spent more time worrying about me and trying to be an adult than just having fun and being a kid. I know he wants a real home more than anything.”

“You can give Noah those things now—right here in Oakdale,” Emma said. “You’ll have stability here. I know plenty of people in this town so I can help you find a job too. You can borrow one of the farm trucks until you save up enough money to buy a new car.”

“Thank you,” Gloria replied. “Noah is going to be so happy. Last night he told me how much he liked it here. In fact he wanted to stay.”

“Luke can probably introduce him to some kids his age,” Emma suggested. “He’ll have friends in no time.”

“I hope so,” she sighed. “Although he’ll never admit it, I know he’s been pretty lonely.”

Emma’s spirits felt a bit lighter as she stood up. She was relieved that she’d be able to convince Gloria to accept her offer. Hopefully, they’d be able to get the fresh start they needed in Oakdale. “Let’s go tell him the good news,” she suggested.

Okay.” Gloria smiled.

Emma was glad Gloria confided in her but she wasn’t quite she she’d heard the complete truth from her though. The nuts and bolts of the story were most likely fact—there was no denying Gloria’s grief and fear—not to mention her concern for her son, but the story of her husband’s death and the events surrounding it didn’t ring true. Maybe it was because the story seemed a tad bit rehearsed. Something about it was just off. But she’d keep this to herself for the time being. Right now the only thing that mattered was keeping them safe regardless of the real story.
Chapter 5

Noah shifted nervously, feeling vulnerable and a bit exposed as he stood next to the car with all of their belongings stacked next to it. He could feel Luke’s judgmental gaze sweeping over the boxes which contained little to the casual bystander, but to him and his mother it was everything they had in the world. He hated that this guy standing next to him seemed to be sizing up their possessions for either a garage sale or the trash dumpster.

“Ah…thanks again for your help,” Noah said, kicking at the gravel in the driveway. “I can probably handle the rest from here. I’m sure you guys have better things to do.”


However, Holden quickly cut him off. “We’ll stick around until the tow truck arrives.”

Noah’s heart sank. *He probably wants to make sure that we leave.*

“I was thinking of taking Whitman out riding,” Luke said to father. “There isn’t much here. You guys can handle this without me.”

“You have all day to ride,” Holden replied. “You can stick around here for a few minutes.”


Great. He wasn’t scoring any points with Luke. But, then again, what did it really matter? They’d soon be out of the Snyders’ hair and Luke wouldn’t have to deal with him ever again.

“Oh good—you’ve unpacked the car,” Emma’s cheery voice came from behind them. Noah, Luke, and Holden spun around to find Emma and Charlene strolling toward them, arms linked together like they were as thick as thieves. “We can bring those boxes inside the house for the time being,” she announced.

“Inside the house?” Holden blinked, wide-eyed.

“Yes, Gloria and Noah are going to be living here—well—out at the cabin once we get it livable,” she explained. “I figured it will take a day or two of cleaning before they can move in.”

A home? Was Emma actually offering them a place of their own? This was too good to be true!

“Really?” Noah asked, looking from his mother to Emma.

“Really,” Charlene said, smiling broadly. “Emma’s made us a very generous offer that I couldn’t refuse.”

“Thank you so much!” Noah gushed practically jumping up and down like a game show contestant. He wanted to run over and hug her but didn’t feel it would be appropriate since they’d just met.

Holden cleared his throat. “Mama, no one has lived in the cabin in years. For all we know nothing will work in it.”

“It’s going to be fine,” Emma assured him. “Now, let’s get these boxes inside the house and then I want to show Noah and Charlene the cabin.”

Noah sensed a bit of tension coming from Emma’s son. It was almost as if he didn’t want them to
stay. Panic was beginning to seize him. What if Holden managed to talk her out of letting them stay? He didn’t want to fathom what would happen to them then.

Holden sidled up next to Emma. “Do you mind if I talk to you for a moment?” he asked in a low voice.

“Noah and I can get the boxes,” Charlene said, striding toward the car. “It’s really no trouble.” She sought out the lightest box which consisted of their winter coats and some pictures she had managed to gather together before they left Ft. Leonard Wood.

“Luke dear, please help them out,” Emma called to her grandson.

“Sure,” Luke said in a pleasant voice but his eyes were anything but. Noah could swear he felt a chill from Luke’s icy glare.

“You’ve really done enough,” Noah told him as he bent to get a box. “You don’t have to help.”

Luke’s eyes softened. “Nah, it’s okay,” he replied, appearing to melt a bit. “My horse isn’t going anywhere.” He grabbed the last box and fell into step next to Noah. “I’ll have plenty of time to take him out—no worries.”

“You have your own horse?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

Luke nodded, grinning slightly. “I’ve been riding ever since I’ve been walking. My dad taught me,” he explained as they approached the screen porch. “He breeds horses.”

Noah glanced over his shoulder just as Emma stepped away from Holden. She caught his eye and smiled warmly at him, which eased some of the tension he was feeling. He really liked Mrs. Snyder. She was so sweet. And now he and his mom were going to be living on her farm. This was going to be like living on a set of a Capra film!

“Do you have everything?” she called to him.

“Yes, ma’am,” he quickly replied. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that Holden had turned in the other direction and was headed toward the barn.

“Good,” she said, strolling toward him. “I just need to get the key to the cabin and we’ll be on our way. Luke, your father would like to speak to you in the barn when you have a moment.”

“Do you need me to go to the cabin with you guys?” Luke asked.

“No, we’ve got it all covered,” Emma replied.

“Okay,” Luke said somewhat surprised as they entered the kitchen.

“Where should we put the boxes, Mrs. Snyder?” Noah asked.

“You can just set them by the island,” she said. “We’ll move them to your new home once it’s cleaned up.”

Luke put down his box on the floor right where Emma had instructed. “I’ll see you later, Grandma,” he said, giving her a quick hug. Then he turned to Noah and Charlene. “Bye.” And he was out the
door before they could reply.

Emma snatched a keychain off the key rack that was at the far side of the kitchen. “We’ll have to go to the hardware store and have an extra set of keys made up for both of you,” she said as she ushered them toward the door. “The cabin is on the other side of the property out by where I used to grow the crops so we’ll drive over in my car but it isn’t too far to walk from here. There’s an old dirt access road that runs along the back of the property that will take us there.”

“Are you sure it’s okay that we live on your property, Mrs. Snyder?” Noah asked half afraid to hear the real answer. The sudden change in events was just too good to be true. And as the old saying goes—’if it’s too good to be true, it usually is.’

“Of course it is!” she exclaimed. “Now why would you ask such a thing?”

Noah chewed his lip, unsure if he should voice his concern. It certainly looked to him like Holden was very reluctant to allow them to live at his mother’s farm. But should he tell Emma this? He didn’t want to stir up trouble between mother and son—especially when she was being so nice to them.

“It’s nothing,” he fibbed.

“If you’re concerned about my son, please don’t be. We had a little talk and everything is fine,” she reassured him. “Your mother and I were working out terms of payment for the cabin. We came up with a plan. You can work for Holden. I wanted to discuss what we had decided with him and he’s on board with it.”

“I hope you don’t mind, Noah,” Charlene spoke up. “Holden breeds horses here at the farm and Emma says he could use the extra help.”

“And so could I,” Emma added.

“I wouldn’t mind at all,” Noah replied totally relieved. This solved his ID problem. Certainly he wouldn’t need to fill out a W-2 form working for Mr. Snyder.

Emma unlocked her car. “In addition to room and board, Holden has agreed to pay you a small wage so that you have some spending money,” she explained. “You can’t live the life of a teenage boy without a bit of pocket change.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate it.” Noah already planned of putting all of his ‘pocket change’ toward their living expenses. But he wouldn’t need the money for any teenage stuff. It wasn’t like he was going to have any friends or be going on any dates. In the four years they’d been on the run, Noah never really had any of those things. Not real friends that he could confide his deepest, darkest secrets in. And certainly not a real date with a boy.

As they drove over to the cabin, Noah stared out the window just taking in the beauty of the Snyder farm. Excitement coursed through his veins as the reality began to set in that this was going to be their home. A real home.

He kept going on and on about a home, almost sounding like Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz. It has been so long since he and his mother had a home. Even when they weren’t on the run, living with the Colonel was never comfortable. They were always on edge because all it took was one wrong word or action to set off his father and then there would be hell to pay.

However, now they were free of his tyranny. Noah and his mother could do as they pleased in their own home. Noah was giddy with excitement. He couldn’t remember the last time he was so
incredibly happy.

Emma parked the car in front of a small, wooden cabin. The white paint was chipping off and the windows covered with years’ worth of dirt, but to Noah it looked like Tara. He glanced over at his mother and by the way her eyes were shining he could tell she was feeling the same way. Reaching over, he grabbed her hand.

“Like I said before—it’s hasn’t been used in some time,” Emma said as she got out of the car.

“It looks perfect,” Charlene said, squeezing Noah’s hand.

Emma chuckled. “I can assure you that it’s far from perfect.” She marched up to the old wooden front porch and unlocked the front door carefully stepping inside the dim cabin.

Noah followed closely behind her, leading his mom into their new home, which smelled musty from being closed up for years. Blinking, he desperately tried to get his eyes to adjust to the muted light in the room because he was so anxious to see what the interior of the cabin looked like. All Noah could make out were various shapes of furniture—a sofa, a table and chairs.

That is, until Emma pulled open the curtains that covered the front window allowing sunlight to illuminate the room. Emma hadn’t been exaggerating when she said the cabin would need some TLC. First and foremost on the list would be soap and water. There had to be at least two inches of dust everywhere.

“I still think it’s perfect, Emma,” Charlene said, glancing around the room they were standing in which was a combination living room/dining room with a large stone fireplace on the far right wall. Directly behind the dining area was the small kitchen area with a stove, sink, and refrigerator. Off the living area there were three doors—two Noah assumed led to bedrooms and the third must be to a bathroom. The cabin was paneled in knotty pine and the floors were hardwood which definitely gave it a rustic feel. The kitchen table had mismatched chairs and the living room sofa was possibly an orange floral print but the cushions were sagging and stained underneath the dirt.

But it didn’t matter. Noah’s director’s eye was already kicking into gear, seeing the potential. “I agree.” He grinned, not caring if he opened one of the bedroom doors and discovered that he had to sleep on an old cot.

Emma shook her head. “Bless your hearts. You certainly know how to find the positive in things,” she said as she unfastened the curtains from the rod. “I’m going to try washing these. Hopefully, they won’t fall apart.”

“Can I look around?” Noah shyly asked as he took a few cautious steps into the living area.

“Please do,” Emma replied. “Make yourself at home.”

“I bet you’re anxious to pick your bedroom,” Charlene teased.

“You get the bigger room, Mom,” Noah said as he approached the door near the fireplace.

“I’m afraid neither is too spacious but both have full size beds and small dressers,” Emma said, placing the curtains on the kitchen table. “The mattresses should be in fairly good shape too.”

“That’s all we need,” Charlene said, following Noah.

Noah opened the door, revealing a small bedroom with a full size bed covered with an old flowered blue flowered bedspread. Next to it was a small nightstand with a lamp. He strolled over to the
window, opening the curtains so he could get a better look.

“Is this the room you want?” Charlene asked.

“We don’t know if it’s the bigger one,” Noah replied.

Emma poked her head inside. “I think they’re pretty close to the same size,” she informed them. “Noah, could you please take the curtains down and hand them to me?”

“Sure,” he said, turning and unhooking the old drapes that covered the single window that was in the room.

“The bedspread is just awful,” Emma said, shaking her head. “I think I might have a couple of extra quilts at the house you can use instead. You’ll need fresh sheets too.” And then she disappeared, probably going into the next room to fetch the curtains for washing.

His mom wrapped her arms around him. “I want you to take this room, string bean,” she told him. “The light in your eyes as you looked around it made me so happy. It’s been awhile since I’ve seen it.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, ducking his head.

“Hey,” she said gently yet firmly, “I’ll have none of that. We’ve had a rough four years. Now I want you to promise me that you’ll start being a kid again.”

Noah pulled away from her. How could she suggest such a thing? He had to stick by her—pull his own weight, take care of her. “But,” Noah began to protest.

“No, ‘but’s’,” Charlene insisted. “If we’re going to put down some roots here, then it’s time for you to start acting more like a teenager. Agreed?”

“What about you?”

“I’m going to get a job and be your mother,” she informed him. “How does that sound?”

There was no denying that it sounded pretty damn good. Maybe he could be friends with Luke and Luke would introduce him to his friends. They could go to the movies, hang out, and do things kids his age were supposed to do.

Maybe…just maybe…

********

Luke just stared at his father totally shocked by what his father had just suggested. His dad had always been on his side. But now it seemed as if he turned against him. Maybe his father never believed in him to begin with.

“It’s only temporary,” Holden said, placing his hand on Luke’s arm.

Luke pulled away, wrapping his arms around his chest. “Why do you want to get rid of me?” he asked tears seeping into his voice.

“Son, we don’t want to get rid of you,” Holden said softly. “We just think it’s a good idea to have an extra pair of eyes here at the farm for a little while. You’d only be living here for a month or so.”

“Who’s we?” Luke demanded. “You and Mom? Was Mom lying when she said that she’s okay with
me being gay? She’s not is she?!” Tears stung his eyes.

Luke knew it was all too good to be true—his mother waking up from her coma declaring that she was perfectly fine with him being gay. Now that she’d been living with it again she’d changed her mind and wanted him gone. Luke felt positively sick.

Holden placed his hands on Luke’s shoulders, steadying him. “Luke, that’s not it at all,” he reassured him. “Your mother and I would never try to get rid of you. And she has accepted your sexuality. I just want someone here while Noah and Gloria settle into the cabin.”

“You don’t like them, do you?”

Holden stepped back from him. “It’s not that I don’t like them…”

“You don’t trust them?” Luke pressed.

“They’re complete strangers,” Holden replied. “I just think it’s best that someone is here to look out for your grandmother.”

His father had a valid point there. While the Carlsons seemed harmless, you couldn’t be too safe. But why did he have to be the one looking out for his grandmother? His mother had only been home from the hospital for month. He missed her and didn’t want to be away from her now.


“And he’s barely ever here—same with Aaron,” Holden diplomatically replied. “That’s why I need you to step up for the family.”

Great. His dad was pulling the family card. Not fucking fair. He knew he could never say no to it. Family always came first with Luke. Already he could feel his resolve beginning to crumble. “But, Dad,” he pleaded, “don’t you and Mom need help with Ethan and the girls? You’ve been so busy with work and all…”

“I just got a new helper,” Holden replied.

Luke was almost afraid to ask. “Who?”

“Noah.”

“But you just got done telling me that you don’t trust him!” Luke exclaimed. “Now he’s going to be working for you?”

“It was your grandmother’s idea,” Holden explained. “She figured it was a good way for them to earn room and board.”

“Do you agree?”

“Yes, I do,” he replied. “I could use the extra help and once he learns the ropes it will allow me to spend more time with your mom and the kids. Luke, you don’t have to move to the farm today. But I would like you to be there tomorrow. Do you think you can have all of your stuff packed by then?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Holden smiled warmly.

“You know I can always help you out,” Luke reminded him. He always enjoyed spending time on
the farm with his father. Granted, mucking out the stalls wasn’t his favorite pastime but loved the rest. And now it looked like this was getting taken away from him as well.

“You need to focus on your studies,” Holden said. “And basketball season will be coming up so you’ll be busy with practices and games. This really makes a lot of sense and it will allow me to get to know Noah better. If he and his mother are up to no good I’ll know about it.”


Luke closed his eyes. He loved it when his dad relied on him, but he wished it were for something else. Even though his father explained why he was asking him to temporarily move to the farm, Luke still felt like he was being exiled. “Okay, Dad,” Luke sighed. “I’ll do it for you.”
Chapter 6

Luke stuffed another striped sweater into his suitcase, making a silent vow that the next item of clothing he purchased would be something of the solid variety. He has way too many stripes in his wardrobe he quickly discovered as he was forced to pack his clothing for his move to the farm. But that was all he was going to pack, besides his laptop and journal. Luke downright refused to bring any other personal affects to his grandma’s because this was only temporary. His dad had promised that it would only be for a month. And Luke had intended to make sure this was one promise his father kept.

Sure, he loved the farm. It also felt like home to him too. And under normal circumstances he’d jump at the chance to stay there, to be close to his horse, the pond, his grandmother’s incredible cooking (and her pies and cookies) and the beautiful land. Fall on the farm was especially amazing with all of the leaves changing color, Gram’s pumpkins ready for ready for picking, and one of Luke’s favorite smells was the scent of burning leaves which always seemed to be in the air this time of the year at the farm.

Even though Luke was only going to be any from his home for a short while, his throat still tightened at the prospect of leaving—at all. This was his home—his room. He belonged here with his family—his mom, dad, Faith, Natalie, and Ethan. He was also going to miss his cousin, Jade, who also lived with them. Although it seemed like she was barely around these days. She had recently gotten a waitressing job at the local teen club, Crash. Jade had claimed it was because the tips were good but Luke suspected it was because his cousin wanted to keep a close eye on her obsession, Will Munson, who was also a friend of Luke’s as was Will’s wife, Gwen. Will also worked at the club which was bound to make things interesting.

Luke was even going to miss all of Jade’s drama.

Blinking back the tears that were threatening to fall, Luke quickly zipped his duffle bag. He needed to get a grip. This wasn’t the end of the world.

“Hey, honey,” Lily said, stepping into his room.

Luke forced a smile onto his face. “Hi, Mom.”

“Is everything all right?” she asked as she approached him.

“Yeah, sure.”


Okay, so he was lying a smidge but he would be fine as soon as he was all settled in at the farm. Leaving was the hard part for him but he’d get through it because that’s what he did these days—found a way to survive.

Lily lovingly ran her hand over his hair, smoothing down the blonde locks. “You do know that your father and I are not sending you away because you’re gay.”

He nodding, staring down at his sneakers. “Yeah, I know.”

Lily tilted his chin up, forcing Luke’s eyes to meet hers. “Do you? Baby, we love and accept you. I
would never dream of sending you away.” Before Luke could reply, they were interrupted by Ethan’s cries coming from down the hall. “Sounds like your little brother is hungry. Could you get him while I get a bottle ready?”

“Sure,” he replied. “Do you think I could feed him before I leave?”

“Of course you can! Why don’t you meet me downstairs in the living room? It will be less chaotic since the girls are in the family room with your father.”

Luke grinned. “We’ll be right down.” He followed his mother out of his bedroom and headed down the hall toward the nursery while his mom went downstairs. “Hey, little guy,” he said as he approached the crib, “it’s okay. Your big brother is here now.” Luke scooped Ethan up, holding him against his chest. He rubbed Ethan’s back, hoping to soothe him as he sauntered out of the room. “Mommy is getting a bottle ready for you. It will be ready in a few minutes.”

Luke carefully carried Ethan down the steps and into the quiet living room. He settled onto the sofa to wait for his mother to arrive with the bottle. Ethan was still a bit restless, but he wasn’t wailing like he’d been when got him out of the crib.


“Here we go!” Lily said, breezing into the room, holding up the bottle. She handed Luke the bottle and then sat down next to him. “It sounds like he’s very hungry.”

“He is,” Luke said, brushing the nipple of the bottle against Ethan’s mouth. “That’s it,” he said as Ethan began sucking on it. Luke grinned, glancing over at his mother. “All is well in the world again.”

“Sure is,” Lily said, draping her arm across the back of the sofa. “I have my two boys right here with me.”

“I’m going to miss doing things like this,” Luke said, staring down at his baby brother.

“Just because you’re going to be living at the farm for a little while doesn’t mean that you can’t come visit us,” Lily explained. “And it doesn’t mean I won’t ask you to babysit now and then. Jade seems to be working a lot of hours at Crash so she’s never around. I just hope she stays out of trouble.”

Luke chuckled, “Good luck with that.”

“I know,” Lily sighed, “but I was hoping that living here and having a job would help ground her.”

He highly doubted anything would ever ground his cousin—it just wasn’t in her nature. “Maybe. You never know,” he diplomatically replied. He wasn’t about to tell his mother that Jade was still pursuing a married man.

“You’re a natural with him, you know,” Lily said, stroking Luke’s hair.


“I hope you can have a family of your own one day. You’d be a wonderful daddy.”

“There’s no reason why I can’t,” Luke informed her. “Just because I’m gay doesn’t mean I can’t have a family. I can adopt or there’s also a surrogate mother…”

“Luke, I didn’t mean to insinuate that you couldn’t,” Lily quickly apologized. “I just want you to be
“I want to be happy too,” Luke said, gently pulling the bottle out of Ethan’s mouth and balancing it on the arm of the sofa. Then he propped Ethan up on his lap so he could burp him. “I want to fall in love—have a boyfriend.”

Lily smiled weakly. “I know you do. And I’m sure that you will find someone. You just need to be patient.”

“Do you want me to have a boyfriend?” Luke asked as he patted Ethan’s back.

“Yes, I do,” she reassured him. “I’ll admit that it will be an adjustment at first but it will be okay.”

Luke nodded as Ethan let out a loud burp. At least his mother had answered honestly. It probably would be a bit strange for his parents the first time he brought home a boyfriend.

“Well, I don’t think you have to worry about any boyfriends in my future,” he said, cradling his baby brother in his arms and picking the bottle up off the arm of the couch. “I think I’m the only gay kid in Oakdale.”

“I highly doubt that,” Lily told him. “Oakdale is a college town. I’m sure there are plenty of boys at the university—not that I necessarily want you getting involved with an older college boy.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not rushing into anything.”

“Okay,” Lily breathed a sigh of relief.

Luke didn’t plan on staying a virgin forever. No way. He only planned on letting the dust settle at home for a month or two before he set his sights on Oakdale U—where the gay boys had to be. College was where a lot of guys decided to come out. And for all he knew Oakdale U could be a regular gay mecca—just waiting to be explored.

After Ethan finished the rest of his bottle and Luke burped him again, he gave his baby brother a kiss and then passed him off to his mother. Luke headed back upstairs to get his laptop, messenger bag with all of his schoolwork, suitcase, and duffle bag so he could head over to the farm. He couldn’t stall too much longer or else his father was liable to come after him and drag him by his ear over to his grandmother’s house.

As soon as he was inside his room, he closed the door and locked it behind him. However, before Luke left he needed to make sure that he hid some of his more personal items. The last thing he needed was his mother or his sisters finding his secret stash of porn and other things. Opening his closet, he sought out an old wooden box he’d carved in Cub Scouts. Currently, it was home to some of his most prized treasures—a foul ball he caught at a White Sox game, courtside ticket stubs to a Chicago Bulls game he’d gone to with his dad and Kevin, a souvenir penny his Aunt Rose had given him from the Jersey shore, and the first journal he’d ever written in.

Scanning his closet, he spotted a shoe box at the bottom of it that he hadn’t quite gotten around to throwing out yet (sometimes it paid to be a bit sloppy). The shoebox would work as a temporary home for his valuables, freeing up the wooden box for the other more sensitive stash.

Once Luke stored the shoebox on the top shelf of his closet, he set the empty wooden box on his bed and opened the nightstand drawer which container his bounty of porn. Luke had condoms and lube because he was going to be damn sure to be prepared for the big event when it finally happened. He even had a couple of condoms and a small packet of lube hidden in his wallet just to be extra safe. He wasn’t going to take any chances because even though he was only seventeen it felt like he’d
been a virgin forever. All of his friends have had sex.

But, then again, all of his friends were straight.

Luke hated feeling so utterly alone—alone and so different.

Fuck. He hadn’t even kissed a boy!

Stop it There’s nothing you can do about it, he told himself. Just hide the porn before Mom or one of the girls comes banging on the door.

Besides the condoms, Luke also had a copy of Unzipped magazine that he’d used to beat off on more than one occasion. In fact, he’d thumbed through it so many times the pages were pretty wrinkled. He’d probably have to break down and get a new one. He also had his gay porn DVD, The Pizza Boy, that he sent away for in the mail along with a dildo that he hadn’t used on himself yet. Luke was still holding out for a boyfriend to be the first one to be inside of him. But he still wanted to be prepared—just in case this virginity thing lasted too long. And there were also pages and pages of Internet research he’d printed out. On them held all of the secrets to positions, techniques—exotic things like rimming. Luke studied this information almost every night determined that he was going to be the best lover—so good that no one would ever want to leave him.

Luke made sure every last item was out of his drawer and then put the lid on the box. He stashed it in the closet on the shelf next to the shoebox. No one should be snooping around in there. Satisfied that his bedroom was now parent and sibling proof, Luke grabbed all of his belongings and unlocked the door.

Everyone was in the family room when Luke shuffled inside with his luggage. His heartstrings got all knotted up at the sight of his family lounging around like they did every Sunday afternoon—his father watching the Bears game, his mother playing with Ethan, and Faith and Natalie involved in a game of Chutes and Ladders on the floor at his parents feet. Usually, Luke was right in the thick of things.

But today he was leaving.

“Luke!” Faith exclaimed as soon as she saw him. Immediately she jumped up, dashing over to him.

“Where are you going?”

Luke glanced over at his parents silently pleading for their help because he didn’t want to be the one to explain the temporary move to the farm. Plus he wasn’t so sure he could pull it off without getting choked up. A lot of guys his age thought having younger siblings was a pain in the ass. Not Luke. He absolutely loved being a big brother.

“Faith, your brother is going to be spending a few weeks at the farm helping out Grandma Emma,” Holden explained.

“Why?” came the eleven year old’s reply, which didn’t surprise Luke one bit. Faith was never one to be just brushed aside with a simple explanation. She was way too smart for that.

“Your grandma has a few projects she needs help with,” Holden replied.

“Can’t Uncle Jack or Aaron help her?” Faith persisted.

Luke had to force himself to keep from grinning from ear to ear. Leave it to his little sister to have his back.
“It’s a special project that only Luke can help with,” Lily added.

“Like what?” Faith asked somewhat frustrated, planting her hands firmly on her hips looking between Lily and Holden, expecting much better answers than she’s been receiving.

As much as Luke would have loved to watch his parents squirm a bit, he decided not to hold a grudge about the move and help them out. Squatting down to his sister’s eye level, he held out his arms. “Come here, princess,” he beckoned to her. “You too, lady bug,” he called to Natalie. His sisters scampered over filling his waiting arms. Luke hugged both of them. “Okay, I’m going to be staying at Gram’s because she’s taken in a lady who has a son who’s a little older than I am. They don’t have any place to live right now so they’re going to be living in the old cabin. And I’m going to be showing them around the farm and stuff—kinda making them feel comfortable and at home since they don’t know anyone in Oakdale. Jack and Aaron can’t do it because they’re never home and Gram needs some extra help.”

“Will you ever come home?” Natalie asked, staring up at him wide-eyed.


“How long is few weeks?” Natalie wondered, tilting her head to the side.

Luke thought for a moment, pondering how to explain it to her in terms that a five year old would understand. “Not too long. I’ll be home before Thanksgiving but probably after Halloween.”

“We’ll miss you,” Faith said, resting her head against Luke’s cheek.

“I’ll miss you guys too,” Luke replied, fighting to keep the emotion out of his voice. “But we’ll still see each other all the time. You’re not going to get rid of me that easily.” He gave each girl a quick kiss on the cheek and then stood up, quickly composing himself. “Okay, I should probably take off.”

His parents both stood up. His mom approached him with Ethan in her arms. “I still want to see you all the time,” she told him. “And Ethan wants to see you too.”


His mother wrapped her free arm around Luke, pulling him into a hug. “I love you, baby, please never forget that.”

“Love you too, Mom,” he whispered, blinking back some tears. Then he moved to his dad, who pulled him into a tight bear hug.

“Thanks again for doing this, Luke,” he said into his ear. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Dad,” Luke replied and then untangled himself from his father’s embrace. He grabbed his belongings off the floor, hoisting his messenger and laptop bags over his shoulder. “You know where I’ll be if you need me;” he said, trying to keep his voice cheerful.

*Suck it up. Don’t be such a pansy. It’s not like you’re going off to war. You’re just going to the farm—walking distance from here! Deal with it!*

“See ya!” Luke waved and then quickly disappeared out the door, not waiting for a response.

He tossed his luggage into his Mustang and then pulled out of the driveway. His parents’ property backed up to Grandma Emma’s farm. Normally Luke would just take the path that led past Snyder
Pond, connecting the two properties so it seemed a bit odd to be driving to his grandma’s house. But he was going to need his car and it would have been a pain to have carried his belongings from his house.

When Luke pulled into his grandma’s driveway it looked like she was the only one home. Well, he wasn’t sure about Gloria and Noah, but they were probably around somewhere since they didn’t have a car. Luke wasn’t too anxious to see either of them at the moment, especially since they were the reason for his upheaval. And if he could help it he really didn’t want to take his hostility out on either of them.

Luke unloaded his car and headed straight into the farmhouse. His grandma was sitting at the kitchen table folding laundry when he entered the kitchen. The moment she saw him she stopped folding the towel she had before her and smiled.

“Hello, Luke,” she welcomed him. “It’s good to see you. I have the guest room all made up for you.”

“Hi,” he said, setting down his stuff. “It looks like you’ve been busy.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” she sighed. “I’ve been in contact with the other members of the Ladies Aid at church seeing what kind of denotations I could get for Gloria and Noah. I’m happy to say that I’ve been getting a lot of good things for them—a much better sofa, linens, newer appliances. Everything is coming along nicely except for the bathroom.”

Luke pulled out a chair and sat at the kitchen table. “What’s wrong with the bathroom?” he asked half afraid to hear the answer.

“The toilet works but that is the only thing in there that does,” Emma explained. “The sink, tub, and shower don’t. We can’t get any running water to come out right now. I’ll have to call a plumber tomorrow so until we can get the problem solved Gloria and Noah will have to wash up here at the house. It will be a bit inconvenient for awhile but that’s the only solution I can come up with.”

How about shipping them off to the Wagon Wheel? Luke wanted to suggest but he held his tongue or else his grandma would have backhanded him for suggesting such a thing. The Snyder way wasn’t sending someone in need packing. Luke needed to learn this.

“Did you need help with anything?” he asked, silently praying that the answer would be no. All he really wanted to do was flee to his new, temporary room. Maybe he could escape with some writing for awhile before he needed to tackle his homework.

“No, I think it’s all covered,” she replied. “Noah has really been a godsend. That boy is such a hard worker. He’s really going to be quite a help around here.”

*What about me? I’m supposed to be here to help too. I’m the one who was uprooted from my home to ‘help the family!’*

Luke forced a smile. “Great.”

“I need to finish folding these bath towels so I can run them out to the cabin,” Emma said as she folded the towel and reached for another from the laundry basket.

Luke stood up. “I’ve got some homework I need to finish up for tomorrow,” he said. “I should get to work on it.”

“I’m going to have Gloria and Noah here for dinner since I haven’t had a chance to take Gloria grocery shopping yet,” Emma told him. “I was planning on having it ready around six.”
Oh hell no.

“I really have a lot of stuff to get through,” Luke fibbed. “I’ll probably just grab something later,” he said, gathering his stuff together.


“I will. It will just be later on after I get my studies done,” he assured his grandma. “Don’t worry. I won’t go hungry.” He quickly opened the door that led to the back staircase and hurried up it as fast as he could before his grandma could protest any further. Turning down dinner was like breaking one of the Ten Commandments in Emma Snyder’s book. The last thing he needed was her chasing after him to see what was wrong.

All he wanted was to be left alone for now. He didn’t need his grandma fussing all over him and he sure as hell didn’t need to share a meal with the reason he was here in the first place.

No fucking way.

As far as he was concerned the less he saw of Noah and his mother the better.
Chapter 7

Noah was exhausted, but he was so incredibly happy. Getting the cabin cleaned up so it could be lived in was worth every ache and pain that riddled his body. He and his mom had been working non-stop since Emma had shown them the cabin the day before.

First, the car had been towed away and his mother had collected the money for it. While his mom and Emma had been in town, Emma had taken her to the local diner, Al’s, where she’d been hired as a waitress. She wouldn’t be starting for a few days but it was a relief to know that they both had jobs as well as a place to live.

While Noah and Charlene had been cleaning the cabin from top to bottom, Emma had been manning the phones, gathering all the essentials they’d need to set up a proper house. She had deemed the sofa garbage but quickly found a suitable replacement for it through the ladies church group she belonged to. The tan striped couch was almost like new except for a small Kool-Aid stain on one of the cushions which was easily covered up with a couple of crimson throw pillows. Noah thought it felt absolutely heavenly. They hadn’t had a sofa since they left Missouri. He couldn’t wait to pop popcorn, curl up on it, and watch a movie.

Another donation that Emma had gotten for them was a 32” color TV. However, they wouldn’t be able to get cable but she was pretty sure that with a pair of rabbit ears they’d be able to pick up the local TV stations. And, of course, Noah would have their DVD player hooked up in no time so they’d be able to watch movies.

Other items were also acquired through The Ladies Aid—some pots and pans, pillows for both beds, and a set of brand new sheets. Noah couldn’t remember the last time he had new sheets for his bed. He was thrilled. But he was over the moon with the quilt Emma had brought him to replace the ratty old bedspread. The patchwork quilt was beautiful and best of all it was made by her which made it even more special to him. His mom also had gotten one as well to replace the bedspread in her room.

For the most part the dirty, musty smell was gone from the cabin. They had all of the windows opened the day before while they scrubbed the walls and floors. And when the windows couldn’t be opened his mother had burned some vanilla and cinnamon scented candles Emma had given her to use since the electricity hadn’t been turned on yet (the big event would happen the next day).

Holden had shown up to make sure that the flue for the chimney was open and working properly since the fireplace was their only heat source. Noah had found himself disappointed when Luke hadn’t come with him. But he quickly chastised himself for it. Luke was off limits for many reasons. Besides the fact that Noah could never act on being gay, Luke didn’t even seem to want to be his friend. Noah just needed to try to forget about him and focus on the positives in his life—having a home, a job, and being free of his father.

Later, Aaron had knocked on their door, offering a much needed extra set of hands. He was quickly put to work by Holden, assisting them with the removal of the old appliances which were replaced with some donated ones that were in much better condition.

Noah and Charlene were a bit overwhelmed by all of the donations that were coming in from complete strangers. They’d never seen such kindness of this magnitude. But it was a bittersweet feeling. Noah was touched that so many people had reached out to them but at the same time he was embarrassed to need charity of this magnitude. Not that he blamed his mother for the predicament. She did what she had to, to get them away from his father.
Noah hated feeling pitied. So he would show the Snyders that they weren’t a charity case. He could pull his weight at the farm so he’d earn the cabin they’d be living in. Holden would not regret employing him. Noah would work his butt off and do every little task Holden gave him without a single complaint or screw up. He’d be the best employee Holden ever had.

Maybe Noah had seen too many movies or maybe it was the hopeless romantic in him, but he was beginning to believe that they were destined to be in Oakdale. Good things were in store for them here.

“Are you almost ready to head up to the house?” Charlene asked, poking her head into the bathroom where Noah was hanging the new shower curtain that his mother had bought while she was in town earlier. “You know there’s no rush on that, string bean,” she said, pointing to the curtain. “Emma hasn’t gotten a hold of the plumber yet so there’s no telling when he’ll get out here to look the shower and the sink.”

“I know,” Noah replied, “but I just want to be ready for when it does work.”

“You need to relax,” she told him. “You’ve been working non-stop since Emma showed us this place. And you start working for Holden tomorrow at six am. I don’t want you all worn out before you even start.”

“I promise I’ll get to bed early tonight,” Noah assured her.

“Come on. Wash up in the kitchen sink,” she instructed. “We don’t want to keep Emma waiting.”

Noah quickly finished snapping the shower curtain in place because he just couldn’t leave the project unfinished (too many years of living under the Colonel’s rules and regulations). No task ever went uncompleted in the Mayer household—no matter how long it took to get it done.

As he passed by the mirror that covered the medicine cabinet, Noah paused to hastily run his fingers through his sweat matted hair. It definitely had seen better days but he supposed it didn’t really matter since it was only dinner with Emma—nothing too fancy.

“Mom, should I change clothes?” he asked, sauntering out of the bathroom and over toward the kitchen.

Noah was wearing his oldest and most worn pair of jeans. And his gray Cedar Point Millennium Force sweatshirt was smudged with dirt. Like most of his t-shirts and sweatshirts the writing on it meant nothing to him. Noah had no idea where Cedar Point was even located. It just happened to be in good condition (at the time of purchase), the correct size and the decent price at the Salvation Army, which was the basic theme of his wardrobe.

“You look fine—just hurry up please,” she said, getting a bit impatient as she moved toward the front door. “You’re handsome regardless of what you’re wearing.”

“I just don’t want to look like a slob,” Noah quickly replied, scrubbing the day’s grime off his hands. It wasn’t like he was worried about looking extra special for someone.

There wasn’t anyone to look extra special for, right?

“Okay…ready.” He dashed toward the door. “Sorry to keep you waiting!”

Together they made the trek to the farmhouse. The autumn air was brisk but Noah relished the smells of the farmland—their new home. The land was so beautiful, peaceful and now they were a part of it.
“This farm reminds me of my grandparents’ place,” Charlene quietly admitted.

“I wish I could have met them.”

“Me too,” she sighed. “They would have loved you. And you would have loved their horse farm. I should never have let him keep me from my family.”

“You probably didn’t have a choice,” Noah said his voice taking on a defensive edge when he spoke about his father.

“No, probably not,” she relented.

“Not unless you wanted to get hurt,” he added. Although his mother didn’t like to talk about it, he’d seen his father hit her on several occasions beginning when he was a very small boy. At first he thought that’s what all husband’s did to their wives until he started spending time at friends’ houses and realized it wasn’t the case. Unfortunately, Noah had been too small and weak to defend his mother and eventually he also became a victim of the Colonel’s abuse as well.

“I wish you’d never seen any of that,” she said softly. “And, more importantly, I would have given anything to have stopped him from laying a hand on you.”

“I know, Mom,” Noah reassured him. “You tried the best you could and we’re safe now in this incredible place.”

“And I bet Emma’s dinners are as good as her breakfasts.” Charlene grinned as they approached the farmhouse.

When they entered the kitchen they were assaulted with an array of delicious smells—pot roast, mashed potatoes, green beans, rolls, and something sweet—probably a pie. The only time he saw so much food assembled in one place was when he worked in a restaurant. Noah’s stomach let out a loud, embarrassing rumble.

“Smells wonderful,” Charlene said, inhaling.

“Thank you, everything is ready,” Emma replied, sticking a spoon in the bowl of mashed potatoes.

“What can I do to help, ma’am?” Noah readily asked.

“You can put the potatoes and green beans on the table,” she instructed. “Gloria, do you think you can grab the rolls.”

“Sure thing, Emma,” Charlene said, stepping up next to him and snatching the wicker basket which contained the fresh baked rolls.

“What would you like to drink?” Emma asked. “We have iced tea, milk, root beer, water?”

“Root beer would be great,” Noah replied as he moved back toward the island so he could ferry more food to the table.

“I’ll have the same,” Charlene added, sitting down in one of the empty chairs.

“Noah, if you can take the pot roast and I’ll handle the drinks, we should be all set,” Emma decided. Noah took the serving platter. “No problem.” He set it down in the middle of the table and then sat down next to his mother.
Emma distributed the drinks and then took her place at the head of the table. “I’m so happy you could join me,” she said, smiling.

“You have enough food to feed about ten more people,” Charlene chuckled.

“I’m so used to cooking for a large group,” she admitted. “Jack and Aaron will dig into the leftovers when they finally get home. I was hoping Luke could join us but he said that he’s too busy with homework.”


Noah’s stomach went all topsy-turvy and his throat bone dry. Luke could have been right here at this table with them.

“It’s a shame he couldn’t join us,” Charlene replied.

“Yes,” Noah managed to croak.

“I’d like to say grace before we eat if you don’t mind,” Emma said, clasping her hands together.

“No, not at all,” Charlene said. “Noah and I have a lot to be thankful for.”

Emma bowed her head. “Dear lord, thank you for the wonderful food on the table. Please bless my family and friends—especially the newest—Gloria and Noah. Please keep everyone safe and healthy. Amen.”


“Now, please don’t be shy,” Emma instructed. “Dig in and take as much as you’d like because there’s plenty to go around.”

Noah reached for the platter of pot roast that was in front of him and speared off a couple of slices of meat before passing it along to his mom. Emma handed him the bowl of green beans which he ladled onto his plate. The food kept coming around the table until his plate was piled high.

“Are you nervous about working with Holden tomorrow?” Emma asked as she buttered a roll.

“A little bit,” Noah admitted, shifting in his chair. “I don’t want to let Mr. Snyder down.”

“All Holden expects out of you is your very best,” Emma explained. “He knows that you don’t have any experience. And I’ve seen all of the hard work you’ve put in at the cabin so I know that you won’t have any problem.”

His mother glanced over at him. “It’s perfectly normal to be nervous before starting a new job,” she assured him. “I’m going to feel the same way on my first day at Al’s. You have an advantage because you already know Holden.”

Yeah, but Noah wasn’t so sure that Holden liked him. However, he wasn’t about to voice this concern aloud. Instead, he forced a smile onto his face. “You’re right.”

“You’ll have to stop over for breakfast,” Emma told him. “I want to be sure that you have a good, warm meal in your belly.”

“I don’t want you to have to get up so early on my account.”

Emma chuckled, “Noah, I grew up on a farm! I’m always up with the roosters!”
How could he be so silly? Of course she was used to being up early! Noah blushed. “I’d love to come over for breakfast.”

“The electricity will be turned on at the cabin tomorrow,” Emma said. “Gloria, we’ll make a trip into town so we can go shopping for groceries and other essentials. Hopefully, I’ll hear back from the plumber so you can finally have a fully functioning bathroom.”

“Thank you,” Charlene replied. “We’re really so grateful for everything you’ve done for us.”

Noah had been in such a rush that he hadn’t thought to grab his bed clothes, a bath towel, and shampoo so he could just take a shower while they were up at the house.

“Would it be okay if I came back a little later to shower?” Noah asked.

“Of course,” Emma said, placing her hand on his arm, “this entire farm is your home—not just the cabin. Please just come back when you’re ready and don’t feel like you have to knock.”

“Okay,” he replied, nodding. Going from a single motel room to an entire farm was going to take some getting used to but he was definitely looking forward to it.

Noah was pretty quiet the rest of the meal while Emma and his mother planned what stores they wanted to go to the next day. He wasn’t the only one who was going to be busy. The ladies seemed to be formulating quite an outing. Noah couldn’t remember the last time his mom had a friend to go shopping with. She certainly hadn’t had any since they left Ft. Leonard Wood.

Had she friends on the base?

Noah remembered couples that his parents associated with but he couldn’t remember his mom having a girlfriend of her own. Probably because it wasn’t allowed.

But now she had one. Emma had called them friends when she said grace. She had sounded sincere too. And she wouldn’t have taken them in if she didn’t care about them. Noah knew he cared about Emma and he’d never do anything to disappoint her or her family.

Once he finished eating his apple pie, Noah pushed himself away from the table. “Everything was amazing, Mrs. Snyder,” he said, grabbing his plate. “May I take your plates?”

“Sure, honey,” Charlene replied.

“That isn’t necessary,” Emma said.

Noah took his mother’s empty plate. “The least I can do is dishes.”

“And I can dry,” Charlene added.

“No, Emma relented, “but I’ll put the dishes away because I want to be sure that my kitchen is in order.”

“No,” Noah grinned as he headed toward the sink with a stack of plates. They were going to make quite a team.

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Noah had returned to the farmhouse a couple of hours later to take his shower so he could get a good night’s sleep. And even though Emma said that he could just let himself in, he still felt a bit odd doing so. The old house had been quiet and still so he’d just crept up the stairs and taken a quick
shower so he could get back to the cabin. Five am was going to come awfully early. Noah didn’t want to be late for breakfast. His mom had picked up an old fashion alarm clock complete with those obnoxious bells to ensure that he’d be awake on time since they didn’t have power yet. But he also wanted to make sure the he got enough sleep so he’d be able to give Holden his best effort.

Noah quickly dried off from the shower, tugging on his old black sweats sans underwear. He liked the feeling of the warm, heavy cotton against all of his flesh when he slept so he preferred to go without his briefs when he could. And now that he had his own room he could do just that. Then he grabbed his gray Detroit Red Wings t-shirt and pulled it over his head. Flipping the lid of the toilet seat closed, Noah sat down and put his sneakers on. He was looking forward to getting back to the cabin so he could crawl into bed. The hot shower had left him feeling clean but drained. Standing up, he snatched his damp towel from the bathtub, draping it over his shoulder and headed out of the bathroom.

Noah froze when he opened the door at the bottom of the stairs. There was Luke dressed in navy blue sweat sweats and a gray Chicago White Sox t-shirt sitting at the kitchen table eating leftover pot roast.

*Shit. What was he doing here?*

Luke glanced up from his plate, his eyes widening. “I thought I heard someone in the shower.”

“You…you…could hear me from down here?” Noah stammered totally taken off guard.

“No, I heard you from my room.”

His room? Wait…does that mean? “I didn’t realize you lived here,” Noah said, moving toward the island where he’d left the flashlight he’d used to guide him from the cabin.

“I do now,” Luke sighed, leaning back in the chair, his t-shirt stretching tightly across his chest. That didn’t make any sense. Hadn’t Emma said Holden lived close by, which would mean Luke would too. But there had to be a reason for Luke’s change of residence.

“Why?” Noah asked as he reached the kitchen island.

“I’m here to make sure you don’t sneak in this house in the middle of the night and make off with the silver,” Luke said, marching past him carrying his empty glass and plate to the sink.

*What? Oh my god no! No!*

“I would never do such a thing!” Noah insisted, his heart pounding in his chest, panicked that any of the Snyders would think he was capable of such a horrible act. “Your grandmother has been nothing but kind to us. We’d never take advantage of her.”

Luke put his dishes into the sink and then spun around. “See that it stays that way.”

Noah needed to make him understand. It was bad enough that Holden seemed to doubt their intentions. Now Luke was as well. Damn. He just couldn’t win! He was starting to feel like he was up against his father, which had always been an impossible situation. “I’m sorry that you have to be uprooted on my accountant,” he told Luke.

“Maybe it’s just an excuse for my parents to get rid of me for a little while,” Luke sighed, shaking his head.
Okay, he wasn’t expecting *that*.

“Why would they want to do get rid of you?” Noah asked.

Luke Snyder was confusing him more by the minute. One second Luke’s pissed at him because he’s the reason he now has to live at his grandmother’s (which was crazy as far as Noah was concerned). And now Luke’s confessing that his parents probably wanted to ship him away to begin with.

Who was he? Some sort of misunderstood teen like James Dean in *Rebel Without A Cause*?

“Because I’m gay,” Luke declared, his deep brown eyes staring right at him. “And when I first came out my mom had a really hard time with it. She said she’s fine with it now but I’m not so sure. Things are a bit complicated at home.”

Holy shit! Luke was gay! The beautiful man standing just a few feet from him was gay! Oh my god…oh my god…oh my god…

Stay calm he quickly reminded himself. *Luke can’t know about you. It doesn’t matter that he’s gay. You still need to keep it a secret.*

“So, you’re gay?” He did his best to be nonchalant.


“No!” Noah exclaimed. “No, I don’t.”

*If you only knew just how much I didn’t have a problem with it,* he thought sadly.


“Say what?”

“Some of my best friends are gay,” Luke said mockingly.

“Trust me, I won’t,” Noah nervously chuckled. Unlike Luke, he didn’t have any friends to speak of but he wasn’t about to admit that and seem like even more of a loser. “And I’m sure that your parents didn’t send to live here because you’re gay. It’s because of me and my mom like you said. I promise you that we’ll show your family we can be trusted and hopefully you’ll be able to move back home soon we’re you belong.”

“My dad said it should only be for a month,” Luke admitted.

Noah snatched the flashlight off the countertop. “I should get going,” he said, palming it in his hand. “I start working for your father tomorrow morning.”

Luke smiled slightly. “He’s quite the task master, but he might go a little easy on you since it’s your first day.”

“I wouldn’t count on it considering the circumstances.”


“I’ll see you around, Luke,” Noah said, heading for the door.

“Good luck tomorrow, Noah,” he called after him.
Noah couldn’t help grinning as he sauntered outside, flipping on the flashlight. Luke actually wished him luck. But his smile quickly faded when he spotted a candy apple red, convertible Mustang parked in the driveway. Noah couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed it before, but it had to belong to Luke. The car looked pretty new which must mean that Luke came from money.

And if that were the case then Luke must have an equally rich boyfriend named Steff, Blane or Hardy who was probably in college. There was no way that Noah could compare with anyone of that caliber. Noah didn’t even have a high school diploma. In fact, he’d never stepped foot in high school since his mother had to home school him due to their life on the run. And college was a just a dream for him—one that he’d probably never achieve.

But didn’t the underdogs always win in the John Hughes films?

No. Duckie lost out to rich boy, Blane, in *Pretty in Pink*. No wonder Noah never really cared for that movie.

*Stop it…stop it…it doesn’t matter. Luke will never know that you’re gay.*

Noah was happy when he reached the cabin—that way he could get his mind off Luke. He was surprised to find it dark and quiet when he entered, not expecting his mother to have gone to bed so early.

But his mom had a long couple of days too. She’d be busy with Emma the next so there’d be no rest for the weary.

Noah strolled into his bedroom, kicked off his sneakers, and deposited his towel into the hamper. Before he turned off the flashlight he made sure the alarm clock was set and then he crawled underneath the covers. As the room plunged into darkness, Noah’s thoughts drifted back to the blonde that was now residing in the farmhouse.

Luke was just so confident and open about being gay.

*That’s probably why his rich college boyfriend loves him.*

Noah squeezed his eyes shut but that failed to get his mind off how incredibly hot Luke is. His t-shirt seemed to cling to his chest and the sweats showed off his ass rather nicely. It was difficult not to get lost in those chocolate eyes. And Noah couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to kiss those perfect bow shaped lips.

His hand dipped inside the waistband of his sweats. Noah bit his lip. It had been so long since he’d done this, but seeing Luke—thinking about Luke had left him so incredibly horny. He needed to do something.

Wrapping his hand around his cock which was hardening and lengthening, Noah began to stroke it. Oh, a kiss would be so nice…

*Noah was alone in the barn, shoveling hay with a pitchfork when Luke sauntered in dressed in tight jeans and an equally tight black t-shirt.*

“I’ve been thinking about you all day, Noah,” Luke said, taking the pitchfork from him and tossing it aside. “Actually, you’re all I’ve been able to think about since I first saw you.”

Luke smelled so good—soapy clean with a hint of spice. Pure heaven...just like the man standing mere inches from him.


Noah’s heart pounded as Luke’s mouth edged closer to his. Oh my god...it was going to happen! Luke was going to kiss him. Noah closed his eyes as Luke’s lips gently pressed against his—ever so softly at first, like silk. Luke’s hand clasped around the back of Noah’s head, holding him firmly in place while his tongue gently parted Noah’s lips.

Yes...yes...yes...kiss me, Luke. Don’t stop kissing me...

Noah moaned as Luke’s tongue plunged deeply inside his mouth. This was the kiss he’d been waiting for all his life...

Noah stifled a groan as ropes of come shot out of his dick, making quite a mess of his sweats and t-shirt. But he was too blissed out to care at the moment. Noah never had an orgasm quite like this one. It was so much better than the ones that resulted from the pictures from the Men’s Health magazine he’d purchased or the hazy images he conjured up in the shower.

Noah carefully slipped out of bed and stripped off his soiled clothing, tossing them into the hamper. Then he fished out clean clothes, put then on and then crawled back into bed. Noah was completely content as he closed his eyes. Yes it was just a fantasy, but for a few minutes he was desired.

And that made Noah very happy—and sleepy.

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Luke hadn’t been expecting to encounter Noah tonight. And he hadn’t expected to still be thinking about him after he walked out the door. He probably shouldn’t have accused him for being the reason that he’s living at the farm. Unfortunately, that’s one of Luke’s problems—he acts first and asks questions later.

And he should have a million questions for Noah. He knew exactly nothing about him, which was all his fault. Basically Luke’s just been trying to ignore Noah because he’s been trying to protect himself from getting hurt again.

But from what he’s seen of Noah so far he didn’t seem like someone who’d hurt anyone.

Just who in the hell was Noah Carlson anyway? Luke wondered as he washed his dirty dishes in the kitchen sink.

From what Luke has seen it Noah appeared to have a close relationship with his mother, which was a bit peculiar. Luke was close with his own mother but Noah’s relationship with his mom seemed to be on another level. His grandmother had mentioned to him that Noah’s father had died in a hunting accident when Noah was young so that could have something to do with the relationship he had with his mom. Noah seemed different - a bit odd. Maybe that because he was quiet or on edge. But maybe being in a strange town made him that way. He couldn’t be certain.

Luke assumed Noah was from Michigan based on the two articles of clothing he’d seen him wear the past couple of days—a University of Michigan sweatshirt and the Detroit Red Wings t-shirt he had on tonight. The Wings t-shirt was from the 2002 Stanley Cup Championship so he’d been in Michigan for at least four years.

Maybe they’re part of the witness protection program because they had to testify against some big
crime syndicate. And one of the bosses figured out their secret identities and they had to go on the run.

Doubtful.

Noah’s probably a regular kid with a very beautiful girlfriend. Hell, he probably had a string of beautiful girlfriends. Noah probably lost his virginity at some obnoxiously early age like 13 and he’s been getting laid ever since. His life has been filled with endless pussy. He most likely left some brokenhearted girl behind in Michigan. Maybe he still has a girlfriend and they’re going to try make a long distance relationship work.

Possibly.

One thing Luke knew for sure was that the Carlsons were poor. The car, Noah’s clothes, and their lack of possessions were telltale signs. And Luke had also overheard his dad tell his mom that his grandmother suspected the Carlsons were homeless too.

Homeless.

Luke had always pictured homeless people to be dirty bums living on the street begging for money, not families—not a kid his age with a mom. He couldn’t imagine what it would be like to have nowhere to go—no money, barely any possessions. Now they didn’t even have a car.

And that’s why his father didn’t trust them. He felt that the Carlsons were desperate enough to try to steal or take advantage of his grandmother. Luke didn’t see it—at least from the short time he’s spent with them.

But that hadn’t stopped him from practically calling Noah a thief. Damn. He could still see the stricken look on Noah’s face after he had made that crack about stealing the silver. Luke doubted Noah could take anything from his grandmother. Noah had probably felt like dirt as it was and Luke had only added to it. Luke really needed to try to be nicer.

Well, there’s only one way he could to that. He’d have to sit down and actually talk to Noah—get to know him better, stare into those deep blue eyes, gaze at that handsome face…

Damn it. Why was Luke allowing himself to get all worked up over a straight guy—again?

Maybe it was because said straight guy was fucking gorgeous.

Still that was no excuse. But at least this straight boy didn’t freak out when Luke announced he was gay.

However, that didn’t make lusting after straight boys okay. Noah shouldn’t even be at his grandmother’s house traipsing around in clothing that leaves little to the imagination—or at least the imagination of a writer.

The boy definitely wasn’t wearing any underwear underneath his sweats. You just shouldn’t tease a highly undersexed gay boy like that. Just. Not. Fair. And something else that wasn’t fair was the size of the cock that Noah had—or appeared to have—good lordy.

And his ass….

The way the sweats cling to the crack of it when he walked—torture…torture…torture.

And now Luke was oh so horny, horny, horny. He darted up the steps two at a time anxious to
escape to his room. Luke made sure that the door was locked before he shut off the lights and sunk underneath the homemade quilts. Thankfully, his room was far away from his grandmother’s although he wished he was at home in his own room to take care of business.

If Luke was living at home, he wouldn’t be so god damn horny in the first place since he wouldn’t have been subjected to freshly showered Noah looking good enough to lick like a lollipop.

*Enough…enough…enough…*


Luke closed his eyes, knowing just how he’d take care of the hard-on he was now sporting. There was nothing like the good old standby. All he needed was his right hand and his imagination and Luke would be transported to paradise. At first this fantasy had started out with Kevin as the star but recent events quickly got that status revoked.

But Luke prided himself on his imagination and he was ready to put it to use…

*Luke was sitting in his parents’ family room lounging on the brown leather sofa wearing just sweats and a t-shirt—anxiously waiting. He was hungry and horny—the perfect combination for what he was expecting.*

*The doorbell rang which made Luke grin broadly. He stood up, sauntering over to the side door that led to the patio and opened it. On the other side stood just what he ordered—a steaming hot pizza and the equally hot delivery boy that went with it—Zac Efron.*

“I’ve got your extra large sausage,” Zac announced.


“It will be $18.95.”

“Here you go,” he said, handing the delivery boy the twenty dollar bill he’d been holding.

“Thanks,” Zac said, taking it and handing Luke the pizza. “Let me get you your change.”

Luke took the pizza and set it down on the table and then returned to the doorway. “You can keep the change. And you can come inside for an even bigger tip.”

“Oh yeah?” Zac asked, arching an eyebrow.


“Lead the way then.”

Luke led him inside the family room but he was so fucking horny that they didn’t get too far. He spun around, grabbing him by his red t-shirt. “Come here, pizza boy,” he growled, crashing his mouth against the delivery boy’s.

“Is this my tip?” Zac asked.

“I was thinking of my cock in your ass,” Luke breathed.

“That’s one hell of a tip.”
“Wait until you see my cock.”

Zac licked his lips. “Let’s see it.”

Luke pulled down his sweatpants, allowing his long, hard dick to spring free. He was quite proud of it as he stood before the hottie naked from the waist down. “Don’t you think this will feel good inside you?” Luke seductively asked.

“Oh yeah,” Zac gasped.

“I wanna see what you got,” Luke said, reaching for Zac’s jeans and expertly undid them. He had them off in no time and was rewarded with the sight of a nice, hard cock.

“So?”

“You’ll do,” Luke replied, strolling over to the armchair where there was a tube of lube and condom stashed underneath the cushion.

“I do have other deliveries to make.”

“Not until after I’ve made mine,” Luke said, wrapping his arm around Zac’s waist. “Don’t worry. I’ll make it worth your while. I haven’t had any complaints yet. Now turn around and rest your hands against the chair. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“You better be good,” Zac said as he assumed the position.

“I’m incredible,” Luke said, ripping open the condom and rolling it onto his cock. Then he flipped open the lube, squirting a glob onto his palm. He made sure that his dick was all slicked up before he dropped the tube to the floor. “Prepare for the fuck of your life,” he murmured as he slowly eased into the delivery boy’s tight ass.

This is exactly what he needed—a hot guy with an equally hot ass.

Luke pounded into him, giving pizza boy one sweet tip. He knew this wasn’t the last time he’d see this one. Pizza boy would be showing up on his doorstep again because once they got a taste of Luke Snyder they always came back for more…

Oh…fuck…

Luke was shooting his load into the tissues he’d grabbed. The pizza boy fantasy never let him down. It was a classic. A damn good one if he may say so himself. Thankfully he managed to keep the mess to a minimum which was another good thing. He wadded up the tissues and tossed them into the waste basket, grinning when he made it in. His skills were still there.

Closing his eyes, Luke sighed hoping that sleep would quickly claim him like it usually did after he pleasured himself. He tried to think about what horrors he might face at school. He also tried not to dwell on the fact that this wasn’t really his bedroom or his comfortable bed.

But most importantly Luke tried not to think about the dark haired boy who lived in cabin on the other side of the property.
Chapter 8

One good thing about living at the farm was the special lunches that Luke’s grandma packed for him. Today he had a turkey sandwich on her homemade sourdough bread, salt and vinegar potato chips, and her yummy special recipe oatmeal raisin cookies. Thankfully, Maddie Coleman shared the same lunch period as he did which made it one of his favorite times of the day.

Since the beginning of the school year Luke and Maddie had become fast friends. Both were outcasts of sorts at Oakdale High School. Luke the newly outed gay kid. And Maddie was the sister of the psycho slasher, Eve, who had killed several people in Oakdale ending her spree up at Raven Lake the very same weekend that Luke had come out to Kevin. They quickly bonded and have been close friends ever since.

“So,” Maddie said, setting down the can of Coke she’d bought for him out of the vending machine, “what has been going on with you? Neither Casey nor I heard a peep from you all weekend! Did you meet someone special? Go anywhere special? Spill…and don’t leave a single detail out!”

Luke rolled his eyes. “I wish it were something so exciting.”

“Awww…a girl can dream,” she said, popping a carrot stick into her mouth. “What were you up to then?”

“My grandma Emma took in this lady and her son whose car died near the farm. They’re from out of state and from the looks of it they’re kinda poor so my gram is letting them live in this old cabin that’s on her property,” Luke explained. “My dad is a little wary of them so he asked me to live at the farm for awhile to act as an unofficial watchdog.”

“You seem less than thrilled.”

“That’s because I am,” he admitted.

“How old is the son?” Maddie asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I think he’s just out of high school,” Luke replied, eyeing her. He knew that tone of voice. Maddie was up to something. “You already have a boyfriend who happens to be one of my close friends so don’t you dare go breaking his heart.”

“Trust me. I won’t.” She grinned. “I simply adore Casey. I was thinking of you. Any chance…?”


“No because he’s butt ugly or no because he’s not gay?” she asked.


“Are you sure?” Maddie asked. “You know your gaydar might not be fully functional yet.”

“I’m sure it works just fine,” Luke insisted a bit irritated. After all he was gay so he damn well should be able to spot other gay guys. Right? There should be a special look or signal—maybe a vibe—something.

“That’s too bad,” Maddie sighed wistfully. “I mean how romantic would it be if fate brought you the man of your dreams...some mysterious stranger who was destined to be your boyfriend. That’s why
their car broke down at near your grandmother’s farm.”

Luke shook his head as he took a bite of his sandwich. “I think you’ve been watching way too many movies.”

“Probably,” she conceded, “but I just want you to find the perfect boyfriend.”

“There’s no such thing.”

“Oh, Luke, you’re too young to be jaded!” Maddie cried, reaching across the table and snatching his hand. “So you fell for the wrong guy. It doesn’t mean that the next one won’t be.”

Luke leaned closer to her. “Well the next one definitely has to be gay.”

Maddie grinned. “True. Now, tell me about your grandmother’s new tenants. Does the son seem nice? You can never have too many friends, right?” she added with a chuckle as she glanced around their empty table. “I know popularity can be such a bitch at times but there’s always room for one more in our posse.”

Luke wrinkled his nose. “I don’t know. Noah—that’s his name—he seems a bit different.”

“Different how?”

Luke hesitated for a moment. How could he describe Noah to Maddie without sounding like a complete asshole?

For the most part, Luke was just pissed that Noah was half of the reason he’d been uprooted from his home. And then there was the whole attraction thing that he would not go into with Maddie. “He just has this odd relationship with his mother,” Luke hedged.

“Are we talking Norman Bates Psycho odd?” Maddie asked.

“Who’s Norman Bates?” Luke asked utterly confused by his friend’s reference. She was forever doing that to him, not that it mattered that he never seemed to get them.

“The Hitchcock classic Psycho,” Maddie replied.

Luke continued to stare at her blankly. “And I should know this because…?”

“Luke,” Maddie was positively exasperated, “you really need to see a movie that was made before you were born!”

“I have!” Luke protested. “I’ve seen Star Wars!”

“Then you need to see something that isn’t in color,” she amended. “Really! How can you not know about Psycho and the famous shower scene? It’s a classic!”

“So you’ve said—over and over,” he muttered.

“I’m going to make you watch something in black and white if it kills me,” Maddie vowed as she took a sip of her water. “So does Noah have a mother fetish or is he just close to her?”

“I guess he’s just close to her,” Luke admitted. “It’s probably because his dad is dead. I don’t know—he just seems really sheltered.”

“Maybe he’s just shy,” Maddie replied. “I hope you were at least nice to him.”
He was polite, wasn’t he? Well…for the most part. Luke shifted a bit uneasily in his chair.


“I wasn’t mean,” Luke quickly clarified. “I just—I guess I probably could have been nicer. But I’ve been going through a lot of shit.”

“I’m sure that Noah and his mom haven’t been living it up if they’re stranded on your grandmother’s farm,” Maddie replied.

She had a point. Luke remembered seeing what looked like were all of the Carlsons’ belongings stacked up next to their wreck of a car. And it wasn’t much. They were poor as a couple of church mice. No wonder Noah had been freaked out about losing their car. It had been basically all they had in the world.

“You’re right,” Luke sighed, feeling like a bit of a heel. He’d definitely have to try to make a better effort the next time he saw Noah. Maybe they could be friends…if he could find a way to get past those amazing blue eyes.

“I’m always right.” Maddie grinned triumphantly.

“Well…well…well…isn’t this special,” Kevin Davis mocked them as he sauntered up to their table with his new best friend, Mark Vero, in tow. “The fairy and the freak…a match made in heaven.”


Kevin leaned over, leering. “Oh…don’t you wish, Snyder.”

“Yeah, Snyder, you wish Kev would pop your sad, pathetic, virgin, cherry ass,” Mark chuckled sadistically.

“Sometimes I wonder why I ever pulled you out of that lake,” Luke muttered, staring down at his sandwich.

“So you could get a cheap thrill by giving me mouth to mouth,” Kevin hissed, “because you knew the only way you’d ever be able to touch me was for me to be unconscious, you sick fuck.”

“He saved your life,” Maddie reminded Kevin.

“Yeah, and I’m still getting asked if I’m the fag’s boyfriend,” Kevin sneered. “Sometimes I wish he would have just let me drown. It would have been better than…”

“Better than having a gay guy give you mouth to mouth?” Luke asked, folding his arms across his chest, shooting daggers at his former best friend.

“What do you think?” Kevin countered.

“Personally, I would have wanted to drown,” Mark scoffed.

“Come on, Luke,” Maddie said, getting up from her chair. “Let’s get out of here. We don’t need to listen to this shit.”

Kevin took a step back from the table. “Now be a good fag and listen to your hag.”

Luke didn’t say anything as he gathered the remnants of his lunch and stood up. However, he was sure to march close enough to Kevin that he gave him a not so subtle bump like he would to an
opposing player on the basketball court. He completely ignored Mark who was just plain evil in Luke’s book.

“The only place you’d scare me would be in the shower!” Kevin called over him.

Luke squeezed his eyes shut while Maddie draped her arm around him as they headed out of the cafeteria. “Hey, don’t let those guys get to you,” she said in a soft, soothing voice. “Kevin’s an asshole. And Mark is a raging homophobe.”

“Maybe I should have left Kevin…” Luke couldn’t even finish the sentence because it wouldn’t be a true statement.

No matter how bad things had gotten between him and Kevin—even with the Kevin calling him a faggot after he’d come out—Luke could never have sat there on the lakeshore and watched him drown. He wasn’t raised that way. From an early age he’d been taught how precious life was, especially growing up so close to his grandmother’s farm. As a young boy he’d seen many foals brought into the world and every time he’d been awed by the experience.


Luke nodded, afraid to trust his voice at the moment. He hated showing signs of weakness, especially at school where he was ripe for the picking.

Maddie wrapped him in her arms, embracing him tightly. “I’m so happy that we’ve become such good friends,” she told him.


Maddie gave him one last squeeze before letting him go. “You know what you need?” she asked.

Luke stared at her blankly. “I haven’t the foggiest.”

“A movie night—with a good movie,” she explained, her enthusiasm bubbling over. “I’m going to pick up a one and come over to the farm. We’ll pop some popcorn and all everything will be perfect!”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that!”

“You don’t want to spend the evening with me,” Luke said. He appreciated her offer but at the same time he didn’t want her pity or anyone else’s for that matter. “I’m sure you much rather spend it with Casey.”

“I’ll bring him with me,” she decided.

“I don’t want to be a third wheel,” he groaned. God he was sick and tired of being the single friend—a role he seemed doomed to play. And with the mood he’s been in lately he really didn’t want to be reminded of this fact.

“Well, what about this Noah guy? Why not ask him to join us?” Maddie suggested. “It might me a nice way to get to know him better. Didn’t you say you wish you were nicer to him?”

“You are relentless,” Luke sighed, knowing when he was beat. Maddie wasn’t going to give up on her plan until Luke said yes. And it wasn’t a bad idea. A movie night with friends could be fun.
Noah might even appreciate the invite too.

“Is that a yes?” she asked, eyes twinkling.

“Yes, come over around seven with Casey and a movie or two,” Luke told her.

“Yay,” she said, clapping her hands, “this will be so much fun. You won’t regret it.”

And Luke knew that he wouldn’t—not with friends like Maddie and Casey, and maybe Noah. Time would tell on that one.

********

Holden was impressed by the hardworking boy sitting across the kitchen table from him. He practically had to twist his arm to get him to take a lunch break. Noah had been giving 110% since the get-go, trying extra hard to impress his new employer. Holden had to admit that it was working—to a degree, but he still wasn’t about to let his guard down or have Luke move back home just quite yet. It was way too soon.

But Noah seemed like a good kid so far. And his manners were impeccable. He always addressed the adults as ma’am, sir, mister, or missus. The respect he seemed to hold for people of authority appeared to be genuine. It wasn’t at all Eddie Haskell-like only being used as a ruse in order to suck up or to try to get away with something. If it was, then Noah was one hell of an actor.

Although that always could be a possibility…

“How are you hanging in there?” Holden said, setting a can of root beer in front of Noah.

“Just fine, sir,” Noah said, glancing up from the one of the turkey sandwiches that Mama had left for them before she had taken Gloria into town.

Holden sat down across from him at the kitchen table. “I know it’s a lot to take in but you’ll get the hang of it,” he told him. “You’ve been doing a good job.”

“I just don’t want to mess anything up.”

That was one thing Holden noticed about Noah right off the bat…his eagerness to please coupled with his fear of doing a task incorrectly. The poor kid was wound very tight. He seemed terrified of making a mistake as if one wrong move would have him and his mother kicked to the curb. Holden didn’t want Noah to fear him—respect yes, but not fear.

“Noah, everyone makes mistakes,” Holden reassured him. “It’s part of the learning process. And when I was learning the business I made my fair share. The important thing is learning what you did wrong and move on.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t expect you to remember everything I teach you today,” Holden continued. “We’ll keep going through your duties all week. By the end of it, it will all become second nature.”

After they had eaten breakfast, Holden had given him a complete tour of the facilities which included the barn, the stables, and the exercise ring. Noah’s eyes had been as big as saucers as he guided him around the area. The kid probably had no idea just how much went into running a horse farm. But he would find out and it would quickly become second nature to him.

Right off the bat, Holden had decided to see what Noah was made of and showed him how to muck
out the stalls. He remembered all too well Luke’s reaction when he taught him this chore. Luke had bellyached a bit but soon became an old pro. Noah had just taken the pitchfork and did the task without uttering one complaint.

Next, he’d showed Noah how to water the horses which entailed filling a bucket from a hose from the water tank in the barn. He had to haul the water to each stall and fill the horses’ water trough twice a day. The horses also had to be feed twice a day as well. Holden explained that they ate corn and oats which were kept in large dry boxes and they also ate alfalfa and hay. The hay was kept up in the loft so Noah would have to climb up there to get it down at feeding time.

But again, Noah didn’t protest.

And in between the chores Holden had also explained what exactly his horse business entailed—they bred American Saddlebreds and sometimes Holden would give lessons but he didn’t do that too often. He also told Noah how long he’d been in business and what he expected from Noah. The boy did a lot of nodding—so much that Holden was sure that Noah was going to have a sore neck by the end of the day. He would be satisfied if half the information he’d told Noah had stuck.

“Does…ah….Luke want to go into the horse breeding business?” Noah asked, picking at his potato chips.

Although that would be Holden’s dream, it wasn’t Luke’s. “No,” Holden replied, “Luke loves to write. And I want my son to go to college and pursue his dreams and not mine.”

“You’d let him do that?” Noah gasped.

“Yes, his mother and I want him to be happy,” Holden replied. “What is your dream? What do you want to do with your life? And I know it’s not working for me.” He added with a wink, hoping to put Noah at ease so he’d answer truthfully.

Noah focused on his can of root beer, lightly tapping the top of it. “It’s just a dream—I mean—I could never…”

“Don’t sell yourself short.”

Noah slowly nodded and then shyly looked up at him. “I want to be a film director,” he admitted, but quickly added, “But we don’t even have the money for college so it’ll never happen. And I’ve never shot any film so I’m probably not any good…”

Someone had really done a number on this kid. And he prayed to god that it wasn’t Noah’s mother. Noah had very little self confidence. It was painful to see how he doubted himself. Holden was going to make it his mission to change this.

“I would bet otherwise,” Holden said, stopping him before he could say anything else self-deprecating. “You just need a chance to give it a try.”

Noah shrugged. “I suppose.”

“So you like movies then?”

“Oh yes!” Noah’s eyes lit up. “Especially the old ones like you’d find on Turner Classic Movies. I know that makes me sound like a geek.”

“No, not at all,” Holden reassured him. “It just shows that you appreciate the classics. Just because something is shiny and new doesn’t necessarily make it better.”
“I haven’t had anything new since…” Noah quickly stopped talking and bit his lip as if realizing he’d said too much. He ducked his head, taking another bite of his sandwich.

Holden decided not to press Noah on the issue, but it appeared that the Carlsons were pretty bad off and had been that way for some time. He could relate to rough times, remembering what it was like after his father had died. There had been some lean years and Holden had learned at a young age what it was like to put in an honest day’s work. But even during the bleakest days Mama had never let the family give up hope or their dreams. And he wasn’t about to let Noah give up his.

“You know, Noah, colleges offer all kinds of scholarships,” he said, steering the subject back to Noah’s dream of being a film director. “There may be a way for you to go to college.”

“It’s a nice thought and all, but I don’t think so, sir,” Noah murmured.

“I think it’s worth looking into,” Holden gently pressed. “My mother-in-law is one of the top donors to Oakdale University. I’m not sure if they have a film program…”

Noah looked up at him a bit panicked. “I couldn’t ask you to do me any favors,” he quickly said. “Your family already has done so much for my mom and me—giving us a place to live and me a job. I couldn’t ask for another thing for you.”

“Okay,” Holden replied, “but if you change your mind. The offer still stands. All right?”

Noah nodded.

“Good,” he said, rising from his chair with his plate and empty root beer can in hand. “Lunch break is over. Now I need to show you how to clean and polish tack.”

“Tack?” Noah asked bewildered.

Holden chuckled, “It’s a term used to describe any of the equipment and accessories worn by horses—saddles, stirrups, bridles, halters, reins, bits, harnesses…”

“That’s a lot of equipment,” Noah said, joining him at the sink with his plate. “I never realized that horses used so much stuff.”

“Noah, when I’m through with you you’ll be an expert when it comes to horses,” Holden declared. He took the plate from Noah and placed it in the sink. “Now come on, we’ve got a long afternoon ahead of us,” he said, returning to business.

And Holden knew that he was going to be teaching Noah a lot more than the horse breeding business. This young man needed to realize that dreams were worth fighting for and that he mattered. This would probably be the most challenging lesson too.

As they headed out toward the barn Holden came up with a way that might help put Noah at ease. So far, he had kept Noah away from the horses and for good reason—they were big and unpredictable and Noah had no experience with them so he could get hurt.

But there was a special horse that Holden trusted and wanted to introduce to Noah so that Noah could get used to being around the animals. Whitman was Luke’s baby. And he was sweet, gentle—a perfect way for Noah to get his first introduction to a horse.

“Before we tackle the tack I want to meet someone,” Holden said, ushering Noah into the barn.

“Okay,” Noah replied uneasily.
Nervous Noah was back.

Hopefully, Whitman would be able to get him to at least smile a little bit. Holden stopped briefly at the bag the hung in the barn where the carrots were kept, pocketing a few and then led Noah over to the horse’s stall. “This is Whitman, Luke’s horse…his pride and joy. My son loves to ride and just adores this horse.”

“He’s so big,” Noah said a bit awestruck, still keeping his distance.

“Yes, he’s big. They’re all pretty big,” Holden said, stepping into the stall. “Come here with me. I want you to get a closer look at him. I’ll be right here with you. Whitman is really a big baby.”

Noah nodded. “Okay.”

Holden stroked Whitman’s mane. “Hey there, boy, this is Noah,” he said in a soothing voice. “He’s going to be around here helping to take care of things.”

“He’s beautiful,” Noah said as he stared at the horse.

Beautiful wouldn’t be the first word Holden would use to describe Whitman—at least on the outside—dapple grey with a Roman nose, which made him stick out like a sore thumb among the Saddlebreds. But Luke loved his ugly mutt of a horse. And Whitman did have a beautiful soul there wasn’t a doubt about that.

“Whitman’s different from the other horses here,” Holden told Noah as he slowly stroked the horse. “He isn’t a show horse like the others. We rescued him.”

“Rescued? From what?” Noah asked.

“A few years ago I took Luke with me to Kentucky. He’d always wanted to go with me on one with my trips to meet with the other horse breeders,” Holden explained. “Even though Luke doesn’t want to go into the business he does love this farm and the horses so I figured he was old enough and brought him along with me. While we were there, we got wind of this one year old colt that was going to be put down because he had founderd.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Noah interrupted, “but what does that mean? Why would they want to kill a horse that was so young?”

“As you can see Whitman here isn’t much of a looker couple that with a serious hoof disease and the owners basically wanted nothing to do with him.”

“Oh my god,” Noah murmured.

“Luke was positively frantic. He couldn’t fathom a horse being killed so inhumanely,” Holden said sadly shaking his head. “He begged me to do something. So we met with the owners and once Luke saw the horse he was a goner. He just had to have him. Luke promised he’d help take care of him and do whatever it took. And, honestly, I couldn’t bear to let this guy go once I heard about him so we took him home with us. Luke was true to his word too, helping look after him. I was so incredibly proud of him because it took a lot of hard work. And Whitman just adores him. You should see how he perks up when Luke comes into the barn. It’s like he knows that boy saved his life.”

“What an incredible story,” Noah whispered, eyes shining.

Holden reached into his pocket, pulling out a carrot. He held it out on his palm for Whitman to take.
“Luke really has a good heart,” he said as Whitman took the carrot from him. “He’s been going through a rough time lately so sometimes his sarcastic streak gets the best of him.” He wasn’t sure if Noah knew Luke was gay, but it wasn’t his place to tell him if he didn’t know yet.

Noah nodded. “I know all about rough times.”

Holden smiled. “I suppose you do.”

“Can I touch him?”

Holden took Noah’s hand, immediately noticing that Noah flinched when he touched him. “Sure. I just want to make sure that you don’t startle him,” he replied.

“Right, that’s a good idea,” Noah readily agreed as Holden placed his hand on Whitman’s neck.

“You can go ahead and pet him—and talk to him too—Luke does it all the time.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Holden assured him. “And I talk to the horses a lot too—so does Mama—it’s a Snyder thing.”

“Hi, Whitman, it’s nice to meet you,” Noah said. Some of the tension seemed to have disappeared from his voice. Whitman turned his head, dipping his nose down toward Noah’s pocket. “Ahhh… what’s he doing?”

“He’s looking for carrots because Luke always hides carrots in his pockets when he comes to visit him,” Holden chuckled, digging in his pocket for the remainder of the carrots. “Here.” He handed them to Noah. “Just put them in the palm of your hand and he’ll eat them right out of it. There’s no need to be afraid. He won’t hurt you.”

“Okay,” Noah said as he opened up his hand and held it out for Whitman.

Just as Holden said Whitman took the carrots out of Noah’s hand which garnered a large grin from the boy.

“That was pretty cool,” Noah said, glancing at Holden.

“And now we really need to polish the tack,” Holden said, steering Noah out of the stall.


“Yes, he is,” Holden replied.

Hopefully, the little visit had done the trick and Noah wouldn’t be so uptight the rest of the afternoon.

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The hot water was heaven on his skin, washing away the dirt and grime from his first day of working with Holden. Noah was amazed that his boss hadn’t raised his voice at him once. Not even when he knocked over one of the newly polished saddles or asked dumb questions. He’d expected Holden to yell, scream or at the very least tell him how incredibly stupid or worthless he was.

But none of those things happened. Instead, Holden had told him he’d done a great job.
A great job.

Holden had also told him he looked forward to working with him again. Noah had been so certain that Holden didn’t like him. But now he was realizing otherwise and it felt good. He knew that he probably hasn’t fully gained Holden’s trust, but he would. It was just time some time.

Noah stepped out of the shower, snatching the towel off the sink and drying off. Since he wasn’t going right to bed, he’d brought a pair of briefs to put on underneath his sweats. He tugged on the same Red Wings t-shirt he’d worn to bed the night before. Noah ran the towel through his hair trying to get most of the water out of it. Then he raked his fingers through his hair so it wasn’t sticking up everywhere. This was his styling method—nothing fancy—just like him. Noah stuffed his dirty clothes inside the tote bag his mother picked up while she was in town today since it looked like they would be taking showers at the house for a little while (Emma’s plumber was on vacation for the next two weeks).

Once Noah had his sneakers on, he headed downstairs only to encounter Luke at the bottom of them. Dammit. Why does he have to be so fucking beautiful? he wondered. Noah had never seen jeans and a red and black striped polo look so good. He wanted to say something witty, but all he could do was stare.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” Luke chuckled.

“Hopefully, our shower will get fixed soon so I won’t have to be barging in here to use yours,” Noah said nervously, clutching his tote bag.

“No worries,” Luke replied. “How was your first day working for my dad?”

Noah was a bit surprised, having expected some sort of sarcastic remark from Luke. He certainly wasn’t expecting him to strike up a conversation here at the bottom of Emma’s stairs but it was nice. “Pretty good. I survived. The horses survived and I don’t think I made your dad mad.”

“He’s a good teacher. I wouldn’t worry about making him mad. What did he have you do today?”

“The first thing I did was muck out all of the stalls.”

“Dad literally started you out with the shittiest job,” Luke snorted.

Noah tried not to focus on the way Luke’s eyes sparkled when he laughed. Quickly he averted his eyes. “It wasn’t too bad. Well, I better get going.”

“Hey, a couple of my friends are coming over later on to watch a movie,” Luke said casually. “Did you want to join us?”

Noah definitely didn’t see this coming—Luke inviting him over. “Really?” he asked, trying to downplay his excitement.

It had been about a year or so since he’d hung out with kids his age. They’d been living in Wisconsin at the time. There were a few people he worked with that he’d been friendly with, one had been the girl he’d tried to date and when that had gone awry Noah also distanced himself from his acquaintances afraid that they’d figure out he was gay.

Of course that was crazy thinking, jumping to the conclusion that just because one date went badly people would assume he was gay. But Noah had been so paranoid about his secret getting out. He
still was scared, but he also desperately wanted friends. And he hoped that Luke could be one of them.

“Yeah, I thought I could introduce you to a couple of my friends,” Luke said, leaning against the wall. “We’ll probably even pop some popcorn,” he added with a grin.

“In that case I’ll be here,” Noah replied, his smile matching Luke’s. “What time?”

“About seven. You can come earlier if you’d like though.”

Earlier? Oh hell yeah he’d be here earlier. “Sounds like fun,” Noah said, sauntering toward the door. “I’ll see you a little later.”

He could have sworn that he felt Luke staring after him as he walked out the door. But that would have been impossible because he has Blane his rich college boyfriend. And the only reason he was asking him over to watch a movie was probably because his grandmother or father had put him up to it.

Because, seriously, why would beautiful, rich Luke want to get to know him?

*Stop it, Noah chastised himself. You don’t know that for sure. This might actually be Luke’s idea.*

Regardless. Noah needed to relax and enjoy himself this evening.

“Hi, string bean,” Charlene greeted Noah when he entered the cabin, “dinner is almost ready. Are you fresh as a daisy now?”

“Yes, I am,” Noah said, taking his dirty clothes into his bedroom. “Dinner smells great.”

“I hope it tastes good,” she called after him. “I’m not as good of a cook as Emma.”

Noah deposited his dirty clothes in the hamper and then joined his mother in the kitchen, placing a kiss on her cheek. “It’s been awhile, but I remember you being a pretty amazing cook too,” he told her. “And I always loved your spaghetti.”

Charlene smiled. “I figured that I would get my feet wet with something simple.”

“I’ll set the table,” Noah said, opening the cupboards until he found the correct one the housed the dishes.

“I’ve missed cooking for you.”

“I was beginning to think we’d never have a real home,” Noah admitted as he got a couple of plates out of the cupboard.

“Me too…funny how things work out though.”

“Yeah…ah.…Luke invited me up to the house to watch a movie with him and his friends,” Noah said as he placed the dishes on the kitchen table.

“That’s great,” Charlene replied as she checked on the garlic bread that was in the oven. “Wouldn’t it be nice if you two could become friends? He seems like a nice boy. Emma just can’t say enough good things about him.”

“Yes, it would,” Noah said, trying to be casual about the situation. He didn’t want his mother to see just how Luke Snyder affected him—how just the night before he’d laid in bed fantasizing about
kissing him.

“I hope you end with more friends than you know what to do with here,” Charlene said. “Can you grab the salad from the refrigerator while I drain the noodles?”

“Sure.”

“I can’t wait to hear all about your first day of work.”

Once they were seated at the kitchen table, Noah filled her in on his day, speaking a mile a minute about Holden and all the things he taught him. He didn’t realize how proud he was of everything he’d accomplished on his first day until he was explaining it to his mom. She seemed equally impressed.

“I’m glad that you enjoy working with Holden,” she said, taking a final bite of her dinner. “I know it wasn’t exactly your choice…”

“But it was a good deal that you and Mrs. Snyder made.”

“Shouldn’t you get going? Don’t you have a movie to go watch?”

“I need to help you clean up and do dishes first.”

Charlene shook her head. “You’ll do no such thing. I forbid it—go see Luke. I’ll handle the clean up.”

“But you…”

Charlene stood up, snatching Noah’s plate from him. “But me nothing,” she said, taking the dishes over to the sink. “You’ve spent way too much time taking care of me. Now go and have fun!”

Instead of protesting, Noah gave her a big hug. “Thank you. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“I better go change into something a bit more presentable,” he said, glancing down at his t-shirt and sweats. He couldn’t go to movie night dressed for bed.

But once he was in his room, staring into his closet he sadly realized that his other options weren’t too much better. Clothing had never mattered before he didn’t care about impressing people before he got to Oakdale. However, now he wanted to look good. Actually he wanted to look better than good. And everything in his closet looked like it came from the Salvation Army. Not one damn thing in it was new.

Noah bit his lip, trying to will the tears to stay away. It was only clothing. It wasn’t that big of a deal. And when it really came down do it, did it really matter?

Luke would never look at him that way. Noah was just the poor boy who worked for his father. He was so pathetic.

There was a soft knock on his bedroom door. “Noah honey?”

“Yeah?” he said, fighting to keep the tears out of his voice.

“Can I come in?”
He quickly wiped his eyes. “Sure.”

“I thought you were going to change clothes,” she said, stepping inside his room.

“I am,” Noah replied, quickly shuffling through his t-shirts and sweatshirts hanging in the closet, praying that something more suitable will miraculously appear.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, placing her hand on his back.

Why did she have to do that? Noah could feel himself beginning to crumble. Be a man, , he quickly reminded himself. Only a little faggot would cry about clothes.

Now he was beginning to sound like the Colonel.

“Nothing,” Noah said, glancing away so his mom couldn’t see his eyes because if she could she’d see that he was lying.

“Noah,” she pressed, gently but firmly. Charlene gave his shoulder a loving squeeze.

“It’s nothing,” he murmured, casting his eyes downward still afraid to look at her.

With her free hand, she thumbed through the clothing hanging in the closet. “I think you are long overdue for some new clothes, string bean. We’ll have to take some of my tip money I get when I start working at the diner and go shopping.”

“No, we couldn’t do that,” Noah quickly replied. “We’ll need that money for important things. You can’t spend it on me!”

“You are important,” Charlene reminded him. “You deserve to finally get some new things.”

“But you don’t have to buy them for me,” Noah insisted. “I’ll have money soon.”

“I want you to promise me that you’ll use it on yourself. I want you to buy clothes, DVDs, burgers, go to the movies…do teenage boy things with it.”

“But…”

“Please, Noah,” Charlene said, giving him a squeeze, “you’ve been working hard to help support us for long enough. And you still are by working for Holden. I want you to take the extra money he’s paying you and use it on yourself. You deserve it. Okay?”

“Okay,” he relented, knowing that this was an argument that he wouldn’t win with his mother.

“Now, let’s find something for you to wear tonight,” she declared.

Already Noah felt better about everything. His mom had a way of making things seem better with her calming nature. And in a matter of moments she pulled out a navy blue and red rugby shirt. It was still old, the colors were faded but it didn’t look like a complete rag. He could have sworn he didn’t see it when he had searched the closet the first time.

“How about this?” she suggested.

Noah grinned. “Yeah, that’s good.”

“Great. I’ll leave you to get changed,” she said, heading out of the room and closing the door behind
Noah changed, making a mental note to buy try to fit some sort of cologne in his budget. He sauntered out of his room and snatched the flashlight off the small table that was by the front door. “I’m going to head out now,” he called to his mom. “Thanks for dinner and your help.”

“My pleasure! Have fun!”

Noah palmed the flashlight as he trekked over to the farmhouse. As he grew closer to it his heart rate kicked into overdrive. He was nervous—very nervous. Shit. He needed to calm the fuck down or else he was going to psyche himself out before he even got there and then he would end up coming off like a complete ass to Luke and his friends—boyfriend or otherwise.
Chapter 9

As Noah approached the house he took a few deep, calming breaths. Tonight was supposed to be fun. This was is what kids his age did—they hung out. His mom was right—it was time he acted his age—enjoyed himself.

Noah wished he could take one last look at himself—just to make sure that he didn’t look like a total tool. Maybe it was best that he couldn’t see himself because if he did look like a tool there was nothing he could do about it now. And for the hundredth time—what did it really matter. Luke was a moot point.

Plastering a smile onto his face, Noah stepped inside the farmhouse where Luke was sitting at the kitchen table typing manically on his laptop. “Hey there,” Noah announced as he slowly approached the table just in case Luke was writing something confidential.

Luke glanced up. “Hey,” he said, immediately closing it, which confirmed Noah’s suspicions.

“I’m sorry to interrupt.”

“It’s okay,” Luke assured him, slipping his laptop into its case. “I was just finishing up anyway.”

Noah hesitated for a moment; this could be the opening he was looking for to get to know Luke better. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right? “So…ah…your dad mentioned that you wanted to be a writer,” Noah said, sitting down next to him at the table.

Luke ducked his head, blushing. “Yeah.”

“Do you want to be a journalist?”


Noah shook his head. “Not at all. Actually, I think it’s pretty cool. Are you any good?”

Luke shrugged. “I’d like to think so—but really—I don’t know.”

Before Luke could ask him what he wanted to do with his life, Noah quickly changed the subject. “Your dad introduced me to Whitman today. I understand why you named him Whitman—after Walt Whitman.”

Although Noah would never admit this aloud, he had been quite impressed that Luke had named his horse after the famous American poet. He’d wrongly assumed that a rich kid like Luke would be only interested in fast cars, video games, and getting drunk but after Holden had introduced him to Whitman this afternoon, Noah was beginning to realize that he probably didn’t know the first thing about Luke Snyder.


“No, it’s something I would have done if I had a pet,” Noah admitted. Of course the Colonel had forbidden pets. He remembered how hard his mom had lobbied for him to be allowed to keep his little brown stuffed puppy dog. “You picked one of the best poets so you really couldn’t go wrong with the name. ‘O Captain my Captain! our fearful trip is done, The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won, The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting…” Noah stopped once he noticed Luke staring at him, slack jawed. “Sorry about that,” he mumbled, cheeks
flushing.

“While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring; But O heart! heart! heart! O the bleeding drops of red, Where on the deck my Captain lies, Fallen cold and dead,” Luke said, meeting Noah’s gaze. “I…uh…never met anyone my age that could recite Whitman without before forced to for class—and even then it’s quickly forgotten.”

Noah shrugged. “My mom loves American poets—Dickenson, Poe, Sandburg, ee comemings so I studied them heavily when she home schooled me,” he admitted. “And sometimes I just can’t help myself and I spout off some of the poems I’ve memorized.”

“That’s definitely nothing to apologize about. I think it’s great,” Luke said. “I swear half the people in my senior class are illiterate.”

“My mom was an English teacher,” Noah explained. “She’s a very smart woman. We’ve just…” His voice trailed off unsure of how exactly to explain to Luke what happened. He couldn’t tell him the truth. And he really hated lying…

“I can imagine that things might get difficult if it was just you and your mom,” Luke supplied.

“Yeah,” Noah said, cutting him off and nodding. “I’d really rather not talk about it right now if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, I understand,” Luke said. “Boy, we really got sidetracked from talking about my horse,” he chuckled.

Noah gladly returned to that topic. “Whitman’s pretty amazing. Your dad told me the story about how you guys rescued him and everything…”

“I couldn’t let those bastards send him off to die,” Luke said, folding his arms across his chest. “He was so young and sick. And they felt that just because he wasn’t some expensive horse he wasn’t worth saving. It wasn’t his fault he was different—not good enough.”

Noah felt as if Luke was talking about him—the pathetic outcast. His stomach knotted up. Maybe Luke would understand if I just told him…

No, you can’t. You barely know him! Are you crazy considering confiding in someone who is practically a perfect stranger?

“He seems pretty great to me,” Noah said quietly. “He’s beautiful…actually.”

“Are you sure you met my horse?” Luke teased. “He’s not one of those fancy horses that my dad breeds.”

“Yes, it was definitely Whitman. And I think he’s amazing in his own right.”

A small smile played on Luke’s lips. “He’s a big sweetheart,” he replied. “Did he con some carrots out of you?”

“Yeah,” Noah chuckled. “He thought I was hiding them in my pockets.”

Luke raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

Noah nodded shyly. “But your dad had them so he gave me some to give to Whitman.”

“His next favorite thing besides being ridden…is being groomed…maybe I can show you
“Yeah, sure,” Noah said, trying to downplay his excitement. He was thrilled that Luke wanted to share something so special with him. After all, Holden had said that Whitman was Luke’s baby. And Noah could tell that from the way Luke was talking about his horse that he held a very dear spot in his heart.

There was definitely more to Luke Snyder than met the eye. A typical spoiled rich kid he definitely wasn’t. And he didn’t even seem like that snarky guy who made the crack about stealing the silver. Luke was sweet, compassionate… And very much off limits. Remember that fact.

“So enough about me,” Luke said, brushing his fingers through his blonde hair. “Tell me about you. What do you want to do…?”

Luke wasn’t able to finish his question because there was a knock on the door. Noah was relieved to have been spared from sharing his pipe dream for the future but now was faced with the anxiety of meeting the friends.

“Hold that thought,” Luke said, getting up from his chair. “It looks like my friends are here.”

Noah was sitting with his back to the door, his eyes focused on his hands which were folded in front of him on the table. He was incredibly nervous. He couldn’t bring himself to turn around to sneak a peek at Luke’s friends. He’d meet them soon enough.


Guys. Great. Surely one of them had to be Blane—Luke’s hot, rich, college boyfriend.


Wait? A girl?

Noah couldn’t help himself. He had to look now. Twisting around in his chair, he discovered that Luke’s friends consisted of a male and a female. They both looked about his age. The guy was good looking—blonde hair with long bangs that hung in his blue eyes. He was casually dressed in a black silk screened tee with a denim jacket and he was holding a DVD. The girl was beautiful—long brown, wavy hair, brown eyes, a cute button nose and a smile that lit up the room.

She steered Luke aside. “He’s gorgeous,” she said in a low voice that Noah probably wasn’t supposed to hear.

Gorgeous? She couldn’t be talking about him. But then who else was there in the room? This didn’t make any sense. He wasn’t gorgeous—he was a mess. And why did she care what he looked like anyway?

“So glad you approve,” Luke muttered. Then he cleared his throat and spoke in a louder voice. “Maddie…Casey…this is Noah. Noah, these are my friends.”

Casey. So it wasn’t Blane, but if John Hughes had made another poor girl/rich boy movie he’d bet any money the next rich boy’s name would be Casey—he was sure of it. “Hi,” Noah said, standing up, “it’s nice to meet you guys.”
“Noah’s from Michigan, right?” Luke said, glancing at him with a slight grin.

“Yeah,” Noah replied, figuring that it was best to keep it as simple as possible. Out of the corner of his eye he could feel Casey eyeing him.

_Shit. There’s no way he could possible know about me…_

“Where in Michigan are you from?” Maddie asked.

“We were living in a small resort town on Lake Huron called East Tawas,” Noah replied, trying not to fidget. “You probably never heard of it.”

“You must have graduated from high school since you’re not going to school with Luke and Maddie,” Casey said, folding his arms across his chest.

Noah wished he could just say yes but Luke knew he was home schooled since they’d just been talking about it. Dammit. Now he was going to stand out even more (and not in a good way).

“Actually, I was home schooled but I’ve completed all of my high school requirements.”

“Home schooled?” Casey asked, completely floored. “What? Are you Amish or something?”

“Casey!” Maddie exclaimed. “Don’t be so rude!”

But Casey wouldn’t let the subject drop. “Well, who the hell is home schooled?”

“I was,” Noah admitted, scuffing his toe along the hardwood floor. Oh why couldn’t he just disappear—like now? This movie night idea probably wasn’t such a good idea after all. What was he thinking trying to fit in with Luke and his friends? He was just some misfit with raggedy old clothes—no diploma—and no future…

“Why?” Casey persisted. “Were you kicked out of school or something?”

“Case, just let it go man,” Luke said, stepping in on his behalf. “People get home schooled all the time.”

“I’m not Amish. I wasn’t kicked out of school. And I don’t have any learning disabilities,” Noah calmly explained as his cheeks burned with shame. “My family was going through a rough time and my mom was a teacher so she was able to home school me.”

“But that can’t really count,” Casey persisted. “You can’t get the same education like you can in a real high school.”

Luke folded his arms across his chest. “Actually, Noah’s was better,” he informed Casey. “I can guarantee that he knows more about American Literature than your sorry ass does. So don’t go giving him shit about being home schooled when you just barely got accepted into OU.”

Suddenly the kitchen had gotten uncomfortably quiet. Casey’s eyes were bugging out of his head while Maddie stood next to him nervously chewing her lip. Noah was stunned. Besides his mother no one had ever gone to bat for him but Luke had just dressed down Casey on his behalf. He couldn’t figure out why Luke would do such a thing for someone he barely knew.

“You’ll have to excuse Casey. Sometimes his mouth gets ahead of his brain,” Maddie quickly said.

“Thanks a lot,” Casey muttered, glancing at Maddie. “I’m sorry about the home school stuff, Noah. Obviously, I didn’t know what I was talking about.”
“It’s okay,” Noah replied. All he wanted at this point was just to let the subject drop. He hated being the center of attention.

“What movie did you guys pick up?” Luke asked, quickly changing the topic.

“X-Men: The Last Stand,” Casey declared, holding it up for everyone to see and grinning.


“No, it wasn’t,” Maddie sighed dramatically.

“Maddie wanted to get some old black and white movie,” Casey grumbled, “but I told her there was a reason why God invented color TV.”

Noah perked up a bit. It wasn’t often he encountered someone else who enjoyed black and white films. He wondered what black and white movie Maddie had in mind. It was pretty rare to encounter someone else his own age that also liked the classics.

“I think we’re better off with X-Men,” Luke agreed. “Does it sound okay to you, Noah?”

“X-Men was always one of my favorites comics,” Noah replied. When I could afford to pick up a comic book, he silently added. Which wasn’t too often, but Luke didn’t need to know just how poor Noah and his mom actually were or else all of the valuables at the farm would be locked up—not just the silver.


Maddie raised her eyebrow, but said nothing. It was almost as if she were privy to some sort of special secret.

But what?

Before Noah could ponder it, Casey blurted out, “I was promised popcorn to go with this movie.”

“Noah and I can take care of it if you show us where the supplies are,” Maddie casually suggested.

Casey had probably told Maddie that he wanted some alone time with Luke before they all watched the movie together. So this was where Maddie was conveniently left alone with Noah while Luke goes off with his boyfriend—probably to make out until the popcorn is ready. At least she liked old movies so they’d be able to talk about them and he’d be spared from any other embarrassing questions from Luke’s boyfriend.

“My pleasure,” Luke said, sauntering over to the pantry. “You know, you’re not going to get off easy with microwave popcorn. We expect good old fashioned stove top popcorn.” He got out the popcorn along with some oil and set it on the kitchen island. Then he strolled over and retrieved a large pot with a lid, placing it next to the popcorn. “I assume you know what to do with this.”

“Don’t worry,” Maddie assure him. “We can figure it out. Right, Noah?”

“Right,” Noah replied, forcing a smile.

“Come on, Casey,” Luke said, placing his hand on Casey’s shoulder and steering him into the parlor. “Fill me in on college life while we wait for our popcorn.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I kinda volunteered you for popcorn duty,” Maddie said, picking up the large pot and lid Luke had left out for them and heading over to the stove.
“No, it’s okay,” Noah replied, following her with the popcorn and oil. “My mom and I used to do it this way when I was little.”

“Good—an old pro.” She grinned.

Noah shrugged. “Something like that. The secret is making sure that you keep shaking the pot to keep it from burning.”

“I have to apologize for my boyfriend’s rude behavior,” she said, taking the oil from him and pouring it into the pot. “Sometimes he can be so tactless. There’s really nothing wrong with being home schooled and he shouldn’t have made you feel that way.”

“Wait—your boyfriend?” Noah asked completely flabbergasted. If Casey was Maddie’s boyfriend that meant he wasn’t Luke’s. Maybe Luke didn’t have a boyfriend after all. But of course he did. Luke was gorgeous, probably smart, had friends, and a great family from what he’s seen so far.

Maddie giggled, “Yes, my boyfriend. You didn’t think…” Noah blushed which only confirmed her suspicions. “Casey would just love that! Oh that’s hilarious!”

“So you like black and white movies?” Noah asked eager to get away from his embarrassing faux pas.

“Love ‘em,” she admitted. “It Happened One Night, Shop Around the Corner, Here Comes Mr. Jordan…”

Noah couldn’t believe it. Maddie was speaking his language. “You gotta love Here Comes Mr. Jordan because it has Claude Rains.”

“Oh!” Maddie exclaimed practically jumping up and down. “Claude Rains. He is the best. Like… absolute best. Love him!”

“What can't he do?”

“Casablanca.”

For the first time in quite awhile, Noah was comfortable. He found a fellow film geek. Who would have thought? “Notorious, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” he quickly rattled off some Claude Rains films as the popcorn began to pop.

“Lawrence of Arabia, Now, Voyager.”

“Casablanca.”

“I said it,” she giggled, playfully smacking him in the arm.

“It has to be said twice,” he chuckled.

“I’m shocked, shocked to find there's gambling going on here!” Maddie quoted from the film as she vigorously shook the pot on the stove to keep the popcorn from burning.

“Round up the usual suspects,” Noah jumped in.

Maddie lifted the pot of popcorn from the burner, placing it on one that wasn’t hot. “Okay, who are you and where do you come from? Were we like separated at birth?” she teased.
Noah grinned, comforted by the fact that he wasn’t the only one feeling the quick bond they had just formed. “Do you know how weird it is to meet someone who actually knows what I’m talking about?”

“Were your parents total movie buffs?”

“My mom is a huge fan but she loves movies from the ‘70s,” Noah explained while Maddie searched for some bowls. “I think she humors my love the oldies but really prefers to watch things in color.”

“You’re lucky,” Maddie sighed. “I can’t get Casey to humor me too often. I actually wanted to rent *Casablanca* tonight but he quickly vetoed it.”

“That’s too bad. I haven’t seen it in awhile and it’s one of my all time favorites,” Noah said. “My copy got ruined and I haven’t gotten around to replacing it.”

“You’ll have to rectify that. It’s a classic and a must for every movie collection,” Maddie replied. “Can you get the butter out of the refrigerator?”

“Sure,” Noah replied. He wasn’t about to tell her that a DVD purchase was a luxury that he couldn’t afford. And his movie collection was pretty pathetic for someone who loved movies as much as he did.

“Well, now I know who to come to when I need a classic movie fix,” Maddie said as she poured the popcorn into a couple of bowls.

Noah found some butter and handed it to Maddie. “Yeah, just as long as your boyfriend doesn’t mind. I don’t want to step on any toes, especially being new in town and all.”

Maddie sliced some butter off into a measuring cup and then put it into the microwave that was above the stove. “Casey may come off as all big and bad but he’s really a softy at heart.” She lowered her voice, leaning close to him. “Just don’t let tell him that I said that.”

“I won’t,” Noah promised, grinning at his new friend.

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Luke couldn’t figure out why Maddie and Noah hadn’t appeared with the popcorn yet. He could smell the popcorn wafting from the kitchen so it had to be almost done. Popping popcorn wasn’t rocket science so it shouldn’t be taking this long.

“Where are they?” Casey grumbled, shifting on the sofa.

“I’m sure it’s almost done,” Luke replied, glancing toward the kitchen. He hoped that Maddie wasn’t making Noah feel uncomfortable. Casey had certainly done a number on him earlier which had surprised Luke. He couldn’t figure out why his friend asked those ridiculous questions.

*Like you have?* an inner voice asked.

*No...like Casey was,* he tried to reason with himself. *I was never intentionally trying to be mean to Noah.*

*Not even when you accused him of trying to steal Gram’s silver?*

All of the sudden Casey was standing up. “I’m going to see what the hell is going on in there,” he declared.
Luke scrambled after him. “I’m sure they’re just making popcorn.” He followed Casey into the kitchen where Noah and Maddie were dumping the popcorn into a couple of bowls.

“From Here to Eternity—the beach scene is just so romantic,” Maddie was saying as Luke and Casey approach the island.

“It looks good on film,” Noah replied, “but realistically I think it would be too much sand.”

“What’s going on here?” Casey asked.

“We were just finishing up the popcorn,” Noah announced as he poured the butter over the bowls.

“ Took you long enough,” Casey huffed, wrapping his arm around Maddie.

“Hey, we wanted to make sure that we didn’t burn it,” Maddie replied.

“I appreciate you guys not wanting to stink up my grandmother’s kitchen,” Luke said, smiling at Noah who seemed to be having a good time. Actually, he looked relaxed which was new for him. Noah was always a bit nervous or tense.

How in the hell did Maddie manage to get Noah to unwind?

Noah returned his smile, shrugging slightly. “I can’t stand the smell of brunt popcorn. It’s the worst. You can’t watch a movie with bad popcorn… it takes away from the mood.”

“So,” Maddie said, turning to Noah. “Bette Davis or Joan Crawford?”

“Bette Davis!” Noah exclaimed not even having to think about her question. “Now Voyager, Jezebel, What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?, Dark Victory…”

“That has both of them,” Maddie interrupted him.

“But it’s still a must see,” Noah insisted.

“You forgot All About Eve,” Maddie declared. “I love that movie!”

“That’s because you interrupted me,” Noah chuckled.

“Can you believe that Luke has never seen Psycho?” Maddie asked, giving Noah a friendly nudge.

“Really?” Noah’s eyes bugged out. “It’s a classic—Janet Leigh, the shower scene, and the Bates Motel.”

“I know,” Maddie nodded knowingly.

Luke rolled his eyes. Here we go again with the ‘Luke hasn’t seen this classic movie’ thing.

“The movie is pure genius,” Noah gushed.

“I know. The shower scene is brilliant,” Maddie quickly added.

“What the hell is it about this shower scene?” Luke asked a bit irritated. He was getting tired of it being referenced.

Noah looked at him like he had grown a second head. “It’s only one of the most famous scenes in American film history,” he enthusiastically explained. “It’s when the heroine gets stabbed in the
shower at the Bates Motel. The scene features 77 different camera angles. Most of the shots are extreme close-ups. And the way it’s cut you never actually see the knife puncturing flesh but you think you do—that coupled with the score that is used over the scene is just pure brilliance.”

“The blood is actually chocolate syrup,” Maddie said, popping a piece of popcorn into her mouth.


“The scene lasted three minutes and had fifty cuts in it,” Noah said, shaking his head.

“That’s just crazy,” Maddie readily agreed.

Luke was being to think Noah and Maddie were the crazy ones. They seemed to be speaking a foreign language.

“What the hell are you guys talking about?” Casey asked positively exasperated.

“It’s geek speak.” Maddie giggled. “I found my twin. I think Noah and I were separated at birth. He’s an old movie buff just like I am. I finally found someone who understands what I’m saying.”

“Maddie has great taste in movies,” Noah said. “You guys should have rented *Psycho*—especially if Luke has never seen it—it’s the perfect thriller especially with Halloween only a few weeks away.”

Noah turned to him. “It may be in black and white but it’s still one of the best horror movies ever made.”

“So I hear,” Luke replied still trying to wrap his head around Noah the film geek. He’d never seen him so animated.

Casey frowned. “*Psycho* wouldn’t have been a very good movie to rent given recent events.”

Oh shit. Casey was in pit bull mode. He better step in before his friend ripped Noah’s head off.


“I’m sorry,” Noah said, the smile quickly fading from his handsome face. “Did something bad happen?”

“Something bad?” Casey mocked him. “Well, if you call some of our classmates getting stabbed to death last month ‘something bad’.”

“Casey!” Maddie exclaimed, glaring at him.

“I…I….didn’t…” Noah stammered, glancing from Casey to Luke obviously mortified by his error.

“Of course you didn’t,” Luke said, placing his hand on Noah’s arm, who immediately tensed. Shit. What the fuck was the thinking touching Noah? Of course the straight kid didn’t want the gay guy coping a feel. Stupid move on his part. Quickly, he released his hold. “No one is blaming you—no one. Right, Casey?” He shot his friend a threatening look. He didn’t know what Casey’s problem was but he needed to cut it out. Now.

“Yeah, right,” Casey conceded. “Sorry. It’s just a touchy subject around here.”

Noah nodded. “I can imagine. And if I knew I wouldn’t have suggested renting a horror movie.”
“It’s really not that big of a deal. Casey is just being a bit overprotective which I can appreciate even if it may be a bit misplaced at the moment,” Maddie said, half reassuring Noah and half chastising her boyfriend. “But I think we will have to make sure Luke sees it in a few months because it is criminal that he’s gone this long without seeing it.”

Luke held up his hands in mock surrender. “Fine…fine. I’ll see the movie just so you stop harassing me about it. Now can we go watch the new, pretty color movie that you guys rented?”

“Yes, that would be great,” Casey readily agreed.

“I don’t know if it will be great,” Maddie teased, grabbing one of the bowls of popcorn.

“It definitely won’t be *The Thin Man*,” Noah chuckled.

“I adore Nick and Nora Charles…and Asta!” Maddie grinned. “I always said if I ever got a dog I’d name it Asta.”

Luke took the other bowl of popcorn. There they go again…

Before they could leave the room the door to the kitchen opened and Maddie’s smile faded. “Oh god,” she muttered, staring at the doorway.

Luke turned to see who she was looking at and there stood his cousin, Jade.
Chapter 10

“Jade! What are you doing here?” Luke asked surprised to see her. He hadn’t invited her over to the movie night because she didn’t get along with Casey and Maddie because of her obsession with Will, who was married to Gwen (both were friends of theirs). Needless to say, Casey and Maddie weren’t pleased when Jade had managed to seduce Will. Even though Will had cheated on his wife, Casey and Maddie’s anger remained focused on Jade since she continued to pursue Will even though he’d told her that he wasn’t going to leave Gwen.

Being stuck between his cousin and friends really sucked so Luke tried to keep them separated if possible but sometimes the two worlds collided and when they did. Oh boy. It was like thermal nuclear war. God he hoped that tonight wouldn’t be one of those nights because he really didn’t want Noah subjected to that madness, especially after all of Casey’s stupid remarks.

“I thought I’d come visit my cousin, but it looks like you already have company,” Jade said a bit tersely.

“We were doing a movie night,” Luke replied, feeling guilty for not including his cousin.

“So I see,” she replied coolly. Then she zeroed in on Maddie. “I didn’t realize you were going to be here.”

“That makes two of us,” Maddie replied, expertly standing her ground.

Jade’s eyes darted from Maddie to Noah, widening a bit like a child discovering a brand new toy. A small smile played on her lips as she slowly drank in the newcomer. “Who’s this?” she asked, slinking over to Noah.

Oh hell no.

“I’m Noah,” he said, extending his hand toward her like a perfect gentleman.

“Jade…Luke’s cousin.” She took it, shaking it a bit too long as far as Luke was concerned. “You must be new to Oakdale because I’ve never seen you before…unless Luke’s been keeping you a secret.”

Noah must have turned ten shades of red. “Umm…yeah. I’m new. That is…”

“Noah and his mom are living out at the cabin,” Luke quickly explained, heading toward the refrigerator to get some cans of Coke to go with the popcorn. “He’s also working for my dad,” he said, placing them on the island next to the bowls. Then he strolled over, joining the others not wanting to be too far from his cousin. Luke hated the way Jade was leering at Noah—like he was a prime piece of meat—bacon wrapped filet mignon. Luke hoped by telling her that Noah was working for his dad she’d back off.

“Oh hell no.

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“How sweet.” She smiled. “Do you like it?”

“So far. Today was my first day,” Noah replied, playing with the hem of his rugby shirt.

Jade nodded, her eyes still roaming over Noah, who seemed totally oblivious that she was sizing him up. “What do you think of Oakdale?”

“I haven’t seen it yet,” Noah admitted, shrugging slightly. “I’ve been here at the farm the entire
Jade placed her hand on Noah’s forearm. “You need a tour of the city!” she said enthusiastically.

“Jade can give you one,” Casey quickly added. “She definitely knows her way around.”

Not Casey too!

Well, he could kind of understand where Casey was coming from on this one. If Jade was keeping Noah occupied, then he wouldn’t be talking movies with Maddie. Casey didn’t like sharing his girlfriend with another guy—even just as a friend. Casey harbored a bit of a jealous streak which had reared its ugly head earlier. Luke was the exception since he was gay and nothing could ever come of their friendship. Casey obviously saw Noah as a threat and wanted him otherwise occupied.

But not with Jade.

Would another girl be more suitable for Noah? Or no girl at all?

“Mr. Snyder’s going to be keeping me pretty busy,” Noah explained. “There’s so much to learn about the horse breeding business.”

“But surely he can’t work you 24/7,” Jade purred sweetly. “You aren’t a prisoner here, are you?”

“Of course he isn’t,” Luke interjected. “He’s only been here a few days.”

Jade flashed him a pointed look. “I believe I was speaking to Noah.”

“Oh brother,” Maddie muttered, rolling her eyes.

Jade turned back to Noah, smiling. “As I was saying, you can’t be working all of the time.”

“Well…” Noah stammered as he picked up one of the cans of Coke off the island and clutching it tightly.

“That’s what I thought,” she said triumphantly. “You do have spare time. And I know that you have to be just dying to get off this farm. You have to be bored to death here!”

“You really should get out and see the sights,” Casey said suddenly sounding like he worked for the Oakdale Chamber of Commerce. “It’s not a bad town. The burgers and shakes at Al’s are the best. Maddie’s brother, Henry, and his girlfriend recently bought the place. You and Jade should go there because you haven’t lived until you’ve had a chocolate shake from Al’s.”

Every fiber of Luke’s being was screaming NO! He just couldn’t let this happen. And when he glanced at Noah, spotting the deer trapped in the headlights look on his face, he was more determined to step in. Luke also knew that Noah didn’t have a car and probably only had the money that his father would be paying him, which he was willing to bet Noah wouldn’t want to blow on Jade.

Jade reached up and playfully tugged at the collar of Noah’s shirt. “What do you think?” she asked seductively. “How about taking me out to Al’s? And, in turn, I’ll give you a tour of Oakdale you’ll never forget.”

Noah shifted uneasily. “That…um…sounds…nice and all…but…”

“But nothing!” Jade exclaimed. “We’ll have so much fun! I promise to make it worth your while,” she added, winking.
Luke couldn’t take it anymore. “Jade, Noah really is going to be pretty busy with my dad,” he said, placing his hand on her arm and gently prying her away from Noah.

“Your father can’t work him every single day,” Jade insisted. “I know for a fact that Holden doesn’t work seven days a week so I’m sure that he’s not going to expect Noah to go without a day off.”

“She has a point there,” Casey piped up but was promptly met with an elbow to the ribs from Maddie. “OW,” he grimaced, “what was that for?”

“Stay out of it,” she hissed through gritted teeth.

“Mr. Snyder and I haven’t discussed my schedule yet so I don’t know when I’m free,” Noah hedged. Luke just couldn’t stand to see Noah twisting in the wind like this. And Jade wasn’t going to back down anytime soon. She was like a dog with a big juicy steak bone. He had to quickly think of something that get Noah off the hook but at the same time wouldn’t start World War III with Jade.

“I know my dad doesn’t work on Sundays,” Luke chimed in before Jade could say anything else. “If you don’t have any plans, Jade and I could take you on a tour of Oakdale. We could even do lunch at Al’s—my treat.” He could feel the daggers being shot his way from his cousin but he didn’t dare look in her direction, instead he focused on Noah’s midnight blue eyes.

“Yeah, sure,” Noah said, grinning. “That is—if it’s not too much trouble.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Jade quickly interjected.

“Do you think we can watch the movie now?” Casey asked slightly irritated. “The butter on our popcorn is getting cold.”

“Sure,” Luke replied and then turned to Jade. “Did you want to join us?” he asked, half hoping she’d say no because she’d probably try to spend the rest of the night flirting with Noah.

“I’d love to,” she said, grabbing one of the bowls of popcorn and a can of Coke. “Come on, Noah.” She linked her arm through his. “We want to be sure to get a good seat.”

“Okay,” Noah replied as he was escorted out of the room. Casey grabbed the other bowl of popcorn. “Wouldn’t it be great if Noah could make Jade forget about Will?” he said. “Hey, Maddie, can you grab the pop?”

“Sure, Casey,” she replied, snatching two cans off the countertop. “Are you coming, Luke?”

He took the last can of Coke. “I’m right behind you,” he muttered, his enthusiasm for this gathering quickly waning. He couldn’t believe just how bothered he was by Jade’s actions.

*It’s not because of anything I feel for Noah, he rationalized with himself. It’s just because Jade is probably all wrong for him. It would be like sending a lamb to the slaughter.*

Luke stopped short when he reached the parlor. Jade had Noah cornered on the love seat—the bowl of popcorn on her lap while Noah sat practically hugging the arm of the small sofa. Luke was tempted to say something but he held his tongue. He had no claim on Noah. And the last thing he needed was to come of sounding like a jealous boyfriend because he was neither of these things.

Maddie and Casey were camped out on the couch but Luke certainly wasn’t going to join them. This
left him with the antique wing back chair which was as uncomfortable as hell. So now not only did he have a shitty seat, Luke also had no popcorn. He felt like a chaperone for date night.

Fucking great.

“So what movie are we watching?” Jade asked.


“I just love X-Men,” Jade said, placing her hand on Noah’s thigh.

Luke just about spit out the Coke he was drinking. Jade despised comic books. In fact, she’d tease mercilessly him about his collection, calling it the “ultimate cock block”. He rolled his eyes. It was going to be a long night.

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Luke was relieved when the movie ended. Somehow he’d managed to stay focused on it and not what may or may not be happening on the love seat across the room from him. He hated how his stomach was all twisted up in knots at the mere prospect of Noah and Jade together.

“We really should get going,” Casey said, standing and stretching.

Noah quickly sprung up from the love seat. “Me too,” he said eagerly. “I have to get up early tomorrow.”

“It was really nice meeting you, Noah,” Maddie said, placing her hand on his arm. “The next time we all do a movie night we’re going to have to rent a classic and show these guys what a real good movie looks like.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Noah readily agreed.

Casey retrieved the DVD of out the player. “Just as long as it’s not some old chick flick.”

“If it’s still too soon for Psycho we could always do The Maltese Falcon,” Noah suggested.

Maddie raised her eyebrows. “Hmmm…a little Sam Spade? I like the way you think, Noah.”

“Are you ready, my dear?” Casey asked, slipping his arm around Maddie’s waist.


“Thanks for bringing the movie,” Luke replied, escorting them out of the room. “I’m glad you guys could come over.” He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Noah gathering the empty Coke cans and bowls. “You don’t have to do that. I can get those later.”

“I don’t mind,” Noah replied with a slight shrug. “It’s the least I can do.”


Of course she would.

Luke left them to the clean up as he walked Maddie and Casey to the door. He’d only be leaving them for a few moments. Nothing too terrible would happen in such a short time. But to make sure, Luke didn’t let Maddie and Casey linger. With one final quick goodbye they were out the door.
“Are you sure you have to leave?” Jade was asking Noah as they strolled into the kitchen, carrying the cans and bowls.

“Uh…yeah,” Noah said, placing the dirty popcorn bowl in the sink.

“Did you need a ride?” she asked, sashaying up next to him depositing the bowl she has holding into the sink.

“No, thanks,” he replied, stepping away from her and heading over to the island to retrieve his flashlight.

“Are you sure?” Jade persisted.

“Jade, the cabin is just across the property,” Luke reminded her. “Noah will be fine.”

Noah turned to Luke. “So you’ll be in touch about Sunday then?”


Noah glanced quickly at Jade as he marched toward the door. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Same here!” she called after Noah.

When Noah reached the door, he hesitated for a moment, gazing at Luke. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Luke said as Noah disappeared out the door.

“What the hell is your problem, Luke?” Jade demanded.

Fuck. He should have known this was coming.

Luke spun around to discover his cousin, standing with her hands planted firmly on her hips ready for a verbal sparring match. No one—blood relative or otherwise—comes between Jade and a potential boyfriend.

“What do you mean?” Luke asked, leaning against the island countertop, feigning innocence.

Her eyes narrowed. “You know damn well! Sticking your nose in where it doesn’t belong with Noah!”

“Oh come on, Jade,” Luke said, rolling his eyes. “You were practically throwing yourself at him. The only thing I did was save you from embarrassing yourself because he obviously wasn’t going to ask you out.”

“I think you want Noah for yourself!”

Luke could feel all of the color drain from his face. No. Jade couldn’t possibly be able to tell that he thought Noah was the most gorgeous boy he’d even seen. There was no way.

Right?

“No,” he quickly replied. “I don’t have a thing for Noah.”
“I’m not blind,” Jade smirked. “I can recognize one of your straight boy crushes anywhere. That’s why you invited yourself along on our date.”

His cousin was delusional. Never once had Noah even acted like he was remotely interested in going on a date with Jade. He’d seemed to be shying away from it. “You never had a date with Noah!” Luke insisted. “He was trying to say no to you but you were too damn stubborn to see it.”

“He was doing no such thing!”

“Fine…whatever,” he muttered, pushing past her so he could wash the popcorn bowls before he went to bed.

Jade placed her hand on Luke’s back. “You know what, it won’t matter if you’re there or not,” she told him. “I’ll be the one who Noah will be interested in, cuz—not you. And I’ll be the one who sees him naked. I bet that Noah has a really hot body. I wonder if he’s still a virgin. I’ve never had a virgin before. It could be a lot of fun teaching him how to make love if he is one…”

Luke couldn’t listen to her anymore. “Jade, I really don’t think it’s a good idea to pursue him,” he said, doing his best to stay calm. The last thing he needed was to give her any more ammunition against him. As it was her arsenal was a bit too loaded for his liking. “Noah works for my dad. It’s just a little too close to home. There are plenty of other guys out there for you to pursue.”

“That’s what makes it exactly so perfect,” Jade insisted. “Noah is the stable boy just like Holden was when he met your mother. Look at how perfectly it worked out for them. Noah and I can be the next version of them.”

“What?” Luke almost dropped the bowl. Jade really had gone off the deep end now, comparing herself to his parents. “You barely know this guy! And now you’re planning on marrying him?”


“The last thing Dad needs is you getting all obsessed with his new employee.”

“Same goes for you.”

He dropped the dishrag he was holding into the sink and turned to Jade. “I’m not obsessed with anyone, got it? I was just looking out for a friend who you seemed to be making uncomfortable.”

“I think he’s just shy,” she decided. “I bet I can get him to come out of his shell. And you know what they say—it’s always the quiet ones who are the wild ones in bed.”

Luke was incensed. He hated how Jade was talking about Noah—like he was going to be some sort of conquest for her. The Noah he’d come to know so far was a sweet, intelligent guy—not some piece of meat to get into bed.

Okay, but having a fit about it now obviously wasn’t getting him anywhere. He just needed to get rid of Jade so he could be alone. He took a deep breath. “I’ve got some homework I need to finish up before I go to bed,” he told her.

“Is that you’re polite way of kicking me out?”


“It’s definitely been an interesting evening,” Jade said, giving Luke a hug. “I’m so happy that I stopped by.”
Luke wished he could have said the said but that would have been an out and out lie. “I’ll see you Sunday.”

“You better not dare try to take Noah on the tour without me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Luke said, plastering his most angelic smile onto his face.

“I’ll see you later then,” she said, heading toward the door.


And then finally he was alone.

After he dried the bowls and put them away, he snatched his laptop off the kitchen table, taking it up to his room. It seemed like a lifetime ago when Noah had walked in on him typing on his personal blog.

Writing about him.

Sitting on his bed, Luke fired up his laptop and logged onto his LiveJournal account. He wanted to finish up what he’d been writing before he went to bed. Now he had more to add to it because there was more to Noah.

Much, much more.

He knows poetry…

Stop it. It doesn’t matter, he quickly reminded himself. Noah is straight. He’s not interested in dating you—kissing you—and certainly not fucking you.

Sighing, Luke read what he had already written.

Is it possible to abandon one straight boy crush for another? Can I really fall for another straight guy? Am I that hopeless?

One thing I do know for certain is that Noah Carlson isn’t Kevin Davis.

When I first saw Noah I immediately noticed that he was gorgeous. Although I have a feeling that Noah doesn’t feel that way about himself. He doesn’t carry himself with the same cocky swagger that Kevin does. Noah would rather disappear while Kevin needs to be the center of attention. Like today when he insisted on coming over to my table at lunch to humiliate me.

What did I ever see in Kevin?

How could I have been friends with someone so shallow? So quick to belittle someone different than him? What does that say about me?

I guess I wasn’t much better than Kevin the other night when I lashed out at Noah. I told him that I had been forced to move to the farm to make sure that he and his mom didn’t make off with Gram’s silver. Talk about a shitty thing to say. I was hurting so I had to make Noah hurt too.

Sometimes I’m such a spoiled brat.

I’m pretty sure that the Carlsons aren’t bad people.
Noah’s all I’ve been able to think about. I couldn’t concentrate in school today because I was lost in visions of his beautiful blue eyes. God…I’m so pathetic.

I came out to him partly hoping beyond hope that he’d confess that he was gay too. No such luck. But at least he didn’t call me a fag like Kevin had. It just goes to show that he’s a much better person that that piece of shit I used to be friends with. I think we might be able to be friends. I hope we can be friends…even if we can’t be more.

But oh what I wouldn’t give to be more…

Noah is just so

The thought was lost because Noah had sauntered into the kitchen so Luke had to quickly stop writing so he wouldn’t get discovered. The interruption was worth it because the conversation that had followed had been a real eye opener.

Noah could quote Whitman.

Luke had practically creamed his jeans like a girl when Noah had begun to spout off O Captain My Captain. It was exciting to discover someone else who appreciated the poets like he did.

Noah seemed to have appreciated his horse Whitman which warmed his heart. Not many people could come out of the stable saying Luke’s horse was beautiful among all of those American Saddlebreds but he could tell that Noah truly meant it. Luke suspected that Noah might be able to identify more closely to Whitman as opposed to the fancy horses that Holden bred.

Luke took a deep breath and began to type.

Noah is just so special. I’m learning that more every day. Unfortunately, the more I learn this the more I want him to be my boyfriend. And it hurts.

Maybe I should just distance myself from him. But I can’t do that. Noah needs a friend and so do I.

Why can’t my life just be easy for once?

Luke posted his entry under “private” and then powered down his laptop and put it away. He decided not to get into the whole Jade thing on his blog. The last thing he wanted to do was rehash it again. Luke hated the fact that she was interested in Noah. What a fucking nightmare it was going to be. While Luke truly loved his cousin, he knew what a barracuda she could be when he came to men. He saw firsthand what had happened when her interest had turned to Will and what a train wreck that had become.

But Noah didn’t seem interested in Jade. He was certain it wasn’t just wishful thinking on his part. And Luke would see for certain on Sunday thanks to his quick thinking.

Luke was about to change into his bedclothes when his cell phone rang. Snatching it off his nightstand, he saw Maddie’s name splashed on the display.

Hmmm…what could she want at this hour?
Even though Luke was ready to just crawl into bed, curiosity got the better of him so he had to answer the phone. “Hey, Mads.”

“Hey, yourself.”

“What’s up?”

“Hopefully, you still are,” she replied. “I wasn’t sure if I was calling too late.”


“You hardly need beauty sleep,” Maddie giggled. “You are too pretty for your own good.”

“Right,” he scoffed, “that’s why I have so many dates.”

“Mmmmm…I have a feeling your time is coming,” she said mysteriously.

Luke raised his eyebrow as he sprawled out on the mattress on his stomach. “Oh? Do you know something I don’t?”

“No,” she replied innocently, “it’s just one of my famous gut instincts.”

“Riiiight—so in other words you’re just appeasing the gay guy—give him some hope so he’s not all mopey senior year.”

“That’s not what I’m doing at all,” Maddie insisted. “Anyway, the reason I’m calling is to apologize for my dumbass boyfriend. I can’t believe what a jealous jerk he was tonight—attacking poor, sweet Noah.”

“I was surprised that he went off on Noah like that,” Luke admitted. “It was completely uncalled for.”

“You can tell Noah that I reamed Casey out. I know I should be flattered that he loves me so much but there’s no need to go all Neanderthal either,” Maddie was talking a mile a minute. “Sometimes I think he has the mentality of a caveman—encouraging Jade to go after Noah. I’m sorry, Luke, I know she’s your cousin and all, but I wouldn’t wish her on poor Noah. Look at what she’s done to Will.”


“Noah’s just so darn sweet,” Maddie gushed. “I can’t believe he’s a movie geek. He really knows his stuff. It’s quite impressive. I would have been happy just spending the night in your grandmother’s kitchen talking to him.”

She wasn’t the only one. Luke would have loved to have spent the night getting to know Noah better too.

“I don’t think Casey would have liked that,” Luke reminded her.

“Oh god no!” Maddie snorted. “He would have had kittens.”

“Hopefully, Casey can be friends with him because Noah is a nice guy.”

“So has he been officially added to Luke Snyder’s list of friends?”

“Yes, I actually came out to him the other night,” Luke quietly confessed as he traced the pattern on
the quilt that covered his bed.


“He was pretty cool about it.” Luke rolled over onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. “He definitely didn’t call me a fag and freak out.”

“Noah seems like a really good guy. I certainly approve of him.”

Luke wasn’t quite sure what Maddie was approving of but he didn’t question her. “And as a friend I also agree that subjecting him to my cousin would be quite awful because of her—shall we say—sketchy track record with men. I just had to save him from being roped into a date with her,” Luke admitted.

“Well, if you weren’t going to do something I was,” Maddie chuckled. “I think Casey would have killed me too. Even I could see how uncomfortable Noah was with her take no prisoners approach.”

Luke had to smile. So it wasn’t just him? Noah really didn’t want to go out with Jade.

“Jade isn’t too happy with me right now,” Luke told her, “but I had to do something.”

“I swear she’s like a black widow spider.”


“But true. Come on, you have to agree.”

“Yes,” he reluctantly admitted, “you do have a point there. I’ll be running interference on Sunday. I might need to bring a whip and a chair.”

“You are definitely going to have your hands full, my friend.”

“Are you sure that Noah didn’t seem interested in Jade?” Luke asked. As soon as the words were out of his mouth he immediately cursed himself for sounding needy and insecure. Hopefully, Maddie wouldn’t read too much into his question.

“No way!” she exclaimed. “He was so uncomfortable. Trust me. The boy wasn’t interested.”

“Okay.”

“What time are you going to Al’s?”

“We should be there around noon,” he replied. Maddie was silent, which meant she was up to something. “Maddie…”


“You too, sweetie. Goodnight. Sweet dreams.”

“Goodnight.” Luke flipped his phone closed and then hauled himself up off the bed. Now it was time to get ready to go to sleep. But with all of this talk about Noah he knew it was going to be hard not to think about him—or dream about him.

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Noah found his mother curled up in the fetal position on the couch, watching TV when he entered the cabin. He didn’t even have see the screen to know what she was watching. All he heard was a few strands of the musical score and he knew that Tony and Gloria were driving through the streets of San Francisco on their way to the opera house to stop the assassination that was about to take place.

“Hey,” Charlene said, sitting up a little bit, “how did your movie night go?”

He strolled over, joining her on the sofa. “I had a good time. There was this girl, Maddie, there and it turns out she’s a classic movie buff like me. She’s so amazing. She loves Claude Raines, The Thin Man, Bette Davis. I swear it’s kismet.”

His mom smiled. “I’m so happy to hear that you had a good time and met such a nice girl.”

“I also met Luke’s friend, Casey, and his cousin, Jade,” Noah added.

“But neither of them are movie buffs?”

“No like Maddie,” he replied, glancing over at his mom, who looked a bit pale. Noah was a bit worried. He hoped that she wasn’t sick again. He thought she had gotten over what had been ailing her the night their car had broken down. “Are you okay, Mom?”

“Sure, string bean,” she said, patting his leg. “I’m just resting and having my own little movie night. Tomorrow is going to be a big day for me. It’s my first day at Al’s.”

“Do you mind if I watch the end with you?”

His mom perked up. “Of course not.”

Noah knew that she’d love his company. Watching movies together had always been their special treat, especially Foul Play even though it was a far cry from Casablanca in Noah’s book. But it was his mother’s favorite so it held a special place in Noah’s heart.

As he watched Tony chase down the albino, Noah’s thoughts drifted to Luke. He swore he could still feel where Luke had touched him. Noah hadn’t expected it. Luke’s hand on his arm had taken him by complete surprise so he tensed up but his body had been screaming for more. Because touching Luke felt so right.

And kissing him would feel…

Noah squeezed his eyes shut.

No. Casey might not be Luke’s boyfriend, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t one out there somewhere. Even if Luke doesn’t have a boyfriend, he can’t fill that role.

Barry Manilow belting out the movie’s theme song snapped Noah out of his reverie. His eyes snapped opened to find his mother, uncoiling herself and stretching as the closing credits rolled on the screen.

“I never get tired of that movie,” she admitted with a slight grin.

Noah returned her smile. “I better get to bed,” he said, leaning over and kissing her on the cheek. “Good luck tomorrow.”

“Thanks. I’ll need it,” she sighed. “It’s been awhile since I’ve waited on tables. I just hope I don’t
drop too many dishes or get any orders wrong.”

“You’ll do great, Mom,” he reassured her.

Noah brushed his teeth in the kitchen sink and then made a quick stop in the bathroom before retiring to his bedroom. Of course once he had changed into his sweats and t-shirt and was snuggled into bed, Noah’s thoughts quickly returned to Luke.

Luke had really surprised him today.

First, when Holden had told him about how Luke had insisted on rescuing Whitman. And then when Luke actually quoted the great Walt Whitman. But mostly when Luke had stuck up for him when Casey had started picking on him—he had chosen him over his own friends which had left Noah completely baffled. No one had ever defended him except for his mother.

Then Luke had stepped in again when Jade started angling for a date. Noah really didn’t want to get stuck going out with another girl he wasn’t interested in. Actually, he really didn’t like her at all. There was something about the way she was eyeing him that had made him extremely uncomfortable. He felt as if he were some sort of prize.

Noah had this feeling a few times before while he was waiting tables at Genii’s Restaurant in East Tawas. A couple of times older female tourists—probably in their early twenties—tried getting him to go to a beach party. One even tried tipping him with her room key. Noah had been mortified because he couldn’t figure out why she’d want to do such a thing. He was a skinny, awkward kid who’s had basically zero experience with girls other than a couple of kisses.

Why would anyone be interested in dating him?

But Jade certainly seemed like she was very interested for some reason much to his dismay. What is he going to do about her? She obviously isn’t the kind of girl who takes ‘no’ for an answer. And he really didn’t want to try to fake it with Luke’s cousin. He’d already done that twice and realized it didn’t work for him. Surely, a third time wasn’t going to change the fact that he was gay. It would only lead to all sorts of trouble. The last thing Noah wanted was trouble with Luke or his family. They’d been so good to him and his mother. He didn’t want to risk it. And faking it would also most likely questions—questions that he might not be able to answer.

Noah was so grateful that Luke would be part of the tour of Oakdale. Hopefully, Luke’s presence would keep things casual. And, in the meantime, Noah would have to figure out a way to subtly let Jade know that he wasn’t interested in her. However, the key was doing so without hurting Jade’s feelings or getting Luke mad at him for messing with his cousin.

How did he get himself in these situations?

But what he really couldn’t figure out was why Luke had volunteered to show him around the town complete with lunch.

Maybe because he considers you a friend, he tried to reason with himself.

Friends. It was still such a foreign concept to Noah. But tonight he had made some new ones. And it was pretty amazing.

Oh what he wouldn’t give for it to happen again…
Maybe she’d been wrong about Noah. Maybe her son wasn’t gay after all. The way Noah had been talking about Maddie the night before really made her wonder. He’d never spoke of a girl like that before. In fact, she’d never seen him so animated about anyone. It was incredibly sweet.

Charlene was also glad that Noah and Luke were becoming friends. Luke seemed like a nice boy. Emma has had plenty of kind words to say about her grandson. Noah definitely needs someone like Luke in his life. It’s been so long since he’s had a friend.

Actually, she couldn’t remember her son ever having any real close friends. Moving every few years to a new Army base made it hard to form friendships especially with Noah being so shy. Winston had always frowned upon Noah having classmates over to the house. He did get out of the house to visit other kids but it took a lot of convincing on Charlene’s part, because she was determined to give Noah the best life she could despite Winston’s crazy rules. However, Noah still missed out on a lot.

Finally, that was behind him. Noah was going to lead a normal life. Only a few days had passed since they’d settled at Oakdale but she could already see the change in Noah. This had to be their last stop. Charlene would do everything humanly possible to make it so. She wasn’t about to see that light in Noah’s eyes go dark.

Charlene’s new job was a far cry from teaching high school English but, then again, that was a lifetime ago. She’d made it through her first shift at Al’s without dumping a milkshake on any of the customers. And every burger had made it to the proper table in a timely manner. Actually, she was pretty damn proud of herself.

If only the pain would go away…

_It’s nothing. I probably just started my period early. That has to be it, _she decided. _It’s the only explanation._

Her cycle was probably thrown off with the stress of the move, losing the car and everything else that has been going on. She would have to stop at Walgreen’s on the way back to the farm to pick up a couple of bottles of Ibuprofen because boy did she have some killer cramps. Thankfully, her shift was over so all she had to do was clean up her station and she’d be able to leave.

Charlene glanced in the mirror, frowning slightly. She was certain there were a couple of new gray hairs taking up residence in her blond hair that was tied back into a short ponytail.

Wow. She was looking much older than her forty-four years—crow’s feet jutted out from her deep blue eyes, her forehead had been creased with valleys of worry, and her once luminous blond hair had turned dishwater, sprinkled with gray. Ruefully, she smiled. Back in the day she’d been quite the looker. That’s what had attracted the young, dashing Army Lieutenant.

Lieutenant Winston Mayer had swept the young teacher off her feet. He had treated her like a princess—flowers, small gifts, fancy restaurants. He was always the perfect gentleman. Before she knew it, Charlene had fallen head over heels in love with Winston Mayer, who promised her that he could show her the world. He had been so incredibly charming. Little did she know that there was a monster just lurking underneath the surface, just ready to come out for his reign of terror and destruction.

Even after all of these years, Charlene was still angry with herself for not seeing the signs. She’d
been an educated woman when she met Winston. It wasn’t like she was some young, helpless
damsel looking for a way to get out of Mommy and Daddy’s house. Charlene had graduated from
Augusta State University in Georgia and had gotten a job as an English teacher at Glenn Hills High
School. She had been pretty proud of her accomplishments—leaving her family in Ohio to attend
college out of state, graduating and getting a job. But she had allowed her judgment to get clouded
like a silly little schoolgirl.

Looking back now on that first year of their marriage there were signs that Winston had “issues.” He
was controlling even on their honeymoon—albeit subtly—so subtly that she hadn’t even noticed she
was being manipulated at the time. Winston would buy her clothes to wear so that she’d always dress
the way he wanted. She always had to appear as if she stepped off the pages of a fashion magazine.
Charlene could never leave the house without makeup because she was his showpiece—his arm
candy.

Ever-so-slowly her friends were dropped by the wayside, replaced by wives of his colleagues. She
was only to socialize with other Army wives that her husband deemed acceptable—officer’s wives.
And the career Charlene had been so proud to have ended the moment she learned she was pregnant.
Winston had insisted that she stay home and focus on being a wife and mother.

They hadn’t been trying to get pregnant but it wasn’t a complete surprise either—at least not to her.
Charlene had warned Winston that she’d messed up taking her birth control pills for the month but
that hadn’t stopped him from having sex (which he wanted all the time) and he refused to use
condoms. At first he wasn’t too happy, but then he quickly warmed to the idea of having a son—a
mirror image of himself.

Every day Charlene would pray that the baby she was carrying was a boy. A part of her feared what
would happen if it wasn’t. Thankfully, it didn’t happen. Noah Andrew Mayer was born on October
20, 1988. The happiest day of her life.

Winston was also thrilled with Noah’s birth—at first. And then it became apparent that he was
jealous of the time that Noah took Charlene away from Winston and his needs. He hadn’t allowed
her to breast feed because “he didn’t want some baby sucking on her tits.” Sometimes her husband
would just demand she let Noah cry in his crib at night. He’d insist that she make love to him instead
of going to her child. The time he had to work or the year he was sent to Iraq had been a godsend
because he wasn’t around to interfere with the care of Noah.

She’d never forget the day the last bit of love she felt for Winston died. It was the summer of 1994
and they were living in Ft. Hood. Noah was five…

Charlene was bustling about the kitchen, preparing dinner which needed to be on the table when
Winston walked through the door. Her husband was very old school about having a hot meal on the
table and his scotch on the rocks waiting for him along with a nice hug and kiss when he walked
through the door after a hard day’s work. Sometimes she felt like she was supposed to be June
Cleaver, keeping the perfect home for Winston.

But she knew better than to complain. Charlene had a sweet, beautiful son whom she loved more
than her own life. Glancing out the kitchen window, she could see her Noah in the backyard picking
flowers. Well…not exactly flowers—weeds—Dandelions and Queen Anne’s Lace. Her little man was
methodically gathering the flowers into his tiny hands and creating a bouquet.

She quickly backed away from the window just in case the bouquet Noah was making was for her.
She didn’t want him to see her and she really needed to get dinner ready. Her focus immediately
returned to the salad that she needed to prepare. The chicken casserole was in the oven and the
green beans just needed to be heated up.
As Charlene was setting the table, Noah bounded into the house, his hand was clutched tightly around a bouquet of Dandelions and Queen Anne’s Lace. “Mommy! I gots you a special present!” he proudly declared.

Charlene set down the plate that she was holding. “Oh you did? What is it?” she asked.

“Pretty flowers—like you,” Noah said, thrusting the bouquet toward her.

She blinked back tears of joy. Of all the gifts she’d received…diamond earrings, expensive perfume, sexing lingerie, dresses...this had to be her favorite. “Noah, they’re beautiful,” she said, bending down and taking the flowers from him. “But it’s not my birthday or Mother’s Day. What is the special occasion?”

“I love you so much, Mommy.”

Charlene wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tightly. “I love you too,” she murmured, giving him a kiss. “Now let’s find a vase so we can put them on the table for dinner. Does that sound good to you?”

“Yes!” Noah happily exclaimed.

She searched through the cupboards until she found a crystal vase that had been a wedding gift. Perfect. Sticking it under the faucet, she filled it with water, placed the flowers into it and then put it on the center of the kitchen table. “There we go!”

“Yay!” Noah clapped his hands.

“You need to go wash up for dinner and put on a clean t-shirt and shorts,” she instructed. “Your father will be home soon. I can’t have you looking like something that the cat just dragged in.”

“We don’t have a cat, Mommy,” Noah giggled as he headed off to the bathroom to wash his hands.

No. Noah wasn’t allowed to have any pets. Another one of many of Winston’s rules. Sometimes Charlene thought that Winston forgot that Noah wasn’t one of his soldiers.

“I’m home, Cheri love!” Winston called.

Shit. She hadn’t poured his scotch.

“Coming, dear!” she called as she quickly grabbed a rocks glass out of the cupboard and prepared the quickest scotch on the rocks of her life. Then she breezed into the living room where Winston was waiting for her with a frown on his face. And it was all her fault. She should have paid better attention to the time.

“Here you go,” she said, handing him his drink and placing a nice long kiss on his lips. “How was your day?”

“You know I like seeing your beautiful face as soon as I walk in the door,” he said, stroking her cheek.

“I know and I’m sorry,” she quickly apologized. “I got hung up in the kitchen with dinner.”

Winston took a sip of his drink. “Dinner does smell good.”

Charlene took his hand. “Come sit down,” she said, leading him toward the kitchen. “It’s just about ready.”
However, when they entered the kitchen Winston immediately dropped her hand. “What the hell is that?” he demanded.

“What?”

He snatched the vase from the center of the table. “This?”

At that moment Noah strolled into the room. “See the pretty flowers that I got for Mommy, Daddy?” he asked excitedly.

Winston yanked the flowers from the vase. “These are not flowers and they’re not pretty,” he boomed.

“But Mommy…” Noah began to protest.

“Young men shouldn’t pick flowers. Only little pansy boys would do something ridiculous like that,” he sneered. He marched over to the trash can and tossed the flowers inside it.

“Winston!” Charlene protested.

“Stay out of it!” he barked.

Noah’s eyes welled up with tears. “Why’d you throw Mommy’s present away?” he asked, lip trembling.

“Noah, you need to learn how to act like a man,” Winston said, looming over the small boy. “I will not have my son acting like a sissy. Are you going to cry over a bunch of weeds?”

“They’re flowers,” Noah sniffed. “Mommy said they’re pretty.”

“They were ugly weeds and they’re in the trash where they belong,” he sternly replied. “Now go to your room. I don’t want to see you until you can prove to me that you can act like a man.”

Noah turned on his heel and dashed from the room. And it was at that moment Winston shattered Charlene’s heart into a million pieces. She fully realized what a heartless man she’d married, because what he’d done to Noah was downright cruel.

“Why did you do that to him?” she asked. “I thought the bouquet was sweet.”

“That boy needs to be toughened up,” Winston declared. “He’s too soft. You’ve been indulging him too much.”

“Winston, he’s five years old!”

“I don’t want my son turning out be to some faggot,” Winton sneered. “I’d sooner kill him.”

Charlene’s blood ran cold. What kind of monster had she married?

Charlene blinked back a few tears, remembering how she’d told Noah that she really did love the flowers when she’d tucked him in that night and how hard it had been to convince him that she really meant it. Winston had really done a number on Noah’s psyche with all of his talk about “being a man.” That was his mantra and he was constantly drilling it into Noah’s head. Secretly, Charlene did what she could for Noah. She was continually reassuring him that he was a good boy and was loved very much just the way he was. But unfortunately it seemed like some of Winston’s words had
managed to strike home no matter how hard Charlene had tried to undo all of his sick, twisted crap.

“Are you all right, Gloria?” Vienna asked, stepping into the small restroom.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Charlene quickly replied. “I’m sorry to have disappeared for so long. I unexpectedly started my period.”

“I hate when that happens,” Vienna groaned. “I remember this one time I was wearing this beautiful white dress. Let’s just say it wasn’t so beautiful and white anymore when I realized my monthly visitor had made a surprise appearance!”

“I think we all have a story like that.”

“Thankfully, I had Henry with me and he was able to act as my human shield,” Vienna said, smiling.

“Henry’s really something,” Charlene replied good-naturedly. She couldn’t imagine Winston ever doing something like that. If an accident like that had ever occurred while they were in public he would have beaten her when they had gotten home for embarrassing him.

“My Henry is a keeper. I wouldn’t trade him for all of the tea in China.” Vienna linked her arm through Charlene’s, leading her out of the restroom. “Now…let’s get you out of here if you’re not feeling well. You did a great job today and we hope to have you back tomorrow!”

“I’ll be back,” Charlene replied. “I hope I didn’t make too bad of an impression hiding out in the bathroom after my shift.”

“I’m no stranger to female problems,” Vienna said in a hushed voice. “And you’re the best new waitress we’ve hired. We can’t let a gem like you get away! You didn’t break one dish! We should give you a raise.”

“Now…now,” Henry said, rushing over, “let’s not get all crazy. We can’t give out merit raises just because the china makes it through a shift undamaged.”

Vienna shrugged. “I’m new to this whole diner thing,” she admitted. “When Henry told me that he won big in a poker game I had hoped it was a diamond necklace or a pile of money—not this diner. I look much better in diamonds than covered in grease.”

Charlene had to admit Vienna did look like she was more cut out for the glamorous life. The raven hair beauty seemed like she belonged in the French Rivera or skiing in the Swiss Alps not helping run a small diner in Illinois.

“Cupcake, we really shouldn’t be talking about how we came to be proprietors of this lovely establishment,” Henry quickly said.

“Oh, Henry!” Vienna exclaimed. “I don’t see what the big deal is.” She turned to Charlene. “He told his younger sister that he actually bought this place. He doesn’t want the sweet little dear to know that he’s back to playing cards.”

“I don’t think Gloria really wants to know about our personal affairs,” Henry said, steering Vienna away from her.

Charlene smiled. “I need to reset some of these tables.” She left headed into the kitchen to get fresh place settings. Henry and Vienna were quite an interesting couple. And one thing she knew for certain was that working for them wasn’t going to be dull.
After everything was ship shape, Charlene clocked out and counted her tips. She had made a decent
amount of money for the lunch shift. It still wasn’t enough to do what she wanted for Noah, but it
was a start. After a few more days she’d have the money she needed to buy Noah a special surprise.
He deserved it. She couldn’t wait to see the look on his face when she gave it to him.

Soon.

But now she had to get some painkillers and take care of herself. Noah couldn’t see how much pain
she was in. Hopefully, the cramps would pass in a day or two.

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Luke had allowed a few days to go by before he ventured into the stables after school to seek out
Noah to firm up the plans for Sunday. The key was not appearing too anxious about the situation. He
needed to be causal. Noah couldn’t know that he’s been counting down the days until the big tour…
even though Jade would be with them.

But it didn’t matter. He’d still be spending the afternoon with Noah.

Luke sauntered into the stable, stopping off to pick up a couple of carrots for Whitman, shoving them
in the front pocket of his jeans. He didn’t see his dad or Noah so he wasn’t sure if they were still
working. Regardless, he didn’t want to disturb them so he figured he’d visit Whitman for a bit so he
let himself inside Whitman’s stall.

“Hi, my baby,” Luke cooed, nuzzling his face against Whitman’s nose. “How are you doing?” His
horse nudged his nose toward Luke’s pocket, seeking out the carrots that were in there. “I can never
fool you, can I?” he said, pulling out the carrots and feeding them to Whitman. Then he said in a low
voice. “I heard you met Noah. He’s something, isn’t he?” Luke murmured, stroking Whitman’s
mane. “He’s so hot and sweet and unfortunately straight.” He laid his head against Whitman’s neck.
“Maybe someday I’ll learn.”

Off in the distance, he could hear voices. Immediately, Luke perked up. “I think that’s Noah. I need
to go talk to him. I’ll be right back,” he said, giving Whitman a quick kiss.

Luke stepped out of the stall and was rendered dead in his tracks. In the distance he could see his dad
and Noah, standing at the end of the stable talking. He was mesmerized by Noah’s gorgeousness—
even in the gray sweatshirt that looked a size too big, jeans that were baggy and dirty—he was just
beautiful.

And then his dad laughed, throwing his arm around Noah, giving him a squeeze. Luke’s stomach
twisted in knots. Why was his dad so chummy with Noah? He couldn’t remember the last time his
father laughed like that with him. Luke chewed his lip as he backed up against Whitman’s stall. He
wasn’t sure how he felt about this.

Whitman plopped his head onto Luke’s shoulder, letting out a loud snort. “Yeah, I hear you, buddy,”
Luke murmured, reaching up to pet him.

“Hey, Luke!” his dad called to him, “is that you?”

“Yeah!” Luke replied, keeping the emotion out of his voice. “I…uh…just stopped by to see Noah
when he’s done working.”

“We’re all done,” Holden said as they approached him, “so he’s all yours.”

He’ll never be mine.
His fathered studied him for a moment. “Is everything okay?”

Luke forced a smile onto his face. “Yeah, fine. I was just hanging out with my baby.”

“Hi, Luke,” Noah said somewhat shyly as he shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. He glanced over at the horse. “Hey, there, Whitman.”

“Hey, Noah,” Luke replied, fighting to keep the visions of him taking Noah, spinning him around and pushing him up against door to Whitman’s stable and just kissing him senseless. And then there were the other things he wanted to do—like sinking to his knees…

“I’ll just leave you boys alone,” Holden said, turning and sauntering out of the stable.

“So…” Luke said suddenly a bit nervous since it was just him, Noah, and the horses.

“So…” Noah repeated, rocking on his heels.

“How’s it been going?”

“Good. I’ve been learning a lot,” Noah replied. “I think some of it is actually starting to stick. Your dad has been great. He’s so patient. I even learned how to drive the tractor today,” he added triumphantly.

Luke was about to make a sarcastic comment but the moment he saw the pride in Noah’s eyes he stopped himself. He had really accomplished something and should be commended not teased—even good-naturedly. “That’s great,” he said, grinning. “Dad’s going to make a horseman out of you yet.”

“One that doesn’t ride,” Noah said, shrugging a bit.

“That could always be rectified,” Luke informed him. “Whitman’s a sweetheart. He’s a good horse to learn on and I would be a very good teacher if you ever wanted to learn. There would always be a horse for you to ride here.”

He kinda surprised himself with his suggestion because he didn’t go around offering riding lessons. In all of his years of friendship, he never taught Kevin or any of his other friends to ride. But here he was offering up lessons to someone he’s known less than a week.

“Oh…wow,” Noah murmured, glancing at Whitman. “I had never been anywhere near a horse until the other day.”

“It would be nice having a riding partner,” Luke said, scratching Whitman’s ear. “Just give it some thought. There’s no pressure.”

“Okay.”

“Are we still on for Sunday?” Luke asked, titling his head to the side. He was trying very hard to focus on Noah’s face and not let his eyes wander over his tall, lean body that was buried underneath Noah’s ill fitting clothing. And he certainly wasn’t going to attempt to imagine how amazing Noah’s body had to look underneath the denim and cotton.

“Yes, definitely. That is, if you still want to,” Noah stammered.

“Definitely.”

“Good. I’m looking forward to it—seeing the town.”
“Me too—showing you that is,” Luke said, silently cursing himself for getting so tongue tied. “I thought I could swing by the cabin and pick you up about eleven and then we can get Jade from my parents’ house.”

“Jade…right.” Noah nodded. “Yeah, sounds good.”

“Great.” Luke grinned ear to ear.

“Great.” Noah brushed his fingers through his hair. “I…ah…should probably get going. But maybe I’ll see you later when I stop by the farmhouse for my shower.”

Oh good god—that was an image he didn’t need in his head right now—wet, naked, Noah.

“Okay, see you later then,” Luke replied, fighting to keep the lust out of his voice.

“Yeah,” Noah replied and then reached over, giving Whitman a stroked. “Bye, Whitman, it was nice to see you. And you too, Luke.” He gave a little wave and then headed out of the stable.

Chapter 12

Noah was stretched out on the sofa, relaxing after one hell of a hard week of work. Holden had taught him everything he needed to know about his business. And it was a lot. His head was still spinning from all of the information that was crammed in there—everything from when to feed and water the horses to tractor driving 101.

Watching *Dead Poets Society* had seemed like the perfect way to unwind. Actually, it was one of his mother’s DVDs (she loved the whole English teacher aspect of it). But when they started talking about Walt Whitman in the film, Noah’s thoughts immediately drifted to Luke, whom he hadn’t seen since their encounter in the stable the prior afternoon.

Noah had been to the farmhouse twice to shower and Luke was nowhere to be found either time which was disappointing. He’d hoped that he’d bump into Luke again but no such luck. It was a Friday night so Luke was most likely out on a date. Someone as incredible and gorgeous as Luke Snyder shouldn’t be expected to sit home alone.

Unlike him.

Not that Noah minded being alone. Having the cabin to himself while his mother worked the dinner shift at Al’s was kinda nice. He so rarely got any time that was truly his own. After his dinner of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and Cheetos, Noah decided to watch a movie while he waited for his mother to get home from work.

In retrospect, he probably wouldn’t have chosen *Dead Poets Society* if he’d known that it would have led to a night of obsessing about a boy he couldn’t have. Noah couldn’t understand why he kept insisting upon torturing himself like this—especially when Luke was most likely out on a date, kissing someone else.

The mere thought of Luke’s perfect pink, bowed lips on someone else’s sliced him to the core.

*Stop it. Watch the damn movie, he told himself.*

But as he focused on the boys of Welton Academy attending the meeting of the *Dead Poets Society* huddled around the fire (this time with two guests - a couple of girls that Charlie had brought to the meeting), he couldn’t prevent his mind from wandering. Closing his eyes, Noah slid his hand down the front of his sweats and pictured him and Luke alone under the stars in front of the campfire…

*They were students at the prestigious Welton Academy dressed in their blue crested blazers, starched white shirts, except Luke had ditched his tie, leaving his shirt undone a few buttons exposing his finely toned chest along with traces of dark blonde chest hair. Noah, on the other hand, still had his neck tie on loosely knotted around his neck because even in front of the campfire fire at their own private meeting of the Dead Poets Society. Noah still adhered to the rules. Together they sat on a blanket that Luke had snuck out of his room. Luke was tending to the fire with a long stick while Noah sat there completely mesmerized by his beauty—the way the flames seemed to highlight Luke’s golden locks, how incredibly dark and sexy his eyes were, and the adorable dimples that appeared whenever Luke smiled which he was doing now.*

*Before Noah realized he was saying it aloud the words were already out of his mouth. “She walks in beauty like, the night, Of cloudless climes and starry skies; All that’s best of dark and bright, Meet in her aspect and her eyes: Thus mellowed to that tender light, Which heaven gaudy day denies,” he said, gazing at Luke.*
“Are you comparing me to a girl?” Luke teased, taking his hand.


“First Lord Byron and now this.” Luke inched his mouth closer to Noah’s. “Are you trying to seduce me, Noah?”


“Good,” Luke murmured, pressing his lips against Noah’s.

Oh yes. Noah moaned as Luke’s tongue darted inside his mouth. Heaven was definitely having Luke Snyder’s tongue inside his mouth. This was the best feeling in the world.

But Noah wanted more. He wanted to see more of Luke—feel more of him…


“You feel so good,” Noah murmured.

Luke’s mouth crushed against his. “I can make you feel even better,” he growled.

In a flash, Noah was on his back, Luke on top of him, tugging off his necktie. It felt so good to have him pressed against him. Oh god Luke was hard. He wanted him. Now.

But Noah had never been with anyone. He didn’t know what to do. What if he disappointed Luke…

SLAM!

Noah’s eyes flew open. Quickly, he pulled his hand out of his sweats. The sound of the truck door (borrowed from Emma’s farm) shutting was enough to snap Noah out of his little fantasy. Sitting up, Noah snatched the throw pillow from the other side of the sofa and put it over his lap to cover the erection that his thoughts of Luke had managed to produce.

Oh shit…oh shit…oh shit…

Noah wanted to run and hide inside his bedroom but he knew that he’d never be able to make it in there without his mother seeing. How could he have let himself get carried away like that, especially out in the living room? He was never stupid and careless like that! His mom had a sixth sense about things, she was going to be able to figure it out and then he’d never be able to look her in the eye again.

“Hi, string bean!” his mother said, breezing through the door carrying a couple of shopping bags. “How are you doing?”

“How are you doing?”

“Good,” he replied, trying to keep his voice causal and will his hard-on to deflate. He paused the movie. “How was work?”

“Al’s is one hopping joint on a Friday night,” Charlene said, plopping down next to him on the couch. “I definitely earned my tips.”

“Are you hungry? Can I get you something to eat?”
She shook her head. “Nope. I grabbed a bite at the diner. That’s one good thing about working at Al’s. I get free meals before or after my shift. They have good food. We’ll have to go eat there on one of my days off,” she said, placing her hand on his arm.

“Actually, I’m going there for lunch on Sunday,” Noah admitted.

“Really?” His mother’s eye’s brightened. “Are you going with Maddie?”

“Ah…no…I’m going with Luke and his cousin, Jade,” Noah stammered a bit. His mother had must have gotten the wrong idea when he told her about Maddie. Great. “They’re taking me on a tour of Oakdale since I haven’t had a chance to see the sights yet.”

“That’s very nice of them.”

“Yeah, it is.” Noah nodded. Thankfully it didn’t seem like his mother had picked up on his earlier activities. He made a silent vow that he’d never masturbate in the living room again.

“I’m working the lunch shift at Al’s on Sunday,” Charlene casually replied, “so I’ll see you and your friends.”

Oh god no! That was the last thing he needed—his mother possibly waiting on them, hearing what was being said at their table. “You are?” Noah asked, fighting to keep the horror out of his voice.

“Don’t worry,” she assured him. “I promise not to embarrass you. I want you to enjoy your lunch.”

Noah relaxed a bit. “Okay.” He glanced down at the floor quite curious about the shopping bags resting at her feet. “What’s in the bags?”

His mom grinned at him. “I did a little shopping after my shift. Do you want to see what I got?”

“Of course!”

She reached down, retrieving the two bags and then handed them to Noah. “Here you go, string bean. Open them.” Noah just stared at her for a moment not quite sure why he should open her packages. “They’re for you.”

“Me? But why?”

“Because I can,” Charlene said, wrapping her arm around him and giving him a squeeze. “And I want to because I haven’t been able to buy you anything for such a long time.”

“But we’re hardly out of the woods,” Noah told her. He hated seeing her waste money when they still didn’t have a car. Right now she was borrowing one of the old farm trucks from Emma to get to and from work. Neither of them had a phone. There were groceries to buy as well as other basic necessities.

“What did I tell you about letting me be the adult from now on?” she gently reminded him. “Hmmm? I’m going to take care of us. And if that means spoiling my amazing son then so be it. So…go on and open your surprises.”

Noah knew better than to argue the point. Plus he was excited for the unexpected gifts from his mom. Digging into the first bag, he pulled out a brand new pair of jeans—something he hadn’t had since he was thirteen years old.

“Wow,” he murmured as he unfolded them.
“I guessed your size based on one of your old pairs,” Charlene quickly explained, “except I bought a size smaller so that they’d fit you better. The receipt is in the bag in case they don’t fit you can exchange them for a different size or return them.”

“I think they should be fine but I will definitely try them on. Thank you so much.” Noah put the jeans back in the bag and then threw his arms around his mom, hugging her tightly.

“You’re welcome but you still have another bag to open.”

Noah peeked into the next shopping bag and saw that there were two shirts inside. One appeared to be a long sleeve button up shirt and the other was a t-shirt. He took out the dressy shirt first to get a better look at it—it was light blue with dark blue pin stripes.

“I thought blue would go nicely with your eyes,” Charlene told him.

“It’s nice. I like it.”

“I got the t-shirt to go underneath it so you can dress it down,” Charlene explained.

Noah set the shirt on his lap and pulled out the medium blue t-shirt that had a silk screen print on the front of it. “Cool,” he said. “I love both of them.”

“And before you say anything about money—all of it was on sale.”

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “You are the best. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Maybe you can wear your new clothes on Sunday,” Charlene suggested. “That is, if they fit.”

Suddenly Noah’s stomach twisted into knots. Did his mother buy him the new clothes so he could impress Maddie? Was she secretly hoping that he’d find a nice girl to date?

“Yeah,” he murmured.

“Is everything all right?” she asked, rubbing his back.

Noah nodded. “It’s just been a long week.” This was partially true. Waking up at 5am every day had caught up to him but his work week wasn’t quite over yet. Holden wanted him to put in a half day tomorrow so he could take him to the feed store and show him the ordering process there. He’d promised Noah that he wouldn’t have to work every Saturday.

Holden had given him $100 cash which had brightened his day. Noah never had this much of his own money in his hands. There was just no way he could possibly keep it all for himself.

“I’m so proud of how hard you’ve been working,” Charlene told him. “Emma told me that Holden has nothing but good things to say about you.”

Noah perked up. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“I got paid today. A hundred dollars. Some of the money should go toward…”

Charlene immediately cut him off. “No,” she firmly stated, “your job with Holden is contributing toward our living arrangement and that’s more than enough. The rest of the money is yours. I want you to buy new clothes, go to the movies, eat out—do fun things.”
How come they all sounded like they pertained to dating? His mother never pushed him before so why now? He should never have mentioned Maddie to her because she obviously got the wrong idea.

“Okay,” he sighed.

“I promise if I need help with the finances I will let you know,” she said. “So stop feeling guilty. I forbid it.”

Noah forced a smile for his mother’s sake because she wasn’t going to let this discussion go until she was convinced that he was okay with everything. And even though he still didn’t feel that way. But, then again, Noah was used to faking his emotions. He was becoming a real pro.

“Sounds good,” he said, giving his mom another hug. “Thanks again for the clothes. I’m going to go try them on right now.”

“Will you give me a fashion show?”

“Mom,” Noah groaned as he gathered the shopping bags together and stood up.

“Come on,” she pressed, “humor your old mother. I want to see if I still have halfway decent fashion sense.”

“Okay,” he relented. After all, it was the least he could do, especially after his mother surprised him with such nice clothes.

Noah took the bags and sauntered into his bedroom, closing the door behind him. He took the clothes out, placing them on his bed and then he stripped out of his sweats and t-shirt. Putting on something new was odd. Tags dangling from his clothes was definitely a novel sight.

Noah buttoned up the jeans and, sure enough, they fit perfectly. It was actually a bit strange having pants that fit so snug across his ass. He snatched the t-shirt off the bed and tugged it over his head—another perfect fit. And then he pulled on the long sleeved shirt to top off his new ensemble.

Unfortunately, he didn’t have a mirror in his room so he couldn’t see how the new clothes looked but he felt really good. Even though it was only his mom, Noah still felt a bit shy as he strolled out of his room to show off his new clothes.

“So,” he said, ducking his head slightly.

“I think you look great!” Charlene exclaimed. “How do you feel?”

He shrugged slightly. “Everything fits.”

“The blue really makes your eyes pop.”

“I haven’t seen how I look. I don’t have a mirror in my room.”

“We’re going to have to rectify that,” she decided. “A teenager can’t go without a mirror. And don’t you dare protest—just march yourself right into the bathroom so you can see how gorgeous you look.”

And Noah did just that. When he caught sight of himself in the mirror he almost didn’t recognize himself. He’d heard the saying “the clothes make the man.” Noah no longer looked like a vagabond. He actually looked halfway decent. This was definitely the outfit he’d be wearing on Sunday. He’d
also have to find a way to a clothing store to pick up more new clothes with the money he earned. It was time to retire his old wardrobe. The sooner the better.

“Well?” Charlene asked when Noah emerged from the bathroom.

Noah smiled. “You did a great job. I’ll have to take you with me to pick out some more clothes because you definitely have good taste.”

“It would be my pleasure to help you spend some of your hard earned money.”

“I better change out of them so I don’t get them dirty,” he decided.

But as Noah took off his light blue shirt, his thoughts drifted back to his fantasy about Luke, wondering what it would be like if Luke were the one removing his clothes. The mere thought both aroused and terrified him.

Noah knew next to nothing about gay sex. Unlike most teenage boys, he never had Internet access so his endless questions about the subject went unanswered. Last year he’d stumbled upon a copy of The Joy of Gay Sex, which he hastily thumbed through. Ultimately it left him with more questions than answers. First and foremost—how in hell was a cock supposed to fit in his ass and feel good?

Noah never even dared trying to stick a finger inside himself to test the waters. He was too much of a chicken shit. And it seemed like he never had any time to himself until now. Still, he wasn’t sure if he was ready to experiment on himself.

Noah also didn’t have anyone to talk to—to confide in about the subject. Until recently he never knew another gay person. But he couldn’t talk to Luke, even though he probably had all of the answers.

He would give anything to be more like Luke.

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Hamilton’s Feed Store in nearby Newberry was bustling with activity on this fine Saturday morning. Holden enjoyed rubbing elbows with the other farmers and breeders from the area. He had brought Noah so he could show him how to place an order along with other things that he might have to send Noah out for from time to time.

Holden draped his arm around Noah, who immediately flinched at his touch. Dammit. He quickly removed it as to not make Noah uncomfortable. Holden was so used to just touching Luke without even thinking about it. Noah’s behavior was quite odd, but before he jumped to the worst case scenario he decided that he needed to have a little talk with Noah first. And he just knew the perfect way to do it too.

“Are you ready for the final part of your training?” Holden asked.

“Yes, sir.” Noah eagerly nodded.

“Good,” he said, escorting Noah toward the front counter. “We’re going to place the feed order for the horses. And then next time you’ll be able to do it on your own. I’ll also show you around the store and point out other things that I might send you up here to pick up.”
“Yes, sir.”

“After we’re done here, I’d like to take you to this old dairy bar in town for a chocolate malt,” Holden told him. “It’s kind of a tradition. I took Luke there the first time I brought him here and my father took me. And then the rest of the day is your own.” Noah had worked hard all week and really deserved the rest of the weekend to kick back and relax. He was very impressed with the boy’s work ethic. It was top notch. Never once did he have to harp on him. Noah was one of the best workers he’s had in a long time.

“Thank you. That’s very nice of you,” Noah replied.

“You’ve earned it.”

Noah just beamed upon hearing Holden’s praise. He really was a sweet kid. And as Holden went over the latest feed order with Phil, who was manning the counter, Noah stood next to Holden listening intently.

Yes, the boy was definitely a keeper.

“This may sound silly to you, but I’ve always enjoyed these trips to the feed store,” Holden admitted once they were settled inside his pickup truck. “As a little boy my father used to bring me and it was such a treat to come with him. It was this big day out for us. I felt like such a grown up coming here with him. So when Luke got old enough I wanted to start the tradition with him.”

“Did he like it?” Noah asked a bit shyly.

Holden grinned broadly. “Oh yeah, he acted like he owned the place when I started bringing him here. Old Ernie Hamilton got such a kick out of it—bless his soul. My daddy would have too. I wish he could have lived to see Luke,” his throat tightened a bit at the last thought. Harvey Snyder would have made one hell of a Grandpa. And it was a crying shame for everyone that it never got to be.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Noah said quietly.

“Me too,” Holden sighed wistfully. Quickly he snapped himself out of it. This was the perfect opportunity to try to get Noah to open up to him. “You know, my father died when I was young just like yours did so I know how tough it can be on you.”

“Yeah.” Noah stared out the passenger’s side window. This was going to be harder than Holden thought. He was going to have to try another approach, but he’d wait until they were settled at the diner with their chocolate malts before he pressed Noah any further. Maybe the boy would relax a little with a chocolaty treat in front of him. Fortunately their destination wasn’t too far away because an awkward silence hung in the air since Noah had shut up like a clam.

“We’re here,” Holden announced as he pulled into the parking lot of Knapp’s Dairy Bar, which was right out of the fifties. You could either pull up and get waited on by one of the carhops on roller skates or else eat inside the art deco diner. He parked the truck in front of the diner so they could enjoy their drinks inside. “I hope you’re in the mood for the best chocolate malt ever.”

“Better than Al’s?”

“Al’s has amazing shakes,” Holden clarified. “This is the place to come for malts. How do you know about Al’s shakes?”
“Luke’s mentioned them,” Noah said, shrugging. “We’re going there tomorrow. He’s going to give me a tour of Oakdale.”

“It’s quite a little town. And be sure to have him show you the university just in case you change your mind about going there.”

Noah nodded but then quickly perked up when he took a good look at his surroundings. “Hey, this place looks like Mel’s Drive-in from American Graffiti.”

Holden chuckled, “Now there’s a blast from the past. I haven’t seen that movie in quite some time.”

“It’s one of my mother’s favorite movies,” Noah said as they entered the diner. “George Lucas shot it in sequence so that as the filming went on the actors would look more and more tired as the night went on. He shot the entire movie in twenty-nine days which is basically unheard of now.”

Holden had never seen Noah so animated but now he knew his soft spot—movies. “That’s really interesting.”

“The casting was brilliant—almost all of the actors were basically unknown at the time and so many ended up hitting it big,” Noah excitedly explained. “Richard Dreyfuss, Harrison Ford, Cindy Williams, Mackenzie Phillips…”

“And Ron Howard went on to become quite the director just like you want to be,” Holden pointed out as they sat down in one of the red vinyl booths.

Noah blushed. “It’s just a dream, sir.”

“I’m sure it started out as a dream to him too,” Holden said. “Did your father know that you wanted to direct movies?”

“No, he died before I could tell him,” he replied, shifting in the booth.

They were momentarily interrupted when the waitress came over to take their order. Holden ordered two chocolate malts and then turned back to Noah. “That’s too bad.”

Noah shrugged, glancing down at the Formica tabletop. Damn. He was losing him again. Thankfully, their malts arrived a few minutes later which lighted the mood a bit. Noah took a sip of it, his eyes lighting up. “Wow. This is good.” He nodded happily. “Thank you for making me part of your family tradition, sir.”

“It’s my pleasure, Noah,” he replied. “You did great this week. It’s the least I could do.”

Noah fiddled with his straw. “Oh no, sir! I’m the one who owes you so much for being so patient with me. I know it couldn’t have been easy. I had to have asked a thousand questions this week.”

“It’s only natural,” Holden reassured him. “Luke had a lot of questions when I was showing him the ropes. I did as well when my father was teaching me. I think he only wanted to toss me into the pond a few times,” he added with a wink which failed to make Noah smile.

“You know, even though my father died when I was just a boy I do have a lot of good memories,” Holden explained. “Besides the trips to the feed store, we went up to Wisconsin every year to cut down a Christmas tree at a family friend’s property. It was always a special trip with my dad and the rest of my brothers. He also liked to take us fishing. One year I fell out of the boat and ended up being the biggest thing my dad caught that weekend.” Holden chuckled at the memory.
“Did he get mad?” Noah asked, holding onto his malt glass tightly.

“Nope. Not at all,” he replied. “In fact he insisted that he get a picture with the big trout he caught which of course was me. It’s one of my favorite pictures of us together.”

Noah nodded absently as he took a sip of his frozen drink so Holden decided to keep pressing onward.

“Dad was also a big White Sox fan so it was a huge treat when he could get tickets and take the entire family to the baseball game. Mama got a big kick out of taking the family into the big city, although I don’t think she was too thrilled about all of the junk food he let us load up on,” Holden said, stirring his malt. “Did you and your father ever do anything special together?”

“Of course,” Noah said a bit defensively.

Holden nodded slowly. “Anything you’d like to share?”

“My dad took me to baseball games too,” Noah insisted. “It was a treat to go to Indianapolis. Dad always liked it when the Yankees came into town.”

The boy obviously didn’t know a thing about baseball because the Yankees never played a game in Indianapolis because there wasn’t a major league team in the city. Noah had to be making up this story, but Holden needed to be sure. And he felt bad for what he was about to do but in the long run it was going to be for Noah’s own good. “The Indianapolis Colts against the Yankees—those were always interesting matchups.”

“Yeah, great games.”

A football team against a baseball team would certainly be something to see. “So was your father a Yankees fan or a Colts fan?”

“Colts—he stuck with the hometown.”

_**Oh, Noah, why are you lying to me?**_ Holden silently wondered.

“Did you have a good relationship with your father?” Holden asked.

“Yes, we were very close,” Noah quickly replied as he fiddled nervously with his straw. His words and body language just weren’t meshing.

If they were so close then how come Noah never mentioned him—not once during all of those hours they’ve spent working together? There have been numerous opportunities when Noah could have done so. Holden felt like he was mentioning one of his children at some point during the day. But the only person Noah ever talked about was his mother—no old friends, no other family—just Gloria.

“I’m sorry that you didn’t get to spend more time with him, Noah. It doesn’t seem fair to that your father was taken away from you.”

Noah’s eyes took on a faraway look. “Yeah.”

“Holidays are birthdays are hard,” Holden quietly admitted. “I think I go overboard with my kids because I still miss my dad.”

“My dad always made a huge deal out of my birthdays,” Noah declared.

Maybe he’d hit on something…
“Oh really?” Holden leaned a bit closer, all ears.

“Oh yeah. He always threw me big birthday parties and invited my entire class from school,” Noah explained. “This one year I wanted to have Cowboy Dan the Gunfighting Balloon Man at my party but he didn’t show up because there was a mix up with the scheduling. They sent a stripper to my party instead and the cowboy to where the stripper was supposed to be and the cowboy got beat up so he wasn’t able to come to my party. But my dad didn’t want to disappoint me so he threw together this makeshift cowboy outfit—strapping mom’s throw rugs to his legs as chaps and he used my toy hat and gun...he called himself Cowboy Gil. At first I was afraid that all of my friends would think it was the stupidest thing ever but it turned out to be the best birthday ever.”

“Sounds great. You were very lucky.” Holden smiled. So great in fact that it was used in the movie Parenthood. Noah probably didn’t think he’d seen that movie. And Holden wasn’t going to call him out on it. He was obviously very desperate if he had to make up stories.

Noah nodded. “I was.”

A lump formed in Holden’s throat. Somehow he doubted that was the case. Maybe Noah’s father had abused him and that’s why Noah flinched whenever Holden touched him. He knew it was quite a leap to make from what little information he had but that was what his gut was telling him must have happened. Mama might know more though.

After Holden dropped Noah off at the cabin, he headed over to the farmhouse hoping to catch his mama alone. He really wanted to try to figure out if Noah had been a victim of abuse. His self-confidence seemed pretty low which also could be another sign. Holden has been trying extra hard all week to build up Noah’s self esteem. The kid really needed to start believing in himself.

“Hi, Mama,” Holden said, strolling through the kitchen door.

“Hello, dear,” Emma replied, glancing up from the oatmeal raisin cookies she was putting on the cooling rack.

“Can I talk to you for a few minutes?”

Emma immediately stopped what she was doing. “Is something wrong?”

Holden pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and sat down. “That’s what I need to find out and I’m hoping that you might be able to help me,” he admitted. “It’s about Noah.”

Emma wiped her hands on her apron, joining him at the table. “I thought everything was going well with him. Did something happen?” she asked, worry etched over her kind, round face.

“Everything has been going very well with him,” Holden reassured her. “He’s been an incredibly hard worker. Actually, I couldn’t have asked for a better helper.” He paused not quite sure how to broach the subject. There was no delicate way to do this. He’d just have to plow forward. “I think Noah might be a victim of abuse.”

“Oh, Holden,” Emma gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. “What would make you think such a thing?”

“The boy has acted like a skittish colt around me from the get-go,” Holden explained.

“He probably picked up on the fact that you didn’t trust him and his mother.”

“No, it’s not that. Whenever I touch Noah he tenses or flinches.” Vividly he could recall every time
he touched the boy and Noah’s almost scared reaction. At first he brushed it off as nerves on Noah’s part. But when it continued to happen, Holden’s gut kept gnawing at him that something wasn’t right. “I think he might have been abused. And I was wondering if Gloria might have mentioned anything…”

“Nothing that would suggest that Noah was abused,” Emma said quietly. “But…” She hesitated, glancing toward the door.

Holden reached across the table, resting his hand on top of his mother’s. “What is it, Mama? You know something, don’t you?” She had quite a way of reading people and she was usually spot on too. He had an inkling that he wasn’t the only with gut feelings when it came to the Carlsons.

“Well, I honestly I don’t believe the story Gloria told me about her husband and the hunting accident and how it eventually resulted in them being homeless,” she admitted. “Something just didn’t ring true about it.”

Wait a second. Gloria lied to Mama and she still insisted on taking them in? Holden was not happy about this…not at all. “I wish you would have told me sooner,” he said tersely.

“Holden,” Emma sighed. “I don’t believe that Gloria and Noah are threats to us. Quite the contrary, actually. I think Gloria might have been a victim of spousal abuse and she finally took Noah and left her husband. Maybe he was also abusing Noah too. I think she made up that story because she’s afraid he might come after them.”

Holden slowly shook his head. “That would explain a lot. When I asked Noah about his father today he made up stories,” he told her. “First about his dad taking him to baseball games, but he got the teams all wrong. Then he took a scene right from a movie about how his dad saved his birthday party. If what you are saying is true, the poor kid probably not only got hit himself but saw his mother get beat up too. And Noah has absolutely no self-confidence, Mama. It’s almost heartbreaking.”

“I can’t honestly see Gloria belittling him.”

“No, it was probably his father if he was a classic abuser he probably did a job on both of them mentally as well as physically.”

“I think spending time with him should help,” Emma decided. “Noah could use a positive male role model in his life. He needs to see that there a good, decent men out there that won’t hurt him.”

“I want to help him and I’ll do everything in my power to do so,” Holden said. He would try to help fix all of the wrongs done to Noah. As a father, he couldn’t imagine every intentionally harming any of his children. Of course, they didn’t know for sure that it was Noah’s father but what his mama said made sense. Holden needed to make sure that Noah felt safe because he was never going to let anyone hit or berate him again.
Chapter 13

Noah stood in front of the bathroom mirror, studying what he could see of his reflection. He was dressed in his new clothes ready for his day with Luke and Jade but he wanted to make sure that he looked his best.

_You’re still a mule in a horse harness_, he told himself, quoting Mammy from _Gone With the Wind_.

He may have new clothing but underneath he was still the same old mess. Noah hated having to lie about his father to Holden, especially after he’d been so kind to him. In retrospect, he wished he wouldn’t have used a scene right out of _Parenthood_, especially after they’d just gotten finished talking about Ron Howard.

_Stupid…stupid…stupid…_

But Holden seemed to have believed him. Noah desperately prayed that Holden had believed him because he didn’t want to let Holden down. He seemed like such a nice man just like Atticus Finch in _To Kill a Mockingbird_. Was it possible that Holden Snyder really was an honest man and a loving father? He knew that Luke was gay and he didn’t seem bothered by it. But Luke also wasn’t living at home…

_That’s because of me. Luke has to make sure I don’t rob Emma blind_, Noah reminded himself.

Even after their heart to heart at the malt shop, Holden still didn’t trust Noah. If Holden wasn’t worried about him and his mom he would have let Luke come home, unless Holden really didn’t like the fact that his son was gay. If this were true then he also wouldn’t like Noah either. Maybe Holden wasn’t so perfect after all.

Luke was probably smart enough to see right through Noah’s fancy façade too. Some new jeans and shirts weren’t going to change a thing. Sighing, Noah sauntered out of the bathroom and glanced at the old wine and Swiss cheese clock that hung above the kitchen sink.

10:52

Noah’s heart rate immediately kicked into overdrive. Luke would be there in roughly eight minutes or so. Noah nervously began to pace. He hadn’t seen Luke since their way too brief encounter in the stable. He tried very hard not to wonder what Luke had been up to all weekend. Mainly because he was afraid of what the answer would be.

Noah blew out a long, calming breath. Thank goodness his mother wasn’t there to see that he was as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs. His behavior would really make her wonder. And that was the last thing he needed.

He still wasn’t thrilled that she’d be working the lunch shift at Al’s. As it was, he was already a bundle of nerves. Having his mother there with a front row seat wasn’t going to help matters.

His mother wouldn’t do anything to embarrass him, would she?

She might just be so thrilled to see him in the company of a female that all bets might very well be off the table.

The low rumble of a car engine rendered Noah completely still. Oh shit. Luke was here. Noah wasn’t sure if he wanted to throw up or jump for joy.
Before he could decide, Luke was knocking at the door. As Noah marched to answer it, he wiped his hands on his jeans and prayed that he didn’t have clammy hands (clammy hands were gross and he didn’t want Luke to think he was gross or creepy). It was most likely a moot point since Luke probably wouldn’t be touching his hands, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Noah opened the door and there stood Luke, fiddling with his car keys. Damn—did he ever look hot! For the first time since Noah met Luke, he wasn’t wearing stripes. He had on a black long sleeved shirt with REYES 06 silkscreened in gold on the front of it.

“Hey,” he said, managing to find his voice.

“Hey,” Luke replied, his tongue darting over his pink lips. “Are you…um…ready?”

“Yeah.” Noah stepped out onto the porch, shutting the door closed behind him.

It was a sunny, mild October day so he didn’t need a coat which was a good thing because his jacket was fraying at the edges. They walked silently to Luke’s Mustang which was parked in the gravel driveway. Noah had never been in a fancy sports car. He felt a little like Cinderella getting inside the beautiful glass coach to go to the ball.

“Here we go,” Luke said, putting the car into reverse. “My parents’ house isn’t far from here. Actually, we could walk because it’s just on the other side of the pond and through the woods. But if we had to wait for Jade to meet us we might be waiting for awhile.”

“Do your parents also have a farm?” he asked, picturing a sprawling horse farm with lots of white fence.


“Oh.” Noah bit his lip.

“I just want to warn you,” Luke said as he pulled out of Emma’s property, “I have two younger sisters and a baby brother. I don’t think we’ll be able to get away without you meeting at least the sisters.”

“I don’t mind.”

Luke grinned. “You might after you meet them.”

Noah glanced down at Luke’s hand as he shifted gears. Oh…wow…was that ever sexy. Luke was certainly good with his hands. Quickly he had to avert his eyes before Luke caught him staring.

“I doubt that.”

“Famous last words,” Luke teased as he turned onto Mile High Road.

This street was much different than the road that Emma’s farm was on. Mile High Road was paved and winding with trees and stately homes. Noah’s mouth almost fell open when they pulled into the driveway of Luke’s parents’ home—mansion was a far better description. This house put the others they had passed along the way to shame. Noah had suspected Luke had come from money but nothing of this caliber.

Noah sat frozen, gaping at the massive gray brick, white columned house that loomed in front of them. He felt as if Luke had transported them to a southern plantation home. Something you’d see in Raintree County.
Never in his wildest dreams could Noah imagine living in such a spectacular house. The three car garage looked larger than the cabin that Noah was currently living in with his mom. Luke would have thought he was positively insane if he’d seen how ecstatic he’d been when Emma had showed it to them.

Probably more like sad and pathetic. Thank god he hadn’t been there.

“Noah…Noah!”

“Hun?” Noah said, turning to find Luke staring at him expectantly. He had his car keys in his hand and the other on the door handle. “Are you going to come inside with me? I thought you wanted to meet the rest of my family.”


They got out of the car and headed toward the house. Instead of going to the front door, Luke led him toward a side patio that was adorned with posh outdoor furniture. There wasn’t one thing about the place that didn’t scream money.

“It’s a little different from Gram’s,” Luke said, stuffing his hands in his front pockets.

“Yeah, just a bit.”

Luke leaned a bit closer to him. “Don’t let all of the fancy trappings fool you. There aren’t any maids or butlers inside. My family is almost as normal as the next.”

Noah nodded as Luke opened the door, ushering him inside to what looked like a family room—a very cozy, lived in family room which wasn’t what he’d expected. They were immediately greeted by a blur of two squealing girls practically tackling Luke to the floor.

“Hey there my sweet little darlings,” Luke said as he knelt down and hugged them, “have you been perfect angels for Mom and Dad?”

“Of course, Luke!” the youngest one chirped.

“Who’s this?” the other girl asked, looking up at Noah.

“This is my friend Noah,” Luke told her.

“Is he your boyfriend?” the little girl excitedly asked.

*Boyfriend.* God…if only! Noah could feel his cheeks burst into flames. He hoped beyond hope that no one—namely Luke—would notice.

“No, we’re just friends,” Luke clarified.

“But he’s a boy and you’re friend,” she persisted.

“Yes, but it’s different,” Luke explained. “We’re just friends.” He turned to Noah, smiling weakly. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay.” Too bad it wasn’t true. “So who are these two lovely little ladies?” he asked, hoping to change the subject. Noah didn’t want to dwell on what couldn’t be—not on a day that he was going to be spending with Luke (even if Jade was going to be with them).

Luke placed his hand on the youngest’s shoulder. “This is Natalie.”
“And I’m Faith,” the other girl said.

“It’s nice to meet both of you,” Noah said to them.

“I thought I heard you!” a woman said, strolling into the room. She threw her arms around Luke, pulling him into a tight embrace. “I miss having you around here!”

“Hey, Mom,” Luke murmured, “it’s good to see you.”

“You must be Noah,” she said when they broke apart. “Holden has told me so many good things about you. I’m so happy to finally meet you. I’m Lily.” She extended her hand toward him.

Noah shook her perfectly manicured hand. “It’s very nice to meet you, Mrs. Snyder.”

Luke’s mother was a beautiful woman with straight shoulder length, light brown hair. She shared the same deep brown eyes as her son—so warm and expressive. Noah could detect a hint of some expensive perfume—something that his own mother might have worn long ago. Lily Snyder reminded him of how his mom used to look before she liberated him from the hospital just over four years ago. The Colonel always made sure that she looked stunning—or else.

Did Holden hold Lily up to those same standards?

“I’m sure you’re happy to finally have a day off,” she said, smiling warmly at him. “My husband has been working you to death.”

“It hasn’t been bad,” he quickly replied. “I appreciate the opportunity that he’s given me. I’d work seven days a week.”

“Shhh…don’t let him hear you say that!” she said, placing her finger to her lips. “I certainly don’t want him working every day. Everyone needs some time to themselves. I like to see Holden. The kids love spending time with their daddy.”

“My lips are sealed.”

A baby’s cries came out of a baby monitor that was sitting on the end table. It looked like he might be meeting the final member of the Snyder family.

“Luke, would you mind running up to get your brother so I can get his bottle ready?” Lily asked. “Your father is making his special chili for lunch and…”

“Say no more,” Luke chuckled. “We don’t want to distract Dad while he’s playing master chef.”

“You got it,” Lily replied. “Thanks for your help, baby.” She breezed out of the room to fix the bottle.

Luke turned to him. “Do you think you’ll be okay with the girls for a few minutes?”

“We’ll take good care of him,” Faith said, looking at him with the most angelic expression.

Natalie took his hand, leading him over to the brown leather sofa. “You can color with me, Noah.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t be long!” Luke called over his shoulder.

Faith skipped over and plopped down on the other side of Noah. “Are you sure you’re not Luke’s boyfriend?” she asked slyly.
“I’m sure,” he replied.

Natalie opened her Scooby-Doo coloring book. “Here—you color this one,” she said, pointing to a picture of Shaggy and Scooby.

Noah picked up a brown crayon and turned to Faith. “So, your brother doesn’t have a boyfriend?” he casually asked.

“Nope!”

Noah bit his lip or else he’d have to explain to Luke’s sister’s why he’s smiling. Luke didn’t have a boyfriend. Well, at least according to his younger sister. But this was very promising news. However, he didn’t plan to do anything with this newfound information because that would mean coming out and that option was still way too scary for him.

“You’re not coloring, Noah,” Natalie reprimanded him.

“Maybe he doesn’t want to color,” Faith countered. “It’s not like you even asked him.”

“Everyone likes to color, Faith,” Natalie huffed. “Right, Noah?”

“Coloring is fun,” Noah diplomatically replied as he began to color Scooby-Doo.

“Do you like boys?” Natalie asked, peering up at him with big curious eyes. The phrase ‘out of the mouths of babes’ had never rung more true. Was he so transparent that a little girl could see right through his act? Or was she just so innocent that she didn’t realize how inappropriate her question was?

“Natalie!” Luke’s voice came from behind them. “You just can’t ask that question to every boy who walks through that door!”

Noah had been gripping the crayon so tightly that he was amazed it hadn’t snapped in half. Silently he prayed that Luke couldn’t detect the terror his sister’s question had raised.


“Yes, but not all boys do,” Luke replied, approaching them carrying a small baby in his arms. “I’m really sorry, Noah. She’s five and because I’m gay I think she assumes that all boys are right now and…”

“It’s okay,” Noah reassured him. “I know she didn’t mean any harm.”

Relief washed over Luke’s handsome features. “I have the littlest Snyder here,” he said. “I promise he won’t say anything offensive, because he’s way too young to talk.”

Noah put down the crayon he was holding and stood up. “What’s his name?”

“Ethan. He’s not only my baby brother, but he’s my godson,” Luke proudly announced.

“That’s really cool,” Noah said as he approached them.

“My cousin, Lucy, is the godmother,” Luke explained. “She’s awesome. Right now she’s an intern at Oakdale Memorial. Here…get a closer look at this handsome little guy. You can check out the family resemblance for yourself.” He winked at Noah, which turned his stomach all topsy turvy.

“He’s…uh…definitely a cutie.”
Lily returned with a bottle. “Isn’t Jade ready yet?”

“No,” Luke sighed. “I did yell at her while I was upstairs and she said that she’d only be a few more minutes.”

Lily shook her head. “I swear that girl is slower than molasses. It’s a wonder she can hold down a job.”

“Well, she has extra incentive to be there on time,” Luke muttered.

Lily held up her hand. “I don’t want to hear it. Now give me Ethan so that when she finally gets her derrière down here you guys can go. It’s so rude to keep company waiting.”

Luke gave Ethan a kiss on his forehead and then handed him over to his mother. “I love you, Eth,” he murmured.

“It was nice meeting you, Noah,” Lily said. “I’m going to take this little guy into the other room where there’s a little less chaos.” She turned on her heel and headed toward the door next to the fireplace.

“Nice meeting you too, Mrs. Snyder,” Noah called after her.

“Are you going to stay here and play with us, Luke?” Natalie asked.

“Not today,” Luke replied. “Noah, Jade and I are going out. But I promise to come over after school tomorrow and play…whatever you want.”

“Even with my princess dolls?”

“Even with your princess dolls.”

Natalie grinned. “You’re the greatest brother ever, Luke!”

“Do you have anything you want to do tomorrow, Faith?” Luke asked his other sister. “I want to spend time with you too.”

“Maybe you can take me for a ride on Whitman?”

“I think I can arrange that,” Luke replied, tussling Faith’s hair.

Noah was utterly bowled over by what an incredible big brother Luke was to Faith, Natalie, and Ethan. He could tell that it wasn’t an act. Luke genuinely cared for each of his siblings. And he seemed like a natural with the baby which just downright baffled Noah who had zero experience with babies. Every day Noah was finding out just what a big and loving heart Luke possessed. And he longed for it to love him too.

“Sorry it took me so long,” Jade said, sauntering into the family room.

“No you’re not,” Luke said, folding his arms across his chest. “You always take a million years to get ready and you always will.”

“Don’t be such a bitch,” she snapped.

“That’s not a nice word,” Faith piped up from the copy of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. “You shouldn’t say it in front of Natalie.”
“Sorry,” Jade said through gritted teeth. Then she plastered a smile on her face and turned to Noah, her eyes traveling slowly up and down his body. “Hi…you look amazing. I’m sorry to have come down in such a snit.”

Noah felt a bit unnerved by the way she was looking at him. God he hoped that she didn’t think the new clothes were on her account. “Uh…thanks…and it’s no problem,” he replied, glancing at Luke. “I was just getting to know the rest of Luke’s family.”

Luke grinned. “And he’s a hit too.”

Jade slinked over to Noah, placing her hand on his arm. “He is a gem, isn’t he?”


“I’m hungry,” Noah readily agreed.

Luke didn’t wait for Jade to respond, he was already headed toward the door. “Let’s go then. Bye my princess and lady bug!” he called to his sisters.

“Bye!” they sing-songed.

Noah gave the girls a little wave. “Bye!”

“Bye, Noah,” Natalie said, “I’ll save the page so we can color next time.”

“It’s a deal.” Noah grinned. And he didn’t doubt that she’d forget. Natalie was quite a little character.

“Bye, Noah,” Faith said shyly. “Hope to see you soon.”

“Me too.”

Jade stopped, putting her hands on her hips. “And what am I? Chopped liver?”

“Jade, we see you all the time!” Natalie giggled.

“Yeah, it’s not a big deal that you’re leaving,” Faith added, glancing down at her book.

“Thanks a lot,” Jade grumbled.

Luke finally herded them out to his car. Jade was still keeping very close to Noah, almost acting like his second skin. All of the excitement he’d had about hanging out with Luke and Jade today was quickly evaporating as Jade was acting like Luke was their escort for a date.

Now he was faced with the dilemma of where he was supposed to sit in Luke’s car. Surely Jade didn’t expect him to squeeze into the tiny backseat of the Mustang with her. Although Noah had no problem with letting Jade have the front seat, because that seemed like the most gentlemanly thing to do. His mother often told him how important it was to act like a gentleman which was quite different from his father’s mantra about ‘being a man’.

Thankfully, Luke spoke up. “Jade, you can take the back so Noah can sit in the front since he has long legs,” Luke decided.

“Jade can always have the front…” Noah offered.

Luke waved his hand. “Nonsense. And, besides, this is supposed to be a tour so you also need to see
the sights which you won’t be able to do from the backseat. Right, Jade?”

“Right, Luke,” she replied tersely as she climbed into the backseat.

Luke crossed over to the driver’s side of the car. “So are you ready to be wowed?” he asked, grinning broadly.

“Absolutely.” Noah smiled. This was going to be a great day.

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Luke still couldn’t get over how incredibly gorgeous Noah looked today. Maybe it had something to do with the new clothes he was wearing which Luke had noticed the moment Noah opened the door at the cabin. If Luke had his way, Noah would always wear blue because it was definitely his color. It made his eyes look even bluer if that were humanly possible.

And he could definitely get used to having Noah sitting in the passenger’s seat of his car. He was so freakin’ hot with his arm propped up against the window. Luke could only imagine how off the charts he’d be with the top down on the car. Good god almighty!

“So are we going to Al’s first?” Jade asked, poking her head between the front seat blocking his view of Noah, which was completely unacceptable.

“Yes,” Luke replied. “Then we’ll give Noah the grand tour. And I suggest you sit back, Jade. I hate it if you went flying through the windshield if I had to stop suddenly.”

Jade muttered something unintelligible and then sat back with a loud huff.

Luke bit his lip, smiling slightly. Now it was perfect. Now he could imagine that it was just Noah and him on a date. He turned to Noah, trying to keep his enthusiasm in check so Noah wouldn’t be able to see right through him. “We’re actually in Luther’s Corners right now which is a small farming community right outside of Oakdale,” he explained.

“It’s nice out here. I like it.”

“Me too,” Luke agreed. “We’re not too far from town. Once you turn onto Mill Road here it takes you right into Oakdale.”

“Got it.” Noah nodded. “Not that I’m going to be driving anytime soon.”

“I’m sure you could borrow a farm truck,” Luke replied. “You could even borrow my car if you really needed to go to town for something.”

“You won’t even let me borrow your car!” Jade complained loudly from the backseat.

“That’s because you’re a horrible driver.”

“I’m not the one who hit me with your car!” Jade spat.

“That was an accident,” Luke insisted. “And I’m not sure you didn’t jump out in front of me on purpose.” He glanced at Noah, who looked a little baffled. “It’s kinda a long story but it ended well. I found out I had a long lost cousin that I accidentally hit with my car.”

“So I gathered,” Noah replied. “I wouldn’t be able to drive your car because the only stick I know how to drive is on the tractor at the farm.”
“Think of this as a souped up tractor,” Luke smirked.

Noah chuckled, “It’s a nice offer but your car is definitely far superior than a tractor.”

“Just let me know if you change your mind,” Luke said as they came upon the Mill Bridge which was the first landmark he could point out to Noah. “This is the Mill Bridge which leads us right into Oakdale and far below us is Stoney River. A couple of people have jumped off this bridge and died so I’d advise against doing that.”

Noah nodded. “Got it—no jumping off the Mill Bridge.”

Luke took them straight down Main Street, figuring he’d save the rest of the highlights for after lunch. He thought he’d point out the significant points of interest on their way to Old Town. But before he could share anything, Jade had already opened her mouth.

“You see that tall glass building on the left, Noah,” Jade said, sticking her head back in between him and Noah. She must have assumed since he had to slow down to 25mph her face was safe from getting smashed into the windshield.

“Yeah?” Noah craned his neck to the left.

“That’s the WorldWide building, which is home to WorldWide Industries owned by Luke’s other grandmother—Lucinda Walsh who also owns half of Oakdale,” Jade announced.

Ugh. Luke wished that Jade would have just kept her mouth shut. Luke didn’t want Noah freaking out that his grandmother was uber rich.

“She doesn’t own half of Oakdale, Jade,” Luke quickly corrected her. “Just a few companies.”

“No such thing,” Jade countered.

“Oh! And you see the fancy hotel there next to WorldWide?” Jade asked, pointing out the window. “That’s the Lakeview. Luke’s mom is part owner of it.”


“She’s also part owner of WOAK which is the local TV station,” Jade added.

“Are you sure your family doesn’t own half the town?” Noah asked Luke.

“Yes,” Luke told him, “there’s plenty of town left for you to see and I can assure you that it’s not owned by my family.”

If Jade was trying to impress Noah with her wealthy family ties, it wasn’t working. Noah seemed to be shrinking back inside himself. It was as if every mention of wealth stripped away Noah’s own self worth. That’s not what Luke wanted. Luke didn’t feel the need to brag about his family’s money. It didn’t matter to him.

Finally, this got Noah to smile again. “Great.”

“Al’s is in this area called Old Town which is an outdoor shopping district that has just about everything you could ever want,” Luke explained as he steered the car into the parking lot behind Old Town.

“Does it have a movie theater?” Noah asked, perking up a little bit.
“As a matter of fact it does—The Gem,” he replied. “It’s an older, smaller one. It doesn’t have stadium seating or some of the other fancy trappings of the new movie theaters.”

“Does it show old movies or new?” Noah excitedly asked.

“I…ah…think both,” Luke said as he got out of the car. “They might have a retrospective night or something like that.” He shrugged. “I don’t know for sure because I’ve never seen anything old there. I just like to go there from time to time because it’s less crowded and they have the best popcorn with real butter. Most people go over to the new AMC Theater.”

Noah grinned. “It sounds absolutely amazing.”

Before Luke could suggest that they go to a movie, Jade had managed to escape from the backseat and had attached herself to Noah’s side. “We should go to a movie there,” Jade said, gazing up at Noah.

“Ahh…we’ll have to see,” Noah stammered, taking a step to the side to try to get away from Jade’s grasp. “It might be difficult with my work schedule and everything.”

Jade placed her hands on her hips. “You managed to come out today.”

Luke hated seeing Noah put on the spot. And he wasn’t about to let Jade bully Noah into taking her to the movies. “And one of the reasons we came out today was to go to lunch so why don’t we do that?” he suggested.

“Yes,” Noah readily agreed.

Jade made sure that she situated herself between him and Noah for the short walk to Al’s. Luke wondered just how long it was going to take until his cousin finally got it through her thick skull that Noah wasn’t interested in her.

When they entered Al’s Luke knew better than to try to sit next to Noah because Jade would just pitch a big fit and the last thing they needed was a huge scene. He picked out one of the tables by the window, choosing to sit on the booth side. That way at least Jade and Noah would be forced to sit in chairs so she’d have to keep her distance from Noah. Luke’s breath caught in his throat when Noah sat down right across from him.

How was he going to be able to eat with those incredible blue eyes staring at him?

Luke picked up a menu, needing something to occupy his nervous hands with even though he knew his order by heart. “I recommend the Al Burger with fries and a chocolate shake,” he told Noah.

“Sounds good to me,” Noah said, carefully unfolding a napkin on his lap.

“What are you going to have, Jade?” Luke asked.

“I think I’m going to have the club sandwich and a Diet Pepsi,” she said, studying the menu.

“I thought the whole reason to come here was to get burgers and fries,” Noah said.

“That was Luke’s idea when he took over our plans,” she replied, putting her menu down.

“Luke!” Maddie exclaimed, breezing through the door. “What are you doing here?” she asked all wide-eyed and innocent.

He should have known that Maddie was going to show up here today after he mentioned it to her.
Bless her meddling heart.

“We’re just introducing Noah to Al’s burgers and chocolate shakes,” Luke replied. “Why don’t you join us?”

Jade shot Luke a murderous glare. Inviting public enemy number one to lunch certainly had pissed off his cousin.

“I’d love to,” Maddie said, sliding next to Luke. “Hi, Noah, it’s so good to see you again.” Then Maddie looked across from her, her smile fading. “Jade.”

“Maddie,” Jade seethed.

“After lunch we’re going to take Noah on a tour of Oakdale,” Luke told Maddie, although she already knew but he figured he should make it look good and he also wanted to try to dispel the tension that seemed to be surrounding the table.

“Sounds like fun,” Maddie said brightly.

“Did you want to join us?” Noah asked.

“Casey and I have plans this afternoon,” she replied warmly, “but thanks for asking.”

“Do you think we could get some service here?” Jade muttered.

And it was at that moment the waitress appeared at the table. Noah glanced up at her. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, honey!”

Sure enough, there stood Noah’s mother. Luke hadn’t seen her since that first day when they learned their car was unfixable. She seemed a lot more relaxed than she had then. Peace of mind will do that to you. The poor woman was dealing with a lot that day.


“Yes, I do,” Gloria replied, blue eyes sparkling. The same blue eyes as Noah had. Luke never noticed the resemblance before but now he was searching Gloria’s face trying to see what other features she shared with her son.

“Nice to see you again, Mrs. Carlson,” Luke said, smiling.

“This is Maddie,” Noah continued.

“Hello, Maddie,” Gloria’s voice brightened as she reached across the table to shake her hand.

What was that all about? Noah couldn’t have a crush on Maddie, could he? He knows she’s with Casey. It would be stupid to waste his time on someone he could never have.

*Kinda like you’re doing now?*

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Maddie replied warmly.

“And this is Luke’s cousin Jade,” Noah told him mother.

“Hi, Jade,” Gloria said, extending her hand toward Jade. However, her tone didn’t have the same warmth as it did when she greeted Maddie. Maybe she had heard Jade’s comment about getting
some service. Or maybe Noah had told her how Jade had been throwing herself at him movie night.

“Hello,” Jade replied sweet as pie.

Gloria pulled out a pad of paper from her apron. “Is everyone ready to place their order?”

The consensus at the table was yes so Maddie started out the orders ending with Luke. Jade was the only one not having a burger and a shake. She was probably watching her waistline which was just crazy because she was quite thin so there was no reason why she couldn’t splurge like the rest of them.

“Noah, have you watched any more movies?” Maddie asked.

“No,” Noah replied, “not really. I’ve been going to bed early. All of the work at the stable wore me out this week.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Luke assured him, stretching his feet out and tangling them with Noah’s. He expected Noah to pull his away but he didn’t. Instead, Luke could have sworn that Noah grinned slightly.

“Right now, I don’t know what is wearing me out more—getting up at 5am or the physical labor,” Noah admitted.

“The physical labor is going to give you big, strong muscles,” Jade said, placing her hand on Noah’s bicep just as Gloria returned with the drinks.

Gloria seemed a bit surprised that Jade was pawing her son. “I…ah…have three chocolate shakes and a diet,” she said, narrowing her eyes as she placed the Diet Pepsi in front of Jade.

Noah discreetly slid out of her grasp as his mother passed out the shakes. “Thanks, Mom,” he said, smiling up at her.

“You’re welcome, honey,” she said, patting his shoulder.


“You’re welcome, Luke,” she replied and then headed off toward the kitchen.

Noah’s eyes locked onto Luke as wrapped his lips around the straw and he took a sip of his shake. “Mmmm…Luke, this is amazing,” he murmured.

Luke never thought he could get aroused drinking a milkshake but damned if it weren’t happening now. All Luke could imagine were Noah’s lips wrapped around his cock instead of that straw—now that would be amazing.

“Do you really like it?” Luke asked, holding Noah’s gaze as he flicked his tongue over his straw.

“Love it.” Noah’s voice was low and husky.

“I’m glad,” Luke replied, taking a sip of his shake, which made Noah grin broadly.

Noah was going to be his undoing.

“Ohoops!” Jade said rather loudly, breaking the magical spell that had been between him and Noah. “I dropped my napkin.”
“We can get you…” Luke started to say but Jade was already out of her chair and ducking underneath the table before he could get the words out.

“What is she…?” Maddie muttered.

Noah straightened up in his chair, also a bit confused as Jade went on her fishing expedition. “Jade?” And then he shot almost a foot in the air. “Whoa—what the hell?” he demanded, jumping the chair.

Jade stood up, napkin in hand. “I was just picking up my napkin,” she said innocently.

“Is everything all right?” Gloria asked, approaching the table with their food.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Noah quickly replied as he sat down in his chair. His face was beet red as stared down at the table unable to look anyone in the eye. Noah’s feet were no longer touching his. One foot was nervously tapping against the tile floor.

Luke threw daggers in Jade’s direction but she just sat there smiling and angelic as a nun attending Sunday mass. It took an act of God not to grab her by the ear and drag her out of the diner. All he wanted to do was bawl her out for making Noah so uncomfortable, especially where his mother works.

Gloria set down Jade’s order in front of her. “I thought I saw you under the table,” she said. “Did you drop something?”

“Just my napkin, but I found it,” she said, holding it up.

“Please let me know if you drop anything else so I can get it for you,” Gloria said, “because we don’t like to see our customers on the floor here at Al’s.”

At that moment Luke knew he loved Noah’s mother. No one was going to pull any shit with this woman.

“Sure,” Jade said sweetly.


Noah looked up from his food a bit bewildered at first but then a smile slowly spread across his lips. “I love his versatility—Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Shop Around the Corner, It’s a Wonderful Life, Rope, Rear Window, Harvey…”

“Don’t forget The Man Who Know Too Much and Broken Arrow,” Maddie excitedly added.

Oh boy. They were in geek mode again, Luke inwardly groaned. But Maddie managed to get Noah to smile again and forget about Jade’s ridiculous stunt which was more than he could do. He wasn’t able to think of a single thing to say.


“I’m…uh…not sure,” he stammered.
“Come on, Luke,” Maddie said, giving him a playful nudge. “You mean to tell me that you’ve never seen *It’s a Wonderful Life*. How can you possibly make it through the holiday season without ever seeing it?”

“Every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings’,” Noah said. “George Bailey—the evil Mr. Potter.”

Luke actually had seen it with his grandma Emma. He remembered watching it with her a few times at the farm while Christmas cookies baked in the kitchen. “Hey, I have seen it,” he happily admitted.

“There’s hope for you yet,” Maddie teased.

“This burger is delicious,” Noah said, wiping his mouth. “Great recommendation, Luke.”

“The best in Oakdale,” Luke replied, happy that at least Noah liked his food choices.

“This is my brother’s fine establishment,” Maddie said, gesturing grandly with her arms.

“Aren’t you lucky?” Jade muttered.

“I would say she is if she gets a family discount,” Noah replied, grinning.

“I do whenever Henry is in a generous mood.”

“Lunch is on me so no one needs to worry about discounts,” Luke reminded them. Although he was tempted to tell Jade that she needed to fend for herself after her stupid stunt.

Maddie rested her head against Luke’s shoulder. “You’re such a sweetie,” she cooed. “I hate to eat and run, but I really do need to meet Casey.”

Luke tousled her hair. “You go right ahead. I’ll see you in school tomorrow. And send Case my love.”

Maddie stood up. “I’ll see you later, Noah. We’ll definitely have to do another movie night. Luke seeing just one out of all of those Jimmy Stewart films isn’t acceptable. We need to culture this boy.”

Luke knew better than to argue with her so he just rolled his eyes. And he did like the idea of another movie night with Noah—even if the movie would most likely be in black and white.

“That would be great.” Noah grinned.

“Bye, Jade, stay off the floor,” Maddie said and then headed out the door.

It took everything in Luke’s power not to laugh out loud. Noah seemed to be biting his lip pretty hard too.

“I don’t know how you can be friends with her, Luke,” Jade spat. “She’s such a snotty, little bitch.”

“Maddie happens to be one of my best friends,” Luke kindly reminded her, “and I will not have you talk that way about her.”

They finished up the rest of their lunch and Gloria brought over the bill. Luke was sure to leave her an extra big tip. He felt bad that it was his cousin trying to do god knows what to her son underneath the table. Hopefully, Noah’s mom was spared from seeing too much of it. Luke wished he could erase that part of the afternoon.

“Did you still want a tour of Old Town?” Luke asked. He wasn’t sure how Noah was going to feel
about spending the rest of the afternoon with Jade.

“Sure, if you still want to,” he replied a bit shyly.

“Of course. Let’s get this show on the road then.” Luke sprung up from the bench seat raring to go.

“Are you heading out?” Gloria asked, swinging by the table to pick up the check.

“Yes, Luke’s going to give me a tour of the city,” Noah told her.

“Sounds like fun,” she said. “Let me get you some change before you go.”


“Thank you very much. I’ll see you later, Noah.”

They headed out of Al’s into the bustling walkways of Old Town. Luke began pointing out the different businesses—The Black Duck, Master’s Dance Studio, Scoops Ice Cream, Fashions.

“Over there is the Book Emporium,” Luke said as they strolled along the cobbled stone sidewalk. “They have new books and a pretty large used book section too. It’s one of my favorite stores here.”

“Can we go inside?” Noah asked.

“Yeah,” Luke excitedly replied. He couldn’t help but get a little giddy that Noah wanted to check out one of his hangouts. “Are you looking for anything in particular?”

Noah shrugged. “No. I just thought you we could browse around if that’s okay.”

“It’s great.”

They went inside with Jade in tow. Luke was secretly hoping that she’d beg off and go to Fashions which was next door but, of course, there was no way she was going to leave him alone with Noah. Not even after it was pretty obvious at lunch that Noah wasn’t interested.

Luke always loved the way the Book Emporium smelled—new books everywhere—hardcover, paperback, leather bound journals. He closed his eyes, just savoring it for a moment. Paradise.

“This is quite a place,” Noah said slightly awestruck.


“Where is that used book section you told me about?”

“It’s in the back. Come on.”

Luke led them back into the used section which held a musty aroma that he loved for an entirely different reason. Sorting through used books was always an adventure. You never knew what treasures you might find.


Noah shook his head. “I just like to look.”

“So do I,” Luke said, glancing at him. And he could have sworn Noah blushed. Side by side they perused the shelves while Jade stood behind them, sighing heavily. Luke paid her
no mind though because he wasn’t going to let her spoil the rest of his day.

“Here’s a blast from the past.” Luke pulled out a tattered copy of *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. “I had to read this in 7th Grade English.”


“No, but it’s a good movie.” Noah grinned.

“I’ll keep it in mind.” He shelved the book and spotted another one, pulling it out. “How about this one?” he asked, holding up a copy of *Shane* by Jack Schaefer. “This was one of my dad’s favorite books.”


“No, but I saw the movie.”

Luke shook his head. “I thought your mom was an English teacher,” he teased. “Didn’t you read any books?”

“Yes, I did. I’ve read lots of books, but I just happen to prefer movies,” Noah insisted. “One of my favorite books is *Catcher in the Rye*.”

Luke grinned. “I’m impressed. It’s one of my favorites too. Did you see the movie?”

“There hasn’t been a movie adaptation,” Noah chuckled.

“And here I thought there was a movie for everything,” Luke teased.

“Are you guys almost done yet?” Jade sighed dramatically.

“We’re still looking,” Luke replied a bit irritated that she was interrupting them. “You can go look at the magazines or we can even meet you over at Fashions.”

“Fine,” Jade huffed. “I’ll be in the magazine section.” She turned on her heel and stomped out of the room.

“I’m amazed that she left,” Luke admitted.


Good lord almighty! Did Noah realize what those innocent little looks were doing to him? Every look today that Noah has cast his way has gone straight to his groin, setting it on fire. “For what?”

“Running interference all day between me and Jade.”

“She has a hard time taking no for an answer,” Luke told him. “That is if you want her to take no for an answer.”

Noah nodded. “I do. I just didn’t want to cause any problems with your family.”
“Believe me, you wouldn’t have caused any problems,” Luke assured him. “No one would ever want you to date someone you’re not interested in just to make other people happy. Trust me, I tried that. It doesn’t work. You have to be true to yourself.”

Noah folded his arms across his chest. “Right, of course,” he coolly replied. Then his gaze quickly focused on the bookshelf in front of him.


“I’m sorry,” Luke said. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” Noah said, keeping his eyes fixed on the bookcase.

“Because I have a tendency to speak first and ask questions later.” Luke tried to lighten the mood. They were having such a good time and Jade had finally left them alone. But he had to go and ruin things.

Noah pulled out Gone with the Wind and held it up. “Have you read this one, Snyder?”

“No, it’s like a thousand pages,” Luke replied.

“It’s also a classic,” Noah countered. “A great writer in the making shouldn’t let a thousand pages stand in his way.”

Luke grinned. “I suppose you’ve seen the movie.”

“All four hours of it,” he proudly admitted. “I don’t let a long movie intimidate me.”

“Ohhh…aren’t you the stud?” Luke teased.

Noah rolled his eyes. “Oh yeah—that’s me,” he said, hitting Luke with the copy of Gone with the Wind that he was still holding.

“Ouch! Hey, no fair hitting me with the heavy artillery there,” Luke flirted.

“Maybe you better find a copy of War and Peace so you can fight back,” Noah countered, blue eyes twinkling.

Luke was positively captivated by Noah. He didn’t want to fight back. He just wanted Noah to take him—right there in the bookstore. What he wouldn’t give to feel Noah’s mouth pressed hotly against his—and his body….

“Are you guys just about ready?” Jade asked not hiding her annoyance.

Dammit. She was supposed to go to the magazine section and stay there! Luke should have known it was too good to be true.


“Let’s get out of here then.”

They left the bookstore and Luke took them through the rest of Old Town, pointing out the different shops, including the movie theater that he had told Noah about. Finally they reached the far end of the shopping district.
“This is Java home to the best coffee in Oakdale,” Luke said as they approached the storefront. “And this wraps up the Old Town portion of our tour.”

“It’s a really cool area,” Noah said, glancing around. “Thanks for showing it to me.”

“Ready to head back to the car?” Luke asked.

“Yes,” Jade quickly replied.

“You can just take me home if you want,” Noah said. “You don’t have to show me anything else. I’ve already taken up a good portion of your Sunday.”

Luke was not going to let Jade’s pissy attitude cut his time with Noah short. He threw his cousin a quick, pointed look. “No way! You were promised the grand tour and that’s what you’ll get.”

“That’s right,” Jade said, smiling ever so sweetly. But Luke knew she was seething underneath.

They trekked back to the car and Jade dutifully resumed her place in the back seat without bitching. Luke put his seatbelt on and started the car, casting a quick glance in Noah’s direction just as Noah did the same. Busted. Smiling weakly, Luke quickly turned to look out the rear window so back out of the parking space.

Luke drove past the police station, quite thankful that Jade didn’t mention he’d been hauled in there over the summer after he wrecked the car Damian had given to him as a 4th of July gift (in reality it had been one of his many ways he’d tried to buy his love). He’d been drunk and very lucky he hadn’t killed himself or anyone else. However, near the police station was WOAK which Luke thought Noah might find interesting since he seemed to like movies so much.

“That’s WOAK TV, which is a CBS affiliate,” Luke explained. “They produce some local programming as well.”


“It is,” Luke replied.

“You’ve been inside?”

“His mom is part owner, remember?” Jade readily supplied.

“Right.” Noah nodded.

Luke was ready to pull the car over and throttled Jade. She was just had to remind Noah that his mom was involved with WOAK. It was like if she couldn’t have Noah than she didn’t want Luke to be friends with him either. “I don’t know if TV interests you like movies do, but since my mom is connected to the station I may be able to swing a tour,” he suggested, hoping to be able to do win some points with Noah.

“That would be awesome.”

They spent the next hour or so driving around, Luke was sure to point out everything Noah would ever want to see in the city—the junkyard that bought the old Cavalier (Luke made sure they stopped to have a moment of silence for it), the Wagon Wheel Motel (a wretched hive of scum and villainy), Bennidito’s Pizzeria (a cheesy slice of heaven), Oakdale High School (Luke’s personal hell), Yo’s Bar (famous for serving minors), and Oakdale Airport (you can always catch a shuttle to O’Hare). Luckily, Jade left out that Lucinda’s private jet was parked at the airport. Thank god for small
miracles.

The final stop was Oakdale University. Luke was ready to take a stroll through the campus with Noah, hoping that he’d be able to convince him to go to school there but Jade had made it known that she was about done with the tour so Luke decided not to press his luck. He could always bring Noah back some other time—just the two of them.

“So, that’s Oakdale in a very large nutshell,” Luke said as they headed back toward Luther’s Corners.


“Oh you might not be saying that after you live here for a little while,” Jade grumbled from the back seat.

“Don’t mind her,” Luke said. “I wouldn’t be sticking around here for college if it sucked that badly.”

“You’re just afraid to leave Mommy and Daddy!” Jade countered.

“Am not!”

“There’s nothing wrong with not wanting to leave home,” Noah said. “You have a great family. I wouldn’t want to leave them if I were you either.”


And then, all too quickly, they were back at the farm—more precisely—the cabin. Luke wished he didn’t have to say goodbye to Noah in front of Jade, but since she was in the backseat he really didn’t have any choice.

Noah turned to face him. “Thanks you guys for a great day,” he said to Luke and Jade but his eyes were focused on Luke. “I had a lot of fun. And I really appreciate the lunch. Are you sure I can’t give you any money for it, Luke?”

“Positive. It’s my treat.”

“Okay.” Noah nodded. “I’ll…ah…talk to you later then.”


“Bye.”

And then Noah was out the door, jogging toward the cabin. Luke sat there, staring after him—his body so long and lean. Damn he wished this day didn’t have to end.
Chapter 14

Charlene was surprised by just how much she enjoyed her job at Al’s. Henry and Vienna were a dream to work for—not only were they easy to get along with but they were incredibly funny, although sometimes they didn’t mean to be. She was getting to know some of the regulars who came in and looked forward to their visits. Most of them were pretty good tippers as well as being interesting to talk to.

So far her most interesting shift had to have been when Noah and his friends came in for lunch a few days ago. She’d been thrilled to see Noah with kids his own age. Noah and Luke looked as if they’d become friends, which really made her happy. In all of the cities they’ve lived in over the years, it never seemed like Noah had any real friends. Occasionally, he’d meet up with co-workers but he never had a friend that he hung out with on a regular basis. Hopefully, he had one now.

Maddie seemed like a really sweet girl and she was very pretty too. When she’d pass by the table she’d hear the occasional movie talk which she knew thrilled Noah to no end. However, Charlene didn’t see any flirting going on between the two of them.

But Jade…

That girl seemed like trouble with a capital T. Luke’s cousin or not, Charlene did not like the way she was pawing her son. She didn’t even want to know what the girl was trying to do while she was under the table. Poor Noah practically jumped a foot in the air when she pulled that move. She didn’t think Noah was interested in her, but she couldn’t be certain.

After Noah had gotten home from his afternoon out, she decided not to press him for details. One thing she noticed was that he was very happy. She hadn’t seen him that way in quite awhile. But she was concerned that Jade might have had something to do with his good mood. Jade seemed like she’d been around the block a few times. Charlene had a pretty good feeling that Noah was still a virgin, which she’d like to keep that way if she could. She’d rather not have Noah’s first sexual experience be with a girl who might have had sex with half of Oakdale.

Of course, Charlene knew this wasn’t realistic. But she figured this was a good time for another talk. If Noah was going to get mixed up with someone like Jade (God help him), she wanted to make sure he was prepared. So on her way home from work she stopped off at Walgreens and picked up a box of condoms.

Armed and ready, Charlene found Noah in his room lying on his bed reading her beat up old copy of *Catcher in the Rye* that she had made Noah read for the English Lit. class she taught him. She was a little surprised that his nose wasn’t buried in one of his film books.

“Hi, string bean,” she said, poking her head into his room.

Noah set the book on his lap. “Hi, Mom. How was work?”

“It was good,” she replied. “Can I talk to you for a few minutes?”

“Sure,” Noah said a bit uneasily as he eyed the small bag she was holding.

Charlene smiled and sat on the edge of the bed. “We never really got a chance to talk about your day out with your friends on Sunday.”

Noah shrugged. “I had a good time. There’s really not that much else to tell.”
She should have known this was going to be like pulling teeth. Even though Charlene constantly told Noah he could talk to her about everything, Noah had a tendency to clam up and internalize things. She suspected that some of it had to do with Winston’s stupid mantra about “having to be a man” even though she told him over and over that it was crap.

“Maddie seems like a nice girl. She’s very pretty,” Charlene began.

“Mom, she has a boyfriend,” Noah snapped, promptly cutting her off. “We’re just friends—we talk about movies—that’s all. I’m sorry,” he said, offering a weak smile.

She placed her hand on his leg. “There’s nothing to be sorry about. You can never have too many friends. I think it’s great that you found someone who shares your interest in film. Jade seemed pretty interested in you,” Charlene said, keeping her tone casual, but it didn’t stop Noah’s eyes from becoming as wide as saucers.

“Ummm…I don’t know,” Noah stammered, his cheeks flushing. “She might be.”

She nodded. “I know we’ve already talked about sex,” she said, which made her son’s cheeks turn even a darker shade of crimson. If Noah wasn’t trapped, Charlene suspected he would have made a mad dash and escaped from the room. “I wanted to be sure that you had these.” Charlene handed Noah the white plastic bag she’d been holding.

Noah peeked inside the bag and was absolutely horrified. “Mom, I’m not even dating anyone! I don’t know why you’d think…”

“There’s nothing wrong with being prepared,” she assured him. “Noah, you need to watch out for girls like Jade. Sometimes they may tell you that they’re on birth control but I want you to always make sure you use protection when you have sex.”

“But I’ve never!” Noah insisted.

Charlene smiled weakly. “You will though someday and I want to make sure that you’re ready,” she explained. “I would prefer it if you waited for someone you loved. It’s too bad that Maddie has a boyfriend because she seemed perfect.”

“She’s pretty amazing,” Noah said quietly.

“Don’t worry,” she reassured him. “There’s someone out there for you.”

Noah nodded, staring down at his hands.

Charlene honestly didn’t understand her son. He’d been so happy on Sunday—downright giddy and now she’d driven him back to the doldrums because she gave him a box of condoms. Was it because Maddie had a boyfriend? Noah certainly seemed sincere when he said they were just friends. And it didn’t seem like Noah held any interest in Jade either.

There was always Luke…

What if her first instinct about Noah had been correct? What if Noah was gay? Could he be harboring a crush on Luke?

There was no way to know for sure. And Noah certainly wasn’t going to confide in her—straight or gay. At least not right now. Hopefully, that would change one day.

I give up, she silently decided.
“So your birthday is coming up,” Charlene said brightly, hoping that she might have better luck with her son if she changed the subject.

Noah shrugged, still not looking too thrilled. “It’s just another day.”

“No, it isn’t,” she insisted. “It’s your eighteenth birthday and I think it’s pretty special. Noah, the day you were born was the happiest day of my life and I think it’s something to celebrate.”

“Technically I’m eighteen but aren’t I turning twenty or something like that?”

He had a point there. He’s been playing two years older for quite some time. “Have you told anyone here your age?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No.”

“Neither have I. All the Snyders know is that you’re done with homeschooling so I don’t see why we can’t celebrate your real age.”

Now this got a little bit of a smile out of him. “Really?”

“Really.” Charlene grinned. It would be nice to be honest about something. “We can go out to dinner if you’d like or I can try baking a cake. It’s been awhile so I can’t guarantee how it might come out.”

“You don’t have to make a big deal out of it.”

“I know I don’t, but I already took the night off from Al’s so you’re going to be stuck with me one way or another—unless you have a better offer,” she quickly added.

“No,” Noah replied, gripping the book that had been resting on his lap. “I definitely don’t have any plans.”

“It’s settled then,” she decided.

A birthday celebration with just the two of them wouldn’t be good enough for Noah’s eighteenth birthday. Not if she could help it. He deserved so much more—something to make up for all of the missed birthdays, the parties he never had as a child because Winston wouldn’t allow it.

“Did you spend any of the money Holden gave you?” Charlene asked.

“No, the trip was strictly sightseeing,” Noah replied. “And Luke bought lunch.”

“That was really nice of him.”

“Yeah.” The corners of Noah’s mouth turned up a bit.

“How would you like to head into town and spend some of your money?” Charlene suggested. “I could help you pick out some more new clothes. I know it’s not cool to go shopping with your mom but since you don’t have a valid license I don’t feel comfortable letting you use the farm truck.”

And then she got a full blown smile out of him. “That would be great.”

“Come on, let’s go,” she said as she stood up. “We’ll even have dinner out at Al’s since I get an employee discount - my treat.”

“Thanks, Mom.”
She pulled him into a tight hug. “You’re welcome. I don’t mean to pry but I do want to look out for you and make sure that you stay safe because I love you very much.”

“I love you too. And you don’t have anything to worry about.”

If only it were that easy. She’d always worry about her Noah.

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Thanks to his mother’s keen eye and ability to sniff out a good sale, Noah now had a bunch of new clothes. He had another new pair of jeans, a couple of polos, some long sleeved shirts, and several t-shirts. It was quite the bounty. He spent almost all of his first paycheck with his mother’s blessing. She had even said that next time she’d help him find some new shoes once he got paid again.

Before they had stopped off for dinner, Noah’s mother wanted to run into the Book Emporium to pick up the latest Women’s Murder Club novel that had been released in paperback. His mother not only enjoyed great literature but she also liked some mindless entertainment as well. While she was searching out her book, Noah caught sight of brown leather journal on display with the phrase Carpe Diem embossed on the front. Immediately, he thought of Dead Poets Society which reminded him of the fantasy he’d had about Luke in front of the campfire. Before he could talk himself out of it, he was purchasing the journal which he intended to be a thank you gift to Luke for his generosity.

Spending the evening shopping with his mother had been a lot of fun. Most guys his age probably wouldn’t be caught dead doing such a thing. But it was the first time they’d be able to go out shopping together for clothes - period. His father had forbid it, stating that shopping was for women so his mother picked out all of his clothes and brought them home for him. If they didn’t fit, she’d take them back to the store and get a different size for him.

Noah grinned wickedly, knowing how furious the Colonel would be if he’d seen them today—his mom selecting clothes for him to try on and Noah coming out of the dressing room, modeling them for her. His father would have been fit to be tied because that’s not what real men did.

But, then again, Noah wasn’t a real man. He was completely smitten with Luke now more than ever thanks to their afternoon together. Luke was sweet, funny, and generous—not to mention that he seemed to get even more gorgeous every time he sees him.

Noah had such an incredible time hanging out with Luke. There were even times when it felt like Luke really liked him. Sometimes the way Luke would look at him would make Noah all warm and tingly. His chocolate eyes seemed to look right through him, which not only excited him but scared him to death as well.

There were also times when Noah caught himself fantasizing that he was on a date with Luke, especially when they were alone for that short bit of heaven in the bookstore. It had been so easy to talk to him, laugh with him. But then Jade had to spoil it. At least Luke didn’t expect him to date his cousin.

Noah’s mother seemed to be another story though. Although she didn’t want him involved with someone like Jade, it was pretty clear that she expected him to eventually have sex with a girl. Preferably someone like Maddie.

Maybe if Maddie wasn’t dating Casey he might be able to make a relationship work with her. She was pretty, sweet, and loved old movies. And if Noah tried hard enough he could control the feelings he had for Luke. It wasn’t like he even knew what he was missing.

Noah would do anything to make his mother happy—even if it meant sacrificing his own happiness.
She’d given up so much so that he could be safe from his father.

Didn’t he owe her the same?

His mother had even given him condoms so he could be safe. She probably thought she was doing him some huge favor too. Noah didn’t even like seeing them. He stashed the condoms inside the drawer of the nightstand where they’d stay unused. He certainly wasn’t going to have sex with a girl. And the chances of him having sex with a boy were very slim at this point. Besides, there was only one boy he wanted to have sex with—even if the thought of it twisted his stomach into a pretzel.

But he couldn’t have Luke—a point that has been made even more painfully clear since Sunday afternoon. Noah had thought that after having such an incredible day with Luke they’d hang out more. However, that hasn’t been the case. In fact, he hasn’t seen him since that day. Noah tried to see him again, hoping to casually run into him when he’d come over to use the shower or maybe out in the barn.

Nothing.

Noah was beginning to wonder if Luke was avoiding him. Maybe he’d done something wrong—said something wrong…

Of course he could always leave a note for Luke or wait until he saw Luke’s Mustang in the driveway before he paid a visit to the farmhouse. But if Luke really wanted to see him again he could always stop by the cabin.

And he hasn’t.

Maybe buying the journal wasn’t such a good idea after all. How could he give a gift to someone who didn’t even want to anything to do with him?
Emma hadn’t been able to get her mind off of Noah since Holden told her his theory about Noah being abused. She just couldn’t imagine anyone laying a hand on that dear sweet boy. Certainly, Gloria never had. It was obvious she adored Noah and would do anything she could to protect him which was probably why they were in the predicament they were currently in.

Gloria had started stopping for a cup of coffee and some sweets whenever she worked the lunch shift at Al’s. Still, Emma didn’t know how to broach the subject with her. The last thing she wanted to do was scare her off or make her feel uncomfortable. All she could do was be Gloria’s friend and wait for the right moment to talk to her. And she’d always keep her eye on Noah.

“Knock…knock,” Gloria said, breezing through the kitchen door.

“Hello there.” Emma poured a couple of cups of coffee. “You are just in time. The coffee is nice and fresh.”

“Great.” Gloria joined her in the kitchen to get her cup. “What sort of treats are you going to fatten me up with today?”

“I have a peach cobbler that’s cooling as we speak.”

“Sounds delicious,” Gloria replied, grinning. “What can I do to help?”

Emma got a couple of small plates out of the cupboard. “You can take these over to the table.”

Gloria took the plates from her and placed them on the table along with her cup of coffee. Then she sat down and waited for Emma to join her.

Emma got some silverware out of the drawer, grabbed the peach cobbler along with her cup of coffee and joined Gloria at the table. “So tell me how everything is going at Al’s,” she said, settling into her chair.

“Same old, same old,” Gloria replied, taking a sip of her coffee. “Henry and Vienna are still as crazy as ever.”

“I can imagine that there’s never a dull moment with them in charge,” Emma chuckled.

“No, there isn’t.”

“I’m glad that you like it there.”

“I do. Thank you for helping me get me the job,” Charlene replied. “The tips have been pretty good, which is going to help me get Noah a nice birthday present.”

Emma perked up. Noah had a birthday coming up, which reminded her that Noah had lied to Holden about his father saving his birthday party. She wondered if Noah had ever really had any birthday parties growing up.

“How old is he going to be?”

“Eighteen.”

Eighteen—such a special age, this deserved a special celebration. Emma’s wheels were already
When is Noah’s birthday?” she asked.

“October 20th.”

“That’s only a couple of weeks away,” Emma said. This left them plenty of time to throw Noah a surprise birthday party. The boy certainly deserved one. Luke could invite some of his friends and, of course, the Snyders would all be there. “What do you think about throwing Noah a surprise birthday party? We could do it here. I thought Luke could ask some of his friends so Noah could have some kids his age there.”

Emma, that’s so sweet of you,” Gloria said, reaching over and placing her hand on Emma’s arm, “but I couldn’t ask you to go through all of that trouble. You’ve already done way too much for us as it is—”

“Nonsense!” she cut her off. “It wouldn’t be any trouble at all. I would need your help of course.

“Of course,” Gloria quickly replied. “Noah would be thrilled with a big birthday with some of his friends.” She glanced away and bit her lip. “You know, he never had one growing up.”

“He didn’t?”

Gloria shook her head. “We always meant to have one for him but before we could his father died and—”

“I understand,” Emma replied. Although she was quite positive this wasn’t the true story. At least she was honest about the fact that Noah has never had a birthday party, which only made her all the more determined to have one for him now.

“He missed out on so much,” Gloria murmured, staring down at her mug.

“It doesn’t have to be that way anymore,” Emma pointed out. “We can make sure that Noah has the best eighteenth birthday ever.”

Gloria glanced up at her, smiling with tears in her eyes. “I’d like nothing better than to make that happen for him.”

“Consider it done then,” Emma decided. “I’ll talk to Luke and make sure that he has some friends there.”

“It seems like he’s been a good friend to Noah.”

“Luke has a really good heart,” Emma told her. “He’ll be a good friend to Noah. So we’re going to have some planning to do now. We’ll have to come up with a way to get Noah over here without raising any suspicion.”

Gloria leaned across the table, taking Emma’s hands in hers. “This is going to be so much fun,” she said excitedly. “I can’t wait to see the look on Noah’s face when we surprise him.”

Emma smiled warmly. “Me too.”

Later, after Gloria had gone, Emma sought out Luke. Usually if she couldn’t find her grandson the first place she’d check would be the pond. However, he wasn’t there so he next stop was the barn. She found him Whitman’s stall. Luke just loved spending time with his horse. If he wasn’t riding him, he was talking to him which was what Emma found him doing when she approached the stall.
“Hello, Luke,” she said loud enough to alert him of her presence.


“Do I need an excuse to see my angel?”

He shrugged. “I suppose not.”

Emma smiled as she let herself into the stall. “Good, because I don’t get to see you enough,” she said as she gave Whitman a pat hello. “I had a nice visit with Noah’s mother today. Did you know that Noah’s eighteenth birthday is coming up?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“I thought it might be nice to throw him a surprise party,” she explained. “Gloria thought it was a great idea. I was hoping that you might be able to help us out.”

Luke’s eyes lit up. “Yeah! I’d love to help! Just tell me what you’d like me to do.”

“I hoped that you might invite some kids Noah’s age to the party,” Emma replied. “It might be more enjoyable for him instead of having a bunch of old fuddy duddies there.” She wasn’t about to go into the fact that Noah has never had a real birthday party. Luke didn’t need to know about any of the suspicions she and Holden had about Noah’s father.

“Awww…Gram, you’re not that old.”

“Thanks a lot,” Emma chuckled.

“I’m sure Maddie and Casey will come,” Luke decided. “They’re my only friends he’s met besides Jade but that didn’t really go so well.”

“Oh?”

Luke bit his lip. “She kinda has the hots for him but he’s not interested. And you know how Jade can be…”

Emma certainly did. Jade was one person she had a hard time trusting, especially since she had caught her in the barn with Lily’s bracelet when she first came into town. Even though she seemed to have made amends, Emma still liked to keep her guard up around her.

“Yes, I understand,” she replied. “We can keep her off the guest list. We don’t want to make Noah uncomfortable.”

“That’s a good idea,” Luke readily agreed. “Is there anything else you need me to do? I can distract him the night of the party—whatever you need.”

She certainly was impressed that Luke was so eager to help. “That’s awfully nice of you, dear, but I think Gloria might have that handled. I’ll let you know if it changes.”

“Okay,” he replied. “When is Noah’s birthday so I can tell Maddie and Casey?”

“It’s the 20th. I hope that won’t be a problem since it’s only a couple of weeks away.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Luke said with a slight smile. “Maddie and Noah have this whole movie thing between them so she’ll want to be there.”
“Good. Now remember mum’s the word,” she reminded him.

“Don’t worry. I won’t ruin the surprise,” Luke assured her as he stroked Whitman’s mane. “What do you say, Grandma? How about saddling up Whitman and taking him for a spin around the pasture?”

Emma had to laugh out loud at her grandson’s preposterous idea. She hadn’t been on horseback in years! “Oh you silly goof!” she chided him. “You know I’ll do no such thing!”

Luke flashed her one of his full-wattage dimpled smiles. “Come on, Gram! I heard you were quite the horsewoman in your day.”

“My day has long since passed, young man,” Emma said, shaking her head. Her grandson could be quite the charmer. Lord have mercy on the young man who fell under his spell because he most likely wouldn’t stand a chance.

“I still think you have a few good years left in you.”

She reached over and pinched his cheek. “From your lips to God’s ears, but I hope I have more than just a few.”

Luke blushed, ducking his head. “I didn’t mean you’re ready for the old folks home yet.”

“I know. I’m just teasing you,” Emma said. “I better get going. I need to get dinner started.”

“Did you need any help?”

“No thank you,” she replied. “Just be washed up and ready to eat in an hour.”


“You’re welcome,” he replied and then gazed at her thoughtfully. “I’m glad that you took Noah and his mother in. I think you’re truly making a difference in their life. Helping Noah’s mom throw him a birthday party is really sweet.”

“You’ve been helpful too.” She was proud of how Luke has stepped up the past couple of weeks—moving into the farm, taking Noah under this wing, especially after his difficult summer. Leaving home hadn’t been easy for Luke but he was handling it quite well. Emma appreciated his help.

“I’m trying.”

She nodded. “I’ll see you in a little while.”

There was a lot to do between now and Noah’s birthday but she’d have a lot of assistance. Emma just prayed that this birthday party would help Noah’s healing process.

*********

All Luke had been able to think about since his visit with his grandma was that Noah’s birthday was coming up. Luke had pondered ways that he could help make his birthday party extra special as he’d eaten the secret recipe chicken wings his grandma had made for dinner. And, of course, there was the matter of a gift which Luke wanted to be the coolest thing ever.

Actually, he hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Noah since he’d given him the grand tour of Oakdale. Luke kept replaying those stolen moments at the bookstore over and over in his mind, vividly remembering Noah’s amazing smile, his infectious laugh—just how incredibly perfect it had
been before Jade had interrupted them.

Jade.

Luke’s blood still boiled when he thought about his cousin. Jade was supposed to be one of his best friends but right now he could barely stand the sight of her. In the past, Luke had always been the first person to defend her. He stood by her side when his parents wanted to throw her out of the house after she first came to town, he was her confidante when no one else would give her the time of day, and most importantly he always had her back even when he didn’t necessarily like what she was up to (namely her pursuit of Will).

But it didn’t always go both ways. Sure, Jade has been there for him - when it suited her. It took Noah coming into town for Luke to truly realize this. Even when Jade had accused him of having a thing for Noah it hadn’t stopped her from still pursuing Noah. If she really cared about Luke, she wouldn’t have thrown herself at Noah during their outing.

At least Noah doesn’t have any interest in Jade.

Luke took solace in that fact. But it also didn’t change the fact that Noah also didn’t have any interest in him besides friendship.

Anyway, Jade hasn’t been speaking to him since that afternoon. She was still very pissed at him for calling her out on all of her shit the moment they got back to his parents after dropping Noah off. Damn. It had been one hell of a heated argument…

“What the fuck did you think you were doing today?” Luke demanded once he put the car into park in his parents’ driveway.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jade feigned innocence. She casually twisted her curly hair around her finger as she stared out the windshield. Once Noah had vacated the front seat, Jade had quickly claimed it as her own for the short drive back to his parents’ house.

Oh god…were they really going to play this game? Seriously…did she think he was that stupid?

“You know damn well ‘what’,” he hissed. “The way you were throwing yourself at Noah today was downright pathetic.”


“I’m not jealous,” Luke insisted. He was determined not to keep the focus on him, though. Jade still had a lot to answer for and he wasn’t about to let her off easily. “I can’t believe that stunt you pulled today at Al’s. What the hell were you trying to do underneath the table?”

“Nothing that Noah wouldn’t have enjoyed if he would just have relaxed,” Jade replied. “My god is that boy ever wound tight.”

“Don’t you have any self respect, Jade?” Luke asked positively exasperated. He couldn’t believe how nonchalant she was being about her actions. She still didn’t see any wrong doing on her part. “You were acting like a slut.”

“You were the one who was acting like a bitch in heat, Luke,” Jade sneered.

Luke was stunned. She did not just say that to him. They’d had their disagreements in the past but
this one seemed have gone to another level. The gloves had definitely come off.

“I was not,” he insisted. “You’re so blinded by your jealousy you can’t even fucking see straight. Once again, you couldn’t get it through your thick skull that a guy wasn’t interested in you—just like Will isn’t interested.”

Jade’s eyes narrowed. “If Will wasn’t interested then I never would have gotten him into bed, which is something you don’t know a thing about since you’re still a virgin. You still haven’t even kissed a guy, have you?”

“Just shut up, Jade!”


Luke chuckled smugly. “Well, that’s where you’re wrong. Noah isn’t interested in you. He told me this afternoon so you can just stop throwing yourself at him.” Hopefully, Jade would heed his words and leave Noah alone once and for all.

“So now you think you can have him all to yourself,” she smirked. “Isn’t that sweet? Too bad he’s straight.”

“I told you that I’m not interested in him,” Luke said through gritted teeth. He was absolutely seething that his cousin kept taunting him with this fact. She was heartless. “I don’t know how many times I have to tell you this.”

“Luke, I’ve had a front row seat for one of your straight boy crushes before,” Jade kindly reminded him. “I know all of the signs. You were practically drooling in your damn milkshake at Al’s. It was pathetic. I’m surprised you haven’t freaked Noah out like you did Kevin.”

Luke desperately tried to maintain his composure. “You’re delusional.”

“No, you are, cuz,” Jade shot back, guns blazing. “Maybe Noah needs to know how you felt for Kevin. I think he’s entitled to know that you have a history of falling for your friends. Isn’t it fair that Noah knows that you want him? I think someone should tell him.”

“Get the fuck out of my car!” Luke spat. He’d had enough of her drama, enough of her bullshit. He wanted her gone. Now. “I’m sick of you and your twisted shit!”

“Fine,” Jade huffed, reaching for the door handle. “I’d rather not be around to watch you make a complete ass out of yourself.” She slammed the door shut and ran toward the house.

Jade had managed to turn his amazing day with Noah into a fucking nightmare. Damn her.

When Luke returned the farm, he marched straight into the barn to Whitman’s stall. He threw his arms around his horse’s neck, burying his head into his mane and just sobbed.

Luke didn’t want to take Jade’s words to heart, but he had. What if Noah was able to figure out that he had a crush on him? What if Noah was freaked out about it? He couldn’t handle going through Kevin part deux.

So Luke had avoided Noah all week. The first day was easy since he’d already made plans to spend time with his sisters after school. Hanging out with the girls helped take his mind off the handsome
boy who lived in his grandmother’s cabin.

However, the rest of the days had been hell. The next day Luke didn’t come home until late, spending his hours after school wandering through Old Town trying not to think about how fun it had been to show Noah the sights. Eventually, he’d ended up at the Book Emporium but he couldn’t bring himself to go to the used section—too many memories. Even the literature section was a bit painful for him so he decided to stick to the vast magazine section which killed a lot of time. His trip wasn’t a complete waste because he bought the *Watchmen* graphic novel as a special treat to himself. He also hoped that maybe reading it might take his mind off of Noah.

Luke had met Will and Casey for coffee at Java the following day. After a round of lattes they shot hoops at Maplelawn Park. Luke was still on the fence about whether or not he was going to try out for the basketball team. He’d been thinking about what Aaron had told him about giving the guys on the team a chance to accept his sexuality. Basketball had been a part of his life since the seventh grade. This was going to be the last year he’d probably be able to play. Luke wasn’t sure if he was ready for that chapter of his life to be over just yet. Just in case, he decided to try out next month, Luke wanted to make sure that he didn’t suck so he needed to practice. It was fun hanging out with Will and Casey, especially since neither of them brought up Noah.

Unlike Maddie.

All she wanted to do was talk about Noah. Luke had kept it simple with her, telling her that Noah wasn’t interested in Jade and that his cousin didn’t take the news too well. He’d left out the rest of the gory details, promptly changing the subject much to his friend’s dismay. Whenever Maddie would try to mention Noah, Luke would quickly change the subject or make up an excuse to leave.

But that would change tomorrow when he told her about Noah’s birthday party. And then it would be open season. Luke knew he’d better be ready for Maddie and whatever crazy questions she might throw his way.

Outside his bedroom door the floorboards creaked as someone passed by his room. Luke held his breath waiting to see if there would be a knock on his door.

Nothing.

The footsteps continued down the hall until Luke heard a door close. He suspected that it was the bathroom door which meant…

Luke’s heart rate quickened. Noah was upstairs—most likely in the shower.

*Oh god…*

He couldn’t stand to think about how sexy Noah would look wet and naked. But what bothered him more was that Noah hadn’t stopped to say hello. In the past four days that they hadn’t seen each other. Noah still hasn’t tried to contact him.

Maybe Jade had been right after all. Maybe Noah could sense his feelings for him which was why Noah was also avoiding him.

*No…no…no…we got along so well. Noah wasn’t freaked out. He liked hanging out with me,* Luke tried to reason with himself.

If that were the case, then why hadn’t he heard from Noah since that afternoon?

Luke would have to find a way to make things right between them.
Maddie was waiting for Luke at their lunch table. Luke was having a relatively decent day, considering the fact that he hadn’t gotten too much sleep the night before. He’d tossed and turned, consumed with thoughts of Noah—most of them not so pleasant. He was still worried about Noah discovering that he’d fallen for him.

Luke figured that helping his grandmother and Noah’s mother with the surprise birthday party would help not only keep him busy but also show Noah that he wanted to be friends with him. And having Casey and Maddie there would help take the focus off of him too.

“Hey, Luke,” Maddie greeted him. “How has your Friday been going?”

“Fine,” he replied, sitting down across from her. “I’ve managed to avoid Kevin and Mark so that always a bonus.”

“Definitely.”

“Do you and Casey have plans two weeks from tonight?” Luke asked as he pulled out a chicken salad sandwich from his brown paper lunch bag.

Maddie gazed thoughtfully toward the ceiling for a moment and then replied, “None that I can think of. What’s up?”

“There’s going to be a surprise birthday party for Noah. His mom and my grandmother are going to be throwing it at the farm,” he explained. “I was hoping that you guys could be there. It would mean a lot to Noah to have some people there his own age. And I can assure you that Jade won’t be invited.”

Maddie’s face lit up. “We’ll definitely be there. I think Noah’s great and would love to help him celebrate his birthday. And the fact that it’s going to be a Jade-free event makes it even more appealing.”

Luke took a sip from his can of Coke. “Good.”

Maddie bit her lip trying hard not to smile. Luke was almost afraid to ask her what was on her mind because it was liable to open Pandora’s Box. She had also been at Al’s so she could very well have picked up on his feelings for Noah that Jade claimed he’d broadcasted in big, bold, neon letters.

However, Luke’s silence did him no good. While he could manage to keep quiet, Maddie couldn’t. “So have you given any thought as to what you’re going to get Noah for his birthday?” she casually asked.


Lie…lie…lie. He’d given it major consideration because he wanted it to be an amazing gift—something Noah would absolutely love.

“Well, Noah loves movies—”

“Really? I never would have guessed,” he sarcastically replied.

“Hey, if you don’t want my help.” Maddie sat back in her chair and folding her arms across her chest.

“I didn’t say that,” Luke said anxious for her assistance. “Remember I’ve witnessed a couple of your
movie debates. They’re hard to forget, you know.”

“If you want to win Noah’s heart you should get him a DVD - some movie that he’d really like,” Maddie excitedly explained.


“Oh, Luke…”

“No,” he quickly cut her off. He did not want to hear her go on about how he had the hots for Noah.

“But you’d make a great couple,” she insisted. “The two of you really seemed to have hit it off. I just think—”

“I just think you really need to stop thinking,” Luke irritably replied. “Noah and I are just friends. That’s all and that’s all it will ever be. Please, just let it go.”

Maddie stared at him for a moment. “I’m sorry.” She reached across the table, placing her hand on Luke’s arm. “I’ll keep my mouth shut for now on.”

Luke cracked a smile. “Well, that’s going to lead to many one sided conversations.”

She smacked his arm. “You know what I mean. Did you still want my help finding a birthday present?”

“Yeah.” Although Luke was determined not to let on just how important it was that he found the perfect gift for Noah. His feelings for Noah had to be his secret.

“Great.” Maddie grinned. “I think we both should get him DVDs.”

“Sounds good to me, but we need to know which ones to get him.” Luke said, because he didn’t want to get Noah just any movie. It had to be the movie. Something that would really bring out the film geek in Noah and just make him go completely nuts.

“You’re going to have to do a recon mission,” Maddie decided.

“A recon mission?” Luke laughed at the notion of Maddie turning this into some cloak and dagger operation.

“Yes. You need to go over to his place and check out his movie collection. And then you can let me know what he has,” she explained. “Based on what he has I can suggest what would be a good DVD to get him.”

“I’ll see what I can find out,” Luke said, but only because he didn’t see any other way to figure out what DVDs Noah already had in his collection. And he couldn’t avoid Noah forever.
Chapter 16

Luke felt as if he were a condemned man being escorted down death row as he trekked across his grandmother’s farmland on his way over to the cabin to see Noah. He was a nervous wreck, worried that he’d say the wrong thing to Noah or, worse yet, Noah would be mad at him for his disappearing act. Maybe Noah wouldn’t want to see him because he’d had time to put all of pieces together and the thought of a gay guy crushing on him was repulsive. So many scenarios rushed through his mind and none of them were good.

When Maddie had come up with this whole “recon” idea, Luke didn’t want to just show up on Noah’s doorstep after not speaking to him for days. Thankfully, his grandma had been able to help him formulate the perfect plan when he told her what he wanted to do. Luke never realized what a schemer his grandma Emma could be when she set her mind to it—she was liable to give Lucinda Walsh a run for her money.

His grandma had baked a fresh batch of oatmeal raisin cookies for him to take to Noah so he wouldn’t show up empty handed. And he also had news to share—the plumber would be out Wednesday to fix the bathroom in the cabin. The days of Noah and Gloria having to shower at the farmhouse were limited—another good reason to arrive unannounced—the perfect double whammy.

Taking a deep breath, Luke stepped up onto the porch, clutching the container of cookies as if it were his life preserver. “Here goes nothing,” he murmured before he knocked on the door.

It seemed like forever before the door swung open, revealing a shirtless Noah clad in only a pair of old black sweatpants. “Uhhh…hi,” Noah stammered, obviously surprised to see him.

“Hey,” Luke said, pushing all of his nervousness aside and trying very hard not to stare at Noah’s chest. Focus on his eyes—not his nipples—eyes! “I brought you some cookies that my grandma made, oatmeal raisin, her specialty. They’re fresh out of the oven,” his words all spilled out in one long breath.

“Ahh…thanks.”

“She wanted to pass along the news that the plumber will be out Wednesday to fix the sink and the shower in the bathroom,” Luke pressed onward. He felt like he just needed to keep talking and everything would be all right.

Noah nodded. “That’s good news. I’ll let my mom know. She’ll be happy to hear it.”

“Is she here?” he asked, trying to peer over Noah’s shoulder. He seemed to be guarding the entrance to the cabin like it was Fort Knox.

“No, she’s at work right now.”

Luke nodded. “You’ll have to be sure to save some cookies for her.”

“I’ll try,” Noah replied, “but you’ll have to give them to me first.”

Shit. He was still holding them, wasn’t he? Why did he tend to turn into an idiot in front of Noah?

Yes, he was going to die right here in front of Noah. This was an entirely different feeling than he had when he had given Kevin that backrub. While it felt good, it didn’t ignite every sense in his body. Luke’s skin tingled where Noah had touched it. He’d never felt anything like it in his life.

“Thanks,” Noah replied, his eyes locking onto Luke’s. There seemed to be a flicker of something there—desire, want, longing, fear? Had Noah felt what he had too? But before Luke could place it, Noah took a step back and the spell was broken.

Damn.

“Are you…uh…busy?” Luke asked, praying that Noah couldn’t see what that brief little touch had done to him. He had to get inside the cabin to look at his DVDs.

“No.”

“Can I come in?”

“Do you really want to hang out with me?” Noah asked meekly.

So Noah hadn’t been avoiding him? It had all been on Luke. He felt like a complete shit for listening to Jade. Noah didn’t suspect that Luke had feelings for him. Thank god. Noah also seemed hurt and disappointed that Luke hadn’t been around.

“It’s been a really busy week,” Luke sheepishly replied. “Can I come in? Please?”

“Sure,” Noah sighed, stepping aside so he could enter.

Luke smiled slightly not wanting to show just how happy that he was that he was being allowed inside.

“I need to put on a shirt.”

“No, that’s all right,” Luke replied without thinking. Noah’s startled look made him quickly amend his statement. “I mean it’s all right. I…uh…skipped my morning coffee so my brain isn’t fully functional today.”

“I’ll be right back,” Noah said and then he headed off to his room.

*Good lord. Why didn’t you just say I want to rip your clothes off?* he silently lamented. Luke wouldn’t be surprised if Noah locked himself inside his room and didn’t come out until he left. He had to start thinking before he spoke or he was liable to get himself into a shit heap full of trouble.

While Noah was in his room, Luke scanned the cabin. He hadn’t been in it in years and from what he’d remembered of it, it had been pretty run down. But now it looked like a cozy retreat. The one thing that caught his eye was a framed photo of a very young Noah. He looked to be about five or six. He was curled up on a sofa, holding a brown stuffed puppy dog. Luke wanted to pick up the picture and kiss it because Noah looked so adorable. Thankfully, he didn’t because Noah stepped out of his bedroom wearing a gray Old Navy t-shirt. Luke quickly set the picture frame down on the end table, feeling like he’d just be caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He’d have to do a better job when it came to the DVDs.

“It’s one of my mother’s favorites,” Noah said, sauntering over to him. “She insisted on putting it out.”

“My mother has a few of those as well,” Luke replied with a slight chuckle.
“I’ll have to see them sometime—just so we’re even.”

“We’ll see about that,” Luke said, taking a few steps into the living room determined to find Noah’s elusive DVD collection. “The cabin looks really nice.”

“It’s nothing compared to your parents’ house.”

Right. Luke’s family lived in a mansion while Noah lived in a small cabin. He hoped his comment hadn’t come off as condescending because that’s not how it was meant to be. Luke turned to Noah. “You know, sometimes I feel more at home on my grandmother’s farm than in my own house,” he admitted. “I’ve always loved it here—not that you could tell when I was told that I was going to have to move here but I really do love it.”

“It’s beautiful land and I’m happy to be able to live here.”

Luke sat down on the sofa, hoping that Noah would join him. That’s when he noticed on the shelf under the DVD player some DVDs lined up—Foul Play, Dead Poets Society, American Graffiti, Jaws, Parenthood, Best Years of Our Lives, Citizen Kane, Rear Window, The Thin Man, The Philadelphia Story. He wondered if that was all of them.

Maybe the rest were lost in a fire. That could be what happened to Noah and his mother—that’s why they’re so down on their luck.

Or else they were left behind when Noah was running from the mob.

*Remember, you decided the Carlsons weren’t in the witness protection program.*

Regardless, it didn’t seem like much of a collection, but Luke quickly reminded himself that Noah hardly had anything which would make getting a couple of new movies such a special gift to him.

Now he just had to find a way to remember the titles. Luke had only heard of a few of them, which wasn’t going to make this task any easier. And he didn’t want to keep staring at them as it might make Noah suspicious.

“Did my dad tell you that he started out as my mother’s stable boy when they were teenagers?”

This got Noah’s attention. He came over and sat down next to Luke on the couch but he was sure to keep ample distance between them. “Really?”

“Yup, they eventually fell in love and got married.”

“Sounds like something right out of a movie.”

“It wasn’t exactly happily ever after,” Luke admitted. His parents’ relationship was far from it. He only hoped that his own (once he had one would be much easier). “They’ve had their fare share of problems and have broken up and gotten back together more times than I’d like to count. But they’re happy now and I hope it stays that way.”

“I hope it stays that way too for your sake,” Noah told him.

“Thanks,” Luke replied, taking another quick glance at the DVDs and trying to commit the titles to memory. “How has your week been going?”

“Good,” Noah replied, tapping his foot against the hardwood floor. “I’m starting to feel a bit more comfortable with everything at the stable. Your dad trusts me to do some things on my own now.”
“That’s great.”

“I just worry that I’ll mess up,” Noah admitted.

“If you do make a mistake my dad won’t get rid of you,” Luke reassured him. “He’s pretty understanding.”

“You’re lucky to have such an amazing father,” Noah said wistfully.

“I’m sorry,” Luke quickly apologized. “I keep talking about my dad and yours is…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Noah quickly said. “It happened awhile ago. I’m fine now—really.”

“Are you sure?”

“Being around your dad helps,” Noah shyly admitted. “After we went to the feed store in Newberry he took me to Knapp’s for a malt. It was really cool.”

Luke didn’t know how he felt about that. Going out for malts at Knapp’s after Hamilton’s Feed Store was a sacred Snyder tradition passed down for generations. He hadn’t been there in ages with his father but now Noah had!!?

“That’s great.” Luke plastered a smile on his face.

“He’s been so good to me. I really enjoy spending time with him.”

A pang of jealousy slapped Luke in the face. Noah saw Luke’s dad a hell of a lot more than he did lately. Luke couldn’t remember the last time he spent more than an hour with his father. Certainly, it hadn’t happened since he’d moved to the farm. Noah was getting all of the time that used to go to him. He was also getting all of those pats on the back and most likely hugs too.

But Dad still loves you—that hasn’t changed, he tried to reason with himself. And Noah has no one but his mom…

Luke felt guilty for even having these feelings. Noah surely meant no harm. “He’s great,” was all he could muster.

Noah nodded, shifting uncomfortably and glancing nervously toward his bedroom. “So….uh… you’ve really been busy?” he asked, his voice was laced with a trace of hurt.

“Yeah,” Luke promptly replied, feeling the need to justify himself and reassure Noah at the same time. “I spent Monday with my sisters. Remember, I’d made plans with them?” Noah nodded.

“There was school stuff I had to do. I also got together with Casey and one of his friends.” Luke bent the truth a bit so that Noah wouldn’t feel badly. If he admitted to wandering around Old Town one day, Noah might think he was avoiding him or something. And if he told Noah that Will was also his friend, then he’d wonder why he wasn’t also invited. It was best this way.

But there was still disappointed etched all over Noah’s face. “Oh.”

“You must have been busy too because I didn’t hear from you either,” Luke countered. He could just as easily put this back on Noah. If Noah really had wanted to see or talk to him he could have found a way.

Noah’s eyes momentarily clouded over but as soon as Luke realized it, it passed making him wonder if he was just imagining things. “I think I’m still adjusting to getting up so early in the morning. I’ve
been pretty wiped out after working all day. I basically eat, shower, and go right to bed.”

“Oh.”

“Hopefully, that will change though,” Noah quickly amended.


God…I have to remember these names…

“Yeah, sure.” Noah shifted and then chewed on his lip. He looked past Luke, over his shoulder toward his bedroom, his eyebrows knitting together. Something seemed to be on his mind.

Did he want Luke to leave? Stay?

Shit. Luke wasn’t sure what the hell he should do anymore. He’d been wrong about avoiding Noah. Luke didn’t want to make another mistake.

“Maybe I should go. I didn’t mean to just barge in here and interrupt your day,” Luke said causally, almost asking Noah for permission to stay because he really didn’t want to leave—unless Noah wanted him to go.

“You didn’t interrupt anything,” Noah quickly assured him. “I just…” He hesitated for a moment. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

Luke wasn’t expecting that reaction. “Uh…yeah…sure.”

And then Noah was gone—dashing toward his bedroom. Luke shook his head as he took the precious time alone to study the DVDs that were on display. Determined to get it right he silently recited the movie titles over and over. He would not screw this up. Noah deserved an awesome birthday gift.


He twisted around to find Noah standing there with his hands behind his back, looking incredibly nervous. “Yeah?”

“I really had a great time Sunday. It was so nice of you to take time out of your busy weekend to show me around the town and it was very generous of you to buy lunch,” Noah said in a rushed breath.

“So did I,” Luke readily agreed. “And buying you lunch was the least I could do for you for having to put up with my pain in the ass cousin. I can’t apologize enough for her inappropriate behavior. If I would have known…”

“It’s okay, Luke,” Noah promptly cut him off. He strolled back over to the sofa, still keeping something hidden behind his back. “…I just thought that thank you wasn’t enough,” he blurted out as he pulled the mystery object out from behind his back and thrust it toward Luke. “It’s not much but…”

Completely flabbergasted, Luke took the brown leather journal from Noah. Not much? It was an incredibly sweet and thoughtful gift. His fingers traced the phrase embossed across the front “Carpe Diem”. God…if only he could live by those words.
“Thank you, Noah,” he finally managed to choke out.

Noah’s cheeks were now flushed. “You’re welcome. I hope you can use it—being a writer and all.”

Use it? He’d treasure it.


Noah grinned. “Good.”

“Good,” Luke repeated, matching his gaze and trying to figure out why someone of such limited means would spend his money on him.

Noah shifted his weight and ducked his head. “Did you maybe want to try one of your grandmother’s cookies?”

He really did want him to stay. Luke’s heart soared all the way to the moon. “Sure,” he casually replied as to not give away his elated state. He would not make the mistake of tipping off Noah and possibly scaring him away.

Luke refused to let his imagination go wild, thinking that Noah’s gift was some declaration of love. Noah was just being nice. That’s all—nothing else. It was a very kind gesture and he’d cherish the journal. Always.

“Would you like some milk to go with them?” he asked as he headed toward the kitchen area.

“Cookies and milk—you’re starting to sound like my grandma,” Luke teased.

Noah stopped, wrinkling his nose. “It kinda does, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” he chuckled, “but I’ll take you up on your offer.”

“Cookies and milk coming right up.”

Luke sat on the sofa fidgeting. Should he get up and sit at the kitchen table or stay where he was—hoping beyond hope that Noah would sit oh so close to him—maybe even feed him one of Gram’s delicious cookies and lick the crumbs off of his chest.

Like that was going to happen.

The front door suddenly opened and Noah’s mother, breezed through it. “Noah, I’m home,” she called brightly.

Noah set the gallon of milk that he was holding down on the counter. “Hi, Mom.”

Gloria glanced over at him, her eyes widening a bit. “Hello, Luke. I didn’t see you sitting there!”

“Hi, Mrs. Carlson,” Luke replied. “I just stopped by to drop off some cookies that my grandmother baked. She also wanted to let you know that the plumber would be by on Wednesday to work on the shower and sink in the bathroom.”

Gloria smiled warmly. “Please call me Gloria. Thank you for sharing the great news and bringing the amazing treats. That was very sweet of you.” Her eyes zeroed in on the journal in his hand.

Luke felt as if she were looking right through him, which was a bit unnerving. Did she know that Noah had purchased the journal for him?
“We were just about to have some cookies and milk. Did you want to join us?” Noah asked his mom.

Luke panicked. “Actually, I should get going,” he said, scrambling to his feet.

Noah wandered out of the kitchen to meet him. “Oh…okay,” he said, biting his lip.

Luke felt that he could stay but he just couldn’t—not with Noah’s mother there. Luke felt if he spent too much time with her she’d be able to figure out how he felt about her son. Surely, Gloria wouldn’t want him having the hots for Noah. She might even forbid Noah to be friends with him. And he couldn’t have that.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Luke said, making sure that his eyes met Noah’s, hoping to convey that he meant every word he’d said.

“Okay.” Noah nodded.

Luke turned to Gloria. “It was nice seeing you again.”


“Thanks.”

He knew that she meant it and he wanted to keep it that way. Luke headed out the door—mission accomplished.
Chapter 17

Noah was so relieved that Holden had to run a bunch of errands this afternoon thus leaving him alone in the stable, because he was afraid that it would be painfully obvious that his thoughts had been solely focused on Luke the moment he reported to work. Thankfully, it wasn’t so much so that he’d messed anything up but his mind was definitely preoccupied with the gorgeous blonde with the big brown eyes.

He swore his skin was forever branded from where Luke’s hand had touched his. The white hot heat from that brief moment had left him longing for Luke in the worst way. Noah wanted to touch him longer—caress his chest, kiss his perfect lips.

Had Luke felt it too?

It would have been impossible not to, wouldn’t it? If he had, Luke certainly hadn’t let on. His face had been unreadable as a professional poker player’s. He could have been holding a Royal Flush and Noah wouldn’t have known.


Noah stopped sweeping and rested his chin on the top of the broom handle, closing his eyes he recalled the snapshot of Luke he committed to memory—Luke, the boy who had everything, thrilled to get a gift from him. This fact alone has had Noah smiling since Luke left the cabin two days ago.

Carpe Diem.

Boy did he ever follow the phrase that was embossed on Luke’s journal. Even after he’d purchased the journal, Noah wasn’t so sure he’d be able to go through with his plan to give it to Luke. He’d been so afraid that Luke would think it was stupid—worse yet—think he was stupid or desperate. But he’d been so wrong. Luke wasn’t like anyone he’d ever met in his life. He was damn near perfect. Noah was proud of himself. He took a chance. Just like Gloria did in Foul Play. The mere thought made him laugh out loud. Oh his mom would be proud of him for referring to her favorite movie. She’d also be proud that he took a chance too. Sadly, giving Luke a gift probably wouldn’t be at the top of her list as far as chances go.

At least his mom genuinely liked Luke. But as his friend, she most likely wouldn’t be thrilled with the prospect of him being Noah’s boyfriend.

Did she even know Luke was gay? Had Emma told her?

Deep down Noah knew it didn’t matter whether or not his mom knew Luke was gay. If she did and it didn’t bother her, it didn’t mean she’d accept him. Finding out your own son was gay was a hell of a lot different.

Nope. Noah had to keep silent.

Well, there was one person he could talk to. Okay…it wasn’t really a person. It was a horse—Luke’s horse. And Noah found himself talking to Whitman quite a bit when no one else was around. He’d give the horse a couple of carrots and pet and talk to him. Sometimes Noah would tell him about his
day, but mostly he’d talk about Luke. Spending time with Whitman made Noah feel closer to Luke. Noah knew it was incredibly corny but he couldn’t help feeling that way. It really helped last week when he thought Luke was avoiding him.

Noah finished sweeping up and made sure that everything was ship shape before he called it a day. But he wasn’t ready to head back to the cabin quite yet. The stable was still empty so he wanted to take advantage of this precious time and spend it with Whitman. Luke wouldn’t be home from school for at least another forty-five minutes - that is if he came right home. Noah tried not to think let his overactive imagination get the best of him.

But it was hard.

Propping the broom up against the wall, Noah sauntered over to the bag that held the carrots to get some for his buddy because no chat with Whitman would be complete without a treat for him. He grabbed a few out of the bag and then strolled over to Whitman’s stall.

Whitman began to snort and shake his head as Noah approached. He knew that he was about to get spoiled.

“You’re no dummy,” Noah said, holding out his hand with one of the carrots resting in the palm. “You know exactly what I’m bringing you, don’t ya?” Whitman took it out of his hand very delicately. “That’s a good boy,” he said, stroking his head. “But I’m sure you’re always a good boy.”

Whitman nudged him with his nose, knowing that there had to be at least one more carrot to be had because Noah never gave him just one.

“Here’s the other one.” Noah held out his hand. “But that’s it. Maybe Luke will be by later to feed you some more. Did he tell you that we had a nice visit the other day? Well, we did. And I had bought him this journal but I didn’t know if I’d have the guts to give it to him. But I did it, Whitman,” Noah said, petting the horse’s nose. “I really did. I gave it to him and he liked it.”

Whitman seemed to be pretty proud of him too.

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“You did an awesome job.” Maddie beamed as they strolled into the Best Buy store that was in the shopping plaza at the far side of the town once they had finished their last class. “I’m so proud of you, Luke. Now are you sure that he didn’t suspect a thing?”

“Positive,” Luke assured her. “I was totally stealth.” He had told her all about his visit with Noah a couple of days ago.

Well, almost everything. Luke left out the journal Noah had given him although he’d been dying to tell someone. Normally, he’d get Maddie’s opinion on the matter because he was still trying to figure out what the gift meant—if there was more to it or if it was exactly what Noah said.

“Perfect. Now we need to find the drama section,” she said when they reached the movie department.

“Do you have an idea of which movie I should get him?” Luke asked.

Maddie scanned the department, honing in on where they needed to go. “Yes, definitely. Hopefully, they’ll have it.” She started walking and Luke followed after her. “Noah wasn’t kidding when he said that he had a small DVD collection so it’s really going to be easy for us.”

“Good,” Luke breathed a sigh of relief. “I can use easy for a change.”
She stopped in front of a shelf, her eyes scanning it until they spotted what she was looking for. Reaching out, Maddie plucked a DVD off the shelf and handed it to Luke. “This is the one you should get him,” she triumphantly announced.

Luke glanced at the DVD in his hand. *Casablanca*. 

Of course Luke had never seen the movie. He flipped it over and read the description on the back of it: “Winner of three Academy Awards including Best Picture, *Casablanca* marks 60 years as a beloved favorite with new digital transfer and so many bonuses that no matter how often you’ve seen it, the Deluxe 2-Disc DVD looks like yet another beginning of a beautiful friendship with an unforgettable classic.”

Luke wrinkled his nose. *This was the movie that Maddie thought he should get Noah?* He held it up. “Seriously?”

“Yes!” Maddie exclaimed. “It’s a classic. Trust me, Noah will love it.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s about a nightclub owner whose long lost love reenters his life with her husband. She hopes that he will help them escape to Lisbon,” Maddie excitedly explained.

“That sounds thrilling,” Luke sarcastically replied. “There’s no way in hell I’m giving this to Noah. It sounds like some old chick flick.”

“It’s not,” Maddie insisted. “There’s intrigue—some action…”

“This movie is sixty-years old,” Luke said, putting it back on the shelf. “I refuse to give him a movie that’s almost as old as my grandmother.”

Sighing, Maddie snatched it off the shelf. “Fine. Casey and I will give it to him,” she decided.


“What are you going to get him then?” Maddie challenged.

Good question. Luke was afraid to ask her for another suggestion because she was liable to pick out some other black and white monstrosity. There was no way in hell he was going to get Noah anything in black and white. He didn’t care what Maddie said. He was going to go with his gut this time.

*Think…think…think…*

Noah liked to talk movies with Maddie, who was all hell bent on the classics and claimed Noah was as well. Surely, *he* could come up with a classic that a young, heterosexual male would love. All guys liked action, adventure, special effects…

“We’re certainly not going to find it in this section,” Luke said, craning his neck to look for the right category.

“What are you looking for?”

“You’ll see.” He spotted what he was looking for and headed toward it.

“Ugh!” Maddie grunted, scurrying after him. “Remember it was my idea to get him a movie in the first place.”

Maddie rolled her eyes. “Whatever, but I do know what I’m talking about.”

“We’ll just see about that,” Luke chuckled as they stopped in the Sci-Fi section. He was about to pick up *Star Wars* when the entire original trilogy boxed set caught his eye. Better yet. Noah was going to *love* his gift. He picked up the boxed set, showing it to Maddie. “This will make any guy drool.”

“But…” Maddie began to protest and then quickly stopped herself.

“But what?”

“Nothing,” she replied, smiling brightly. “I’m sure Noah will think it’s great.”

Of course he would. Luke had no doubt.
A couple of nights later Luke sat on his bed holding the journal that Noah had given him, marveling at it as if it were a precious gem. Carpe Diem. He traced the phrase that was on the front of the leather bound book. If only he could just seize the day and confess his true feelings to Noah. There was no way, though. Not unless he wanted to lose him as a friend, which he didn’t.

Luke hadn’t seen him since his little recon mission. But not because Luke was avoiding Noah. This time he truly had been busy between shopping for the perfect birthday gift for Noah, spending time with his family (at his parents’ request), and studying for his French test.

However, this didn’t stop Luke from thinking about Noah all the time. The journal he was holding had once been in Noah’s bedroom. Oh what he wouldn’t give to be able to get inside Noah’s bedroom one day.

Hell…forget the bedroom. He’d love to get inside Noah.

Fuck.

Luke shoved the journal inside his nightstand drawer. The pages inside it were still pristine—just waiting to be written on. Luke had made a solemn vow to himself that he would only write in this special journal when he had something extraordinary to write about.

The slightest little thought about fucking Noah left Luke’s cheeks flushed and his cock aching. He wasn’t going to get the rest of his government homework finished when he was so damn horny. He knew just the trick to solve his problem.

Luke flopped back against his pillow, sliding his hand down the front of his gray sweatpants. Closing his eyes, he blew out a long breath. This was going to be so good…

He was sitting at the kitchen table wearing just sweats and a t-shirt anxiously waiting for his delivery. He was hungry and horny so he called his favorite pizza place because they never failed to satisfy him. Their delivery boys were known for their customer service.

But Luke knew that he wouldn’t be seeing one delivery boy anymore—Zac. He’d been fired. That boy was a thing of a past. There was someone new in town that was a hell of a lot hotter with incredible blue eyes that Luke wanted to lose himself in forever—among other things.

The doorbell rang which made Luke grin broadly. Snatching the twenty dollar bill that was resting on the kitchen table, he stood up, sauntered over to door and opened it. On the other side stood just what he ordered…a steaming hot pizza and the equally hot delivery boy that went with it—Noah.

“I’ve got your extra large sausage,” Noah announced.


“It will be $18.95.”

“Here you go,” he said, handing the bill to the delivery boy.

“Thanks,” Noah said, taking it and handing Luke the pizza. “Let me get you your change.”
Luke took the pizza and set it down on the table and then returned to the doorway. “You can keep the change. And you can come inside for an even bigger tip.”

“Oh yeah?” Noah asked, arching an eyebrow.


“Lead the way then.”

Luke led him inside the kitchen but he was so fucking horny that they didn’t get too far. He spun around, grabbing him by his red t-shirt. “Come here, pizza boy,” he growled, crashing his mouth against the delivery boy’s.

“Is this my tip?” Noah asked.

“I was thinking of my cock in your ass,” Luke breathed.

“That’s one hell of a tip.”

“Wait until you see my cock.”

Noah licked his lips. “Show it to me.”

Luke pulled down his sweatpants, allowing his long, hard dick to spring free. He was quite proud of it as he stood before the hottie naked from the waist down. “Don’t you think this will feel good inside you?” Luke seductively asked as he kicked his sweatpants aside.

“Oh yeah,” Noah gasped.

“I wanna see what you got,” Luke said, reaching for Noah’s jeans and expertly undid them. He had them off in no time and was rewarded with the sight of a nice, hard cock—the biggest he’s seen yet. Much, much better than Zac's. “You’re incredible,” he gasped.

“You did order the extra large sausage, didn’t you?” Noah’s blue eyes bore into him.

“I certainly did,” Luke replied, strolling over to island where there was a tube of lube and condom stashed one of the drawers.

Noah glanced at his watch. “I do have other deliveries to make.”

“Not until after I’ve made mine,” Luke said, wrapping his arm around Noah’s waist. “Don’t worry. I’ll make it worth your while. I haven’t had any complaints yet. Now turn around and rest your hands against the countertop. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“I don’t usually do this,” Noah said as he assumed the position.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make you feel incredible,” Luke assured him, ripping open the condom and rolling it onto his cock. Then he flipped open the lube, squirting a glob onto his palm. He made sure that his dick was all slicked up before he dropped the tube to the floor. “Prepare for the fuck of your life,” he murmured as he slowly eased into the delivery boy’s tight ass.

Luke wasn’t prepared for just how incredibly hot and tight Noah’s ass was or the low throaty moan he made as Luke entered him. He had so many pizza boys, but no one was like Noah.

Noah pushed back against him, begging him to fuck him harder, deeper. None of the other boys had done this. They all just stood there and took it. But Noah really enjoyed it. And it drove Luke
completely wild, prompting him to seek out Noah’s cock, wrapping his hand around it, jacking it in time with his thrusts. Luke nuzzled his face in the crook of Noah’s neck, kissing, licking and nipping. He wanted to mark Noah so that everyone knew that Noah was his.

Noah tasted just as good as the pizza he was delivering.

“You’re incredible,” Luke gasped as he continued to stroke and fuck Noah.

“Fuck…Luke...so good,” Noah moaned, throwing his head back. “I need to see you—need to kiss you—please.”

Luke wasn’t about to deny Noah’s request. Kissing Noah’s mouth while they fucked would be amazing. And seeing Noah’s face when he came—good god almighty—what was he waiting for? Luke quickly pulled out of Noah, stepping back so Noah could turn around.

And as Noah did so, he toed off his shoes and socks and stepped out of his jeans. “I’d like to see more of you too,” he said, nodding toward Luke’s t-shirt.

“Same goes for you, Noah.”

Together they stripped off their respective shirts, leaving them both naked in the middle of Luke’s grandmother’s kitchen. Noah was indeed by far the most beautiful guy he’d ever seen—a nice smooth, hairless chest, a dark trail of hair leading from his belly button to the pubic hair that surrounded Noah’s delectable cock—such a perfect body that Luke couldn’t wait to get back inside.


Luke backed Noah up against the island, lifting him until he was sitting on the counter with his legs spread wide and ready for him. “I wanna see you come,” he breathed as he slid his dick inside him.

Noah squeezed his eyes shut. “Oh yeah.”

As Luke began to thrust he kept his eyes focused on Noah, watching as he opened his eyes and focused on him. They were connected. Locked on to each other. Luke never felt this way about anyone else—not Kevin or any of the other pizza boys. This was so incredibly different—like he was flying, soaring high over the farm.

Noah grabbed his hand and held it tightly. “I’m so close,” he panted.

Luke didn’t even remember if all of the others came before him. All he cared about was just reaching his climax. But now he wanted to see Noah first. And he did.


And then he came completely undone.

Fuck. Luke came so suddenly that he hadn’t had time to grab any tissue. There was come on his belly, a bit on his t-shirt and some on his sweats. He was pretty much a mess.

Luke hadn’t expected his fantasy to get off track like that, but boy had it resulted in one hell of an intense orgasm. His body was still shaking from it.
Dammit. Why did Noah have to affect him like this?

Luke mopped up what he could with some tissue but he really needed to get a wet washcloth and clean up more thoroughly. Hauling himself up off the mattress, Luke sauntered out of his room and down the hall to the bathroom, hoping and praying the entire time that he wouldn’t encounter his grandmother in the hallway because he’d hate to have to explain his post orgasmic, blissed out state to her. Without even looking in a mirror, Luke knew that he was a rumpled mess.

Thankfully, he arrived at the bathroom without any unexpected run-ins. Luke opened the door and there stood a wet and very naked Noah.


Luke’s eyes bugged out of his head and he could have sworn his jaw had hit the bathroom floor because he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He’d just been fantasizing about Noah and his cock and here it was—right in front of him. Wow…was it ever big and it wasn’t even hard. “Oh my god,” he gasped.

Noah quickly grabbed a nearby towel, wrapping it around his waist. “Shit! I forgot to lock the door,” he stammered, turning a very dark shade of crimson.


“I…um…I’ll be done in a few minutes,” Noah said, ducking his head as he made sure that the towel was securely fastened his waist.

Oh fuck. He was still staring at Noah. Luke quickly averted his eyes. Great…now he looked like the desperate gay guy trying to get a cheap thrill by checking out the hot straight guy. And on top of it he’d just gone beating off. Great…now he looked like an even bigger pervert. Hopefully Noah wouldn’t be able to figure out that last little tidbit.

“I’m so sorry,” he quickly apologized. “I had no idea that you were in here.”

“It’s okay.”

Luke nodded. “I’ll just get out of here. I’m really, really sorry.” He turned high tailed it out of the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Once he was in the hallway, he banged his head against the wall.

_Stupid…stupid…stupid._

Maybe one day he’d be able to look Noah in the eye again.

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Noah was still a bit bewildered. Luke had blown in and out of the bathroom like a tornado, leaving him completely confused in his wake. When he’d come to the farmhouse to take his last shower here he hadn’t planned on giving Luke a free show, but he’d been in such a hurry that he must have forgotten to lock the door.

He could swear that he could still feel Luke’s eyes burning into his skin. Actually, more precisely his dick. Luke was totally checking him out. And Noah hadn’t known whether he should feel aroused or mortified.

Luke surely had seen his fair share of naked guys. Undoubtedly, they were better built than him and
probably better endowed too. Noah really had no idea how he measured up to other guys his age since he hadn’t stepped foot in a locker room since he was thirteen.

Had Luke liked what he seen?

Luke had certainly barged into the bathroom in quite a state—face flushed, clothes rumpled, and eyes glassy. Noah wondered if he’d been in his room beating off. But the mere thought of Luke engaged in such an intimate act made Noah’s cheeks burn and his cock twitch.

Shit.

He really needed to get out of there. Quickly Noah put on his sweats, t-shirt, socks, and sneakers. With any luck he’d make it out of the farmhouse without running into Luke. He just couldn’t face him at the moment.

Noah carefully opened the bathroom door, poking his head into the hallway. The coast was clear so he made a mad dash down the hall to the stairs. Luck was on his side because he made it down the steps and through the kitchen without encountering another soul which was nothing short of a miracle.

And Noah didn’t even have to deal with his mother when he returned to the cabin because she was still at work. He was able to sequester himself away in his room without going through the inquisition. Noah tossed his towel into the hamper and then stretched out on the bed. Sleep was going to be next to impossible at this point because all he could think about was Luke and what he might be thinking at this very moment.

Was Luke in his grandmother’s shower fantasizing about him?

In your dreams.

But the look in his eyes…

He was just surprised that he walked in on you naked.

Probably. But in Noah’s fantasy world that wouldn’t be the case…

_The bathroom was illuminated in a soft golden glow, lit entirely by candles due to a power outage at the farm. Noah stepped out of the shower, toweling himself off just as the door swung open, revealing Luke. Noah’s heart rate kicked up a few notches at the sight of him. He was dressed only in a pair of gray sweatpants, showing off his chest which was dusted with fine blonde hair that Noah longed to run his fingers through. And there was the trail of other hair from his navel that disappeared into the waistband of his sweats. Luke’s chocolate eyes were smoldering, lips wet and aching to be kissed. Noah couldn’t remember Luke ever looking sexier._


“I left the door open just for you,” Noah replied, draping the towel around his neck.

“I just had to see you,” Luke said as his eyes hungrily inched over Noah’s naked body. “All of those nights I’d lay in my bedroom imagining what you looked like while you were showering—it was torture.”

“Which is better?” Noah asked. “The fantasy or the reality?”
“The reality,” Luke said, grabbing Noah’s towel and pulling him closer to him. “You are so much hotter than I could ever have imaged.” He emphasized his point by placing a searing kiss on Noah’s lips, Luke’s tongue eagerly pushing its way inside his mouth and tangling with his own which made Noah quite hard.

Noah silently agreed that the reality was much better than any of the fantasies he’d come up with so far. He trailed his fingers across Luke’s chest, weaving them through the wisps of fine hair—so perfect, so masculine.

Noah was truly in heaven.

His hand brushed against Luke’s nipple which elicited a low groan from him. Noah traced the swollen bud with his fingertip as he moved his mouth from Luke’s lips to his neck.

This was nice too.


Luke felt so amazing, like endless reams of silk. Noah could kiss and touch his beautiful body forever. He wanted to explore all of it. And he just loved the sounds Luke made when he caressed him—a beautiful, full, orchestral score.

Noah wrapped his hands around Luke’s back, ghosting his fingers over the well defined muscles.

So beautiful…so beautiful.


Was he the same size as him? Bigger? Smaller? Is it all slick and red right now? What would it feel like to touch it, to make him come?

Luke moaned, grinding his body up against his.

Oh my…

Noah groaned and shuddered as endless amounts of come shot from his cock. He’d never felt anything so incredible in his life. Luke was amazing.

But sadly when Noah opened his eyes, he was reminded that it wasn’t Luke who’d gotten him off. Luke was nowhere to be seen. He was just in Noah’s dreams.
Chapter 19

Noah had planned on going home after his work was done. He tried to pass by Whitman’s stall without stopping. But it was impossible because the moment Whitman spotted him, he began to whinny. Noah thought he could just ignore him and keep going. Not a chance. Luke’s horse was pretty determined to get his way and kept up the noise.

It just killed him.

Noah promptly turned around and got a few carrots for his four legged friend. Never did he imagine that a horse would have such an effect on him. Of course, he never dreamed he’d fall so hard for his owner. Especially after their first meeting—Luke Snyder was so full of snark and attitude. Noah was certain that someone like Luke would never be friends with him.

And now they were. Actually, Luke was the best friend he’d ever had but he wasn’t about to share this fact with him. Luke was liable to think he was some sort of loser deeming him a BFF after such a short time. He’d keep this little tidbit between him and Whitman.

“You just had to get your way, didn’t you?” Noah said, feeding Whitman a carrot. “You know I’ll never say no to you.”

“Are you spoiling my horse?”


Thank god he hadn’t been saying anything incriminating. “It’s…uh…just a few carrots,” Noah sheepishly replied, glancing at Luke as he strutted toward him looking a bit like a cowboy - dressed in a blue and blacked checked flannel shirt with tight fitting jeans and cowboy boots. Wow. He looked amazing. It was hard not to get tongue-tied. “I…uh…hope you…uh…don’t mind.”

Luke grinned. “No, not at all. I was just teasing.”

Noah relaxed a bit. “Okay.”

“I just hope Whitman hasn’t been telling you any of my secrets,” Luke said, reaching up and rubbing Whitman’s head.

“You talk to him quite a bit?” Noah asked, shyly glancing at him.

“All the time,” he chuckled. “You’ll find that happening a lot around here. My dad does it quite a bit—so does the rest of my family. I guess we’re all a bit whacky.”

“I don’t think that’s whacky at all,” Noah admitted. “I’ve been talking to Whitman. I hope that’s okay.

“Of course, it is.”

“Good,” he said, smiling. Noah didn’t want to have to give up his visits with Whitman. His afternoons would be incomplete without them. “He’s a really good listener.”

“He sure is,” Luke agreed. “And he really likes you. If I don’t watch out you might become his favorite.”

“That could never happen.”
“To ensure that I do stay on his good side, I think I better give him a good grooming,” Luke said, letting himself inside Whitman’s stall. “Did you want to help me?”


“It’s not too hard,” Luke said. “I’ll take care of all of the tricky parts. But if you have something else you rather do I understand…”

Oh, no! Noah didn’t want Luke to get the impression that he didn’t want to spend time with him because that was hardly the case. If he had his way, he’d be with Luke every waking second of the day since that was how often Luke seemed to be on his mind. “No, I don’t have any other plans,” Noah quickly replied. “I’d love to help. Just show me what to do.”

Luke grinned. “Come on, in.” Noah let himself into Whitman’s stall while Luke dug into the supply box and retrieved some items. “Here.” Luke handed him an oval rubber brush. “Let me just fasten Whitman here so we can be sure that he doesn’t go anywhere on us,” he said as he clipped a long leather strap to Whitman’s halter that also was also connected to the wall. Luke did this on each side of the horse. “Usually, I don’t tie him up when I groom him, but I just want to be extra cautious since you’re helping me today.

“Why don’t you get on the other side of Whitman,” Luke suggested. “Just always remember that whenever you walk behind him that you let him know you’re back there. You don’t want him to accidentally kick you.”

“Right.” Noah nodded, feeling a bit tense. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all. Surely, he’d find a way to screw this up and then he’d have an unhappy horse and friend. Carefully, he stepped behind the horse. “I’m right here, Whitman,” he announced as he maneuvered to the other side.

“Perfect.” Luke grinned. “Now just slip your hand through the handle of the curry brush you have in your hand. We’re going to brush in the direction of his hair so we can loosen all of the dirt and dust, but we want to stay away from his legs and face.”

“Got it,” Noah said, slipping his hand through the rubber handle so that his palm was resting flat against the top of the brush.

Luke began to brush Whitman so Noah quickly followed suit. Whitman stood there perfectly content. “So the shower in the cabin is fixed. I bet you’ll be happy you don’t have to trek to my gram’s house anymore.”

Noah shrugged. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“Until I walked in on you.”

He’d never ever forget Luke walking in on him—how his eyes had roamed over his body, how he longed to feel more than Luke’s hands on him. Noah blushed. “I should have locked the door. That was my fault.”

“You’ll never forget to lock the door again,” Luke declared.

“We probably won’t really see each other that much now,” Noah quietly admitted. “I won’t have a reason to come to the house.”

Luke stopped brushing Whitman. “Oh…well. I thought we were friends.”
“We are.”

“Then you do have a reason,” Luke said, sauntering over to the box and retrieving two other brushes. “You’re always welcome to come over and hang out with me.”

“I just didn’t want to intrude,” Noah said as he finished brushing Whitman. He took the curry brush off his hand.


“Okay.” Noah handed him the curry brush and got a brush that reminded him of an old fashioned scrub brush in its place.

“I just gave you a body brush. We’re going to go over everything we just did with this brush,” Luke explained. “And we can also do his legs and belly.”

“He…uh…really seems to like this,” Noah said as he resumed brushing the horse.


Noah swallowed hard. “Yeah, I suppose so.” He couldn’t admit that the only loving touches in his life had come from his mother—that his father liked to hit him, had actually did it so hard he’d gotten a concussion. And he sure as hell couldn’t confess that he felt nothing when his lips had touched a girl’s lips.

The air in the stall seemed to grow thick, tense and a bit electric. Noah wished Luke would say something but he remained silent, intently working on Whitman. Damn. He was liable to go insane.

Finally, Noah blurted out, “My birthday is next Friday.”

“Really? How old are you going to be?”

“Eighteen,” Noah replied as he brushed Whitman’s hind leg.

Luke was also crouched down across from him brushing the other leg. “You’re older than me,” he informed him. “I won’t be eighteen until May. Done?”

“Hun?”

“Brushing?”

“Oh, yeah.” Noah handed him the brush.

Luke stood up, strolled over to the box, and returned with two more brushes. “This is a finishing brush,” he said, passing the brush to Noah. “It will give him a shiny coat. Just brush over all of the areas you just did with this one.”

“There’s a lot to this,” Noah said as he began to brush Whitman once again.

Luke laughed. “I’m only about halfway done. I still need to do his tail, face, and hoofs. You can stay and watch if you’d like.”

And Noah did just that once he was done with the finishing brush. Watching Luke complete the rest of the grooming was quite interesting. He’d talk to Whitman as he combed out his tail so it was as
pretty as a model’s long locks. Then he moved to the hoofs—cleaning out the dirt with a hoof pick. Luke explained how important it was to check Whitman’s hoofs for any signs of disease. The last thing Luke did was clean Whitman’s face off with a soft cloth. He also took the time to check the horse’s ears and teeth. Noah was quite impressed that Luke all of this seemed second nature to him.

“You’re such a good boy,” Luke said, placing a kiss on Whitman’s nose when he was all done.

At that moment Noah would have given anything to be Whitman.

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So far, Noah’s birthday hadn’t started out differently than the any other day, but he was used to that when it came to his birthday. His father—the Colonel (as Noah would rather think of him because he’d like to believe that his father was really dead)—never liked to make a fuss about his birthday. There was never a party, but one way or another his mom always made sure that he had a small cake so he could blow out the candles. Noah always got one gift—at least in front of the Colonel. Most times his mother would sneak him a couple more. Even as a little boy he knew how sorry she was that he wasn’t allowed to have parties like the other kids. But Noah knew he wasn’t like the other kids.

And he still wasn’t like them. Noah was now eighteen, gay, and shut tightly in the closet. Not even the most gorgeous, open, incredible guy could lure him out, although Luke wasn’t exactly proclaiming his undying love for him either. He wasn’t being anything more than a friend.

Noah quickly pushed the flash of disappointment he felt aside. He should be happy to have Luke in his life—period. He’s never had a friend like him. Hopefully, he’d see him today. Noah secretly wished that Luke would surprise him with a birthday present. He knew better than to get his hopes up because it usually led to disappointment.

At least this birthday he and his mom had their own place. They were in the best shape they’d been in a long time—surrounded by great people. That was the greatest present of all.

When he got home from working in the stables he discovered different sized boxes wrapped in bright red Happy Birthday wrapping paper sitting on the kitchen table. His mother probably spent more than she should have on him but he couldn’t help being excited at the prospect of opening four presents, which was something he hadn’t done since the Christmas before they left Missouri.

Noah glanced at the clock in the kitchen. His mother should be home from Al’s soon. She had worked the lunch shift instead of her typical Friday night dinner shift so she could take him out to celebrate his birthday. He had no idea where they were going to eat. Al’s was the only place he’d ever been thanks to Luke.

Noah wasn’t going to sit around thinking about Luke today. It was his birthday and he was supposed to be happy so going through another Friday night wondering what Luke was up to wasn’t going to put a smile on his face. Instead, Noah marched into his bedroom so he could pick out an outfit to wear tonight.

Since he still had so few new clothes his choices were limited. There was a shirt he hadn’t worn yet—a red and blue long sleeved plaid—so he decided on it. The tags were still on it so he cut them off with the scissors he kept in his room that were used precisely for this occasion. Noah grabbed a clean pair of jeans, fresh underwear and socks from his dresser and took the clothes into the bathroom so he could take a shower.

The days of showering at the farm were over. Luke would never walk in on him naked again. The plumber had gotten their bathroom to full working order. His mom was thrilled. Noah already missed
going to the farmhouse every day. They still did their laundry there but that was once a week and his mom usually gathered up his dirty clothes before he could take them on his own.

But it wasn’t the same. Noah enjoyed those random encounters with Luke. There was this nagging feeling in his gut that he wasn’t going to see as much of Luke now. And he hated it.

Luke had told him that they were friends and he could come by whenever he wanted. Even though Luke’s invitation was sincere, Noah still felt like the hired help and was a bit uneasy just showing up to hang out with him.

Noah had to stop this. He really was going to drive himself crazy.

Noah stripped out of his dirty, work clothes and stepped into the steaming hot shower. It was time to clear his mind and relax. Tonight, he was just going to enjoy spending his birthday with his mother. They really did have a lot to celebrate. Noah needed to stay focused on everything he had—not what he couldn’t have.

After he was showered and changed, Noah strolled into his bedroom and deposited his dirty clothes into the hamper in his room. Now he felt as if he could take on the world. He returned to the living room, turned on the TV and stretched out on the sofa to wait for his mom to get home. He didn’t feel like getting up to put a movie in so he surfed through their limited channels, finally settling on Oprah.

*Boy, has it been quite a week,* Noah thought as he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.
“Noah…hey…come on…wake up, birthday boy.”

Noah slowly opened his eyes and focused on his mom, who was kneeling next to the sofa. “Hi,” he croaked.

“Has turning eighteen worn you out, old man?” she teased, brushing her fingers through his hair.

Noah yawned. “I didn’t realize I was that tired.”

“I hope you’re still up for your big night on the town.”

“Definitely.”

Charlene smiled. “Good. Now I’m sure that you noticed that there are a few birthday presents on the kitchen table for you.”

Noah’s grin matched hers. “Were those for me?”

“You know they are!” she said, mussing up his hair. “How would you like to open them before we head out to dinner?” she suggested as she stood up. His mom had already changed out of her work attire so he must have been out for quite awhile.

“I’d love to!” he excited replied, feeling like a little kid again.

“You stay right there and I’ll bring them to you.”

“You’re spoiling me.”

“You deserve to be spoiled for one day,” Charlene called as she gathered up his gifts from the kitchen table. “You can spoil me on my birthday.”

“April is a long time to wait to spoil you.”

She placed the presents in his lap. “It will give me something to look forward to. Now, come on, open them.”

Noah began with the card, carefully tearing open the envelope and pulling out the card, which was tan with leaves and a butterfly on it and Happy Birthday, Son. He opened it and silently read the inside, “Having a son like you is one of the nicest gifts life ever gave me. I’m so proud of you, and when I think of you, it’s with all the love a parent’s heart can hold. Happy eighteenth birthday, Noah. I love you so much! Mom.”

“Thanks,” he said, swallowing the lump that had formed in his throat.

“You’re welcome, string bean,” she replied, rubbing his back. “If you don’t like any of the gifts you can return them.”

“I’m sure I’ll love all of them. Is there any particular order I should open them in?”

“Nope…just start tearing into them!”

Noah decided to go with the smallest box and work his way to the largest. The littlest was very light,
which left him completely confused as to what it could possibly be. And it didn’t help that he hadn’t asked his mother for a single thing for his birthday. Well, there was one way to find out…

He tore the red paper, revealing a nondescript box. Still no clue. Charlene Mayer was one crafty lady. Noah opened the box and inside was an envelope. “You’re really making me work for this one,” he chuckled, opening it and discovering six movie passes to the Gem Movie Theater.

“I figured that you might want to go see some new movies for a change,” his mother told him. “And this way you could take a friend or two if you’d like.”

At least she didn’t say date. That was something. “This is great,” he said, grinning. “Thank you so much! It’s been so long since I’ve been to a movie theater.”

“It’s been too long.”

“Mom…” Noah didn’t want her to feel badly about all of the things he’d missed, because he’d rather not have a few things than be trapped with the Colonel.

His mom put her arm around him. “Today’s about celebrating, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good—next present.”

The next one was a bit bigger and heavier. Noah was still clueless. He ripped the wrapping paper off and discovered a Drakkar Noir gift set which contained aftershave, cologne, and deodorant. Noah never had aftershave or cologne before—it just was a luxury that couldn’t be afforded.

“I thought you were long overdue for this,” she told him. “I hope you like the way it smells. If you don’t you can pick out something else.”

Noah opened the box, picked up the bottle of cologne and opened it. “I’m sure I’ll like it. You have good taste.” Then he sniffed the fragrance—a spicy, berry, citrusy smell. Yeah, this could be him. He liked it. “It’s a keeper,” he declared.

“I’m so glad you liked it,” she happily replied. “So far I’m two for two.”

There were two boxes left—both were the size of shirt boxes—so Noah hoped that it meant he was getting some new clothes. He was still in dire need of new clothing because his wardrobe still mainly consisted of secondhand clothing. But it was improving—slowly. Hopefully, he’d be adding to his collection.

Noah tore into the first shirt box, lifting off the lid and pushing the tissue aside to reveal a light green dress shirt with white pin stripes. “It’s nice,” he said, taking it out of the box for a better look.

“I thought you could use another color besides blue.”

“You did a good job.” He folded the shirt and put it back in the box, setting it aside. “You’re really spoiling me. I wasn’t expecting all of this,” he said, reaching for the next box.

“Just think of them as belated gifts from the years I couldn’t really get you much,” his mom replied.

As far as he was concerned, she didn’t have anything to make up for, she’s always done the best she could. Now she’d outdone herself. He was trying very hard not to think of how much his birthday celebration was probably setting them back. His mother would have a fit if she knew the thought had
even momentarily crossed his mind.

Noah opened the final box which held a pair of khaki pants. “This is a change.”

“I thought you it might be good to have something besides jeans in your wardrobe—just in case.”

*Just in case what? he wanted to ask. Just in case he went out on a date? In case he decided to use the condoms he had stashed in his nightstand? Were all of his mother’s gifts to be used to woo some girl?* he panicked.

“You don’t like them, do you?” Charlene’s disappointed voice broke through his thoughts.

“No, it’s not that,” he quickly replied.

“What is it?”

He couldn’t tell her that he fancy cologne and clothes weren’t going to find him a girlfriend.

“Nothing—they’re great.”

“Are you sure? I have all of the receipts. They’re in my purse. I’ll get them for you,” she said, standing up and heading into the kitchen. “You can return anything you don’t like. Noah, please don’t worry about hurting my feelings.”

Noah set the box to the side and followed her. “Mom, I love everything you got me. I don’t want to return a thing.”

His mom stopped searching through her purse and glanced up at him. “Are you positive?”

“Yes.” And he was. He loved the gifts she had picked out for him and wouldn’t dream of taking any of them back. Noah just wished that he could put the gifts to use on Luke—get all dressed up in his newest outfit complete with cologne and take him to the movies.

“Okay.” She smiled. “Are you ready to go to dinner?”

“Sure,” he replied, grinning right back at her. “Where are we going?”

“Where would you like to go?”

“The only restaurant I’ve ever been to is Al’s,” he confessed.

“Well, we can’t go there,” his mom said, slipping on her jacket. “Did you have anything in mind?”

“Luke showed me a pizza parlor. I haven’t had pizza in a long time.”

“Pizza it is then,” his mom decided as she snatched her purse off the table. “Why don’t you try out your new cologne?”

Noah shrugged. “Okay.” He took the bottle out of the box and dabbed a bit on his neck, hoping that it wasn’t too much since he didn’t have experience in this area. Noah set the bottle on the coffee table and then put on his coat. “I’m ready to go now.”

“I hope you don’t mind if we make a quick stop at the farmhouse,” his mom said as they headed out the door. “Emma made me a copy of her oatmeal raisin cookie recipe. I wanted to make you some tomorrow.”

“I don’t mind at all,” he replied, “especially if I’m going to get cookies tomorrow.”
They piled into the old pickup truck and drove around to the farmhouse. His mom put the truck in park and cut the engine. “You should probably come inside,” she suggested. “Sometimes Emma can get a little chatty and I’m sure she’d love to see you too.”

Noah peered out the windshield, noticing Luke’s Mustang parked in the driveway which brought a smile to his lips. “Yeah, I’ll definitely come in,” he replied, hoping that he’d get a chance to see Luke. Just spending a few minutes with him would make his birthday complete.

“Great. I promise that it won’t take long.”

“There’s no rush,” he said, getting out of the truck.

“Emma can give me directions to this pizza parlor Luke told you about,” his mother told him as they strolled toward the house.

If only they could just take Luke with them, but Noah didn’t dare suggest such a thing. He couldn’t ask his mom to pay for another person. He was too chicken to ask Luke in the first place. Surely, Luke would have better things to do than go out to dinner with Noah and his mom on a Friday night.

He followed his mother through the screened porch. “That would be great because I don’t remember where it is. I remember the name though. It was Bennidito’s Pizzeria.”

“Got it,” she replied, opening the door to the farmhouse.

Noah stepped inside behind her and was met with a very loud, “Surprise!” He froze in the doorway, stunned to see Emma’s kitchen filled with multi-colored streamers, a large banner that read “Happy 18th Birthday, Noah!” and most importantly people—Luke, Maddie, Casey, Holden, Lily holding baby Ethan, Faith, Natalie, Emma. He couldn’t believe that they were all there for him.


“I hope you’re not disappointed that we won’t be going out to dinner,” Charlene said to him.

Noah shook his head. “No, not at all,” he replied, following Luke into the room. “I definitely wasn’t expecting this.”

Emma hugged him warmly. “That’s why it’s called a surprise party. Happy birthday, dear. Now sit down. We’ve prepared a big birthday feast for you!”

Sure enough, the kitchen table was filled with food—a pot roast, mashed potatoes, gravy, green bean casserole, mixed vegetables, tossed salad, and biscuits. Everything smelled absolutely delicious. “It certainly is a feast,” Noah said, sauntering toward the table. “I think it will be better than pizza at Benndito’s.”

“You’ve obviously never had pizza from Benndito’s,” Luke replied.

“Oh, Luke, you’re impossible,” Emma said, playfully swatting her grandson.

“It is the bomb, Mrs. Snyder,” Casey said from across the room, “but so is your cooking.”

“Well put, Casey,” Maddie replied, shaking her head as they sat down at the table.

Before Noah could sit down his path was blocked by Faith and Natalie. “Happy birthday, Noah!” Luke’s sisters sang. Natalie wrapped her little arms around Noah’s leg while Faith smiled up at him.
with big dreamy brown eyes.

“Thank you,” Noah replied a bit bewildered that they were so taken with him after their only meeting. He had no idea he made such an impression on them.

“You need to let Noah go so he can eat dinner,” Luke said, carefully extracting Natalie from Noah’s leg.

“I want to sit next to him,” she declared.

“You need to sit next to me,” Lily spoke up. “I want to make sure that you eat all of your dinner or else there won’t be any dessert for you.”


“I promise that we’ll visit a little later,” Noah said to her.
She immediately brightened. “Cool beans!”

“Me too?” Faith asked, still right by his side not budging.

“Yes, you too,” Noah promised.

“Go sit by Mom and Dad.” Luke shooed his sisters away and then turned to Noah. “I’m really sorry about that. I know the last thing you want to do on your birthday is entertain my sisters.” He lowered his voice. “I can probably get my parents to take them home after dinner.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Noah reassured him. “They’re really sweet.”

“You’re the sweet one,” Luke told him. “We should probably sit down. Gram hates it when dinner gets cold.”

Noah was thrilled when Luke selected the seat next to him. He just hoped that the entire table wouldn’t be able to tell. Noah’s mother sat on the other side of him. Emma rounded out the rest of the table. Everything was perfect. He was surrounded by the people he cared most about in the world.

“Thank you so much for coming, Maddie and Casey,” Noah said, gazing across the couple who was sitting across the table from him holding hands. “I’m so happy that you could make it tonight.”

“When Luke told me that it was your birthday there was no way that we’d miss it,” Maddie informed him.

“And I can never say no to cake and ice cream,” Casey added.

Maddie rolled her eyes. “Don’t listen to him. He would have come even if there wasn’t cake and ice cream.”

Noah barely heard them because he was still trying to wrap his head around the fact that Luke had helped plan this party. “You were in on this?” Noah asked, turning to Luke.

He shrugged, blushing a little. “All I did was invite Maddie and Casey. Your mom and my grandma did all of the heavy lifting.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, my angel,” Emma said from the other end of the table. “Luke would have done a lot more if we would have let him.”
Noah never had a friend like this. They’d only known each other for a short time and Luke was helping throw him a surprise birthday party. He was truly amazing. “Thanks,” he murmured.

“It was nothing,” Luke said, reaching for the biscuits.

“Luke Snyder, you better not think of eating anything before we say grace,” Emma warned her grandson.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Luke flashed a dimpled smile that made Noah dizzy.

Now he knew why Emma called Luke her angel. He was truly a gift from heaven.

“Okay everyone,” Emma addressed the table. “I’d like to say a few words before we eat. Dear lord, thank you for the delicious food on our table and for all wonderful people who have gathered to help Noah celebrate his birthday. Please let him have an amazing year and bless everyone here. Amen.”

“Let’s dig in,” Holden said, reaching for the pot roast.

Dinner was incredible, much better than a pizza could have been—especially with Luke sitting next to him. Noah was surprised that he didn’t spill gravy on himself or drop his fork on the floor. The conversation flowed easily around the table—Lily and Holden chimed in between making sure that the girls were eating everything on their plates while Emma fused over Ethan, Casey cracked the occasional joke, and his mother engaged Maddie in a conversation about Grace Kelly and Rear Window. He had always dreamed of big dinners like this—everyone talking at once, just enjoying themselves without any tension in the room. This was so different from all of his other birthdays. Even the ones without the Colonel.

“So you weren’t expecting a party?” Luke casually asked.

Noah couldn’t confess that he never had a birthday party in his life—not even to Luke, who probably had one every year. And he prayed that Holden wouldn’t mention the story he’d told him over the malts at Knapp’s. He’d just die on the spot if he was caught in that lie today out of all days.

“No, you guys are a sneaky bunch,” Noah quietly replied as to not bring attention to their conversation.

“And pushy and meddlesome—so just be forewarned.”

“Done.” He grinned.

Emma stood up and began to clear some of the plates off the table. “You kids can wait in parlor while we clean up in here,” she announced.

“Can I help with dishes, Mrs. Snyder?” Noah asked, placing his napkin on the table. He didn’t feel right doing nothing while everyone cleaned up.

“Not today, dear,” she informed him. “I’ll take you up on your offer next time.”

“Come on,” Luke said, placing his hand on Noah’s arm. “It’s not too often that I get out of dish duty.”

“Will Noah open presents when you’re done with dishes?” Faith asked.

Presents? Surely he wasn’t going to be getting presents from everyone here. Just having dinner and hanging out with everyone was more than enough for him.
“Yes, we’ll do presents once we have this kitchen back in order,” Emma replied as she deposited some dishes in the sink.

“I was thinking that we might be able to do a hayride if anyone was interested,” Holden suggested. “I don’t know how the birthday boy feels about it —”

Noah had never been on a hayride before! It sounded amazing, especially the possibility of being in the back of hay-filled wagon with Luke.

“That would be great—if it’s not too much trouble,” Noah replied. Then he glanced at Luke and the others. “And if everyone else is interested—”

“Heck yeah!” Casey exclaimed. “Hay fight!”

“We want to go too!” Natalie said, bouncing in her chair.

“You and Faith can go too,” Lily replied. “The hay fighting will have to low-key.”

“Sure thing, Mrs. Snyder,” Casey assured her.

“Don’t worry,” Maddie spoke up. “I can keep everyone under control.”

“I would say that the hayride is a definite yes,” Luke said. “Did you need help getting the wagon ready?”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind,” Holden said, getting up from his chair. “Casey, do you think you can also lend a hand?”

“No problem.” Casey sprung up from his seat.

While Holden, Luke, and Casey went outside to get the hayride setup, Noah, Maddie, and the girls ventured into the parlor to wait for the all clear from the kitchen. Noah sat on the sofa flanked by Faith and Natalie, which garnered a knowing smile from Maddie.

“Have you ever been on a hayride, Noah?” Faith asked.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Wow!” Natalie exclaimed, wide-eyed. “It’s gonna be so much fun! They’re the best!”

“I bet.” Noah grinned.

“I’ve never been on a hayride either,” Maddie confessed. “This is going to be like something right out of a Capra movie.”


“He was a famous movie director,” Noah replied. “He made a lot of movies way before you were born.” He glanced over at Maddie, shaking his head. “You know, I was thinking the same thing.”

“That’s because I can read your mind,” she replied with a gleam in her eye.

Noah certainly hoped that wasn’t the case because Maddie would know how hopelessly he had fallen for Luke—utterly captivated by his amazing looks and sweetness. She’d also know that he wished that he was going on a hayride for two.
Noah could feel his cheeks growing warm. “Good luck finding anything in there besides useless movie facts,” he said, hoping to mask what he was really thinking.

“Hey, now, there’s nothing useless about movie facts,” she laughed.

“We’ve got everything just about cleaned up in the kitchen,” Noah’s mom announced, peaking her head into the room. “As soon as the men are finished outside we can do gifts.” She ducked back into the kitchen most likely to help finish up in there.

“Will you open mine first?” Faith asked shyly.

“Sure,” Noah replied a bit surprised that she had gotten him a present on her own.

“Then me,” Natalie insisted. “Then me!”

Noah chuckled. “You’ll be second.”

Natalie rested her head against Noah’s arm. “Thank you, Noah.”


“Are you ladies harassing Noah?”

“No!” Natalie sang.

Luke raised an eyebrow. “So he enjoys having two little girls stuck to him like glue?”

“I’m not a little girl, Luke,” Faith huffed, scowling up at her big brother.

“We’re not glue,” Natalie added, folding her arms defiantly across her chest.

Luke scooped her up off the sofa. “You, my lady bug, are the stickiest, gooiest glue there is—you are super glue,” he said, tickling her.

Natalie giggled. “You’re silly!”

Noah gazed up at them, trying very hard to contain the goofy grin that threatened to overtake his face. Luke was silly, which was one of the many things he found so damn attractive about him.

“Your sister has you pegged,” Maddie quipped.

“You’d know all about goofballs since you’re dating the biggest one of all,” Luke retorted.

“Hey,” Casey said, sauntering into the room, “I’d prefer the term eccentric because it makes me sound more mysterious.”

“Sometimes it’s a mystery to me why Maddie puts up with you,” Luke replied good-naturedly.

“Why it’s my charm and good looks,” Casey declared.

Charlene appeared in the archway. “Okay, we’re ready in the kitchen. Emma thought that you could open your presents in there and then we could have some cake and ice cream before you guys head out for the hayride.”

Noah followed everyone into the kitchen, stopping short when he saw the gifts on the kitchen table. There were so many. He definitely wasn’t expecting all of them.
“Come on, Noah,” Faith said, taking his hand and leading him toward the table. “Remember you said you’d open mine first.”

“Yes, I did.” Noah was in somewhat of a daze as he sat down at the table, gazing helplessly up at his mom. He felt like a fish flapping weakly on the dock (he’d seen plenty of those when the Colonel had taken him fishing).

Faith put a small box wrapped in blue paper with balloons on it in front of him. “Here you go!” she declared. “Don’t forget to open the card first.”

Noah followed her instructions, discovering a handmade card with a big 18 on the front of it surrounded by smiley faces. “Did you make this?” he asked.

“Yes, I did,” Faith proudly replied.

Noah decided that he wouldn’t read the cards aloud because he wasn’t sure he’d be able to trust his emotions. He opened it and inside it said:

_Happy 18th Birthday, Noah! I hope you have a very happy day! Luv, Faith._

“It’s very nice,” he said, smiling.

Noah set the card aside and then ripped the wrapping paper from the box. Carefully, he removed the lid to reveal a small picture frame made out of wooden Popsicle sticks and glitter. It was one of the sweetest things he’d ever seen.

“Wow, Faith!” Noah said, lifting it up so everyone could see. “I’m going to have to find the perfect picture to put in here.”

“I’m so happy you like it, Noah. I made it especially for you.” Faith was positively beaming.

“Me next! Me next!” Natalie insisted, plopping an Elmo gift bag in front of him. “I picked out the bag. It’s one of my favorites—I just love Elmo.”

“Elmo is pretty cool,” Noah agreed. He found the card that Natalie had made for him. It had a big yellow sun on the front of it along with what looked like possibly flowers. Inside it said in five year old scrawl:

_Happy B day! 18! Natalie along with a big red heart._

“This is a very pretty card,” he told her.

“I drawed it myself,” she informed him.

Grinning, Noah dug through the tissue and pulled out a rolled piece of paper that was tied with a piece of red ribbon. He untied it and unrolled it to reveal a page from a coloring book—Shaggy, Scooby, and Velma—colored and signed by Natalie Snyder.

“I colored it just for you, Noah,” Natalie declared.

“I see that. You did such a nice job,” he told her. “I’m going to hang this up in my room so I can see it every day.”

“Really?”

“Really.”
“Cool.” She grinned.

Noah rolled it back up and put it back in the bag so it wouldn’t get wrinkled. So far his gifts were so thoughtful. He was truly touched that Luke’s sisters each took the time to make gifts for him.

“Here’s another one,” Charlene said, placing a small, rectangular box in front of him.

Noah opened the card first which had a cake with an 18 on it. Inside it read:

Today it is your birthday and it's hoped that it will bring, all that you would wish for and the best of everything. Have A Great Day! Lily, Holden, and Ethan

He tore through the wrapping paper and discovered a Motorola cell phone. This was something he never owned—it was a luxury well beyond his means. Noah wasn’t sure how he was going to pay for it now even getting the phone as a gift.

“It’s a pay as you go phone,” Holden informed him as if reading his mind. “Lily and I will be putting a certain dollar amount on it a month for you for a year.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Snyder, that’s way too generous of you,” Noah quickly replied. “I can’t accept such a large gift from you.”

“Well, part of it is me being a bit selfish,” Holden admitted. “I would like a way to be able to easily get a hold of you and I figured this was the best solution.”

“We hope you don’t mind but we opened it and programmed in some phone numbers,” Lily added. “Luke helped us. He’s our phone expert.”

Noah turned to him. “You’ll have to give me lessons.”

“No problem.”

“Thank you very much,” Noah said to them. “I really appreciate it.”

“It was our pleasure,” Lily replied, smiling.

The next present Noah had to open was much larger. Again, Noah opened the card first which had a beautiful fall scene on the front of it. In gold script it read:

Make a wish and follow where it leads you… Noah opened the card and continued reading, May all of your birthday dreams come true. Happy 18th Birthday, Noah! Emma.

He really hoped that he wasn’t blushing because surely Emma hadn’t known that his wishes entailed kissing her grandson (among other things). “This is from Mrs. Snyder,” he managed to squeak out as he slid the card back inside the envelope, setting it aside.

Noah removed all of the wrapping paper on the gift only to find a non-descript box underneath. He opened the box, pushed aside the tissue paper and exposed a dark brown winter jacket.

“I hope you like it. Your mother helped me pick it out,” Emma spoke up. “It’s going to be getting colder soon and I wanted to be sure that you had something to keep you warm. The stables can get awfully chilly.”

“I love it,” Noah said, picking it up to get a better look at it. “You did a great job. Thank you so much, Mrs. Snyder.”
“You’re quite welcome, dear,” she replied. “I want to make sure that you stay warm and healthy this winter.”

“Thanks to you I will.”

There were only two boxes left, which meant they had to be presents from Luke and Maddie and Casey, but he wasn’t sure who gave him what so he decided to just work his way to the smallest. The next gift was considerably smaller than Emma’s, but it was heavy. Noah opened the card which just had a picture of a horse on the front. He didn’t even have to open it to figure out who it was from —Luke. His heart was racing as he opened the card, nearly exploding when he saw that his birthday wish from Luke was entirely handwritten.

Noah,

_May your eighteenth birthday be the beginning of a special year for you. I hope it’s filled with lots of joy and love. I’m so happy that we’ve become friends._ Luke

Noah could think of a way that Luke could make sure that it was filled with joy and love. Shit. His cheeks were beginning to feel warm. “Ummm…this one is from Luke,” Noah managed to spit out. Ducking his head so that no one would notice that he was blushing, Noah quickly busied himself with unwrapping Luke’s gift. He was excited to see what Luke had picked out for him. They had only known each other for a few weeks so Luke didn’t know too much about him—just little tidbits that he’d chosen to share.

Underneath the blue Happy Birthday paper was the original Star Wars trilogy DVD box set. More movies for his collection! Noah was always happy to get new DVDs. “Thank you, Luke,” Noah said, grinning.

“I figured that everyone likes Star Wars. It’s a classic,” Luke proudly declared. Noah definitely got a kick out of Luke considering Star Wars a classic. Well, it probably was in some respect but not the way that Casablanca or Mr. Smith Goes to Washington was, however he wasn’t going to contradict Luke since he seemed so proud of himself.

“I just love Star Wars,” Charlene excitedly replied. “I had such a crush on Harrison Ford.”

“Me too!” Lily agreed. “I had a bad case of puppy love for Han Solo. When Holden here showed up at our stable he kind of reminded me of modern day Han Solo.”

“Way too much information, Mom,” Luke muttered, shaking his head.


“Do I remind you of any of your old movie stars?” Casey asked, giving Maddie a playful nudge.

“Darling, you definitely don’t fit into the classic movie star mold,” she replied.

“That’s because I’m ultra cool,” he said, winking at her.

Maddie slowly nodded. “Yeah, that’s it.”

Noah watched in amazement. He’d never seen a couple that was so playful with each other. If his
mother had ever teased his father like that, she would have gotten slapped.

“Our gift is next,” Casey announced. “You saved the best for last.”

“We’ll see about that,” Luke countered.

Noah was really intrigued especially since the box was shaped like a DVD. If it came from Maddie, it was bound to be a true classic with starring Stewart, Davis, Grant, Gable, or possibly Hepburn. Even though they’d only had a few conversations about movies, their tastes were spot on.

He opened the card which looked like it would be the only humorous one he received. On the front of it was a picture of a Dachshund with a sock in its mouth and underneath it said:

*Happy Birthday! Noah opened it and silently read: Get out and celebrate! Don’t stay home and play with your wiener all day! Maddie and Casey*

Again, he thanked his lucky stars that he’d chosen not to read his cards aloud.

“Isn’t that the best card?” Casey chuckled. “I picked it out myself!”

“I kinda figured that out,” Noah smirked.

Luke peeked over Noah’s shoulder so he could see what all of the fuss was about. “Only you, Casey,” he snorted.

“You’d know all about that, Snyder!”

“Casey, behave yourself.” Maddie nudged him. “Why don’t you open the present, Noah?” she cheerfully suggested.

“Good idea,” Noah readily agreed. Then he tore into the gift, anxious to see what was concealed underneath the wrapping paper. When the faces of Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart were revealed Noah couldn’t contain himself. “Oh my god! It’s *Casablanca!*” he exclaimed as he ripped away the rest of the paper. “And it’s the two disc special edition. You guys are the best! This is like one of my all time favorite movies!”

“You’re welcome,” Maddie giggled.

Noah quickly scanned the back of the box. “This is so awesome! It’s been digitally remastered and there are two documentaries.”

“It sounds like you will be in film geek heaven,” Charlene said.

“Thank you so much! I love this. I can’t wait to watch it!”

“Well, I did put a lot of thought into it and decided that the old black and white movie was the way to go,” Casey replied.

“I think we better do the cake and ice cream now so you can go on the hayride before it gets too late for the little ones,” Emma announced.

“I’m not little,” Faith grumbled.

“I wish I had a camera,” Charlene sighed.

Maddie hit slapped her hand against her forehead. “I’m such a doofus. I have a camera in my purse!
I’ll go get it.” She quickly dashed into the other room.

Noah cleared his throat. “I just want to thank everyone again for the nice, thoughtful gifts. This is definitely the best birthday I’ve ever had,” he managed to say without getting all choked up.

As soon as Maddie returned with her camera, Emma lit the candles on the birthday cake (all eighteen of them) and everyone began to sing. Noah closed his eyes and made a wish—courage to someday come out to his mother and for Luke to return the feelings he had for him (okay it was two things but Noah figured he had a few birthday wishes to spare)—and then blew out all of the candles.

Maybe they would come true.
Maddie had told him to buy Noah _Casablanca_ but, no, Luke hadn’t listened to her because if he had his gift would have been Noah’s favorite. He would have gotten the big hug Noah had given Maddie after they finished up with the cake and ice cream.

But no. Luke just had to get him the _Star Wars_ trilogy. Noah seemed to like his gift but he didn’t love it. And Luke had wanted him to love it, just like he wanted Noah to love him.

However, Luke wasn’t going to let it ruin his night. Noah was geeked about the hayride and this was something he could share with him. Maddie might know all about old movies but the farm was his stomping ground. He was going to make sure that Noah enjoyed the rest of his birthday.

And Luke could enjoy it too. The hayride offered him the opportunity to get closer to Noah. Hay fights could lead to wrestling which could lead to groping which could lead to…

*Stop it right there,* he told himself. *That would make you no better than Jade trying to make a grab for Noah’s cock. He’s straight. Deal with it.*

“Okay, everyone, pile in the back,” Holden announced. “Natalie, why don’t you ride up front with me.”

“I wanna sit with Noah,” Natalie insisted.

“Sweetie, I think you should leave the back to the big kids,” Holden told her.

“It’s okay, Mr. Snyder,” Noah spoke up. “I don’t mind keeping an eye on Natalie, if it’s all right with you.”

“Are you sure, Noah? This is your birthday.”

“Yes, I’m positive.”

Why did Noah have to do that? Just when Luke was trying so hard to convince himself that he must not fall in love with the straight boy, Noah does something that makes it almost impossible—he’s incredibly sweet to Natalie.

“Hop in, everyone!” Holden announced.

Holden opened the back of the wagon and helped Faith get up inside. Luke was right behind her, settling in next to her and Noah followed. Luke was happy to see that he chose to sit next to him. Holden lifted Natalie over the side of the wagon. She immediately plopped into Noah’s lap.

“Natalie, you don’t have to sit on his lap,” Luke informed her.

“Do so,” she insisted. “Noah said I could sit with him.”

“With him, not on him,” Luke tried to reason with her, which he knew was next to impossible because his little sister was just as stubborn as he was.

“She’s fine where she is, Luke,” Noah said, glancing at Luke and giving him a little smile.

“You are a saint.”
“If you change your mind, Noah, just let me know,” Holden told him, “and I’ll take her up by me. She can help me drive.”

Maddie and Casey piled into the back of the wagon, situating themselves across from the boys. Grinning, Maddie pulled out her camera. “Okay, if you thought I was done taking pictures—think again.”

“Cheese!” Natalie was already posing. She was the ham of the Snyder family.

Luke knew better than to bitch so he just smiled instead and put his arm around Faith.

“Perfect!” Maddie said as she snapped the picture. “Now I’d like to get a picture of just Luke and Noah. Natalie, do you think you can scoot to the side for a couple of minutes?”

“I get Noah’s lap back when you’re done.”

“You sure can,” Noah assured her.

“Don’t be a brat,” Luke warned his sister as she scampered off Noah’s lap. He couldn’t believe that the five year old was acting as if Noah was her boyfriend.

Jealous?

Unfortunately…yes…a little.


Luke leaned a little closer to Noah, catching a whiff of his cologne – something he’s never noticed before. Damn…did he ever smell good—spicy with a hint of citrus and lavender. Mmmm.

“Great!” Then there was a bright flash. “Luke, take a picture of me and Casey now!” She thrust the camera into his hand. Luke did just that as Natalie commandeered Noah’s lap and his father got the horses ready to roll.

Casey draped his arm around Maddie. The two of them looked so damn adorable. Luke envied how easy it was for them as he snapped the picture. They loved each other—it was so obvious. Maddie and Casey were fortunate enough that they didn’t have to worry about the ramifications of showing their love for each other.

“Noah, I’ll be sure to get you copies of all of the pictures once I have prints made,” Maddie told him.

“Thanks. I’d really appreciate it.”

The tractor lurched forward—they were moving. It only took a couple of minutes before Maddie and Casey got a bit more comfortable. Maddie rested her against Casey’s shoulder. Casey stroked her hair as she rested her hand in his lap.

Luke had to avert his eyes, feeling as if he were intruding on an intimate moment (well, as intimate as you could get in a wagon with four other people). Tilting his head back, he stared up into the sky, which was so black and filled with millions of stars. It was such a perfect night. And he was sharing it with Noah—even if they weren’t exactly alone.

Noah had been quietly chatting with Natalie. Bless his heart. Luke was certain that Noah hadn’t bargained for entertaining a five year old for the entire hayride but Noah was certainly being a good sport about it. He was beginning to wonder if Noah had a mean bone in his body.
Beside him Faith giggled softly, “I think they went to kiss.”

Luke looked and, sure enough, Casey and Maddie had snuck to the back of the wagon where there were some bales of hay stacked. They had ducked behind them, using them to their advantage, partially blocking them as they kissed.

“Shhh,” he hushed his sister, giving her a playful nudge. There was no need to interrupt the happy couple.

Beside him Luke noticed that it had suddenly gotten quiet. Glancing at Noah, he saw that his chatty baby sister had fallen asleep in his friend’s lap. Luke felt like he was going to get a mouth full of cavities from the sweetness of the sight. He didn’t doubt that Noah would make an awesome father one day.

“I bet you thought she’d never shut up,” Luke whispered.

“She’s adorable,” Noah replied with a grin.

“I think you’re pretty awesome for putting up with her tonight.”

Noah shrugged. “It wasn’t any great sacrifice.”

“Well, your babysitting duties are officially over,” Luke said, reaching for his sister. “I want you to enjoy the rest of the night.” Ever so carefully he lifted Natalie from Noah’s lap, placing her in the hay next to Faith. “Can you please keep an eye on her so Noah and I can hang out?”

“Are you going to go kiss too?” Faith asked.

Oh good lord. He hoped Noah hadn’t heard that question! Why did Faith seem hell bent on outing his feelings for Noah? He was floored that she seemed to know how he felt about Noah. Luke didn’t think his feelings were obvious.


“Fine,” Faith sighed.

Luke turned back to Noah who had stretched out in the hay and was staring up at the stars—so long and lean and incredibly handsome. Okay…he could do this. There was nothing wrong with just hanging out. That’s what friends did, right?

“Want company?” he asked.

Noah’s face brightened. “Yeah, sure.”

Taking a deep breath, Luke laid next to Noah but he was sure to keep a respectable distance between them even though Luke wanted nothing more than to snuggle up next to him and rest his head against Noah’s chest. “It’s quite a night,” Luke said as his heart hammered in his chest.

“Sure is,” Noah agreed. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many stars.”

Luke had to admit that the stars did seem brighter tonight. He suspected that it was because Noah was next to him. Anything would look better with Noah around he decided. “Yeah,” he replied.

*Great one, Snyder. You’re supposed to be the writer.*

“Just think—somewhere out there in a galaxy far, far, away there is an epic battle against the evil
empire,” Noah said, turning his head toward him and smiling, his tongue darting out to lick his lips.

Noah’s lips were just mere inches from his.

It took every ounce of self control not to just lean forward and kiss Noah. Luke wanted nothing more than to capture Noah’s tongue in his mouth and take it deep inside it. Instead he replied, “Actually, it was a long time ago.”

“Thank you, Luke, for helping make this the best birthday ever,” Noah whispered, staring deeply into his eyes. “I’ll never forget it.”

Luke’s mouth had dried up like the Sahara. “You're welcome,” he finally managed.

Then the wagon came to an abrupt halt. “We’re back!” Holden announced.

Everything happened at once—Noah quickly sat up, Maddie and Casey hastily came up for air, and Natalie woke up. The back of the hay wagon had suddenly become chaos.

But nothing could compare to the chaos of Luke’s heart.
Chapter 22

Noah was still on cloud nine the day after his birthday. It was truly the best birthday ever. Lying in the hay with Luke looking up at the stars seemed like something right out of a movie. He had almost forgotten that they weren’t the only two in the back of the wagon. But it was still perfect as far as he was concerned because he was surrounded by incredible people that he couldn’t imagine his life without even though he’s only known them for a few short weeks.

The card that Luke had given him was still sitting on his nightstand. Noah had been guilty of rereading it several times. He was truly touched that Luke had opted to write his own card instead of just signing his name to something he found in the store. But he was also trying very hard not to read too much into it.

After all, Luke was a writer so it only made sense that he’d write his own birthday greeting. However, that didn’t stop Noah from picking up the card and reading it again.

Noah,

*May your eighteenth birthday be the beginning of a special year for you. I hope it’s filled with lots of joy and love. I’m so happy that we’ve become friends. Luke*

Noah longed to be sharing his love with Luke.

*Unless you come out you don’t have a chance,* an inner voice reminded him.

Noah was quickly reminded of the gifts his mother had gotten him. She clearly expected a straight son and he wasn’t going to disappoint her, especially now after she’s given him so much. Noah could control his feelings for Luke. He had to—it was his only option.

Noah also had to figure out how to use the cell phone Luke’s parents had given him. It came with directions but having Luke explain the finer points of it would be much more fun. Luke had also said that he should stop by so they could hang out. Now he had the perfect reason—even though Luke had told him he didn’t need an excuse to come over.

Snatching the cell phone from the box, Noah made a quick stop in the bathroom to check his appearance and splash on a tiny bit of cologne. Just because he couldn’t do anything about his feelings for Luke didn’t mean that he couldn’t smell nice for his friend. Satisfied with his appearance, Noah sauntered into the living room to get his coat off the coat rack next to the door and put it on (it was still a little too warm to wear the new coat Emma had bought him).

As Noah hiked toward the farmhouse he hoped that Luke would be home. There was a good chance that he might be out with his friends—or someone else. His fears were quickly alleviated when he spotted Luke’s Mustang in the driveway. But that didn’t stop his heart from hammering in his chest as he approached the farmhouse.

Luke was his friend. He shouldn’t be so nervous about seeing his friend.

Tell that to the butterflies in his stomach.

Noah was hopeless. He’d probably always get worked up whenever he saw Luke. How could he
not? Noah wasn’t blind. Luke was so damn beautiful with a heart that matched his appearance.

Taking a deep breath, Noah entered the screen porch and knocked on the door. Even though he’d been told that he needn’t knock, Noah felt since he no longer showered at the farmhouse and wasn’t expected that he should just to be polite.

The door opened, revealing Luke in a red and black striped polo. “Hey, Noah,” he said, a smile creeping to his lips.

“Hey…uh…are you busy?”

“No, come in,” he said, stepping aside so that Noah could enter. “What’s up?”

Noah pulled the cell phone out of his pocket. “I was hoping that you could help me with this if you have time.”

“Sure.” The smile seemed to fade a bit.

“I…uh…never had a cell phone before,” he confessed. “I know that makes me seem pretty lame.”

Luke shook his head. “No it doesn’t,” he reassured him. “And there are plenty of people in my school that don’t have them. Why don’t we go into the parlor that way there’s less of a chance of us being disturbed. My grandma is at a church bazaar but she should be home in an hour or so. There’s no telling when Jack, Aaron or another one of my relatives might make an appearance.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Noah agreed. He especially liked the part about not being interrupted.

“I thought that you might be spending the day watching *Casablanca*,” Luke said as they headed into the parlor.

“Actually, I haven’t had time,” he confessed. “Your dad had a few things around the stable he wanted me to take care of this morning. I ended up taking a nap after I grabbed a bite to eat. I am looking forward to watching it though when I get the time. It’s a really good movie. You should see it sometime.”

“I had no idea that you’d like something like that.”

“I love old movies,” Noah gushed. “They’re the best. There were so many great actors and actresses back in the ‘30s and ‘40s. I never get tired of watching the classics. I miss not being able to watch TCM.”

“What’s TCM?”

Noah couldn’t believe that Luke didn’t know what TCM stood for. It was sacrilegious. “Turner Classic Movies. It’s a cable station that shows the best movies – without commercials too. I’d watch it whenever I got the chance.”

“You sound a lot like Maddie,” Luke chuckled. “She thinks I’m hopeless when it comes to movies too.”

“I don’t think anyone is ever hopeless. I’d be willing to share my favorites with you if you were interested,” Noah suggested, praying that Luke wouldn’t laugh in his face.

“That *Casablanca* movie which is older than my grandma is that good?” Luke asked, raising an eyebrow.
“I think so.”

“I might have to take you up on that offer.”

“Anytime you want,” Noah replied. God he hoped he didn’t sound too eager.

“We should probably sit on the sofa,” Luke suggested. “It will be easier for me to explain all of the features of the phone.”

“You mean there’s more than just calling?” Noah asked as he sat down on the couch.

“Now it’s my turn to be an expert,” Luke smugly replied as he joined him, sitting thigh to thigh. “Yes, you can also send text messages. It’s pretty cool. But first, I’ll show you how to access your phone book. Let me see the phone.”

Noah handed him the phone, his fingers brushing against Luke’s. The electric change was there—all 100,000 watts of it. Could Luke feel this spark? Or was it all in his mind?

Luke flashed him a dimpled smile. “I promise this will be painless.”

“Okay,” he croaked.

Luke carefully explained how to access the phone book. Noah was surprised to see all of the different names and numbers in there—Holden’s cell, Lily’s cell, Emma, the Snyder’s home number, Maddie, Casey, Al’s, and Hamilton’s Feed Store. But the phone number he fixated on was Luke’s.

“You can either dial from your phone book or use speed dial,” Luke was saying. “Each of these names also has a number assigned to them. So if you want to call the first person on your speed dial list you hit 1 and send.”

“Who would that be?” Noah asked.

“Ahh…me,” Luke said, biting his lip. “I figured since we’re friends and all you’d probably call me the most.”

Noah liked the idea of Luke being his number one, being the one person he called more than anyone else. And it thrilled him that Luke felt this way. “Good idea.”

“If your mom had a phone, I might have put her first but since she doesn’t…”

“I still might call you the most—because we’re friends and all.”

“Yeah.” Luke nodded. “I also like to text a lot so you need to learn how to do that too because I expect you to reply to me.”


how r u?
Noah typed in: **good** and hit send.

Luke’s phone beeped and he retrieved the message. “Very good. You’ll be a pro before you know it.” And then Luke showed him the rest of the features on his phone—how to add a contact, change his ringtone, and check voicemail.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. If you have any questions, you can either call or text me.”

Noah typed into his phone very slowly:

**do u have plans 2 nite?**

He waited for what seemed like an eternity for Luke to reply.


With that Noah’s heart felt as if it were smashed into a million pieces. Silently, he cursed himself for doing such thing. The text to Luke was such a stupid idea. Luke must think he’s the lamest person on the planet. No wonder he said that he already had plans.

“Oh,” Noah replied, failing miserably to hide his disappointment.

“I’m going over to my Grandma Lucinda’s house,” Luke explained. “She was giving me a hard time about not seeing her so she insisted on an audience with her grandson this evening. You just don’t say no to Lucinda Walsh.”

“Is this the grandmother that owns half the town?”

“Jade was exaggerating. But she does own WorldWide Industries which is the biggest business in Oakdale,” Luke told him. “She’s a pretty shrewd business woman but has a soft spot for her family, especially me. We’ve always been close.”

Luke was fortunate to have two loving grandmothers. Noah never knew any of his grandparents growing up. “You’re very lucky.”

“You’ll have to meet her. She’s really something.”

“I’d like that.”

“And maybe….uh….we can do something some other night?” Luke said, gazing at him hopefully.

Suddenly all seemed right in the world again. With one look from Luke Noah’s mood could instantly brighten. “Definitely.”

“Good.”

“Good.” Luke nodded. “And I have a way to get a hold of you now.”

“Same here,” Noah said, clutching his cell phone tightly. “I should…umm…probably get going.”

Even though it was the last thing he wanted to do, he forced himself to get up.
Luke stood. “Okay,” he said as they strolled out of the room. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Have fun tonight.”

Noah glanced down at the cell phone in his hand as he trekked back to the cabin. Hopefully he’d be using it quite a bit to talk to Luke. After all, Luke had programmed him as his number one.

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Two days had passed since Noah’s birthday celebration and Luke was still basking in the afterglow of it. Unfortunately, nothing terribly earth shattering had happened between them but Noah had thanked him for giving him the best birthday ever. Now that was something. Maddie couldn’t even lay claim to that.

“Well, if it isn’t my little bro,” Aaron said as he peeked through the door at the bottom of the staircase. “I was beginning to forget what you looked like.”

“And I was beginning to forget that you even lived here,” Luke replied, shoveling a forkful of scrambled eggs into his mouth.

Aaron headed straight for the coffee pot. “I see you’re still as witty as ever.”

“Don’t you know it?”

Aaron poured himself a cup and then helped himself to what was left of the breakfast that their grandmother had fixed. “So how has school been?” he said, sitting down across from him.

“Please don’t tell me we’re going to have that conversation again,” Luke groaned.

“I just know that basketball tryouts have to be coming up,” Aaron casually replied as he buttered a piece of toast. “I hope you plan on trying out.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” he admitted. “And I know I would miss not playing,” Luke said, staring down at his breakfast. “But I still don’t know if it’s worth the hassle I might have to face…not only from guys on my team, but what about the other teams? What if word gets out about me?”

“What if it does?” Aaron countered. “Luke, I hate to break it to you but you’re probably going to be facing bigotry for the rest of your life. I wish it weren’t so.”

“No, you’re probably right,” he sighed. There could be a lot of cruel people in the world. And he’d probably encounter his fair share of them. The sooner he thickened up his skin the better.

“You can’t let them win. You gotta fight for what you believe in. And I know firsthand that you are stubborn as hell and won’t back down.”

Luke didn’t want to start compromising now. If he gave up basketball because he was afraid to stand up for himself, then what would he be willing to sacrifice next? He would not let Kevin or assholes like him win. Not if he could help it.

“You’re right, Aaron,” he said, his eyes meeting his brother’s. “I love playing basketball and I’m not ready to give it up. I’m going to try out.”
“Don’t give them a reason not to put you on the team,” Aaron warned.

“I won’t. I’m going to start practicing again,” Luke assured him. “Coach will have to put me on the team and the guys will have to deal. Actually, I don’t want them to deal. I want them to just think of me as the same guy that they’ve always played with.”

“Hey, just deal with one thing at a time,” Aaron pointed out. “For now just focus on making the team—once you do then you can worry about your teammates.”

Luke nodded. The situation was a lot less daunting when presented in that fashion. “Okay.”

Aaron grinned. “I promise I’ll be at your games yelling my fool head off for you.”

Luke knew that was a promise Aaron would keep. And knowing his brother he’d have the rest of the Snyders there with him. Luke would do everything he could to make his family proud.

“My eyes must be deceiving me!” Emma said, strolling through the backdoor. “Do I actually see two of my grandchildren sitting at my kitchen table at the same time?”

“You certainly do, Grandma,” Aaron replied. “I’m working the lunch shift at the Lakeview today.”

“Is there any chance that I could convince you to be around for dinner tonight?” she asked. “I’m having Noah and Gloria over and it looks like Jack will be able to join us too.”

Luke nearly dropped his fork—Noah was going to be there for dinner. “They are?” he asked, trying to keep his voice casual.

“Yes, I thought it would be nice to have a table full of people for a change,” she replied, reaching for a dish towel. “I really enjoyed it the other night at Noah’s birthday party.”

“It was nice having everyone over,” Luke agreed. “Definitely a smashing success.”

Emma gazed at them wistfully. “It was so nice seeing such a big smile on that boy’s face. Noah is such a sweet young man.”

Yes, he certainly was. And Luke couldn’t wait to see him again.
Luke was out behind the barn, dribbling the basketball on the old, small makeshift basketball court. The concrete was cracked and the hoop rusted, having lost its netting long ago but it was a perfect place for him to practice some of the skills he’d need in order to make the Varsity team in a few weeks.

So far he’d been out there for an hour doing layups, shooting free throws (even though there wasn’t a key painted on the cement). More times than not Luke made the baskets. A better test would be to have someone to play against. He had tried Casey, but he already had plans with Maddie. Will had to work at Crash so he wasn’t an option either.

There was always Noah, but he would probably have been more of a distraction than a formidable sparring partner. Staring at Noah, “accidentally” colliding with Noah would be far more enjoyable than actually trying to get the ball through the hoop. And Luke really needed to focus on practicing, not drooling over some hot guy.

Luke stopped dribbling and clutched it tightly. “I don’t want to become Noah’s worst nightmare just like I did with Kevin. I don’t want Noah to worry that every time I look at him that I’m remembering what he looked like naked.”

Noah wasn’t Kevin. Not even close. Noah was so incredibly sweet. Kevin Davis didn’t know the meaning of the word sweet or even kind.

But still, Luke didn’t want to take that chance. Noah seemed like he’s led a rather sheltered life so chances were he’d never had another guy fall for him. There was no way to know for sure just how Noah would react to it.

Unless Luke confessed his true feelings to Noah. Luke wasn’t about to go there again no matter how sweet and nice the guy was to him. Noah was way too important to him. And he’d rather have friendship than nothing at all.

Luke began to dribble the ball again. “I won’t make the same mistake,” he murmured as he aimed toward the hoop. “I won’t…I won’t.” Then he released the ball and it sailed through the hoop.

The deal was sealed.

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Noah hadn’t expected to be working in the stables this afternoon, but when Holden had called him, asking if he could help out on his day off because he had to leave town to meet with some breeders in Kentucky Noah couldn’t say no. Holden had even promised to pay him double for helping out on such short notice. He would have helped out even without the extra money, but it was certainly going to come in handy. Noah made a vow to pick up a little gift for his mom (if he could somehow find a way into town) since she’s done so much for him lately.

Working the extra day really wasn’t a hardship. Noah loved seeing all the horses—especially Whitman. He actually missed him if he went a day without seeing him. The workload for the day...
was pretty light too. Besides the usual feeding and watering, Noah just had to make sure that everything was stocked and clean in the stable.

Before Noah left, he stopped to give Whitman a couple of carrots and pet him. He’d already told him about his surprise birthday party the day before. But there was still plenty to talk about.

“Hey there, boy,” Noah said, opening his hand so Whitman could take a carrot. “How are you doing today? I bet you didn’t expect to see me, hun?” He stroked the horse’s nose. “It’s hard to stay away from one of my best buds.” Noah lowered his voice as he fed Whitman the other carrot. “Yesterday Luke showed me how to use my new cell phone. It was pretty cool. I’m looking forward to using it a lot. He put his number in as number one on the speed dial.” He leaned closer and whispered, “I really liked that.”

Noah planted a quick kiss on Whitman’s nose like he’d seen Luke do quite a few times. He’s always been a bit reluctant, worried either Whitman might not react well or he didn’t have the right to do such a thing. He knew in his heart that needn’t be concerned with either of those things.

“I better get going,” Noah told him. “I’m having dinner with Luke and some of his family tonight at the farmhouse. I’m really looking forward to it. But that’s no big surprise, right?” he chuckled. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As Noah sauntered out of the barn he stopped short, catching sight of Luke dressed in jeans and a gray hoodie, shooting a basketball. He was struck by the sheer beauty of it—the way Luke’s body left the ground as he made the shot as well as the way the ball sunk perfectly through the hoop. Oblivious to him, Luke jogged over, picked up the ball and began to dribble, repeating the process.

Noah hung back a bit so he could watch Luke without (hopefully) being discovered. He had no idea that Luke was so athletic. Watching him dribble and shoot was mesmerizing. Noah wondered if Luke was on his high school basketball team. Luke in a basketball uniform would be…

“Noah?”

What? Shit!

Busted.

“Hey,” Noah said, cheeks flushing as he stepped out of the shadow of the barn.

“Were you watching me?” Luke asked, balancing the basketball against his hip.

Although Noah wanted to deny…deny…deny, he knew that Luke would be able to see through his lie in a heartbeat. “Uh…yeah.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt you,” he replied weakly.

“I don’t like being snuck up on,” Luke snapped.

Noah was taken aback. It had been quite awhile since he’d seen the snarky side of Luke Snyder. But to be fair, Noah shouldn’t have spying on him. “You’re really good, Luke,” he told him, hoping to make peace. “Are you on your school’s team?”

“I was last year. I’m trying to get ready for tryouts this year.”
“Looks like you’ll make it to me.”

Luke shrugged. “Well, I’m the gay kid this year so I really have to bring my best game,” he explained. “I can’t give them the slightest excuse for them not to put me on the team.” Luke dribbled the ball a couple of times. “You know, shooting baskets by myself really isn’t all that challenging. But playing against someone would really help me out. What do you say?”

What Noah wanted to was turn and run. Long ago the Colonel had drilled it into him that he was a lost cause when it came to sports. The words “disappointment”, “hopeless”, “failure”, and “pathetic” were the ones that immediately came to mind. There were more—he was certain of it.

However, the hopeful, utterly adorable look on Luke’s face kept him there and compelled him to reply, “Sure, it will be fun.”

Noah hoped it would be fun. He prayed that Luke wouldn’t think he was a pathetic mess and immediately regret asking him to play.

Noah tried very hard to push every negative thought aside as he joined Luke on the old basketball court. Psyching himself out wouldn’t do him any good. Maybe if he was honest about his lack of experience Luke’s expectations wouldn’t be too high. “I…uh…haven’t played since junior high gym class,” he confessed, ducking his head as he was afraid to see the look on Luke’s face.

“You’re going to be rusty,” Luke said. “I just might have to go a little easy on you.”

Some good natured teasing Noah could definitely handle. “Just as long as you don’t taunt me to death,” Noah replied with a slight grin.

“I’ll cut you some slack on the smack—just this once.” Luke tossed him the ball. “Heads up.”

Holding a basketball again was a bit strange. Noah tentatively dribbled it, trying to get the feel for it. “Are we…uh…gonna keep score?”

“Why don’t we just mess around?” Luke suggested. “That way you can warm up—get a feel for things.”

Staring at Luke was doing quite a good job of getting him heated up. And…oh…what he’d like to feel…

“So are you just going to stand there dribbling?”

“Uh…sorry. I told you I was out of practice.”

“Well, the only way you’re going to get better is if you try to get around me and shoot the ball,” Luke teased. “Actually, why don’t you just try to shoot the ball?”

“Right.” Noah took a deep breath and then pressed forward toward the basket—toward his impending embarrassment.

*Please don’t let me release the world’s worse air ball.*

He tried not to think of Luke as he approached the hoop—only getting off the best possible shot. Focusing on the basket, Noah heaved the ball upward, praying for a miracle.

What he got was it sailing just shy of the rim.

“Where?” Noah dared to ask.

“Faith pretty much sucks,” Luke said as he trotted by him to pick up the ball.

Great. His skills were being compared to a little girl. “Thanks a lot,” Noah muttered.

Luke grinned. “You’re welcome. Why don’t you try defending me while I try scoring?”

A brief image of Luke moving in for a kiss while they were sitting on Emma’s sofa watching a movie flashed through his mind. But that’s not what Luke had in mind, especially since he had already blown by him and was charging toward the basket.

Damn.


Noah shrugged. “Sure.”

“You might want to try a little harder than that to defend me the next time.”

“Right.”

Luke tossed him the ball. “Your turn. Watch out—I’m going to make you work for your next shot.”

Noah took a deep breath. He could do this. It was just a game. They weren’t even keeping score.

“Here goes nothing,” he muttered, moving toward the basket. This time Luke held true to his word blocking his way. Noah tried to go around him, but Luke was there. Damn, he was fast. Not knowing what else to do, Noah shot the ball. This time it bounced off the rim.

Fuck.

When Luke picked up the ball this time Noah was ready for him. Well, a little more ready for him. Luke still scored but at least he put up a better effort trying to defend the basket.

“You just might make me work up a sweat,” Luke taunted.

“You will,” Noah shot back. “I’m just warming up.”

Maybe if he talked a good game he might just put the ball through the hoop. He couldn’t do any worse. And after a few more tries, that’s exactly what happened.

“Yes!” Noah exclaimed, pumping his fist.

“This is getting serious now,” Luke said, unzipping his gray hoodie to reveal a green t-shirt that clung to his chest.

Even though he only made one basket, Noah’s confidence had improved significantly. He guarded Luke better, got closer. Their bodies bumped together. Noah was doing his damnedest to make Luke work for every basket he got. He also wanted to show Luke that he could also score again.

And he did. A few more times.

“You’re not hustling me, are you?” Luke asked, eyeing him warily.

“No, I’m definitely not Fast Eddie Felson.”
“Who?”

“Never mind,” Noah chuckled. “Let’s just get back to playing.”

Luke ran his fingers through his hair. “I’m really starting to work up a sweat. I think I need to lose this,” he said, reaching for the hem of his t-shirt, tugging it over his head and tossing it on the grass.

Luke was shirtless. It was literally a dream come true. His chest looked just like he’d fantasized—nice pecs, dusted with fine light brown chest hair. Noah couldn’t take his eyes off him. He was positively captivated by how gorgeous Luke looked all hot, sweaty and half dressed.

And Noah’s body was beginning to react. He’d have to be dead not to get hard staring at Luke in this state. Noah quickly turned away.


Noah was actually very hot—now so more than ever. “Uh…kinda.”

“You don’t have to worry about taking your sweatshirt off in front of me. I’m not going to try to turn you to the dark side of the force.”

Luke referenced a movie! Noah spun around. “Hey, Star Wars!”

“Yeah, Star Wars.”

Noah grinned. “I’m impressed.”

“Well, it’s not some black and white movie that was made before my parents were born—definitely no Casablanca but it is a good movie,” Luke replied as he picked up the basketball.

“I never said it wasn’t.” Noah explained. “Star Wars was the first movie that had merchandising tied to it. George Lucas was a genius when he demanded all of the sequel and merchandising rights to Star Wars. Twentieth Century Fox thought he was crazy at the time. Now they’re the ones that look crazy.”

Luke shook his head. “How do you know so much about movies?”

“I’ve read a lot of books about them as well as watched every special under the sun,” Noah confessed. “I’m a hopeless geek.”

“It’s kinda cool that you know so much about so many of them,” Luke admitted. “I want to see this Casablanca movie sometime so I can see what all of the fuss is about.”

“I can definitely arrange that.”


“Yeah. And I think I will take this sweatshirt off.”

Noah felt very self-conscious as he peeled his navy blue University of Michigan sweatshirt over his head. Of course, he was being ridiculous since Luke had seen him naked. It’s not like Luke was seeing anything new. But that hadn’t stopped Luke from gazing at Noah’s chest. Noah wished that Luke would like what he saw—a lot.

Noah tossed his sweatshirt next to Luke’s hoodie. “Where were we?”
“Hun?” Luke asked as if he were in a trance.

“Basketball,” Noah clarified. “Do you get the ball or me?”

“Oh!” Luke snapped out of it. “You can start.” He tossed it over to Noah.

They began playing again in earnest. Noah tried to forget that he was playing against the most beautiful boy in the world. He focused all of his energy on making baskets and getting the ball away from Luke, succeeding in doing both from time to time. When Luke would bump into him, playing defense, Noah ignored the sparks that shot through his body—pushed down the longing he felt for Luke.

Basketball…basketball…basketball was his mantra.

Luke was still far superior, but Noah had definitely moved up from pathetic. He actually wanted to challenge Luke. He upped his defensive mode. Luke wasn’t going to keep the ball without a fight—not if Noah could do anything about it.

Luke was under the net ready for a layup when Noah made his grab for the ball. “I don’t think so, Snyder,” he grunted.


However, Noah wasn’t going to give up. He wanted that ball. He wanted to show Luke that he was a fighter—a worthy opponent.

But Luke wasn’t giving up either. He was stubborn, gripping the basketball as if it were the one of the Crown Jewels of England. This was going to be one hell of a fight, because Noah had no intention of losing.

Luke tripped, stumbling backward onto the grass taking Noah with him. The ball slipped out of Luke’s grasp as he landed on the ground, Noah tumbling on top of him. Noah was chest to chest, skin on skin with Luke—hot, sweaty—incredible. Better than anything he could have ever imagined. Luke’s eyes were open wide, staring up at him in awe. Noah knew he should say something—ask Luke if he was okay. But he couldn’t find his voice—couldn’t catch his breath. And his heart was beating so damn fast.

Shit. Noah was getting hard. He had to get off Luke before he felt it.

But wait…

Noah wasn’t the only one. Luke was also hard. He was sure he felt Luke’s cock straining up against him through his jeans. And it felt so good—so right. Noah wanted to grind his erection into Luke’s.

Noah gazed deeply into Luke’s eyes that seemed to be filled with such need—desire. He swore they were probably mirrors of his own. Because that’s all he felt at this moment was the need and desire to kiss Luke.

Yes, this is what he needed. Luke was everything to him. He couldn’t deny it any more…

“Noah! Luke!”

The sound of Noah’s mother’s voice made him roll off Luke and stand upright in a flash. “What is it, Mom?” Noah asked, trying to keep the panic from his voice.
“Dinner is going to be ready in about an hour,” she said, approaching the court. “Emma wanted to make sure that you two had plenty of time to get cleaned up.”

“I need to go grab a shower,” Noah said, marching over to grab his sweatshirt, making sure that he didn’t look back at Luke. He couldn’t bear it. Not when he’d be so close to…

No, he couldn’t think about what his mother almost interrupted.

“I’ll see you boys soon,” she said and then turned and head back toward the farmhouse.


Noah pulled his sweatshirt over his head. “I really need to go take a shower. I’ll see you at dinner.”

And then Noah dashed toward the cabin, not looking back because if he did it would hurt too much.
Chapter 24

Luke’s mind was still reeling as he lay on the grass behind the barn, staring up at the sky. Noah had just been on top of him—hot, sweaty, and hard. Yes, Noah had been hard. Luke knew he had felt him. And there was only one reason why Noah would be hard, right?

*Oh my god…oh my god…oh my god…*

Luke didn’t want to jump to any conclusions. He certainly didn’t want to get his hopes up. But there was also no denying the look in Noah’s eyes. Noah wanted him. Luke knew that look because it was what he was feeling at that exact moment. He thought for sure that Noah was going to kiss him. It almost seemed inevitable.

That is until Noah’s mom had showed up.

And then Noah couldn’t get away from Luke fast enough. Noah wouldn’t even look at him.

*Noah was probably scared out of his mind.*

Luke remembered the first time his feelings for Kevin almost got the best of him. They’d been at his grandmother’s pool house watching a movie. He couldn’t even remember which one now because he’d wanted so badly to forget the incident right after it happened…

“So do you want to watch another movie?” Luke asked as he picked up the DVD they’d just finished watching out of the player. He really loved spending time with Kevin. If they watched another movie then Kevin would stick around. And maybe if it got late enough, he just might spend the night. Luke always enjoyed their sleepovers because they’d stay up half the night talking and joking around.

“Sure, whatcha got?”

*The Bourne Supremacy and Dodgeball.*

Kevin grinned and reached into his bag. “How about this?” he asked, holding up a DVD—*Stuffin Young Muffins 2.* “Now this is what I call entertainment.”

“Kevin, you can’t be serious!” Luke exclaimed. The thought of watching a porno with Kevin horrified Luke. There would most likely be naked men in it and Luke had no idea how he’d react to seeing one on the screen.

Although, he knew how his body reacted when he closed his eyes at night which was why he couldn’t take the chance of something bad happening in front of Kevin. And he didn’t know if he’d be able to fake his enthusiasm for the females in movie.

“You gotta admit that these hot ladies are much better than Matt Damon,” Kevin countered.

Actually, he found Matt Damon very attractive which was a huge problem. “Of course they are,” Luke lied. “But, Kevin, you know my grandmother likes to pop in here unannounced.”

Kevin stood up, sauntering over toward the DVD player with the porno in his hand. “So?”

“So we can’t.”
“Just try and stop me,” Kevin challenged, grinning wickedly.

Luke didn’t think twice, he lunged at Kevin, grabbing for the DVD but Kevin managed to hold it out of Luke’s reach. However, that didn’t stop their bodies from colliding and tumbling to the floor. Luke landed on top of Kevin, his body pressed against his friend’s.

And Luke was suddenly aware of everything about Kevin’s body—how it felt so strong and solid beneath him, the faint scent of sweat, and his parted lips. Luke’s own body tingled.

Was this what it was supposed to feel like?

“You know I can take you any time…any day, Snyder,” Kevin taunted him.

“Not today,” Luke grunted, reaching of the DVD which was still held out of his grasp.

“Come on, you can do better than that. Be a man.”

He was a man—damn it.

Luke lunged forward, rubbing his body against Kevin’s trying to ignore how incredible it felt. He just needed to focus on getting the DVD. But it was easier said than done. Kevin Davis wasn’t one to just lie there. Over the years Luke had many wrestling matches with his best friend and they were always intense.

However, it wasn’t supposed to be this intense. Having Kevin, flip him over onto his back should not be arousing him.

But it was.

Luke was supposed to be fighting back. Instead he was getting hard.

Fuck.

Using every ounce of strength he had in him, Luke pushed Kevin off and sprang to his feet, snatching the porno that had fallen from Kevin’s hand. “I won,” he said, quickly turning away from Kevin. Then he tossed the DVD toward Kevin’s bag.

“Looks like you got yourself some balls after all,” Kevin chuckled. “I was beginning to wonder.”


“What’s wrong, Snyder?” Kevin asked.

“Nothing,” Luke snapped, keeping his back to him. Kevin couldn’t see the effect he was having on him. He’d hate him. “You know…I don’t think I’m in the mood to watch a movie after all. Actually, I’m kinda tired.”

“Make up your mind,” Kevin grumbled. “Sometimes you can be so weird.”

Kevin could never know just how weird Luke felt.

Noah had every right to be afraid. But he should also know that Luke wouldn’t hate him. Noah knew Luke was gay so he wouldn’t freak out like Kevin had freaked out with him.
So why hadn’t Noah come out to him?

Probably for the very same reasons Luke had denied his sexuality. Noah could be afraid of his mother’s reaction which was very understandable. Although, Luke would bet that Gloria would be accepting—at least from what he’s seen. But, then again, you just never know. His own mother hadn’t had the best reaction when Luke came out to her.

Luke wanted to chase after Noah and tell him that everything was going to be okay. He’d been through everything Noah was going through and he’d help him. And more importantly he’d always be there for him.

Deep down Luke knew that Noah needed his space right now. Pushing Noah could drive him away. Luke would have to give him time. At least try.

Sighing, Luke finally hauled himself to his feet and grabbed his t-shirt, tugging it over his head. He needed to take a shower and get ready for dinner—get ready to face Noah again.

********

Luke couldn’t stand the tension. Noah sat next to him but he might as well have been at another table. He had barely looked at him since he joined everyone for dinner after returning from the cabin freshly showered. Luke tried not to take it personally. But it still stung a bit. Thankfully, no one else seemed to notice the apprehension between them. They all seemed busy with their own conversations while Luke and Noah dined in silence.

During dessert which consisted of apple pie and leftover ice cream from Noah’s birthday party that Emma got everyone’s attention. “We have a bit of excitement coming up next month,” she announced. “The Hobble Gobble Ball is the day after Thanksgiving.”

Gloria laughed. “What is a Hobble Gobble Ball?”

“It’s a charity ball that raises money to help the Oakdale Foodbank,” Emma explained. “It’s one of the big social events of the season.”

“The name is whacky,” Jack added, “but it’s really a fun event. I think half the town ends up going.”

“People of all ages,” Aaron said, glancing over at Luke and Noah. “I expect you’ll be there this year, little bro.”

Luke knew there was no way he’d be able to get out of it. His Grandma Lucinda was on the board of the charity the ball supported. His mother would undoubtedly make sure he went this year so he could help represent the family (as if there wouldn’t already be enough of them in attendance). “Yes, I’ll be there,” he sighed.

“Gloria, you have to be sure that you get the night off so you can go,” Emma told her. “It’s such a lovely event.”

“I don’t know,” Gloria replied, blushing slightly. “I haven’t been dancing in years. And I wouldn’t have anything to wear to such a fancy event.”

“It’s not black tie,” Aaron interjected.

“My mom has tons of dresses,” Luke told her. “I’m sure she’d let you borrow one.”

“That’s a sweet offer, Luke, but I couldn’t…”
“Lily wouldn’t mind, dear,” Emma added. “Luke’s right. She has so many dresses she could open up her own store.”

“But there’s the cost,” Gloria admitted. “A fancy event like that must be expensive.”

“I know we don’t really know each other all that well but you could go as my date,” Jack suggested. “I’m not the world’s best dancer but I can take you for a spin on the dance floor without stepping on your feet.”

“I don’t want you to feel obligated,” Gloria said, shifting in her chair.

“Actually, it would be my pleasure,” Jack replied with his most sincere smile.

“All right,” she agreed, smiling. “I’ll go. And I’ll try to not step on your feet.”

Emma turned to Noah. “You’ll have to come too,” she informed him.

“I couldn’t…” Noah stammered.

“No nonsense…you can go with Luke,” Emma replied.

Noah turned beat red. “I…I…don’t have a suit. And I…”

Luke hated seeing Noah put on the spot, but he also knew that his grandmother could be quite stubborn. Noah had little chance of getting out of going to the big ball. “Don’t worry,” he reassured him. “If you get a better offer you don’t have to stay stuck with me.”

“I have some of Seth’s old suits,” Emma said. “I bet we can find something that would work for you. I’m pretty handy with a sewing machine too.”

“Noah, it will be fun,” Gloria gently added from across the table. “I would love it if you could go.”

Noah swallowed. “Okay.”

Luke was secretly thrilled that Noah would be going to the ball with him. He had visions of them dancing together in the swanky Crystal Ballroom at the Lakeview. However, next to him Noah looked like he just wanted to disappear. All Luke wanted to do was reach out, take his hand, and tell him that everything was okay.

This was making Luke crazy. He couldn’t handle it anymore. Space be damned. He needed to talk to Noah.

Now.

“Ahhh…Noah and I can handle dish duty,” Luke said, rising from his chair.

“That would be lovely.” Emma beamed. “Are you sure you boys don’t mind?”

Noah glanced up at him, blinking a few times before adding, “No, not at all. We’d love to help.”

Resolved to his fate, Noah stood up and began to collect the dirty plates.

Luke knew there was no way Noah would be able to turn down helping out with dishes. Soon Noah would be his captive audience and they’d be able to talk.

“Gloria, why don’t we take our coffee and retire to the parlor so the boys can clean up in here without stepping all over us,” Emma suggested. “Aaron and Jack, are you going to join us?”
“I’m going to meet up with some friends at Yo’s,” Aaron said, grabbing his jacket off the coat rack.

“I’m going to head over to Carly’s to visit the kids for a little while,” Jack replied. “Dinner was amazing. We should do it more often.”


Good. He was alone with Noah.

Luke quickly gathered the rest of the plates from the kitchen table. “So I’ll wash and you can dry,” he suggested. “The dishtowels are in the drawer next to the sink.”

“Okay,” Noah quietly replied as he retrieved one from the drawer.

Luke strolled over to the sink, stacking the rest of the dishes next to it. He reached underneath to get the soap. “I hope you’re not mad that I volunteered you for clean up,” he said as he filled the sink with hot water and added a generous squirt of dish soap.

Noah shook his head. “No, I don’t mind helping. It’s the least I can do for your grandmother.”

“Dish duty always scores big points with Gram,” Luke said as he washed a large bowl and handed it to Noah who remained silent. So he pressed on, “I’m surprised that she didn’t faint on the spot. I’m kinda notorious for trying to get out of dish duty. I usually duck into the bathroom right after dessert. Aaron would tease me that I didn’t want to get dishpan hands.”

Still nothing.

Luke kept washing the dishes and handing them to Noah. “Wow…I must sound like some spoiled brat but I’d never leave my grandma in a lurch. I really do my fair share of choirs around here. I’ve mucked out endless stalls, helped my dad mend fences, and I can never say no when Gram asks me to run to the store for her…no matter what time of day it is.”

He could swear he could hear crickets chirping. This was madness. So much for trying to break the ice. Fuck it. He was going to go in full throttle now.

“You know, Noah, it’s okay,” Luke said, handing Noah a dinner plate, his fingers brushing against Noah’s. There were those sparks again. Did Noah feel them too?

“W-w-what?” Noah stammered, gaping at him.

Luke held his bewildered gaze. “You know after we were playing basketball when—”

The plate Noah had been holding crashed to the floor, shattering into several pieces. Noah practically jumped ten feet in the air. “Oh my god,” he gasped.

“Is everything all right in there?” Emma called from the parlor.


“I have plenty of plates. There’s no need to worry just as long as no one got hurt!”

Well, no one was physically hurt.

However, the horrified look on Noah’s face worried Luke. Fuck. He shouldn’t have pushed him. “It’s okay,” Luke reassured him as he knelt down to pick up the pieces.
“I’m sorry,” Noah murmured. “I’m so sorry.” And then Noah turned and fled out the door.

Luke crashed and burned on that one.

********

Luke was happy to finally be locked away in his bedroom. He’d told his grandma and Gloria that Noah hadn’t been feeling well so he had just sent Noah back to the cabin. Hopefully, Noah’s story would somewhat mirror his.

Oh, Noah.

Luke hadn’t been prepared for the anguished look on his face when he tried to broach the subject. If only he could reassure Noah that everything really would be okay. But he couldn’t guarantee it. He could listen to his fears. He could share his experiences. And he could still be his friend.

Damn it. Noah needed him.


Noah probably wouldn’t pick up the phone.

Luke could still call him. Maybe leave a message…

The last thing Noah needs is more pressure. He was so freaked out when he left. Luke didn’t need to freak him out even more.

Fuck.

Luke put down his cell phone and grabbed his Carpe Diem journal from the nightstand. Now more than ever he needed to write. Getting his thoughts down would hopefully help him make sense of things. And, of course, he wanted to always remember what it felt like having Noah on top of him.

It had felt so incredible…

Closing his eyes, Luke took a deep breath. He couldn’t believe what he was about to write. But he truly believed it in his heart…

I think Noah might be gay.

There. It’s out. Well, not really “officially” out. Noah certainly hasn’t admitted it out loud, but his body has—his actions have…

Oh have they ever.

We were playing basketball and a fight for the ball left us on the grass with Noah on top of me. And he was hard. Noah was on top of me—shirtless—and his cock was hard! He was fucking aroused being so close to me! I never would have dreamed…well…scratch that…I dreamed and fantasized about Noah desiring me quite a bit.

Today I found out he actually does!

Okay…he didn’t tell me, but I know. All the signs are there—besides the obvious hard-on. The way Noah was looking at me—oh my god—it was like he wanted to devour me. The need in his eyes was so intense. I swear I almost forgot how to breathe just staring back at him. And his lips were getting
so close to mine.

Noah was going to kiss me.

Well, if his mother hadn’t interrupted us.

After that everything went downhill in a hurry. Noah jumped off me like I had suddenly caught on fire. And then he wouldn’t even look at me.

I don’t blame him, though.

Until today, I had no idea that Noah could possibly be gay. Noah has most likely been hiding in the closet for quite awhile and is still terrified of coming out. I can obviously relate since I was quite the train wreck when I was dealing with my sexuality.

Noah doesn’t know any of this because I never told him just how difficult it was for me to come out. Maybe if I did, he would confide in me. I want to help him. Noah needs to know that he can trust me. We can get through this together. I’ll stick by his side no matter what.

Noah’s my friend. And I hope that one day he’ll be so much more.

Luke tucked his journal back inside the nightstand, feeling much better after writing in it. But he was still restless. His skin still seemed to tingle from where Noah’s bare chest had been pressed against his.

His smooth, hot, sweaty, chest.

Luke’s cock twitched and he knew there was no use fighting it. He tugged his shirt off and unzipped his jeans, stripping down to his gray boxer briefs. Closing his eyes, Luke’s thoughts drifted back to the basketball court to Noah’s body pressed against his, imagining what might have happened if Noah’s mom hadn’t shown up…

Luke gazed up at Noah, his heart hammering in his chest. The weight of Noah’s body on top of his felt so damn good. But what felt even better was his cock, which was rock hard, poking against his hip. Luke wanted to grind himself against it.

Before he could, Noah’s lips were on his, kissing him slowly. Luke moaned, lacing his fingers through Noah’s hair, pulling him closer. Yes…Noah really did want him. Noah’s kiss deepened, his hips rubbed against Luke’s.

“I love you,” Noah breathed, gazing into his eyes.


Noah nuzzled his face against Luke’s neck, licking a path down toward his chest. Luke stared up at the sky, wondering how he in the world he got so lucky. Noah lapped a trail through his chest hair, kissing and licking his way toward Luke’s bellybutton.


“Yeah?”


Oh my god…oh my god…oh my god…

He’d never had anything so hot and wet this snug around his cock. Fuck…Noah’s mouth fit perfect—just like a glove. Noah’s tongue swirled over the head, eliciting a throaty moan from Luke.

Holiest of fuck…

Through hooded eyes Luke peered down at Noah whose head eagerly bobbed up and down as he licked Luke’s dick. Luke couldn’t remember ever seeing a more erotic sight. He threaded his fingers through Noah’s dark locks, silently urging Noah to take more of him.

Oh how he wanted Noah to take more of him. Luke wanted Noah to just swallow him fucking whole.

And then Noah seemed to do just that, taking his cock deeply into his mouth.

Yes…yes…yes…

Luke managed to grab some tissues just before he came—hard/i>. Fuck…he couldn’t remember the last time he came like that.

Well, the last really good orgasm had happened as a result of a Noah fantasy.

Luke couldn’t help but smile; after he helped Noah deal with being gay his fantasies would be real. Luke just knew it.
Noah was a fucking wreck. He couldn’t eat. He couldn’t sleep. All he could do was replay those few minutes with Luke over and over in his mind. He’d actually been moments away from kissing Luke. His fucking hormones had gotten the best of him and he’d been so consumed with lust that he almost threw everything away just to satisfy his urge. The thought of his mother discovering him kissing Luke still made Noah shudder. The pain, disappointment, anger—she would have felt toward him. It would have been unbearable.

He never felt so alone in his life.

Well, Luke had tried to talk to him. But Noah had freaked out. He just couldn’t deal with the number of things Luke could have said to him so Noah bolted like a bumbling idiot.

Luke had to think he was the biggest loser in the world.

Noah squeezed his eyes shut as he leaned against the wall of the barn. Actually, he was quite terrified to find out what Luke really thought of him. Luke was perfect while he was a pathetic closet case.

Thankfully, Holden was still in Kentucky. Noah didn’t need Luke’s father questioning why he was so out of sorts. He had a difficult enough time dealing with his mother the night before. Luke was kind enough to make up a believable excuse for Noah’s hasty departure. When Noah’s mom returned from Emma’s she fawned all over him, which made him feel even worse.

Noah did his best to keep busy—placing his first solo order with Hamilton’s Feed Store, stocking the hayloft, and washing out the horse trailers. But his mind kept finding its way back to those few intense minutes with Luke. Part of Noah was screaming for him to just call Luke.

Good thing his cell phone was safely tucked away in his room so he couldn’t foolishly cave in to such a desire. Noah needed to stay strong. But if he didn’t talk to someone he was liable to go crazy.

And Noah knew just who he could count on.

Whitman’s stall wasn’t too far away. Noah grabbed an extra large handful of carrots for his confidant because Whitman deserved an extra treat for what he was about to lay on him. As Noah approached his stall, he could see Whitman’s tail, swishing broadly which made Noah smile. Although he didn’t get quite the same enthusiastic greeting as Luke, Whitman was still happy to see him just the same.

“Hey, buddy,” Noah said as he carefully let himself inside the stall. Even though Whitman was gentle as a bunny rabbit he was still cautious around him because Holden had drilled it into him that he always needed to be alert when he was around all of the horses.

Whitman gave him a friendly snort in return as if to say hello back. This only further convinced Noah that he was one of the smartest animals on the planet.

He put a carrot on his palm and held it out for Whitman. “I really need a friend right now, Whitman,” he quietly admitted. “I don’t have anyone else to turn to. I can’t talk about Luke because he’s part of the problem.”

Noah could feel a lump forming in his throat as he gazed into Whitman’s big brown eyes. “H-h-he hasn’t done anything wrong,” he explained. “It’s me. I’m…I’m…” Noah gulped for air and finally spit it out, “I’m gay. B-b-but…I can’t be, Whitman. I just can’t.” His voice finally cracked and he
began to sob, his entire body shaking from the intensity of his grief.

Noah buried his face in his hands, hoping to get the tears to stop pouring from his eyes but it was no use. The floodgates had been opened.

Weak…pathetic…disgusting…faggot. Your mother will toss your vile ass right out of the house as soon as she finds out.

Even though Noah hadn’t heard the Colonel’s voice in over four years it was crystal clear in his mind now. Why couldn’t that man just leave him alone? Why did he still haunt him after all these years?

Noah felt a gentle nudge. Moving his hands away from his face, he discovered that Whitman was nuzzling his nose against Noah’s face as if to comfort him. He reached into his pocket, getting out a carrot for his friend. “Thanks, Whit,” he croaked as he fed it to him.

Noah took a few shaky breaths as he stroked Whitman’s mane. “I’m sure my big revelation wasn’t such a surprise to you since I talk about Luke non-stop. And I obviously know that he’s gay. I wish I could be out and proud like him,” he confessed. “But it’s not that easy for me. If my father ever found out…god…I think he’d kill me.” Noah shuddered at the thought. “And my mom…even though she’s amazing…she wants a straight son. She just does. I didn’t tell you what she got me for my birthday, did I? Date stuff…fancy clothes, cologne, and movie passes. She wants me dating…girls…bad.”

A fresh set of tears filled Noah’s eyes when he allowed himself to think about who he really wanted.


“I-I-I almost kissed Luke,” Noah’s voice was nearly a whisper. “I almost said fuck it all and kissed Luke.” He glanced up at the ceiling, shaking his head. “God…that could have been such a disaster. Besides my mom almost catching us, Luke probably isn’t even interested in me. Why would he be, Whitman?” Noah asked his confidant. “I’m this skinny loser who’s never even graduated from high school. I’ll probably never go to college. Luke deserves someone better than me.”

Noah wiped his eyes and dug into his pocket for another carrot for Whitman. He sighed as he fed it to him. “I do care about him so much. And I don’t know how I’m supposed to make these feelings for him go away, but I have to.”

Maybe Luke didn’t even notice that Noah was so the brink of cracking. Maybe all of this worrying was for nothing.

But Noah knew better. He saw the look in Luke’s eyes. Luke knew something was up. He’d even tried to talk to him afterward. And now everything was a mess.
Jade Taylor was never one to follow the rules. In fact she despised them—just like she despised being pushed aside by Will and then Luke. Her cousin was supposed to be her friend. Luke was supposed to be there for her no matter what. In the past he’d done whatever she’d wanted.

Ever since Noah had come into the picture everything changed. Luke had turned on her, choosing a practical stranger over family. It infuriated her. And it had gone on long enough. Luke’s silly little crush on Noah needed to come to an end.

Jade was determined to make sure it happened. Not so long ago, Luke had been wrapped around her little finger. She wanted her little lapdog back. This snarky, defiant Luke needed to be put in his place. Jade was sick of his high and mighty Snyder attitude.

And she was also sick of being the one left out in the cold. Jade had found out from Natalie that there had been a surprise birthday party the other night for Noah and she hadn’t been invited. Luke was probably behind her being left off the guest list.

Luke was going to regret that move.

Jade just needed to find a way to make him pay—to make him hurt like he’d hurt her. She knew Noah was the key but the big question was how she could use him. The answer might be in Luke’s journal. He was forever writing in the damn thing like a little girl. She knew that he kept one online and a traditional one. Jade had seen him write in both at different times. She just needed to get to them.

It was still early enough in the day so Luke would still be in school. Jade would only have to elude Emma who definitely wasn’t a fan of hers. Getting by her shouldn’t be too hard, though. Emma was always busy with something. And if Jade happened to encounter her she could always say she was stopping by to see Luke.

Satisfied with her plan, Jade headed over the farm. Unlike everyone else in her family she was not a fan of this place. Besides never feeling truly welcomed there, Jade preferred the comfort and luxury of her Aunt Lily’s mansion. She intended on living there as long as she could. As far as she was concerned she deserved to be there to make up for all of the years that she was separated from her real family—her wealthy Aunt Lily. It wasn’t fair that she’d been given up for adoption, never knowing her birth mother whom had been murdered a couple of years ago.

When Jade reached the screen porch she opened the door ever so carefully, trying not to alert anyone to her arrival. She peered into the kitchen window to see if she could see Emma or anyone else in the Snyder kitchen.

Empty.

Good.

Slowly she opened the door and crept inside the kitchen. In the distance she could hear the faint sound of the TV as well as a sewing machine which meant Emma was busy at work in her sewing room. Jade hoped that she would stay in there for just a few more minutes so she could sneak up the stairs.

Ever so carefully she crept across the kitchen and opened the door that led to the back staircase, making sure that it didn’t make a sound.
Jade quickly ascended the stairs not wanting to press her luck. When she reached the top, she hesitated so she could listen for any signs of life in the upper level of the farmhouse.

Still Nothing.

Jade made a beeline for Luke’s bedroom, shutting the door behind her. A smile crept to her lips. She made it without being discovered. Now she needed to accomplish her mission and get out of there successfully.

Scanning the room, Jade’s eyes immediately fell on the nightstand. Why not start with the obvious? Luke might just feel safe enough here to put his precious journal in there.

Jade sauntered over to Luke’s unmade bed and sat down on it. Then she leaned over, pulling open the drawer to the nightstand and peering inside it. Sure enough…there was a brown leather journal with the words “Carpe Diem” on the front of it.

“Thank you, Luke,” she murmured, pulling it out of the drawer.

Jade quickly flipped to the middle of the journal, but it was blank so she decided to start at the beginning, which proved to be very interesting…

This journal was a gift from Noah, but I didn’t want to write in it until I had something amazing to write about because I consider this a special journal since it came from a special person.

Today was Noah’s 18th birthday. And we managed to pull off a surprise party for him tonight which was really a thrill for him. I don’t think he’s had many—if any—birthday parties. I don’t think the smile left his face the entire night.

God I just love his smile. I’ll never ever get tired of looking at it.

And it looked especially amazing in the moonlight. Dad took us all on a hayride. When he first suggested it I was cringing, thinking that Noah, Maddie, and Casey would think it was incredibly lame. But they didn’t. Noah had so much fun—even though he spent half the time entertaining Natalie.

But when it was finally just the two of us lying in the hay, looking at the stars— wow. I was so tempted to kiss him.

I didn’t though. It would have been crazy, especially since Noah is straight.

Well, at least I’m pretty sure he’s straight. There was a moment when our eyes met—I thought maybe, just maybe…

I know…wishful thinking.

God I just can’t stop thinking about Noah though.

“Luke, you are so fucking pathetic,” Jade muttered. “When are you ever going to learn?”

And then Jade turned the page and really hit paydirt.
Luke stood in the door, frozen in horror—Jade was sitting on his bed reading his journal. And not just any journal, the journal. The one Luke had just poured out his heart and soul into the night before. The one he had written about his suspicions about Noah being gay in. Bile rose to his throat. Jade couldn’t know Noah’s secret.

Luke had to protect him. He needed to be strong for Noah.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he demanded, causing Jade to jump and slam the journal shut.

However, she quickly recovered. “Just a little light reading,” she replied with a knowing grin. “You really are quite the writer, Luke.”

“You had no right going through my stuff.” He marched over and snatched the journal out of her hands.

“I just wanted to catch up on things,” Jade said, peering up at him innocently. “I hear I’ve been missing out on a lot—Noah’s birthday party for instance.”

Luke decided to play dumb. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I know all about Noah’s surprise birthday party,” Jade said, standing up so she was eye to eye with him. “You know the one I wasn’t invited to. Natalie told me all about it.”

“I…uh…wasn’t in charge of the guest list,” Luke told her.

“And I’m sure you told them that I’m also friends with Noah too.”

“It wasn’t my place since I wasn’t planning the party,” Luke diplomatically replied. Of course he wasn’t about to tell her that there was no way in hell he was going to even suggest that she be at the party. Not after the way she had thrown herself at Noah when they all went to out that one Sunday afternoon.

“Right,” Jade chuckled bitterly, “because you want Noah all for yourself. And he wants you too because he’s gay. Is that it?”

Luke’s cheeks flamed, his hands balled up into fists. Oh how he wanted to hurt her. Of course he’d never lay a hand on his cousin. But that didn’t stop him from being livid. “What is written in my journal is private!” Luke hissed through clenched teeth.

“I’m sure Noah would just love to hear your theories!”

“You wouldn’t dare!”


Luke’s mind was racing. He had to think fast. Jade could not go to Noah about this. He’d just die if she told Noah everything he’d written about him. “We are family, Jade. Never forget that. I’ve always had your back,” Luke reminded her. “When the shit was hitting the fan with Will I was there for you. And when my parents wanted to throw you out I made sure they didn’t.”

“You were also using me as a beard so you could pretend to be straight,” Jade reminded him.

“But I kept lying for you.”
“Until it no longer suited you.”

“Jade, it was tearing me apart,” Luke sighed. “And didn’t it all work out for the best? You eventually found out that you really are Rose’s daughter. My mom accepts you and is letting you live with us. I think it’s a pretty good situation.”

“It is,” she relented. “Everything was pretty great until you developed this unhealthy crush on Noah.”

“Me?” Luke was flabbergasted. How dare she turn this all around on him? He wasn’t the one making inappropriate grabs for him in public? He wasn’t the one who continued to pursue Noah after he made it clear he wasn’t interested?

“Yes, you,” Jade insisted. “You suddenly think because Noah lands on top of you during some stupid basketball game and gets a supposed boner that he’s gay? You’re really reaching, Luke! According to what you wrote he didn’t admit he was gay or confess any secret crush on you! Are you even sure that he was hard? Or do you just wish he was?”

Luke turned away from her. He knew what he felt and what he saw. Noah desired him. He was certain of it.

Right?

“You haven’t heard from him have you?” Jade taunted him. “If Noah really had the hots for you he would have contacted you by now. Maybe he’s finally figured out that you want him…”

“Stop it, Jade!” Luke spat.

Jade sauntered over to him and placed her hand on his shoulder. “I’m really worried about you, Luke,” she told him. “I saw what happened with Kevin. I saw how hurt and devastated you were. It broke my heart. I don’t want to see you go through that again.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re becoming delusional.”

Luke closed his eyes and willed himself to remain calm. “I’m not. Noah and I are friends.”

“Noah likes girls, Luke,” Jade added. “You really need to accept that fact.”

“I have,” Luke replied, glancing at her, hoping that she’d believe him and wouldn’t go to Noah with the information that she read in his journal. “I would never want to lose Noah’s friendship like I lost Kevin’s. I hope what you read in my journal stays private.”

“Don’t worry, Luke,” Jade reassured him. “I’ll always have your best interests at heart.” She gave him a quick hug and then she breezed out of the room, leaving Luke chilled to the bone.

His most intimate thoughts about Noah’s were now in his cousin’s hands. This scared him shitless. Luke had been so certain that Noah was gay but now he was riddled with doubt thanks to Jade. Maybe she was right. What if he was projecting all of the longing he felt for longing for Noah onto him? He might just be that pathetic guy Jade had painted him to be.

Fuck.
Chapter 27

Noah was beginning to get used to having the stable to himself. Holden was still in Kentucky and wouldn’t be returning until the next day. Everything had been running without a hitch despite feeling like his world was spinning out of control. The one place he felt like he had a handle on things was at the stables. It was his safe haven.

Even though he was operating on basically no sleep, Noah had been working hard. One thing he hadn’t been doing was slacking. When Holden returned Noah wanted everything to be perfect.

Being busy helped keep his mind off what happened with Luke. Well, what almost happened. Thankfully, he was granted a reprieve. And Noah was going to make sure that he didn’t slip up again. He was going to keep his feelings for Luke under control. So far he’d managed to keep his distance from him since it happened.

It had been two days of hell. Noah missed his friend. Worse yet, it was next to impossible to deny how incredible it felt to have Luke’s body pressed so tightly against his—to be so close to finally kissing him.

But he had to. There wasn’t any other choice. He needed to be the perfect son.

Noah was putting away the tack he’d polished when he heard a voice he hadn’t heard in awhile call his name. At first he froze, but he took a deep breath and turned around. “Hi, Jade,” he said, keeping his voice friendly.

“Hey, it’s been awhile,” she purred.

“Yeah, I’ve been pretty busy,” he replied. “Mr. Snyder is…uh…in Kentucky right now so I’ve had a lot to do here.”

“I know he’s out of town,” Jade smirked. “I live with the Snyders, remember?”

Noah blushed, suddenly feeling very foolish. “Right.”

She sauntered closer to him, closing the space between them. “I think you’ve been working too hard. You could probably use a break.”

“I…uh…really do need finish up here,” Noah stammered as he was being slowly backed into an empty stall by Jade. He was trapped. There had to be a way to talk himself out of this situation and get her to leave.

“Holden isn’t here to crack the whip. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

Jade was practically standing right on top of him. He could smell her too sweet perfume which was such a sharp contrast to Luke.

Stop thinking about him!

“Y-y-you should go,” Noah said, hoping that she’d just listen to him. “I really do need to finish working.”

“Jesus, Noah!” Jade exclaimed. “You are wound way too tight.”

“N-n-no…I-I-I…”
“Shhhhh…” She took the rag he was holding out of his hand, tossing it aside. “Just relax.”

An alarm wailed loudly in his head as if an F5 tornado were bearing down on the farm. “I-I-I…” Noah stuttered, searching for an escape.

Jade rubbed his arm. “It’s okay. There’s no one here but you and me and all of these horses,” she said smoothly. “And they’re not going to say a thing. I can make you feel so good, Noah. Why don’t you let me take care of you?”

And then, much to Noah’s astonishment, Jade began to unbutton her blouse.

“W-w-what are you doing?” Noah asked.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Jade slowly peeled off her blouse, allowing it to fall to the stable floor. “I think you know,” she whispered seductively as she stood before him in a red lacy bra. “And I think you want a little taste of this, don’t you? I think you’ve always wanted it. Now you can have it since little Luke isn’t around to spoil our fun.”

Luke—that’s who he wanted.

No, he couldn’t have Luke. Noah needed to try to be normal.

Jade unhooked her bra which fastened in front. Her breasts spilled out of it. Obviously, she wanted to have sex with him. Did she know that he was still a virgin?

*Maybe I could do this. I wouldn’t have to be a virgin anymore. If I had sex with her, it might be able to help me control my other feelings…*

Jade brought his hand to her breast. “Doesn’t this feel nice?”

“Yes,” Noah whispered hoarsely.

********

Dammit. Luke was going to talk to Noah. They were friends. And friends helped each other—even when one of them didn’t want it. As far as Luke was concerned Luke had given Noah enough time to deal with whatever it was that had happened a couple of days ago. Now it was time to talk. This time Luke wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

Luke had wanted to make sure that he caught Noah alone so he’d faked being sick and got out of his final period of school. Government class was extremely boring anyway. And it wasn’t like he was missing a test or anything important. He just hoped that the school wouldn’t call his mother because he didn’t like lying to her.

During the drive out to the farm, Luke tried to come up with different approaches to talk to Noah. He didn’t want to alienate him either. Luke just needed to get Noah to trust him. He could always tell Noah about how difficult it was for him to come out to his friends and family.

“At least this time he won’t be able to run away,” Luke murmured as he pulled into the driveway. “Noah would never leave work early, especially when my dad’s away. He’s way too reliable for that.”

And that was why Luke was going for the sneak attack approach. He knew he was fighting dirty. But it was for Noah’s own good.

When Luke entered the barn, he was tempted to call out a greeting to Noah but quickly decided
against it.

*Sneak attack, remember*

Luke stopped to pet Whitman and that’s when he thought he heard voices coming from the other side of the stable. “That’s odd,” he murmured as he set out to investigate.

Who would Noah be talking to?

He followed the voices, approaching cautiously as he did so. And then he caught sight of something that made him freeze. Jade and Noah were in an empty corner stall, huddled close together. The thing that stunned him most was that she was topless and Noah’s hand was on her breast.

“Doesn’t it feel nice?” she purred.

“Yes,” Noah whispered.

Yes?!?

No!!!!

Luke turned and fled out of the barn, not looking back. He wanted to get away from there. He couldn’t bear to stick around to see what happened next. His heart shattered at the thought of Noah with Jade.

Hadn’t Noah told him that he wasn’t interested in her?

Luke scrambled behind the wheel of his car. All he could think was “get me out of here”. Once he got it started, he threw it into gear leaving a spray of gravel in his wake.

Go. Go. Go.

At first Luke didn’t know where he was headed; it was like he was on autopilot. And then he found himself pulling up outside Curly’s Liquor Store. In a pinch Kevin and he used to come here to get a buyer for alcohol.

Was that what he was doing now?

Luke took a deep breath and got out of his car, scanning the parking lot as he did so. There happened to be a young lady who looked like she could be in her late twenties approaching the store.

Here goes nothing.

“Excuse me,” Luke said in his sweetest, most polite voice.

“Yes?”

“Hi…uh…could you do me a really big favor?” he asked, flashing her his dimples.

She shifted uncomfortable. “Maybe.”

Luke got his wallet out of his pocket and handed her a fifty dollar bill. “Will you please get me a bottle of Absolut Vodka? Please, you can keep the change.”

“I don’t know…”
“Please,” Luke begged, giving her his best sad puppy dog look. He fished a twenty out of his wallet and handed it to her to sweeten the deal. “Please, I’d really appreciate it.”

“Okay,” she relented.

“I’ll just wait over there in that Mustang,” he said, gesturing toward his car.

She nodded and disappeared in the store.

Luke went back to his car to wait, trying to dismiss the voices that were telling him how wrong it was to get a bottle of vodka. He hadn’t had a drink in months. And he still might not. Just because he was having someone buy him some alcohol didn’t mean he was necessarily going to drink it. He just wanted to have it with him…like a security blanket.

Yeah, that’s it.

A few minutes later the young lady emerged from the store with a couple of bags. She made a beeline for his car. Luke had been half-afraid she might just take off with his money. He lowered the window so she could deliver the package.

“Thanks,” he said as she handed it to him.

“You’re welcome,” she replied. “Just please be careful. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Don’t won’t. I’ll be fine,” he assured her as he put the bag on the passenger’s seat.

But he was anything but fine.

Now what?

Luke needed to place where he could go to sort this all out and no one would bother him. The park would be too public. He was liable to run into someone he knew there. Right now Luke wanted to be alone.

The warehouse district was a good place to get lost. Luke and Kevin had gotten shitfaced there a few times. But the area was depressing not to mention a bit dangerous. And Luke didn’t really want to go to a place that reminded him of yet another straight boy he had an unrequited crush on.

Luke turned right, toward the water. The docks would offer the sanctuary he needed. All he had to do was head out on one of the piers and he’d be able to vanish for awhile. Granted, sometimes the docks weren’t much safer than the warehouse district but the view of the river was a hell of a lot better.

Activity at the docks was minimal for a Tuesday afternoon. And for that Luke was grateful. He parked the Mustang as close to Pier 18 as he could and grabbed the brown paper bag the bottle of Absolut was in. The pier was deserted so he trekked all the way to the end of it, sitting down on the cold concrete and placing the bag next to him.

Jade and Noah.

“No…no…no….” Luke murmured, rocking back and forth. “Noah wouldn’t go there. He’s gay. I know he’s gay. He wants me. I saw it with my own eyes.”

*But he hasn’t talked to you since that day.*

“Noah’s scared. I was scared when I first realized what I felt for Kevin,” Luke said softly as he...
stared at the river. “He’s not going to do anything. Noah wouldn’t do that to me. He wouldn’t. I just know it.”

Luke blew out a long, calming breath. Noah wouldn’t lie to him. He’d told him he wasn’t interested in Jade so he wasn’t interested in Jade. Noah’s feelings didn’t suddenly change overnight.

Noah had been hard. Luke had done that to him. Not Jade. Jade could never do that do Noah.

Everything was going to be okay. He just needed to have a little faith.

Then Luke’s phone beeped, indicating that he had a text message. He was half afraid to see who it was from. But of course his curiosity got the best of him so he pulled the phone out of his pocket and discovered it was from Jade.

Fuck.

*Just delete it,* an inner voice said.

However, he didn’t listen to it and opened it.

**Fucked Noah in barn. Hes so not gay. J**

Tears stung Luke’s eyes as he flipped his phone shut and stuffed it back in his pocket. Why did he keep doing this to himself? Why did he have to fall for another one of his straight friends? Why did this hurt worse than Kevin?

His heart ached. He felt as if everything he’d known about Noah was a lie. Noah had ultimately chosen Jade over him, leaving him alone. Luke was always left alone.

He needed to make the pain go away. And Luke knew just how to do it. He reached for the bottle of Absolut Vodka and unscrewed the top.
Chapter 28

“Doesn’t this feel nice?” Jade asked, placing Noah’s hand on her bare breast.

“Yes,” Noah whispered hoarsely.

But it was a lie. Noah didn’t feel the same white hot heat he felt when he touched Luke. He felt nothing but the urge to just get the hell out of there. This wasn’t right. His cock wasn’t responding. How was he going to be able to do this?

Did he really want to do this?

Before he could answer, Jade’s lips were on his kissing him forcefully. Her tongue tried to push its way inside his mouth but Noah kept his lips clamped firmly together. “No!” Noah spat, pushing Jade away from him. “This isn’t right.”

“Don’t worry. No one will see.”

“No, we shouldn’t do this,” Noah insisted. “I changed my mind.”

“Come on, Noah,” Jade said, reaching for his belt buckle. “Don’t be afraid. I know you want this. It’s okay if you’re still a virgin. I can be nice and gentle with you. It won’t hurt a bit. I promise—you’ll like it. A lot. I’ll fuck you sooo good,” she murmured, brushing her lips against his neck.

“I’m not a virgin,” he lied. “This just isn’t right. Mr. Snyder trusted me to take care of everything while he was away.”

Jade rested her hands on his hips. “He’ll never know. Just let me take care of you, Noah. We can have so much fun together—” she purred.

“No, Jade!” Noah said, stepping away from her. “I said no! Just please put your clothes back on and go!”

“What is your problem?” Jade demanded, her eyes narrowing.

“I was just about to ask the same thing,” Emma demanded, standing at the stall door. “What on earth is going on in here? Jade, put your clothing on this instant!”

Noah just wanted to disappear—it was bad enough that Jade was half-naked trying to seduce him, but having Emma discover them was his worst nightmare. What must Emma think of him out here with Jade half dressed when Holden was out of town? He really messed up big time. This was just what he needed as if his life wasn’t one big colossal mess already.

And now it was going to get even worse.

“I think you better head on home, Jade,” Emma said as Jade buttoned up her blouse. “You shouldn’t be coming around here when Noah should be working. You know better than that, young lady. My stables are not some brothel. I better not see you in here again!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jade sneered. She shot both of them daggers before storming out of the barn.

Noah had never seen Mrs. Snyder so angry. And to think he was partially to blame. Mrs. Snyder had done so much for him and his mother. The mere thought of letting her down just devastated him.
“Oh my god, Mrs. Snyder,” Noah cried as tears spilled down his cheeks. “I’m so…so….sorry. I told her to leave - honestly I did, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“I’m not surprised, Noah,” Emma calmly replied.

“P-p-please don’t fire me,” Noah begged, desperate not to lose his job. He and his mother needed to survive. He didn’t even want to think that he could have put their future him jeopardy. He just had to make it right. “I’ll never let anything like this happen again. I should have made her leave. I’m so…so…sorry.”

“Oh, Noah.” Emma came over and wrapped her arms around him. “You didn’t do anything wrong, dear. Jade has been up to no good long before you ever came to town. I’ve had her number for a long time.” She gently rubbed circles on his back.

“P-p-please don’t tell my mom,” he sobbed. “She’d be so disappointed in me.” Noah knew his mother didn’t like Jade (not that he could blame her) and she wouldn’t be happy that he’d allowed himself to be put in such a precarious situation. What if Emma hadn’t been so understanding? He could have ruined everything for them.

“Noah, you really didn’t do anything wrong,” she tried to reassure him.

“Please,” he begged, pulling away from Emma, his eyes meeting hers with a pleading gaze.

Emma placed her hand on his damp cheek. “Okay, dear,” she relented. “I won’t say a word.”

He let out a shaky breath. “Thank you.”

“I want you to let me know if Jade bothers you here again,” Emma told him. “I don’t care if she’s Lily’s niece. I want to make sure that she stays away from this farm. All right?”

Noah could tell that she meant business. He wouldn’t be surprised if she had a shotgun hidden somewhere that she used to run people off her land. “Yes, ma’am,” he replied.

Emma smiled warmly. “Now, why don’t you go home and get some rest?” she suggested. “You’ve had a rough day.”

If only Noah could get some sleep, but it wasn’t that easy. “I need to finish polishing the tack,” Noah said, picking up the rag that Jade had tossed aside. “I don’t have much left but I want to be sure that I have everything done before Mr. Snyder returns tomorrow.”

“Then I’ll help you,” Emma decided.

“I couldn’t ask you—”

“You weren’t,” she corrected him. “And this is my farm so if I want to help out I can. I’ve polished plenty of tack in my day so I can help you get through the rest of it in no time.”

“Thank you.” Noah smiled. Sometimes it was easiest just accepting help. He welcomed the company. Emma had a way of making him believe everything would be all right even when logically it didn’t seem like it could be.

Together they worked side by side, polishing a couple of saddles. Emma told him how her father had taught her how to polish tack. Noah was positively enthralled by her stories of growing up on the farm. He hadn’t realized that it had been in the family for so long. He’d become part of its history which was an honor.
Once they were finished, Emma gave him a big hug and sent him on his way to get some rest. Noah only hoped that it would come. He was breathing a little bit easier. Having sex with Jade would have been a huge mistake. Thank god he’d come to his senses.

But there was still Luke…

_No…no…no…I can’t._

Noah stretched out on his bed and closed his eyes, pushing all thoughts of Luke from his mind, which wasn’t an easy task. He always thought of Luke before he went to sleep. Actually, he was guilty of doing other things while thinking of Luke. But he couldn’t do that anymore.

Finally, exhaustion overtook him and he drifted off to sleep.

*****

Luke opened the bottle of Absolut and brought it to his lips. This would make the pain go away. Everything would be so much better once he was completely numb. His mind would be void of Jade and Noah.

But what would happen when he sobered up?

It wouldn’t change the fact that Noah was straight after all and he’d still fucked Jade. Luke’s dream of being Noah’s boyfriend was just that—a stupid, silly dream.

Fuck.

Luke squeezed his eyes shut and put the bottle down. He needed to get a fucking grip on himself. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his cell phone and sought out a familiar number. As the phone rang he held his breath.

_Please…please…please…_

“Hello?”


“Luke, what is it?” she asked, her voice full of concern. “Are you hurt?”

“No, but I really need your help,” he told her. “I’m down at the docks—Pier 18—is there any way you can come?”

“I’ll be right there,” she promised. “Just hang on.”

“I will,” he whispered and then snapped his phone shut.

But he needed to get rid of the temptation before he did something really stupid. Luke snatched the bottle of vodka and took it to the edge of the pier, pouring it out into the river. As the last of it spilled out of the bottle, Luke felt a sense of relief wash through him. At least temporarily.

Luke put the empty bottle back into the paper bag and sat down on the concrete. Maddie couldn’t get there fast enough.

*Fucked Noah in barn. He’s so not gay.*

“Why did you do it, Noah?” Luke asked as tears spilled from his eyes. “Why? Why were you
fucking lying to me?” It hurt him to think that maybe Noah was more like Kevin than he’d originally thought. All that mattered was getting laid when it came down to it.

Jade was right after all. He was getting delusional—imagining looks that hadn’t been there. Luke was so desperate for a boyfriend that he creating scenarios that just flat out didn’t exist. No wonder Noah was so freaked out the other day—he had felt Luke’s arousal—seen Luke’s desire for him…

Fuck.

Luke had probably ruined another friendship. He buried his head in his hands and began to cry. Why did he keep doing this?

********

Luke’s phone call really had Maddie worried. She’d never heard him so upset. He sounded as if the world were coming to an end. At first she was certain he had to be hurt, but he said he wasn’t. Maybe he was in trouble…

Regardless, Maddie was on her way to him, breaking every speed law in the process. If she got pulled over, she was already prepared to use the fact that she was dating Lieutenant Hughes’ son to her advantage. Getting to Luke quickly was imperative. She needed to make sure he was safe and that he didn’t do anything stupid.

Being at the docks wasn’t the smartest move on his part. Casey’s mom spoke about the shady dealings that went on down there. Good thing Casey wasn’t around when she got the call or else he’d have a fit, knowing where she was headed. It didn’t matter to her where Luke was at. She’d go anywhere for him. Luke was one of her best friends. If it weren’t for him, she would have probably dropped out of high school by now. Sharing her senior year with Luke made it bearable—even enjoyable at times.

Maddie didn’t have any difficulty spotting Luke’s car. His red Mustang stuck out like a whore in a convent. She parked next to it and then headed toward Pier 18. Immediately, she spotted Luke sitting on the concrete, feet drawn up to his chest, head buried in his hands.

This is worse than I thought…

Luke looked devastated. What the hell could have happened to him? she wondered as she jogged toward him.

“Oh, Luke! What’s going on?” Maddie knelt next to him, wrapping her arm around him to comfort him.

He glanced up at her, his long lashes soaked with tears. “Everything is such a mess,” Luke sniffed.

Maddie was completely baffled. For the most part Luke had been fine at school earlier that day. He was a bit quieter than usual but overall it didn’t seem like there was anything wrong. And now only a couple of hours later he was a wreck.

“What’s a mess?” she asked, rubbing his back. “Luke, you know you can tell me anything.”

Instead of talking, Luke pulled out his cell phone, opened it, punched a couple of buttons and wordlessly—yes wordlessly—handed it to her. Maddie was not expecting the text that was displayed and, obviously, neither had Luke.

So, Jade was claiming to have fucked Noah. But it was bullshit. Noah would never, ever have sex with Jade. For one thing, Noah was gay. Maddie was almost certain of it. The way he looked at
Luke was a dead giveaway. Noah was completely smitten with him. And he also hung on every word Luke said. It was pretty darn adorable. Maddie was surprised that Luke hadn’t picked up on this by now.

Unless she was off base…

Regardless, Noah would not have sex with Jade. When they had lunch at Al’s Noah hadn’t shown the slightest interest in her. He only seemed to have eyes for Luke that day.

“She’s lying to you, Luke,” Maddie said, handing the phone back to him. Maddie didn’t know why Jade would lie to her cousin but she wouldn’t put it past her. She didn’t think Jade actually had any genuine feelings for Noah. No…Jade was most likely using him to try to make Will jealous or something sick like that.

“I saw them,” Luke quietly replied as he stared out at the river.

Whoa…wait a second. She definitely wasn’t expecting this turn of events. However, there had to be a logical explanation.

“What exactly did you see?” Maddie carefully asked. She still wasn’t buying that anything had happened between Jade and Noah. Unless Luke had actually seen them in the act she wouldn’t believe it.

“They were in the stable together. Jade didn’t have her top on…or her bra. And Noah—” Luke’s voice hitched. “Noah’s hand was on her breast. She asked him if he liked how it felt and he said yes. I didn’t stick around to see the rest. But from Jade’s text we know what happened.” Luke buried his face in his hands.

“Hey…hey…hey,” she murmured, resting her head on his shoulder. “I still think you’re jumping to conclusions.” Maddie truly believed it too. There was more to this story because she just couldn’t see Noah going there—not with Jade. And she wasn’t ready to accept that she was totally wrong about Noah. “You really like him, don’t you?” she asked, nudging him gently.


Right. Luke was probably falling in love with Noah. He could deny it all he wanted but she had eyes. Luke was smitten – head over heels – most likely convinced that Noah had hung the moon.

“Luke, you wouldn’t be so upset if you didn’t have feelings for him,” Maddie carefully pointed out. Just as the words were out of her mouth, her eyes caught sight of a brown paper bag next to him and snatched it half afraid of what she’d find inside.

Luke quickly lifted his head, eyes widening as the realization of what she discovered struck him full force. “Maddie, it’s not what you think!” he pleaded.

Oh please no. Her stomach plummeted as she reached inside and pulled out an empty bottle of Absolut.

“Please tell me that you did not drink this.”

“I didn’t! I swear!” Luke insisted. “I wanted to. I was so close to doing it but I called you instead and then dumped it into the river so I wouldn’t be tempted.”

Maddie put down the bottle and threw her arms around him, relieved that Luke had the willpower not to give in to his demons. “I’m so happy that you did, Luke. You know you can tell me anything.
I’ll always be here for you.”

“I do like Noah,” Luke confessed. “A lot. And I thought he might like me too. We were playing basketball the other day and things got a bit—heated. We wrestled for the ball and ended up on the grass. Noah was on top of me…God…it felt so good…and my…uh…body reacted to it but so did his or so I thought. Maybe I was imagining it. I don’t know anymore.” Luke sighed, obviously exasperated by his situation. “I thought he might want me. I really thought he was going to kiss me. At that moment I was so sure that he was gay.”

“Did something happen?”

“His mom called us and Noah got off me so fast. Things have been very awkward since then. And then Jade found my journals and read them. Of course, she thinks I’m imagining everything,” Luke said, shaking his head ruefully. “She says there’s no way Noah can be gay. It’s all in my head. I don’t know what to think anymore.”

Maddie didn’t know what to say. She was completely torn.

While she was almost sure that Noah was gay, she didn’t want to get Luke’s hopes up just in case she was wrong. Maddie loved Luke dearly and didn’t want to see him get hurt again either. He’d been through so much in such a short time. Kevin had shattered his heart. Luke had also dealt with his mother being in a coma and his bio dad trying to send him off to some sort of straight camp.

So she decided to keep quiet about her suspicions about Noah. At least for now. But she could still offer him advice and give him reassurance.

“You’re thinking way too much,” Maddie told him. “Noah isn’t suddenly going to change his feelings about Jade. If he told you a couple of weeks ago that he didn’t like her than he still doesn’t like her.”

“But—”

“He isn’t,” she insisted. “Every time I’ve seen Noah around her it looks like he wants to hightail it in the other direction.”

“Maybe he just wanted to get laid,” Luke countered.

“Do you honestly think Noah is like that?”

Luke was quiet for what seemed like forever before he finally spoke. “No.”

“And if Noah is straight are you going to stop being friends with him?”

“No.”

“Good because I would hate to think all you wanted was to get into his pants because that would make you as shallow as your cousin. Noah is special and if you really care about him he might need you now.”


“Then nothing has changed between the two of you,” Maddie pointed out. “I think Noah needs you as his friend now more than ever—especially if he is gay. Noah hasn’t even been in Oakdale a month yet. You’re the closest friend he has. I’m sure he doesn’t want to lose you.”
Luke glanced at her, brown eyes wide and wet. “I don’t want to lose him either. I can’t go through what I went through with Kevin.”

“Noah definitely isn’t Kevin,” Maddie reassured him. “He already knows you’re gay so he’s not going to bail on you because of it.”

“I’m sure that he probably figured out how I feel about him after our little encounter. That could change everything. Being friends with a gay guy is one thing, having him crush on you is another.”

Maddie reached out, taking his hand. “Sweetie, I think you’re worrying about things that you just don’t need to be right now.”

“Easy for you to say.”

She sighed. “You know who it hasn’t been easy on? Noah. Just for a moment try putting yourself in his shoes. Being friends with you can be quite intimidating.”

“Maddie—”

“Please hear me out,” she quickly cut him off. “Luke, Noah and his mom are living on your grandmother’s farm, Noah is working for your dad, and didn’t you say when they arrived in town it looked like they’d been homeless?” Luke reluctantly nodded his head so she continued, “You come from a wealthy family. You drive a nice car. And you’re drop dead gorgeous. I bet Noah thinks he can’t measure up.”

“None of that matters to me,” Luke insisted. “And Noah is the one who is drop dead gorgeous—not me.”

“You’re both easy on the eyes. I know that none of the other stuff matters and you know that,” Maddie replied. “Now it’s time for you to show Noah. Just be his friend—slowly gain his trust just like you’ve been doing. I bet Noah hasn’t had anyone in his life that he’s been able to really talk to in quite awhile so just give him time.”

Luke smile weakly. “You know patience isn’t really my strong suit.”

“I know,” she chuckled. “But you better give it a shot.” Then Maddie took a deep breath. There was something that’s been bothering her for quite awhile and she was sure how Luke was going to take it. While Luke could see Jade’s faults and was undoubtedly very mad at her, he always seemed to defend her in the end which made Maddie crazy. But she couldn’t hold her tongue any longer. “Luke, you know I love you to death, right?”

“Yeeeaaah.”

“Why do you keep letting Jade get the best of you?” she asked. “Here she is once again manipulating you. When she first came to town it was threatening to ‘out’ you, then she got you to side with her when she was fucking around with Will, and now she’s keeps going after Noah when she knows how you feel about him. Before you try to defend her—which I pray to god that you don’t—you need to ask yourself why you always listen to her even when you know she’s a lying, manipulative bitch?”


“Sorry, but it needed to be said. I just can’t sit by and watch you constantly get played by her.”

Luke slowly nodded. “No, you’re right,” he sighed. “And, believe it or not, I have called her out on
her shit. But yet I still fall for it.”

“Why?”

“She’s my cousin—family—I guess being raised a Snyder I want to think that family wouldn’t constantly try to hurt you, but I should know better,” he admitted, “look who my bio dad is.”

“I wasn’t the best judge of my own family,” Maddie said, raising her palms in mock surrender. “I have a psycho sister who tried to kill half the town and my brother has gambling issues. You know, just because someone is a blood relative it doesn’t make them a good person.”

“I know.”

“Can you promise me that you’ll stop taking Jade’s word as gospel?”

“I’ll try.”

“Do or do not—there is no try.”

Luke rolled his eyes. “Are you trying to win me over by actually quoting a movie that I’ve seen?”

“Yes,” Maddie admitted. “I hate to see you so sad. You deserve to be happy. You’ve been through enough crap this year.”

“Agreed.” Luke nodded. “Thank you for coming to my rescue. If you hadn’t come, I would have done something really stupid.”

“That’s why I’m here—to keep you on the straight and narrow.”

Luke playfully swatted her arm. “Bite your tongue about the straight part.”

“Sorry. I’d never wish that on you!”

Luke got to his feet and offered her his hand. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Maddie took it, allowing him to pull her up. “Gladly. And I want you to promise me that you’re not to going go chasing after Noah today. If he wants to talk, he’ll call you. Just give him some space. God only knows what kind of head games Jade might have played with him.”

“All the more reason—”

“Luke, Noah isn’t going anywhere,” Maddie reminded him. “He lives on your grandmother’s farm. Trust me on this on. Okay?”

“Okay,” he finally relented.

“Good.” Maddie smiled. “I’ll see you in school tomorrow.” She gave him a quick hug before getting into her car. Hopefully, Luke would listen to her and not do anything rash.
Chapter 29

Charlene hadn’t been able to shake the image of Noah lying on top of Luke in the grass a few days ago. Ever since she had interrupted them, Noah had been acting weird. Whenever she had tried to talk to him, he had insisted that he was fine.

Then she overheard a couple of teenagers talking about that “gay Snyder kid” who sounded a lot like Luke. If this were true, everything she’d seen on Sunday made a lot more sense. She could have interrupted an intimate moment between the boys. Or it could have been completely innocent. One thing she knew for certain was Noah hasn’t been the same since that evening.

Charlene planned on stopping off at the farm after her breakfast shift at the diner. Luke wouldn’t be home when she dropped in to visit Emma which would be a good thing because she planned on asking her about him. Maybe if she got more insight about Luke it would help her deal with her own son. Charlene was getting desperate at this point because she was worried about Noah.

“Hi, Emma,” she said, cautiously stepping into the kitchen of the farmhouse. “I hope you’re not too busy.”

Emma, who was sitting at the kitchen table hunched over a newspaper with a pen in hand. “No, I was just doing a crossword puzzle,” she replied, smiling. “I think I got about as much of it done as I can.”

“I was hoping that we might be able to chat for a few minutes,” she said as she approached the table. “Please, sit down,” she replied, setting the pen down. “Would you like a cup of tea or some coffee?”

Charlene pulled out a chair and sat down. “No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

“So what brings you by this afternoon?” Emma asked, smiling.

“I was hoping to talk to you about Luke,” Charlene admitted.


“No, no,” Charlene quickly assured her. “I was just… I hesitated. This was going to be harder than she thought. She didn’t want to put Emma on the defensive, especially after she’s been nothing but kind to her and Noah. However, Charlene really needed to know for her own piece of mind so she pressed on. “Is Luke gay?” she blurted out.

“Why on earth would you ask that?” Emma’s voice had taken on a defensive edge.

“I heard some boys talking about it at the diner and - ”

“Idle gossip runs rapid in this town. It hurts me to hear that my grandson is a victim of it,” Emma said, shaking her head sadly. “I suppose you want to know if it’s true.”

“Yes.” She felt incredibly guilty for admitting it, but she still needed to know.

“Yes, he is gay,” Emma replied coolly. “I certainly hope this doesn’t change how you feel about Luke. I just won’t tolerate prejudice—”

“Oh no!” Charlene exclaimed, reaching for Emma’s hand. “Luke is such a sweet boy. He’s been such a good friend to Noah. I would never think differently because he’s gay. Never.”
“But yet you felt the need to ask if he was.”

Yes she did. But her intentions weren’t sinister. Now that sure knew about Luke she honestly didn’t feel any differently toward him. “I just wondered since he and Noah are becoming such good friends. I think Luke is a good influence on Noah. He seems to make him happy,” Charlene explained.

“I’m happy to hear that,” Emma said, smiling softly. “Luke is really a special boy. He’s been through so much since he came out in the spring. Lily and Holden had a mixed reaction about it. Holden had suspected so it was easier for him to handle, but Lily was in denial for quite awhile which was really hard on Luke.

“I’m not sure if you’re aware, but Holden isn’t Luke’s birth father. That would be Damian Grimaldi, who lives in Malta and was once married to Lily. Holden adopted Luke and raised him as his own. This past summer Damian returned to town and when he found out about Luke, he wanted to send him to this camp that would try to make him straight.”

“Oh my goodness,” Charlene gasped. Damian Grimaldi sounded like someone that Winston Mayer would take hunting with him. Two peas in a pod for sure. Poor Luke. It must have been an incredibly difficult time for him.

“That man lied and tried to manipulate Luke. He really put him through the wringer, but it all worked out in the end and Damian returned to Malta,” Emma explained. “Unfortunately, Luke’s heartache didn’t stop there. When his best friend found out he was gay, he ended the friendship. So I’m pretty protective of my grandson. He’s had enough heartache to last him a lifetime.”

“Yes, he has,” she quietly replied.

So now she knew—Luke was gay. But that didn’t necessarily mean Noah was gay. There was probably a simple explanation for what she saw the other day. The boys could have been just goofing around—roughhousing. Boys did that all the time.

Charlene just didn’t want to think about Noah possibly facing so much bigotry and hatred in the world. His life had already been hard enough…

Emma squeezed her hand. “How come I have a feeling that’s not the only thing on your mind?”

Charlene forced a smile. “You know me. I’m always concerned about Noah,” she admitted. “Right now it seems like the weight of the world is on his shoulders. I’ve tried to talk to him but he keeps telling me that there’s nothing wrong.”

Emma slowly nodded but remained silent. Charlene had a feeling that there was something she wasn’t telling her.

“What is it, Emma?” she gently pressed.

“I know why Noah has been upset,” she admitted. “He had asked me not to say anything, but I know as a mother I would want to know so I’m going to break his confidence.”

Charlene was almost afraid to ask. “What is it?”

“The other day walked in on Jade and Noah in the stable and she had her top off and she was propositioning Noah…”

“Oh dear,” she gasped, feeling all of the color drain out of her face. Why did that girl keep turning up
like a bad penny? “Do I want to know what happened?”

“Noah was telling her to put her clothes back on, but she wasn’t listening. That’s when I made my presence known.”

“Thank goodness.”

“Noah was really upset,” Emma explained. “He was so worried about getting fired, but I assured him that wouldn’t happen. And, of course, he didn’t want me to tell you. He insisted that nothing happened between them. I’m pretty sure he was telling the truth.”

“I’m so happy that you walked in when you did,” Charlene told her. “I don’t like that Jade girl. I wish she’d just leave Noah alone.”

“She won’t be bothering him here. Jade is not welcome at this farm.”

Charlene forced a smile. “At least I know what’s been bothering Noah. Now I just need to figure out what to do.”

“Would you like some advice from someone who has raised a couple of boys of her own?”

“Please.”

“Well, I would suspect that Noah is still pretty innocent,” Emma ventured.

“I think so too,” Charlene agreed. The reaction Emma had gotten when she walked in on Noah and Jade led her to believe that Noah was still a virgin. “I’ve had the sex talk with him, given him condoms so he’s safe, but I’ve always encouraged him to wait for the right person.”

“It’s only natural that he’s going to be curious, but I don’t think anything happened between them. Right now I think he’s embarrassed so I think bringing this incident up again would only make the situation worse,” she explained. “I wouldn’t worry about him. He wasn’t about to be manipulated by Jade. Noah has a good head on his shoulders.”

“But he’s also a teenage boy,” Charlene sighed.

Emma patted her arm. “You’ve raised him well, Gloria. Trust that he will do the right thing.”

“I will even if it gives me a few more gray hairs.”

“My children gave me plenty.” Emma chuckled as she rose from her chair. “I made a lemon Bundt cake this morning and you’re not leaving here until you have a piece.”

Even after having her questions answered, Charlene still found that she was still more confused than ever. She had thought if she found out if Luke was gay it would be the missing piece the puzzle. However, nothing was solved.

Had she really thought if Luke was gay it would mean Noah was as well?

That was crazy. She was silly to even entertain such a notion.

After what Emma told her about Noah and Jade in the barn, Charlene was convinced that she had probably been wrong about Noah all along. He was probably experimenting or at least trying to and then thinking better of it.

Or denying his sexuality...
If only she could get Noah to open up. Charlene knew that she just couldn’t come right out and ask him if he were gay. Not with the way he’d been acting as of late. Somehow she’d just have to find a way to let him know that she was there for him.
Chapter 30

Noah was surprised to find his mom awake and making breakfast when he stumbled out of bed early the next morning after yet another fitful night of sleep. Usually his mom was still asleep when Noah left for the stables. He was used to just grabbing a bowl of cereal for breakfast. If Noah’s stomach wasn’t still so twisted into knots, the delicious smells coming from the kitchen would have been welcomed.

The fact that this piping hot breakfast would come with the company of his mother, who had been quite concerned about him over the past few days wasn’t helping his nerves. This meal undoubtedly was another attempt to get to the bottom of things. Noah loved his mother dearly, but he just wished she would give him his space. Her constant barrage of questions as well as her concern was only making him feel guiltier.

“Good morning, string bean,” Charlene said, turning to greet him with a spatula in hand.

“Morning, Mom,” Noah replied, ambling into the kitchen.

“What are you doing up so early?”

“I’m working the breakfast shift today,” she cheerfully informed him. “I thought it would be nice to cook you a good, hearty meal before we both had to head off to work.”

Noah smiled weakly. “Thanks.”

“Could you get some syrup out of the refrigerator?”

“Sure.” He got out the bottle and placed it on the kitchen table. Then Noah proceeded to stroll over to the cupboard to get out some plates for them.

“You are such a great help,” she said, scooping the last pancake off the griddle. “I don’t know what I’d do without you. The coffee should be done so you can pour us a couple of cups.”

After Noah had set the table, he did just that, fixing his mom’s mug just the way she liked it with just a splash of cream. He hoped that this meal wouldn’t turn into the inquisition. Noah really didn’t like being so evasive with his mother. But he also couldn’t confide in her this time either. It really was for the best—at least that’s what he kept telling himself.

Her waitressing skills were on display as she sauntered over to the table balancing plates of pancakes, bacon, and toast. “Breakfast is served,” she proudly announced. “I hope everything tastes okay.”

“It’ll be great, Mom,” he assured her. “Thank you for going through all of this trouble.”

“Cooking for my baby is never any trouble.”

Noah wondered if he’d still be “her baby” or “her string bean” if she knew how close he was to kissing Luke when she’d interrupted him. He quickly dismissed the thought before his mother picked up on his mood change and launched into worry mode.

“I still appreciate it,” he replied, spearing a couple of pancakes off the serving platter.

His mother gingerly sat down across from him. Something about the way she was carrying herself didn’t seem quite right. “Are you okay?” he asked, immediately forgetting about the food on his plate.
She hesitated for a split second and then snatched a couple of pieces of bacon from the plate at the center of the table. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“But you seem to be moving a little slowly,” he pressed.

“I’m just tired,” she quickly replied. “I’m not used to getting up before sunrise. I’ll be as good as new once I have my cup of coffee and eat something. I have a long day ahead of me. Henry asked if I could also work the lunch shift as well today and I told him that I would because the extra money will be worth it.”

Noah frowned. “You shouldn’t push yourself. I have a lot of money saved up—”

“I’m perfectly capable of providing for this family. Your money is supposed to go toward fun things and new clothes. When was the last time you spent some money on yourself?”

“The last time you took me shopping,” he quietly admitted.

His mother slowly shook her head. “I wish you could get out more. One of the reasons I got you movie passes was so that you’d go out and enjoy yourself. I know how much you’ve missed seeing movies in the theater.”

Noah lowered his head, suddenly feeling like he was back on the hot seat again. He took a bite of the pancakes. “I’ll eventually use them,” he mumbled.

“I know you don’t have a driver’s license that reflects the name you’re using, but I don’t see any harm in letting you borrow the farm truck for an evening. You’re a very safe driver. I hate seeing you trapped here.”

“I’m not trapped here,” Noah told her. “At least it doesn’t feel that way to me. I’ve made some friends so it’s not like I’m all alone.”

“But wouldn’t it be nice to go to the movies with one of your friends?” his mom suggested. “Maddie would probably love to go—”

Not this again. His mom was going to push the dating thing—not that he could really blame her after what she saw a few days ago. There was no doubt in his mind that his mom wanted to steer him on the path of the straight and narrow.

“She has a boyfriend. And before you suggest it, I’m not interested in Jade either,” he quickly cut her off, praying that this subject would be dropped which would be one hell of a miracle.

His mom set down her fork. “Noah, I wasn’t suggesting a date. I only suggested Maddie because I know she’s a movie buff like you. You could always ask Luke. You two always seem to have fun together.”

Noah could feel the color drain from his face. Had his mother picked up on the fact that he had an enormous crush on Luke? Was she trying to find out if he was gay? Regardless, he needed to stay poised and not give away anything.

“We’re friends,” he replied a bit surprised by how calm his voice sounded because inside he was freaking out.

“That’s my point. Friends hang out and do things like go to the movies - at least they did back when I was a teenager. I don’t think things changed that much between then and now.”
“Yes, friends do things like that.” Noah sighed.

“Well, then borrow the truck some night and hang out with your friend,” she said with a smile as she picked up her fork and plucked a pancake from the platter.

“Thanks for the offer. I might take you up on it.”

That is, if Noah could summon the courage to face Luke again. Not only was he still reeling over their close encounter, Noah was also worried about what Jade might have said to Luke about the disaster in the barn. She undoubtedly would tell Luke what an awful person he was and how he’d gotten her banned from the farm.

His mom beamed. “Good. I just want you to have fun.”

Her definition of fun and Noah’s differed, especially when it came to Luke. She certainly wasn’t encouraging him to ask Luke out on a date. As far as his mom was concerned, he and Noah were friends. Sadly that’s all they could ever be.

Noah hurried through the rest of his meal, eager to avoid any more of his mother’s friendly suggestions. He loved her so much but he wished she’d just back off. Noah wasn’t sure how much of this he could take.

“I better get going,” Noah said, grabbing his plate and rising from his chair. “Mr. Snyder will be back today so I want to get there a little early to double check everything.”

He placed his dirty dishes in the sink and then stopped to give his mom a kiss on the cheek before he headed out. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said, gazing up at him proudly. “Have a good day, string bean.”

Noah slipped on his jacket and then headed out into the cool morning air. The moon and the stars were still out in their full glory since the sun wouldn’t be making its appearance for another hour or so. The farm was so exceptionally peaceful at this time of day. If only he could find the same peace within himself.

As he trekked toward the barn, Noah did his best to dismiss his conversation with his mother, trying not to read too much into her suggestion about the movies. There was a good chance that she wasn’t pushing for him to go out on a date. It was still hard to ignore all of the other signals she’s given off lately—the sex talk, the condoms, the cologne, new clothes, and the movie passes.

Once Noah was inside the barn, surrounded by the horses his brain went straight into work mode. There were hungry animals that needed to be attended to and Noah wanted to get a head start on things to show Holden that he’d been able to keep everything under control while he was gone.

Well, almost everything.

Jade had almost managed to convince him to make the worse mistake of his life. But he hadn’t. Emma promised to keep his secret so no one would find out. Noah wouldn’t allow himself to consider Jade spilling the beans.

“Good morning, Noah,” Holden greeted him as he sauntered in from the exercise ring. “You’re here a little early.”

“I was hoping to do one last walk through to make sure everything was in order,” Noah sheepishly admitted.

“I’ve been here for a half hour and I didn’t come across anything that looked like it was neglected in
my absence,” Holden informed him. “It looks like you did a great job of keeping everything running while I was away.” He patted Noah on the back.

Noah tried not to stiffen up when Holden touched him but failed for a split second. He wished he could stop associating his innocent touches with the abusive ones inflicted on him by his father. In his heart Noah knew that Holden would never hurt him but years of physical abuse from his father still lingered.

“Thank you, sir,” he quickly replied, doing his best to relax. “Hopefully, you’ll still feel that way when the order from Hamilton’s comes in.”

Holden grinned. “I’m sure I will. You really went above and beyond the call of duty to step in for me on such short notice.”

“I’m always willing to help.”

“There will be something extra for you when you get paid on Friday,” he replied. “Now I think we should start feeding these hungry horses before we have a revolt on our hands.”

Noah was grateful to get to work.

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Later that afternoon Holden had gotten a phone call that Faith needed to be picked up early from school because she had gotten sick. Lily had been in the midst of a board meeting at the Lakeview so Holden had to be the one to get her.

“I’m sorry I have to desert you again, Noah,” he said, shaking his head as he pocketed his cell phone.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Snyder,” Noah assured him. “I can finish up here. Taking care of your daughter is top priority.”

“I’m very lucky to have such a trustworthy helper.”

A pang of guilt flashed through him. Trustworthy was the last thing he’s felt lately. “I hope Faith isn’t too sick.”

“Hopefully some TLC and chicken soup will do the trick.”

Noah couldn’t imagine the Colonel ever dropping everything to pick him up from school when he was sick. He certainly never would have given him a dose of TLC or chicken soup. It would have been more likely a good smack and then his mother probably would have gotten slapped for allowing him to get sick in the first place.

“Faith’s very lucky to have you to take care of her,” he murmured.

Holden nodded, a soft smile playing across his lips but his eyes seemed a bit sad. “Don’t stick around too long. You’ve been working a lot lately. I don’t want you to wear yourself down and get sick.”

“I won’t.”

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

After Holden left, Noah swept up and then headed to get some carrots for Whitman. They had a lot to talk about.
Luke was seething as he drove home from school. He had hoped it would be an escape for him given the crap that had gone down with Jade. But he wasn’t so lucky. School had sucked royally. It wasn’t because of a surprise quiz or anything else to do with his classes.

His hell came in the form of Chad Fitzsimmons, who was a friend of Kevin and Mark. Chad had tried out for Varsity basketball the year before but hadn’t made it; instead he was given a spot on the JV team, which hadn’t set well with his enormous ego. Chad had caught Luke outside of the gym, copying down the information for the Varsity basketball tryouts, which were a little over a week away.

“You’re not seriously considering trying out for the team,” Chad sneered, strutting over toward him.

“I certainly am,” Luke replied as he tucked his notebook into his messenger bag.

“What makes you think anyone would want your pansy ass on the team?”

Chad’s comment struck him to the core but Luke wasn’t about to let him see it.

“Afraid you might get beaten out by the gay guy?” Luke calmly countered. “You couldn’t even make Varsity last year.”

“Just keep stay away from the team, cocksucker,” Chad warned. “No one wants to worry about you getting your rocks off watching the other guys in the shower.”

“You don’t know shit,” Luke muttered as he turned and walked away. The school had a zero tolerance rule regarding fighting so he wasn’t about to get suspended and potentially lose the chance to tryout because of Chad’s homophobia.

“That’s it—walk away, you little faggot!” Chad called after him.

And that’s what Luke did even though it killed him to do so. But he vowed that he’d ultimately make Chad pay.

Luke desperately needed to let all of the anger he had pent up due to Chad’s bigoted remarks. He hated days like this—being the butt of some fag joke, snickered at because of his sexuality, or just downright having such hatred spewed at him. Luke always tried to take the higher road, keeping his head up and being dignified. After all, he was the gay poster boy so god forbid he screw up.

By the time he parked his car in the driveway at the farm, some of his anger had subsided but he still felt the urge to escape. And he knew the perfect way, which didn’t involve sneaking some of Grandma Emma’s elderberry wine. Luke dashed upstairs and quickly changed into an old Chicago Bulls sweatshirt and his cowboy boots. A nice long ride on Whitman would do him a world of good.

However, when Luke entered the stable he could hear Noah talking to someone. Luke stopped short, fearing that Jade might be having another rendezvous with him.

Stop it. They didn’t have sex, he chastised himself.

Luke knew he should probably make his presence known but he remained silent as he crept closer to the sound of Noah’s voice which was becoming louder.
“Whitman, it was just awful,” Noah was saying. “I kept telling Jade no, but she wouldn’t listen to me. I was mortified when Mrs. Snyder walked in because it looked like…like…Jade and I were going to….but it wasn’t the case. I really hate Jade. I thought for sure I was going to be fired but Mrs. Snyder believed me. Thank god she did. I thought I was going to lose everything. And if Luke ever finds out—”

Noah really didn’t have sex with Jade. He never wanted to in the first place. And Noah was still broken up about Jade’s antics.

Luke couldn’t bear to listen to anymore. “I did,” he said, stepping up to Whitman’s stall.

Noah glanced up at him, his eyes filled with horror. “Y-y-you did?”

“Jade sent me a text saying that you guys…uh…fucked.” Luke’s cheeks flamed as he uttered the last word. He suddenly felt a little self-conscious being so blunt with Noah.

“Oh my god,” Noah gasped. He looked like he was ready to make a mad dash for it—and probably would have if Luke hadn’t been blocking his only exit.

“I never believed it though,” Luke fibbed. If Noah knew how quickly he’d jumped to conclusions and then bought into Jade’s bullshit, he would be devastated. “You had told me that you weren’t interested in Jade—”

“I’m not,” Noah insisted. “I’ve never even had sex with anyone.” And then he seemed to realize his admission, quickly ducking his head as his face turned bright crimson.

Noah had never been with anyone. Luke was probably the first to see him naked. Luke wanted to see him naked again—be Noah’s first and have Noah be his. Damn. It would be incredible to share something so special together. The mere thought of it possibly becoming a reality made him a bit dizzy.

Luke could have also admitted that he was also a virgin but instead he squeaked, “Really?”

Noah shrugged. “This is probably going to sound lame but my mom had always told me that my first time should be with someone special—someone I love,” he said, shyly gazing at Luke.

Luke decided to see if he could get Noah to tip his hand. “Whoever she is, she’ll be a lucky girl.”

“Yeah,” Noah replied, glancing away from him.

So much for his fantasy—if Noah is really straight.

Luke wasn’t going to focus on that now. He was determined to heed Maddie’s advice and just be Noah’s friend. Hopefully, everything else would fall into place.

“I’m sorry Jade put you in such a bad situation,” Luke said. “I’ll never forgive her for it.”

“Luke, I don’t want to ruin your relationship with your cousin!”

Luke shook his head. “Jade has done a lot of bad stuff—to me and my friends. In the past I’ve forgiven her but I’m not going to this time. She’s crossed too many lines. I’m done with her. If she ever tries to mess with you again, she’ll be very sorry.”

“Remind me never to get you on my bad side,” Noah said, grinning slightly.

“I think you’re pretty safe.” Luke reached over and stroked Whitman’s mane. “Right, boy?”
“Are you going to take Whitman out?” Noah asked.

“Yeah, I need to ride,” Luke admitted. “It’s been quite a rough day.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

This would have been the perfectly opportunity to vent some of his frustration about Chad. But instead of confiding in Noah, Luke remained silent, not wanting to burden him with the shit he encountered at school for being gay. For all he knew, Noah could be hiding in the closet and Luke didn’t want to give him a reason to lock the door and never come out.

“It’s nothing that a ride on Whit won’t cure.” Luke shrugged it off.

“I can get Whitman ready for you,” Noah suggested. “Just tell me which saddle you use and I can go get it.”

“Noah, you may work for my dad but you’re not my servant,” Luke told him. This was the perfect opportunity for him to try to make Noah understand that they were equals. “I don’t expect you to wait on me. You’re my friend. I hope you don’t think that I’m better than you or that you have to cater to me because of my dad.”

“I only wanted to help,” Noah quickly admitted, casting his eyes downward.

Shit. He didn’t mean to make Noah feel badly either.

“I know,” Luke admitted. “And I appreciate it. I just wanted to make sure that you knew I was nothing special.”

Noah shook his head. “That’s where you’re wrong, Luke,” he corrected him. “You are very special. But you’re also right—we are friends. I need to remember that.”

What they needed was some time off the farm together—just the two of them. It needed to be something casual and fun. Luke came up with the perfect idea. Hopefully, Noah would agree.

“Do you have plans for Halloween?” Luke asked.

“I…uh…don’t think so—”

“If you’re game I thought maybe we could do something.”

“Like what?” Noah asked, raising his eyebrows. “I don’t have a costume for a Halloween party—”

“It’s not a Halloween party. There’s this street fair in Old Town on Halloween night,” Luke explained. “They put up a haunted house in one of the parking lots. There are caramel apples, kettle corn, and games. It might be fun to go and hang out.”

“Yeah that would be great!”

“Really? You don’t think it’s stupid?”

“No, I haven’t done anything for Halloween in awhile,” Noah quietly confessed.

“Then we have to make up for it,” Luke decided.

“Thanks for thinking of me, Luke. I know you have lots of friends you could have asked.”
If Noah only knew just how much Luke thought about him. Luke decided that it was probably best if he get Whitman and hit the fields before he said too much. “No problem,” he replied. “I think I better get going if I want to take my boy for a ride before it gets dark.”

“Are you sure I can’t help?” Noah offered. “Because friends do help each other out.”


Together they got Whitman saddled up and ready to go. Luke explaining every step he did to get his horse prepared. Noah listened intently and asked a few questions too.

“I should probably head home,” Noah finally said.

“I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Soon,” Noah repeated with a smile and then strolled out of the stall.

Luke stood there next to Whitman, gazing at Noah until he was out of sight. Noah thought he was special. He clung to that revelation like a security blanket. Maybe his instincts were right after all. Hopefully, spending Halloween together would be a step in the right direction.
Halloween had never been a special day for Noah. Even when he was a little boy he never had too much fun dressing up and going out trick or treating. Costumes had to be approved by his father despite his mother’s intervention, most of his candy was also confiscated by the Colonel, and since Noah hardly had any friends when he did trick or treat it was always with his mother. He envied the other children who were allowed to go out in groups, eat all their candy, and dress in really cool and scary costumes.

Noah was thankful that Luke hadn’t suggested going to a Halloween party. The thought of trying to blend in with Luke’s other friends and mingle with strangers scared him shitless. He didn’t want Luke to see that he was social disaster. And as much as Noah would finally like to dress up for Halloween the way he wanted, he was happy that tonight would be costume free. He had no doubt he would have stressed about coming up with something really amazing because surely Luke would. Noah was doing a pretty good job of stressing out over what to wear, which was just crazy because he wasn’t supposed to be trying to impress Luke.

Finally, he selected a blue long sleeved shirt, deciding to wear a gray t-shirt underneath it. He topped off his outfit with a spritz of cologne. For a moment he felt like he was getting ready to go out on a date, but he quickly dismissed the thought.

His mom was working at Al’s tonight since they were expecting it to be busy with the overflow from the street fair. Noah was thankful that she wasn’t around to see him primping for his non-date with Luke. She’d have questions or make comments that he really wasn’t ready to deal with even though he was only hanging out with a friend. Noah wasn’t quite sure what his mom was thinking these days when it came to his life.

Luke had called Noah a couple of days after asking him to the street fair to firm up plans (Luke would be picking him up at 6:30) and to chat. Noah had hoped that Luke would tell him what had been bothering him the other day, but he hadn’t. And Noah didn’t press. He had also feared that Luke might bring up their basketball game but that hadn’t happened either.

Maybe Noah had blown the whole thing out of portion after all.

Regardless he was happy to be hanging out with Luke tonight. No pushy cousins, no other relatives or Luke’s friends—just them. Noah had really missed his friend and now he’d have him back. Nothing was going to get in the way of their friendship this time.

There was a knock on the door promptly at 6:30. Luke was there to pick him up.

Relax, have fun and remember he’s your friend—just your friend.

And with that thought in mind, Noah opened the door and realized that it was easy to think rationally until Luke was just a few feet from him—dimples grin, sparkling coffee eyes—just downright beautiful. Luke had on an olive green jacket which was unzipped to reveal a gray and green striped sweater.

“Hey,” Noah said as his heart hammered wildly in his chest.


He grabbed the new brown jacket Emma had given him for his birthday. “I’m ready if you are.”
“Let’s get out of here,” Luke said, heading toward his car.

Noah took a deep breath and followed him…damn…who was he kidding? He’d follow Luke anywhere.

“You know, if it’s really boring we could always find something else to do,” Luke said as soon as they settled into his Mustang.

Noah couldn’t imagine anything that involved Luke would be boring. The one time they had gone out had been fun even though Jade had been there, butting in every chance she had gotten. “I’m sure it will be great.”

“I have to admit I’ve been craving some kettle corn big time,” Luke chuckled.

“Sounds delicious,” Noah readily agreed. “I haven’t had a caramel apple in years.”

“The first one will be on me then,” Luke said, smiling warmly in his direction.

“You don’t have to. I have plenty of money,” Noah stammered. “You paid for me the last time we went out.” Oh no…I’m making it sound like we dating or something, he inwardly cringed.

“I didn’t mean to imply that you didn’t have money,” Luke quickly replied. “I just wanted to try to make up for Jade’s lecherous behavior.”

Noah felt like a total tool. He really needed to just get used to people being nice. “No, I’m sorry. I’m just being a freak,” he muttered, staring out the passenger’s side window.

“Hey,” Luke said, taking one hand off the steering wheel and resting it on Noah’s arm. “You are definitely not a freak. I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable.”

The way it felt when Luke touched him was still amazing. Noah was feeling quite incredible—not that he could admit this to Luke. He glanced over at Luke. “No, we’re cool. You can get the caramel apples and I’ll spring for the kettle corn.”

“And we’ll each fend for ourselves when it comes to drinks,” Luke added.

“Deal.”


“Actually, this is fine,” Noah admitted. “I’m used to listening to ’70s and ’80s music because of my mom. I’m afraid my musical taste probably isn’t too cool.” He couldn’t bring himself to tell Luke that they were so poor they hadn’t been able to buy a radio, deciding to forgo one for a DVD player and their limited movie collection. Only the CD player in the now defunct Cavalier had worked so they were only able to listen to the handful of CDs that his mom had gotten from the Salvation Army or Goodwill stores.

“I’m not some great aficionado. My taste is across the board,” Luke explained. “People just like what they like—you shouldn’t have to apologize for it.”

Was Luke still talking about music?

*Of course he was*, Noah reasoned with himself. *What else could he be talking about?*
“Yeah, right.”

“Actually, I have a confession,” Luke said, glancing over at him, biting his lip.


“When I was little my dad would take me riding and I’d sing John Denver’s *Thank God I’m a Country Boy* at the top of my lungs.”

So it was about music after all. Noah quickly pushed away his disappointment. “Please tell me you also had on a cowboy hat,” he said, hoping to keep the mood light.

“I had it all going on,” Luke chuckled.

*And you still do,* Noah silently added. He took a deep breath. It was his turn now. “I think I might have you beat,” Noah admitted.

Luke grinned. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

“I’ve been known to sing Barry Manilow tunes with my mom,” Noah said, his cheeks turning pink. This sharing business was still so new to him. He wasn’t used to having a friend that he could actually talk to or felt like he could trust—to an extent.


Noah smiled, relieved that Luke didn’t think he was a total loser after all. It was comforting to know that Luke wasn’t quick to judge or tease him. There were some dark demons in there—not to mention the mother lode of all secrets.

Luke decided to park in the lot at the Lakeview which was only a couple of blocks away from Old Town, citing that parking spaces closer would probably be at a premium. Noah didn’t mind the walk. It was a beautiful, clear night—so full of stars and the moon bright in the sky.

Old Town was all decked out for Halloween. Corn stalks adorned the lamp posts, jackal lanterns lit up every store window, ghosts and bats hung from various shop signs, and cobwebs covered the bushes. Throughout the streets creepy music played.

“This is pretty cool,” Noah said a bit in awe, not caring if his geekiness was once again rearing its head.

“Oakdale does know how to do Halloween.”

Noah was still taking everything in—the booths for face painting, games, a fortune teller, and food. His senses were being assaulted with the delicious aromas of the fair—hot dogs, caramel apples, funnel cakes, cotton candy, and kettle corn among other things. It was a junk food heaven and Noah wanted to eat it all.

“What do you want to do first?” Noah shyly asked.

“How about having our fortunes told?” Luke suggested. “It might be funny to see what crazy stuff she comes up with.”

“Sure,” he replied even though he was a bit apprehensive about it. Noah feared that the fortune teller might spill one of his deep dark secrets. But he also didn’t want to shoot down Luke’s first
suggestion. Luke probably wouldn’t take anything the fortune teller said seriously. It would be all in good fun.

They sauntered over to the booth where an older lady dressed up in Gypsy garb sat at a table with a crystal ball in front of her. There was no way this would be real. She looked like someone straight from a B movie.

“Sit…sit…and I will tell you your future,” the lady urged.

“Let’s hear it,” Luke said, sitting down across from the fortune teller.

“Ahhh….yes,” she said, gazing into the crystal ball. “You’ll be taking a journey soon which will result in true love.” The lady looked up and smiled. “Five dollars, please.”

Luke dug into his wallet and handed her a five dollar bill. “Uhh…thanks,” he replied as he stood up, his face a little flushed. “Your turn.”

Noah took a deep breath and sat down. The fortune teller studied him for a moment before turning her gaze to the crystal ball. “Let me see…yes…if you take the chance you will be rewarded,” she said mysteriously.


But he didn’t ask any of them. “Uh…okay.”

“Your heart knows,” she replied, catching his eye. “Five dollars, please.”

As Noah paid her, he prayed that Luke wouldn’t notice how rattled he was by her declaration. It didn’t mean anything. This was all fun and games.

“That was interesting,” Luke laughed once they had left the booth. “I think she memorized a bunch of fortunes from some fortune cookies she got at Wing Wah’s.”

“Yeah,” Noah quickly agreed eager to make a joke out of it. “She probably knows like four and will keep repeating them all night.”

“Let’s hit the haunted house,” Luke suggested. “Maybe we’ll actually get a good scare.”

Noah was pretty sure that nothing could top the scare his fortune put into him. He wasn’t good at taking chances. And he just couldn’t risk it. Things were finally good for him and his mom.

The haunted house turned out to only be good for a laugh. Ed Wood would have been proud with the amount of cheesy effects and acting in it. From there, Luke decided that he wanted to win his sisters some stuffed animals so they headed to the game section. Noah watched as Luke spent an obscene amount of money at the ring toss until he finally won a stuffed purple bear for Faith. Luke’s arm was worn out from the ring toss so Noah tried his luck at the water gun game, winning Natalie a stuffed hot pink kitty after only a few tries.

“You really know how to handle a water gun,” Luke said, grinning.

Noah shrugged. “Just lucky.”

Little did Luke know that the Colonel had made him go to the shooting range when he turned twelve. The Colonel had made sure that his boy knew how to handle a gun. Noah would never
forget the hours he spent under the Colonel’s watchful eye, enduring taunts and being punished until he could hit the target accurately.

“I’m starving,” Luke announced, stopping in front of one of the food stands. “Losing all of that money made me work up quite an appetite.”

“Everything looks and smells so good,” Noah said, staring at the various carts and booths. “I can eat just about anything right now.”

“I was thinking that we could start out with hot dogs before loading up on the other treats,” Luke suggested.

“Great idea,” Noah agreed, reaching for his wallet.

The boys each ordered a hotdog and Coke and then found an empty table to eat at. Luke had piled his hotdog with ketchup, mustard, and relish while Noah kept it simple with just ketchup. Noah’s eyes nearly popped out of his head as he watched Luke open his mouth wide, taking the first bite of his hotdog.

“Mmmm…this is amazing,” Luke groaned, a bit of ketchup dripping from his lips.

Noah had no idea that watching Luke eat could be so damn erotic.

“Yeah, it’s great,” Noah said, staring at Luke who swiped his tongue over his lips to clean up the stray ketchup.

Luke chuckled. “You haven’t even tried yours yet.”


“Yeah, really good,” Luke murmured and then took another bite of his hotdog.

Noah decided to stay focused on eating, not watching Luke since it could get him into all kinds of trouble. Luke seemed to be just as intent on polishing off his hotdog too.

“So what did you want to do next?” Luke asked as he took a sip of his Coke.

Before Noah could answer, three guys about their age marched over to their table. From the scowls on their faces it didn’t look like they were coming over for a friendly chat. The smile that had been a permanent fixture on Luke’s face since arriving in Old Town quickly faded.

“Well, well, well isn’t this sweet?” the blonde with blue eyes taunted, who seemed to be the leader of the small group by the way he strutted like a peacock.

“Did you finally find some guy who will let you suck his cock?” the brunet sneered. He reminded Noah of a slimy used car salesman. But there was darkness about him that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. The last time he’d seen such hatred in someone’s eyes was back at Fort Leonard Wood.


“I think Snyder wants to be alone with his boyfriend,” the tall, lanky guy with light brown hair sinisterly laughed. “Did he win these cute little toys for you?” he asked, picking up the bear from the table.
Luke snatched it back. “Get your hands off this. It’s for my sister,” he snapped. “He’s not my boyfriend. We’re just friends.”

Noah was taken aback by Luke’s declaration. Of course he knew that Luke wasn’t his boyfriend—could never be his boyfriend. But it still stung hearing the words spoken aloud.


“Just f**k off, Kevin!” Luke yelled, his hands gripping the wrought iron table they were sitting at.

The brunet turned to Noah. “You better watch yourself,” he said. “Snyder, here has a habit of falling in love with his friends, unless you want to be the fag’s eye candy.”

Luke had a crush on one of his friends? This was definitely news to Noah. A surge of jealousy coursed through his body as he wondered which guy had caught Luke’s eye.

“Mark, leave him alone,” Luke said, rising from his chair. “Noah has never done anything to you. Your problem is with me.”

“Ohhh…we’re so scared!” the tall guy taunted. “The little fairy has his wings in a twist. We better watch it or else he’ll throw his fairy dust at us!”

“Chad, you damn well better be scared because there’s no way in hell you’ll be making the basketball team,” Luke replied coolly. “Just wait until I kick your ass at tryouts.”

“I bet you’d rather do something else to my ass, you fucking perv. I can assure you that no one wants the queer on the team,” Chad retorted. “Don’t you dare try out.”

Noah’s blood boiled, hearing all of the insults and derogatory remarks being hurled at Luke. He was amazed by how calmly Luke was handling himself, which made him wonder if Luke was used to remarks like this. Did he go through this on a daily basis at school?

“You know I’m better than you—that’s why you didn’t make the team last year and that’s why you won’t make it again this year,” Luke informed him.

“All I know is that you’re a pathetic little fag,” Chad said, taking a step toward Luke.

“Snyder is nothing to worry about,” Kevin added. “He’s nothing but trash - just like the rest of his high and mighty family.”

“Wasn’t your mom whoring around with that Morrissey guy who had dealings with the black market?” Mark asked.

“He was only one of many guys his mom fucked in this town,” Kevin taunted.

That’s when Luke finally snapped, pushed beyond his limit of tolerance. “Just get the f**k out of here!” he yelled.

“Are you going to make us, Snyder?” Kevin demanded, planting his hands on the table and leering at Luke. “That’s quite a joke.”

Noah finally couldn’t sit there quietly anymore. Enough was enough. Luke didn’t deserve to be treated this way. From what he gathered the only big crime Luke had committed in these assholes’ eyes was being gay. He sprung up from his chair so quickly it fell over, hitting the pavement with a loud clank. “I’ll make you,” he informed them. “Just take your bigoted asses and get the hell out of
“Isn’t this sweet?” Mark sneered. “Are you going to defend this cocksucker’s honor, Noah?”

“The little bitch certainly needs defending. He’s such a pathetic mess,” Kevin laughed bitterly. “His real father only wanted him for his inheritance, he’s afraid to let a girl kiss him, and he’s not even man enough to handle a couple of beers.”

Noah no longer saw the blonde asshole standing before him, Kevin had transformed into the Colonel—taunting him, demeaning him. He balled up his right hand into a fist and swung, connecting perfectly with their tormentor’s face. Kevin never saw it coming. He landed in a heap on the concrete.

“Who’s next?” Noah demanded, his eyes boring into Mark and Chad. He had no problem taking those two assholes out. Punching Kevin had made him feel powerful for the first time in his life. He could fight like a man even if the Colonel never thought he was capable of it.


“Fuck,” Kevin groaned, lifting his head slightly off the ground. His lip was swollen and bloody.

Mark knelt down next to him. “Are you all right, Kev?” he asked.

“Just get me away from these psychos,” he muttered.

Chad and Mark helped Kevin to his feet while Noah watched in a bit of a daze as the adrenaline ebbed and reality began to sink in. Noah hadn’t thought twice about standing up to Kevin and his minions. He didn’t think about his safety—just Luke.

Never in his life had he snapped like that, but hearing all of the horrible things those bastards were saying to Luke infuriated him. Luke didn’t deserve it. He was one of the greatest people he knew. Noah would do anything to defend Luke, the best friend he’s ever had in his life.

For most of his life he had to sit by and watch the bullies. Noah had been helpless when the Colonel beat him. He also had witnessed his father abusing his mother, but was too little to help.

But not anymore. Noah would never stand by and watch someone he loved be hurt in any fashion.

“You’re lucky we’re leaving,” Chad sneered. “Or else I’d kick your ass, fag lover.”

Mark turned, eyes burning into Noah fueled with hatred. “I think Noah’s a fucking faggot after all—probably will get his cock sucked by Snyder as a nice thank you present.”

Noah’s blood ran cold. They couldn’t know. There was no way. All he did was stand up for Luke.

Luke placed his hand on Noah’s arm. “Hey, those guys are assholes. They don’t know shit.”

Noah mutely nodded, praying that Luke would ignore the last few insults that were levied before the guys took off.


Noah forced himself to shake off the slurs that had been slung his way. He flexed his fingers, shaking out his hand. “It’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“Let me see,” Luke said, taking Noah’s hand in his and studying it intently.
“Luke,” Noah murmured as the soreness in his hand was replaced with tingling of a different nature. Luke was holding his hand, which was enough for him to forget any pain he was feeling.

Ever so gently Luke traced his fingers over Noah’s knuckles. “It looks like we should probably get some ice to make sure there isn’t any swelling.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” he weakly protested. Noah didn’t want to seem like a wimp in Luke’s eyes. A real man would tough it out, wouldn’t he?

“Yes, you will be after we get some ice,” Luke insisted as he gathered up the stuffed animals they’d won for the girls. “I think there’s a first aid station by the haunted house.”

“Lead the way.” Noah knew Luke wasn’t going to give up.

“Is your had starting to swell?”

“I think it’s still all right,” Noah replied rubbing his hand, which stung a little bit, but he wasn’t going to share that information with Luke or else he’d have him in the emergency room. “How are you? Are you okay?”

“Yes, because of you. Thank you for sticking up for me,” Luke said, glancing at him as they hiked toward the parking lot where the first aid station was located. “You didn’t have to put yourself out there. I seriously can’t thank you enough.”

“I’m sorry I just lost it like that,” Noah told him as they approached the first aid station. “I just hated hearing the things they were saying to you.”

“I’m sorry you had to get mixed up in my drama,” Luke sighed. “This was supposed to be a fun night out and it’s ruined—”

“It doesn’t have to be ruined,” Noah quickly replied. He’d been having so much fun with Luke and he didn’t want those assholes to spoil everything.

Luke stepped up to the first aid station and talked to the attendant. He managed to convince her just to give him an ice pack without any fuss. Then he turned to Noah, handing it to him. “Here…put this on your hand,” he instructed.

“Thanks.”

“I hope you don’t mind but I’m really not in the mood to stick around here,” Luke confessed. “I wouldn’t put it past those guys to try to come after you or do something else really stupid.”

“Did you want to go home then?”


“Yeah, sure.”

“I’ll be right back.”

“You know when they say that in horror movies it’s usually the kiss of death,” Luke chuckled ruefully.
Noah flashed him a reassuring smile. “I know tonight might seem like something out of a horror movie, but hopefully we’ll be able to change the genre before the night is over.”

He headed off toward the kettle corn stand. Luke had his heart set on that particular treat so Noah was going to make sure that he got his friend a big bag to go. Noah ordered the largest bag which smelled absolutely mouth-watering and then he returned to Luke, triumphantly handing it to him.

“What’s this for?” Luke asked a bit bewildered.

“It’s your kettle corn. I wasn’t going to let you leave without getting what you wanted.”

Luke grinned. “Thanks. I know just where we can take this.”

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Luke had been uncharacteristically quiet the entire time they were in the car. Noah couldn’t help but wonder how often Luke was faced with that kind of bigotry. It must be hell having people hate you because of your sexuality—something that couldn’t be helped.

You can’t help that you’ve fallen for Luke, an inner voice whispered to him. Just like Luke can’t help it either—whomever he chooses to love.

But Noah wasn’t anything like Luke. He didn’t have his confidence or courage.

You didn’t have any problem sticking up for Luke earlier…

Noah was drawn out of his reverie when he realized that Luke had pulled into the driveway at the farm. His heart sank. Luke had decided to come home after all.

“I…uh…thought we might go hang out at the pond,” Luke said nervously glancing at Noah.

“Yeah, sure.” Noah was so relieved that he would have agreed to go anywhere with Luke. He handed Luke the plastic bag of popcorn that had been resting at his feet during the drive home when they got out of the car. “Don’t forget your treat.”

“Thanks. You better plan on eating some of this too,” Luke said as they headed toward the pond.

“You bet I am. That’s why I got a large order.”

When they reached the pond, Luke hopped up on the picnic table so Noah joined him. He opened the bag of kettle corn, grabbed a handful of popcorn and then held it toward Noah so he could get some.

“I go to school with those assholes,” Luke finally admitted, his voice cutting through the darkness. “They’ve been basically been doing their best to make my year hell.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I try not to let it bother me, but it’s hard,” Luke sighed, “especially when they make shitty comments about my family. I suppose you’re wondering if what they said is true though.”

It was only natural that Noah had a million questions for Luke. The biggest of them all being who the friend that Luke had fallen for was. But he also didn’t want to put Luke on the spot either. He’d already been through enough for one night; Noah didn’t want to make it worse for him.

“It’s none of my business,” Noah replied. “You don’t owe me any explanations.”
Luke slowly nodded his head. “I think I do,” he admitted. “But there are some things I’m just not ready to talk about right now.”

“I understand.”

Boy…did Noah ever understand. He’d love to be able to just tell Luke everything—what his real name was, why he and his mom were so damn poor, and of course there was the granddaddy of all secrets.

“My mom and dad have had problems in their marriage,” Luke said, staring toward the moonlit pond. “They’ve both made some mistakes. But she’s not the town slut. She’s a great mom—”

Noah gently rested his hand on Luke’s shoulder. “I can see that she is, Luke. Both of your parents are great. What that jerk said isn’t going to change my mind about them, okay?”

Luke nodded and then took a deep breath. “Kevin…the blonde…he…he…was my best friend growing up,” he quietly explained. “When I was discovering who I was I…uh…sorta developed a crush on him.”

Noah swallowed. So it was Kevin that Luke had fallen for. Was that Luke’s type? The blonde, blue-eyed, jock? He wasn’t anything like that.

“I really liked him and hoped that maybe he’d feel the same way for me. But he was always talking about girls, dating, trying to get me to double date with him. It was hell and I had a hard time coping with it…I did some stupid stuff… I drank a lot and I tried to deny the fact that I was gay. But that’s another story,” Luke admitted as he clutched the bag of popcorn. “Eventually, I decided to come out to Kevin and it went badly. And then Jade let it slip to Kevin that I was in love with him.”

Noah closed his eyes. Oh shit. He was afraid to imagine how Kevin took the news. He’d seen firsthand just what an asshole Kevin was to Luke. “Damn,” was all he managed to mutter.

“Kevin freaked and that was the end of the friendship. And, of course, he didn’t want to be associated with the fag so once school started he made sure to rip on me whenever he got the chance.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through all of that,” Noah told him. “I never would have known. You’re so confident.”

“I try not to let it bother me,” Luke admitted, glancing at Noah. “I don’t want to hide who I am because it almost destroyed me so I deal. Not everyone is like them. There are good, accepting people out there like you.”

Noah forced a smile. “You’re my friend—no matter what.”

“Don’t worry,” Luke said, his sad, brown eyes meeting Noah’s. “I don’t make it a habit to fall for all of my straight friends. You’re safe.”

But for the first time in his life, Noah didn’t want to be safe.
Luke sat in the cafeteria anxiously waiting for Maddie to join him for lunch. He couldn’t wait to see his friend. He had so much to tell her. She was going to flip out when she found out that Noah—sweet, sweet Noah—had punched out Kevin.

Luke would never forget it. One minute they were hanging out, having fun and the next…

His body tingled when he remembered how suddenly Noah’s blue eyes were flashing with anger as Noah jumped up ready to protect him. It was so fucking hot. He knew he shouldn’t think such an act of violence was good, but then again, Kevin really needed to be put in his place.

Noah did just that. For him.

Now Luke was falling deeper—down, down, down into a pit that almost reached China. Noah standing up to Kevin pretty much sealed the deal. He hadn’t thought twice about defending him—hadn’t contemplated that he could have been getting himself into a three on one fight. Of course, Luke wouldn’t have let Noah fight alone. He would have joined him.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Maddie said, sitting down across from him.

Luke grinned. “These thoughts are worth a hell of a lot more than a penny.”

“Oh?” she immediately perked up. “Do tell!”

He leaned across the table. “Noah punched out Kevin last night.”

“What!?!?” she practically shrieked. “No way!”

“Yes! We were at the street fair in Old Town last night sitting at a table minding our own business when Kevin, Mark and Chad came over, giving me all kinds of shit. Then they started in on Noah too which really pissed me off,” Luke explained as Maddie hunched closer. “But then Noah—oh my god—he just jumped up and decked Kevin—knocked him right to the ground. Noah was ready to go after Mark and Chad, but they picked up Kevin’s sorry ass and got the hell out of there before it could happen.”


“I know, right?”

“Is Noah okay? Did he hurt himself?”

“No, he’s fine,” Luke reassured her. “I got him some ice for his hand so it wouldn’t swell.” He vividly remembered, tending to Noah’s hand—the way Noah’s fingers felt—the overwhelming urge to kiss Noah that he had to battle. It had been so damn hard not to just hug Noah and never let go. Luke was so grateful that Noah had stepped up for him. And he loved taking care of Noah, which had felt so natural to him.

Maddie smiled. “That’s good to hear. So….Noah stood up for you…”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t mean anything,” Luke quickly dismissed her. He was so afraid to allow himself to even entertain the fact that it could mean more, because he’d be crushed if he got his hopes up only to have them dashed. “We’re just friends.”
“Good friends?”


“That’s great! I told you that Noah needed a friend,” she said excitedly. “Have you been spending a lot of time together?”

“Not as much as I would like,” he admitted. If Luke had his way, he’d see Noah every day. But he didn’t want to push Noah so that’s why he lied about not having feelings for him. Damn. It had really hurt to do it but it was necessary after all of the shit that Kevin and his cronies had said. And Luke had once again felt himself slipping while they were at the pond—just aching to kiss him. He’d been so afraid that Noah might have sensed it so he lied. Big time.

“You could always change that. I’m sure Noah would love to spend more time with you too.”

“Yeah,” Luke said slowly nodding, “but it’s such a catch-22. The more we’re together the more I…” He quickly stopped himself before spilling to Maddie just how much he cared about Noah. Luke didn’t want her to see that he was falling in love with Noah.

“The more you care about him,” Maddie carefully supplied.

“Yeah, but I know it’s pointless. He’s straight—at least that’s what he claims.”

“Luke, you just never know what might happen between you.”

“Well, according to this crazy fortune teller we saw I’m supposed to embark on some trip and find love,” Luke chuckled ruefully. “Yeah, right…like that is going to happen.”

“Never under estimate the power of a mystic.”

Luke rolled his eyes. “She was most likely some old lady they hired that could fit into the costume. You should have seen her. She looked like an old gypsy—crystal ball and everything. It obviously wasn’t real.”

“When did you become such a cynic?” Maddie asked, shaking her head.

“Please,” he scoffed, folding his arms across his chest. “You wouldn’t have fallen for her bullshit if you were there. You’re smarter than that.” But what he wasn’t confessing was that he’d love for the fortune teller to be right—that he’d find love. But not with just anyone. Luke wanted Noah.

“I am very intelligent but I also like to believe that anything is possible.”

“Right now I just want to make the basketball team,” Luke said, changing the subject to a safer topic.

“You will,” she assured him. “They would have to be insane not to put you on the team. You were first string last year.”

“But last year everyone thought I was straight,” Luke countered, reaching for his drink.

“It shouldn’t matter.”

“No, it shouldn’t but will it?”

Maddie reached over, taking his hand in hers. “Have a little faith, Luke.”

Luke couldn’t help wondering if she were still talking about basketball…
The entire weekend had been consumed thinking about and preparing for basketball tryouts. Countless hours had been spent practicing. Shot after shot, Luke had been determined that he would be flawless when it came time to execute for Coach Foster. He was going to leave everything on the court today. No regrets.

Luke took a deep breath before heading into the gym locker room to change into his shorts and t-shirt. God how he prayed that everyone wasn’t going to react the way Chad had when they realized that he planned on trying out for the team. He’d never been so nervous about entering a locker room in his life. The night before he’d almost given into his fear and decided not to try out.

But then Kevin, Mark, Chad and others like them would win. Luke couldn’t allow it. He had to at least give this a shot. Noah seemed to think he was this huge pillar of strength and he didn’t want to let him down. Maybe if Noah saw how Luke faced his fears, Noah would do the same.

There were only a few guys in the locker room when Luke entered it. Keeping his head down, he marched over to the far corner hoping that he wouldn’t bring attention to himself. All he wanted to do was change clothes so he could head out onto the court and get in some practice before the tryouts officially began.

“I was wondering if we’d see you here, Snyder,” Gary, the Center who had played with Luke since the seventh grade, said as he set his duffle bag next to Luke on the bench.

Luke tugged his t-shirt over his head. “I have every right to be here. There’s no way I was going to give up basketball my senior year,” he defiantly replied.

“I never said you didn’t,” Gary told him.

“Sorry,” Luke sighed, sitting down on the bench. “I’m a bit defensive these days.”

Gary nodded. “Anyone who wouldn’t want you on the team is crazy. You were one of the best players last year.”

“Thanks,” Luke said, forcing a weak smile. “Unfortunately I don’t think everyone is going to agree.”

“Not everyone in this school is a complete asshole.”

“True,” he admitted, although it felt that way. Especially after the Halloween run in with Kevin and company. “All I want to do is play. I just hope Coach and everyone realizes it. I’m still the same guy I was last year.”

“You’ve got me on your side,” Gary said, patting his shoulder.

“I’m happy to hear it,” Luke said, slipping on his high tops. Suddenly the weight of the world didn’t feel like it was on his shoulders anymore.

Chad strutted into the locker room as if he owned it and the world seemed to crash back down onto him. Chad had a knack of turning gold to shit. “I thought I told you that fags weren’t welcome here,” he sneered at Luke. “No one wants a pervert like you for a teammate.”

“Fuck you,” Luke muttered as he tied his sneakers.

Chad planted himself in front of Luke, glaring down at him. “Aren’t you afraid that your cocksucker boyfriend would be jealous if he heard you saying that you wanted to fuck someone else?”
“You don’t know shit.”

“What’s the matter? Can’t fight your battles without him around to take cheap shots for you?”

*Don’t let him bait you, Luke told himself. He knows I’m a better basketball player than him. He’s just trying to eliminate me before tryouts even begin.*

“Fitzsimmons, just shut the fuck up!” Gary yelled, jumping in on Luke’s behalf.

“Looks like we have a fag lover in our midst,” Chad taunted.

“No, it looks like we have a fucking bigot here,” Shamar spoke up from across the room. He’d been playing basketball with Luke since his freshman year. Luke was thankful that Shamar seemed to not think any differently toward him. It gave him hope that Chad might be in the minority.

“Hey, I just don’t want some guy checking out my dick in the shower,” Chad informed them.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Coach Foster demanded as he marched out of his office. Everyone immediately clammed up. Chad quickly dug inside of his duffle bag, acting as if everything was okay. Luke decided to keep quiet. He wanted to make the team based purely on his abilities. Hopefully, Coach Foster would judge him fairly and not let any remarks he may have heard about Luke tarnish his judgment.

“Nothing, coach,” Gary finally said.

The coach glanced slowly around the room. “See that it stays that way. I will not stand for any drama in the locker room,” he announced. “Everyone better be out on the court in ten minutes.”

Luke hoped he wasn’t considered “drama.”

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The results of the tryouts wouldn’t be posted until the following morning. Luke drove back to the farm exhausted, but knowing that he had given it his all. Coach Foster seemed to have liked what he saw from his effort. But he still couldn’t be sure.

Luke was surprised to find his father sitting in the kitchen when he strolled through the door. Hopefully, there wasn’t anything wrong with the family. “Hey, Dad,” he said cautiously. “Is everything okay with Mom and the kids?”

Holden smiled. “Everything is fine at home. There’s nothing to worry about,” he reassured him. “Have a seat and keep your old man company for a bit.”

Luke let out the breath he was holding and sat down at the table. “Good. I couldn’t handle any more stress today.”

“Rough day, son?”

“Basketball tryouts,” Luke replied. “I think I probably made the team but you just never know.” He decided to keep things simple, not alerting his father to the recent bout of hate and bigotry he’s faced lately, which was the worst he’s faced since returning to school. Hearing about his latest trials and tribulations would probably upset his father which Luke didn’t want to do.

“I didn’t have any idea that tryouts were today,” Holden replied with a frown.

“It is to me,” Holden insisted. “I like to know what’s going on in your life.”

“Everything is fine.”

Holden slowly nodded. “Okay,” he replied and then took a deep breath. “Luke, the reason why I’m here is because I need to talk to you.”

Luke froze, a bit scared of why his father might want to talk to him. If there was something wrong with his parents’ marriage again, he wouldn’t be able to handle it. Luke couldn’t go through another breakup with them. He barely made it through the last one. “About what?” he finally managed to ask.

“I think it’s time for you to move back home.”

Home?

Luke was immediately hit with a mixture of joy and sadness. He was thrilled that his parents wanted him back—wanted him to be part of their family again. When his father had told him that he wanted Luke to move to the farm, Luke had been devastated. It had felt like he was being punished for being gay. That afternoon he’d been certain the world was coming to an end.

But now a part Luke felt like he was home right now. Living with his grandmother at the farm has been amazing. He loved being able to help her.


“Yes, of course,” Holden chuckled. “We’ve missed you since you’ve been gone. Your mother and the girls are so excited to have you come back. Our family really hasn’t been the same without you, Luke.”

He really needed to hear that. His family was so important to him. And it felt so good to know that he was just as important to them. Sometimes Luke just needed to be reassured that he was loved and wanted.

“I’ve missed them too,” Luke admitted. His little sisters could be a pain in the butt at times but Luke really enjoyed being their big brother. He’d spent so little quality time with them since he moved to the farm.

“This move was only supposed to be temporary,” Holden reminded him. “Gloria and Noah obviously aren’t here to hurt anyone…”

Noah. Shit. This meant he was going to have to leave Noah! Shouldn’t he be staying close to him? Noah needed a friend. And Luke needed to be there for him.

“You don’t need me to watch over them anymore,” Luke cut him off. “My work here is done so it’s just time to leave?”

“I think you need to be home with your family.”

“Grandma is my family too,” Luke insisted. “She can still use my help around here. I just can’t abandon her now.”

Holden frowned. “You didn’t want to move here in the first place, now you don’t want to move home? I don’t understand your change of heart. I thought you’d be happy to come home.”
His dad couldn’t know the real reason he wanted to stay. “I am happy that you want me to come home, but I also like it here too. I enjoy being able to help out. Aaron and Jack are hardly ever here. Grandma will practically be alone if I leave.”

“I’m not asking you to move to Siberia,” Holden chuckled. “You’re still going to be able to visit your grandmother whenever you want. Our family isn’t complete without you. Your mother and I feel like we’ve been missing out on important things in your life. Neither of us knew about basketball tryouts. Before we know it you’ll be going off to college. It’s really time for you to move back.”

Luke hated disappointing his parents. And it would be nice to be home with his mom and dad, sisters and Ethan. He also missed his room. Noah wouldn’t be too far away. He’d still find a way to spend a lot of time with him. “When do you want me back?” he asked, hoping that he’d have some time to get used to the idea that he wasn’t going to be living on the same property as Noah.

“The sooner the better. I was thinking tonight.”

“Tonight?” Luke was surprised that they wanted him home so soon.

“You don’t have much to pack,” Holden pointed out. “There’s no reason to wait.”

Luke could think of a few—Noah being first and foremost on his list. However, he could tell that his father wasn’t going to listen to any excuse, especially since his mind was made up. Damn Snyder stubbornness. “I’ll be home in a little while.”

“Did you need help packing?”

Luke shook his head. “No, I’ve got it. Like you said I don’t have much to move back.”

Holden stood up. “We’ll see you in a little bit then.” He gave Luke’s shoulder a pat. “We can’t wait to have you back.”

Luke didn’t know if he should celebrate or cry. His parents loved and missed him terribly. He was happy that they still wanted him home. But home felt so far away from Noah. Reluctantly, he pushed himself away from the table and trudged upstairs as his father strolled out of the house.

*It’s not the end of the world,* he tried to reason with himself. *Noah will be an extra five minutes away. I can deal with it.*

He had to deal with it. There was no other choice. And everything was going to be okay.

Right?

Before Luke packed, he needed to call Noah so that he knew where to find Luke – not that he ever dropped by unexpectedly just to hang out. Surely, Noah wouldn’t do it once he moved back home. Even after their talk in the barn Luke had a feeling that his parents’ house still intimated Noah.

He just had to make sure that Noah knew the move wouldn’t change anything. He’d still be close by —just a walk by the pond and through the woods that separated the two properties.

Taking a deep breath, Luke pulled out his phone and hit speed dial one. He had put Noah in that position, hoping that one day he’d be calling the number quite a bit. So far it hasn’t happened.


“Hey, Noah,” Luke said, smiling. Hearing his friend’s voice on the other end of the line did that to
him. Especially since Noah always seemed so happy to hear from him.

“How did tryouts go today?”

Luke was thrilled that Noah remembered. “Pretty good. I think I have a good shot of making the team.” Luke wasn’t going to tell Noah about the locker room shit. He’d deal with it on his own this time.

“When do you find out for sure?”

“Tomorrow.”

“I hope you make it.”

“If I do, you have to come to my home games,” Luke told him.

“Yeah, I’d like that,” Noah replied. “I’ll definitely find a way to be there.”

Luke tried not to get too excited since he didn’t even know if he’d made the team. But the thought of Noah being there to watch him, his eyes on the court the entire time, definitely thrilled him.

“I’ll hold you to that—if I make the team,” Luke flirted.

“You will. Don’t forget I’ve seen you in action so I know how amazing you are,” Noah countered.

Luke would never forget that day. Noah on top of him—shirtless and sweaty…

Stop it. You’ve got other business to take care of right now.

“I…uh…needed to let you know something,” Luke said, getting to the unfortunate reason why he’d called Noah.

“Yeah?”

There was no mistaking the apprehension in Noah’s voice, which was going to make this even more difficult. “Yeah…uh…my dad was here when I got back from tryouts,” Luke explained. “He told me that he and my mom want me to move back home—tonight.”

“Oh.”

“I guess they miss me and decided that it’s time to reunite the family.”

“So no one is worried about the silver anymore?”

He cringed. “Noah, I never should have said…”

“Hey, I was just teasing, Snyder,” Noah reassured him. “I’m happy that your dad thinks my mom and I are trustworthy.”

“There never should’ve been any doubt.”

“Your dad was just looking out for your grandma,” Noah said quietly. “I don’t blame him for that. He did the right thing.”

“I’m glad that you’re not holding a grudge.”

“Not a chance.”
“At least my parents don’t live far from here so it really won’t be any different,” Luke said, trying to convince himself that nothing was going to change between Noah and him just because he was going to be living in a different location. “You can actually walk there from here. There’s a path between the two properties just past the pond.”

“That’s pretty convenient,” Noah admitted.

“Yeah, so you won’t have an excuse not to visit.”

“Or vice versa,” Noah countered.

“Right,” Luke agreed. “Well…ah…I guess I should get going so I can pack or else my dad will be back to drag me out of here.”

“Okay,” Noah replied with a touch of sadness in this voice. “Be sure to let me know if you made the team.”

“You’ll be the first person I call,” Luke promised. “So…uh…I’ll talk to you tomorrow then.”


“Bye, Noah,” Luke said, then flipped his phone shut.

It was time to pack. He needed to go home.
Chapter 33

Sleeping in his own bed had been a bit strange, but Luke had to admit that it felt really good to be back in it. He swore he had the most comfortable mattress in the world. It hadn’t taken him long to move his things back into his room. And one of the first things he’d done was find the picture Maddie had taken of him and Noah on Noah’s birthday when they were in the hay wagon and tacked it onto his bulletin board. That way Noah would always be close to him.

After Luke showered and got dressed, he joined his family in the kitchen where his mother had prepared quite a feast—French toast, bacon, sausage, and fresh fruit. The kitchen smelled heavenly. For a moment he almost thought he was in his grandma’s kitchen at the farm. But then his little sisters wouldn’t be sitting at the table, grinning at him.


“Good morning, Luke!” Lily beamed at him. “I’m so happy that you’re back. I’ve missed cooking for you.”

“It’s nice to be back,” Luke said with a smile. And he wasn’t lying either. Being home again with his family felt really nice. He sauntered over to the counter and poured himself a cup of coffee, adding cream and two spoonfuls of sugar. “Breakfast looks and smells great, but you shouldn’t have gone through all of this trouble, though.”

Lily draped her arm around him, kissing him on the cheek. “It’s never any trouble. I wanted to do something special to welcome you back home. And today’s the big day you find out whether or not you made the team, isn’t it?”

Luke sat down at the table. “Yes it is.”


“Thanks, Faithie.”

“Did you want to take my new pink kitty that Noah won for me with you for good luck?” Natalie asked, stuffing a piece of bacon into her mouth.

His sister’s offer warmed his heart, but he had enough problems at school without being seen in the halls with a stuffed pink kitty. “Thanks, lady bug, but I think kitty needs to stay with you.”

His mother joined them at the table. “Let’s hope Ethan sleeps for a little while longer so I can eat,” she sighed. “I swear he’s determined never to let me have a hot meal.”


“And you better too if you don’t want to be late for school,” Lily replied.

Luke glanced at the clock on the microwave, discovering that his mother was right. Damn. And he’d wanted to get to school a little early so he could see the results before the crowd gathered around the list. He quickly took a few more large bites and then wiped his mouth. “I gotta run,” he announced, jumping out of his chair. He gave his mother a quick kiss on the cheek. “Breakfast was great. I’ll see you guys later.”

“But, Luke, you only ate half of it!” Lily called after him.
Luke didn’t stop to offer her a reply. His fate on the basketball team awaited him.

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The crowd that he’d hoped wouldn’t be gathered around the gym was already there. A terrible, sinking feeling loomed over him as he slowly approached the guys that were huddled around the list of the new Varsity basketball team.


Luke froze in his place. “I am?”

“Like there was ever any doubt,” Shamar laughed. “You’re the best shooting guard in the school!”

“You’re just sucking up to me because you want to me pass you the ball more,” Luke chuckled as he approached him. “You did make the team, didn’t you?”


“Please tell me Chad,” Luke said as he made his way to the list, needing to see his name written on it.

“You got it.”

“Sweet.” Luke grinned. And his smile got even wider when he saw for himself that he was indeed part of Oakdale High’s Varsity basketball team.

Yes! He’d done it! Coach still had faith in him. Maybe there were more good people in the world than bad. Senior year just got a whole lot better.

“Snyder, congratulations!” Gary said, playfully punching Luke in the arm. “I’m so glad you decided to tryout. It looks like we’re going to have a great team.”

“The little fag made the team?” Chad sneered as he marched toward the group.

Luke folded his arms across his chest. “I told you that I’d beat your ass.”

Chad’s eyes narrowed. “You what? There’s no fucking way in hell they’d put a queer on the team over me.”

“Look for yourself,” Gary said, stepping aside so Chad could take a look at the list.

Chad stepped closer to the posting on the wall outside the gym. His cruel eyes scanned it and then turned to the group. “I wouldn’t want to be a team with a faggit anyway,” he declared. “Just watch yourselves in the shower.”

Shamar lumbered over to Chad, standing toe to toe with him. “Just get the hell out of here before I really fuck you up.”

“Hey, Shamar, don’t,” Luke said, tugging at his arm. “He’s not worth it. And I’m not about to lose our small forward because of this asshole.”

“You better listen to the little bitch because you don’t want to get into trouble,” Chad hissed. “And, Snyder, this isn’t over. No fucking way.”

The warning bell for first period promptly doused the heated encountered. Everyone quickly scattered so they wouldn’t be late for class. Luke was secretly relieved because he didn’t want to see
any of his teammates get into trouble because of him.

“Come on,” Gary said, jerking his head toward the hallway that led away from the gym. “Let’s get out of here. If I’m late for Trig one more time old Milbury is going to give me detention and Coach will bust a nut if I can’t make our first practice.”

Luke and Shamar followed him, leaving Chad in their wake. However, Luke had a sinking feeling that Chad was going to make good on his promise. Luke was really going to have to watch his back. And his battles were only going to get worse now that he made the team.

But Luke quickly pushed his worries aside. Chad’s threats weren’t going to ruin his happiness. He made the team! And he wasn’t going to let anyone take away from his triumph. Luke couldn’t wait to share the good news with his friends—especially Noah.

Luke was so excited to finally get home because he was dying to tell his friends about making the team. Maddie hadn’t been in school due to a nasty case of the flu or else he would have told her at lunch. So he sat on the news the entire day, instead of texting or calling anyone. Noah was going to be the first one to know.

However, instead of being able to head right home after school there had been a team meeting. Luke had half-expected the coach to pull him aside for a talk about his sexuality and how it couldn’t disrupt the team. But it never happened. Coach Foster treated Luke the same way he had the year before when Luke was still in the closet. In fact, everyone on the team had. Hopefully, it would stay that way.

Luke was so anxious to see Noah that he drove straight to the cabin instead of stopping off at home first. Of course, he could have just called Noah to share the news but Luke wanted to tell him in person so he could see his reaction. He parked the car in the deserted driveway which most likely meant that Noah’s mom wouldn’t be home. Luke didn’t think Noah has driven anywhere since he arrived in Oakdale (at least not to his knowledge), which was kinda strange.

Bounding up onto the porch, Luke was finding it hard to contain his excitement. He was going to be playing basketball again. For the first time since starting his senior year of high school he was beginning to feel somewhat normal. And it was almost like he fit in again even if Chad tried to ruin it for him.

Luke knocked on the door and tried to patiently wait for someone to answer. He felt as if he were going to explode from all of the excitement he had bottled up inside of him. Just as he was about to knock again, the door opened, revealing Noah dressed in an old gray sweatshirt and ratty jeans.


“I made it!” he exclaimed. “I’m on the team! And everyone seems fine with it—well except Chad—but he’s pissed that he didn’t make the team. We also know he’s a raging asshole, though. But so far so good as far as everyone else is concerned. There was a meeting today and all of the guys were pretty cool toward me. I definitely know that a couple of them really have my back.” Luke realized he was talking a mile a minute. “Ah…I’m pretty excited,” he confessed.

“Yeah, I can tell,” Noah chuckled.

“Sorry. It’s just that…”

Noah held up his hand. “No need to apologize. You deserve to be happy.”


“You better come to some of my games—especially the first one—remember you promised,” Luke said, rocking on his heels.

“I’ll be there.”

“The season doesn’t start until the first week of December so we have a few weeks.”

“Plenty of time for you to get even more fabulous,” Noah said, eyes sparkling.

Why did Noah have to be so sweet and gorgeous? Luke blushed. “Well, the extra practice won’t hurt.”

“Did you…uh…want to come in?” Noah asked.

As much as Luke wanted to, he also knew that he needed to go home and share his good news with his parents, who would want to make a big deal out of it. He’d hang out with Noah another time—soon.

“I wish I could,” he confessed, “but I really need to get home. I haven’t even told my parents yet. You’re actually the first to know.”

“I am?”

“I told you that you’d be first,” Luke reminded him. “And I always keep my promises.”

Noah bit his lip. “I’m glad.”

“I…ah…really should get going,” Luke said, trying to summon the strength to turn and leave, it was quite difficult. Each time Luke saw Noah he seemed to fall even harder for him.

“Okay, talk to you soon?” It was more of a question than a declaration.

“Definitely.” Luke grinned. Taking one last look at Noah, he turned on his heel, forcing himself to trek back to his car. Luke would make damn sure that they had a chance to hang out soon.
Chapter 34

Noah was surprised when his cell phone rang. He still wasn’t quite used to having one. He’d yet to make an outgoing call on it. He’d definitely been tempted. More times than he could count he’d wanted to call Luke but ultimately chickened out. Luke had called him a few times though. Seeing his friend’s name on the display always increased his heart rate.

And there it was again. Luke Snyder.

His heart rate soared as he flipped opened the phone. “Hey, Luke,” he said, grinning.

“How are you?”

“Hey, Noah,” Luke’s voice filled his ear. “How are you?”

“Pretty good. You?”

“I’m fine considering the circumstances,” Luke admitted.

“Oh?” Noah’s curiosity piqued.

“I’m babysitting tonight. My parents are taking advantage of having me back home and going out on a date,” Luke explained. “I’m happy that they’re going out. They certainly deserve it.”

“You’re a good son.”

“How about being a good friend and joining me?” Luke suggested. “It would be nice to have some backup and company. That is, if you’re not doing anything tonight.”

“No,” Noah quickly replied. “I mean…yes…I can come over. I don’t have any plans.” He cringed at himself for being so eager. Noah really needed to learn how to be cool like Luke.

“Maybe we can order pizza or watch a movie,” Luke said. “I know it might not be the best way to spend a Friday night -”

It sounded like heaven to him. “Yeah, sure,” Noah said, keeping the excitement out of his voice. Much better.


“I’ll be there.”

“See you then. Bye.”

“Bye,” Noah said, then flipped his phone shut.

Yes! He did a fist pump in the air. Luke wanted to hang out with him. Noah quickly jumped off his bed, heading straight to the closet. There was no way in hell that he planned on showing up on Luke’s parents’ mansion wearing an old sweatshirt and second hand jeans.

Noah decided on the red and blue plaid shirt he’d worn on his birthday with a red t-shirt underneath. And, of course, he put on a better pair of jeans. Once he was dressed, Noah used a bit of cologne before strolling into the bathroom to make sure that he looked okay.

And then he immediately cursed himself for primping to help Luke babysit. This wasn’t a date. He shouldn’t be doing this—not if they were going to just be friends. But it didn’t make him change
back into what he was wearing earlier.

At quarter to seven Noah decided it was time to leave. As Noah was heading toward the door, a DVD caught his eye. Luke had mentioned possibly watching a movie so he snatched the movie just in case they needed something to watch.

Noah put on his coat, grabbed a flashlight and headed out the door. Finding the path Luke had told him about wasn’t a problem. He was happy that he’d taken the flashlight because it was pretty dark along it. Past the pond and through the woods he trekked, eager to see Luke.

Would Luke be just as eager to see him?

It was doubtful. Luke had told him that he didn’t have the hots for him. They were strictly friends. And Luke was going to find love soon—at least that’s what the crazy fortune teller had told him.

She was crazy, right?

Noah wasn’t really supposed to take any crazy chances. The only chance Noah wanted to take was coming out to Luke and finally confessing his true feelings for him.

But he couldn’t—not if he wanted to keep his nice, safe life on track.

When he emerged from the woods he found himself standing in a grand backyard that was impeccably landscaped. There were steps leading up to a majestic patio that spanned the back of the house. The flowers that once adorned the planter boxes along the half wall that separated the patio from the lawn were dead, but Noah could imagine that in the summer it was beautiful.

Noah hiked toward the side of the house where the garage was located as well as a path that led to a gray wooden door which he assumed would lead him into the cozy, side patio he entered the house through with Luke. He felt a little like a burglar sneaking around the grounds with his flashlight. Hopefully, no one would get the wrong idea and call the police.

Carefully opening the door, Noah was relieved that he was in the right place. Noah shoved the DVD he’d selected into his coat pocket and knocked on the door.

“Hello, Noah,” Luke said, grinning when he opened the door.


Luke looked amazingly beautiful. And he certainly didn’t seem like he was dressed just for babysitting. His maroon and gray sweater fit like a glove as did his jeans.

“Noah!” the girls squealed, rushing toward the door.

Natalie practically body slammed him. “I’m so happy you’re here!”

“Me too,” Faith added, giving Noah a quick hug. “Hopefully, you can keep Luke from being so bossy.”

Luke rolled his eyes. “I’m not bossy,” he replied and then made eye contact with Noah. “I can take your flashlight and coat.”

“Thanks,” Noah said, handing Luke the flashlight and then shrugged out of his jacket. On the floor between the couch and the chair Luke’s baby brother was strapped into a bouncy seat, holding a rattle.
Luke took Noah’s coat and hung it up in the closet. “Are you ready for a wild and crazy night?” he teased.

“Bring it on!”

“Did you want to color with me?” Natalie asked.

“He doesn’t want to color,” Faith said, rolling her eyes. “That’s boring.”

“I can show you my bedroom, Noah,” Natalie said, taking his hand. “I’ve got lots and lots of stuffed animals.”

“Why don’t we let Noah get settled before he’s bombarded with requests,” Luke said, steering Noah away from his sisters. “They think you’re better than Zac Enron,” he chuckled.

“I doubt that.”

At that moment Ethan decided to start crying. It was amazing - one moment he seemed happy and content and now he was screaming.

“Ethan,” Luke said, strolling over to the crying baby, “I bet you’re hungry. Let’s go get a bottle.” He turned to Noah. “I’ll be back in a few. I just need to heat up a bottle for the little guy. I promise that the girls won’t torture you too much while I’m gone.”

“Torture?” Luke grinned. “Just stick to board games and you’ll be fine. But don’t let them win. They’re ruthless at Sorry. Candy land and Chutes and Ladders will probably be less vicious.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Noah replied. Board games he could handle. Another round of boyfriend questions not so much.

Luke grinned as he tried to soothe Ethan. “It’s okay. Dinner is coming soon,” he said, strolling out of the room.

Noah couldn’t help but stare after him. Luke was so amazing with his baby brother. If he were confronted with a crying baby, he’d be tempted to run the other way. Noah didn’t have any experience with babies. In fact, he’s never held one.

Caring for a child was “women’s work” the Colonel would often say. Real men certainly didn’t fuss over babies.

“What do you dare to challenge us to a game of Sorry?” Faith asked, appearing at his side with the game in hand.

“We’ll play nice, Noah,” Natalie promised.

Luke’s sisters were way too adorable to say no to. “Let’s play.”

While Faith carefully set the game up on the coffee table, Noah sat down on the floor. He hadn’t played this game in years. Actually, he couldn’t remember the last time he played a board game.

“I’m going to be yellow,” Faith announced. “Natalie will be red. You have to be blue because Luke is always green.”

Noah didn’t realize that there were so many special rules to Sorry. “Got it.”
Faith handed him the cards. “You can shuffle because you can probably do it better than me.”

“I go first ‘cuz I’m little,” Natalie announced.

“Okay,” Noah said as he shuffled the cards and placed them on the center of the game board.

“So…they suckered you into Sorry,” Luke said, sauntering into the room feeding Ethan. “Just remember—I warned you.”

Noah glanced up at Luke, grinning. “Yes, you did.”

Luke gingerly sat down on the sofa, still cradling Ethan. “I want a front row seat. This is going to be good.”

And Noah quickly learned just how ruthless two sweet, little girls could be. Faith and Natalie quickly ganged up on “the boy”, sending his blue pieces back to his home base whenever they could—even when it didn’t make sense strategically. Noah was a victim of the “Sorry” card more times than he’d like to remember. If he hadn’t been the one to shuffle the cards, he would have sworn the deck was stacked. Noah never managed to get a single guy into the safety zone by the time the game was over.

“I won!” Natalie exclaimed, throwing her hands into the air. “Girls rule!”

“I don’t believe it,” Noah mumbled. He’d just had his ass handed to him by a couple of little girls.


“Let’s play again,” Faith said as she gathered the discarded cards.

“I think Noah has been tortured enough for one evening,” Luke said, placing Ethan’s bottle on the end table. “We want him to come back again someday, right?”

“Right,” Natalie sighed.

“Hey, Noah, do you think you can hold Ethan while I order the pizza?” Luke asked, eyeing him hopefully.

“I-I don’t know,” Noah stammered suddenly quite panicked at the prospect of holding a baby. “I’ve never held a baby. I don’t want to hurt him.”


Why was Luke so irresistible? Those deep chocolate eyes were lethal. If Noah allowed himself, he’d be able to get lost in them for hours—days even. Luke could probably convince him to do anything and he’d happily go along with him. Bank robbing? Sure no problem. Allow me to drive the getaway car for you, Luke.


“The most important thing is to make sure that you support his head,” Luke explained. “See how I’m holding him?”

“Yeah.”

“You just need to do the same,” Luke instructed as he slowly rose to his feet. “I’m going to hand Ethan to you now.”
Noah swallowed a bit nervous about actually going through with being left with Ethan—even for a few minutes. “Okay.”

Luke flashed him a reassuring smile. “He doesn’t bite. And if he starts to get cranky just put his pacifier in his mouth.” Noah nodded as Luke placed Ethan in his waiting arms. “There you go… that’s it…support his head…perfect.”

Noah gazed down at the baby in his arms. Ethan had Luke’s brown eyes. He wondered if this was what Luke looked like when he was a baby. “He’s pretty light,” he said, glancing up at Luke.

“Yeah, but he’s getting bigger every day. I can’t get over how much he’s changed while I was living at the farm,” Luke replied. “Do you feel comfortable?”

“We’ll be fine. Go order the pizza.”

“It won’t take long,” Luke said as he headed out of the room.

Noah blew out a breath, relaxing a little bit. Holding Ethan wasn’t nearly as scary as he’d feared. It was comforting knowing that Luke trusted him with his little brother.

“You’re doing a good job,” Faith said as she folded up the game board and put it into the box.

“Thanks.” Noah grinned.

Natalie perched herself next to Noah. “He’s just a baby. He won’t hurt you.”

“He might hurt your ears if he starts screaming,” Faith replied, snatching the game off the table.

“Let’s hope that doesn’t happen,” Noah chuckled.

“The pizza will be here in about forty-five minutes,” Luke said, sauntering into the room. He glanced down at Noah. “I think you just might be a natural after all. The little peanut looks like he’s falling asleep.”

Noah glanced at Ethan and sure enough his eyes were getting droopy. “I guess he thinks I’m pretty boring.”

“No, you’re a miracle worker. Sometimes getting him to sleep can be quite challenging,” Luke said quietly. “Let me take him from you so I can put him in his crib. If we’re lucky, he’ll sleep for us.” He carefully took the baby from him. “I’ll be right back and then we can think of something fun to do.”

As soon as Luke was out of the room, Faith sat down in the armchair. “Are you sure you don’t want to play another game? We have a lot to choose from.”

“We can play Chutes and Ladders!” Natalie exclaimed. “I’m good at it!”

“You were pretty good at Sorry,” Noah laughed. “I think we should wait for Luke so we can see what he wants to do. We don’t want to leave him out.”


Noah could feel his cheeks beginning to burn. “Well, I like him too. We’re friends,” he replied evenly. Faith didn’t really know what she was talking about. There was no way that Luke liked him like that. Luke had told him that he wasn’t interested in anything but friendship.

“Boyfriends,” Natalie giggled.
“Uh…no…just friends like you have in school,” Noah tried to reason with her.


“Do you have a girlfriend?” Natalie asked, grinning broadly.

Damn. Luke hadn’t mentioned that his sisters were also ruthless with their questions. Noah thought he was through with the inquisition after his first visit to the Snyder mansion.

“No, I don’t.”

“I can be your girlfriend,” Natalie giggled.

“You are way too young for him,” Luke said, wandering into the room. “You need to stick to the Kindergartners, lady bug.”

Natalie frowned. “But I like older boys.”


“I brought a movie along,” Noah suggested. “We could always watch it.”

“Somehow I have a feeling that the girls aren’t going to like *Casablanca,*” Luke said, flopping down next to Natalie on the sofa.

“What’s Cabana?” Natalie asked.

*Casablanca* is a black and white movie that’s as old as Grandma,” Luke replied, ruffling her hair.

“I’ll watch it,” Faith quickly replied. “I bet it’s great.”

“I…uh…didn’t bring *Casablanca,*” Noah kindly informed him. “I brought *Star Wars,* which I thought would be entertaining for everyone.”

“I think that’s a great idea.” Luke grinned.

“What’s *Star Wars*?” Natalie asked, peering up at Noah.

“It’s the story of a princess that needs to be rescued from a bunch of bad guys. It takes place in a galaxy far, far away,” Noah explained.

“I like princesses,” Natalie declared.

“Let’s watch it,” Faith added enthusiastically.

Noah glanced over at Luke who said, “I’m definitely in. I’ll make some popcorn to go with the pizza. Faithie, can you pour us some drinks? Noah, would you like a Coke?”

“Yes, please,” he replied, hauling himself to his feet. “Natalie and I can get the movie set up.”

“I know how to do the DVD!” Natalie exclaimed. “I can show you!”

“Sounds like a plan then,” Luke said, rising from the sofa. “We’ll be back in a few with refreshments. Come on, Faith.”

Noah strolled over to the closet where Luke had put his coat. Digging inside the pocket, he found the *Star Wars* DVD he’d stashed in there. “Here we go,” he said, handing the movie to Natalie. “Could
“Sure,” she said, smiling up at him dreamily.

Noah knew he should probably sit in one of the armchairs, but the best view of the TV was from the couch. It was a pretty big sofa so they should all be able to fit. And if Luke just happened to be sitting practically on top of him then so be it.

The *Star Wars* theme song came on when the menu for the movie popped up on the TV screen. “Good job, Nat,” Noah said and then patted the brown leather couch cushion. “Why don’t you come sit with me while we wait for Luke and Faith?”

“Okay.” Natalie planted herself right next to him. “Is there a prince in the movie?”

“No, but there are some heroes and villains.”

“I like heroes and villains.”

“I hope you like lots of butter,” Luke said, sauntering into the family room. “Faith went a little crazy with it.”

“The more butter the better,” Noah replied. “We’re ready here when you are.”

Faith placed a glass of Coke on the coaster that was on the coffee table while Luke put the two bowls of popcorn on the coffee table, grabbed the remote to the DVD player, turned off the lights, and sat on the other side of Natalie.

“Let’s do it,” Luke said, pressing the play button.

As John Williams’ orchestral score filled the room, Luke carefully read the opening crawl to Natalie. Noah reached over, grabbing one of the bowls of popcorn so he could share it with Natalie. He was fortunate that he’d be sharing the popcorn with Natalie because he didn’t think he could handle splitting it with Luke. The mere prospect of the hands accidentally brushing against each other—oh wow—Noah didn’t think he’d be able to handle it. Every time Luke touched him it was electric which made Noah just want to die on the spot.

The girls were enthralled with the movie from the moment the Star Destroyer raced across the screen. They thought Princess Leia was great, although Natalie had wanted to know where her tiara was. Both laughed at the droids. But the girls really got a kick out of one of the heroes being name “Luke”.

The pizza arrived just as Luke, Ben and the droids were heading into Moss Easley. Luke paused the movie while he paid for the pizza and Faith went into the kitchen to get the paper plates and napkins. Once everyone was settled in with a slice of pizza on their plate Luke resumed the movie.

Natalie had conked out by the time the heroes had gotten trapped in the trash compactor, her head resting on Luke’s lap.

“I’m surprise she lasted this long,” Luke whispered.

“She’ll be disappointed that she missed the end,” Noah replied, gazing down at her.

“We’ll just have to watch it again sometime,” Luke said, glancing over at him with a slight grin on his face. “Hey, can I have some of your popcorn? Faith ate most of ours.”
“Did not!” Faith insisted. “You’re the one who was being a pig.”


“Help yourself.”

Luke dug his hand into the popcorn, his fingers lightly brushing against the back of Noah’s hand. From that moment on, Noah could barely concentrate on the movie. All he could think about was Luke and how he wanted more than friendship with him—how nice it would be to feel more than just his hand touching his because they were sharing a bowl of popcorn.

The rest of the movie Noah had lost himself in a fantasy where he and Luke were boyfriends and this was one of their many dates together. Noah squeezed his eyes shut as the credits began to roll.

*I need to stop this. I’m only making myself feel bad when I should be glad that Luke is happy spending time with me.*

“I still bet this is better than *Casablanca,*” Luke whispered in his ear.

Even Luke’s voice was electrically charged.

“We’ll see about that,” Noah said, turning to face him. Their faces were inches apart. Luke looked so sexy in the dim light. And his lips—oh what Noah wanted to do to Luke’s lips.

“I’m going to bed,” Faith announced, jumping up from the couch and bringing Noah back to reality. “I really liked the movie, Noah. Thanks for bringing it over.”

Noah quickly regained his composure. “You’re welcome.”

“I better put Natalie to bed,” Luke said, gently scooping up his sister.

Noah started to stand. “I should probably go then.”

“No, stay—at least for a little while longer,” Luke said, gazing at him with big brown cow eyes.

“Okay…I’ll uh…just take care of the movie,” he replied doing his best to sound casual when inside he was a mixture of excitement and nervousness. Noah wasn’t sure if he could trust himself alone with Luke in the dark.

“Goodnight, Noah,” Faith said, giving him a little wave.

“Goodnight.”

“I’ll give Nat a kiss for you,” Luke said as he took Natalie out of the room.

Noah opened the DVD player and returned the movie back to its case. He put it into his coat pocket so he wouldn’t forget it when he left. He couldn’t stay long. If Faith hadn’t spoken up, Noah wasn’t sure he would have been able to contain himself. Luke just looked so damn kissable.

Sighing, Noah settled himself into the arm chair, figuring it was a much safer bet than sitting on the sofa with Luke. Besides, Luke wasn’t interested in him. He needed to keep reminding himself of this fact.

“The girls are in bed so it’s just…oh,” Luke stopped, frowning slightly when he noticed Noah had moved. “Ah…it’s you and me now,” he quickly recovered and sat down on the couch. “I hope tonight wasn’t too boring for you.”
“No, not at all,” Noah replied with a slight grin. “I got my butt kicked by a couple of girls, ate some pizza, and watched a good movie.”


Noah nodded. “And I also had some delicious popcorn.”

“The popcorn was pretty damn good if I may say so myself,” Luke said quite proud of himself.

“Yeah,” Noah murmured, remembering the smoothness of Luke’s skin. His lips were probably just as smooth.

No...no...no...it just isn’t possible.

“I really should go,” Noah said, springing from the chair.

“Are you sure? We could watch another movie or…”

“Yes, I’m sure. I have to get up early tomorrow morning. Your dad has me working,” Noah replied, heading toward the closet to get his coat.


Noah slipped on his jacket. “I don’t mind. I really enjoy helping out. All of the horses are great—especially Whitman.”


“I’m sure he’d like that.” Noah didn’t admit aloud how much he’d love to see Luke tomorrow too. Even if it only was for a short while. He grabbed the flashlight off the desk. “Thanks for inviting me over.”

Luke followed him to the door. “I should be thanking you, Noah. You really helped me out. I don’t know if I could have handled all three kids by myself. One of us might have ended up tied to a chair.”

“I’m glad we averted disaster then,” Noah chuckled.

“Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow,” Luke said hopefully.

“Maybe,” Noah said and then slipped outside, turning on his flashlight.

Why did Luke have to be such an amazing guy? He made it so damn easy to fall for him. Noah couldn’t understand why Luke didn’t have a boyfriend—not that he wanted him to have a boyfriend.

Unless it was him.

If you take the chance you will be rewarded.

Too bad it wasn’t as easy as it sounded. Why did Noah have to be such a fucking coward?
Chapter 35

Luke woke up hard and horny as hell. Erotic dreams of Noah had plagued him the entire night. The worst of it was they had felt so real. Luke could swear that he could still feel Noah’s lips all over his body. Why did his subconscious insist on torturing him?

Glancing lazily at the alarm clock on the nightstand, Luke saw that it was already 11am. Fuck. He rarely slept this late. Hauling himself out of bed, Luke grabbed a clean pair of underwear from his dresser and marched straight to the bathroom that was attached to his room. Now more than ever he was grateful to have his own bathroom, especially since he needed to take care of his raging hard-on.

Luke got out a clean towel and washcloth and then adjusted the temperature of the water in the shower until it was nice and steamy. He stripped out of his White Sox t-shirt, black sleep pants and boxer briefs ready to relive one of the many dreams he had about Noah.

Stepping under the hot spray of water, Luke lathered up his hands, grasped his erection, and closed his eyes...

“I just love watching movies with you, Luke,” Noah said, snuggled next to him on the family room sofa.

“Me too,” Luke said, placing the empty bowl that had once held the popcorn they’d been sharing on the coffee table. All throughout the movie their fingers had been brushing together which drove Luke wild and had made it quite difficult to concentrate on the movie. By the time the movie had ended his fingers were a sticky mess from the butter which coated the popcorn. He started to reach for a napkin, but Noah stopped him grabbing his wrist.


“Mmmm…you taste so good,” Noah said, Luke’s fingers slipping from his mouth.

“I bet you’re even better,” Luke breathed as he wrapped his hand and the back of Noah’s head, drawing him into a salty/buttery kiss. Noah was absolutely delicious. He broke the kiss, gazing deeply into Noah’s eyes. “I love you, Noah. I’ve always loved you.”


“Show me.”

Noah gently pushed Luke so that he was lying on his back, unbuckling Luke’s belt.

Oh yeah...Noah was really going to show him.

Noah slowly undressed Luke—first his jeans and underwear followed by his sweater. And Noah then stood up and stripped out of his clothes. Luke’s cock ached as more and more of Noah’s flesh was exposed—pale, flawless skin that made his mouth water—until he was finally naked.

Noah was damn near perfect—long and lean, his cock hard and glistening. Luke ached for him. He
needed Noah on top of him, loving him.

Noah covered Luke’s body with his - finally they were skin to skin. Noah’s cock poked against his hip, leaving a trail of precome. Luke’s body was on fire - his cock was throbbing, begging for release. He wanted Noah - now.


“Yes.”

Noah lifted Luke’s legs so that his ankles were resting against Noah’s shoulders.


And then Noah pushed his cock inside him.

Holy shit…

Luke came hard, come splashing against the shower tile. “Oh fuck,” he gasped a bit surprised by just how powerful his climax had been, not to mention where his fantasy had taken him. Luke had never once imagined anyone fucking him. He was always the top. But with Noah he wanted everything.

Wow.

He rested his head against the cool tile, trying to regain his breath.

The water started to cool so Luke quickly washed his hair along with the rest of his body. He needed to grab a bite to eat and then head over to the farm so he could take Whitman out for a ride. Maybe run into Noah too.

Luke dried off and then changed into jeans, his black and blue flannel, and cowboy boots. Once he was satisfied with his appearance he headed downstairs. He wasn’t sure how long Noah would be working so he needed to grab something quick to eat.

Still soaring on his post-orgasmic high, Luke bounded down the steps. The house was eerily quiet, which was a good thing. His parents might wonder why he was glowing. And he certainly didn’t want to explain it to them. They couldn’t know that he’d once again fallen for one of his friends.

Strolling into the kitchen, Luke halted in his tracks when he discovered his dad standing at the island making a sandwich.

Oh shit.

“Look who’s finally decided to make an appearance,” Holden said as he put the finishing touches on his sandwich.

Please don’t let him figure out what I’ve been up to in the shower, he silently prayed. Luke would just die on the spot.


“The kids must have really worn you out last night,” Holden chuckled. “It’s a good thing that you had some help. The girls mentioned that Noah was over last night.”
Luke could feel the heat creeping to his cheeks at the mention of Noah’s name. *Way to be cool and nonchalant, Snyder.*

“Yeah, he was nice enough to come over and help with the little monsters,” he replied. “He even took it in stride when Faith and Natalie killed him at Sorry.”

“He’s a good kid,” Holden said, slicing his sandwich in half. “I’m happy that you two have become friends.”

“Me too,” Luke admitted, hoping he wasn’t swooning like a love sick school girl.

“Would you like half of my sandwich?” Holden offered. “I think we have a fresh bag of potato chips that I can open if you guys didn’t break into them last night.”

Luke grinned. When he was little he always loved splitting sandwiches with his father, it made him feel so important. “Yeah that would be great. The chips are safe. We pigged out on pizza and popcorn,” he admitted. A chill ran through his body as he remembered Noah’s hand touching his. He was completely hopeless.

“Can you get them out of the pantry?” Holden asked as he got an extra plate out of the cupboard for Luke’s sandwich. “Did you want a can of Coke or root beer?”

“Root beer.” They always had root beer together; it was their poison so to speak.

Luke ventured into the pantry and found the bag of BBQ potato chips. He grabbed it off the shelf and joined his dad at the kitchen table. It had been over a month since he shared a private meal with his father. He didn’t realize how much he had missed little moments like this with his dad until now.

“So if you’re not too old to take a trip with your old man I was thinking that we could go up to Gus’s tree farm in Wisconsin and cut down a couple of Christmas trees—one for us and one for your grandma,” Holden said as he picked up his sandwich. “I thought we could invite Noah too—if you don’t mind.”

Did he mind if Noah took a trip with them? Oh hell no!

It took Luke everything in his power to keep his composure instead of jumping for joy. “Yeah, that would be great,” he replied evenly. “I think Noah would enjoy a trip out of Oakdale.”

Holden nodded. “Good. If you’re going to talk to him soon, you’ll have to run it by him.”

“I was going to take Whitman out after I ate so maybe I’ll run into him,” Luke casually replied. *I better run into Noah. Well, if I don’t I can always drop by the cabin after I’m done riding and invite him,* he quickly reasoned with himself.

“Just let me know what he says.”

“I will.”

You’ll be taking a journey soon which will result in true love.

No way. There was no way in hell that this was the journey the fortune teller had told him about. The only guy he loved was Noah. Yes, he loved Noah. There was no use denying it anymore. Luke was head over fucking heels. God help him.

And Noah was going to suddenly reciprocate Luke’s feelings on a trip with his dad?
No fucking way.

But then again…

He wouldn’t allow himself to go there.

Luke quickly polished off his sandwich. “I should run if I want to catch up with Noah and tell him about the trip.”

“I need to take care of a few things here but if you stick around the stables and wait to take Whitman out I can join you,” Holden suggested as he collected the dirty plates. “I know Apollo would love the exercise. And we haven’t been riding together—”

“In a very long time,” Luke said. The last time they went riding was in the spring before he came out which seemed like a lifetime ago to him. “I’d like that, Dad. I’ll see you in a little while.”

Luke practically floated over to the farm. His happiness knew no bounds—he was on his way to possibly see Noah and he was thrilled to be able to hang out with his dad too. He’d really missed his father while he was living at the farm. More than he dared to admit to himself.

The stable was quiet when Luke entered it aside from the occasion neighing of the horses. For a few minutes he thought that he might have missed Noah—that is until he reached Whitman’s stall where he discovered Noah feeding him a carrot.

“I thought I might have missed you,” Luke announced which made Noah jump. “Ahhh…sorry to startle you.”

“It’s okay,” he admitted sheepishly. “I hope you don’t mind that I was giving Whitman a snack.”

“No, of course not. You’re his buddy.”

“I…uh…stop by to visit him before I leave for the day,” Noah confessed.

Luke joined him in Whitman’s stall. “I’m sure he likes the company. I wish I could get out here to see him more often.”

“I think he likes the carrots more than my company,” Noah chuckled.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Luke said, petting his horse. “You’d like Noah even if he didn’t spoil you rotten, right Whit?” Whitman let out a loud snort. “See, I told you.”

“So that was horse speak for yes?”

“Sure was,” Luke said, grinning. “I’m surprised you haven’t learned that yet since you spend so much time with him.”

“I mostly do the talking,” Noah said quietly, glancing away from Luke.

Luke would give anything to know some of the conversations Noah and Whitman have had. Did Noah ever talk about him? Or his life before he and his mother arrived in Oakdale?

There was so much about Noah that he didn’t know. His emotions always seemed to be held in check. Luke knew practically nothing about Noah’s life except for a few basic things. But what he did know about Noah he loved—his sweetness, his warmth, and his consideration for others—especially his mother. Luke remembered hearing his grandma tell his Aunt Meg that you could always tell that a man would make a good partner by the way he treated his mother. Based on that
information Noah would be worth his weight in gold.

“I know how that goes,” Luke joked.

“So I suppose that you’re here to take Whitman out for a ride?”

“Yeah, and my dad is going to come out too,” Luke replied. “I need to teach you how to ride after Thanksgiving so you can join us sometime.”

“I don’t know…” Noah stammered. “I don’t think I’d be any good on a horse.”

“Sure you would,” Luke assured him. “Whitman loves you and from what my dad has told me the other horses don’t think you’re too shabby either. Take a chance, Noah. I promise that I won’t let you get hurt.” I wish you would take a chance with me, he silently added.

Noah nodded. “Okay, we’ll see.”

“My dad and I are going up to Wisconsin to cut down some Christmas trees next Saturday,” Luke explained as he stroked Whitman’s mane but kept his eyes on Noah who was rocking on his heels, hands stuffed in his coat pocket.

“He’ll probably want me to work,” Noah interrupted. “It won’t be a problem. I don’t mind helping out.”

Noah was so incredibly thoughtful, which was one of the reasons why Luke loved him. He never seemed to think of himself. “Actually, we were hoping that you’d come with us,” Luke told him.

“To Wisconsin?” Noah asked, eyes widening.

“Yeah, it might not be the most exciting trip…”

“No, I’d love to…I mean it sounds like it could be fun.”

“It will just be a day trip,” Luke explained. “We’ll leave in the morning and be back around supper. A friend of the family has this Christmas tree farm that we always get our trees from. Along the way we stop at this old diner for lunch and Gerke’s Tree Farm is about an hour from there.”

Holden sauntered up the stall, dressed for riding. “So are you going to join us for our little trip, Noah?” he asked.

“Yes, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” Holden assured him. “The more the merrier. We’d love for you to come along. But beware we’re going to put you to work.”


“I can help with whatever you need,” Noah eagerly replied.

“Good.” Holden nodded. “I’m going to go saddle up Apollo. I’ll meet you outside, Luke. And thanks again for working today for me, Noah.”

“It was no problem,” Noah said and then turned to Luke. “I can help you get Whitman ready.”

“Sure.”
“We’re going to have to get you on a horse one day!” Holden called as he marched toward Apollo’s stall.

“See?” Luke said, giving Noah a playful nudge as they exited Whitman’s stall so they could get his tack.

Noah shook his head, chuckling and giving him a bump in return. “You Snyders just don’t give up.”

Luke swallowed. “Not a chance. We’re stubborn as hell.”

All rationale told him that he should just give up hoping that Noah would ever return his feelings. But something deep inside him refused to let go—that tiny voice which said Noah and he belonged together.
Chapter 36

Noah had barely slept because he was so excited about his trip to Wisconsin with Luke and Holden. Being asked to join them on a father/son trip was a thrill. He’d never been allowed to bring friends along on his fishing trips with the Colonel. Noah hadn’t really minded at the time because those trips seemed like the only time that Noah didn’t disappoint his father. Catching fish was something he’d been able to do well. He also was able to set up a tent, make a campfire, and do everything else that made a good camper (at least in the Colonel’s eyes). From a very young age the Colonel had instilled a list of survival skills into his brain, quizzing him on them continuously until they were second nature.

After he ate a bowl of cereal for breakfast and showered, Noah got dressed for the trip. He put a gray t-shirt on underneath his navy U of M sweatshirt. Dressing in layers was always key when going out into the woods (survival rule number one). Noah grabbed an old blue and gray flannel, jeans, and underwear and stuffed it into his duffle bag along with a fresh pair of socks just in case his got wet.

The weather in Oakdale had taken a bitter cold turn over the past week. There had been talk of snow showers hitting in the next day or two. Noah wasn’t sure if they had any snow in Wisconsin yet. But he decided that he should bring some extra clothes just in case (survival rule number two).

“Are you sure you don’t want me to pack you any snacks?” Charlene asked when Noah strolled out of his bedroom.

“Luke said that I didn’t need to worry about anything,” Noah replied. “All I had to do was show up at the farm.”

“Emma will probably load you guys up with goodies if you’re meeting at the farm.”

Noah grinned. “Probably. I hope there will be some of her oatmeal raisin cookies.”

“What’s in the duffle bag?”

“I figured that I should pack an extra set of clothes - just in case.”

“Good thinking,” Charlene replied. “I just saw on the news that we’re supposed to get some snow today. You better dress warm.”

“I am,” he reassured her. “And I have my new coat to keep me warm.” Noah glanced at the clock at it was almost 10am which was the time they had planned on leaving. “I really need to get going.”

Noah gave his mom a hug. “Don’t work too hard today.”

“Noah tugged his coat on. “I will. I’ll see you sometime tonight,” he said as he wrapped his scarf around his neck and picked his duffle bag from the floor.

Holden’s pickup truck was already parked in the driveway when he reached the farmhouse. Noah hoped that he hadn’t been keeping them waiting too long. Instead of knocking, he just let himself inside the kitchen where Luke was standing with his arms folded across his chest.

“I can’t believe you have to leave today,” Luke grumbled, frowning.

“Oh...hi,” Noah said tentatively stepping into the room.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he quickly apologized.


The sour expression Luke wore sent his heart plummeting into his stomach. This wasn’t the same Luke he’d been making plans with for this trip all week. “Is something wrong?” Noah asked.

“It is if you consider our trip being ruined,” Luke sighed. “Dad has to go to Kentucky—today so he won’t be able to go to Wisconsin.”

Noah should have known that it was too good to be true. “Oh,” was all he managed to utter.

“Luke, I have to go and meet with this potential buyer,” Holden explained. “If I don’t meet with him then he’ll find another breeder to buy a horse from.”


Noah silently agreed. But he wasn’t about to give Holden any grief because he understood how important his business was to him.

Holden regarded both boys for a moment. “You know, there isn’t any reason why you can’t go without me,” he finally said. “Luke, you’ve been up to Gus’s plenty of times so you know your way. You’re both old enough to go on your own if you feel up to it.”

“Sure we do!” Luke exclaimed and then turned to him. “I mean…I am if you are, Noah.”

“Yeah…yeah,” Noah readily agreed. The prospect of just him and Luke making the trip alone was better than the original plan. He enjoyed spending time with Holden but spending the entire day with Luke would be heaven.

“Okay, but I need you both to promise me that you’ll be careful,” Holden said. “Just go up to Gus’s and come right home. No detours. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Noah said.


“If run into any problems call me or your mother,” Holden added.

“I will. I have my cell phone,” he said, patting the front pocket of his jeans. “You don’t have anything to worry about. And we’ll pick out awesome Christmas trees, right Noah?”

“The best.”

“Here are the keys to the truck. It’s gassed up and packed with everything you need for tree hunting. There’s plenty of rope so be sure to secure the trees tightly,” Holden said, handing Luke the keys. “Don’t forget to take the cooler your grandmother packed for us.”


“Yeah.”
“What’s with the duffle bag?” Luke asked, grabbing one of the handles on the cooler that was sitting on the island.

“Just some extra clothes—you never know when you’ll need them,” he sheepishly admitted. Luke was going to think he was some sort of geek packing a fresh set of clothing for a day trip.

“We’re only going to Wisconsin not the north pole,” Luke snickered. “Can you grab the other side of the cooler for me?”

“Sure.”

“I think it’s a good idea to bring a few extra things,” Holden spoke up. “You can never be too safe. And, Luke, make sure that you have a hat.”

“It’s in my pocket, Dad,” Luke said as he escorted Noah out the door. “Have a safe trip to Kentucky!”

“Bye, Mr. Snyder,” Noah called.

“Finally, we can get out of here,” Luke sighed. “We’ll stash the cooler and your duffle bag on the rear seat.”

Once everything was stowed in the back, Noah climbed into the front of the cab, fastening the seatbelt around him. His mind briefly flashed back to the first time he was in this truck. Noah was so frightened—worried about his mother’s health and freaked out because he’d used the wrong name when he’d introduced himself to Emma. Little did he know that he’d end up happier than he’s even been. The Snyders turned out to be the most amazing people—especially Luke.

“First stop, Elsie’s Diner,” Luke announced as he started the truck. “Unless you need to take a piss before then.”

“I’ll definitely let you know,” Noah chuckled.

“It’s only a couple of hours until we hit the diner so we’ll get there just in time for lunch.”

“Sounds good.”

“They have the best sandwiches. The Reuben is out of this world.”

“I’ll have to try it.”

“Does my dad have any good CDs in here?” Luke asked, glancing over at him. “They’d be in the glove box.”

“Let me see.” Noah opened the glove compartment and found a few CDs. “We have the Eagles Hotel California, The Beatles 1, and the Rolling Stones Hot Rocks.”

“I’ll leave it up to you,” Luke decided. “Pick your poison.”

Noah picked disc one of the Rolling Stones and slid it into the CD player. Time Is on My Side was the first song on it.

“Nice choice.”

Noah set the rest of the CDs between them on the seat. “Glad you like it,” he replied. He figured that there wasn’t anything remotely romantic or suggestive about the Rolling Stones so it would be the
safest bet. Not that Luke would think he was trying to send him a message.

Why did he have to overanalyze everything?

“So…we have a long trip ahead of us,” Luke said, keeping his eyes focused on the road. “Tell me something about yourself, something I don’t already know.”

“W-w-what?” Noah panicked. Never once did it occur to him that being alone all day with Luke would lead to him having to actually talk about himself.

Luke glanced at him. “Noah, I think we’re pretty good friends, but I barely know a thing about you.”

Yes, this was very true but it was by design. There were good reasons why Noah has been so guarded around Luke. Everyone needed to stay safe so keeping quiet was the best way to ensure that happened.

“There’s really not much to tell,” Noah hedged.

“I don’t believe it.”

Well…’I’m gay too’ just wasn’t going to roll off his tongue so Noah needed to figure out something else that he could share with Luke. Some tidbit that wouldn’t give anything about his past or sexuality away.

He had to tell Luke something. “I want to direct movies,” he blurted out.

“Really?”

“Yeah, pretty lame, hun?”

“No, not at all,” Luke said, flashing him a little smile. “Remember you are talking to someone who wants to write a bestselling novel. Do you have a video camera? Have you shot any movies?”

“No,” Noah confessed, staring out the passenger’s side window. He didn’t want Luke to see just how embarrassed he was about it. What kind of aspiring filmmaker has never even picked up a video camera?

“You certainly like movies so I don’t have any doubt that you’d be a great director,” Luke quickly said. “You can always go to college to study filmmaking. I think Oakdale University has a pretty good film program. You could go there in the fall—”

Noah turned toward him, completely baffled. “Maybe in my dreams. There isn’t any money to send me to college. We’re poor—a charity case living on your grandma’s good graces.”

“You and your mom aren’t some charity case,” Luke insisted. “You have been earning your stay. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Easy for you to say,” Noah mumbled.

“Yes, I guess it is. I’ve been fortunate enough that I’ve never had to worry about money,” Luke confessed. “But there are still ways for you to go to college. You’re a bright guy. There are scholarships. My other grandmother—”

“I haven’t even gotten my GED yet,” Noah told him. “And I’m not about to become indebted to your other grandmother. I’ve got to stand on my own two feet like a man.” He inwardly cringed once the words were out of his mouth. Noah inwardly cringed. He sounded just like the Colonel.
“I’m sorry,” Luke said quietly. “I shouldn’t have pushed.”

Noah squeezed his eyes shut. Damn it…the last thing he wanted to do was make Luke feel badly. “No, I’m sorry. I just really hate having to rely so heavily on others. I feel like I’ve been doing it forever.”

“It’s not your fault that you and your mother were a victim of bad circumstances.”

Luke had no idea just how close to the mark he was with that comment. “It’s still hard.” Noah hadn’t meant to turn an innocent question into such a buzz kill. If he didn’t lighten things up it was going to be a very long day. “So…uh…have you ever given any thought to writing…say…a movie script?” he asked, shyly peeking at Luke.

Luke looked over at him, grinning. “Only if you directed it.”

“Maybe someday.”

“Maybe.”

The conversation shifted to a light tone with Luke doing most of the talking. Luke told him all about Gus Gerke’s tree farm and how they’d been getting their Christmas trees from his property. Gus had gone to school with Emma’s deceased husband, Harvey. He was actually the best man at their wedding. And before Noah knew it they were pulling into the parking lot of Elsie’s Diner.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Luke said after he parked the truck.

“I’m starving.”

Noah was a bit surprised when they entered the diner. He’d been expecting something shiny and art deco like Knapp’s in Newberry but this place was the polar opposite. The black vinyl booths were patched with duct tape. The tiled floor was worn and cracked. Off to the side by the cash register was a small gift shop area which looked like it was filled with tacky chotchkies.

“Don’t worry—the food is great,” Luke whispered, leaning close to him.

“Who’s worried?”

“You can take a seat anywhere, boys!” a middle aged lady with frizzy red hair called from behind the counter. “I’ll be right with you.”

Luke found an empty booth by the window for them. The menus were already on the table so they each grabbed one. Noah had planned on ordering the Reuben but he decided to scan the menu just in case something more appealing caught his eye. And it did.

“I don’t know why I bother looking at the menu,” Luke said, closing it. “I always go with the same thing. It’s tradition. What are you going to order?”

“The Big Stack,” Noah announced.

Luke picked up the menu, opening it. “Hmmm…salami, ham, roast beef, turkey, Swiss, lettuce, tomato, onion and mayo on a sub bun. That’s quite a sandwich,” he said, chocolate eyes sparkling. “I can’t vouch for it since I’ve never had it. Are you sure you don’t want to go with the Reuben?”

Noah shook his head. “There’s no substitute for four different kinds of meat.”

“Well, far be it for me to get between you and your four different kinds of meat,” Luke chuckled.
Noah blushed. “I guess I like big sandwiches.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a big sandwich and the more meat the better. Maybe I should try the Big Stack.”

“I would hate for you to go against tradition. You could always have a bite of mine—just to see if you like it.”


“Okay, boys, are you two ready to order?” the waitress asked, chomping on her gum.

“I’ll have a Reuben and a Coke,” Luke said.

“And I’ll take the Big Stack and a Coke.”

“Got it,” she said, scribbling down their orders. “My name is Alice. If you need anything just holler.”

“Thanks,” Noah said, tucking the menu back behind the napkin holder. “This is so classic—we’re at a diner and our waitresses name is Alice,” he snickered once she was well out of earshot.

“What’s so classic about that?” Luke was dumbfounded.

“Alice—the main character in Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore was a waitress in a diner,” Noah explained. “It’s a great film from the early ’70s—directed by Scorsese. My mom really enjoyed it. She said they turned it into a TV series Alice, which ran in the late seventies/early eighties.”

“Is your mom a film geek too?”

“She enjoys films a lot,” Noah replied, toying with his napkin. “But our tastes are different when it comes to them. I like the really old stuff and she enjoys the movies she grew up watching—especially when she was a teenager.”


“Yeah, movies are our escape,” Noah said wistfully. Then he realized that he might have said too much. “Uh...how far are we from the tree farm?”

“We’re about an hour away,” Luke told him. “We need to find a large tree for my parents and something smaller for my grandma.”

“Got it.”

“Hey, we should probably pick out a tree for you and your mom!”

While the prospect of having a Christmas tree of their own thrilled Noah, it wasn’t possible—for many reasons. “Oh no! We don’t need a tree,” he quickly replied.


“We celebrate Christmas but -”

“But nothing. Mr. Gerke will let us get another small tree. It won’t be any problem.”

“It’s not charity, it’s a Christmas tree,” Luke said, daring him to dispute him.

Noah sighed. “We don’t even have any ornaments or lights. It would be pointless to get one.”

Their conversation was briefly interrupted when Alice arrived with their Cokes. Noah was thankful for the distraction and hoped that Luke would let the topic go now.

“We always have extra lights.” Luke refused to give up. “I know a couple of girls that would probably love to make some ornaments for the tree.” He leaned across the table. “My sisters are quite smitten with you.”

Noah ducked his head so Luke couldn’t see that he was blushing again. “Faith and Natalie are pretty amazing.”

“If you ever want a much younger girlfriend, I can definitely set you up,” Luke laughed.

But I want a boyfriend. I want you to be my boyfriend, Luke.

“I…un…prefer people my own age,” Noah replied.

“Have you ever had a serious girlfriend?” Luke asked, taking a sip of his Coke.

Noah tried to will himself from not going into full blown panic mode. Calm and cool. Just answer the question without wigging out. “No, I’ve dated a bit, but there was no one special,” he replied, staring down at his drink as he slowly stirred it with his straw.

“When you first came to town I thought you’d left a trail of broken hearts behind.”

Him? Was Luke crazy? “Hardly,” he scoffed. It was time to turn the tables, putting the focus back on Luke where it was much safer. “What about you? Have you broken any hearts?”


“Wow! I’m surprised,” Noah said, gaping at him.


“It’s just…well,” Noah fumbled for the right words to describe Luke Snyder without giving away his feelings about Luke, “you’re…uh…” He swallowed. “You’re a pretty amazing guy from what I’ve seen so far.”

“Noah, you have…”

Before Luke could finish his sentence, Alice appeared at their table with their order. “One Reuben and one Big Stack.”

Noah swore he’d never seen someone happier to get a sandwich than Luke. What exactly had he been saved from? Did Luke have some of his own demons he was battling with too?

No way that could be possible. Luke just seemed so perfect—unlike him.

“Wow! That’s a lot of meat,” Luke said, peering over at Noah’s sandwich.

The Big Stack definitely looked like it lived up to its name. The sandwich looked like something that Dagwood Bumstead would have created. “Did you want a bite?” Noah offered.
“If you don’t mind,” Luke shyly replied.


Luke carefully picked up the sandwich and bit into it. “Mmmm…” he said, chewing. “There really is something to be said for four different kinds of meat.” He placed the sandwich back on the plate, sliding it back to Noah. “Did you want a bite of mine?”

“Sure.” Noah took half of Luke’s Reuben, tasting it. Yum….he’d been right about it being a great sandwich. It was probably the best Reuben he’d ever eaten. “You’re right. It’s amazing.”

“Did you want to share?” Luke asked. “We could swap half of our sandwiches. I really wouldn’t mind having more of your meat…uh…meat sandwich.”

“Great idea,” Noah said. He grabbed his knife and cut his Big Stack in half, handing Luke the half he’d already sampled. After they swapped halves, Noah took a bite of his sandwich which was just as good as Luke’s. Four meats rocked.

Lunch was a pretty quiet affair aside from the occasional moan of satisfaction that came from both boys on a couple of occasions. Noah hadn’t realized just how hungry he was until he bit into Luke’s sandwich. Luke was definitely enjoying his as well. There was a comfortable silence between them which surprised Noah. Usually, he’d be all nervous that he wasn’t interesting or should try to fill the void in conversation. But not with Luke. Noah almost felt as if he could just let his guard down and be himself.

Almost.

Alice was there to collect their plates once they only held crumbs. “Would you boys like dessert?” she asked.


“Nah…I’m good. Thanks.”

“I’ll be right back with your check then,” she told them. “You can pay at the cash register.”

“They do have great cheesecake here,” Luke said after Alice was out of earshot, “but I couldn’t eat another thing right now. Grandma loaded us up with all kinds of treats. We wouldn’t want those to go to waste.”

“Especially if there are any oatmeal raisin cookies,” Noah added, grinning.

“I’m sure there are.”

“I hope there’s enough for you,” Noah teased.

“I’m definitely prepared to fight you for them,” Luke playfully countered.

Alice slapped the check onto the table. “Here you go!”


“I have money. I can pay for my half,” Noah insisted.

Luke shook his head. “My dad and I invited you on this trip so you’re our guest. Or should I say my guest since he had to bail on us.”
“Can I at least get the tip?”

“Nope.”

Noah sighed. “I’m going to use the restroom then.”

“I’ll meet you out by the truck,” Luke said, fishing his wallet out of his pocket.

“Thanks for lunch. I really appreciate it.” Noah slid out of the booth and he trekked toward the restroom which was nestled within the small gift shop. He snickered at the cleverness of it. The owners hoped that some little trinket would catch your eye on the way to pee.

That’s just what happened to Noah. There hanging from a circular rack was a perfect little gift for Luke—a keychain with a yellow wedge of cheese dangling from it. Nothing said Wisconsin like a cheese.

Noah snatched the keychain off the rack and took it to the checkout, hoping that Luke wouldn’t catch him in the act. He glanced over at the booth they’d been sitting in and Luke was still there with his back to Noah, talking on his cell phone. He quickly paid for the keychain, shoved it into his pocket and dashed into the men’s room.

When he came out Luke was just entering the restroom. “Hey,” Luke said, digging into his jacket pocket, “here are the keys. Why don’t you get the truck warmed up for us?”

“Sure, no problem.” Noah took the keys and headed out into the parking lot.

Damn. It was getting colder.

He unlocked the truck and got inside. Noah put the key in the ignition, starting the truck. It couldn’t get warm fast enough. He was freezing. Noah put in the Beatles CD and found himself singing along to *Love Me Do* until Luke opened the driver’s side door which quickly shut him up.

“Sorry about the wait,” he said, putting a brown paper bag down between them.

“Did you break down and get some cheesecake to go?” Noah asked, eyeing the bag.

“Actually, this is for you.” Luke picked up the bag and handed it to Noah.

“What is it?” Noah asked a bit bewildered. He wasn’t expecting Luke to get him anything.

“You’ll have to open it and find out.” Luke grinned.

Noah opened the bag, peering inside and discovering a snow globe. “What the…?” he murmured, pulling the object out of the bag. Luke Snyder had gotten him a tacky Wisconsin snow globe with a black and white cow standing inside it.

“I thought you’d like a souvenir of our trip to lovely Wisconsin,” Luke said, his eyes shining. “What better way to commemorate it than with a tacky snow globe since it’s winter and all. I was hoping they’d have one with a hunk of cheese inside it since it’s…uh…cheesy.”

“It’s pretty great.” Noah smiled broadly. Luke was right, the snow globe was pretty tacky but he loved it. He’d treasure it forever because it came from Luke. “And speaking of cheese,” he said digging into his pocket. “I guess…uh…great minds think alike. I got this for you.” Noah handed Luke the cheese keychain he’d purchased.

“Cheese!” Luke exclaimed, laughing. “It’s awesome! Don’t think that I won’t use it. My keys are
Noah took the keychain from Luke. “Sure. And thanks for my gift,” Noah said carefully putting it back into the bag. “It will go right next to my Popsicle stick picture frame.”

“You really used it?” Luke asked as he backed the truck out of its parking space.

“Yeah.” Noah kept his reply simple. The frame held the picture that Maddie had taken of Luke and him on his birthday. He’d been so happy it came in the mail a couple of weeks ago. Maddie had been sweet enough to send it to him.

“Faith will be thrilled to hear it.”

As they headed north the sky began to cloud over. Soon there were snow flurries in the air. It looked like the snow prediction for Illinois also held true for Wisconsin. Hopefully, they wouldn’t get too much. But as they got further down the road the flurries quickly turned into large flakes.


“We just need to pass some cows and it would be a dead ringer,” Noah added.

“I’m sure it will just blow through. Nothing to worry about.”

Noah peered out the window. This weather didn’t look like it was going to pass. “I don’t know—” Luke shrugged. “Even if it starts accumulating this bad boy can make it through anything—we’ll be fine.”

Noah sat back and tried to relax. Luke knew what he was doing. He wasn’t going to let a little snow bother him. So far it had been an amazing trip. Luke bought him a present! He also liked the one Noah had gotten him. As far as he was concerned nothing could ruin this day.

As one song faded into the next they continued to sing and laugh—good times indeed.

“Here we go,” Luke said, slowing down the truck and turning onto a dirt road. “Are you ready to get to find the three most amazing Christmas trees ever?”

“Yes!” Noah enthusiastically replied.

Luke parked the truck in the driveway of a small brick house. “We just need to tell Mr. Gerke that we’re here,” Luke explained, tugging on his brown knit hat. “He’ll take us out to the trees and then it’s up to us to pick which ones we want.”

They got out of the truck and marched up to the front door of the house. Luke rang the doorbell while Noah stood next to him with his hands buried in his pockets. The door to the house opened, revealing an elderly man with thinning snow white hair.

“Why hello there, Luke,” Gus greeted him. “It’s so good to see you! Your father called me to let me know that you’d be coming up here with your friend.”

“Yes, this is Noah,” Luke replied. “And, Noah, this is Mr. Gerke a dear family friend and owner of the best tree farm in the world.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Noah. I always knew I liked you, Luke,” Gus said, stepping out onto the
“Normally, I’d take you out to the lot but the missus and I need to head out. We’re going to Madison to stay with my daughter for a couple of days. She just had a baby girl.”

“Congratulations!” Luke exclaimed. “Don’t worry about us. We’ll be fine. I was wondering if it would be possible to get another tree. It wouldn’t be anything too large.”


“I have extra money,” Luke continued, ignoring Noah.

Gus waved his hand. “Don’t worry about it. I told your father that it will be seventy-five dollars and that’s all I’ll take from you.”

“Thank you. That’s very generous, sir,” Noah spoke up.

“You’re welcome,” Gus replied. “And, Luke, if you can’t find any trees on the lot that you like feel free to search the rest of the property.”

“Great, thanks!” Luke said, pulling the money out of his wallet and paying Gus.

“Are you sure that you’ll be okay?” Gus asked as he pocketed the money Luke had given him.

“Yes. I’ve got my cell phone so we’ll be fine,” Luke said, patting the front pocket of his jeans.

“Be careful driving in the snow. It looks like we might get a lot so that’s why Ethel and I need to get on the road.”

“My dad’s truck can get through anything,” Luke reassured him. “And I’ll drive carefully.”

Gus stuck out his hand. “It was good seeing you again, Luke. Send our love to your grandmother and the rest of your family.”

Luke shook his hand. “I will. Thanks again for the extra Christmas tree.”

Gus turned to Noah, offering his hand. “It was nice meeting you, Noah. Be sure to keep Luke out of trouble.”

“I will, sir,” Noah replied as he shook Gus’s hand. “It was nice meeting you too.”

“The lot is down that access road you came in on,” Gus explained. “You’ll want to make a right out of the here and it will be the first driveway on the left,” Gus explained.

“Got it.” Luke nodded and then turned to Noah. “Are you ready?”

“Ready.”

The boys said goodbye to Gus and trekked back to the truck. The snowflakes seemed to be getting bigger by the minute. Noah tried to dismiss the nagging feeling in his gut that the snowfall wasn’t going to be letting up anytime soon—if anything, it would only get worse. He’d voiced his concern once so doing so again would only make him look like a worrywart. He had to trust that Luke wouldn’t steer them wrong.

Or at least he seemed to. And Luke had his cell phone so they’d be fine.

Luke drove over to the lot that Gus had told them about. There were several rows of pine trees ready for their inspection. Noah made sure that his scarf was tied tightly around his neck before he stepped
outside into the winter wonderland.

“We’ll need a smaller tree for the cabin,” Luke said, digging in the backseat for the saw and rope. “And something average for my grandma’s. I’m not sure if we’re going to find anything big enough in this area for my parents, though.”

“It looks like there’s plenty to choose from.”

“We’ll see.” Luke already began hiking toward the trees. “Just yell if you see something you like.”

Noah honestly didn’t know the first thing about picking out a proper Christmas tree. Luke was probably right, the tree for the cabin should be smaller so it wouldn’t take up a lot of space. It would also be easier to decorate too. He slowly walked down the first aisle, inspecting each tree—some were too big, others seemed to be missing branches or looked a little crooked to him. Finally, at the end of the row, he found what looked like the perfect tree—at least to him.


Luke darted over to him with the saw in hand. “Which one is it?”

“Right here.” Noah pointed to his prized tree.

Luke examined the tree that Noah had selected. “Good eye, Noah. This will be perfect for the cabin.” He lay down next to the tree in the snow. “I’m going to need you to hold up the bottom branches so I can see what I’m doing.”


Luke grunted. “I’m almost through.”

“I’ve got a hold of it,” Noah said, grasping the trunk, which shook as Luke cut through the trunk.

Luke rolled away from the tree. “Let her go!”

“Timber!” Noah let the tree fall into the snow.

Luke stood up, brushing the snow off himself. “I need to haul this thing back to the truck.”

“Did you need help?”

“I’ve got this one,” Luke replied. “You can drag the next one.”

Once the tree was placed in the back of the pickup truck, they sought out the next tree. This time they searched together. Luke was impressed with how thorough Noah was with the inspection process, which Noah took pride in. Noah found a tree that Luke agreed would be perfect for his grandmother’s parlor.

They followed the same procedure for cutting down the second tree. But this time Noah dragged it to the truck. Together they loaded it next to the first one.

“I haven’t seen any that are large enough for my parents’ house,” Luke announced. “I remember going to another section with my dad a couple of years ago. It’s where we got the tree for our house. I think we should go back there.”
Even though Gus had told them they could get their trees from anywhere, Noah was still a bit apprehensive about veering from the assigned lot. “Are you sure? We haven’t checked out all of the trees in this area.”

“I’ve seen enough to know that the right tree for my house isn’t here,” Luke said, strolling toward the cab of the truck. “I’ve been coming to this place for years. I know where the really good spots are.”

Noah knew it was pointless to argue. Luke’s mind was definitely made up. “Let’s go.”

They piled into the truck. Luke steered them out of the driveway and down a very snow-covered road. Luke turned off into a wooded drive and then made a couple of more turns. Noah wondered if they were even still on the tree farm. One thing for certain was that they were surrounded by some pretty big pine trees. Luke would most certainly find the ultimate Christmas tree for his parents.

“Now these are some fine Christmas trees,” Luke declared when they got out of the truck.

“Just how big did you want to go?”

Luke chuckled. “Well, it does have to fit in the back with the others so I can’t go too big.” Luke glanced up at the sky. “Wow…it’s really coming down. We should probably get a move on so we can get back on the road. It doesn’t look like it’s going to stop snowing anytime soon.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Noah agreed. If anything the snow was getting worse, not better.

Luke led the way through the pine trees until he found one that he thought fit the bill. Together they worked quickly to bring down the biggest of the trees they’d conquered. The haul to the truck seemed to take forever as it took both of their efforts to get it to the truck through the rapidly accumulating snow. And it took some serious maneuvering to get the tree into the back of the truck and secured.

But they did and now it was time to head back to Oakdale. Before they could head out there was about an inch of snow that needed to be cleared off the windshield. Noah hoped that it wasn’t snowing this badly in Illinois.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Luke said once the truck was warmed up and ready to go.

“Good plan.”

Once Luke got the truck turned around it became apparent that their tire tracks had all but vanished. “This is going to be an interesting trip home,” Luke said, taking a deep breath.

“Yeah,” Noah murmured, eyes riveted to the falling snow.

“But not to worry,” Luke reassured him. “This truck is unstoppable.”

“I think we just might need unstoppable.”

Luke slowed the truck when they reached the end of the road. “If memory serves me correctly if I make a right out of here this road should lead us to the main road.”

“Should?” Noah asked, arching an eyebrow. “Maybe we should just go back the way we came.”

“No…no…I’m sure this way will be quicker,” Luke said already making the turn into the unexplored territory.

Noah prayed that they weren’t making a huge mistake as the truck trudged along the snowy road.

Fuck was right. They’d reached a dead end. So much for Luke’s stellar memory.

“I guess I better get this thing turned around so we can go back the way we came.” Luke sighed. “Please feel free to say I told you so.”

“Nah…I’d never do that,” Noah replied, casting a quick smile in his direction. Too many times in his life the Colonel had uttered those words to him to make him feel small and worthless. Noah didn’t want to make Luke feel badly about the situation they were in. It was an honest mistake.

“Hang on. This is going to be tricky,” Luke announced as he put the truck in reverse. He cut the wheel and gunned the engine as the truck dipped off the road. Then there was a loud thud. “Fuck!” Luke exclaimed as the truck spun out of control.

“This…isn’t…good,” Noah grunted when the truck came to an abrupt stop.

“Let’s not panic. I can get us out of here.” Luke stepped on the gas but the truck didn’t move. “I think we might have hit something.”

Luke opened the door. “There’s one way to find out.”

Noah wasn’t about to let Luke investigate on his own so he quickly followed. “Let’s hope for the best.” The words quickly died in his throat when he saw the predicament they were in. The truck had spun out into a snow bank, the back tires sunk deeply into the snow.

“Fuck. This isn’t going to be pretty,” Luke said, staring at a large log that had been hiding in the snow.

Well, until they ran over it.

Noah peered underneath the truck. “Ahh…Luke, I think you better take a look at this.”

Luke crouched down, taking a look. “Shit. It looks like the front axle is broken. We’re not going anywhere—at least in the truck.”

“Is your dad going to be mad?” Noah nervously asked.

“It was an accident. He’ll be worried about us more than the truck.” Luke stood up, reaching into the pocket of his jeans. He pulled out his cell phone, flipping it open. “Don’t even tell me—”

“What?”


“And Gus and his wife are gone,” Noah added, his stomach twisting into knots.

“We should get back into the truck and figure out what the hell we’re going to do now,” Luke said as he opened the door to the cab and tossed his cell phone on the dashboard.

Noah got back inside the truck, which was still warm but he knew it wasn’t going to last. They needed to stay warm and not do anything rash that would get them into even more trouble.

“Maybe we should try walking to the main road and flagging down someone,” Luke suggested.
“Are we even sure which way the main road is?”

“Pretty sure.”

Pretty sure wasn’t good enough for Noah. The laws of survival that the Colonel had drilled into his head told him that leaving the truck would be a very big mistake. One thing that Noah did trust as far as the Colonel was concerned was his knowledge of survival. The Colonel had received his fair share of accommodations because he was a good soldier and leader. The Army just didn’t know what a horrendous husband and father he was.

“Luke, I don’t think we should go anywhere,” Noah replied as he turned to face him. “It’s pretty nasty out there. If we start walking we could end up lost and we’d be without shelter. Also, if we move the chances of being found lessen.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Luke slowly nodded his head. “I didn’t think of those scenarios. I’m nothing but trouble today,” he sighed, staring up at the ceiling of the cab.

“Hey,” Noah said gently touching Luke’s arm. “The only reason I know what to do is because my father drilled stuff like that into my head when I was little. We’d go on these fishing and hunting trips so he wanted to be sure that I was always prepared.”

“He did a good job.”

Noah forced a smile. “Thanks.”

Would his father finally be proud of him now for knowing what to do in this situation? Noah still doubted it. The Colonel would find something wrong with his actions—namely that he had gotten lost with a gay guy.

“Brrrr…it’s really cold in here. I think we need some heat.” Luke reached to start up the truck but Noah quickly stopped him.

“Wait!”


“I noticed that the back end was pretty buried which would mean that the exhaust is buried as well,” Noah explained. “If we try to run the truck we’ll end up with carbon monoxide poisoning.”

“We could try to dig it out,” Luke suggested.

“Do we have a shovel?”

Luke turned around and checked the backseat. “No, but we do have a blanket.”

“That’s good. We’re going to need it.”

Luke tossed the blanket between them. “We also have the food my grandma packed for us.”

“At least we won’t starve to death,” Noah said, trying to make light of the situation.

“I suppose we can’t dig the back out with our hands,” Luke sighed.

Noah peered out the window. “Not at the rate the snow is coming down. And it’s freezing out there.”
“I guess even if we succeeded it wouldn’t do us too much good. The tank is almost on E. I planned of filling up before we headed home. God…I’m such an idiot!” Luke pounded his fist against the steering wheel.

“You didn’t know this was going to happen.”

“It wouldn’t have if I hadn’t insisted on finding a really big tree.”

“We need to stay warm,” Noah said, picking up the blanket. “And I…uh…think the best way to do that is to get under this blanket and…uh…kinda huddle together.”

“Body heat—good idea.”

Noah scooted over so he was sitting right next to Luke and draped the blanket over them. He was hesitant to lean into Luke or put his arm around him. If he did so, he was certain that his feelings for Luke would be evident.

“This really isn’t doing too much good,” Luke said, shyly glancing at Noah. “We should probably…uh…at least touch each other. I…uh…understand if you don’t want to…”

“No,” Noah quickly replied. “You’re right. In order to generate body heat our bodies should be touching.”

Luke nodded. “I can…uh…put my arm around you if you wanted to lean into me…”

“Yeah, okay.” Noah’s heart was beating wildly at the prospect of having Luke’s arm around him.

“We can give it a try.” Luke tentatively draped his arm around Noah’s shoulders.

Noah pressed his body closer to Luke’s, a shiver went through his body as he nestled himself against the boy of his dreams. The cold wasn’t the reason for the extra chill. In fact he couldn’t feel the cold at all—just how incredible it felt to be so close to Luke, to have Luke’s arm around him.

This is how it’s supposed to feel.

Don’t go there, an inner voice warned. This is only about keeping warm. That’s it.


“Me too,” Noah replied, staring out the window at the huge snowflakes that continued to fall.

“It was a good idea. You’ve had a lot of them today. I bet your father would be proud of you.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Noah said before he even realized it. Shit…being so close to Luke made him feel safe. Maybe too safe because he’d let his guard down and admitted something he never planned on telling anyone.

“Really? Why not?” the surprise was evident in Luke’s voice.

Noah hesitated. He could lie or he could be truthful - to a point. He glanced at Luke who was gazing at him with wide concerned eyes. Inside Noah could feel one of the many walls he’d erected come tumbling down.

“My father was never proud of me,” Noah quietly admitted as he glanced away from Luke. “He expected perfection and I was…am…far from perfect. He wasn’t a nice man—respected by his peers yes but at home…” Noah took a deep breath. “He…uh…hit my mother—a lot. She protected me the
best she could but he’d hit me too.” He dropped his head afraid to meet Luke’s gaze.

“Oh, Noah, I’m so sorry.”

“That man made me feel so weak and pathetic,” Noah said, his voice cracking a bit. “I would have done anything to help my mother. I hated seeing her treated like shit and beaten.”

“You were just a boy,” Luke murmured as he reassuringly rubbed Noah’s arm.

“A scared shitless little boy,” Noah clarified, casting a quick glance at Luke. “Sometimes the sound of his voice would just make me shake because I never knew if either of us had done something to piss him off. And if we had…”

“He’d take it out of you or your mom.”

Noah nodded. “It didn’t have to be much. She could have cooked the wrong meal or didn’t make the bed. And with me all I had to do was look at him wrong and I’d get backhanded.”

“And if you did worse?” Luke quietly asked.

Noah’s eyes filled with tears as he remembered the very last beating he received from Winston Mayer. “I’d end up in the hospital with a concussion,” he choked out, wiping a tear from his cheek and quickly looking away from Luke. He didn’t want Luke to see him cry.


“How could you? Your father is perfect. He’d never do anything to hurt you or your mom.”


“He isn’t?” Noah couldn’t hide his surprise. Never in a million years would he have been able to guess that Holden and Luke weren’t biologically related. They just seemed so much alike.

“No. My biological father’s name is Damian Grimaldi,” Luke explained. “It’s kinda a long story but he was married to my mother at one time.”

“Where is he now?”

“Malta—that’s where he’s from. And I hope he stays there,” Luke bitterly replied. “I never want to see him again. He’s hurt me and my family too many times.”

“May I ask how?” Noah cautiously asked. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t feel comfortable. It’s really none of my business.”

“The list is kinda long, but I guess we have a lot of time on our hands,” Luke chuckled ruefully. “When I was nine he decided that he was going to fake my death so he could take me back to Malta with him. My dad found me before he could but then we were kidnapped by Damian’s brother, Dante, who took us to Malta. He was trying to use me to get half of the Grimaldi fortune. Long story short it didn’t work. Then this past summer Damian showed up in town. I’d just come out and my mom was having a hard time with it but he pretended that he accepted me. I, like a fool, believed him.”

“I think it’s only natural to want to believe your father.”
“My father is Holden Snyder,” Luke quickly corrected him. “Damian is nothing to me. He tried to send me to this deprogramming camp that would make me straight and he let me think it was my mom’s idea.”

“You didn’t go?”

“Obviously.”

Right, stupid question.

“How did you get out of it?” Noah asked.

Luke was quiet for a moment before he finally answered, “When they came to get me I ran upstairs to stall and called my dad. I told him to come home right away. But while I was stalling my mom came home and found me upstairs. She tried to convince me that she didn’t want to send me away. Oh god… I wish I would have listened to her.” Luke’s voice hitched.

Noah had a sinking feeling that something really bad had happened but he was afraid to ask what. Whatever it was talking about it months later was obviously upsetting Luke. “It’s okay. You don’t have to say anymore,” Noah said, placing his hand on Luke’s thigh.

“No… no… you’re my friend. This is something you should know,” Luke insisted. “I’ve done some terrible things. And this is the worst of them. I was so upset and angry with my mom. I just wanted her to go away so I pushed her. She lost her footing and fell down the stairs.” Luke stared up at him with watery eyes. “She was pregnant with Ethan. I could have killed both of them.”

Noah was stunned. But even knowing Luke for just over a month Noah didn’t have a doubt that it had been just a terrible accident.

“But you didn’t,” Noah said, not breaking their gaze. “It was an accident. You never would have intentionally hurt your mom and her unborn baby. Never. You are a good person, Luke. They’re okay now so everything worked out in the end.”

Luke wiped his eyes. “Yeah, my mom never blamed me. She accepts me the way I am. My dad didn’t end up hating me either even if Damian tried to convince me otherwise.”

Damian sounded a lot like the Colonel. Luke was lucky that he wasn’t raised by that man. “You’re free from him,” Noah said. Just like I’m free from the Colonel.

“You know, I’m getting kinda hungry,” Luke said quickly changing the subject. “Did you want to see what kinds of goodies my grandma packed for us?”

Eating would be a good distraction—something they both needed. “Yeah. I’ll take a look in the cooler.” Noah turned and knelt on the sea, peering over it anxious to find out what Emma had packed for them. “Far out,” he said, grinning when he opened the contents of the cooler.

“I’ll take that as a good sign.”

“Very good. Your grandma really loaded us up,” he said as he dug through the contents of the cooler. “There are four sandwiches, about a dozen cookies…”


Noah picked up the Ziploc bag, examining them. “Looks that way.”
“Far out!”

Noah set the bag down and continued looking through the cooler. “We also have some small bags of chips, six bottles of water and a thermos.”

“A thermos?” Luke whipped around so that he was kneeling next to Noah. “Lemme see!” Noah handed it to Luke, who promptly opened it and sniffed. “Ohhh…hot chocolate! Grandma, I love you!”

Luke was about to pour some in the cup but Noah stopped him. “Wait! We should probably save it!” Noah exclaimed, which made Luke freeze. “I mean…we don’t know when someone is going to find us and it’s going to get colder once the sun goes down so we’re going to need the hot chocolate to help keep us warm.”

Luke screwed the cap back onto the thermos. “Someone will find us. Our parents are going to realize that something is wrong when we don’t come home.”

“But Mr. and Mrs. Gerke left town…”

“My dad will find us, Noah,” Luke tried to reassure him. “Nothing will stand in his way. He’ll find us—just like he found me when Damian tried to take me away.”

Noah nodded. “We should probably eat something.”

“Did you want to split a sandwich and a bag of chips?”

“Yeah.”

Luke reached into the cooler and pulled out a sandwich, which he handed to Noah. Then he grabbed a couple of bottles of water and a bag of potato chips. Noah closed the cooler and turned back around, pulling the blanket up onto their laps.

They ate in relative silence. Noah was trying very hard not to think about what would happen if someone didn’t find them soon. He believed that Holden would move heaven and Earth to find them. The large snowflakes falling outside were a harsh reminder that it wasn’t going to be easy. The windshield was already covered with snow. Noah was afraid to contemplate how bad the road conditions were.

“I gotta piss like a racehorse,” Luke declared as he polished off the rest of his sandwich. He put the cap back on his bottle of water. “I think it’s time to suck it up and brave the cold.”

Noah had to pee too. He’d just been trying to ignore this fact for the past hour. “Me too,” Noah sighed.

Luke wrapped his scarf tighter around his neck. “It won’t be too bad if we make it quick.”

“Right…on three,” Noah said, sliding back to the passenger’s side of the truck.

“One…two…three,” they counted together.

Oh fuck was it cold outside. Noah was definitely going to make this quick.

“I’m going to head down by the trees,” Luke said, trudging through the snow.

“I’ll go across the road,” Noah decided. As tempting as it was to follow Luke, he knew that he couldn’t. There was a chance that he might get caught sneaking a peek at something he shouldn’t so
it was best that they both had their privacy.


“Yes…kinda!” Luke called back.

“What’s kinda?” Noah asked but his question was soon answered when he found Luke heading toward him, wet from the waist down and shivering. This wasn’t good at all. “What happened?”


“Noah guided Luke toward the truck. “Yes, you will.”

“N-n-noo000.”

Noah opened the driver’s side door. “Get in and I’ll make sure that you don’t freeze.” Once Luke was inside the truck Noah trotted through the snow to the other side and got in. Luke’s arms were wrapped around himself as he rocked back and forth, teeth chattering. “Remember that duffle bag you teased me about?”


“It’s a good thing I brought it because there are an extra set of clothes in there,” Noah said, picking the blanket up from the floor and draping it across Luke’s lap. “You need to take off everything that’s wet while I get you some dry clothes.”

“’k-k-kay.”

Noah turned around, giving Luke some privacy as he pulled out all of the clothing he had packed that morning. He tried not to let himself consider the fact that Luke was next to him taking off his pants. Luke was freezing. Noah needed to make sure that he got dried off and warmed up quickly. Helping Luke was the only thing that mattered, not his raging hormones.

Luke’s wet clothes were sitting on his lap. Noah took Luke’s jeans, socks, and underwear and put them on the floor. “We gotta make sure that you’re dry before you put the clothes on,” Noah said, unwrapping his scarf which was going to act as a towel.


Noah took a deep breath before wrapping the scarf around one of Luke’s feet and vigorously rubbing it. He was trying to make sure it was dry while he also tried to warm Luke up in the process.

“S-s-so cold I can’t even l-l-laugh,” Luke muttered.

“Are your feet ticklish, Snyder?”

“Mmmhhmmm.”

“Now I know your kryptonite,” Noah teased, hoping to get Luke’s mind off of how miserable he was feeling.

Noah was happy that his plan seemed to be working. Now if he could just get his mind off of how muscular Luke’s calves felt. Unfortunately, his cock didn’t seem to recognize the fact that there was a scarf separating Noah’s hands from Luke’s flesh. Touching Luke in any fashion never failed to arouse him. 

*Stop it, he chastised himself. Luke is freezing right now. You need to take care of him not get turned on by him. Get a hold of yourself.*

“How’s this?” Noah asked, glancing up at Luke. Were his eyes always so amazing? They were positively mesmerizing. They seemed to be filled with desire just like they’d been after their basketball game. 

Oh wow.  


“Melting?” Noah’s breath caught in his throat.  

“Oh…I’m not quite a frozen popsicle anymore,” Luke clarified.  

“That’s good,” Noah replied as he moved up to Luke’s knees. He would not think about how he was slowly closing in on Luke’s cock. His hand slid from the scarf, brushing against Luke’s knee. He was warming up. And did it ever feel good…  

“I-I-I can get the rest,” Luke spoke up.  

*Shit. He was making Luke feel uncomfortable. What the hell was he thinking?*  

He wasn’t which was the problem. For once in his life he was acting on purely on instinct and now it had gotten him in trouble. Noah handed Luke the scarf. “That’s a good idea.” He sat back and focused his attention on the clothes he had gathered together for Luke to wear. But he knew that once Luke had the dry clothes on they still weren’t out of the woods. He had to keep him safe - whatever it took. 


“Give it to me,” Noah said, taking it from him. “I’ll put it with the rest of the wet stuff.” He dropped the scarf on top of Luke’s discarded clothes. And then Noah handed Luke his dry clothing.  

Luke pulled out Noah’s white briefs and snickered, “Tightie whities—you really are a boy scout, Noah.”  

Noah could feel his face flame. “Some people just aren’t as cool as you, Snyder.”  

“I’m so cool I’m almost frozen,” Luke chuckled ruefully.  

“We’re going to fix that.”  

“I don’t see how,” Luke grumbled as he tugged on the jeans Noah had given him.  

“First, we’re going to start with the hot chocolate that your grandma made,” Noah explained. “We’ll just have to go back to the body heat thing. It’s the best we can do.” He didn’t wait for Luke to respond, instead he turned about and pulled the thermos out of the cooler. Noah unscrewed the cap and filled it with hot chocolate while Luke put his socks on. “Here…drink.”
Luke took it with shaky hands, bringing the small cup to his lips. “Thanks.”

Noah held onto the thermos ready to refill the cup once Luke had emptied it. “How does it taste?”

“Good, you’ll have to try it.”

“Not this time,” Noah replied. “You need it to warm up.”

Luke glanced at him. “You have to be freezing too.”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. You’re the one who decided to go all polar bear and take a swim.”

“I couldn’t help myself. The creek looked so inviting.”

Noah held out the thermos. “Here, take some more.”

Luke allowed him to pour more hot cocoa. “At least have a sip,” he insisted, flashing his chocolate eyes at him.

“Just one little sip, then the rest is yours.” Noah took a small drink of the hot chocolate which was slid its way down his throat leaving a nice hot trail. Having something warm in his belly felt good. “Mmmm…thanks,” he said, handing the cup back to Luke.

“Please take more.”

As tempting as it was to take Luke up on his offer to split the cocoa, he couldn’t. “I’m good besides I prefer mine with whipped cream,” he teased.

“Snob.”

“If I drink too much, I’ll have to pee again. I really don’t want to have to go outside again.”

“Good point. At least I got to pee before I fell into the creek.”

“There’s one good thing.”

“I can think of some others,” Luke said, taking a sip of the hot chocolate. “We have food, shelter, a blanket—each other. I mean, I’d hate to be stuck out here by myself. I would probably be lost in the woods or worse if it wasn’t for you.”

“I don’t. I think you’re pretty scrappy. You wouldn’t be too bad off on your own.”

“Yeah, right,” Luke scoffed. “I’m feeling a little better. I think it’s best to save some hot chocolate for later.”

“See, you are pretty smart,” Noah said, giving him a nudge.

Noah screwed the top back onto the thermos, took the cup from Luke and placed it on top of it. He put it back into the cooler and then he settled in underneath the blanket. Luke had his arms folded across his chest, rubbing his arms for warmth.

“I don’t think that’s going to do too much good,” Noah told him.

“Do you think we should…uh…?”
“Yeah,” Noah quickly replied. “We can’t risk you getting hypothermia.”

“Yeah.”

“I can...uh...sorta put my arms around you—if that’s okay,” Noah suggested, hoping that Luke couldn’t see that he was blushing.

Luke nodded. “Yeah, it is. I’m still so cold.”


“We’re never going to warm up,” Luke said, still shaking.

“Talk to me—get your mind off of how cold you are.”

“I don’t think it will work.”

“Come on, Luke,” Noah tried to coax him. “I know how much you like to talk. You can’t tell me that you’re passing down the opportunity to do so. Tell me a story. Tell me anything. Before you know it help will be here and we can get you to the hospital to get checked out.”

Luke’s head snapped up. “No! No hospital—no way.”

“Luke...”

“I hate hospitals. I never want to have to go back.”

“But...”

“No, I almost died in one. I just can’t...”

“Hey, hey,” Noah said, trying to soothe him as he rubbed Luke’s back. “It will be okay. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”


“What happened?”

“Last fall I got a kidney infection. It was so bad that I needed a transplant but it took awhile to find a donor so I almost didn’t make it,” Luke quietly explained.

“Oh wow.” He tightened his hold on Luke. The mere thought of Luke almost dying last year was almost unbearable. Luke had become so important to him. He couldn’t imagine what his life would be like if he’d never met Luke.

“I’m okay now,” Luke said, glancing up at him. “I have one kidney and I’m on meds for the rest of my life, but I’m okay.”

“I can understand your aversion to hospitals.”

“Let’s just make sure that I don’t have to go back to one,” Luke decided, snuggling closer to him.

“It’s a deal,” Noah promised.
Charlene woke up to a darkened cabin. The only light was coming from the TV which was stuck on the menu screen for *Foul Play*. She hadn’t meant to doze off but it had been a very busy day at the diner which coupled with some bad cramps made for one, long, exhausting day. Driving home had been a bit tricky with all of the snow that was accumulating on the road. She couldn’t remember ever seeing so much snow before Thanksgiving.

Stretching, Charlene slowly rose from the sofa. “Noah?” she called out.

Nothing.

She padded over to his bedroom and peered inside. Noah’s bed was made. It didn’t look like he’d been in his room since he left this morning. Charlene strolled into the kitchen, glancing up at the clock above the sink.

10:15.

A chill coursed through her body. Noah told her that he’d be home by dinner. It wasn’t like him to not tell her if he was going to be late. Maybe he’d stopped off at home while she was sleeping and didn’t want to wake her before going out again. She turned toward the kitchen table, searching for a note, but there wasn’t one.

“Don’t panic,” she murmured. “He might be at Luke’s or Emma’s. There’s a logical explanation for this.”

However, that didn’t stop her from hastily putting on her boots and coat. She needed to get to Emma’s so she could find out what was going on. On her way out the door, she snatched the flashlight from the table and willed herself not to panic which was almost impossible since her string bean was missing.

The trek to the farm was longer than normal. Almost a foot of snow had fallen throughout the day. She was definitely going to get a cell phone once everything was said and done. Not having a phone made her helpless. Charlene had vowed never to helpless again after she’d left Winston.

After what seemed like an eternity she finally reached the farmhouse. “Emma,” Charlene huffed as she let herself inside. “Emma…”

Emma came out of the parlor. “Gloria, what is it?”

“The boys—have you heard from Luke and Noah?”

“Why no…I haven’t,” she replied, bringing her hand to her chest. “But I’m sure they must be at Lily and Holden’s. They might have lost track of time. You know how boys are.”

“Noah isn’t one to forget,” Charlene told her. “He knows I worry about him so he always lets me know when he’s going to be late. Have you heard from Holden since they left? There’s an awful lot of snow out there—”

“Holden didn’t go with them.” Emma pursed her lips. “He found out that he needed to go to Kentucky today so the boys went by themselves.”

“Oh no,” Charlene grasped the island to steady herself.

“Let me call Lily,” Emma said, marching over to the telephone and picking up the receiver. “I’m sure
she’ll be able to give us some answers. Don’t you worry.”

It was too late. Charlene was positively frantic but she wouldn’t let herself fall apart.

“Hello, Lily dear, I’m sorry to call so late but I wanted to check to see if Luke and Noah are there… oh….no Gloria hasn’t heard from them either.” Emma went pale. “Yes, that’s a good idea. You do that and I’ll call Holden…please let me know if you hear from him or the boys.”

“They’re missing,” Charlene gasped.

Emma nodded. “Lily hasn’t heard from them since they stopped for lunch but she’s going to try calling their cell phones. I’m going to call Holden and see if he knows anything.”

“He would have called if he heard from the boys,” Charlene said, wrapping her arms around herself.

“We don’t know that,” Emma said as she dialed the phone. “Maybe he has. Let’s tackle one problem at a time.”

While Charlene appreciated what Emma was trying to do, her gut told her that Luke and Noah were in trouble. They were smart boys and would have called if they were able. Luke didn’t seem like a boy who’d needlessly worry his family.

“Hello, Holden. I need to know if you’ve talked to Luke since the boys left this morning…they haven’t come back yet and no one has heard from them since they stopped off for lunch,” Emma explained. “I know…i know it’s not like him so I’m very concerned….okay please call me right back.” Emma hung up the phone and took a deep breath. “Holden is going to call Gus who’s the owner of the tree farm that the boys went to.”

Charlene nodded. “That’s a good idea. Hopefully, he’ll know something.”

“Gus was the best man at my wedding. If the boys didn’t show up as planned he would have called either me or Holden.”

Charlene tried to focus on the positive, not on the fact that Luke and Noah could be stranded in a ditch somewhere—or worse. When the phone rang again, she jumped.

“Hello…okay I’ll let Holden know. He’s going to call Gus. I’ll call the minute I hear something.” Emma hung up the phone. “Luke’s cell is going straight to voicemail and Noah’s will ring before it goes to voicemail.”

“Noah might not have taken his cell phone,” Charlene replied. “He tends to forget it since it’s still so new to him.”

“Hopefully, Holden will have better news but at least we know that the boys were fine around noon.”

“But that was so long ago.”

The phone rang again and Emma quickly answered it. “Hello…Lily can’t reach the boys on their cell phones but she talked to Luke when they’d stopped for lunch at that diner you like so much… Okay…please be careful and keep us posted. Goodbye, Holden.”

Charlene tried to brace herself for the worst. “It’s bad news, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid so,” Emma calmly replied. “There wasn’t an answer at Gus’s so Holden is going to drive
up there.”

“There’s so much snow. Holden’s going to have a difficult time getting there. And when he does—” Charlene couldn’t bring herself to finish the thought. The situation was hopeless.

Emma wrapped her arms around Charlene, pulling her into a tight hug. “He will find them,” she murmured. “Have faith.”

Charlene squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn’t lose her string bean. Noah just had to be all right.

*******

As Luke came out of his slumber he realized that he was still so very cold. But even though he was freezing there was still something quite comforting about his situation. He wasn’t alone. There was a long, lean body pressed up against him. And it felt so damn good.

Luke could feel soft, silky hair against his cheek. Slowly he opened his eyes to discover Noah’s head resting on his shoulder. No wonder he’d slept so soundly. He had Noah nestled up snuggly against him. It felt so perfect. Noah was perfect.

Maybe the fortune teller hadn’t been a fraud after all. Luke was sure that he was hopelessly in love with Noah—that Noah was his true love. There couldn’t possibly be anyone more perfect for him in the world than Noah.

Carefully Luke slipped off his glove and tentatively touched Noah’s pale cheek. His skin was so soft. Instinct took over as Luke began to caress his cheek. Noah had taken care of him—kept him warm, made sure he felt safe. Luke just loved him so much. Now more than ever. Noah had finally started to open up to him too. He couldn’t believe Noah’s father had beaten him and his mother. No wonder he was so cautious.

Luke had also confessed things to Noah he never shared with anyone. He’d been afraid that Noah would think he was a terrible person. But he hadn’t. Noah seemed to understand the hell Luke had been through this year.

_I love you, Noah._


_Shit._

Luke pulled his hand away from Noah’s face as if it had suddenly caught fire.

“Oh my god,” Luke stammered. “I’m so…so….sorry. I…uh…Noah, I have these feelings for you. I know I told you that I didn’t but I lied and—”


There was a knock on the window. Luke whipped his head around to find his father standing outside the truck. They’d been rescued—a few minutes too early.
Chapter 37

Luke liked him—really like him—like that. A couple of days later Noah was still having a hard time wrapping his head around this revelation. Noah had been about to confess to Luke that the feeling was mutual. The moment had felt so right. Luke had seemed so scared of being rejected by him.

Noah wasn’t anyone to be afraid of—he was an awkward geek. Hardly someone he’d think Luke would be attracted to. But Luke was. He had told Noah so. Trying to wrap his head around this new information was next to impossible. Luke liked him, desired him, for god only knows how long.

Before Noah could respond to Luke’s declaration, Holden had showed up to save them. He also saved Noah from spilling his secret. Never in his life had he been so torn between utter relief and frustration.

On the way home Noah hadn’t really gotten the chance to talk to Luke. Well, not about what happened before Holden had arrived. Holden had been so busy fussing over the boys. He’d given each a giant bear hug. For the first time ever Noah didn’t flinch. It felt incredible because his father had never once hugged him like that.

Luke had been right when he’d said that Holden wouldn’t be upset about his truck.

“Accidents happen. My truck can be fixed,” Holden had said. “But neither of you can be replaced.”

It had taken everything in Noah’s power not to break down and sob right then and there. The Colonel would never have said that to him. He most likely would have beaten Noah within an inch of his life if he had wrecked his father’s truck. A stolen bicycle had gotten him a concussion.

Noah had actually slept for most of the trip back to Oakdale. Being in the toasty warm truck next to Luke was so comforting. He had to fight the urge to rest his head on Luke’s shoulder since Holden was there. When Noah woke up as they were entering Luther’s Corners, he discovered that Luke was snoring, resting his head against Noah’s arm.

Holden had gently nudged Luke awake when they reached the farm. Luke had glanced at Noah blushing and muttering a quick apology. After that, everything was a blur. There were hugs and kisses from everyone before his mother spirited him away to the cabin.

Noah didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye to Luke, who kept insisting that he didn’t need to go to the hospital when Lily had suggested it. Noah’s mom had insisted that he head straight to bed for more rest. Later on, Emma had brought over a very large container of chicken soup, which was out of this world.

Holden gave Noah the next day off so he could continue to rest and recuperate. He’d mentioned that Luke was going to be staying home from school just so they could make sure that he was all right. It was just a precaution Holden reassured him, since Luke didn’t seem to be suffering any ill effects from his run-in with the creek.

After Noah had insisted that his mother didn’t have to call off work to stay and watch over him, he warmed up the chicken soup that Emma had delivered the day before. Noah set up camp on the sofa so he’d be able to enjoy the soup as well as watch a movie—Star Wars since it reminded him of helping Luke babysit, which had been an incredible night. Actually, each time he was with Luke was better than the last.

Noah had picked up his cell phone several times, wanting to call Luke. But every time he chickened
out. There was always an excuse—Luke needed his rest, Luke would call him if he wanted to talk. Even after everything they went through together, Noah was still apprehensive. He really wanted to finish what Holden had interrupted.

But what if Noah confessed to Luke that he liked him too and Luke told him that he hadn’t meant what he said?

*He did,* Noah reminded himself. *You saw the look in his eyes. Luke was dead serious.*

Luke needed to hear the truth from him, which would mean coming out. Admitting he was gay aloud to anyone (besides Whitman) still terrified him. If he comes out to Luke, how long will he be able to keep it a secret from everyone else?

Could he keep it from his mother, Luke’s family, and friends?

“They, Noah, you can go ahead and call it a day,” Holden said, placing his hand on Noah’s shoulder. “I don’t want to wear you out.”

Noah leaned against the pitchfork he’d been using to muck out the stalls. “I’m really fine, sir. I can stay until quitting time.”

“No, today,” Holden gently insisted as he squeezed Noah’s shoulder. “I want to make sure that you stay healthy because I really need you around here. I missed you yesterday.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here.”

“You needed to rest and recharge your batteries. Lily and I wanted Luke to stay home today but he insisted on going to school,” Holden explained. “I know he didn’t want to miss basketball practice again. I think he’s afraid he’ll be replaced if he misses another one. Noah, I can’t thank you enough for taking care of him. Luke won’t stop talking about how it was your quick and reasonable thinking that kept him safe.”

“Luke would have done the same for me. I’m glad to hear that he’s feeling better,” Noah said, trying desperately to keep his emotions in check. He definitely wasn’t ready for Luke’s father to see just how much his son meant to him.

“He’s back to his feisty self,” Holden chuckled. “Now…go on…get out of here. I’m going to call it a day too.”

“If it’s okay, I’m going to stop by and say hi to Whitman.”

“He’ll like that, especially since Luke hasn’t been able to see him lately.”

“Good.” Noah nodded.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Holden said, sauntering away.

“Bye,” Noah said and then turned, heading in the opposite direction toward Whitman’s stall. He stopped and grabbed a handful of carrots anxious to have one of his talks with Whitman.

As he approached the stall, Whitman perked up which put a smile on Noah’s face. Luke had teased Noah that he was going to become one of Whitman’s favorite people. At first Noah didn’t think it was possible, but now there was no mistaking that Whitman would get excited whenever Noah stopped by for a visit.
“Hey, Whit,” Noah said, letting himself into the stall. “How are you doing today?”

Whitman’s nose poked at the front pocket of Noah’s jeans, knowing that was where his treats were kept. Noah had started putting the carrots in that pocket because that was what Luke did.

*Oh, Luke…*

Another not so subtle nudge reminded Noah of the reason he was there. “Okay, buddy. You’ll get your carrot. Just be patient. I know it’s hard for you,” he teased, stroking Whitman’s head. “You’re just like your owner.”

Noah dug into his pocket, producing a carrot which Whitman quickly ate out of the palm of his hand. “I’m sorry I haven’t been by lately and Luke is too. I’m sure he misses you,” he explained. “Luke and I had a bit of an adventure a few days ago. We got stuck in the snow in Wisconsin. It should have been an awful experience but it wasn’t.” He fed Whitman another carrot as he continued to stroke his mane. “It was actually pretty amazing. Luke and I talked about some serious stuff—stuff I’ve only told you. The next morning I woke up to him caressing my face. I swear I thought I was dreaming.” Noah lowered his voice and continued, “I never wanted him to stop touching me. It felt so good. And then he told me that he had feelings for me—that he lied when he’d told me that he didn’t on Halloween. I was just about to tell him that I felt the same way, but then his dad was there to save us.”

Noah fed Whitman another carrot, taking a deep, shuddering breath. “I almost came out to him. I wasn’t even thinking. I just reacted to what Luke told me. It was like all of my dreams were coming true. Luke is interested in me—like I’ve been fantasizing about. But,” Noah’s voice cracked, “now that I’ve had a couple of days to think about it—god—I’m scared too. Admitting how I feel about Luke would be admitting that I’m…gay…and I don’t know if I can do it.” Noah closed his eyes, resting his head against Whitman. “But the thought of not being with Luke scares me too. I just don’t know what to do.”

Noah had never been more torn in his life. His heart was telling him to be honest with Luke. But his head kept dwelling on the consequences—his secret would most likely come out to everyone.

*If you take the chance you will be rewarded…*

“Hello there,” Emma called as she approached Whitman’s stall.

Noah’s eyes snapped open and stood up straight. “Hello, Mrs. Snyder,” he replied, digging into his pocket to fish out the last carrot for Whitman.

“Holden told me that I might find you out here.”

“I was just visiting Whitman,” Noah stammered. “I thought he could use the company.”

Emma smiled warmly. “That was very thoughtful of you.”

“I’ve actually grown quite fond of him.”

“It’s hard not to. He’s a charmer just like his owner,” Emma chuckled.

Noah prayed that she didn’t notice he was blushing. She was spot on with her assessment. Luke had definitely charmed him. He was so incredible.

*Stop it. Don’t have these thoughts with Luke’s grandmother standing right there.*
“Well,” Emma cleared her throat. “The reason why I came looking for you was to invite you and your mother to Thanksgiving dinner.”

“Are you sure it’s not too much trouble?”

“We always have plenty of food. Thanksgiving is a time to celebrate family and friends. I’d really love to have you two join us.”

Thanksgiving dinner at the farm with Luke’s family sounded great. All his life he’d wanted to be a part of a big Thanksgiving dinner like he saw in the movies. “Yeah, that would be awesome!” he readily agreed. “I’m sure my mom would love to come.”

“I’m happy to hear it. Dinner will be at two o’clock but please feel free to come by earlier. There’s always plenty going on.”

“Thank you. I’ll let her know.”

“I’ll see you later,” Emma said. “Goodbye, Whitman.”

Noah waited until she was gone before he said his goodbye to Whitman. “Thank you for listening to me, Whit. I hope I do the right thing.” He gave Whitman one final pat before letting himself out of the stall.

The cabin was deserted when he returned. His mom was working the lunch/afternoon shift. Noah stretched out on the couch and watched a little TV until he decided that he would make something for dinner for them. He liked to help out on the days that his mom worked because he knew that waiting on tables was hard work. Often she came home pretty tired so Noah had asked her to start to teach him to cook so he could take make some meals for them. He still didn’t know how to make anything too elaborate but there were a handful of dishes he felt comfortable preparing.

As he was gathering all of the ingredients to make spaghetti his thoughts drifted to Luke’s confession.

I have these feelings for you. I know I told you that I didn’t but I lied...

“I owe Luke the truth,” Noah said aloud as he got the spaghetti sauce out of the cupboard. “He took a chance and told me. Now it’s my turn.”

Noah was getting a large pot out of the cupboard so he could boil water for pasta when his mother came home. When he turned to greet her, Noah immediately noticed how pale and drawn she appeared. Not only did it look like she was ready to collapse he saw when she removed her coat that her clothes seemed to hang very loosely on her. She looked as if she lost a good ten pounds—maybe more. His mother was trim to begin with but now she was downright skinny.

How did he not notice this before?

Because you were so wrapped up with your feelings for Luke, an inner voice chastised.

“How did he not notice this before?

“Mom, are you okay?” Noah asked, rushing over to her.

Charlene smiled weakly. “Of course I am, string bean. It was just a really busy day.”

Noah placed his hand on her forehead like she’d done to him a million times. “Are you sure you’re not getting sick?”
She brushed his hand away. “Yes, I’m sure. I’m just a little tired.”

“I was planning on making dinner. Does spaghetti sound good?”

“Sounds great.”

Noah still wasn’t totally convinced that his mother was just tired. But he also knew that pestering her wouldn’t do any good. However, he could do his best to get her to rest and relax for the rest of the evening. “Would you like me to make you a cup of Chamomile tea?”

“That would be lovely,” Charlene replied as she gingerly made her way over to the sofa.

“Just kick back and relax,” Noah instructed. “I’ll have your tea ready in a jiffy.”

“Thank you, string bean.”

Noah hurried to back into the kitchen to make a cup of tea of his mother. Maybe she was just tired. It had been a rough few days for her between worrying about him and working long hours. This reasoning would have sufficed except that there wasn’t any denying the weight loss.

He tried not to worry about his mother as he put some water in the tea kettle and set it on the stove. In the background he could hear the WOAK news. There was a report about the upcoming Hobble Gobble Ball—the social event of the season. His mom just had to be well enough to go because he knew how much she’d been looking forward to it. She’d even given him fair warning that she expected at have at least one dance with her son.

Noah got out his mom’s favorite mug, reassuring himself that the tea would do the trick. A flash of déjà vu washed over him. He was suddenly nine years old again…
“Oh, baby…”

“He hurt you.”
Charlene gingerly sat up. “I’ll be okay.”

“I made your favorite tea,” Noah said, setting the cup on the nightstand. “And I have ice too.”

“You know what I really need?” she asked, eyes filled with tears.

“What?”

“A hug and kiss from you.”

Noah threw his arms around his mom and kissed her cheek. “I love you, Mommy.”

“I love you too, Noah,” she murmured, squeezing him tightly. “I love you so, so much. Never, ever forget it.”

The kettle began to whistle so he took it off the stove and quickly prepared the tea for her. While she drank her tea he would cook dinner. A nice, hot meal would also do her a world of good. He’d make sure she ate every bite too.

“Here you go, Mom,” Noah said in his most cheerful voice so that she wouldn’t know that he was worried sick. She hated it when he worried. Her motto was “all the worrying in the world can’t change a thing”.

Noah discovered that his mother had curled up on the couch sound asleep. He placed the tea on the end table and carefully covered his mom with the afghan that was draped over the back of the sofa. “Sweet dreams,” he murmured, lightly kissing her cheek.

Noah tiptoed back into the kitchen to make dinner but suddenly he’d lost his appetite. Never in his life has he seen his mother so frail.

“I can’t tell her,” he muttered. “I’ve got to protect her. If she knew the truth about me…” Noah’s eyes burned with tears. “I don’t think she could take it right now.”

Noah squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the tears that were threatening to spill. He couldn’t take the chance—not now, not when it could hurt his mother.
Chapter 38

*It’s funny how quickly things can change,* Noah mused. What was once going to be a large gathering at Emma’s for Thanksgiving had turned into a small one at the cabin.

The night before Emma had told Charlene that her family wouldn’t be able to make it to the farm for Thanksgiving dinner. Jack was scheduled to work all day so Carly decided to take Parker and Sage to Northern Michigan for a ski trip. Aaron had picked up a shift at the Lakeview to earn some extra money since he was saving up to move into an apartment. Faith and Natalie had come down with the flu so Holden and Lily were going to stay home and care for them. Holden had sent Luke to stay with Emma because he was afraid that he’d come down with it too and he wanted to keep Luke healthy.

When Charlene had heard Emma’s plight she suggested that they have Thanksgiving dinner at the cabin so Emma wouldn’t be reminded that her family wouldn’t be with her this year. Emma had loved the idea, saying she’d still cook the turkey along with some side dishes. Charlene had insisted that she help cook so she was making a green bean casserole and the salad.

Noah was happy to see that his mother seemed to be feeling better. He had insisted that she find someone to cover her shift the day before Thanksgiving so she could rest. He was also relieved that she’d have the day after Thanksgiving off as well.

However, just because his mom seemed to be feeling better his decision hadn’t changed. Noah just couldn’t confess his true feelings to Luke. He didn’t know how to broach the subject. Luke most likely wouldn’t let this go, especially since he’d put his feelings out there. It was going to suck to have to lie to Luke. Noah hated lying period. But he had no other choice.

“You’re awfully quiet today,” Charlene said, placing a gentle hand on his back. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, sure. It’s Thanksgiving,” Noah quickly replied. “We certainly have a lot to be thankful for.”

“Yes, we do,” she said, stroking his hair. “But if there’s something bothering you I wish you’d tell me. I’m here for you, string bean. There’s nothing you can’t tell me.”

*I’m gay and I’m in love with Luke.*

No, she wouldn’t want to hear that. Even Luke’s mother had freaked out when she found out Luke was gay. Noah couldn’t do that to his mom.

“I’m fine,” Noah insisted. “What can I do to help?”

Charlene sighed, a bit defeated. “How about setting the table?”

“Great.” Noah went over to the cupboard where the plates were kept and got out four.

“I’m so glad that Emma and Luke are coming here,” Charlene said as she checked on the green bean casserole that was in the oven. “She was so upset that her plans fell apart.”

Noah’s stomach twisted into knots at the mention of Luke’s name. He hadn’t seen Luke since their rescue. The prospect of seeing him again elicited a myriad of emotions—everything from excitement—to dread because he didn’t want to hurt Luke.
“Yeah.”

“I’m also happy that we’re finally going to have a real Thanksgiving,” Charlene continued to speak. It seemed like she was determined to engage Noah in some sort of conversation.

“Me too,” he replied still keeping his answers short in fear of accidently spilling something he shouldn’t.

Charlene was about to say something else but then her attention drifted elsewhere. “I think I hear a car. Can you go check to see if Emma and Luke are here? I’m sure they’ll need some help with the food.”

“Okay,” Noah said, placing the last piece of silverware on the table. He threw on his jacket, dashing outside to find that Emma and Luke were getting out of Emma’s car. Luke was balancing a few bowls as he bumped the car door shut with his butt. Noah forced himself not to stare. He was supposed to help, not gawk. Luke couldn’t see him looking at him like that. “Hi, can I help carry anything inside?” Noah asked, focusing his attention on Emma.

“Yes, you can,” she replied, opening the trunk. “Please be a dear and grab the platter with the turkey on it and the basket of rolls if you can.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Noah trotted to the open trunk. “You can just go ahead inside.” As he snatched the tin foil covered platter and basket, Emma appeared at his side to fetch the two pie dishes that were covered in saran wrap. It looked like they were going to be eating very well.

“Hey,” Luke said shyly as he came out of the cabin headed back to the car.

“Hey,” Noah managed to reply barely making eye contact with Luke. One look into those deep brown eyes and he’d surely be a goner. He just kept his head down and marched straight inside the cabin.

“Noah, you can just put the platter on the table,” Emma instructed. “I already carved up the turkey for us.”

Noah put the platter at the center of the kitchen table along with the rolls. He was taking off his coat just as Luke entered the cabin. “What’s that?” he asked, eyeing the large green (vegetable?) that filled Luke’s arms along with a—was that a saw?

“It’s the Hubbard squash,” Luke replied, setting it down on the kitchen counter along with the hacksaw he’d been holding. He also slid off his jacket which Noah took from him along with Emma’s and hung up on the coat rack by the front door.

“What on earth are we going to do with it?” Charlene chuckled.

“Cut it,” Luke said, turning toward them.

Hun?

Emma picking up on the confusion spoke up. “It’s a Snyder tradition to cut a Hubbard Squash we grow on the farm. Even though this isn’t a typical Snyder Thanksgiving I wanted to try to keep one of the traditions this year,” she explained. “I was hoping that you and Noah could cut it.”

“You’ll be honorary Snyders,” Luke spoke up, flashing a wide grin at Noah.

“We’d love to!” Charlene exclaimed.
Luke picked up the hacksaw, handing it to Noah and allowing his fingers to brush against his. Electricity coursed through Noah’s body.

*Stop it...stop it...stop it...*

“Why don’t you go first?” Luke suggested.

“Okay.” Noah began to saw the large squash.

Emma appeared at his side with a camera. “I’m going to need to get a few pictures to commemorate the occasion,” she declared as she snapped a photo.

He made a little headway before he decided to hand off the honor to his mother. “I think it’s your turn to take a crack at this, Mom.”

“I’ll do my best,” Charlene said, placing her hand on the saw and going to it.

“I’ve never heard of such a tradition,” Noah admitted. None of the movies he’d seen ever had the characters cutting up giant vegetables.

“It’s been around as long as I’ve been,” Luke said, grinning at him.

Why does he have to do that?

*Because he likes you—like that.*

Emma took a picture of Charlene sawing the squash and then replied, “It was a tradition that started with Harvey’s grandfather. The squash was one of the first successful crops that they grew so they saved the biggest one and decided to celebrate as well as give thanks by cutting it on Thanksgiving. Everyone in the family enjoyed the ritual so much that they decided to do it every Thanksgiving. The tradition has been passed down through the generations.” She placed her hand on Luke’s arm. “And I expect you to pass on the tradition to your family when you start one.”

Luke blushed. “Grandma, I’m not even out of high school yet.”

“I don’t mean right away,” Emma chuckled. “I expect you to graduate from college and write a best seller first.” She placed a quick kiss on Luke’s cheek. “Why don’t you finish cutting the squash, my angel?”


Luke took the hacksaw from her. “No worries. I’m an old pro at this.”

The flash of Emma’s camera went off just as Luke sliced through the last bit of the Hubbard squash. “Noah, why don’t you stand next to Luke so I can get a picture of both of you.”

Noah bit his lip. “Uh...sure.” He stepped next to Luke, suppressing the urge to put his arm around him. Luke stepped a bit closer so their bodies were touching. So when Emma said smile it was the most natural reaction in the world for Noah. Once the photo was taken, he quickly stepped away from Luke, needing to breath. Being so close to Luke was just too much—the smell of his cologne, the heat of his body, knowing how amazing his skin felt.

“We should probably get the squash off the counter so there’s room for the food,” Emma said. “I think it’s best that we do a buffet since the table isn’t big enough to hold all of this food.”

“Good idea,” Charlene agreed. “I can get you a bag to put the squash in.”
Noah moved the basket of rolls from the table to the counter. “Are we going to be eating soon?” he asked. “If we are I’ll uncover all of the food.”

“Yes, I think that’s a good idea,” Charlene said, handing Emma the trash bag she got for her.

“Luke, will you help me clean up here?” Emma asked.

“Sure, Grandma.”

Charlene got out the food she had prepared while Noah made room for all of the side dishes— mashed sweet potatoes, stuffing, cranberries, green bean casserole, and the salad. After Luke had cleared away the squash, Noah put the pumpkin and apple pies Emma had baked in its place.

“Luke, can you take the squash out to the car?” Emma asked. “It will stay cool out there. I’ll make some Winter Squash Pecan bread out of it tomorrow.”

“Sounds delicious,” Charlene replied, removing the tin foil from the turkey on the table.

“I’ll be sure that you get a loaf. There will be plenty.”

When Luke returned, Charlene got everyone’s drink order and Noah helped pass them out. It looked like they were finally ready to eat. All of the food smelled so incredibly delectable. His mom and Emma had done a great job.

Charlene and Emma sat down next to each other at the small square table, leaving Noah no choice but to sit next to Luke. At least he wasn’t right next to him because if he was he didn’t think he’d be able to eat. When Luke glanced at him, eyeing him through his long lashes, Noah had to duck his head so that no one could see that he was blushing.

“Another tradition we have is going around the table and saying what we’re thankful for,” Emma announced. “If it’s okay, I’d like to start.”

“Yes, please do,” Charlene said, smiling warmly.

“I’m thankful to have met two wonderful people this year—Gloria and Noah,” Emma said, folding her hands in front of her on the table. “I’m extra thankful that Luke and Noah came back safely to us after their little adventure in Wisconsin.”

Charlene spoke up next. “I’m also thankful for that too. I’d like to add that I’m very grateful to Emma and the rest of the Snyder family for your hospitality. You’ve given us a place to live as well as becoming great friends.”

“I’ll go next,” Luke said, clearing his throat. “I’m thankful to have such a great new friend. I wouldn’t be here without him.” Noah squirmed in his seat, torn between being embarrassed about Luke’s public praise and being incredibly flattered—thrilled even. “I know you guys never intended to stay in Oakdale but I’m very happy that you did.”

“So am I,” Noah admitted, but quickly added, “I mean, being here has allowed me to meet some amazing people and a pretty cool horse.” This made Luke chuckle. “I’m thankful that Mr. Snyder took a chance on someone who knew nothing about horses or working on a farm. And I’m happy that you’re my friend, Luke.”

“Let’s all join hands for grace,” Emma suggested as she reached for Charlene and Luke’s hands.

Noah felt a bit dizzy. He was going to have to hold Luke’s hand. He was sure that once he took it
everyone in the room would be able to see the affect Luke had on him. It was going to be impossible to make it through grace.

*Just keep your head down and eyes closed.*

But it was so hard to ignore how incredible Luke’s hand felt wrapped around his. Noah’s stomach twisted into knots. Hopefully, Emma’s prayer would be short and sweet because he couldn’t handle touching Luke. It hurt too much knowing that he couldn’t have the beautiful boy who actually liked him.

“Dear lord, thank you for bringing us together on this special day,” Emma said. “We’re thankful that fate brought us all together and for the wonderful meal that we’re about to share. Please grant everyone love, happiness, and good health. Amen.”

“Amen,” everyone murmured.

Luke gave Noah’s hand a little squeeze before releasing it. “Let’s eat,” he said, springing up from his seat. “I’m starving!”

The meal was just like Noah had always imagined. The food was delicious and there was non-stop, joyous chatter. It might not have been a large gathering but it didn’t make it any less special to Noah.

After dessert and the dishes were washed and put away, Emma suggested that Charlene return to the farm with her for a cup of tea which would allow the boys to hang out without the old people around—maybe watch a movie. Charlene readily agreed. They probably thought they were doing the boys a favor, allowing them to kick back and hang out, but now Noah was faced with being alone with Luke for the first time since Holden rescued him.

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“Thank you for suggesting that I come back here with you,” Charlene said when they entered Emma’s kitchen. “Noah never has anyone over. He deserves to have some time alone with one of his friends. It’s been so long since he’s had someone he’s close to.”

“I thought the boys could use a break after spending the day with us,” Emma replied, strolling toward the cupboard. “How about that tea I promised you?”

“It would be lovely.”

“Are you okay, Gloria?” Emma asked as she got the teapot out of the cupboard. “I hope you don’t mind me saying but you seem awfully run down.”

Charlene put on her bravest face. “I think worrying about the boys and working so many hours is finally catching up to me,” she said, smiling weakly. “I think having today and tomorrow off will do me a lot of good.”

“If you ever want to see a doctor for a checkup, we have some really fine ones at the hospital.”

“A good night’s sleep will do me a world of good,” Charlene quickly replied. “And relaxing here with you. I’m in some desperate need of adult time.”

“We could have our own movie night,” Emma suggested as she filled the tea pot with water. “The boys can’t have all of the fun.”

“It sounds good. I would love to watch something different for a change,” she admitted. “Our movie collection is rather limited.”
“Mine isn’t anything to brag about but I always enjoy watching *The Sound of Music* this time of the year.”

Charlene smiled. “I haven’t seen that movie in years. I’d love to watch it.”

Charlene really hoped that Noah was having fun. It was apparent that Noah enjoyed being around Luke—a lot. She would have to be blind not to see how much Luke meant to him. And she had a feeling—no it was more than a feeling—she knew it was more than friendship. Her string bean was most definitely gay.

But it didn’t matter to her. The pure joy Noah had been missing for years only appeared when he was with Luke. Noah was in love.

“I think Noah is gay,” Charlene blurted out. She had skirted around the issue with Emma before, but now she really needed to talk about it because she wasn’t sure if she should say anything or just let Noah come to her.

“So do I,” Emma replied. “I think he and Luke are quite smitten with each other.”

“You noticed that too?” Charlene grinned.

“It’s hard not to,” Emma said just as the kettle began to whistle. She took it off the stove and poured the piping hot water into the two mugs. “Now I’m not so sure if they’ve figured it out.”

“I was wondering about that,” Charlene admitted. It didn’t look like Luke and Noah had progressed to anything beyond friendship. If they had then they were hiding it quite well.

“Well, from what I know Luke hasn’t had a boyfriend yet,” Emma said as she prepared the tea. “I think he might be cautious, especially if Noah hasn’t come out to him.”

Charlene pursed her lips. “I don’t think he has. Noah is very guarded.”

Emma handed her one of the steaming mugs of tea. “Noah is a dear, sweet boy. Luke is very lucky to have a friend like him. I don’t even want to think of what would have happened in Wisconsin if Noah hadn’t taken care of him.”

“It’s one good thing he learned from his father,” Charlene muttered.

“Oh?”

Charlene’s heart sunk. She hadn’t meant to say that aloud. “Noah’s father took him fishing and hunting quite a bit. He was always instilling proper survival techniques into him—even as a very young boy. He thought Noah should be a man.”

“Noah obviously listened to him,” Emma diplomatically replied.

“Yes, he did.” Probably more than he should have. Charlene doubted if she’d ever know for sure what kind of damage Winston had done to his psyche. His father’s views might be the reason why Noah was still in the closet.

“Come, let’s go sit in the parlor.” Emma guided her into the next room where they both settled onto the sofa.

“Should I ask Noah if he’s gay?”

“That’s tricky,” Emma admitted. “You don’t want to put him on the defensive.”
“No, definitely not.” Charlene remembered their other sex talks which hadn’t gone so smoothly.

“Give him some more time,” Emma suggested. “Be supportive. Don’t push him. I think spending time with Luke might help him come to terms with his own sexuality.”

“I hope so.”

Emma patted her hand. “Have a little faith.” She rose from the couch. “Are you ready to watch the movie?”

“Yes, just don’t mind me if I start singing along,” Charlene replied.

“Good, then I won’t be the only one,” Emma chuckled.

Charlene had a lot to be thankful for today. One of them was her dear friend Emma. She was truly blessed.

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Luke had been waiting for this moment ever since his father had rescued them. Finally he was alone with Noah again. He needed to hear Noah’s full reaction to his declaration. Noah had seemed like he was going to say something important to him before they were interrupted. Luke hoped that Noah was going to return the sentiment. He’d been holding onto this wish for the past few days.

If Luke could have had his way, he would have seen Noah before now. But his parents had insisted that he stay in bed and rest once he had gotten home. They’d even taken away his cell phone and computer to ensure that he’d done just that. Thankfully, he’d been able to convince his parents to let him go to school the following day so he wouldn’t miss basketball practice. It had felt good being out in the real world again, but it had also left him exhausted.

However, Noah was never far from his mind. When his parents had returned his cell phone to him, he’d considered calling Noah but decided against it. What they needed to discuss had to be done face to face. His parents hadn’t wanted him going anywhere besides school until the holiday. His mom had said that he needed to be healthy for Thanksgiving and the Hobble Gobble Ball.

All through dinner he’d been trying to get a read on Noah but it was next to impossible. Noah’s feelings were being kept close to the vest. Not that Luke could blame him since Grandma and Noah’s mom were there.

Nervous electricity seemed to be crackling in the air ever since they’d been left alone. There was so much that Luke wanted to tell Noah. He’d had days to gather his thoughts. Luke’s mouth was suddenly very dry.

“So…” Luke said, stuffing his hands into the front pocket of his jeans.

“So…” Noah repeated, his eyes darting everywhere but never locking with Luke’s.

“So far it’s been a great Thanksgiving,” Luke said, hoping to break the tension.

“Yeah, the best I’ve had in a long time,” Noah admitted, grinning slightly. “Did you…uh…want to go sit in the living room?”

The living room meant the sofa which could lead to all sorts of possibilities…

*Don’t get too far ahead of yourself. We need to talk. Big time.*
“Yeah,” he replied and then followed Noah over to the living room area. Noah allowed Luke to sit down first and then he joined him, keeping a bit of space between them.

*Space could be good. We need to clear the air before we jump into anything.*

“I’m sorry that I lied to you before—about how I feel,” Luke just started to spill his guts. Nothing like getting right to it. “I just didn’t want to freak you out like I did Kevin. And you didn’t.”

Noah glanced away. “No, I didn’t.”

Luke took a deep breath. “I think you were about to tell me something before my dad showed up.”

Noah turned to him, biting his lip. “Yeah…I…uh,” he stumbled over the words. Noah squeezed his eyes shut for a moment.

*No…no…no,* Luke silently panicked. *Noah wasn’t going to do this. He couldn’t do this…*

Noah opened his eyes, briefly meeting Luke’s before Noah averted them. “Luke, you’re my best friend. I’m so incredibly flattered that you’re attracted to me. I like you—but not like that.”


“Oh,” was all Luke could manage. He was stunned. Noah was supposed to tell him how much he liked him, not let him down gently. Luke would have bet his only kidney that Noah felt the same way.

Had Luke imagined the longing looks? The electricity that sizzled when they touched?

“I still want to be friends,” Noah quickly reassured him. “I hope you do too, but I understand if you don’t.”

“No, you’re one of my best friends too. I don’t want to lose that.”

“Good.”

“Well, I guess I should probably go,” Luke said, starting to stand up but Noah grabbed his wrist.

“Please don’t go,” Noah said, staring up at him. “I want to hang out with you. We could still watch a movie.”

Noah’s pleading gaze cut him to the core. Damn those intense blue eyes. “Why don’t we watch that *Casablanca* movie you’re so fond of?” he suggested, sitting down.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

Noah leapt off the couch. He quickly found the movie and popped it in the DVD player.

Luke was afraid that if there was silence between them things would quickly become awkward so he started talking about the first thing that came to mind. “You know Maddie tried to get me to buy you *Casablanca* for your birthday, but I didn’t think it would be a movie that you’d be interested in,” he explained. “Little did I know that she had obviously picked up on my feelings for you so she was trying to help me out. Of course, I didn’t listen.”

“I really liked your gift. I actually watched *Star Wars* a few days ago.”
“Really?”

Noah chuckled. “Well…yeah…it’s always a fun movie to watch.”

*And it was even more fun watching it with you,* Luke silently added, his heart aching. This almost hurt as badly as it had when Kevin called him a fag. Luke forced a smile. Noah could never know how disappointed it was that the feeling wasn’t mutual.

“Would you like something to drink?” Noah asked. “I’d offer popcorn too but I think we’re both too stuffed to eat.”

A drink—vodka sounded really good right about now. Hell…he’d even settle for a bottle of his grandma’s Elderberry wine. He just wanted the ache to go away.


“You sure?” Noah asked as he headed to the kitchen. “We still have some Coke left or I can make some coffee.”

“I’ll stick to the water.” He could always pretend it was vodka.

Luke really hated it when his thoughts turned to getting drunk. It took him back to a horrible time in his life. Rationally he knew it wasn’t the answer to his problems. But oh it was such an easy way to make him forget. And right now he wanted to forget every fleeting look or touch he’d ever shared with Noah.

Being “just friends” was going to be a lot harder than he thought. But the alternative was just unthinkable. Noah was amazing. And the thought of never talking or spending time with Noah again would send him straight to the liquor store—consequences be damned.

“Ahhh…we’re going to have to get that Christmas tree of yours set up,” Luke said, breaking the silence. “Maybe we can do it when Grandma does hers that way you can borrow some of her unused ornaments. I swear she has enough for two trees. And as soon as the girls feel better they’ll make you some ornaments. They were really excited when I told them that you needed some for your Christmas tree.”

“Sounds like a great plan,” Noah said, strolling over to the sofa. “Once my mom got over being so worried about us she was thrilled that we had gotten a tree for the cabin. It’s been so long.” He handed Luke a glass of ice water and then sat down next to him, snatching the remote from the old coffee table. “You’re going to love this movie. I promise.”

Luke clutched his glass of ice water tightly as the movie began. He was still doubtful after the opening credits. The map and voiceover seemed a bit cheesy to him but he kept his mouth shut. Much to his surprise he quickly found himself drawn in as a man was chased down in the street and killed.

Maddie had been right. *Casablanca* had it all—action, intrigue, and romance. It didn’t take long for Luke to get swept up in Rick and Ilsa’s love story. He was pulling for them to get their happy ending—certain it would happen.

Didn’t the guy always get the girl in the end in the movies?

This time he didn’t. Instead of running away with his true love, Rick scarified his feelings for the greater good. He put his love for Ilsa aside so she could escape with her husband. Luke was fighting back the tears as Rick explained his change of plans to her at the airport. Rick had ended up alone—
just like him.

And as Rick and Captain Louis Renault strolled into the fog together after Ilse’s plane took off, Noah shyly glanced at him. “So…what did you think?”

Luke looked away, hoping that Noah wouldn’t see the tears that were streaming down his cheeks. “It was pretty good,” he sniffed.

“The….uh….ending always gets me every time,” Noah quietly confessed. “I’ve lost count how many times I’ve watched this movie but it always makes me….uh….cry.”

“I’m glad I’m not the only one,” Luke said, wiping his eyes. “I was starting to feel like a total loser.”

“You’re not a loser.”

“I just expected them to end up together in the end, you know?”

Noah nodded. “Yes, I do. I guess sometimes you need to sacrifice your happiness so that others can be happy.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Luke replied. Although he didn’t necessarily agree. If two people loved each other so much then they should just be together. Period.

“Rick saw how important Laszlo was to the resistance against the Nazis,” Noah explained. “He finally realized all this man had been through and that Laszlo really did love his wife. I think Rick figured Laszlo needed her more than he did so he stepped aside.”

“I still think Rick and Ilse deserved to be together. It was obvious they were still in love.”

Noah snatched Luke’s empty glass off the coffee table. “Did you want some more to drink?”

“I should get going,” Luke said, slowly standing up and stretching. “It’s been a long day and we have that ball thing tomorrow night. I wouldn’t be surprised if my mom wants me to babysit so she can go shopping or whatever.”

“Okay,” Noah’s voice was laced with disappointment. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“Yeah,” Luke replied. Already he was dreading the ball. Standing around watching all of the couples dancing and having a great time when he couldn’t have what he truly wanted wasn’t going to be fun. At all.

“I’m glad you stuck around and watched the movie,” Noah said as Luke put on his coat. “I had a lot of fun today.” He smiled at Luke, his eyes so blue and amazing— just like the rest of him.

*This is killing me…*

But Luke needed to do the right thing and let go. Just like Rick had in *Casablanca.*
Chapter 39

Noah was a bit nervous about the ball. He’d never been to a dance before so he was certain that if he’d try to actually dance he’d look like a total tool. Most of the night would most likely be spent on the sidelines with Luke, which wasn’t a bad thing at all. Unless Luke got the sudden urge to go dance with his other friends which just might happen after Noah had to tell him that he only thought of Luke as a friend.

Luke seemed to have taken it pretty well. He had stayed around to watch Casablanca. And he’d told him that he still wanted to be friends, which was good. Noah wasn’t going to lose Luke. At least it didn’t seem that way.

But Noah realized something else after Luke had left. He still loved him despite what he’d told Luke. Although watching the movie with Luke had been fun, it had also been torture too. At the end, when Noah saw the tears streaming down his cheeks, he’d wanted to take Luke in his arms and comfort him—just like he had in the truck.

Noah couldn’t though. He’d made his choice and he’d have to find a way to live with it. He had his mother to think about. And he hadn’t seen her as happy as she’s been the past couple of days. Being able to have a real Thanksgiving was just as important to her as it was to him. Also, his mom was so excited about the Hobble Gobble Ball.

Noah was really looking forward to getting all dressed up and seeing his mother dressed up too. She really deserved a special night out. She’d been talking about it all week. And now it was finally here.

They were going over the Luke’s parents’ house to get ready. Lily had insisted on not only lending Charlene the perfect dress but doing her hair and makeup as well. His mom was thrilled at the prospect of doing “girl” stuff.

“Are you almost ready?” Charlene called from the living room.

“Yeah,” Noah replied, pulling the black suit that Emma had altered for him out of the closet. After much debate, he decided to go with the light green shirt that his mother had bought him for his birthday. Noah also grabbed a clean pair of socks and the dress shoes his mother dragged him out to buy the week before. Now he was all set.

“I want to make sure that Lily has enough time to make me look halfway decent.”

Noah strolled out of his room with his suit slung over his shoulder. “You are already beautiful,” he assured her. “It won’t take much to make you look even more spectacular.”

Charlene kissed his cheek. “You’re such a sweet boy. Are you sure that you have everything?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s go then.”

They took the farm truck over to Lily and Holden’s house. Noah gave his mother directions since she’d never been there. The houses along Mile High Road looked so beautiful covered in snow. But the most beautiful house was the Snyder mansion.

“What a beautiful house,” Charlene muttered as she parked the truck.
“Yeah, it’s something,” Noah agreed.

“You’d never know they have so much money from the way they act,” Charlene said as she got out of the truck, “especially Luke. He’s so sweet and helpful—definitely not a spoiled rich kid.”

“He’s pretty great,” Noah murmured.

Charlene glanced at Noah and smiled. “Did you want lead the way?”

“Yes, I think we should go through the side door which is over this way,” Noah said, escorting his mother up the driveway and through the gate that led to the patio. He knocked on the door, which was answered by Holden.

“Hello,” Holden greeted them. “Lily can’t wait to start playing makeover. Our bathroom is starting to look like a beauty parlor.”

“I’ve been looking forward to it too,” Charlene said, stepping inside the house.

Luke came bounding into the room dressed in jeans and a blue t-shirt. “Is that….?” His question was left unfinished when he saw Noah and his mother standing in the family room. “Hey, Noah,” he said a little shyly.


“Hi, Gloria. It’s nice to see you again,” Luke said, smiling.

“Lily said to get you right upstairs,” Holden said. “Luke, your mother wanted me to remind you not to dawdle. Your grandmother’s limousine will be here to pick us up at six thirty sharp.”


Noah followed Luke upstairs, his heart pounding in chest. He’d never been in Luke’s room. He felt as if he were about to enter a sacred territory. Finally, he was going to see where Luke slept and most likely did other things as well.

As he stepped inside the blue striped wallpapered room (Noah had to chuckled slightly that even Luke’s bedroom was done up in stripes), the first thing he noticed was a bulletin board with a Chicago Bulls calendar and several pictures tacked to it. One picture in particular leapt out at him—it was the same one he had framed on his nightstand.

“I still need to take a shower,” Luke was saying. “I have some comics you can read or you can just set your suit down and go back downstairs so you can watch TV.”

Noah draped his suit over Luke’s desk chair and put his shoes down next to the desk on the floor. “I’ll wait here and check out some comics.”

“What interests you? I have X-men, Iron Man, Spider-man…”

“X-men is good.”

“Any particular issue you’d like to see?” Luke asked, sauntering over to his bookcase.

“I haven’t read an X-men comic in a few years so anything is fine with me,” Noah admitted as he

Luke rifled through his collection, selecting a few. “Here you go. I picked out my favorites.”

Noah made sure that their fingers didn’t touch when he took them from Luke. “Great.”

Luke marched over to his dresser, pulling out some black socks and underwear. Noah quickly glanced down at the comics Luke had chosen for him so he wouldn’t get caught staring at him. “I shouldn’t be too long,” Luke said as he rummaged through his closet.

Noah opened the first comic, keeping his eyes focused on it. “Okay.”

And then he heard the bathroom door slam shut. Noah blew out a long, calming breath and tried not to think about Luke on the other side of the wall, stripping down to nothing—soaping himself up in the shower—so beautiful and wet—his hands scouring every inch of his body as he washed himself.

Oh fuck…

“This is not how you get over your feelings for him,” Noah murmured. He tried to focus on the first page of the comic but the words just seemed to be a jumbled mess. For all he knew he could have been staring at the page for minutes—hours, but his mind was definitely elsewhere.

Gorgeous…naked…

Noah stood up and began to pace. His eyes immediately drawn to the picture from his birthday.

I have these feelings for you. I know I told you that I didn’t but I lied…

“I lied too,” Noah whispered, staring at the picture of them. He wrapped his arms around himself. Noah had too though. He did the right thing.

“Sorry I took so long,” Luke said, emerging from the bathroom dressed in a black suit with a baby blue dress shirt, tying a light and dark blue patterned neck tie.

Noah swallowed hard. Damn…he’s so fucking beautiful.

“It’s…uh…okay,” Noah replied, head down marching over to the desk to retrieve his suit and shoes. “I guess I should probably get dressed now.”

“Yeah, you can use my bathroom.”

“Thanks.” Noah headed right inside it. Tonight was going to be even harder than he’d imagined.

Noah quickly changed into his dress clothes, trying oh so hard not to dwell on the fact that Luke’s bathroom smelled just like him—musky with a trace of vanilla and citrus.

Just put on your clothes so you can get out of here.

As Noah slipped on his suit coat, he stared at his reflection in the mirror. For the first time in quite awhile, he didn’t feel like a pauper. Emma had done an amazing job altering the suit to fit him. It looked like new. The green pinstriped shirt his mom had given him for this birthday looked perfect with it. But something was missing—his tie. Hopefully, Luke would have one he could borrow.

“I…uh…forgot my tie,” Noah sheepishly admitted as he strolled out of the bathroom.

Luke’s eyes burned into him—so hot with desire, which made him tingle. Noah had always wanted
Luke to look at him like that. And now he was. Noah felt lightheaded.

“I’m sure I have something you can borrow,” Luke finally said. He marched over to his closet and returned with a black and dark green striped tie. “I think this should match.” Luke handed Noah the tie.

“Thanks,” he replied, slipping it around his neck. And then he realized that he hadn’t tied a tie in years. His hands were trembling as he tried to remember how to do it under Luke’s attentive gaze.


“I haven’t done this in awhile so I’m kinda out of practice.”

“I can do it,” Luke offered, slowly closing the space between them.

“Okay,” Noah murmured. He knew that he’d never be able to get the tie tied on his own.

“Let me know if it’s too tight,” Luke said softly as he began to go to work on Noah’s tie.


Luke’s brown eyes were so intense and they were standing so close together. The scent of Luke’s musky cologne was intoxicating. Noah could feel himself slipping, becoming caught up in all that was Luke Snyder.

“What’s wrong?” Luke asked, gazing up at him.


*Take a chance.*

Noah leaned down and placed a soft kiss on Luke’s lips. Luke stared at him, his eyes a mixture of amazement and desire. It was the desire in them that gave Noah the courage to kiss him again. This time more intensely. Noah’s tongue gently parted Luke’s lips, seeking its way inside. Noah thought he was going to spontaneously combust when their tongues made contact.

Finally he felt normal. He was home.

“Luke! Noah!” Lily called from outside of the room. “It’s almost time to leave!”

*Fuck!* Noah quickly broke the kiss, his heart hammering. Without a word to Luke, he ran out of the room.
Luke picked up the comic books that were strewn over his bed, trying very hard not to dwell on the fact that Noah was in his bathroom changing clothes. Noah stripped down to his underwear (probably tightie whities). He would most definitely look hot in them because Noah looked hot in anything.

And nothing.

Ugh!

*You’ve got to stop this,* Luke tried to reason with himself. *You can’t have him. Noah doesn’t want you. He never will because he’s fucking straight.*

Luke returned the comics to their proper place on the bookshelf. The sound of the bathroom door opening startled him. Get it together and just be his friend.

But the thought quickly left his brain when he turned to see Noah looking more gorgeous than ever in his black suit with a light green pinstriped shirt underneath. There was no way in hell that Luke was going to make it through this night. Not with Noah looking so fucking hot.

Maybe he could suddenly come down with the flu…

“I…uh…forgot my tie,” Noah sheepishly admitted.

*I want him so bad. God…I’d give anything for him to want me.*

Shit…he was staring at Noah—practically drooling. This was not getting his shit together. “I’m sure I have something you can borrow,” Luke said, forcing himself to stop gawking at Noah. He marched over to his closet, returning with a black and dark green striped tie. “I think this should match.” He handed Noah the tie.

“Thanks,” Noah replied, slipping it around his neck. He tried tying it but it was pretty obvious that he didn’t know what he was doing. All Noah was managing to do was make a mess of the tie.


“I haven’t done this in awhile so I’m kinda out of practice.”

“I can do it,” Luke offered, slowly closing the space between them.


Luke tried not to think about how amazing Noah smelled or how deep blue his eyes were. He just needed to tie the necktie so they could join the others downstairs. Easy enough, right?

“Let me know if it’s too tight,” he said softly as he began to go to work on Noah’s tie. *Just concentrate on making the perfect Windsor knot that Dad taught me to make when I turned thirteen.*

“Okay,” Noah whispered, his eyes burning intensely. They’d turned such a dark midnight blue that they were almost black.

Luke had seen a look similar to this only once before. Noah had been on top of him—hot and sweaty from playing basketball. But it hadn’t meant anything then and it certainly couldn’t mean anything
now.

Right?


“What’s wrong?”

Noah pressed his lips against Luke’s, kissing him softly. Holy fucking shit. This was not what Luke had expected. Not at all. Luke gaped at him, wanting to say something but he was speechless. He just wanted more of Noah, which he got. But this time Noah kissed him harder, slipping his tongue inside Luke’s waiting mouth.

Oh yes…finally…finally Luke knew what it was like to kiss someone and enjoy it. He never wanted to stop, afraid that if they did it might never happen again.

“Luke! Noah!” Lily called from outside of the room. “It’s almost time to leave!”

Noah broke the kiss and dashed out of the room. As quickly and as unexpectedly as it started, it was over—thanks to his mom’s horrible timing.

Luke stood in his bedroom stunned. Noah had just kissed him. Actually, they ended up kissing each other. It was the most incredibly amazing kiss of his life. His lips were still tingling from it.

And then Noah was gone, practically running out of the room. Luke wasn’t sure what to make of it—any of it. Twenty-four hours ago Noah had told him that he only liked him as a friend. A day later Noah was kissing him.

Noah had lied. It was the only logical explanation. Luke wouldn’t even consider the other alternative—that it was some sort of joke or that Noah was experimenting. No…Noah had liked him all along, but for some reason felt the need to lie.

“Luke!” Lily called again. “Come on, get a move on!”

Right—the ball—the reason Noah needed a tie in the first place.

“Coming!” Luke shouted as he headed out of his bedroom. As he descended the staircase he began to formulate a plan. He needed to talk to Noah—really talk to him. No excuses—no lies. He wasn’t going to give up this time.

Luke smirked as he reached the bottom of the stairs. Jade had been so wrong about Noah. If he was actually talking to his cousin he’d be thrilled to tell her so. However, since Luke had moved back home they’d managed to keep a polite distance from each other which has been pretty tricky since he didn’t want his parents to wonder what was going on between them.

Luke was surprised to find that almost everyone who was going to the ball gathered in the living room—Grandma Emma, Jack, his mom, Gloria and Noah. He couldn’t get enough of Noah in a suit and tie. He had to be the most incredibly handsome boy in the entire world.

Noah’s eyes briefly met his, but Noah quickly averted them returning his focus to Gloria. Luke’s stomach twisted into knots. The confidence he’d been feeling just moments ago slowly slipped away.

“Don’t you look so handsome,” Lily exclaimed, rushing over to him.

“I can’t help it,” Lily insisted. “It’s so rare to see you all dressed up like this. I’m not the only one who gushed over my son. You missed Gloria fussing over Noah.”

Gloria turned to Luke and smiled. “It’s every mother’s prerogative to fuss over her son.” She looked elegant dressed in the black cocktail dress she had borrowed from his mother with her hair piled up into a bun.


“Thank you, Luke,” she replied, smiling. “I have to agree with your mother. You are very handsome.”

“Thanks.”

Holden strolled into the room. “I think that the babysitter is settled in with the kids. She has our numbers in case she runs into any problems.”

“Did you lock the little monsters away?” Luke joked. He was a bit surprised that they weren’t running through the living room like a couple of banshees or trying to convince Noah to take them to the ball as his date.

“They’re in the family room watching Lady and the Tramp,” Holden replied. “Hopefully it will keep them occupied for a while. Faith is pretty disappointed that she’s too young to go.”

“I hope you don’t mind if I take a few pictures,” Lily said, producing a camera.

“Mom,” Luke groaned. “It’s not like we’re all going to prom.”

“I know but it’s so rare that we’re all dressed up,” Lily replied. “I’m sure Gloria would love some nice pictures with Noah.”

Holden came up behind him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Just humor your mother.”

So Luke, and everyone else for that matter, did, posing and smiling as instructed. It was controlled chaos as Lily played photographer/director gathering everyone for various groupings and poses. Gloria had even stepped in to take some family pictures for Lily. All hope of trying to get a moment alone with Noah before the ball was futile. He’d just have to find a way once they reached the Lakeview.

“Now I’d like to get a picture of the boys together,” Lily announced.

Luke got a quick glimpse of Noah who was nervously biting his lip. He seemed like he was ready to jump out of his skin. Oh god—what if…

*Don’t even go there,* Luke warned himself. *We’re in a room full of people. It’s not like Noah can profess his undying love to me right now.*

“Sure,” Noah finally replied.

“Why don’t you two stand in front of the fireplace,” Lily suggested as she got ready to take the picture.


Luke took a deep breath and put his arm around Noah, resting his hand against Noah’s back instead of letting it slip around his waist. Noah immediately tensed up, which sent Luke’s heart plummeting. This wasn’t good. Not at all.


Little did his mother know that asking him to smile right now was like asking him to suddenly become interested in women. He needed to be a good sport and not cause a scene. No one could know that his heart had probably been broken. Again.

“Perfect,” Lily said, snapping the picture.

As soon as the flash went off, Noah was stepping away from Luke without a word. Running again—just fucking perfect. It looked like the kiss was some sort of sick, twisted joke after all or Noah could be experimenting. Either prospect just flat out sucked. There was a third possibility—maybe Noah was just scared.

But if that were the case, Noah could still talk to him. At least say more than one word. They’d just kissed—the best kiss of his life—the only kiss that ever really mattered to him.

Luke was about to follow after him to try to see if he couldn’t steal a few minutes alone before they had to leave. A mink and diamond tornado blew into the room, stopping Luke from getting an opportunity to talk to Noah before they left for the ball.

“I have arrived,” Lucinda announced, breezing through the archway from the foyer. Grandmother was always one to make a grand entrance whenever she got the chance.

“You bet your bottom dollar, mister,” Lucinda replied. “It looks like we’re going to have quite a showing tonight.” She glided into the room, assessing everyone in it until she came across the two people she’d never met. “Now why don’t you introduce me to that lovely lady and her son?” she asked, turning to Luke.

Luke put on his best face, escorting his grandmother over to where Gloria and Noah were standing. “I have someone who’d like to meet you,” Luke said, clearing his throat. “Gloria and Noah, this is my grandmother Lucinda Walsh.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Gloria,” Lucinda said, shaking her hand. And then she turned to Noah. “And I’ve heard so much about you, Noah. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

Why did she have to say that? Now Noah knew that he’d talked about him to his family. Luke feared that he was going to look even more pathetic than he already was. Great.

Noah shook her hand. “Thanks, Ms. Walsh. Same here.”

“We should probably head out,” Lucinda announced to everyone. “It wouldn’t look good if one of the board members was late to the event.”

Luke was happy it was time to leave, although he was tempted to suggest that he drive by himself. It would raise all sorts of questions though. He’d just have to suck it up and hope that the limo ride wasn’t too awkward.

You still don’t know how Noah feels, he tried to reason with himself. Noah might just feel the same way as you do…
But if Noah really did care he would have tried to reassure Luke. Noah could have pulled him aside. Something.

Lucinda directed everyone to the waiting limo, suggesting that Luke and Noah get in first since they were the youngest so it would be easiest for them to crawl to the seating up front by the partition. Luke knew better than to protest because one just didn’t say “no” to Lucinda Walsh—not without an epic battle.

Luke climbed into the limousine, Noah following right behind him. Luke tried not to think about the handsome boy sitting next to him. Why did Noah have to kiss him if he didn’t plan on acknowledging it? Knowing what he would be missing made all of it hurt even worse.

“I think the occasion deserves a toast,” Lucinda announced once they were on their way. Champagne filled glasses were passed out. However, Luke and Noah were given ginger ale instead. Luke felt that familiar pull as he eyed his mom’s glass of champagne. Oh what he wouldn’t give to switch glasses with her.

Luke vividly remembered the last time he had champagne. It had been a happy occasion for his family—just like tonight. His mom and dad were remarrying. Luke should have been thrilled, but he was deep in the closet at the time and felt that he’d never find anyone to love him. Months later he still felt the same way.

For a few moments up in his bedroom Luke thought all of his dreams had come true. Luke wanted those moments back. But Noah has given him nothing since then—not one single sign.

Well, Noah has if Luke considered his reaction to his touch.

Fuck.

Luke hadn’t even heard his grandmother’s toast. His mother was smiling at him, clinking her glass against his. Luke couldn’t even bring himself to look at Noah. All he could focus on was the fact that Noah still wasn’t talking. Noah just sat like a marble statue the entire ride to the Lakeview.

When the limo pulled in front of the hotel, everyone seemed to pair up like they were getting off Noah’s Ark. Luke was left with Noah as they were the last to exit the limousine. He’d expected Noah to run ahead with Gloria and Jack but he didn’t.

“This is really something,” Noah said as they strolled through the lobby of the hotel.

Luke couldn’t do this. He couldn’t hang around Noah all night, making stupid small talk and acting as if nothing happened. They kissed for fuck’s sake.

“You don’t have to stay by my side. It’s not like we’re on a date or anything,” Luke snapped at Noah the moment they entered the Crystal Ballroom. He just needed to get away from Noah.

Now.

“Luke, I…”

“Noah! Luke!” Casey said, rushing over to them, practically tackling them with a giant hug. “Am I ever happy to see you guys! You need to save me!”

“From what?” Luke asked, still a bit surprised by Casey’s over enthusiastic greeting.
“Maddie,” he said in a hushed tone.

“Casey,” Maddie said, marching over toward them.

“Noah, you create a diversion while I talk to my buddy Luke,” Casey said as he steered Luke toward the exit.

“What?” Noah stared after them, flabbergasted.

“Talk about those old movies or something,” Casey called over his shoulder. “Come on, let’s get of here.”


Casey slung an arm around Luke’s shoulder. “You wouldn’t believe what a bitch Maddie has been today,” he grumbled. “I swear she must be on the rag or something because the claws are definitely out. I can’t say or do anything right.”

Luke found it a bit hard to believe that his sweet friend Maddie was suddenly a bitch on wheels. Maddie only got that way when she was fighting for a friend like she had when she was supporting Gwen when Jade was trying to breakup Will and Gwen’s marriage or when she stuck up for him against Kevin and the other bigots of the world.

“So what did you do to make her so angry?” Luke asked as they strolled out of the Crystal Ballroom.

“Why do you think it’s something that I did?” Casey countered.

“Well…”

“Fine,” Casey sighed. “She’s pissed that I had a little bit to drink. But it’s a party, right? We should be fucking celebrating, especially after this shitty year. It’s not my fault that she doesn’t want to partake in the spirits I smuggled in.”

“Smuggled in?”

Casey guided him into the hallway that led to the hotel’s administrative offices. After doing a quick scan of the area, Casey pulled open his suit coat to reveal a shiny silver flask tucked away in the inner pocket. “Jack Daniels—right here. It goes so nicely with Coke or just straight up,” he declared. “Hey, want some? I hate partying alone.”

Luke’s mouth practically watered at the prospect of some JD. Jack could make the hurt go away. Jack could make anything better. Hadn’t he helped him out in the past?

Just one little sip would take the edge off…

Luke quickly pushed the thoughts from his mind. He was crazy for considering it. His family was in the ballroom—Noah was there. If he showed up drunk, they’d never forgive him. Not after everything he put them through this past year. Noah would see that he really wasn’t worth it after all—that Luke was just one fucked up mess.


“Are you sure you don’t want just one drink?” Casey asked, holding out the flask.

Just one drink would also lead to another, the angel perched on his shoulder kindly reminded him. You can’t get drunk. It won’t solve a thing.
You can’t make it through this night without a little pick me up, a devilish voice countered. Are you really going to be able to watch Noah all night knowing that he doesn’t give a shit about you?

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Maddie still couldn’t believe how a special night had turned into complete shit. She’d been looking forward to the ball, thinking that it would be so much fun to get all dressed up to go out with Casey. They hadn’t gone to homecoming together because it was too soon after the killings at Raven Lake. But now she was ready to celebrate and live life again.

Apparently, Casey had taken the same view, deciding to start living it up before he picked her up. Maddie immediately noticed Casey’s buzzed state when he showed up on her doorstep. The night went quickly downhill from there.

Maddie was mad that she had to drive because she wasn’t about to get behind the wheel with Casey after he’d been drinking. Casey was pissed that she didn’t want to drink with him. She had hoped that once they reached the Lakeview their tempers would have cooled. Casey had just kept goading her, comparing her to his mother which really threw her over the edge.

Things hit rock bottom when Casey left her standing in the middle of the ballroom so he could run—yes run—to greet Luke and Noah. That was the last straw. Before she could catch up with Casey, he was escorting Luke out of the room, leaving her with a dumbfounded Noah.

“Rough night?” Noah asked, smiling weakly.

“You don’t even know the half of it,” Maddie sighed, shaking her head. “Tonight definitely isn’t going how I planned.”

“Yeah…”

Maddie regarded him for a moment. “You look quite dashing—a regular Cary Grant.”

Noah blushed. “Thanks, and you make a lovely Vivian Leigh.”

“You’re so sweet,” she replied, smiling. “Right now I wish I could say the same about my boyfriend.”

“Maybe Luke could talk some sense into him.”

“Not when Casey’s been drinking. Right now he thinks everyone needs to be drunk to have a good time,” Maddie muttered. Oh great…Casey was with Luke. He wouldn’t. “I…uh…better go find him,” she said, turning and leaving Noah in her wake.

Now she just needed to find them. As she scanned the lobby she noticed a hallway that she was pretty sure led to Luke’s mother’s office. And when she entered it her blood began to boil. Casey was holding out his flask toward Luke.

Oh…no…no…no…

“What the hell are you doing?” Maddie demanded. She was so loud that Casey nearly dropped the flask and Luke jumped about a foot in the air. “Casey, you know damn well that Luke can’t drink!”

“I…uh…wasn’t thinking,” Casey stammered.

“That’s no big surprise,” Maddie spat. Whirling around, she grabbed Luke by the lapel of his suit coat, pulling him down the hallway. “You better not have been about to take him up on his offer.”
“No,” Luke replied, glancing away from her, “but I was tempted.”

“What? I’m going to kill him!”

“No…no…it’s not Casey’s fault,” Luke protested as Maddie dragged him into the hotel lobby. “I… I’m just having a bad night too.”


“What is so bad that would make you want to drink?” she quietly asked. “Did Jade do something?”

The last time she’d found him on the verge of drinking Jade had lied about having sex with Noah. Maddie wouldn’t put it past her do something else to hurt Luke. Jade was just evil. Simple as that.

Luke shook his head. “It wasn’t Jade,” he replied, chewing his lip. “It was Noah.”

Maddie’s eyes widened. “Noah? What did he do?”

Luke leaned closer to her. “He kissed me,” he whispered.

“And this is a bad thing?”

“It is when he runs out of the room right after it,” Luke replied, slumping against the back of the love seat. “He really hasn’t said anything to me since.”

“So you think he was just what—jerking you around? Experimenting?” she asked, trying to get inside the somewhat chaotic brain of Luke Snyder. Besides being one of the sweetest guys she’s ever known, Luke was also insecure and guilty of jumping to some very bad conclusions. She needed to find out if that was what he was doing now because he couldn’t turn to alcohol. Knowing Luke had entertained the thought of it for one second made her crazy. “Why would you think something like that? Noah is your friend.”

“You know when we were trapped in Wisconsin…I…uh…kinda blurted out that I had feelings for him,” Luke confessed. “He woke up to me caressing his face.”

“Luke…”

“I just couldn’t help myself,” Luke quickly explained, wringing his hands. “He took such good care of me and he looked so gorgeous. I just slipped.”

Maddie couldn’t believe that Luke had been keeping this from her. When he’d returned to school he had really downplayed his adventure in Wisconsin. He had left a lot of important details out.

“Then what happened?” she gently pressed. “What did Noah say?”

“He started to say something but then my dad showed up so I never got to hear it,” Luke replied. “When we got together on Thanksgiving I brought it up again. I was so sure that Noah was going to tell me that he felt the same way.”

“But he didn’t?” Maddie asked, completely floored. She was certain that Noah was gay and had a big time crush on Luke. Everything she had observed when the two of them were together led her to that conclusion. Noah practically lit up each time Luke talked to him. She caught him, staring at Luke quite often too. Maddie had thought it would only be a matter of time before the two of them realized that they were meant to be together.

“No, he said that I was his best friend…he was flattered but he didn’t like me like that,” Luke explained, his eyes tearing up a bit.
Maddie placed her hand on his. “Did you ever think that he was lying to you? I don’t think he’d kiss you unless he meant it. Maybe he’s afraid….”

“He knows how I feel,” Luke insisted. “And now he’s acting like I don’t fucking exist and the kiss never happened. I think that pretty much says it all.”

“Luke, I think you could be wrong about Noah,” Maddie told him. “I always thought he might like you—the kiss proves it.”

Luke shot to his feet. “You thought Noah might like me and you didn’t tell me?”

“I wasn’t a hundred percent positive that he was gay. I didn’t want to get your hopes up,” Maddie tried to reason with him. “I saw how hurt you’d been by Kevin so I didn’t want to see you go through it again.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter because he’s just like Kevin.”

Why did he have to be so damn stubborn? He wasn’t even listening to reasoning at this point.

“Luke…”

Luke vehemently shook his head. “No, the kiss proves that he was just fucking with the gay guy. If Noah were really my friend, he would have said something to me by now.”

Maddie had to agree with Luke there. Noah should have tried talking to him at this point. The Noah she knew didn’t seem like he’d jerk Luke around, but she’d been wrong about people before. She hadn’t known that her very own sister was a psychotic murderer.

“Why don’t you try talking to him?”

“No…no….I just don’t want to talk about this anymore. I can’t do this,” he decided. Luke didn’t wait around for her reply; instead he just turned and marched away.

Men. What was it with them tonight?

Deciding that dwelling on that fact would just make her night worse, Maddie returned to the ballroom. She was about to join Will and Gwen at their table when she spotted Noah sitting at a nearby table talking to Emma. As the first few notes of Dionne Warwick’s *That’s What Friends Are For* began to play, Maddie knew exactly what she needed to do.

She made a beeline straight for Noah. If Luke wouldn’t get to the bottom of things, she would. Noah would talk to her. Maddie wouldn’t give him any other choice.

“Hello, Maddie,” Emma said as Maddie approached the table.

“Hi, Mrs. Snyder,” Maddie replied with a smile. “Do you mind if I borrow Noah for a little while?”

“By all means.”

Maddie snatched Noah’s hand, pulling him to his feet. “Come on, you owe me a dance.”

“Maddie, I don’t dance,” Noah protested as she led him to the dance floor. “Wouldn’t you rather dance with Casey?”

“Nope.”

“I swear I have two left feet.”
Maddie placed her hand on his waist. “Don’t worry. Casey isn’t exactly Fred Astaire.” As they began to sway to the music, she quickly learned that Noah seemed just as cautious on the dance floor as he was about his friendships. The only time she’d ever seen him truly relax was when they talked about movies. Tonight he’d seemed extra tense. Now she knew why.

“Have you…uh…seen Luke?” Noah asked, peering over her shoulder.

“Yes, I was just talking to him.”

“Oh?” Noah asked, stiffening up a bit.

“Did you mean it or not, Noah?” Maddie asked, peering up at him.

“Mean—what?” Noah carefully asked, looking as if he were formulating an escape plan.

Maddie held his hand tightly so he couldn’t go anywhere. He might have been able to run away from Luke but not her. It was time he answered for his actions. “You know what,” Maddie insisted. “Luke told me about the kiss.”

Noah’s face grew pale. “Oh my god—he did?” he squeaked.

“Yes. Luke is one of my best friends. I love him to death and I’m sick of seeing him get hurt. So help me if you’re jerking him around…”


“What the hell is going on here?” Casey demanded, storming toward them.

Great. This was the last thing she needed now. Noah was just about to open up to her. She was certain of it. “Nothing,” Maddie replied. “Noah and I were just dancing together.”

Ignoring her, Casey turned his ire on Noah. “Are you trying to put the moves on my girlfriend?”

Noah backed away from Maddie. “No, not at all.”

“I think it is,” Casey said, stepping between Noah and Maddie. “I think you’ve had the hots for her since the first day you met her.” He inched toward Noah with his fists clenched at his side.

Maddie tugged at Casey’s arm, trying to hold him back. “Casey, it’s not like that. We were just talking.”

“Stop answering for him,” Casey spat. “Noah needs to man up and answer for himself.”

“It’s like Maddie said—we were just talking,” Noah tried to reason with him. “I’m not interested in her that way.”

“I think you’re full of shit,” Casey countered, grabbing the lapels of Noah’s suit coat. “I think you need to be reminded that she has a boyfriend.”

“Casey, stop!” Maddie yelled. “Just stop! You are making an ass out of yourself. Again! You have no right to come in here and act like a Neanderthal. I can dance with whoever I like. You don’t own me.”

“You’re my girlfriend,” Casey hissed, glancing back at her but still not letting go of Noah’s suit coat. “You should be dancing with me!”
“Not tonight—not after the way you’ve been acting,” Maddie replied, shaking her head. “The Casey I fell in love with didn’t show up on my doorstep to pick me up. So until that guy returns I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“Maddie you’re being ridiculous!” Casey shouted.

“Just leave, Casey. Please… go… sober up.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” Casey insisted. “You’re the one who is acting like a bitch.”

“Don’t you ever call me that—not if you still want to date me!”

“Why don’t you go fuck yourself?” Noah hissed, his eyes narrowing, fists clenching. “I will not stand here and listen to you insult Maddie.”

“This is none of your fucking business,” Casey shot back.

“It is when you’re rude to one of my friends,” Noah practically snarled.

Maddie was shocked to see this side of Noah. He was usually so sweet and timid, not this fiercely protective guy ready to take Casey down. Noah definitely wasn’t a pushover. And if she didn’t do something fast she would have a big time brawl on her hands.

“Guys, please stop!” Maddie begged.

She hadn’t meant to draw attention to their situation. But Holden and Jack who’d been standing nearby rushed over. While Maddie was embarrassed that Casey had caused such a scene, she was grateful that reinforcements had arrived since Casey was hell bent to get into a fight and Noah was right there ready to take him on.

“Casey, you don’t want to do anything you’ll regret,” Jack warned.

“But he can’t keep trying to move in on my girl,” Casey insisted, not budging.

“Casey.” Holden placed his hand on Casey’s shoulder. “Noah isn’t trying to come between you and Maddie. They’re just friends.”

“He’s right,” Noah spoke up. “Maddie’s my friend—that’s all. I swear.”

“Come on, Casey,” Holden said, gently drawing him away from Noah. “I think you need to step away and get some air.”

“Fine,” Casey grumbled, pulling away from Holden’s grasp. He stalked off the dance floor without another word.

Jack followed after him, probably to make sure that he wasn’t going to cause any more problems. Hopefully, Casey would just keep his mouth shut. He was lucky that Jack had gone easy on him, which he most likely did for Margo’s sake.

“I’m sorry,” Noah quickly apologized.

The poor guy looked like he just wanted to be swallowed up by the dance floor. “You have nothing to be sorry about,” Maddie reassured him. As far as Casey went that is. Luke might be another story. She still needed to get to the bottom of things.

“Are you going to be okay?” Holden asked.
“Yes, I’m fine,” Noah said still looking a bit rattled.

“Me too,” Maddie replied. “Thanks for stepping in, Mr. Snyder.”

“Any time—have fun,” Holden said and then strolled away.

Maddie placed her hand on Noah’s arm, hoping to calm him and resume their dance. He still needed to tell her what his intentions were as far as Luke was concerned. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea that one dance would cause so much trouble.”

“It’s okay,” Noah replied, taking her hand. “Are you really sure that you’re okay?”

“I’m very pissed at Casey right now but other than that yeah—I’m good.”

Noah tentatively leaned forward. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” she replied, hoping that he was going to ask her a question about Luke.

“Does…uh…Casey…uh…hit you?” Noah whispered. “Because if he does…uh…you really should tell someone…anyone. There are so many people who would help you if you’re in a bad situation. I know Luke would. And he wouldn’t judge or…”

“Noah…no…no,” Maddie reassured him. “Casey has never laid a hand on me. I swear.”

Noah breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay…good…good.”

Maddie wondered what would make him jump to that conclusion. Yes…Casey was being a raging asshole but she at no time ever felt like he’d hurt her. She knew so little about Noah. He never shared anything about his past. If you looked up enigma in the dictionary Noah’s face would be featured.

“Why do you ask?” Maddie squeezed his hand.

“N-n-no particular reason,” Noah stammered, letting her hand drop. “I just wanted to make sure that you were all right. I…uh…promised my mom a dance so I’ll think I’m going to find her now.”

Maddie hadn’t gotten the answer to her question. “But, Noah…”

“I’ll talk to you later,” Noah said, heading off the dance floor toward the table that his mother was sitting at.

Maddie was never going to get an answer out of him. One thing she did know for certain was that Luke and Noah needed to talk. Soon. A smile crept to her lips. Luke owed her a dance.

********

Luke had been happy to encounter his cousin, Lucy, coming out of the ladies’ room. It had been ages since he’d spent any time with her. She was very busy between her residency at Memorial and boyfriend, Dusty Donovan. Lucy had no idea that Luke had fallen in love with Noah. In fact, she didn’t even know about the handsome stranger who’d unexpectedly come into Luke’s life over a month ago.

“Why if it isn’t my gorgeous cousin?” Lucy beamed, linking her arm through Luke’s. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“I was dragged here by my parents,” Luke countered. “Are you here with Dusty?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Why don’t you come join us? We need to catch up…unless you have a date.”
At this rate he was never going to have a real date. “No, I don’t have a date.”

“Then it’s settled,” Lucy decided, escorting him into the ballroom where a slow song was playing.

As they headed to Lucy’s table Luke noticed that Noah was dancing with Maddie. An all too familiar pang consumed Luke. He wanted to be the one with Noah—even feeling as hurt and confused as he was at the moment.

Did Noah realize what he was doing to him? In twenty-four hours he’d been tempted to drink more than once. His drinking days were some of the lowest of his life. Luke hated that he’d considered resorting to his crutch. Rationally he knew that getting drunk would only mask the problem. When he sobered up, Noah still wouldn’t like him. Noah definitely wouldn’t like him when Luke was drunk because he could get pretty mean. Luke quickly looked away before either of them realized that he was staring at them.

“Tell me about our adorable godson,” Lucy said as she sat down. “He must be getting so big.”

“Ethan is great,” Luke replied with a smile. Talking about his baby brother never failed to make him grin. He was truly a miracle. “You need to stop by and see him. He’s going to forget who you are.”

“Thanks for laying on the guilt,” Lucy chuckled.

“I gotta do what it takes to get you to come over.”

Luke’s attention was drawn to the dance floor where Casey was making quite a scene with Noah and Maddie. Luke was about to get up to intervene, but his dad and Jack beat him to the punch so he decided to stay out of it. From what he gathered Casey was jealous of Noah and Maddie. He said a silent prayer of thanks because if he would have succumbed to his urge to drink it could have very well been him causing the ruckus.

“Young love,” Lucy sighed. “Looks like Maddie has all the boys fighting over her these days. I’ve never seen the guy dancing with her before. Does he go to school with you?”

Luke forced himself to tear his eyes away from the dance floor. Watching Maddie and Noah resume their dance would just hurt too much—even if they were just friends. “No, he doesn’t.”

“He’s cute,” Lucy said, nudging him. “Maybe he’s gay…”

“Where’s Dusty?”

“Nice way to change the subject.”

“Excuse me,” Maddie said, appearing at their table. “I was hoping that I might be able to convince Luke to dance with me.”


Maddie smiled weakly. “I don’t think Casey will bother us. Please.”

“Go on, Luke,” Lucy urged him. “Dusty will be back in a few minutes. He was just going to get a couple of drinks for us.”

“Sure,” Luke said, rising from his chair. He waited until they were out of earshot before he said, “I saw the commotion. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Casey was just being an ass,” Maddie replied. “I don’t know why he insists on getting
jealous of Noah.”

“You’re beautiful. Noah’s gorgeous. I think that about sums it up.”

Maddie took his hand, sliding her arm around his waist. “And you are too sweet.”

“Yeah, well…” Not sweet enough for Noah.

She seemed to read his mind. “Don’t give up on, Noah.”

“Do you know something that I don’t?” Luke asked hopefully. After all, Maddie had been dancing with Noah. Maybe he’d opened up to her about the kiss.

“No, not really,” Maddie replied, her focus drifting over Luke’s shoulder. “Oh dear, is Noah’s mom sick?”

“Why do you ask?”

“She just looks so different from the last time I saw her. It seems like she’s lost some weight.”

Luke casually spun them around so he could get a better look at Noah’s mom. Shit. Maddie hadn’t mentioned that Noah was dancing with her. Noah seemed to be protectively holding onto his frail mother. She was practically a skeleton.

Now it made sense. Noah was afraid—afraid of hurting his mother. Maddie was right. Luke was shocked that he hadn’t noticed it before—Gloria looked ill. Poor Noah. Luke knew firsthand how difficult it was dealing with a sick parent. The months Lily had been in a coma had been hell for Luke.


“Yeah?”

“I think I lost you there for a minute,” she chuckled.


“Are you okay?” Maddie gazed up at him, studying his face.

“I think I am now.”

When the song ended, Luke excused himself so he could go outside to get some air. He sat down on a bench outside of the Lakeview, wrapping his arms around his chest, shielding himself from the cold November breeze as well as a rush of emotions that threatened to consume him. His mind was still reeling from his recent revelation. Luke was torn. He hated that Gloria seemed to be ill. She was such a nice lady.

Once Luke processed what Noah had to be going through, he was relieved that Noah was most likely gay, which meant that the kiss hadn’t been a mistake. Of course, this didn’t mean that Noah was going to admit it, especially if he was worried about his mother.

Luke was also very aware how hard it was to decide to come out. He’d tried hiding the fact that he was gay behind alcohol and pretending he was straight. Luke had been so terrified that his parents would hate him. All of the deceit ultimately took its toll and he had to confess…
“This whole thing with Jade was a scam,” Luke admitted to Holden, turning his back to his father. It was just so hard to face him right now—so hard admitting that he’d been lying, especially knowing how his parents disliked Jade. If it hadn’t been for his lies then she would’ve been out of their lives.

“You mean how she got here?” Holden asked.

“I mean everything between us,” he confessed. “We weren’t in love…”

“Well, maybe it wasn’t…”

His dad wasn’t making this any easier. Luke needed him to just listen. He turned to face him. “We weren’t together. There was nothing between us.”

“You told your mom and me…”


A brief flash of realization crossed over his father’s face. Luke was pretty sure that his dad already knew. But it still didn’t make this any easier for him.

Luke fought to keep his emotions in check. “So are you going to ask?”

“You said you have something to tell me so I assume you will,” Holden carefully replied.

“I don’t need to, do I? Because you already know.”

“I don’t know anything,” Holden said. “But I’ve wondered—about a lot of things.”

“But you never asked,” Luke whispered, “because you didn’t want to know. And I understand that.”

“Well good because I don’t. I love you. You’re my son. That never changes.”

Luke desperately hoped his dad really meant it. More than anything, he needed his parents to still love him. “Yeah.”

“Yeah, it’s just you and me. Tell me,” Holden said quietly.


“That never changes.”

Luke shook his head. “You say that now…”

“No…I mean it,” Holden insisted. “There’s nothing you can’t tell me.”

He could do this. His dad would still love him. He all but said so. Luke just needed to finally admit the truth to him so they could move on. And maybe once he did it all of the pain he’d been feeling for so long would finally go away. “Okay…okay…the reason that Jade will be the only girlfriend I ever have is because…”

“That is not true,” Lily said, strolling into the living room. “I’m sorry to interrupt but I can’t sit still for that. Jade is not the only girl in the world, honey.”

“Oh,” Lily said, quickly glancing at Holden. “That’s good.”

“And he was about to tell us…”

“Oh I know…I know…oh, honey,” Lily said, cupping Luke’s face in her hands. “I see it. I see you’re hurting, but you’ll heal. That girl was not right for you.”

“Yeah but, Mom, no girl would ever be…”

“Oh…I know…I know…I know it feels like that right now…that you’ll never find someone who means that much to you,” Lily tried to reassure him. “But that’s not true. You’re a wonderful guy.”

Luke couldn’t handle listening to her. He needed to get the truth out. “Mom…mom…please stop.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m biased. I apologize.” Lily went on as if she wasn’t hearing a word he was saying. “But…you’re smart, sensitive and caring. You’re so handsome,” she said, caressing his hair. “The girls are going to be falling all over you.”

“Lily,” Holden interrupted, “we were in the middle of something.”

Lily glanced over her shoulder at Holden. “Oh.” She returned her focus to Luke. “Oh I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt. I won’t talk about this.” Lily started to leave, but Luke grabbed her arm, stopping her.

“No…Mom it’s okay…it’s okay,” Luke told her. “Please stay.”

“Is that what you want?” Holden asked, studying him.

Luke appreciated that his father was trying to protect him but he really only wanted to have this conversation one time. “Yeah,” Luke breathed. “Yeah…let me just…let me just do this once.”


“Luke has something that he needs to tell us.”

Luke took a deep breath. It was finally time to come clean. “I have done some pretty rotten things in the last few months. And I have made your life so much harder than it needed to be…”

“Honey, I’m fine,” Lily insisted.

“I know.” Luke took a shuddering breath and continued, “And I hope so. I’m counting on that because—I’m so tired of lying.” He gazed at his parents, praying they’d understand what he was trying to tell them. His dad seemed to get it.

But his mom…

“About?” Lily pressed.


Lily seemed stunned—just standing there gaping at him. Luke wished she would say something. The silence was killing him. His mom just stared at him as if he’d just admitted he was a serial killer.

“You’re gay?” she murmured.


But she didn’t. She just walked away.

Luke had been shocked and so very hurt by some of the things his mother had said to him that afternoon. His worst fears had been quickly realized. She didn’t accept him for who he was; instead she grasped at straws, hoping that because he was still a virgin he didn’t know what he really wanted. His mom had tried to convince him that he didn’t know himself—that he was just confused. She reminded him of a female friend that he’d supposedly had a crush on as well as questioning his “decision” to be gay. However, the worst had been when she told him that she was sad for him.

Sad.

His mom made it seem like being gay was such a tragedy. She’d acted like he’d suddenly become a complete stranger. An already difficult situation had morphed into a nightmare.

The agony of that moment still lingers even though his mom has apologized for her reaction several times. Being rejected by his mom—even for a couple of months—had been so incredibly painful. If his very own mother couldn’t love and accept him then how could anyone else?


Noah was probably struggling like he had been. All Noah had was his mom and if she no longer loved him then Noah would have no one. He’d probably rather hide his sexuality forever than risk losing the love of his mom. Luke had tried doing the same thing.

Why hadn’t Luke figured this out before?

“Oh, Noah,” Luke murmured. “Why won’t you just find me and tell me that everything is okay—that you wanted to kiss me? You can confide in me. We’re supposed to be friends—best friends.”

You sent him away, an inner voice reminded him. Maybe you should try to find him.

This might have been the best idea he’s had all night. Luke stood up just as Kevin, Mark, and Chad came strolling down the sidewalk, laughing and playfully shoving each other.

Fuck.

“Well…well…well…look who’s all dressed up with no place to go,” Kevin taunted him as Mark and Chad circled around Luke, making sure that he couldn’t go anywhere without going through them.

“Don’t they let fags inside?” Chad smirked.

The stench of alcohol radiated from them. There was no telling what the terrible trio intended to do since they were undoubtedly chocked full of liquid courage. Alcohol and assholes definitely didn’t mix.

“Shut up,” Luke spat, his heart racing. He needed to get back inside before it got really ugly.

Mark grabbed his arm. “I’d like to see you make us—especially since your cocksucker boyfriend
isn’t here to fight your battle.”

“Where is he?” Kevin asked, getting right up into Luke’s face. Beer seemed to be leaking from his pores. “Did you have a lovers’ quarrel?”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Luke snapped, trying to move past Kevin but was quickly held back by Mark.

“You’re not going anywhere, fag,” Mark hissed into Luke’s ear, wrapping his arms tightly around Luke so he couldn’t move. “We still have a couple of scores to settle.”

Fuck.

“Get your damn hands off of him!” Noah’s voice came from behind Luke.

“So the boyfriend makes an appearance after all,” Kevin smirked. “I guess it’s hard to keep true love apart.”


Mark gripped him tighter. “You are in no position to tell us anything, princess.”

“I said let him go,” Noah demanded, pushing his way past between Mark and Chad.

“It’s three against one,” Kevin countered. “Do you really want to go against the odds? Last time you were lucky. This time you’ll end up on the pavement.”

“No he won’t,” Casey’s voice rang through the night air.

“We’ve just evened up the odds,” another voice added.

Was that Will? Luke craned his neck to see but his view was blocked by Chad.

“Looks like the fag has got himself a regular gay posse,” Chad cracked. “I’m not afraid to take on some more fag lovers.”

“I prefer wolf pack,” Casey replied. “It sounds more bad ass. We’re definitely bad ass. I just can’t wait to prove it.” He punched his fist into his hand to emphasize the point.

“If you lay one hand on Luke you’re going down,” Noah said calmly.

“Is everything okay boys?” Dusty asked, strolling over with a lit cigar.

Mark shoved Luke into Noah. “This piece of trash isn’t worth it.”

“We’ll see you later, Luke,” Chad sneered. It was more of a threat than a promise.

As Kevin and his minions stalked off toward Old Town, Luke had a sinking feeling in his gut. This problem wasn’t going to just go away. Deep down Luke feared there was going to be a day when there wouldn’t be anyone to come to his defense.

“Nice guys,” Dusty muttered, snuffing out his cigar in the outdoor ashtray before strolling back inside the hotel.

“Are you okay?” Will asked.
“Yeah, thanks to you guys,” Luke said, his gaze falling on Noah. Wow…Noah had once again had his back. This spoke volumes.

“Too bad Dusty showed up because I was looking forward to kicking Kevin Davis’ ass,” Casey declared.

“No,” Noah spoke up. “Kevin would have been mine.”

A chill washed over Luke. Noah knew all about Kevin—the crush he’d had on him as well as Kevin’s horrible reaction to it. Did Noah want to seek some sort of special revenge on him? Did it have to do with how Luke once felt about Kevin?

“I’m kinda happy we didn’t have to fight,” Will admitted. “Gwen would have killed me.”

Casey turned to Noah and took a deep breath. “I…uh…really owe you an apology, Noah,” he quietly admitted. “I said some really shitty things to you and jumped to some pretty stupid conclusions. I’m sorry.” He stuck out his hand as a peace offering.

Noah shook it, staring intently at Casey. “I accept your apology, Casey, but the person you really should say you are sorry to is Maddie. I’ve only known her a short time, but it’s obvious how special she is. She does not deserve to be treated that way. Ever. We're just friends, but if you pull shit like that again—” Noah stepped up to Casey, getting right in his face. “You will answer to me. Got it?”

Casey, obviously stunned by Noah being all bad ass, just nodded.

“Damn,” Will muttered, “well said.”

*And incredibly hot,* Luke couldn’t help but think. Noah was so fiercely loyal. First he stood up to the assholes and now he was calling Casey out on his shit. Was it wrong to think that it was damn sexy?

“You’re right, Noah, I have a lot of apologizing to do,” Casey admitted. “I’m going to try to find Maddie.”

“Good luck,” Luke said, smiling ruefully. “She’s not too happy with you right now.”

Will draped an arm around Casey, steering him toward the entrance of the Lakeview. “I’ll be sure to tell her what a hero you just were. It will help. Everyone just loves a hero.”

Once Casey and Will had gone, Noah turned to Luke and whispered, “And that’s all Maddie or any girl can be to me Luke—a friend.”

Oh my god. Was Noah actually admitting that he was gay?


Noah nodded. “I meant it—what happened in your room. It wasn't a joke.”

Luke stared up at him, still stunned that Noah was finally talking to him. And not only was he talking, Noah was telling him what he needed to hear the entire night. “You did?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So that means…”

“Yeah, I do.”
“We really need to talk,” Luke said. A thousand questions raced through his mind. There was still so much he needed to know.

“I agree,” Noah replied, “but not tonight.”

“Tomorrow then,” Luke decided. “We can meet at the pond. It will be private there.”

“How about eleven o’clock.”

“I’ll be there,” Luke promised. He wouldn’t miss it for the world.
Noah sat on top of the picnic table, staring at the frozen pond which was sparkling like a diamond underneath the bright sunlight. He’d been out here for a half hour already, showing up an hour early for his meeting with Luke. Sitting in the cabin waiting had been making him anxious, so he decided to just head to the pond, which helped calm him. It was easy to lose himself in the beauty of the Snyder farm.

Noah hadn’t forgotten why he was there. He’d kissed Luke. Noah had replayed that kiss in his mind about a hundred times. It was undoubtedly the best moment of his life. Finally, Noah was able to be himself for the first time ever.

Luke now knew he was gay even if he hadn’t exactly come out and admitted it. Saying the actual word aloud still scared him. Actually, admitting it to another person would make it real. And making it real would change his life forever.

Throughout Noah’s life he’d been subjected to Winston Mayer’s ideals and bigotry. There were also the fag jokes he heard while he was still in school—the snickers, the derogatory remarks. Part of Noah was afraid to be associated with so much hatred. He’d seen firsthand what Luke had to endure.


Noah didn’t want to think about not being with Luke. If Luke could hold his head up high then so could he. Luke would help him deal. Noah had confessed that he meant the kiss. And there was no going back now. Not that he wanted to. However, he wasn’t exactly ready to totally come out either.

Noah hoped that Luke would understand. He didn’t want to lose Luke. Not when Luke could quite possibly become his boyfriend. The mere thought set loose about a hundred butterflies in his stomach. There would be phone calls, text messages, dates, more kisses and—well—more. Luke knew he was a virgin. Luke’s probably had experience though. Maybe he’s even had sex. Noah wasn’t sure he was ready for sex yet, especially since he still had problems saying the word “gay”.

Noah blew out a long, calming breath. It would be okay. All he needed to do was be honest with Luke.

Out of the corner of his eye Noah could see a figure approaching the picnic table. Noah checked his watch, discovering it was only 10:40. Luke was early. Noah’s heart leapt to his throat as Luke strolled toward him, hands stuffed in the pockets of his winter jacket which was slightly unzipped to reveal a red and blue striped sweater. Luke, noticing Noah’s gaze, smiled shyly at him.

“You’re early,” Noah called to him, hoping that he sounded casual – not like the nervous wreck he’d suddenly become.

“So are you.”

“I guess I was a little anxious,” he sheepishly admitted.

“Me too.” Luke brushed the snow off the space next to Noah on the picnic table and then hopped up onto it. “Hey,” he said, glancing at him with a slight grin playing on his lips.

“Hey.”

“So…” Luke rocked nervously, his hands still stuffed in his pockets.
“So…I’m…uh…” Noah stammered. Say it—just fucking say it. He already knows. “I’m…uh…gay.”


Noah nodded. “I know…it’s just…well…the only time I ever said it out loud was to Whitman.”

“I said it to him too,” Luke admitted. “I told him how scared I was that everyone would hate me because I wasn’t who they expected me to be.”

“I…uh…also talked to him about you,” Noah said, glancing at Luke half afraid that Luke would think he was a loser because he’d been too afraid to admit his true feelings to him. “Whitman knows everything—well almost everything.”

“Whitman also knew how I felt about you—how I wished that you felt the same way.”

Luke had done the exact same thing. Noah grinned. “He really got an earful from both of us.”

“And a lot of carrots.”

“Yeah,” Noah said quietly, reflecting on the countless heart to hearts he’d had with Whitman. He didn’t know what he would have done without him. Whitman knew so much about him but Luke, his best friend, didn’t. And it wasn’t right. “I’m sorry I lied to you, Luke. When you told me how you felt about me I really wanted to tell you that I felt the same way about you but I was scared and…”

Noah took a deep breath. “The first moment I saw you I thought you were so beautiful. I’d never been so struck by someone before. And then I thought you hated me. God that hurt, but deep down I wasn’t surprised because I figured that someone as gorgeous as you would never like me. I was awed when you came out to me. You were so confident and proud about it. I’d never seen anything like it. You were such the polar opposite of me. I figured that you had to have some rich, handsome, college boyfriend. I tried so hard to bury my feelings for you but it didn’t work. Especially when I discovered what a kind, amazing person you were.

“I was so determined to accept that being friends with you was enough. But I was so wrong. It was so incredibly difficult being close to you and not telling you. There were times that I almost slipped up—like when we were on the hayride and playing basketball. God, Luke, I wanted so much to…um…just kiss you and hold you and…stuff.”

“Noah…” Luke began, but he was quickly cut off.

“Please, I just gotta get this out,” Noah told him. “Luke, for almost five years I haven’t had any friends—just my mom. We’ve moved from town to town—lived in nine different states all while I was struggling with being gay—trying so hard to believe that I wasn’t. But I knew deep down that I was however it didn’t stop me from kissing a few girls, hoping that it would change things. But it didn’t. I’ve been ashamed for so long, Luke. But you opened my eyes that maybe I have nothing to be ashamed of—I mean, you are so brave and proud, and that’s one of the reasons I’m—you know—crazy about you. I want to be like you, but it’s so fucking scary.”

Luke took his hand. “Hey, I understand,” he told him. “I’ve been there. I wasn’t so quick to come out. I tried to deny it as long as I could, but after I finally told my parents it was such a huge relief. Finally—finally I could be myself.

“I’m sorry that I was such a prick to you at first. It wasn’t anything you’d done. It was all me and how scared I was to fall for a straight guy after the hell I’d gone through with Kevin. I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to kiss you or tell you how I really felt. I also wanted to kiss you during
the hayride, after that basketball game, and when we were stuck in the truck. I’m so…so…happy that you kissed me.”

“Me too.”

“We need to promise each other that from now on that we’ll be honest with each other,” Luke told him. “Lies almost destroyed me once and I can’t risk it again.”

Noah’s stomach twisted into knots. Luke had no idea that the very first words out of his mouth were a lie. He wasn’t Noah Carlson. His father wasn’t killed in a hunting accident. Noah didn’t want to lose Luke now. He couldn’t. “Luke…I…uh…I don’t even know how to say this…” his voice began to falter.

“Hey, hey,” Luke said, giving his hand a squeeze. “You can tell me anything—anything. Okay?” He gazed at him with deep, reassuring eyes.

Noah licked his lips. He just couldn’t stare into Luke’s big brown, trusting eyes and continue to lie to him. Luke would never forgive him if he didn’t tell him the truth now. And he needed Luke—now more than ever. Noah could feel tears pricking at his eyes.

“Hey, are you okay?” Luke asked.

Noah nodded, taking a deep breath. He could do this. He had to do this. “My name isn’t Noah Carlson—it’s Noah Mayer. My mom’s name is Charlene. She took the name Gloria from a character in her favorite movie. We’ve been on the run for over four years…” Everything came out in one long rushed breath before the tears began to pour down his cheeks.


“If only it were that simple,” Noah sniffed. “No, we aren’t involved with the mob. My father—Winston Mayer—actually Colonel Winston Mayer is very much alive—at least he was when we left Ft. Leonard Wood.” Noah forced himself to look at Luke who was staring at him a bit dumbfounded. “What I told you about my father—the beatings—was true. He’s a very cold, cold man. But he’s also a very respected Colonel in the Army. They view him as a hero, not the monster that he is…” the last part came out with a sob.


“When I was thirteen I had insisted on riding my new bike to school and it got stolen. I was so afraid to come home from school that day. I knew my father would be furious. Turns out furious was an understatement.”


“He beat me unconscious,” Noah confessed, tears still spilling from his eyes. “When my mom got home from grocery shopping she was horrified. She finally convinced him to take me to the hospital where I was diagnosed with a concussion. The story was that I had taken a very nasty spill on my bike and I hadn’t been wearing a helmet.”


“Please don’t think that my mom didn’t try to protect me because she did,” Noah pleaded. He couldn’t bear it if Luke blamed Charlene for him ending up in the hospital. His mother always protected him the best way she could—taking so many beatings as a result of it.
“Hey,” Luke murmured, wiping the tears that were now pouring down Noah’s cheeks. “I know she does. Anyone can see how much she loves you.”

Noah nodded, sniffing. “She’d been planning to get us away from him, getting fake IDs and saving whatever money she could without him noticing. She just needed the right moment so we could get a head start. When I was ready to be released from the hospital she made sure that he didn’t know and picked me up while he was on duty. And then we started running and haven’t stopped since…” He couldn’t continue, too overcome with emotion to go on. The wound ran so deep and hurt so damn much. He doubted that the pain would ever stop.


“You don’t have to run anymore. You and your mom are safe here,” Luke reassured him. “My family will protect you. Jack can make sure that your father never comes near you again. And Grandmother has access to the top lawyers in the state.”

No…no…no! Luke couldn’t tell anyone about him and his mom. Everyone in Luke’s family would be in danger. It didn’t matter if Jack was a cop. The Colonel would find a way to win if he was challenged. He always did.

Noah quickly pulled away from Luke absolutely horrified at the thought of putting the Snyders in danger. He wouldn’t do that to them—not after they’d taken him and his mother in. “You can’t say a word, Luke!”


“No,” he vehemently maintained. “I mean it…no way. He’s evil, Luke. If he ever found out that I’m gay, he’d kill me.”

“I can’t believe…”

“He would. Trust me.”

“But…”

“Luke, he’s a monster,” Noah insisted, refusing to back down on this issue. And when Luke slid his arm around Noah’s waist, he knew that he now had the strength to continue. He was quickly learning that as long as he had Luke by his side he could do almost anything. “When I was nine he took me fishing. Those trips were usually pretty enjoyable. One thing I could do was catch fish—at least most of the time. But this outing the fish just weren’t biting, which really pissed off the Colonel. He’s a man that always has to win.

“He got drunk—shitfaced drunk, which scared me to death. The Colonel is nasty sober and it’s only magnified when he’d been drinking. I was helping him load the truck. I had my water bottle in one hand and the tackle box in the other. I dropped the tackle box, which shouldn’t be a big deal right?” Noah stole a quick glance at Luke, who was watching him intently. He was sure Luke probably had a million questions but he was keeping quiet, letting Noah get his story out. Luke just nodded, urging Noah to continue.

“But it was huge. He just lost it—went fucking batshit crazy, calling me a ‘useless little mama’s boy’ accusing me of being more worried about not spilling any water than his expensive equipment. He said he’d teach me to be a man though—he’d toughed me up…” Noah’s voice cracked as he uttered
“Noah, you don’t have to say anymore,” Luke quietly said.

While Noah appreciate that Luke was trying to spare Noah from reliving the painful experience, he really needed to keep going. For many reasons. “I do,” Noah insisted. “I’ve never told this story to anyone…not even my mom because I wanted to protect her—keep her from getting hurt. H-h-h-he pulled out a gun. My first instinct was to run as fast as I could and never look back. But I knew my father was a sharp shooter and he’d kill me with one shot,” Noah explained, fighting to keep the emotion out of his voice because he was afraid if he started crying now he wouldn’t be able to stop. “The Colonel told me to stand against the tree for a little target practice. He’d show me what he thought of my precious water bottle. He also warned me not to move, flinch or cry or I’d be very sorry. I knew he meant business. If I disobeyed he’d kill me and he’d bury my body out there in the woods with the wild animals. My mom would never know what happened to me. So I stood there like a statue while my father raised his gun at me and fired, shooting the water bottle off my head. I swear he was maybe an inch from hitting me…”

“Oh, Noah…”

“My own father hates me. He’s always hated me—ever since I can remember,” Noah sobbed. “I don’t even know what I did to him. I’ve always tried to be a good boy. Even though I haven’t seen him in years, I can still hear his voice as if he was standing right next to me telling me how pathetic and worthless I am. And it’s so hard to convince myself that I’m not those things…”

The next thing he knew Luke had gathered him into a tight hug. Noah could hear Luke sniffling as he just squeezed him like he never intended on letting him go. For what seemed like hours they just held each other, not saying a word just allowing their emotions to run their course.

When Luke finally spoke, his voice was a bit hoarse. “Hey, I don’t want anyone calling my boyfriend pathetic and worthless. I happen to think he’s not only gorgeous but smart and sweet with such an incredible heart.”

Boyfriend? Noah was utterly flabbergasted. Luke thought of him as his boyfriend.


Luke shut his eyes, cringing slightly. “I don’t—I just totally weirded you out.”

“No,” Noah insisted, but he still needed to know. “Is that what you want? Do you want me to be your boyfriend?”


A grin crept to Noah’s lips as he laced his fingers through Luke’s. “I want that too.”

Luke broke into a full-dimpled smile. “I think this means we should probably go out on a date or something.”

“Yeah.”

“Maddie is going to be thrilled that we finally got our shit together,” Luke chuckled. “And my family just loves you so they’re going to be over the moon…”

Whoa…wait…his family? Luke couldn’t tell his family about them because it would mean coming
out to his mom which he didn’t plan on doing. Noah still couldn’t risk it. No way.


“But…”

“I can’t come out to my mom,” Noah insisted. She was all he had in the world. If she rejected him, then he’d be on his own and he couldn’t bear it. “She’s done so much for me, Luke. She’s protected me, took beatings to prevent me from getting hurt. I love her so much and if this hurts her it will kill me. It will.”

“But, Noah, your mom isn’t going to stop loving you because you’re gay,” Luke replied. “You’re all she has too and there’s no way she’d reject you. Chances are she already suspects. My dad knew before I told him.”

“But you said that you’re mother didn’t take it well at first so she obviously didn’t know that you were gay,” Noah countered.

“I think deep down she knew but just didn’t want to acknowledge it because she hoped it wasn’t true.”

Noah glanced away from Luke’s earnest gaze. “I can’t risk it. She’s the only family I have. I won’t lose her. This whole thing of coming out…I mean…it’s still really hard for me.”

“I know.”

“I can’t even accept myself half the time so how is my mom supposed to handle it?”

“There’s nothing wrong with being gay,” Luke said quietly.

“Logically I know this, but I don’t know if I’ll ever be free of the Colonel whether it’s his views or all of the shit he’s done to me. My mom did her best to give me the love and support that he didn’t.” Noah shuddered. “But when someone constantly tells you how weak and useless you are you start to believe it.”

Luke caressed Noah’s cheek. “You are neither of those things,” he said, eyes brimming with tears. “You are incredible, strong, and brave.”

Noah squeezed his eyes shut, trying very hard not to lose it. Hearing Luke say all of those amazing things about him—the scrawny, awkward kid who was so unloved by his own father was overwhelming. “Are you sure that you’re not talking about yourself?”

Luke nudged him, playfully. “Yeah, well it goes without saying that I’m all of those things but you are too.”

This made Noah grin. One of the things he loved about Luke was his sense of humor and ability to put him at ease in an instant. “You’re crazy.”


“Same here.”

Luke gazed at him thoughtfully for a moment. “We can keep us a secret for now. Well from everyone besides Maddie because she’ll want to know if we worked things out and Maddie can always tell when I’m lying.”
“Okay.” Noah was relieved that he wasn’t going to push him to come out to his mom right now.


Noah’s heart sank. He should have known there was going to be a stipulation attached.

“We can’t keep it a secret for too long. I hid who I was once and it nearly killed me,” Luke told him. “You’re going to have to tell your mom before Christmas because I want to be able to celebrate it openly with you.”

Christmas was exactly a month from today. Noah could slowly start preparing his mom for the big revelation. “I can do that.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“If you want me there with you when you tell her, I will be,” Luke said. “I’ll help you any way I can.”

“You’ve already helped me—so much,” Noah murmured, his eyes dropping to Luke’s perfect pink, bow-shaped lips that had turned up into a smile. Noah’s eyes shifted up to Luke’s which were gazing at him intensely through his long lashes.

Luke was so fucking beautiful.

Noah, completely under Luke’s spell, slowly leaned forward, seeking out Luke’s lips. Luke moaned when they made contact, placing his hands on Noah’s shoulders, pulling him closer. Noah had thought that no kiss could ever top his first one with Luke, but he’d been wrong. They kissed slowly, taking the time to thoroughly explore each other’s mouth.

When they finally broke the kiss, Luke rested his forehead against Noah’s. “I’ve wanted to do that again since the first one.”

“Me too.” Noah impishly grinned.

“Do you have plans for the rest of the day?”

“No.”

Luke smiled slyly. “Good, because I think it’s time to go on our first date.”
Luke didn’t want to run home to pick up his car so he decided that he’d ask his grandma if he could borrow one of the farm trucks for their date. His mind was still reeling from his long talk with Noah. Never…ever…had he expected Noah to confess the horrors of his childhood. Luke thought Damian was horrible, but the Colonel sounded a hundred times worse. It was a wonder that Noah had managed to survive and turn out so incredibly sweet.

_I’ve always tried to be a good boy._

Luke had never heard a more heartbreaking sentence in his life. His big, tall boyfriend, the one that fearlessly punched Kevin, sounded like a lost child—a child that his own father tormented with punches and sick, murderous games.

His first instinct had been to call his dad as soon as he reached the farmhouse and tell him everything. Noah and his mom needed to be protected from that monster. After hearing Noah’s fishing story, Luke believed that the Colonel would kill Noah or his mom if given the chance. He needed to make sure that Noah stayed safe.

Luke also quickly realized that Noah needed someone to trust and he’d chosen Luke. He couldn’t very well turn around and betray Noah’s confidence now. It would destroy Noah, who seemed to be holding on by his fingernails at this point.

Noah needed to feel normal for probably the first time in his life. Going out on a date was definitely a step in the right direction. Luke would make sure that he fun and learned that there was nothing wrong with just being Noah.

While Luke was commandeering a ride for them, Noah had gone back to the cabin to leave a note for his mother so she wouldn’t worry.

“You can borrow the truck, Luke,” Emma said, handing over the keys. “But you need to promise me that you’ll help get all of the Christmas decorations down from the attic.”

“I will—Monday after basketball practice. I promise. And I’ll even help decorate,” Luke told her. “I can probably get Noah to help me too.”

“In that case I’ll make a special dinner for my little elves,” Emma decided.

“It’s definitely a deal then.” Luke grinned, still soaring in the clouds over the fact that Noah had agreed to be his boyfriend. He wondered if his grandmother could figure out why he was so happy. Would the entire world realize how he was completely in love with Noah?

“Drive carefully. Don’t get caught in any snow banks.”

“I’ll be safe,” Luke reassured her, giving her a quick hug. “See you later!”

Luke already knew what he had in mind for their date. He figured he’d get Noah out of town so they wouldn’t have to worry about running into anyone they knew. About a half hour away there was a sleepy little town called Crystal Falls. Luke was certain that they’d be able to find a place to grab a bite to eat and maybe an ice cream afterward. Noah definitely deserved a tasty treat.

He had no idea that Noah had been through such hell. Everything about Noah’s behavior since he first set foot in Oakdale now made complete sense. No wonder Noah had been so skittish. He was
afraid that his father might find them even after all of this time. His protectiveness over his mother was natural. For over four years it had been the two of them running and surviving.

Luke thought that Noah should let him tell his family about their troubles with the Colonel. They would be able to help them. But Noah had been so insistent that nothing was said. Luke decided that he’d go along with him for a little while. Just like he’d keep their relationship a secret until Noah came out to his mom. Both were temporary situations as far as Luke was concerned. He’d find a way to make Noah see how right he was about the two issues.

Noah met up with him in the driveway, looking just as eager as Luke felt about the date. A fresh wave of giddiness washed over Luke. All he wanted to do was shout from the rooftops how happy he finally was but he couldn’t since they were keeping it a secret.

“Ready to rock ‘n roll?” Luke asked, holding up the keys and shaking them.

Noah laughed. “The last time you asked me that we ended up trapped in the middle of nowhere with a broken axle on your dad’s truck.”

“You’re starting to sound like my grandma,” Luke groaned. “I take one wrong turn and now I’m never going to hear the end of it.”

“Well, it was one hell of a wrong turn,” Noah said, following Luke to the older black pickup truck that had a Snyder Stables logo on the two doors.

Luke shrugged as he unlocked the doors. “I think some pretty good things came out of our little adventure.”

“Yeah.” Noah blushed, ducking his head.

“Did you leave your note?” Luke asked, fastening his seatbelt.

“I left it on the kitchen table so that my mom will see it when she gets home from work,” Noah replied.

Luke’s grandma had told him on many occasions that his insistent curiosity had killed hundreds of cats. Another one was about to be added to the count. He couldn’t get the image of how frail Gloria…err…Charlene had looked at the ball. “How is your mom doing?” Luke asked, trying very hard to keep his tone casual.

“Why do you ask?”

“It just seems like—I don’t know—maybe that she’s lost a lot of weight,” Luke ventured. “I thought she looked beautiful all dressed up for the ball but she…”

“She’s fine,” Noah cut him off. “She’s just been working so hard since we got here. She’s very determined to make up for not being able to give me anything for so long. You know I hadn’t had any new clothes up until my mom was able to buy me some with her tip money.”

“Noah,” Luke said, glancing over at him and pleading with his eyes for forgiveness, “I didn’t mean to upset you. I was concerned…”

“I can take care of my mom,” Noah insisted.

“I never said that you couldn’t,” Luke countered.
Were they having their first fight during their first date? Fuck. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be going. Luke had no idea that what he thought was an innocent question would cause so much trouble. His grandma was right, his curiosity tended to get him into hot water. When was he going to learn to keep his mouth shut?

Noah stared up at the ceiling, blowing out a long breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you. I’m just so used to protecting my mom.”

Luke placed his hand on Noah’s thigh. “Hey, it’s okay. I shouldn’t stick my nose in where it doesn’t belong.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s nice that you care so much.”

“I do.”

“So…uh…where are you taking me?” Noah asked, his demeanor relaxing again.

“I thought we could head over to Crystal Falls—grab some lunch, maybe get an ice cream cone, go check out the falls.”

“There are actual falls there?”

“Yeah,” Luke replied. “Hopefully, they’re not frozen over so there will be something to see.”

“I like your plan.”

It took everything for Luke not to let out an excited yelp. The day was back on track and getting better by the minute. Conversation came easily the rest of the ride to Crystal Falls. Noah was the most relaxed Luke had ever seen him. The weight of the world had been lifted from Noah’s shoulders. If only Noah would come totally clean with everyone, he’d truly be free.

Luke knew better than to push him. At least not on the first date.

Their lunch options were pretty limited—a family diner, McDonald’s, and a little Chinese restaurant. They decided that they didn’t drive a half hour to eat at McDonald’s and the Bamboo Palace looked like anything but a palace so that left Jenny’s Family Restaurant.

The parking lot of Jenny’s was practically full, which was a good sign as far as Luke was concerned. The food must be halfway decent if there were so many people there. Luke found a place to park and then they headed inside.

They were greeted by a girl about their age that obviously had eyes for Noah. Luke wanted to grab Noah’s hand to show her that Noah was his boyfriend. But Luke remembered that Noah had admitted he often had issues dealing with his sexuality. Couple that with the fact that Noah only had his foot out of the closet, he decided to just keep his hands to himself in public.

At least for now.

The girl led them to a booth where she placed the menus on the table and turned to Noah. “Your waitress will be right with you but if you need anything please let me know.”

“Okay,” Noah replied with a smile, seemingly unaware that the hostess was flirting with him.

Once the hostess headed back up front Luke leaned across the table. “Looks like my boyfriend is quite the stud,” Luke said in a hushed voice.
“What are you talking about?”

Luke rolled his eyes. “The hostess was flirting with you.”

Noah opened his menu, burying his head inside it. “No, she wasn’t,” he mumbled.

Oh his clueless Noah. He was really going to have to work on Noah’s low self-esteem.

The waitress came to take their orders. They ordered the same thing—a bacon cheeseburger, fries, and a Coke. As soon as the waitress left the table, Noah stretched out his long legs, allowing them to tangle with Luke’s. The moment they made contact, Noah broke out into a grin which made Luke smile. This wasn’t holding hands but it was still very nice.

Luke fiddled with his napkin. “So my first basketball game is Friday night…uh…will you come?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“I can talk to Maddie—see if she and Casey can pick you up so you’ll have someone to sit with,” Luke explained. “There’s a good chance that Kevin and those guys will be there…”

“I’m not afraid of them,” Noah replied, his eyes set and determined.

“I know.”

“I’ll take them on as long as they keep threatening you.”

While he thought ass kicking Noah was incredibly sexy, he hated to be viewed as some damsel in distress, especially when it came to matters dealing with Kevin. “You shouldn’t have to,” Luke sighed.

“I like being able to protect you,” Noah quietly admitted.

Right, because when Noah and his mother lived with his father he’d been helpless. But now he’s bigger, stronger and he can defend the people he cares about. Luke was now one of them.

“You’re definitely good at it,” Luke chuckled, trying to lighten up the conversation.

The waitress dropped off their drinks. Noah unwrapped his straw and asked, “So do people at school give you a hard time?”

Luke wished that Noah hadn’t asked that question because he now had to answer it honestly. And it really sucked to have to admit the shit he’s been enduring at school since September.

“Some,” Luke answered evenly. “I get comments here and there. Kevin and his friends are the worst which you’ve seen firsthand. But I’m not getting stuffed into garbage cans or lockers.” He forced a smile.

“Maddie has your back.”

Luke nodded. “Maddie definitely has my back. So do the guys on the team. They’ve been pretty great. I haven’t heard one snide remark and there hasn’t been a mass exodus when I enter the shower area.”

“Good,” Noah laughed. “I’d hate to have to take on the entire basketball team.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?”
“In a heartbeat.”

They dug into their food as soon as the waitress arrived with their burgers and fries. The food was pretty good but not as tasty as Al’s. The company certainly made up for it. Sometimes Luke would glance up from his meal just to find Noah staring at him with the cutest smile on his face. Their feet stayed tangled tightly together which made Luke giddy. Hopefully, they could spend some time alone before they headed back to Oakdale.

“Did you save some room for ice cream?” Luke asked as Noah polished off the last French fry.

Noah grinned broadly. “There’s always room for ice cream.”

“You are a man after my own heart,” Luke teased as he got his wallet out of his pocket.

“I have money,” Noah quickly volunteered.

Luke leaned across the table. “This is a date. I asked you out on it so I’m going to pay for our dinner.”

“I’m just not used to this whole thing,” he sheepishly admitted.

Luke snatched the bill off the table, tossing a few dollars on the table for a tip. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

After Luke paid the bill, they headed out to the truck for the short drive to Garland’s Ice Cream Parlor. Luke insisted on paying for the cones. He got peanut butter and chocolate and Noah chose mint chocolate chip.

“Why don’t we head to the falls?” Luke suggested after he paid for the cones.

“Are you sure you just don’t want to eat them here?”

“I bet the view at the falls is much nicer,” Luke said. On his way out the door, he took a lick of his ice cream. “Mmmm…I swear there’s no better combination than peanut butter and chocolate.”

“Really?” Noah asked, raising his eyebrows.


Noah must have turned twenty shades of red. “Uh…okay,” he said, taking the cone and tentatively licking it.

Luke didn’t expect his cock to twitch watching Noah take one lick of his ice cream cone. Oh damn. He was so incredibly sexy. And he’s my boyfriend now, Luke happily reminded himself.

Noah handed the cone back to him. “You’re right. It’s delicious,” he replied. “Do you wanna try mine?”

What Luke really wanted to do was sink to his knees and lick Noah’s dick right there in the parking lot. “Sure,” he said, taking Noah’s ice cream and tasting it. He licked his lips and handed the cone back to him. “Very good. Come on, let’s go someplace more private.”

The drive to Crystal Falls Park wasn’t long since it was only a half mile down the road. Luke managed to steer and eat his ice cream without landing the truck in a ditch. The park was open but deserted. It wasn’t exactly park going weather. This pleased Luke since he’d been banking on it being a ghost town when he suggested coming here. He parked the truck, leaving it on and idling so
that they’d have plenty of heat to keep them warm. The space that he chose offered a view of the river and the partially frozen water falls—all three feet of them.

“Those are some falls,” Noah teased, lapping up his ice cream. “I wonder if you’d be able to survive going over them in a barrel.”

“Hey, I never promised you Niagara Falls.” Luke licked his cone. “But you have to admit that the view isn’t too bad.”

“No, not bad at all,” Noah’s voice had lowered a couple of octaves.

Luke was mesmerized as he watched Noah lovingly lick the last of his ice cream. Just the mere thought of Noah maybe one day doing that to his cock made him feel like he was going to spontaneously combust. Noah’s eyes met his as he bit into the cone.

Luke quickly finished off his ice cream. There were better and much more fun things they could be doing besides eating. “Yum…that was incredible.”

“The best ice cream I’ve ever had,” Noah replied. There was still a bit of mint chocolate chip lingering just below his bottom lip.

“You’ve got…”

“What?”

Instead of just telling Noah where to wipe or wiping it off him, Luke leaned forwarded quickly closing the space between them. “You’ve got a little—here,” he murmured, swiping his tongue along Noah’s bottom lip and lapping up the leftovers. “Much better.”

“Are you sure you got it all?” Noah breathed.

“Let me double check,” Luke whispered, pressing his lips against Noah’s, quickly deepening the kiss. His tongue explored Noah’s cool minty mouth. Delicious. And it was making him quite hard. God how wanted more.

Noah moaned softly—so softly it was barely audible but Luke had heard it since he was so in tune now with everything that was Noah. Noah’s response made him even hornier than he already was which was saying a lot. Luke slipped his hands underneath Noah’s jacket which was already unzipped.

Why did Noah have to dress in layers, especially today? Luke thought as his hands wandered up the back of Noah’s plaid shirt. Ever-so-carefully Luke tugged Noah’s t-shirt so that it slipped out of his jeans.

Almost there.

Luke’s heart was beating loud and fast like a bongo player on speed as he reached underneath Noah’s t-shirt finally feeling Noah’s skin on his fingertips. Oh Noah felt so good—just as he’d remembered from their brief encountered after their game of one on one which seemed like a lifetime ago. Groaning, Luke pressed himself closer to Noah. Their kisses intensified, becoming wetter and sloppier.

“Did…you…uh…want to go somewhere?” Noah asked, lifting his mouth slightly from Luke’s.

“We are somewhere,” Luke breathed.
Noah pulled back a little, his face flushed and lips swollen. “Uh…like…a motel,” he squeaked. “We…uh…passed one on the way into town.”

*Hell yes!* was the first thought that came to Luke’s mind. He wanted nothing more than to be buried so deeply inside Noah. It would be amazing—he just knew it. Luke was about to agree, but then he picked up on the trace of uncertainty in Noah’s eyes. Noah was a virgin. He’d just admitted to Luke a few hours ago that he was gay, which had been difficult for him to say aloud. And now he was practically offering himself up on a platter probably because that’s what Noah thought that Luke wanted—maybe even expected. But Luke didn’t.

Well, not until they were both ready.

When Luke really thought about it he knew that he wasn’t ready either. Sure, he’d seen the mechanics in his Pizza Boy porn but he wanted to do it right when it came to Noah because he loved him. Losing their virginity together was a huge step. Maybe he was a hopeless romantic, but their first time together should be special, not in some crummy motel room.

Also, Noah had been through the wringer today. The last thing Luke wanted to do was pressure him into something he wasn’t ready for which could ultimately make Noah crack.

But this didn’t mean they needed to stop altogether either. Together they could find a happy medium. Luke was quite happy just making out with Noah. He’d been dreaming about it for so long.

“This is nice,” Luke said, resting his forehead against Noah’s, not wanting to break contact with him. He felt way too good.

Noah lowered his eyes, chewing his lip. “I just thought that you might wanna—you know. I’m sure that your other boyfriends…”

Other boyfriends? Noah was so off base—bless his big gorgeous heart.

“I do,” Luke admitted. “Someday…when the time is right for both of us. I don’t think our first time should be in a truck or rushed at some sleazy motel.”

“Okay.”

Luke took a deep breath. Noah deserved to know the truth—that he wasn’t this big experienced stud. There were no boyfriends, no sex—just a lot of heartache until now. “And there weren’t any boyfriends,” he admitted.


“Nope. There hasn’t been any sex either with anyone. I’m a virgin.”

“You are?”

Luke nodded. “I am. You’re also the first guy I’ve ever kissed,” he told Noah. “And it was the first kiss that felt really good—great.”

“Wow,” Noah gasped. “I just assumed that you had all of this experience. I mean you’re so…well…you’re you and…”

“And I’m so happy that you gave me my first real kiss,” Luke said, smiling shyly.

“Me too.” Noah gave him a quick kiss.
“So are you okay with waiting?” Luke asked, playing with Noah’s hair—his soft beautiful hair that he’d been waiting forever to finally touch like this. “At least for a little while. I’m not talking a year or anything like that.”

Noah grinned. “Yes, it sounds like a good plan to me,” he replied, taking Luke’s free hand. “So I know you don’t want the first time to be in a truck or a cheap motel, but have you thought about what you wanted to be like?”

“I’ve thought about being with you—a lot,” Luke confessed. “But I never thought about a real first time scenario. Have you?”


“So do you have a fantasy first time? Would it be lit by candlelight and rose petals strewn about the duvet?”

“I don’t even know how to spell duvet. And as far as the rose petals go you can cut them out of my movie,” Noah chuckled.

Luke was happy to see him loosen up and play along. “Okay…okay…I guess the bearskin rug B&B is out of the picture. What about…um…oh…what about like all sweaty and hot in the locker room after a really rough game of handball?”

“Handball?” Noah snickered. “Do people actually play handball?”


“Not for the first time, Snyder,” Noah said, squeezing his hand. “Try again…you’re the writer.”

“Well, you’re the director so what do you see?” Luke countered.

Noah kinda shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s something that can’t be planned and we’ll both just know when the time is right. But it would be nothing like From Here to Eternity…”

“Hun?”

“You know—us together in the surf with the waves crashing over us,” Noah explained.


“Exactly.”

“So?” Luke prompted. He wasn’t going to let Noah off the hook so easily.

“I think just being with you—sharing that with you—no matter where or when it happens will be special,” Noah said, staring down at their entwined hands.

Luke carefully lifted Noah’s chin so that they were eye to eye. “You’re so amazing, Noah Mayer,” he whispered.

“It’s kinda nice hearing you use my real name,” Noah quietly admitted.

“I’m glad you trusted me enough to confide in me.”

Luke could definitely get used to all of this kissing. He felt like he was making up for all of the kisses he missed while he was in the closet. Noah seemed like he was relaxing, letting go with Luke, which thrilled him. Having gained Noah’s trust was so important to Luke. He needed to keep it. Luke couldn’t push him.

This time Luke allowed Noah to dictate their kiss, which started out slow and sweet. Noah’s lips were soft against his. Ever-so-carefully he parted Luke’s lips with his tongue, slipping it inside. Their bodies were drawn together like a couple of magnets. However, it was a bit maddening since there were so many layers of clothing between them.

Luke wanted to really feel Noah so he shrugged out of his jacket. The cab of the truck was quite warm and toasty. The windows were beginning to fog over as their kiss ramped up. Luke despite his best efforts to hold back was practically crawling on top of Noah. He just needed to be closer to his boyfriend.

Noah fell back against the passenger’s side door. “Ow,” he grunted.

“Are you okay? Did you want to stop?”

“The door handle is just jammed in my back,” Noah replied. “I can…uh…take off my jacket and put it behind me. That should help if you don’t want to stop.”

“No, this is good.”

“Good.” Luke grinned and then reached for his discarded coat. “Here take mine too.”

While Noah made a suitable pillow to lean against, Luke tried to get his raging hormones under control. His cock was so hard. And so was Noah’s he discovered, glancing down at his lap. Noah’s t-shirt had also ridden up from his waist revealing a thin line of dark hair, traveling from his navel disappearing into his jeans.

Fuck.

Luke covered Noah’s body with his, their hips fitting together perfectly, denim clad erections aligning like two puzzle pieces of a puzzle. God he was ready to explode. Noah felt so incredible against him. Their mouths hungrily came together.

Yes…yes…yes.


Oh good god. Noah wanted this as much as he did.

Luke kissed Noah’s neck, working his way to Noah’s earlobe. “Noah,” he murmured, nibbling on it.


Holy shit…did he just make Noah come?

Luke grinded his hips against Noah. Fuck…Noah’s crotch was wet. He did come.
Luke was coming, crying out loudly as his body endured shockwave after glorious shockwave.

“Wow,” Noah breathed, gazing up at him. His pupils were completely blown.


“This was the best first date I’ve ever had,” Noah said, gazing up at Luke with a very large, happy grin on his face.

“Me too,” Luke replied, smiling so wide that his cheeks hurt.

And he couldn’t wait for their second date.
Chapter 43

Noah lay in bed, stretching his arms over his head with a huge grin on his face. Never in his life could he remember waking up so happy. He couldn’t remember being this happy period. His first date with Luke had been incredible. Being able to confide in him had been such a relief. The weight of the world was never truer than in this instance. Noah hadn’t realized what a burden it had been carrying around his secrets until he confessed them to Luke.

Finally, he could truly be himself with Luke. No more lies. Noah had thought the day would never come.

Lunch, ice cream, and then making out in the truck—it had been quite a day. He’d never dreamed that their lunch date would end with them steaming up the windows of the truck—or Luke making him come.

Noah had tried to hold back. He was afraid of what would Luke might think about him if all it took were a few kisses, some touching and grinding to make him come. But then Luke did as well—loud and proud, just like he was about everything else.

Noah loved how it felt to have Luke’s hands on his flesh, his strong body rubbing against his. But it was also scary how fast things escalated between them. Kissing and petting Noah could handle. Everything else frightened him because when it came to the mechanics of gay sex Noah was clueless. His brief peek at The Joy of Gay Sex hadn’t done him any good. Besides, it was over a year ago when he quickly thumbed through it, which hadn’t helped one bit. Noah still couldn’t believe that he had suggested going to a motel because once they got there he would have been in well over his head. Good thing that Luke had turned him down.

Hearing that Luke was also a virgin had been such a relief. They were in the same boat. Well, maybe. Noah had a feeling that Luke knew a hell of a lot more than he did when it came to sex even if he didn’t have any practical experience. Hopefully, he wouldn’t disappoint Luke.

Luke definitely didn’t sound disappointed. Not at all.

Thankfully, the evidence of his incredible date had dried by the time Luke dropped him off at home. It was a good thing too because his mother was preparing dinner when he walked through the door. Truth be told, he practically floated into the cabin—probably glowing. Seeing his mom had brought him quickly back to reality though. And back to hiding. He had prayed that she wouldn’t be able to figure out that just an hour earlier he and Luke had been all over each other.
Noah was pretty sure that his secret was still safe. His mom hadn’t acted like she knew that he had been on a date with Luke, not just hanging out…

“You’re just in time for dinner,” Charlene said, turning to greet him with one of her trademark loving smiles. “I hope you’re hungry. The meatloaf should be ready in about fifteen minutes.”

Actually, Noah was a little hungry. All of that kissing had really made him work up an appetite—among other things. He nearly blushed at the thought of Luke on top of him, pressing his cock into his. It had been so intense.


“How about set the table?”

“Done.” Noah hung up his coat and then joined Charlene in the kitchen. He got a couple of plates out of the cupboard and silverware from the drawer.

“Did you have fun with Luke?” Charlene asked as she checked the vegetables that were cooking on the stove.

“Yeah…uh…we went to lunch at this diner in Crystal Falls,” Noah said, trying so hard to keep his voice casual. “It was nice seeing another city besides Oakdale.”

“I’m happy that you were able to get out. You shouldn’t have to be cooped up on this farm.”

Noah hoped his mom would still think that when he laid his idea on her. “Do you…uh…think it might be all right if I borrow the truck tomorrow if you don’t need it?” he asked. “It wouldn’t be for too long. I was just hoping to go to the store.”

Charlene turned to him. “I suppose it would be okay just as long as you are super careful.”
“I promise. I won’t go a mile over the speed limit.”

“Don’t leave Oakdale.”

“I won’t,” Noah replied, strolling over to the refrigerator to get out a couple of cans of Coke. His mission wouldn’t take him too far.

“Are you going anyplace special?” Charlene casually asked.

“I just have some errands I’d like to run…nothing special.”

“Emma and I are going to spend the day together,” Charlene said, sitting down at the kitchen table to wait for the food to be ready. “We’re going to have lunch and then start our Christmas shopping.”

“Where are you going?” Noah asked, hoping that it wasn’t going to be the same place he planned on going to.

“I’m not sure—probably all over.”

Great. He’d have to be on the lookout for his mom wherever he went. Well, he’d just have to be sure that he got a head start on her. Just in case.

“I’m happy that you and Mrs. Snyder have become such good friends,” Noah said, placing the can of Coke in front of her. “She’s a really nice lady.”

“We’re very fortunate to have met the Snyders.”

Noah couldn’t agree more.
Noah quickly realized that it wasn’t going to be as easy as he thought to keep his relationship with Luke a secret. Luke made him so happy. It was going to be difficult to hide that fact, especially from his mom. She had a knack for being in tune with his moods.

Luke was really, truly his boyfriend now. Wrapping his head around this concept was still a bit mind boggling for him. Luke—incredible, beautiful, confident, intelligent Luke thought he was pretty amazing. The same boy whom the Colonel had endlessly berated now had someone who thought he wasn’t so bad. His mother had always told Noah how special he was, but it was difficult to think that she wasn’t just saying those things to make up for the hell the Colonel had put him through.

Hopefully, knowing how Luke really felt about him—even after confessing everything would help him see himself in a different light. Noah wasn’t so sure that he’d ever feel totally comfortable in his own skin, though. It was going to take some time to stop seeing himself as the kid the Colonel endlessly criticized.

Noah stood in front of the new full length mirror that now hung on the back of his bedroom door. It wasn’t anything fancy, just framed in brown plastic. His mom had bought it for him saying that she’d promised him a mirror because every bedroom needed one (she had even bought one for hers). He still wasn’t comfortable using it. In fact the only time he ever used it was when he knew he would be seeing Luke.


Taking a deep breath, Noah tugged his t-shirt over his head, revealing his smooth hairless chest. The only hair visible was the fine dark line from his navel that disappeared underneath his sweatpants. Noah tried to see his body through Luke’s eyes but all he saw was a skinny kid—nothing that anyone in their right mind would find sexy.

When he stripped off his sweatpants leaving him with only his white briefs, he knew one thing he could change. The tightie whites had to go. Now. Luke had teased him about them so he definitely had to find something more appealing to wear, which was one of the reasons why he needed to borrow the truck. Noah wanted to make sure that he looked desirable for his boyfriend when they got to that point.

Noah pulled off his underwear so he could finish his assessment. Luke had already seen his cock. 
He hoped it hadn’t been a disappointment. Noah had no idea how he measured up.

And then there was his ass. Noah turned to get a better look at it. His butt was round and firm. Hopefully Luke would like it.

What if he didn’t?

*Luke said you were gorgeous,* Noah reminded himself.

Sadly he wondered if he’d ever feel that way.

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At least he prayed this would be the case.

Target wasn’t busy when he got there. Noah headed straight to the men’s department in search of underwear. Scanning the shelves, he saw his options – boxers, boxer briefs, and bikini briefs. Noah quickly ruled out the bikini briefs because he’d probably look ridiculous in them. Boxers would be a step up from his current tightie whities. But the boxer briefs were probably the best bet since that was what Luke wore (at least on the day they’d been trapped in Wisconsin). Noah found his size and then selected a few different packs—black, gray, and navy blue.

Then he decided to browse through the clothes to see if he could find something new to wear to Luke’s basketball game since his wardrobe was still quite limited. Watching Luke play was going to be special and most likely their second date so Noah wanted to be sure that he had something new to wear for it. He found a green sweater with a zip up collar that looked like it could be either dressed up or down which would work nicely for the occasion.

After Noah paid for his items, he grabbed a quick bite to eat in the café inside Target. He knew his mom and Emma definitely wouldn’t be dining there. The hotdog he ordered was devoured in a few bites. Noah was eager to get his purchases stashed inside the truck and then head over to Old Town to see if he could get some Christmas gift ideas for his mom. She deserved something very special.
Noah parked the truck in the lot of the far side of Old Town. It was strange being there without Luke, but it also felt good to be out on his own because it gave him a sense of freedom that he’s never felt in his life. He could definitely get used to this.

Fashions was probably the best place to start as far as shopping for his mom was concerned. She hasn’t had anything new to wear years. Instead of splurging on herself once she began working at Al’s, she had chosen to buy things for him instead. Noah appreciated everything she’s done for him, but he really wished that she’d do something special for herself too. Christmas would be the perfect opportunity to show his mom how grateful he was for every sacrifice she’d made for him.

Before stepping inside, Noah peered in the windows to make sure that his mom and Emma weren’t in there. The coast was clear so Noah entered the swanky store feeling a bit like a fish out of water. He didn’t even know where to begin to look. Shopping for his mom wasn’t going to be as easy as he’d hoped.

“May I help you?” an older lady decked out in an emerald green dress asked.

“I’m…uh…just looking,” Noah stammered.

“If you change your mind or have any questions, my name is Lisa and I’d be happy to assist you,” she told him.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Noah scanned the store, quickly ruling out things he wouldn’t be buying—dresses, lingerie, and shoes. There were several handbags he could chose from as well as perfume and jewelry but he thought he’d probably be best off with clothing because it seemed like everything she owned was too big for her now. He was still worried about her weight loss even though she had insisted that it was nothing to be concerned with. He’d just have to trust her when she said that she was okay because pushing the issue would only make her upset. And he hated seeing his mother distressed. The Colonel had made her feel that way all the time.

Noah quickly realized that even narrowing down the field still left him with plenty of options. Damn.

“Noah?” a familiar female voice called out to him.
He turned to find Maddie sauntering toward him. “Hey, Maddie.” He grinned quite happy to see her. Seeing a familiar face made the store feel a lot less daunting.

“Are you out doing some early Christmas shopping?”

“I’m trying,” he sighed. “I thought maybe I could try to find something for my mom.”

“Would you like some help?”

“You don’t mind?” Noah was surprised that she would even consider taking time from her shopping to assist him.

“Please,” Maddie laughed, placing her hand on his arm. “I just love to shop. And it’s always fun to spend other people’s money.”

“I’d love your help. I was thinking of getting her something to wear but I don’t even know where to begin or what size she’d be.”

Maddie glanced around the store, seemingly pondering Noah’s predicament. “How about a nice sweater?” she finally suggested. “Winters can get pretty cold here so it’s always good to have something warm to wear.”

Maddie’s suggestion sounded good to him. “I like that idea.”

“Great,” she said, strolling toward the far wall. “The sweaters are over here. Do you have a particular color in mind?”

“Uh…no.”

“No worries. Your mother will look great in anything.” Maddie began to browse through one of the racks. “I think she’s probably a small. Here’s a wool one.” She held up a sweater that looked like something you’d wear to a ski lodge—it was navy blue with an intricate design done up in various
shades of lighter blue around the collar. While it was pretty, it didn’t look like something that his mom would wear.

Noah shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

Next she showed him a cream cable knit sweater. Noah shook his head again. The color seemed too bland for his mom. He wanted something a little more vibrant for her. Then a deep red sweater caught his eye. It looked so soft. And when he touched it he could have sworn he was touching a cloud. This is what he wanted for his mom.

“Do you like that one?” Maddie asked, walking over toward his end of the rack.

“Yeah, I think I do.”

She picked it up, examining it with a fine tooth comb. “You have great taste. It’s cashmere.”

“Is that good?” he asked, knowing that his utter cluelessness about fashion was pretty apparent. So much for the gay stereotype.

“Very and expensive too.”

Noah looked at the price tag. Wow was it ever—$125, which he didn’t have at the moment. “Oh,” Noah muttered unable to hide his disappointment. “I don’t have the much money right now.”

“I think I might be able to help come up with a solution,” Maddie declared. “Just give me a few minutes. I’ll be right back.” She sauntered over to the lady that had offered to help him and began to chat with her. A couple of minutes later they were both strolling toward him.

“I understand that you’re interested in purchasing a sweater for your mother for Christmas,” Lisa said.

“Yes, but I don’t have enough money,” Noah sheepishly admitted.
“I’d be happy to put it on layaway for you. All you’d have to do is put a deposit down on it today and then you would just need to stop by and make weekly payments on it,” Lisa explained.

Noah could afford to pay a little at a time toward the sweater. His mom definitely deserved something so soft and pretty. He knew she’d never buy such a nice sweater for herself.

“Yes, I’d like to do that,” he said, handing the sweater to Lisa. He was so grateful that Maddie had come up with a solution for his dilemma. “I can give you fifty dollars right now.”

“That would be lovely. Let’s go ring you up,” Lisa said, escorting them to the cash register.

Once everything a payment plan agreed upon, Noah and Maddie left the store together. Noah was thrilled that he was able to find something special for his mother. He was certain that she was going to love it and most likely give him a hard time for spending so much money.

“Thanks for helping out,” Noah said. “I really appreciate it.”

“Why don’t we head over to Java for a couple of mochachinos,” Maddie suggested.

“I’ve never had a mochachino before,” Noah confessed. Fancy, expensive coffee had never been in his tiny budget before coming to Oakdale. However, every day it seems like he’s been able to experience something new or something he’s been denied due to their circumstances. Oakdale has given him a lot. A few months ago he never thought he’d have friends to help him shop or grab a coffee with.

“I need to show you what you’re missing out on,” Maddie declared, linking her arm through his.

“Come on, it will be great. We can even split a blondie.”

Yes, it would be great. Maddie had no idea how much her friendship meant to him. Maybe someday she’d find out.

Noah grinned. “Now you’re talking,” he said, allowing Maddie to lead the way.
Maddie found a table for them to sit at while Noah was up at the counter placing their order. He had insisted on paying for their mochachinos and blondies (after he’d seen the tasty treat he’d decided that one wasn’t going to be big enough to share). She had considered telling Noah that she could pay for her own because she knew that his money was limited. However, Maddie decided against it after she saw how important it was for him to buy her a mochachino and a snack. He was absolutely thrilled to be able to thank her for her help at Fashions.

Noah had seemed pretty happy and relaxed when she ran into him earlier. Maddie had to wonder if Luke had anything to do with his chipper mood. Of course she had every intention of finding out. She just needed to wait for the right moment to bring up the subject.

“They’ll bring our order over in a few minutes,” Noah said, sliding into the chair across from her.

“Great. I can’t wait to see what you think of your mochachino.”

“I’m sure I’ll love it.” He grinned. “We seem to have pretty similar tastes.”

“Yes we do. Great movies and friends to name a couple of them.”

A couple of minutes later their order was delivered by one of the baristas. Maddie practically hung on the edge of her seat, waiting for Noah’s verdict. “Well?” she asked after he took a sip from the steaming mug.

“Amazing.”

“I told you so!”

Noah shook his head, chuckling. “There was never a doubt in my mind that I wouldn’t like it.” He took another sip and asked, “Have you and Casey made up?”

“Yes, we did,” Maddie replied. “He apologized over and over for being a complete asshole. To try to make it up for ruining my night, he took me to dinner at the Old Mill Inn which is pretty pricey and then he let me pick a DVD to rent.”
“Did you choose something in black and white?”

“Oh, yes. I made him suffer,” Maddie giggled.

“Please don’t leave me in suspense,” Noah begged. “You’ve got to tell me which one you chose.”

“Dark Victory.”

“Good one,” Noah said, reaching for his blondie. “A classic tear-jerker.”

Maddie grinned. “Yes, that was part of my master plan. And it worked. The big stud teared up at the end. I think I made my point.” She had selected the movie due to the sad ending, wanting to show Casey that true love could be ripped apart at any time by tragedy.

“Sounds like a pretty nice evening,” Noah said. “I’m glad or else he’d have to answer to me.”

Maddie regarded Noah for a moment. This was the second time he’d tried to protect her. He was obviously a fiercely loyal friend, which was always good to have in your corner. His statement also reminded her of how he’d been worried about Casey possibly abusing her. Their fight had been a bit ugly; however she was surprised that Noah would jump to such a conclusion. She couldn’t help but wonder if Noah had grown up in an abusive environment. If he had, it would explain a lot.

“Noah,” she carefully began, knowing that this wasn’t going to be an easy subject to broach. “I was wondering why you thought Casey might be hurting me.”

“Oh,” Noah muttered, sitting back in his chair. Immediately, he began to fiddle with the napkin next to his plate. “Uh…no reason…I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Maddie reached across the table, placing her hand on top of Noah’s. “No…I’m glad that you were concerned about me. It’s really sweet but at the same time I kinda wanted to know why you might think that Casey would hurt me.”
Noah continued to stare down at his napkin as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world while the internal struggle as to whether or not to speak played across his face. Nervously chewing his lip, his eyes finally met hers. “My…uh…father was pretty strict,” he quietly explained. “He believed in…uh…a firm hand.” His eyes darted back to the napkin.

“Oh, okay,” Maddie simply replied. If you read between the lines was pretty easy to conclude that Noah and possibly his mother had most likely been a victim of his “firm hand”. And if this were the case, she didn’t feel comfortable pushing Noah for further explanation. If Noah wanted to elaborate, he would. Now it made sense that this could be why he was so reserved around strangers and seemed to have a hard time trusting people. She shuddered to think of what it would be like to have someone that was supposed to love and protect you hurt you instead.

“Do you mind if we change the subject?”

“Not at all.”

“Good,” Noah replied with a slight grin.

Maddie was glad to see Noah’s amazing smile return. It was time for the million dollar question. She’d been keeping mum too long. “So did you and Luke talk about things?”

Noah’s smile widened. “Yes,” he replied, his cheeks turning pink.

“Is there anything you care to share?”

“We’ve decided to be boyfriends,” Noah shyly admitted as he leaned across the table to share his secret with her.

‘Boyfriends!’??

Maddie let out an excited yelp which turned the heads of a few Java patrons but she didn’t care. She was so excited for them! Finally, Luke had someone special in his life and she couldn’t have picked a better guy than Noah. “Oh my god!” she gushed, bouncing happily in her chair. “I’m so happy for you!”
“Maddie,” Noah hissed, grasping her hands as to try to settle her down, “it’s a secret. Please don’t announce it to the entire city.”

A secret? Were those two trying to kill her? This was such happy news. She wanted to be able to rejoice in it. Shout from the rooftops!

“Well at least she could share the good news with Casey. That was something. She knew she could trust him, especially when it came to Luke. Since Casey has been known to accidentally mess up from time to time, Maddie would swear him with the threat of death not to let this huge secret slip.

“Is there a reason why you’re keeping it a secret?”

“I’m not ready to come out to my mom yet,” Noah quietly confessed. “I need some more time to try to figure out the best way to handle it.”

An image of how pale and thin Gloria looked at the ball flashed in her mind helped her understand his reasoning. He was afraid of upsetting his mom. At least now he had Luke to help him through the coming out process. “Luke’s been there. You’ll be able to lean on him. And you always have me and Casey too.”

“Thanks,” Noah replied visibly relaxing. “There is actually something that you might be able to help me out with…”

“Anything…just name it.”

Noah traced the rim of his mug with his finger. “Luke wants me to go to his first basketball game which is this upcoming Friday. He thought that maybe you, Casey, and I could all go together so I wouldn’t have to sit alone.”
Going to Luke’s basketball game would be a blast. Even though she wasn’t much of a sports fan she was looking forward to watching Luke play this year, especially since she knew how important making the team had been to him. “Absolutely!” Maddie grinned.

“I can’t wait to see him really play,” Noah admitted.

“He’ll be thrilled to have his boyfriend there,” Maddie whispered.

Noah turned beet red. Luke and Noah were going to be so unbelievably cute together! She was so excited about telling Casey the good news. He’d be happy for Luke but she had a feeling that he was going to really like the fact that Noah was gay. This should keep his jealous outbursts to a minimum now.

Maddie couldn’t wait to talk to Luke so she could hear his side of the story. Luke would definitely be more apt to give her details. Noah would probably die on the spot if she pressed him. She was looking forward to school the next day because her talk with Luke needed to happen in person.

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Luke was camped out with Faith and Natalie at the coffee table which was littered with various types of paper, markers, scissors, glue, glitter, ribbon, old Christmas cards, multi-colored toothpicks, Popsicle sticks and a large bowl of popcorn. He had Natalie cutting snowflakes out of typing paper, Faith was making more elaborate ornaments out of the photos from the Christmas cards framing them in either Popsicle sticks or toothpicks (depending on the size of the picture), and Luke was stringing popcorn. All of their hard work was for Noah and Charlene’s Christmas tree. As predicted the girls were thrilled to help make decorations for it.

“Noah’s gonna love my snowflakes best,” Natalie declared.

Faith rolled her eyes. “Anyone can make snowflakes.”

“Not like me,” Natalie sang.

Luke ruffled her hair. “You are doing a great job, lady bug.” He turned to Faith. “And I love the ornaments you are making and so will Noah.”
“Why are you doing that to the popcorn?” Faith asked. “Isn’t putting popcorn on a Christmas tree weird?”

“No, it’s not,” Luke informed her. “Grandma taught me how to do it when I was about your age. Noah loves movies so this will be perfect for his Christmas tree.”

Luke was going to have something else that was going to be perfect for Noah’s Christmas tree. After they had watched *Casablanca*, Luke went on eBay and found a *Casablanca* ornament that was going to be perfect for the tree. The seller assured Luke that he’d get it in the next few days. He couldn’t wait to surprise Noah with it.

Luke couldn’t wait to see Noah again. He was still on Cloud Nine from their first date. Last night he’d pleasured himself as he remembered how amazing it felt to be on top of Noah. He definitely went to sleep with a big smile on his face. And he was still soaring today.

Hopefully, Noah was just as happy as he was. He’d have to call him later. There mere thought of hearing Noah’s deep voice made him grin. It was a good thing his parents weren’t in the room to see him because it would be difficult to explain his incredible mood.

“What’s going on in here?” Lucy asked, strolling into the family room.

Luke glanced up from the popcorn he was stringing. “What brings you here?” he asked his cousin.

“I was actually in the other room visiting my darling godson,” Lucy said, sitting down in the armchair. “Your mom just put him down for a nap so I figured I’d visit the rest of the family.”

“We making ornaments for Noah’s Christmas tree,” Natalie proudly announced.


Before either Faith or Natalie could say anything embarrassing, Luke quickly answered, “He’s a friend of mine. Actually, he was the guy dancing with Maddie at the ball. He and his mom live in the cabin on my grandma’s farm.”
“That’s really nice of you guys,” Lucy said.

Luke could practically see the wheels turning in her head. He had to squash any “ideas” she had about Noah no matter how much he wanted to pull Lucy aside to share his good news with her. “They have a tree but nothing to decorate it with so we figured we’d help out.”

“That’s so sweet.” Lucy smiled, reaching over and examining one of Faith’s toothpick ornaments that was shaped like a pentagon. “I can see that you’ve been very busy. I’m sure they’ll be thrilled.”

“I’m making the bestest snowflakes.” Natalie held up one of her creations for Lucy to see.

“You’re doing a great job,” Lucy said. “All of you are.” Her eyes rested on Luke, who tried not to blush.

“Noah’s had a rough time,” he said, concentrating on his task. “I just thought it would be nice if we could all help out. The girls think he’s sooo cute.”

“He is,” Natalie giggled.


“You didn’t have to,” Luke chuckled. “You practically swoon every time you’re around him.”

This remark garnered him another punch from his sister. “Shut. Up.”

“I’ve seen Noah,” Lucy spoke up. “He’s very cute.”

Cute was the understatement of the century. Luke’s boyfriend was fucking gorgeous. But he didn’t say a word so he just continued to string popcorn and smile.
Emma always enjoyed the hustle and bustle of Old Town during the Christmas season. All of the decorations were out now and Christmas music could be heard as they ventured from store to store. They took their time slowly strolling through the shopping area still quite stuffed from their lunch at Mabel’s.

“Is there any particular store you’d like to stop at?” Emma asked.

“I’d like to stop at the bookstore to see if I can pick up some film books for Noah,” Gloria said. “He wants to be a director some day. I want so badly for him to go to college so he can achieve that dream.”

“We have a lovely university right here in town,” Emma told her. “I believe Luke plans on going there in the fall.”

“I’d give anything for Noah to be able to join him,” Gloria quietly admitted.

Emma took her hand, squeezing it. “We’ll think of a way.”

“I’ve been putting aside a little bit of money, hoping that it might help,” Gloria explained. “Noah doesn’t know this. He’d get upset if he knew because he doesn’t think I should be spending money on him. But even though he’s eighteen he’s still my baby and I want the best for him.”

“Of course you do.”

“This year he’s going to have the best Christmas,” Gloria said as they arrived at the bookstore. “I’m going to spoil him if it’s the last thing I do.”

“You’ll have to join us for Christmas dinner,” Emma told her.

“Won’t you already have a house full?”

“The more the merrier. I always make way too much food. Besides, you and Noah are a part of the
family now."

“Okay,” Gloria agreed. “I’m sure Noah will be thrilled. He just loves spending time at your house.”

“I’m glad to hear that’s the case,” Emma chuckled. “Luke volunteered him to help get my Christmas decorations down from the attic tomorrow evening. I’m going to make lasagna so why don’t you plan on coming over for dinner.”

“I’ll be there. Thank you.”

The Book Emporium was quite busy. It looked like a lot of people were doing their Christmas shopping. While Gloria headed to the Film/Television section, Emma ventured over to the romance section and picked up a new novel for herself before wandering into the children’s section to get a couple of books for Natalie. She met up with Gloria in line at the cash register.

“It’s pretty hot in here,” Gloria murmured.

“You won’t be saying that once we get back outside.”

Gloria smiled weakly. “Probably not.”

“It looks like you had some luck finding books for Noah,” Emma said, noticing the two books that Gloria was holding.

“Yes, I did. I hope he likes them,” she replied. “It looks like you were successful too.”

“Just a bit—a book for me and a couple for Natalie.”

After they paid for their purchases, they headed out into the cold afternoon air. Gloria looked a bit pale. Maybe she should suggest walking over to Java for a cup of coffee or tea so they could rest for a bit.

“It feels good to have officially started my Christmas shopping,” Gloria said.
“Yes, it does,” Emma agreed. “I still have a long ways to go. Why don’t we walk toward Java so we can get something to drink?”

“Gloria!” Emma exclaimed, dropping her bag and crouching down next to Gloria. She shook Gloria but her eyes remained closed. Emma quickly reached into her purse, pulling out her cell phone and dialing 9-1-1.

“9-1-1…what’s your emergency?” the operator asked.

“My friend collapsed outside of the Book Emporium in Old Town,” Emma explained. “She’s unconscious.”

“Does she have a pulse?”

Emma felt Gloria’s wrist. “Yes, she does, but I’ve tried to wake her but she won’t come out of it.”

“I’ll dispatch an ambulance. It will be there shortly,” the operator replied. “I’ll stay on the line with you until it gets there. Don’t try to move her.”

“I won’t,” Emma said, wishing that Gloria would give her a reassuring sign. She gently stroked Gloria’s hair as a crowd gather around them. A few people offered their assistance which she politely refused. Help was on the way. Emma had faith that Gloria would be okay.

“Hang in there, Gloria,” Emma murmured. “The ambulance is coming. We’re going to get you to the hospital.”

A few minutes later the paramedics came rushing toward them, pushing a gurney. Emma stepped back allowing them to care for Gloria. While she watched, she said a silent prayer that Gloria would be all right.

The paramedics allowed her to ride along to Memorial. Just as the doors to the ambulance were slammed shut, Gloria’s eyes fluttered open. “Where am I?” she whispered.
“You’re on the way to the hospital,” Emma told her. “You collapsed outside of the bookstore. I’m going to call Noah so he can meet us at the hospital.”

“No!” Gloria protested, grasping Emma’s wrist. “Don’t call him. Please, I don’t want him to worry.”

“Ma’am, you need to relax,” one of the paramedics told Gloria.

“Don’t call Noah,” Gloria insisted.

“Ma’am…”

“I won’t,” Emma promised, squeezing her hand. “Now do what they tell you.”

She didn’t like making that promise. Noah would want to be with his mother. But as a mother, Emma could also understand Gloria’s desire not to worry Noah, especially if this ended up not being serious.

When they arrived at the hospital, Gloria was promptly wheeled away leaving Emma to pass the time in the waiting room. Emma wasn’t sure how long Gloria would be in the hospital. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be anything serious, but it was too early to tell. She pulled out her cell phone, dialing Holden and Lily’s number.

“Hello,” Holden answered the phone.

“Hi, dear,” Emma said, her voice a bit shaky.

“Mama, what’s wrong?”

“I have a favor to ask you.”
Gloria had told her not to tell Noah what was going on, but she hadn’t mentioned anyone else. If Noah was going to be protected, Emma needed some help. “Gloria and I were shopping in Old Town and she collapsed.”

“Oh no,” Holden gasped. “Is she okay?”

“She’s in the ER right now,” Emma replied. “I haven’t heard anything yet.”

“Did you need me to contact Noah?”

“No. Gloria was adamant about Noah not knowing,” she explained. “I was hoping that maybe you could have Luke invite Noah over for dinner at your house. That way he’ll be distracted and won’t realize that his mom isn’t home yet.”

“What if they need to keep her overnight?”

Good question. Emma prayed that it wouldn’t get to that point. “Let’s worry about that if and when the time comes,” she decided.

“Okay,” Holden agreed. “We’ll keep Noah occupied. Please keep me posted.”

“I will.”

They said goodbye and Emma hung up the phone. Noah would be in good hands with Luke and the rest of the family. She prayed that Gloria was as well.
Chapter 44

Noah was thrilled when Luke had called to ask him over for dinner. Luke had been so sweet and even a little bit shy on the phone as he extended the last minute invite. As soon as Noah hung up, he began to panic. Dinner with Luke at his house also meant that his parents would be there.

What if they figured out that he was more than “just friends” with Luke?

Maybe he should call Luke back to tell him that he changed his mind…

No, that was crazy. He wanted to see Luke. And it wasn’t like he’s never had dinner with Luke’s family before. However, he wasn’t Luke’s boyfriend then. Everything was different now. But in a good way—a very good way.

Noah spritzed some cologne on his neck and then took a quick look in the mirror. Brushing his fingers through his hair, he let out a heavy sigh. He supposed that he looked presentable enough in his maroon polo with a gray long sleeved t-shirt underneath.

Stop it, he chastised himself. You are overanalyzing things again.

True. Luke has seen him in all states of dress and undress and he still wanted to be his boyfriend. Secondhand clothing hadn’t stopped Luke from liking him. Luke had stuck by him even after hearing about some of the horrors the Colonel had inflicted. That right there spoke volumes.

Noah sauntered out of his bedroom into the kitchen where he scribbled a quick note for his mom as to where he’d be for the next few hours. He grabbed his coat and flashlight for his trek to Luke’s house. Even though he’d been to the Snyder house a few times he was still a little intimidated by the mansion.

Would there ever be a time when he wasn’t?

The Snyders always made him feel welcome. He wondered if it would hold true when they found out that he was Luke’s boyfriend. Somehow he got the feeling that the poor stable boy wasn’t their ideal match for their son. They most likely wanted the best for Luke and Noah was sure that wasn’t him. He had enough baggage to fill a 747 jumbo jet. Not to mention an evil, sadistic father.

As he neared the mansion Noah pushed these thoughts aside. He was going to see Luke. This alone managed to put a huge grin on his face which was still present when he knocked on the door.


“Hey.”

“I’m glad you could make it.”

“Me too.”


“I hope you’re ready for my sisters,” Luke warned him. “They’ve been bouncing off the walls since they found out that you were coming over for dinner.”

Noah lowered his voice. “I hope they weren’t the only ones.”

As soon as Noah stepped through the door he was greeted by Luke’s sisters dashing toward him. He set down the flashlight on the desk so that he could be ready for the enthusiastic hugs he got from them. Being able to spend time with Faith and Natalie was always a bonus. He enjoyed seeing how happy and carefree they were because he’d never felt that way when he was a child. Interacting with them made Noah feel like a kid again, but this time he was a happy one.

“Hello, girls,” Noah said, throwing an arm around each of them.

“We’ve been making ornaments for you all day!” Natalie happily exclaimed.

“Natalie, you weren’t supposed to say anything,” Faith hissed. “You’re such a blabber mouth.”

“You were?” Noah asked, glancing at Luke somewhat bewildered.


Noah’s heart felt like it was going to burst from all of the love that filled it. Luke had said in passing that the girls would love to make ornaments for the tree, but he didn’t think it would ever come to fruition.

“That’s so sweet,” Noah told them. “I can’t wait to see them.”

Natalie grabbed his hand. “C’mere and I’ll show you,” she tugged him toward the coffee table.

“Nat, at least let him take his coat off,” Luke sighed.

“It’s okay,” Noah replied, slipping off his jacket as he was led away.

Luke took it from him before he got too far and hung it up. “I hope you know that you’re only adding fuel to the fire,” he replied, folding his arms across his chest.

“I made you snowflakes,” Natalie informed him. “They’re so pretty.”

Faith appeared at his side. “You have to see the ornaments I made you.”

Noah looked down at the coffee table, discovering a box filled with handmade ornaments—snowflakes, various shapes made out of Popsicle sticks and colored toothpicks which were used to frame different Christmas pictures, and a long strand of popcorn. It was apparent that a lot of time and love had gone into the contents of the box. “This is great,” he said, picking up a toothpick ornament.

“Thank you.” Faith beamed.

“See my snowflake,” Natalie said, thrusting one of her creations at him.

“Your snowflakes are very pretty.”

“I make the bestest in the world!” Natalie declared.

“Luke strung the popcorn,” Faith said. “He said it’s because you like movies.”

Luke had really put a lot of thought into what he made for him and his mom. Noah was truly touched. He never knew that popcorn on a string could make him so emotional. “Thank you,” he
said, his eyes locking onto Luke’s.


It was a sweet beautiful moment. Noah wished he was able to kiss (or at least hug) Luke but he
didn’t make a move, instead he stood there mesmerized. Playing it safe was the best bet. And then
Natalie began to giggle loudly, breaking the spell between him and Luke.

“I think it’s funny.” Natalie snickered. “I wanna eat it!”

“You can’t eat my Christmas decorations,” Noah said, tickling her. “If you do my Christmas tree
will be empty.” Natalie squealed with delight as he continued to tickle her until she finally agreed
that she wouldn’t eat his “ornaments.”

“I thought I heard someone here,” Lily said, strolling into the family room. She smiled at him
warmly, placing a perfectly manicured hand on his arm. “I’m happy that you could make it for
dinner, Noah.”

Lily’s smile was just as amazing as her son’s. She just had a way of making him feel very welcome.
“Thank you for inviting me, ma’am.”

“I hope you like beef stew,” she replied.

“Yes, I do. It sounds great.”

“Well, it’s just about ready so why don’t we all go into the kitchen.”

“I get to sit next to Noah!” Natalie exclaimed, jumping up and down as if she’d won the entire stock
of toys at Toys ‘R Us.


“But,” Faith protested, frowning.

“Noah is my friend and I’m not about to let him get surrounded at dinner,” Luke declared.

Noah didn’t want to cause any problems with Luke’s family. Although he’d prefer to sit next to

However, Luke wasn’t about to let him finish his sentence. “No way,” Luke insisted. “Mom!”

“Faith, Luke is right,” Lily said, putting her arm around her eldest daughter. “You can sit next to
Noah the next time he comes over for dinner.”

Next time.

Noah was thrilled that Luke’s mom planned to invite him back for dinner. Having Luke’s family like
him meant so much to Noah. For most of his life he felt as if he’d been on the outside looking in, but
in the Snyders’ eyes he wasn’t the weird kid or the guy who didn’t fit in. He was just Luke’s friend.

Natalie scampered into the kitchen quickly claiming a chair. She patted the one next to her. “I saved
you a seat, Noah!” she called to him.

Noah sat down in the chair next to Natalie. Luke quickly snatched the one next to him. Guess Luke
wasn’t going to take any chances.
“It’s nice to see you, Noah,” Holden said, stopping behind Noah and giving him a friendly pat on the back which made Noah smile.

Finally, he was past tensing or flinching whenever Holden touched him. Noah trusted him—admired him because he was such a good man and father. “It’s nice seeing you too, sir,” Noah replied. “I’m happy to be here.”

“Hopefully, we can get through the meal without Ethan getting cranky,” Holden said, putting Ethan in a bouncy chair which was on the floor next to the kitchen table. Then he took a seat at the head of the table. “It’s been touch and go lately.”

“Mostly go,” Lily said, slipping into the chair that was on the other side of Ethan’s bouncy chair.

“If he starts crying just hand him to Noah. He really has a way with Ethan,” Luke teased.

“I-I-I…got…lucky,” he stammered, cheeks burning. “It was just that one time. I don’t have any experience with babies.”

Lily reassuringly smiled at him. “Don’t worry. We’re not going to put you on babysitting duty.”

“Yet,” Holden chuckled.

Noah must have had a look of sheer panic on his face because Luke leaned over, gently placing his hand on Noah’s arm. “They’re just teasing,” he whispered.

“I know,” Noah replied. Although he couldn’t help but feel relieved, which probably didn’t go unnoticed. He’d be more than happy to help Luke out the next time he had to babysit. They made a good team.

“I’m starving,” Luke said, reaching for the beef stew.


“Noah can have some—after me,” Luke said, flashing Noah a wicked smile which made him laugh.

“Luke,” Lily sighed, utterly exasperated. “I thought we taught you better manners. You’re acting like you were raised in a barn.”

“Wasn’t I?” Luke asked as he scooped some stew onto his plate. “Dad had me on horseback before I was out of diapers.”

“He does have a point,” Holden conceded.

Lily rolled her eyes at her husband. “Thanks a lot for your support.”


“He is,” Natalie eagerly agreed as Holden spooned mashed potatoes onto her plate.

“Hey,” Luke protested. “I’m sitting right here you know. Don’t come to me the next time you little monsters want someone to take you to Al’s for milkshakes.”

Noah had to bite his lip in order to stifle a giggle, suddenly feeling like he was sitting in the middle of a sitcom. He decided that it was best he stay out of the family squabble so he continued to load his plate up with the delicious smelling food instead.
“Why doesn’t everyone just cool it and eat,” Holden calmly suggested. “Your mom made a wonderful meal for us all to enjoy. We have a special guest so let’s not make him suffer through all of your arguing.”

It was so nice to finally be a part of something good—something normal. There were fathers that loved their children. Noah was happy to witness it firsthand.

Noah snapped out of his reverie when he felt something graze against his leg. Stifling a grin was very difficult when he realized that it was Luke snaking his foot around Noah’s calf.

*Oh god…*

Noah’s first instinct was to move his leg. After all, they were having dinner with Luke’s family. But it felt very nice to have physical contact with Luke at the dinner table so he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“How is everything, Noah?” Lily asked as she took a sip of her soda.

For a split second Noah froze, afraid that Luke’s parents had figured out what was going on underneath the table. But it was impossible unless either of them had suddenly developed x-ray vision. Lily had to be talking about the food. “It’s great, ma’am,” he replied. “Very delicious.”

“Please feel free to help yourself to seconds if you like,” Holden said, stabbing a piece of beef with his fork. “We have plenty.”

“Thank you,” Noah said, nodding.

Everything was damn near perfect—until Jade walked in. Noah suddenly felt nauseous. He hadn’t seen her since their disastrous encounter in the barn—something he’d hoped he could forget since it was one of the most humiliating moments of his life. Jade had made him feel stupid, inadequate and helpless just like the Colonel always had managed to do.

Luke quickly moved his foot so they wouldn’t get discovered. Noah said a silent prayer of thanks that one of them still had their wits about him. While he was dealing with his queasy stomach, Luke was saving their asses. Thank god.

“Looks like I’m just in time for dinner,” Jade announced.

“Just get a plate and join us,” Lily said, waving her over. “The food is still hot.”

“I’d love to,” Jade said with a smug smile as she traipsed over to the cupboard.

Noah willed his stomach to settle down. He needed to handle this like a man. And a man would stick it out—do what he had to do. Noah quickly focused on his dinner, not wanting to make eye contact with her. Surely, she wouldn’t make a scene in front of Luke’s parents. He just hoped that Luke would keep his mouth shut.

Jade squeezed in between Lily and Faith. “Mmmm…this smells delectable,” she purred.

“Thank you,” Lily replied. “I would have set a place for you if I’d known you were going to be home in time for dinner.”

“It was slow at the club so Will sent me home,” Jade said, getting some stew.

Luke probably just opened a huge can of worms. Noah braced himself for the storm that was liable to erupt.


Luke plastered a smile onto his face. “It’s so nice of you to join us,” his voice range with false sincerity.


“I’m glad to have gotten an opportunity to spend some time with my family as well as our guest here,” Jade replied, draping a napkin across her lap. “It’s so nice to see you again, Noah. How are things at the farm? Working hard cleaning the stalls?”

“Yeah,” was all Noah could muster. Now all he wanted to do was finish eating and get out of there—preferably with Luke.

Luke seemed to sense that Noah was uncomfortable because he picked up his pace, quickly clearing his plate. Noah decided to follow suit. They both finished within seconds of each other.

Luke wiped his mouth and placed the napkin on his plate. “That was great,” he said, scooting away from the table. “Noah, can I take your plate?”

“Yes, please.”


“I’m full. Maybe a little later,” Luke said as he took the dirty plates over to the sink. “Did you want one, Noah?”

“No, thank you,” Noah replied. “I couldn’t eat another bite. I’m stuffed.”

Luke deposited the dishes in the sink and then sauntered toward the kitchen table. “Hey, did you want to listen to some of the new songs I downloaded?” he asked Noah. “Or we could check out the new comics I picked up last week?”

“Thrilling,” Jade muttered.

“That would be great,” Noah readily agreed. He could just kiss Luke for thinking up a good excuse to get them out of there. “Thanks for dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Snyder.”

“You’re welcome, Noah,” Holden replied. “You can join us anytime.”

“Come on,” Luke said, jerking his head toward the back staircase.

Noah trailed behind Luke as he trekked up the stairs and down the hall to Luke’s bedroom. His heart was thumping like a jackhammer as he followed Luke inside. He’d never forget what happened the last time they were in there together—the kiss that changed their lives.

Once they were inside, Luke locked the door behind them. “Gotta keep the riff raff out,” he said. Noah swallowed. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry Jade showed up. I had no idea she’d be around.”
Noah stuffed his hands into his pockets. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. I don’t like seeing you uncomfortable,” Luke said, slowly closing the space between them.

“You got us out of there before it could get ugly.”

“Sometimes I forget she lives here,” Luke admitted. “We’ve been managing to avoid each other as much as possible.”

“Good,” Noah replied with a nod.

The air in the room seemed to be sizzling with sexual tension. Noah didn’t know if he should kiss Luke or ask about those comic books he’d mentioned downstairs. His gaze drifted down past Luke’s belt to the prominent bulge in Luke’s jeans.

Noah was mesmerized. No wonder why he came with that rubbing against him. Good god almighty.

“See something you like?” Luke asked, placing his hands on Noah’s shoulders.

Busted.

“Maybe.” Noah could feel his cheeks flaming.


“Well…” But his sentence was never finished. Instead Luke’s lips were on his, silencing him. Yes, this was much better. Noah quickly allowed himself to become lost in Luke’s sweet kiss. He was barely aware that Luke had moved his hands from his shoulders. They were on his back now, caressing him.

So nice….so safe.

But then the one of Luke’s hands moved to Noah’s ass, cupping it. Oh my…

*Only a vile deviant would enjoy having his ass touched by another man,* the Colonel’s voice echoed in his mind. *I always knew there was something wrong with you. You’re such a pathetic faggot. You don’t even know how to properly please your little, perverted boyfriend.*

Noah tensed and panicked. Fuck. He hadn’t been expecting Luke to touch him like that. But worse was not being able to enjoy it without freaking out.

Luke quickly picked up on Noah’s unease and pulled away slightly, allowing his hand to drop away from Noah’s butt. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed.”

“No…no…it’s okay.”

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” Luke insisted.

Ugh…why did he have to be such a loser? He should be ecstatic that Luke desired him; not hearing the Colonel’s voice berated him.

“I’m not good at this,” Noah sighed.

“Good at what?”
“This. I don’t know what to do…”

“Hey, you’re very good at kissing,” Luke said, stroking Noah’s cheek and smiling up at him.

“That’s about all I know how to do,” Noah replied, casting his eyes downward afraid to see the disappointment on Luke’s face.

“I bet you know how to do more than that. You’ve jerked off, haven’t you?”

Luke didn’t just ask him about jerking off. Noah thought he was going to die of embarrassment. “Uh…yeah…” he stammered. Please don’t let him ask what he thought about or how often he did it. I don’t want him to think I’m some sort of pervert.

“Then I’m sure you’ll be able to give a good hand job…you know…when the time is right. There’s no rush,” Luke told him.

“I suppose…” Noah still wasn’t completely convinced.

“I’ve never done any of this before either,” Luke gently reminded him as he played with the back of Noah’s hair.

Noah bit his lip. “Yeah, but…”

“But what?”

Noah was starting to regret his promise to be completely honest with Luke because in doing so he was about to sound like a total tool. “I really don’t know anything about sex…with a guy…I never had access to the Internet…or magazines…or books…or porn…”

“It’s okay,” Luke reassured him. “Even though I have it doesn’t mean that I’m some expert. I know what goes where, but that’s about it. The best part is that we can figure this all out together.”

Noah nodded, relieved that Luke was so understanding. “Okay.”

“I think we’ll have a lot of fun figuring it all out—at our own pace.” Luke grinned mischievously. This made Noah smile. It did sound like a lot of fun. “Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry you’re involved with such a head case. The Colonel was such a bigot. Sometimes I can still hear him in my head and…”

Luke rested his forehead against Noah’s. “Hey…hey…hey…you are not a head case. You’ve been through hell. There are bound to be scars.”

Noah hated that Luke had to deal with his insecurities and his naiveté. “You deserve better.”

“Everything that you’ve endured and survived makes you—you. And I really like you, Noah,” Luke said, gazing deeply into his eyes.

“I really like you too, Luke—so much.”

Luke planted a big smack on his lips. “Why don’t we check out my new Spider-man comic?”

“Sounds good,” Noah readily agreed.
Luke ventured over to his bookshelf and dug out the comic. “We can look at it on my bed. It will be easier that way.” He sauntered over to the bed, flopping down on it on his stomach.

Noah’s heart rate quickened. He was going to lie on Luke’s bed with him—not that anything was going to necessarily happen between them, especially after their little talk. But still, laying next to Luke was something out of his dreams.

“Okay,” Noah said, kicking off his shoes and joining him. They were practically elbow to elbow. It felt nice. Very nice. And he was going to enjoy it. There was nothing wrong with how he felt about Luke. He needed to keep reminding himself of this fact.

“Which issue was the last one you’ve seen?” Luke asked, flipping open the Spider-man comic book.

“I haven’t seen a Spider-man comic in a very long time.”

“Did you want me to get something else?”

“No…no…I haven’t seen anything in years.”

“I take it the Colonel wasn’t a fan of comic books,” Luke said, raising an eyebrow.

“No, not at all,” Noah quietly admitted. “I was probably 12 when he caught me with one.”

“I’m going to guess it wasn’t pretty.”

Noah swallowed. He could tell Luke what happened. He needed to tell him. Every little thing that Noah got off his chest made him feel better. “He…uh…took it away from me, rolled it up and proceeded to hit me repeatedly with it,” Noah explained, staring that the comic book laid out before them. Telling Luke about the bad times was one thing, looking at him while he did so was still too difficult—like now. “It hurt so badly. He just wouldn’t let up. Finally my mom discovered what was happening and she begged him to stop. He did but then he backhanded her for interfering.”

1. I’d rather take the beating than see him turn on her…”

Luke rubbed Noah’s back. “She’s your mom. It’s instinct that she’d take care of you. She loves you and would never want to see you hurt,” Luke told him. “Don’t you dare feel guilty for anything that happened to her because your father is a sick, twisted man.”

Noah finally summoned the courage to look at Luke, who was gazing at him with big cow eyes. There wasn’t one hint of judgment or pity in them. All he could see was—dare he even think it—love. He nodded which made Luke smile—dimples and all.

Noah couldn’t help himself. He just had to kiss Luke. His lips looked too perfect not to do so. Leaning closer, Noah placed a gentle kiss on Luke’s lips. Luke moaned as Noah slipped his tongue inside his mouth. Noah smiled into the kiss. There was one thing he’d learned in the very short time they’d been boyfriends was that when Luke liked something Noah did he was very vocal about it. Eliciting this kind of response from Luke thrilled Noah.

Just as he slipped his arms around Luke, the door handle rattled loudly. Luke was on his feet before Noah could realize what was happening. Shit. Someone was trying to get into Luke’s room. Thank god Luke had locked the door or else they would have gotten an eyeful.

“Luke, why is the door locked?” Jade’s annoyed voice came from the other side.

Fuck. Jade. This could only lead to trouble.
Noah scrambled so that he was sitting on the edge of Luke’s bed. He snatched the comic, placing it on his lap. Luke glanced over his shoulder at him and Noah gave him a slight nod. Bring it on.

Luke unlocked the door and whipped it open. “What the hell, Jade?”

“That’s what I was going to ask you,” Jade stated, hands planted on her hips with a look of annoyance on her face. “Why do you have your door locked? Are you up to no good?”

Noah forced himself to keep his nose buried in the comic book afraid that if Jade saw his face she’d be able to figure out everything. Jade would make his life hell if she knew the truth. The mere thought of the consequences was enough to churn his stomach.

“I locked it to keep Faith and Natalie out,” Luke calmly replied. Actually, Noah was impressed by how nonchalant Luke was acting. “They’ve been bugging Noah since the moment he walked through the door. I thought I’d give him a little break from the munchkin brigade.”

“What are you two up to in here? Something you don’t want your parents to see?” Jade sneered. “Some drinking maybe—or pot?”

“Just looking at comics,” Noah said, holding up the Spider-man issue for her to see.

“Fun times,” she snickered.

“Are you done?” Luke asked not bothering to hide is irritation.

“For now. See you later, cuz….Noah,” Jade said before she flounced down the hall.


“You don’t think she knows, do you?” Noah whispered.

“No, she just came by to try to stir up trouble,” Luke said, sauntering toward the bed. “I wish she’d move out. I hate that she lives here too.”

“That sucks.”

“Tell me about it.” Luke sat next to Noah. “But I’m not going to let her win.”

Noah knew all about fighting the good fight. And he didn’t doubt that Luke would triumph over the wicked witch. “I know you won’t,” he said quietly.

“Let’s forget about her,” Luke decided. “I think there are other things we can be doing…”

Noah could think of a few. But the sinking feeling of their close call also weighed heavily on his mind. They best not risk it again. The next person knocking on Luke’s door could be his mom.

“I…uh…should probably get going,” Noah said, forcing himself to stand up and not look into Luke’s eyes. He couldn’t fall under his boyfriend’s spell.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I need to get up early tomorrow for work and I haven’t really been home all day.”

“Okay.” There was no mistaking the disappointment in Luke’s voice.
Shit. Noah needed to make this right. He couldn’t have Luke thinking that he didn’t want to spend time with him. “Do you still want my help with your grandma’s Christmas decorations tomorrow evening?” he asked, turning to face Luke.

His face brightened. “Yes, definitely. I’m going to head to the farm straight from basketball practice. I can call you when I get there.”

“Sounds good.”

“And don’t forget she’s going to make us dinner,” Luke reminded him. “So come hungry.”

“I will.” Noah grinned.

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Emma shifted again in the uncomfortable chair in the waiting room. She’d been sitting in it for hours hoping—praying—that Gloria would be all right. But as each hour passed without an update she began to fear the worst. The sight of her dear friend crumpled on the pavement outside of the bookstore was still vivid.

Finally, Dr. Bob Hughes strolled into the waiting room. Emma tried to search for some reassurance in his kind features, but she couldn’t find a thing. Dr. Bob was a professional so it was his job to be neutral when duty called. Emma stood up, bracing herself for the news he was about to deliver.

“How is she?” Emma asked.

“She’s conscious and resting now,” Bob explained. “I’d like to keep her overnight for observation but she’s adamant that she wants to go home.”

“I think she’s worried about upsetting her son,” Emma replied. “Gloria would probably like to keep this from him if she can.”

“I can’t force her to stay overnight. I was hoping that you might get her to reconsider her decision to check herself out.”

“Is her condition serious?” Emma asked.

“I’m really not at liberty to disclose her medical details to you since you’re not family. You’ll have to ask Gloria.”

Emma’s insides twisted into knots. Even though Dr. Bob hadn’t said anything she was still worried, especially since he wanted to keep her overnight. She needed to convince Gloria to stay in the hospital. “Can I see her?”

“I’ll take you to her right now. We don’t have her checked into a room since we’re not sure if she’s going to stay.”

Dr. Bob led her into the examination area to the last curtained off space. “I’ll be back shortly.”

“Thank you.” Emma stepped behind the curtain and there Gloria was lying in bed. Her color looked a lot better than before but she still seemed worn out. “Hello there,” she said, approaching the bed.
“Hi.” Gloria smiled weakly. “Are you here to take me home?”

Emma pulled up a chair and sat down next to the bed. “Gloria, Dr. Hughes thinks it will be best if you stay here so they can make sure you’re okay.”

“I feel so much better,” Gloria said, sitting up a bit as if to prove her point. “I just want to go home and see Noah.”

“Don’t you think you should follow the doctor’s orders?”

“I found out what I needed,” Gloria countered. “Dr. Hughes said that I’m very anemic so when my blood sugar dropped I fainted. It’s really nothing to worry about. I need to get some rest and try to avoid stress.”

Emma really wanted to believe Gloria but she’s also known Dr. Bob for quite awhile. He wouldn’t want to keep Gloria overnight unless he thought it was absolutely necessary. Gloria’s explanation probably wouldn’t warrant an overnight stay. However, she couldn’t be a hundred percent sure though.

“That’s good to hear,” Emma said, forcing a reassuring smile. “I still think it would be a good idea to stay—just in case.”

“I don’t have health insurance. I can’t afford to stay here even if I wanted to.”

Emma placed her hand on top of Gloria’s, trying to calm her friend. She needed to get well, not stress over medical bills. “Don’t worry about the costs. I’ll make sure everything is taken care of.”

“I can’t ask you to do that,” Gloria insisted. “You’ve already done so much.”

“I’m not going to take ‘no’ for an answer though. You see, here in Oakdale we take care of our friends so that’s what I’m going to do. Understood?” Gloria nodded. “Good. Now that concern is out of the way why don’t you take it easy here—”

“No. I’ve got to get home. Noah.”

“Don’t worry about Noah,” Emma tried to reassure her. “He’s having dinner at Lily and Holden’s. I’m sure he’ll stay and spend some time with Luke.”

“I’d still like to be home before he gets back.”

Gloria had her mind made up. No matter what Emma said to her wasn’t going to get her to change her mind. Right now all Emma could do was get Gloria back to the cabin and make sure he took it easy for awhile.

Emma sighed. “I just need you to promise that you’ll rest for the next few days—no shifts at the diner.”

“But I need to work and I don’t want to lose my job.”

“Just let me worry about all that,” Emma insisted. A quick conversation with Henry would put an end to Gloria’s worrying. He wouldn’t fire her for being sick. Emma would make sure of it.

“Okay.” Gloria nodded.

This made Emma smile. Finally, her friend was agreeing with her. Now she just needed to make sure that Gloria got well.
Luke knew he should probably go to bed but he was too wound up to sleep. All he could think about was Noah—especially how Noah had been lying on this very bed kissing him…well…until Jade had to ruin the moment.

Quickly, he pushed thoughts of his cousin aside. Luke much rather think about Noah and he’d rather write about him too. Maybe if he wrote in his journal for a little while he would get sleepy.

Luke got up and sauntered over to his dresser where he kept his journal stashed. He’d learned the hard way that he couldn’t leave something so personal and important in his nightstand drawer. Once he moved back home he decided to keep his journal hidden in his underwear drawer beneath his assorted boxer briefs. Luke dug it out, snatched a pen off his desk, and then plopped down on his bed.

Ever since Luke had started junior high he had enjoyed writing—short stories, poems, and even articles for the school newspaper. He didn’t start keeping a journal until he entered high school which is when he really began to struggle with his sexuality. Writing had kept him sane - for the most part.

Luke quickly discovered that he really enjoyed writing about Noah. Page after page of the journal Noah had given him was filled with everything Noah—his thoughts about him, the time they’ve spent together, and blow by blow details of their first kiss as well as all of the kisses that have followed.

Taking a deep breath, Luke poured out his heart…

Noah was here tonight…in my room…on my bed. I still have a hard time believing that he’s really my boyfriend. I think he might feel the same way. Noah seems to think I’m this perfect guy with all of the answers. I’m trying very hard to live up to that image. Noah’s been disappointed so much in his life. So help me I will not be another person in his life that lets him down.

I wish I could tell him how much I love him, but it’s too soon. We’ve only been on one date. I don’t want to freak him out. I already kinda did that tonight.

We were kissing but then I had to grab his ass and ruin it. I couldn’t help myself. Noah’s ass is amazing and I needed to know what it would be like to touch it. But my dumb move made him uncomfortable. Sometimes I can be so stupid. I forget that Noah has led a very sheltered life and he still isn’t out yet. This is all new to him—it’s new to me too but not in the same way that it is for Noah. I’ve had six months to get used to being out and proud of it.

I don’t doubt that Noah will get to the point where I am right now. He’s been taking baby steps. Like when we were looking at the Spider-man comic on my bed he kissed me. It was sweet and incredible and

Before Luke could finish writing the sentence, his door flew open and there stood Jade. Fuck. He’d forgotten to lock it. Why couldn’t she leave him the fuck alone? She was really pissing him off
“Oh look, Luke is writing in his diary. Dear Diary, today I had a friend over which proves that I’m not a loser after all,” she taunted.

Luke snapped the journal shut. “Get the fuck out of here!” he barked.

“I don’t have to. I live here too,” she kindly reminded him. “I think it’s sweet that you’re writing about Noah.”

“I think you’re jealous that he’d rather see me than you,” he shot back. Getting Jade all riled up was probably a very bad idea, but Luke couldn’t help himself. He wasn’t the loser that Jade had portrayed him to be.

“Please,” Jade scoffed, leaning against the doorjamb. “Noah is child’s play. I prefer men—not boys. You can play in the sandbox with Noah all you want.”

“Noah is my friend which is something that you don’t know anything about since you don’t have any. You always find a way to hurt everyone who tries to care about you. You’re poison. That’s why you’ll always be alone.”

“And you’re pathetic and that’s why you’ll always be alone!” Jade hissed as Lily appeared behind her.

“What is going on here?” Lily demanded. “I could hear you two shouting all the way downstairs. So help me if either of you woke up Ethan—”

“Sorry, Lily,” Jade mumbled.

“I haven’t heard him cry,” Luke ventured, hoping to appease his mother. Jade has caused enough trouble and he wasn’t about to let her get him in hot water with his mom.

“How could you?” Lily asked. “You two are too busy screaming at each other. I want to know what this is all about.”

“It’s just a silly disagreement that got out of hand,” Jade said. “I really should go get ready for bed.” She turned on her heel before Lily could reply and marched away.

Lily looked after her, shaking her head. Luke clutched his journal, praying that his mom would just let this drop so he could go to sleep and forget this ever happened.

But no such luck. Lily stepped inside his bedroom, closing the door behind her. “Luke, what is going on between you and Jade?” she asked, sitting on the edge of his bed.

“Nothing. It was just a stupid argument,” Luke said, staring down at his lap because if he met her gaze she’d be able to tell that he was lying.

“I thought I heard Noah’s name mentioned,” Lily pressed.


Lily placed her hand on his leg. “Baby, you can tell me anything. I know I’ve let you down in the past but I can assure you it won’t happen again.”

“Jade hates Noah because he’s not interested in her. He shot her down when she tried to come onto him.”
“And how do you fit into all of this?”

“Noah is my best friend,” Luke explained, choosing his words very carefully. He couldn’t accidentally ‘out’ Noah. And he needed to be sure that he didn’t say anything that would alert his mom about his new relationship. “I hate to hear her talk smack about him. Jade is mad at me because I’m taking his side over hers but I’m tired of how she treats people. She lied to us when she first came into town. She convinced me to stay in the closet and pretend to be her boyfriend so you and Dad wouldn’t throw her out. She almost broke up Will and Gwen’s marriage. Mom, she’s not a nice person. I don’t care if she’s my cousin. I won’t let her keep walking all over me and my friends.”

“Okay, okay,” Lily silenced him. “I agree that Jade hasn’t made the best choices but I promised Rose that I’d take care of her.”

“But Aunt Rose is dead.”

“I know. It’s complicated…”

Luke glanced away from her quite annoyed. “Fine. I’ll just avoid her and everything should be okay.” So much for his mom being on his side. He should have known that her word meant shit.

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable in your own home. You are my son, Luke, and you’ll always come first.”


Lily leaned forward, smoothing his hair. “You will—even if that means telling Jade that she needs to move out on her own. I know your father would be happy to see her leave even if he hasn’t come out and said so. You’re right. Jade has done some terrible things. And if what you’re telling me is true—”

“It is,” Luke insisted.

“Okay.” Lily squeezed his hand. “I’ve tried very hard to keep Jade on the straight and narrow but I think living here has only given her a sense of entitlement. She’s a big girl and being out on her own might do her some good.”

Luke couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Are you really going to ask her to leave?”

“I’m not going to kick her to the curb but, yes, I’m going to tell her that it’s time she finds her own place to live. I’ll even help her find an apartment.”

Luke nodded. He was happy that he wasn’t going to have to deal with Jade in his home on a daily basis, but he knew that she wouldn’t go down without a fight. The hatches were going to need to be battened down when Hurricane Jade struck.

Lily gathered Luke in her arms, hugging him tightly. “I love you, baby. I wish you would have come to me about this,” she told him. “I always want to see you happy.”

But Luke was happy. Unfortunately, he couldn’t share it with his mom. Yet.
Chapter 45

Maddie was grinning at Luke like the cat that ate a hundred canaries when he sauntered into the cafeteria. Her lunch was all spread out before her and there was a can of Coke waiting for him. She was up to something. And it looked like he was about to find out what.

“Hey there,” Luke said, slipping into his usual seat.

“Hi, Luke.” Maddie beamed. “So did you have a good weekend?”

Luke stared at her, trying to figure out exactly what she knew. But it was impossible, right? There was no way in hell that she could already know that Noah was his boyfriend. He’d only told her about the kiss. And he hadn’t talked to Maddie since the disastrous Hobble Gobble Ball.

“Yeah,” he replied somewhat cautiously. “How was yours?”

“Very good. Casey and I made up,” she said as she unwrapped her sandwich. “He took me to the Old Mill Inn for dinner Saturday night to try to make up for his behavior at the ball.”

“My parents love to go there for special occasions,” Luke said, grinning. “You definitely deserved a nice night out. I’m glad that Casey has a sense of romance.”

“Casey can definitely be romantic—don’t let his studly exterior fool you.”

“I know Casey is a big marshmallow,” Luke chuckled as he pulled out a sandwich and a bag of pretzels from his brown paper lunch sack. “I grew up with him so he can’t fool me.”

“What did you do this weekend? Did you happen to talk to Noah?” Maddie quickly countered with a knowing smile. Ever since he sat down she’d been like a shark slowly circling waiting for just the right time to strike. Now she was going in for the kill. Luke knew that she wouldn’t be satisfied until she drained him of all the details once he admitted talking to Noah.

“How come I have a feeling that you already know the answer to that question?” he asked, eyeing her.

“I ran into Noah Sunday afternoon,” she admitted. “I helped him do some Christmas shopping for his mom. We went to Java afterwards. He bought me a mochachino and a blondie. Your boyfriend had never had a mochachino before so I had to show him what he’s been missing out on.”

Whoa…wait. Luke’s mind was reeling. Noah and Maddie had hung out at Java on Sunday. Noah never mentioned it to him.

Well, they had been busy doing other things…

And Maddie knew that Noah was his boyfriend so Noah had to have told her about it. Noah actually told Maddie that he was his boyfriend. This was huge. A few days ago he’d had a problem with the word ‘gay’. Now he was admitting to Maddie that Luke was his boyfriend.

“So…he told you?” Luke causally asked.

“Yes,” Maddie practically squealed, leaning across the table. “I’m so thrilled for you!” She quickly lowered her voice when she realized that a couple of people were staring at their table. “I know…I know…it’s a secret. I told Casey and threatened him with no more sex if he says a word. But still—
wow. Luke, I told you that you’d find someone and he’s perfect—just perfect. You gotta tell me all about your first date. I want details and don’t even think about leaving one thing out.”

Luke stared at her slack jawed, amazed that she could get all of that out in one breath. This was why he loved Maddie. She was genuinely ecstatic that Noah and he were together now.

“Well?” Maddie prompted. “Our lunch period is only so long…”

Grinning, Luke slowly shook his head. “You really are something, Maddie Coleman.”

“Tell me something that I don’t already know. But more importantly tell me about your date. Where did you go? What did you do? When are you going to see him again?”

Luke held up his hands in mock surrender. “Okay…okay. I took him to lunch in Crystal Falls because I figured if we were keeping things on the down low it would be best to go someplace out of the way.”

“Good idea.”

“And after lunch…”

“Wait…wait…wait,” Maddie interrupted. “You’re skipping things! How was it? Did you have a lot to talk about?”

“Didn’t Noah tell you anything?”

“Come on,” Maddie laughed as she sat back in her chair. “This is Noah. He didn’t give any details and I knew better to ask.”

She had a point there. Luke definitely couldn’t see Noah divulging too much—if anything—about their date. Noah would probably be playing things close to the vest with everyone else until he came out. Luke hoped it was sooner rather than later.

“Right,” Luke conceded. “Yes, we had a lot to talk about. It was nice—comfortable—perfect actually. He’s so sweet and clueless about just how incredible he is. The hostess tried flirting with him but he didn’t even realize it. Anyway, after we ate we stopped and got ice cream. Then we went to look at the Crystal Falls.”

“I’ll bet you did,” Maddie smirked, which made Luke blush. “So how was that?”


“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah,” he replied. “But we just kissed—a lot.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I know.” Luke nodded, his cheeks flushing. “We’re going to meet at the farm after I’m done with basketball practice. He’s agreed to help me get my grandma’s Christmas decorations down from the attic. She’s going to make dinner of course.”

“So how do you feel about hiding your relationship?” Maddie cautiously asked.

He wasn’t surprised that she was asking him this. Maddie knew how hard he’d struggled to come out and how long it took him to actually start feeling good about himself. Firsthand she has
witnessed some of the bigotry that his decision brought about. Maddie always wanted the best for him, just like he wanted for her which is why he loved her so much.

“Well,” Luke hedged. “It’s not the most ideal situation. You know me…I want to tell everyone because I’m so damn happy.”

“But…”

“But being out is still new to him,” he explained. “And I don’t want to push him. But I did tell him he needs to come out to his mom before Christmas because I want to spend the holiday openly with him.”

“How do you think his mom will take the news?”

“I don’t think she’ll be upset. She might even suspect. I don’t know,” Luke replied, toying with his can of Coke. “But I could be wrong. Look at how my mom reacted.”

“Different circumstances.”

“Yes,” Luke conceded. Maddie had no idea just how different. He shuddered to think about all of the awful things the Colonel must have done to Noah and his mother.

“Do you think he might be trying to protect his mom?” Maddie asked, resting her chin on her hand. “Because it would make sense if he thought she was sick.”

“That’s what I think,” Luke admitted, a wave of guilt washed over him. Noah had confided so much in him. It almost felt like he was betraying him. But this was Maddie he was talking to—a friend to both of them.

“The poor guy,” Maddie sighed.

“I…uh…asked about his mom’s health and he got really defensive. I didn’t want to push him because he’s been through a lot.”

“I figured as much. He mentioned that his father was strict.”

“Yeah,” Luke quietly replied. He wasn’t about to elaborate. The things Noah had told him about the Colonel would go to the grave with him.

“He has you now,” Maddie said, smiling warmly at Luke. “You’ll help him get through this.”

“I hope so.” Luke was prepared to do whatever he needed to in order to help Noah. But would Noah let him? “I just don’t want to push him too much. Ultimately coming out to his mom had to be on his terms when he’s ready.”

“Just as long as it’s before Christmas.”

“Right.”

Maddie reached across the table, lacing her fingers through his. “Don’t worry. I have a very good feeling about you guys.”

So did Luke.
Noah had been looking forward to talking to Whitman all day. He had so much to tell him! There were a few times throughout the day that he had to stop himself from venturing over to Whitman’s stall. Knowing his luck, Holden would stumble upon him talking to the horse and then his secret would be out.

So he had to wait. Patiently. Thankfully, Holden had kept him quite busy. There was a delivery from Hamilton’s to accept, stalls to muck, and floors to sweep, not to mention feeding and watering the horses.

As soon as Noah was certain that Holden had left for the day, Noah headed directly to Whitman’s stall—after he grabbed a handful of carrots. He couldn’t go visit his buddy empty handed. Whitman’s tail swished vigorously as Noah approached him.

“Hi, Whit,” Noah said as he let himself into the stall. “How are you doing?” He gave him a friendly pat. Then he pulled a carrot out of his pocket and fed it to him. “I’m doing great. Better than great if it’s even possible. Luke is my boyfriend,” Noah gushed. “Yes, your Luke is my boyfriend! I’m so, so happy! I feel like I’m in the middle of the most amazing dream. I’m afraid to wake up from it. But it’s real.”

Whitman couldn’t talk but Noah could swear that he was happy for him and Luke. He was probably thinking “about time”. And it was. Kissing Luke had been the best chance he ever took. The crazy fortune teller had been right after all.

Noah placed another carrot on his palm for Whitman. “I’m pretty sure Luke is just as happy as I am. At least he seems to be. I’m not sure if he’s been out to visit you since we became boyfriends. If he hasn’t, I’m sure he will. Luke is so amazing but you already know that,” he explained as he stroked Whitman’s mane. “He saved both of us. You from a horrible fate and me from living a total lie.” He took a deep breath. “Luke wants me to come out - all the way out. I know he’s right that I can’t keep hiding who I am. And he deserves a boyfriend who is willing to be honest about everything. But I just can’t help being so scared of disappointing or hurting my mom…”

Whitman snorted, nudging Noah’s arm so that he would give him the last carrot in his pocket. “Here you go,” Noah said, feeding it to him. “I know what you’re going to say. I need to tell my mom everything. I promised Luke that I would before Christmas and I will keep my promise. I just need to find the right time, but I will. Somehow.”

Noah petted Whitman a few more times before thanking him for listening and then he said goodbye. As he hiked back to the cabin his thoughts drifted to Luke. He was going to see him this evening, which made him so happy. They were going to get Emma’s Christmas decorations down from the attic. Hopefully, they’d be able to finagle a way to share some kisses.

Noah absolutely loved kissing Luke. He couldn’t get enough of his boyfriend’s kisses.

Noah was surprised to find his mom home when he returned to the cabin. Usually she worked the lunch shift on Mondays and didn’t get home until close to dinner time. Maybe she was sick again. When he’d gotten back from Luke’s he’d found a note on the kitchen table from his mom saying that she’d had a long day and had gone to bed early.

“Mom, what are you doing here?” he asked as he shrugged out of his jacket.
She patted the spot next to her on the sofa. “Come here and talk to me.”

Noah immediately went into panic mode. First, it looked like his mom had missed work and now she wanted to have a talk with him. From the look on her face, it was going to be a serious one. “Is everything okay?”

“It is now,” she replied. “But yesterday when I was shopping with Emma I fainted and I—”

“Wait,” Noah interrupted her. “You fainted? And I’m only finding out about this now?”

Charlene placed her hand on his thigh. “Noah, please let me finish.”

He nodded. “Sorry.”

She took a breath and continued, “So I was taken to the hospital and it turns out that I was anemic. My blood sugar had dropped which made me pass out.”

Noah stared at his mom as he was assaulted with a million different emotions. There were dark circles under her eyes and she was rail thin. It seemed like she had aged ten years overnight.

But it hadn’t been overnight. His mom was deteriorating right before his eyes, but he hadn’t been paying attention.

Dammit. He’s been so busy mooning over Luke that he’d failed to realize just how sick his mom has gotten! How could he be so self-centered when his mom needed him? He was an awful son. When he first noticed her weight loss he should have said something to her. If he had, she probably wouldn’t have ended up in the hospital. He couldn’t do anything right.

“What are they doing to help you?” Noah asked. “Shouldn’t you still be in the hospital? This sounds serious.”

Charlene put her arm around Noah. “It’s not serious that’s why they let me come home,” she calmly explained. “Dr. Hughes said I need to get more rest and eat better.”

“I’ll help out more. I can do all of the cleaning and laundry, cook more, and run your errands for you.”

“Noah, you’ve already been such a help.”

No that wasn’t true because if he was his mom wouldn’t have ended up in the hospital for running herself ragged. He needed to start paying better attention to his mom, taking better care of her. If something were to happen to her…

Noah couldn’t even go there. His mom was his only family. She always loved and protected him when no one else had. There was no way in hell that Noah would let her down again.

“I’ll do more,” he insisted. “You need to get your rest.”

Charlene kissed his cheek. “Okay. I’m not going to turn down extra help but I don’t want you staying here hovering over me 24/7.”

“But…”

“Noah, you still need to have a life of your own,” Charlene insisted. “I’m so happy that you have friends. I want you to spend time with them.”
“And I want to make sure that you get better and don’t pass out again. Why didn’t anyone tell me?”
Noah asked. His mom had been taken to the hospital and no one had told him. He thought that
Emma out of all people would have made sure he knew.

“I asked Emma not to tell you,” Charlene explained. “I didn’t want to worry you, especially if it was
nothing which it turned out to be because I was released. Everything is okay.”

Noah’s mind was reeling. He’d been clueless because he’d spent the evening with Luke at his
parents’ house. Never once did he think that his mom might be in trouble.

His stomach twisted into knots. That was most likely the plan. Emma had probably put the Snyders
up to inviting him over so he’d be distracted. There had been some big conspiracy to keep him in the
dark and he didn’t like it one bit. Worst yet Luke was most likely a part of it.

So much for total honesty.

Last night had been a scam. Luke was probably just helping his parents out. Noah should have
known something was up since he hadn’t heard from Luke all day. He should have known it was all
too good to be true.

“Noah, are you okay?” Charlene asked, smoothing her hand over his hair.

No!
he wanted to scream. Everyone he thought he could trust has been lying to him so he was
definitely not okay. But Noah was raised to be a good soldier. His feelings were secondary. Suck it
up and be a man.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he finally replied. “I just wish someone would have told me before now. I can
handle these things. I’m not a child.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I really thought it was nothing so there was no need to worry you.”
Noah nodded absently. “Emma told me that you’re going to help Luke get down her Christmas
decorations this evening. That’s awfully nice of you.”

“It’s the least I can do. She’s done so much for us.”

“Yes, she has. I’m proud of you,” she told him. “You’ve been doing such a great job with Holden.”

Noah forced a smile. “Thanks.”

“Emma also invited me over for dinner tonight. I hope you don’t mind if I tag along with you.”

“No,” All of the excitement that he’d felt the entire day about seeing Luke vanished. He just wanted
to lock himself in his room and disappear. For the first time in quite awhile he felt alone and
betrayed.

“Great.” Charlene grinned. She gave his leg a pat. “Why don’t you go get cleaned up? You
shouldn’t go over there smelling like a barn.”

“Good idea.”

Noah stood up and marched into his bedroom. Normally, he’d be fussing over what to wear since
he’d be seeing Luke tonight but right now he didn’t care. He grabbed a pair of his old jeans and his
Cedar Point sweatshirt as well as a clean pair of briefs— there was no need for the boxer briefs now.
Good thing he hadn’t gotten a chance to take them out of the packages and wash them. He’d
probably be able to get his money back.
After Noah showered and put on his clean clothes, he sequestered himself in his bedroom. He made sure that his cell phone was on and charged since Luke was suppose to call him. Now he couldn’t help but wonder what Luke’s intentions were for tonight.

Maybe he just didn’t want to lug all of the boxes down from the attic by himself. Or maybe his mom needed more tests at the hospital so they’d sneak away while the boys were busy. Either prospect just sucked to put it bluntly.

Noah lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling waiting. About an hour later his cell phone finally rang. Luke’s name was on the display when he picked it up. Noah took a deep breath, hoping to calm himself before he answered.

“Hello.”


“Hey.”

“I just got done with practice. I should be at my grandma’s in twenty minutes if you’re still game.”

“I’ll…uh…be there.”

“I can’t wait to see you.”

Noah could almost hear him smiling on the other end of the phone. He desperately wanted to believe that Luke really wanted to see him. But he had to be cautious. “Everyone has an agenda” the Colonel once told him. It looks like he might have been right about some things after all.

“Same here,” Noah quickly replied. “See you in a little bit.” He squeezed his eyes shut. As much as he didn’t want to do it, Noah needed to call Luke out on his shit. He couldn’t allow himself to be yanked around. For far too long he lived his life under his father’s control. Noah needed to make sure that he was the one in charge.

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Luke was setting the table when Noah and Charlene entered the farmhouse. He immediately glanced at Noah and grinned, his eyes sparkling, dimples deep—the kind of smile that never ceased to make Noah feel lightheaded. Tonight was no exception dammit. Noah quickly pushed his feelings aside. He couldn’t allow himself to fall under Luke’s spell. They had to talk. Luke needed to know that Noah knew about the lie.

“Hey, there,” Luke greeted them.

“Hello,” Charlene said as she took off her coat. “It’s so nice to see you.”

“Hi,” Noah replied evenly.

“Dinner is almost ready,” Emma informed them. “I figured I’d better make sure that the boys were well fed before I put them to work.”

Noah cautiously approached Luke, who was putting the last couple of plates on the table, while Charlene joined Emma in the kitchen. “Uh…can I talk to you for a few minutes?” he quietly asked.
“In private.”

Luke set the last plate down, the smile that had been on his face since Noah had walked in the door faded. “We can go into the parlor.”

Noah glanced over at Emma and Charlene who were busy chatting and getting the different side dishes together. Good. He followed Luke out of the room, hands stuffed inside his pockets, determined to say his piece.

Once they were in the parlor, Luke turned to him. “Is everything okay?”

“I thought we weren’t going to keep secrets from each other,” Noah whispered.

Luke stared at him, utterly flabbergasted. “What are you talking about?”

“Please stop lying to me,” Noah pleaded. “I know all about the big cover up—you, your family—hiding the fact that my mom was in the hospital yesterday.”

Luke’s eyes widened. “She was? Noah, I—”

“I thought I could trust you. I thought everything we talked about the other day was real,” Noah said in a hushed tone, fighting to keep the emotion out of his voice. He didn’t want Luke to see just how badly he’d hurt him. “But you’re just like everyone else. I was so stupid—”

“Noah,” Luke begged, his eyes glistening. “I swear to you this is the first time I’m hearing about it.” He reached out, touching Noah’s arm. “My dad suggested that I invite you over for dinner. I was thrilled because I wanted to see you. I didn’t know what they were up to. Honest.”

Noah studied Luke who was on the verge of tears. Oh no…look at what he’s done. He really messed up big time. Luke obviously was just as clueless as he’d been. “I-I-I’m sorry. I just thought since everyone else seemed to know…”

Luke stepped closer to him. “Noah, I will always have your back,” he promised. “I’d never do anything to lose your trust. You’re way too important to me.”

Noah nodded, squeezing his eyes shut. “I hope you can forgive me.”

“Of course. You’re my boyfriend,” Luke quietly reassured him. “So why was your mom in the hospital? Was it serious?”

“She just fainted from having low blood sugar. She said she’s going to be fine.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Boys! Dinner’s ready!” Emma called. “Come on!”

“Let’s eat,” Luke said, jerking his head toward the kitchen.

Noah followed him, silently praying that he hadn’t screwed everything up with Luke.

Dinner was delicious. And relaxed. Thankfully, Luke had acted as if Noah had never accused him of lying. He was chatty, joking around with his grandma and Noah which had put him at ease.

“Are you ready to tackle the attic?” Luke asked as he polished off the last of his oatmeal raisin cookie.
Noah scooted away from the table. “Sure am.”

“Now be careful,” Emma said. “I don’t want either of you falling from the ladder because you’re carrying more than you should.”

“She also doesn’t want us to break any of her ornaments either,” Luke cracked.

Emma swatted him with a dishtowel. “You silly goose! You know that you’re more important to me than a box of old ornaments. Now get going!”

Luke chuckled as he led Noah upstairs. “I just love getting her goat. It’s so much fun.”

“She is a good sport.”

“The best.”

When they reached the top of the stairs, Luke led him halfway down the hallway. Reaching up, Luke pulled on the chain releasing the trap door in the ceiling. He unfolded the stairs, making sure they were locked in place.

Noah peered up into the attic which was pitch black with cold air wafting down from it. He hadn’t thought about getting his coat. They probably wouldn’t be up there long. How many boxes could there possibly be?

“Did you want me to get a flashlight?” Noah asked.

“Nah, there’s actually a light up there,” Luke said. “We should be good.”

“Okay,” he said as he followed Luke up the ladder, which allowed him an incredible view of Luke’s ass. Noah was half tempted to reach up and touch it but he couldn’t imagine making such a bold move.

Luke tugged on the string, casting the attic in a dim light. Noah stood up when he reached the top of the stairs, marveling how large it was up here. There were boxes of all shapes and sizes stacked throughout the attic as well as an old crib, a tire, a baby buggy, and a green garden hose.

“The Christmas stuff is usually all together but it depends on who helped put the decorations away,” Luke explained. “If it was my dad or Jack everything will be pretty organized. But if it was my cousin, Brad, or even Aaron then the stuff could be anywhere.”

“Sounds like we might have our work cut out for us,” Noah said, rubbing his hands together. Damn. It was chilly up there. He could even see his breath in front of his face.

“Are you cold?”

Noah shrugged. “A little but I’m sure I’ll warm up once we start moving.”

“Or,” Luke said, sauntering toward him. “There are other ways.”

Noah swallowed, his heart raced at the prospect of other ways. “Oh?”

Luke placed his hands on Noah’s shoulders. “Yeah, if you’re interested.”


“Good.” Luke grinned, lifting up onto his tiptoes and kissing Noah.
Noah was happy that he didn’t have his jacket after all. Having Luke draped around him, holding him tight as their tongues tangled together in a slow delicious dance made him quite hot. Luke moaned. The amazing sound went straight to his cock which was beginning to get hard.

Because of his reaction the night before, Noah knew that he’d have to be the one to set the pace. Right now all he wanted to do was to try to get closer to Luke. Noah wrapped his arms around Luke, sliding his hands underneath Luke’s sweatshirt. Luke responded by grinding his own hard-on into Noah’s.

Noah tried to hold it back but a small whimper managed to escape from his lips. He loved feeling Luke’s erection against his. It still blew his mind that Luke could get so turned on by him.

“Oh, Noah,” Luke breathed, lifting his wet, swollen lips from Noah’s.

Noah swallowed, gasping for breath. “I…oh my…this is better than a coat.”


Noah rested his forehead against Luke’s. “Are you teasing me, Snyder?”

“Kinda.” Luke’s tongue darted across his bottom lip which pushed Noah over the edge. Luke was definitely teasing him in a couple different ways.

Noah nibbled on Luke’s bottom lip. Luke shuddered as he raked his fingers through the back of Noah’s hair. Mmmm…so nice. Noah was quickly getting lost in another slow, deep, hot kiss. The only thing he was concentrating on how good it felt to be so close to Luke. Noah shifted his hips, trying to experience that delicious friction again.

“Luke!” Emma’s voice called from somewhere below them. “Luke, is everything all right up there? Do you boys need help?”

The boys jumped apart. Noah stumbled into some boxes but managed to keep his balance while Luke yelled down to Emma.

“Yeah, everything is fine! We’re just making sure we have all of the boxes before we bring them down!”

Fuck. They were almost caught again.

Noah shouldn’t be surprised though since they were supposed to be moving boxes of Christmas decorations out of the attic. Try to tell that to his body though. He was aroused, shaking, but relieved that they’d dodged another bullet.

How many more get out of jail free cards did they have until they were finally caught?

He didn’t want to go there. The thought of someone from Luke’s family or—horrors—his own mother made him ill.

Noah quickly decided that he should busy himself with locating the boxes they’d come up there for. He turned around to discover that the boxes he almost fell over were labeled “Christmas”. Good thing he didn’t knock any over because he would have hated to have broken anything.

“Here are some,” Noah called over his shoulder to Luke.

“Great,” Luke said, joining him and examining the boxes. “It looks like we have lights and some
ornaments. There should be more though.” He ventured over to the other side of the attic while Noah continued to look around. “Found some! We should probably stack them all together so we don’t miss any.”

“Good idea,” Noah agreed. He moved the boxes that were by him over by the ladder while Luke did the same with the ones he found.

“Brad should never be allowed to put the decorations away,” Luke grumbled as he stacked the last box with the others. “We should probably do one last sweep of the attic to make sure that we got all of them.”

Noah poked around, searching for more boxes labeled “Christmas” but didn’t find anything. However, Luke discovered a wreath that had been missed so he added it to the pile.

“It would probably work best if you went down to the bottom of the ladder and I handed you the boxes,” Luke suggested.

The light in the attic blinked out and then Luke was climbing down the ladder with the wreath hooked on his shoulder. “That’s it. One more floor to go. Good thing I love my grandma so much because this is a bitch. She has way too many decorations.”

Noah wasn’t surprised that Emma decorated the farm to the hilt. He really couldn’t imagine it any other way. “I figured she’d go all out.”


They trekked down the stairs each carrying a box. Noah was surprised to find Emma tidying up the kitchen by herself. “Where is my mom?” he asked.

“She was feeling a little tired so she headed home,” Emma explained.

“Is she okay?” he asked, setting the box down on the floor. Just a day ago she’d been at the hospital. He hoped that she wasn’t having some sort of relapse.

“Yes, she fine,” Emma reassured him.

“Okay,” he replied, hoping that Emma wasn’t keeping anything from him. His mom had seemed all right earlier so she probably was just tired. And Emma wouldn’t have let her leave if she wasn’t okay.


“Yup.”

Another trip turned into several but they finally moved all of the Christmas decorations into the kitchen. Noah was happy when the last box was deposited with the rest.

“I swear I don’t know how I manage to accumulate more stuff every year,” Emma said, shaking her head.

“You just can’t help yourself,” Luke sighed, leaning against the island. “You’re a sucker for Christmas.”

“I know I have more ornaments than the tree can handle so I’m going to sort through them and give some to you and your mother,” Emma told Noah. “I think I have extra lights too. You can stop by
tomorrow after you’re done working and I’ll have a box or two for you to take home.”

Noah grinned. “Thank you so much, Mrs. Snyder.” Now he was excited to start decorating their Christmas tree which has been standing bare in the corner of the living room.

“You’re welcome. I’m happy to help out.”

The clock hanging on the wall caught his eye. It was just after eight thirty. As much as he didn’t want to leave Luke, he knew that he really should go home. Five a.m. always came too quickly.

“I better get going,” Noah forced himself to say.

“I really appreciate your help,” Emma said, patting Noah’s back. “Don’t forget to stop by tomorrow afternoon.”

“I won’t.”

“I should go too,” Luke spoke up. “I have some homework to do.” He gave Emma a hug and then turned to Noah. “I’ll walk you out.”

“Goodbye.” Noah waved to Emma as he put his coat on.

Luke followed him outside. As soon as they were a few feet from the screen porch, Luke grabbed Noah’s hand. “Come on,” he said, tugging Noah toward the barn.

“What are you doing?” Noah asked, laughing.

“I thought we could finish what we started earlier up in the attic,” Luke said, flashing him a mischievous grin.

Noah’s heartbeat kicked up a few notches. More kisses, more touching, and maybe just more. “Yeah,” he managed to croak. Noah thought that they were going to go inside the barn, but Luke surprised him, taking him around to the other side. “Are you sure that no one will see us?” he asked, glancing around his surroundings. They were out of view from the house, but anyone coming up the driveway would be able to see them.

“Gram won’t be coming out here,” Luke said as he backed Noah up against the side of the barn. “Your mom is at home.”


Luke’s mouth moved from Noah’s lips to his ear. “Am I making you hard?” he breathed hotly, nibbling on the earlobe. “You’re making me hard. You’re so hot, Noah.” He traced his tongue along the shell of Noah’s ear.

How was it that his ear had become connected to his cock? Noah shuddered. Luke kissing his ear was making him painfully hard. And his body wanted more—friction, kisses, touching—he wanted it all. “Oh,” he gasped.

Luke’s fingertips brushed against his cock, which was fully erect straining against his jeans. “Is this

“Yeah.” Noah’s eyes fluttered shut as he tried to focus on breathing.

“You feel so good, Noah,” Luke whispered as his fingers slowly trailed along Noah’s length.


“Do you want to come again?” Luke’s tongue darted into Noah’s ear.

“Y-y-yes…”

“Me too.”

Noah swallowed, clutching Luke tightly. Luke shifted his hips, grinding into Noah’s groin. Yes…yes…yes. This is what he needed now.

_Focus on Luke_, Noah reminded himself. _Don’t let the demons take over. This is good. Luke is good. There’s nothing wrong with what we’re doing…with feeling this way._


Fuck. Noah could feel his balls beginning to tighten. He was so close. “Uhh,” he grunted, sinking his fingers deeper into Luke’s back, just hanging on by a thread.


Noah bit his lip as the thread snapped. Good lord…it was better than the first time, more intense somehow. He gripped Luke tightly, riding out the last of the shockwaves and then Luke came.

“Oh fuck,” he moaned loudly, burying his head in the crook of Noah’s neck. Noah held Luke’s trembling body pleased that he was able to elicit such a powerful response from him. Luke finally glanced up at Noah, face flush and eyes shining. He was so beautiful.


“Wow,” Luke chuckled softly. He glanced down at their crotches, which were both soaked with come. “We made quite a mess.”

“I hope my mom is sleeping because I don’t know how I’m going to explain this,” Noah said.

“I’ve got an idea!” Luke said, snatching Noah’s hand. He tugged him toward a large patch of virgin snow.

“What are you doing?” Noah laughed. Somehow he got a feeling that Luke had something crazy in mind.


“What are you up to, Luke?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“This,” Luke said, tickling Noah’s sides.

Noah certainly didn’t see that coming. Luke was like a stealth fighter, swooping in for the attack.
He hadn’t been tickled since he was a little kid. Biting his lip, he tried to fight the laughter, but it was a losing battle. Luke was very good at this.


“A-ha! You are ticklish!”


And thus began the snow war. It was thrown and stuffed, leaving them both covered in it from head to toe. Neither seemed to care as they wrestled around in the snow like a couple of puppies until they were both exhausted.


“Truce,” Noah agreed, standing up and brushing the snow off his body. He offered Luke a hand which was immediately accepted. Luke pulled him to his feet. “I’m soaked.”

“See, I told you that I had a plan.”

“Yes, you did.” Noah stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Are you doing anything after school tomorrow?”

“I have basketball practice, but I’m free after that.”

“Did you want to come over for dinner and maybe help decorate the Christmas tree?” Noah asked in one fast rush.

“Yeah.”

“I know it’s kinda lame, but…”

Luke placed his hand on Noah’s arm. “It’s not lame. I love spending time with you…being with you. Nothing that involves those two things can be lame.”

Noah blushed. “Okay.”

“How about I call you when I’m on my way?”

“That would be great.”

“Good,” Luke said, giving Noah’s arm a squeeze. “I really do have some homework to do tonight so I better head home.”


Luke grinned. “Can’t wait,” he replied. Then he turned on his heel and headed toward his car.
which was parked in Emma’s driveway.

Noah stood there watching him until Luke pulled away. Boy was he ever lucky to have him in his life.

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Charlene sat on the couch, fighting to stay awake until Noah got home. Not because she didn’t trust him. She wanted to show him that she was really okay. She was…she was…well…at least that’s what she’s been telling herself since her visit to the hospital. The test results would come back fine.

They just had to. Because if they didn’t…

She didn’t want to go there.

So she didn’t. Instead, Charlene focused on the lie she’d told Emma and Noah. The doctors didn’t tell her anything about anemia or low blood sugar. Actually, they hadn’t told her anything concrete. They only ran a battery of tests on her. Dr. Hughes had said he’d put a rush on the results so she should know something soon.

She almost didn’t want to know…

The door to the cabin opened, revealing a disheveled, wet Noah with pink cheeks and a bit of snow in his hair. He was grinning with a wistful look in his eyes, almost as if he was in his own little world which seemed like a happy place. This thrilled Charlene since she knew he hasn’t had too many truly happy moments in his life.

“Hey there, string bean,” Charlene called to him.

Noah froze in his spot, seemingly startled to hear her voice. “Hi, Mom.”

“What happened to you?”

The smile quickly faded from his face. “What do you mean?” he asked cautiously.

“You’re all wet.”

“I…uh…Luke and I had a snow ball fight,” Noah said, turning his back to her as he slipped off his coat and hung it up on the coat rack.

Charlene laughed. “It looks like you were caught in an avalanche.”

“I guess we got a little carried away,” Noah said, ducking his head.

“Actually it sounds like fun. When was the last time you had a snowball fight?”

“Never.”

Charlene’s heart ached. How was it that Noah had gone eighteen years without ever getting into a simple snowball fight? How many other normal things had he missed out on because of his abnormal life? Her poor baby…
Noah sat down next to her. “How are you feeling? Maybe you should be in bed resting. Mrs. Snyder said that you left because you were tired.”

Charlene reached over and squeezed his hand. “I’m good. Please don’t worry. I told you that there’s no need to.”

“I know,” Noah quietly admitted. “But I can’t help it. You were in the hospital yesterday.”

“And I was released,” Charlene gently reminded him. Of course she omitted the fact that Dr. Hughes had been adamant that she spend the night for observation. “I took it easy today, had an amazing dinner, and I’ll be going to bed soon.”

“Okay,” Noah relented.

“Emma was so happy that you agreed to help Luke tonight. She said that there were a lot of boxes up in the attic.”

“I was glad I could help her. She offered to give us some of her old ornaments for the tree.”

Charlene was looking forward to finally decorating their Christmas tree. It had been way too long since they’d had a tree to enjoy and she wanted to make the most of it. She should have known that Emma would help their cause once again like some magical fairy godmother. “She’s so sweet. Knowing her, she’ll make sure we have a beautiful tree.”

“Actually, she isn’t the only one who wants to make sure we have a well decorated tree,” Noah said, getting up from the sofa and heading into his bedroom. A couple of minutes later he returned, holding a box. “Luke and his sisters made these for us.”

Luke and his sisters made them a bunch of ornaments. Charlene eagerly peered into the box the moment Noah set it on the coffee table. The contents of the box made her grin. The handmade ornaments were lovely. She had no doubt that Luke was behind it. He was such a thoughtful boy.

“That was so sweet of them,” Charlene said, picking up a paper snowflake.

“Natalie made all of the snowflakes. She says they’re the bestest ever.”

“They are.”

“I…uh…kinda invited Luke over tomorrow evening to help decorate the tree. I told him that he could have dinner with us too,” Noah said, shifting his weight from his right foot to his left. “I hope it’s okay. If it isn’t, I can call him—”

“It’s perfectly fine, Noah,” Charlene reassured him. She was happy that Noah had invited Luke over. In all of their years on the run Noah had never felt comfortable enough to invite anyone over. Luke seemed to be the exception. He was a good friend—maybe more. She couldn’t be certain at this point. “You’re always welcome to invite your friends over. I won’t be home until sometime after dinner though because I’ll be working.”

“I can pick another day.”

Charlene didn’t want Noah to change his plans. Finally he was doing things he should have been able to do his entire life—like hanging out with friends for instance. “You’ll do no such thing. Luke is welcome to come over. You’ll just have to cook dinner and be sure to leave me some ornaments to hang on the tree.”
Noah smiled. “I can definitely do that. Do we have anything that I can make?”

Charlene thought for a moment, trying to recall the contents of the refrigerator and freezer. “There is some ground sirloin in the freezer. I’m pretty sure we have the ingredients to make tacos.” And if they didn’t she would make sure that they did while Noah was working.

“I think I can handle tacos. I just hope Luke likes them.”

“I’m sure he does.”

Noah nodded. Charlene could swear she saw the wheels turning in his brain. She wished he’d just confide in her. However, tonight wasn’t the night to press him. “And on that note I think I’m going to head to bed.” She stood up careful not to wince as she did so or else Noah would start fussing over her again.

“Me too.” Noah hugged her. “I love you.”

“I love you too, string bean. Sleep tight.”

Charlene was determined to try her best to do just that. She wouldn’t dwell on the test results that she was expecting from the hospital. Instead, she’d focus on all of the positives in her life—namely seeing Noah’s smile. She never wanted to leave his face.
Noah stood at the stove, mixing together the ground beef and taco seasoning. Luke should be there shortly for dinner and decorating. So far, so good. The lettuce, tomatoes, cheese and sour cream were sitting on the table and the shells were warming in the oven. He had to admit the meal smelled pretty good. Hopefully it would taste that way.

There was a knock on the door which put a smile on Noah’s face. Luke had arrived. He’d been looking forward to this moment all day. He turned off the oven so the shells wouldn’t burn and went to answer the door.

“Hello, Noah,” Luke said, grinning from ear to ear. He was holding a small red gift bag, which piqued Noah’s curiosity. Maybe it was something for his mom or perhaps the girls had made more ornaments. Hopefully, he wouldn’t have to wait too long to find out.


“Something smells delicious,” Luke said, sauntering into the cabin. He shifted the bag from hand to hand as he shrugged out of his coat.

Noah took Luke’s jacket from him, hanging it up on the coat rack. “I…uh…made tacos. I hope you like them.”

“Mexican food is almost as great as burgers and Chinese food.”


“Doesn’t smell that way,” Luke said, gazing up at him. “And to what do I owe the honor of you cooking for me?”

“My mom is working the dinner shift at Al’s.”

Luke pouted. “And here I thought you were trying to woo me.

Noah blushed. “I was kinda hoping to impress you by cooking instead of just ordering a pizza.”

“It worked.”

Noah grinned, brushing his lips against Luke’s. “Good.”

“Mmmm…this is very good,” Luke murmured into the kiss.

Yes it was. And then the buzzer on the stove went off, interrupting the moment. “Shit,” Noah muttered. “I better get that. I don’t want to burn our dinner.”


Noah rushed over to the stove, shut off the timer as well as the burner that the ground beef was simmering on. “Dinner is ready whenever you are,” he called to Luke. Luke set the gift bag he’d been holding down on the end table and then joined Noah in the kitchen.

“Can I do anything?” he asked, resting his hand on top of one of the kitchen chairs.
“You can get the drinks if you’d like. I’ll take a Coke. Help yourself to whatever you’d like.”

Luke strolled over to him, slipping his arms around his waist and licking the shell of Noah’s ear. “I’ll have some of this,” he breathed.


Noah was almost ready to say screw dinner and drag Luke over to the sofa. However, thoughts of his mom coming home early and catching them quickly squashed the idea. Still, a couple of more kisses probably wouldn’t hurt. “Maybe for dessert,” he replied, his face flushed.


While Luke dug in the refrigerator, Noah scooped the ground beef into a large bowl and placed it along with the shells on the kitchen table. Luke set a can of Coke in front of Noah’s plate before sitting down at the table.

“Thanks.” Noah opened the Coke. “Dig in.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Luke said, snatching a taco shell from the plate. “I’m starving. Practice was a bitch.”

“Why?” Noah hoped that Luke’s teammates hadn’t changed their minds about him and were no giving him a hard time.

“Coach worked our asses off,” Luke sighed as he piled the toppings on his taco. “I’d be surprised if I didn’t have an ass left.”

“Oh you do,” Noah murmured, spooning some sour cream into his taco shell.

Luke grinned as he took a big bite of his taco. Noah tried not to stare at him as Luke chewed, but it was next to impossible. He was anxious to see if Luke liked it. Luke caught his eye and gave him a thumbs up.

“So it’s okay?”


“Thanks,” Noah replied and then took a bite of his taco, which tasted pretty damn good. “I…uh… kinda told Whitman about us.”


Noah felt a little embarrassed that he’d just confessed to Luke that he told Luke’s horse about their relationship. Even though Luke already knew he frequently talked to Whitman and confessed to it as well, Noah was still a little worried Luke might think he was some kind of loser because who runs and tells a horse that he has a boyfriend.

Well, obviously Noah did. “Yeah.” Noah ducked his head unable to meet Luke’s gaze.

“I bet he was happy for us,” Luke declared. “He probably said ‘I told you so’.”

Noah grinned quite relived he wasn’t lame in Luke’s eyes after all. “Yeah, kinda.”
“I haven’t been out to see him since you became my boyfriend,” Luke confessed as he assembled another taco. “I really suck. Good thing he has you. I’ve been so busy with practice and other things.”

Noah had a good feeling that he was considered “other things”. “He understands. You know, it’s nothing a handful of carrots and a ride won’t be able to cure.”

“Yeah, Whit is easy that way,” Luke chuckled. “Maybe I’ll stop off and see him before I head home.”

“I’m sure he’ll like it if you do.”

They polished off a couple of more tacos before they declared themselves stuffed. Noah stood up, clearing their plates. “Your grandma set us up with lights and ornaments so the tree should look pretty good.”

“Great,” Luke said, rising from his chair. “Are there any containers to put the leftovers in?”

“Yeah, in the cupboard next to the stove, but you don’t have to do anything you’re the guest.”


“In that case I’m going to put you on dish duty too,” Noah teased as he stacked the dirty plates on the counter next to the sink.

“I’ll even wash,” Luke said as he scraped the leftover meat into the plastic container.

Noah joined him at the table so he could help him pack away the food. “I should have you over for dinner every night.”

“You wouldn’t hear me complaining,” Luke murmured, taking the container over to the refrigerator.

Noah bit his lip. He could definitely get used to Luke being around all the time. Having him help out in the kitchen seemed so natural. They worked together putting away the food and clearing the table as if they’d been together forever. It was nice—normal. Noah wanted to just savor this feeling.

Luke put the food away while Noah got out the dish soap, rag, and towels. “So,” Luke said, spinning around and rubbing his hands together, “let’s get these dishes done so we can get to the fun stuff.” He sauntered over to the sink and poured a generous amount of dish soap into it.

“Whoa…do you think you used enough soap there?” Noah chuckled.

“I like lots of bubbles,” Luke declared, scooping up a handful of suds and blowing them at Noah. “I even like bubble baths!”

“Seriously?” Noah couldn’t imagine ever making a statement like that. The Colonel never allowed his mother to give him bubble baths. It wasn’t something he wanted his son to take because they were for sissies.

“Yeah, does that make me gay?” Luke teased.

“You are gay—the last time I checked.”

“Maybe you should check again,” Luke suggested, waggling his eyebrows.

Noah leaned over, brushing his lips against Luke’s. “Very gay.”
Noah swallowed. Yes he was, but hearing it aloud still made him a little uneasy. How come he could tease Luke about it, but when it came to him he was still a freak about it? He had to find a way to deal with all of this—to come out to his mom, to be able to openly show affection toward Luke out in the real world. Noah couldn’t—no he wouldn’t—let Luke down. He needed to be the kind of boyfriend Luke deserved—out and proud just like him.

“We should probably…uh…get the dishes done,” Noah stuttered, cheeks flaming.

There was a flash of disappointment in Luke’s eyes. “Okay.”

“Are you sure that you don’t want me to wash?”

Luke shook his head as he scrubbed one of the plates. “Nah, you know where everything goes so it’s just easier this way.”

Noah took a deep breath. “My father…he…uh…never let me take bubble baths,” he quietly admitted as he dried a plate. “He freaked out when he saw my mom preparing one for me. There were so many basic things that I never got to experience because of him and his twisted views of what a man should be—even when I was just a little boy.”

“One of these days I’ll have to make sure you get your bubble bath—with me,” Luke said, glancing at him.

Noah smiled so thankful that Luke wasn’t taking pity on him. This made opening up to him about terrible things from his past easier. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

“Yes!” Luke did a sudsy fist pump.

Noah just shook his head and laughed. Oh how he loved his crazy boyfriend. He just hoped one day he’d be able to tell him just how much.

They made quick work of the rest of the dirty dishes. Everything was washed and put away in no time, leaving the kitchen spotless. Noah wanted to make sure that his mom didn’t come home to a mess. As it was, he thought she worked way too hard at Al’s.

“Are you ready to decorate the tree?” Noah asked has he hung up the damp dish towel to dry.

Luke sauntered into the living room. “I will be as soon as you open this,” he said, picking up the gift bag.

“What’s that?” Noah asked, his heart fluttering.

“You’ll have to open it and find out.”

Noah took the gift bag from him, digging through the tissue until he felt a small box. Pulling it out of the bag, he discovered that it was a Hallmark Casablanca Christmas ornament which looked like the movie poster from the film. It was so thoughtful and just perfect. Noah could feel a lump forming in his throat. He wasn’t used to this—to someone other than his mother being so damn nice to him.


“I…uh…know how much the movie means to you and that you always needed ornaments for your tree,” Luke quickly explained, shoving his hands in his front pockets. “I just wanted you to have a real ornament of your very own. I really enjoyed watching that movie with you.”
“Even though I had lied to you about how I felt?”

“Yeah.” Luke scuffed his sneaker against the hardwood floor, “because you were sharing one of your favorite movies with me. And you didn’t throw me out after I poured my heart out to you.”

“Never.”


Noah put it along with the bag down on the end table and then closed the space between him and Luke. “I love it,” he murmured, kissing Luke hard on the lips. Luke moaned in response, wrapping his arms around Noah and pulling him closer so that their bodies were pressed tightly together. Noah felt dizzy as the bruising kiss gained intensity. He was so giddy that Luke cared about him enough to give him such a thoughtful gift.


Noah rested his forehead against Luke’s. “We should probably do that decorating thing.”

“Yeah, we should.”

But neither made a move. They just stood there staring at each other, breathing heavily. Noah’s gaze was fixated on Luke’s wet, swollen lips.


“Hun?”

“We’re going to need to start with the lights.” Noah forced himself to step away from Luke. “Your grandma gave me a lot of lights,” he said, moving over toward one of the boxes Emma had given him. “I’ve never put lights on a tree, though. Actually, I’ve never decorated a tree.”

“Let me guess,” Luke said, picking up a string of lights. “It wasn’t manly enough?”

“Yeah,” Noah admitted, gazing down at all colored lights in the box. “The Colonel and I sat on the sofa while my mom did all of the work. He always put the star on the top of the tree though. I guess that’s a stud move,” he added with a rueful chuckle.

“I’m happy your mom got you away from him.”


Luke’s chocolate eyes burned into him. “You know, he doesn’t know shit. And his views are twisted. I wish I could make you forget everything he’s ever said or did to you.”

Noah wished that Luke could too. Every night he prayed that he’d forget the sound of the Colonel’s voice as well as every harsh word he ever uttered. “Being with you helps,” he confessed. When he was with Luke it was easy to feed off his energy—feel special.

“I’m glad.” Luke grinned and then took a deep breath. “I can put the lights on the tree if you’d like.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “I can untangle the lights and make sure they all work.”

“Perfect plan.”

Luke plugged the first string of lights into the socket and began stringing them through the bottom
branches of the tree, bending over to do so. Noah’s gaze was immediately drawn to Luke’s nice round ass, his breath catching in his throat as Luke’s striped sweater rode up his back, exposing his pale skin along with a hint of navy blue underwear.


“Yeah, sure.” Noah stepped forward, handing him what he had in his hand, fingers brushing. The electricity surged through his body. “Looking good.”

“Thanks.” Luke grinned, seemingly understanding the double meaning of Noah’s statement which only made his blush deepen.

Noah went back to untangling and testing the lights as Luke continued to put them on the tree. Each branch was slowly becoming lit in a rainbow of colors. By the time the tree was fully covered in lights, it was glowing as if decorated with precious rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and topaz.

“I think that’s enough lights,” Luke declared, stepping back to study his handiwork.

“It’s just perfect.”

Luke turned to him. “It’s going to look even better once we put the popcorn and ornaments on it. The popcorn should be next,” he explained. “You game?”

“Sure,” Noah replied even though he didn’t have a clue as to how he should put said popcorn on the tree. Deep down he knew it wasn’t brain surgery, but there was a part of him that was convinced that it needed to be perfect because perfection was always demanded by the Colonel.

Luke must have sensed his unease because he picked up the long string of popcorn and headed toward the tree. “Come on, we can do it together.”

Noah smiled, utterly relieved. “M’kay.”

Together they draped the popcorn around the tree with Luke reassuring him that it didn’t need to be perfect because having it a little uneven was part of its charm. At least that’s what Luke’s grandma would always say. Emma Snyder was a smart woman so Noah wasn’t about to argue with her logic or Luke’s. Noah had to admit that once all of the popcorn was wrapped around the tree albeit a bit crooked he really liked the way it looked—homey and charming. He couldn’t wait to finish decorating it.

“Now you need to do the honor of putting the first ornament on the tree,” Luke said, placing his hand on Noah’s arm.

“I know just the right one to start with.” Actually, there was no other choice as far as Noah was concerned. He marched over to the end table where he’d left the<i>Casablanca</i> ornament Luke had given him. This would be perfect. Noah would place it front and center so he would be able to always see it and be reminded of Luke.

“I was hoping you’d pick that one.”

“Like there was any doubt?” Noah asked, approaching the tree.


Noah hung the ornament on the tree and smiled. “I know that I’m the luckiest guy in the world.
Thank you, Luke. Thank you for so much.”

“You’re welcome,” Luke murmured, draping his arms over Noah’s shoulders and pulling him into a sweet kiss.

Noah was indeed very lucky.

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Standing on the porch of the cabin, peering through the window, Charlene’s eyes filled with tears as she watched Luke and Noah kissing. Noah was really gay. It was quite obvious now that he and Luke have moved beyond friendship. And she couldn’t be happier for them.

Charlene stepped back as the boys parted so she wouldn’t be seen. Noah’s smile practically lit up the room as he gazed lovingly at Luke. She couldn’t remember the last time she saw Noah so happy—if ever. He needed to stay this happy because he deserved it after so many years of suffering. She was determined to make sure of it - no matter what. Not even if the test results came back unfavorably.

Her string bean was happy. Most likely in love.

She took a deep breath and then stomped extra loudly on the porch to give the boys plenty of forewarning. They didn’t need her to walk in on something they weren’t ready to share. Hopefully they would be soon though.

“Hello, boys!” Charlene called extra loudly as she stepped into the cabin clutching a shopping bag which contained a special surprise for the occasion.


“Hey, Mom,” Noah replied, dashing toward her. “How are you? Are you hungry? We saved some tacos for you. Would you like me to warm one up for you?” His questions were coming fast and furious as he tried to help her off with her coat.

“Whoa,” she laughed. “One thing at a time.”

“I highly recommend the tacos,” Luke spoke up from across the room. “They’re amazing. Noah did a great job.”

The blush that colored Noah’s cheeks didn’t go unnoticed by Charlene. And the way Luke gazed at Noah was so sweet. He was looking at Noah like he was the greatest thing in the world, which he was. Charlene was happy that Noah had found someone who felt that way about him. Hopefully, Luke will help her son realize what she’s been trying to tell him throughout his life—he’s amazing.

“I’m looking forward to trying them,” Charlene said. She held out the shopping bag she was holding toward Noah. “I got something for the tree.”

Noah took the bag, peering inside. “Oh my,” he murmured, pulling out the angel that she had bought to top off their tree.

When they were with Winston it always had to be a star, which was all the more reason to get
something else. Charlene picked out an angel so she could watch over them. They needed some help from heaven.

“Do you like it?”

“I love it.”

Charlene strolled over to the tree to check out the boys’ handiwork. The lights and the strung popcorn looked nice, but it was the lone ornament that hung on the tree that caught her eye. “This is lovely,” she said, gently touching the Casablanca ornament.


While Charlene highly doubted this was the case, she didn’t say so. “Thank you, Luke.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I think I’ll have one of those delicious tacos I heard about,” Charlene said, heading toward the kitchen.

“I’ll fix them for you,” Noah said, falling into step beside her. “Just tell me what you’d like on them.”

“I can handle it.”

“Mom, you’ve been working hard all day and haven’t been feeling well. You need to relax. Please.” His deep blue eyes pleaded with her.

Charlene didn’t have the energy to disagree with him. “Okay, load me up with the works,” she decided, easing into one of the kitchen chairs.

The tacos lived up to their hype. Charlene ate two of them before joining the boys in the living room to help decorate the tree. Luke and Noah tried to act casual in front of her, but their fleeting glances at each other didn’t go unnoticed by her. She’d forgotten how sweet young love could be since it had been practically a lifetime ago since she felt the butterflies in the stomach or the rush of emotions from just looking at that special someone.

After the last ornament was hung on the tree, Noah put the angel on top completing it. “It’s beautiful,” Charlene marveled, gazing at the tree. “I think it’s the most beautiful tree I’ve ever seen. It’s filled with so much love.”

“Yeah,” the boys agreed.

Yes, definitely love.
Charlene hummed quietly as she was getting ready to head to the diner the following morning. Seeing firsthand how happy and in love Noah was had done wonders for her. She could barely feel the aching that had become constant in her abdomen. Noah’s joy was the best medicine in the world.

Just as she was about to grab her purse from the chair it was sitting on, there was a knock on the door. This couldn’t be good. Noah wouldn’t knock. And it was still a bit early for visitors.

Steeling herself, Charlene opened the door, hoping for the best, but bracing herself for the worst. There stood Emma smiling weakly. Charlene’s stomach twisted into knots. Emma was most likely there for one reason—to tell her that the hospital had called. Emma’s number was the only number she had left with Oakdale Memorial.

“Hi,” Charlene said, putting on her bravest face.

“Hi, dear,” Emma replied with a trace of apprehension in her voice. “I was hoping I’d catch you before you left for work. The hospital called. They’d like you to come in.”

So there it was—they wanted to see her which couldn’t be good news. Good news would be delivered over the phone. But bad…bad was always dealt with face to face. “Oh.” She could feel the color drain from her face.

Emma placed her hand on Charlene’s arm. “It doesn’t mean it’s bad news.”

She pursed her lips together. “It’s certainly not good news.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I think I do,” Charlene murmured.

“Let me drive you there,” Emma suggested. “Regardless of why they want to see you, I don’t think you should be alone. Unless you’d rather me get Noah.”

“No,” Charlene snapped. “I don’t want Noah to be a part of this.”

Emma was taken aback by her vehement response. “Okay. It will just be the two of us.”

“I’m sorry,” Charlene quickly apologized. “I didn’t mean to jump down your throat.”

“Don’t worry,” Emma assured her. “You’ve been under a lot of stress a lately.”

“I would like you to come with me,” Charlene said, reaching for Emma’s hand and squeezing it. “I need a friend right now. Let me get my purse and coat.” She marched into the kitchen grabbed her purse and then slipped on her coat. “Let’s go.”

The ride to the hospital was relatively quiet. Emma did her best to make small talk, trying to keep Charlene’s mind off her meeting with the doctor, but it wasn’t working. Charlene’s mind just kept running through every scenario. Unfortunately, most of them were negative. She refused to let herself entertain the worst case scenario. No way.

“Emma, will you come with me when I talk to Dr. Hughes?” Charlene asked once Emma parked the car in the hospital parking lot.
“Of course.”

Thankfully, they didn’t have to wait long before they were escorted into Dr. Hughes’ office. Charlene sat in one of the chairs across from his desk and folded her hands on her lap, silently saying a prayer. Her faith which had waned after suffering years of Winston’s abuse had been somewhat renewed after arriving in Oakdale. Emma and the rest of the Snyders showed her that good people existed.

Emma reached out and took her hand as Dr. Hughes entered the office. Charlene took a deep breath, squeezing it. No matter what, she knew that she wouldn’t be alone.

“Hello, Gloria…Emma,” Dr. Hughes said as he settled in behind his desk.

“Hello,” Charlene murmured, her heart hammering in her chest.

Emma held on tightly to Charlene’s hand. “Hello, Bob.”

Dr. Hughes opened the file he’d been holding, scanning the papers inside it. His kind eyes met hers. “I’m afraid that I have bad news for you, Gloria.”

**Bad news.**

Charlene’s heart plummeted as any last thread of hope vanished. “H-h-how bad?” she stammered.

Dr. Hughes sighed, “I’m afraid there’s no easy way to tell you this. After reviewing your test results, we’re determined that you have stage 4 endometrial cancer.”

Cancer—her mind was reeling from the word. It was such an ugly word—filled with dread and—she shuddered to think it—death.

Emma spoke up. “What is that, exactly?”

Charlene was grateful that Emma was with her. She was having a hard time processing what Dr. Hughes had told her. **Cancer**—the word just kept echoing in her mind.

“It’s a form of uterine cancer that develops in the lining of the uterus. In Gloria’s case, because it went undetected and untreated for so long, the cancer has spread throughout her body,” Dr. Hughes explained. “The scans, blood work, and other tests we ran the other day have shown that the cancer has moved beyond the abdominal cavity, where it has already invaded the cervix, bladder, and rectum, and has spread to the lymph nodes and the liver.”

“H-h-how do we treat it?” Charlene asked, silently praying that there was a way to treat it.

Dr. Hughes swallowed. “Unfortunately, Gloria, at this stage of progression the cancer has metastasized to so many organ systems that even with the most aggressive treatments, the chances for any long term survival would be less than 5 percent. I'm afraid your condition is terminal.”

“How long do I have?” Charlene asked, her own voice distant and foreign in her ears.

“It’s hard to say with certainty—perhaps 4 months, but probably less,” Dr. Hughes replied gently.

Less than 4 months? No…no…she couldn’t die and leave Noah! There mere thought sent her into a panic. Her baby still needed her. Winston Mayer was out there somewhere possibly still searching for them. Noah needed to be protected from him. **She** needed to protect him from that monster.

“Bob, there has to be something,” Emma insisted. “Surgery or radiation? Chemotherapy?”
Dr. Hughes shook his head sadly. “With the extent of the metastases, it would be virtually impossible for surgeons to remove all of the cancer. Of course, we will treat Gloria aggressively if that is her wish. But I do not want to give you any false hope. It's possible that chemotherapy and radiation might buy her an additional month or two, but it will also make her very ill and weak. The consideration here is not just how long she has left, but how she wants to spend those months.”

“No. No treatment,” Charlene said, finding her voice. “I don’t want to spend the time I have left that way. I need to stay as strong as I can for Noah.”

Dr. Hughes nodded. “We will, of course, give you medications for the pain to keep you as comfortable as possible. Dr. Robinson is the oncologist that has been assigned to your case and will be overseeing your care directly,” Dr. Hughes said. “She’s going to come in now to answer any additional questions you might have.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“I will go get her now. And, Gloria? I’m really sorry that I couldn’t give you better news,” Dr. Hughes said before stepping out of the room.

Once Dr. Hughes left the room, Charlene buried her face in her hands and began to sob. She wasn’t crying for herself, her tears were for her son, who was going to be left without any family. He was too young to have to go through this. Finally, he’d found happiness here in Oakdale with Luke.

Charlene felt an arm slip around her, drawing her into a warm, tight embrace. “You’re not alone in this,” Emma reassured her. “We’ll all be here for you and Noah. We’re going to take care of both of you.”

For the hundredth time Charlene said a silent thank you that Emma Snyder was by her side. Emma, besides being her best friend, was also a godsend, holding her hand, and asking the important questions. She was Charlene’s rock. Emma needed to know the truth about who she really was—all that she and Noah had been through. Charlene couldn’t keep lying to someone who had not only opened her home to her and Noah but her heart as well. She made a silent promise that she’d come clean to Emma as soon as the time was right.

“I’ll go with you to tell him if you’d like—whatever you want, Gloria.”

Oh Noah—her Noah—what was she going to do about him? He was so happy right now. Finally after so many years of abuse and heartache he was in a good place and had found someone to love.

But Noah would give it all up in a heartbeat if he knew she was sick. He’d want to spend every waking moment looking after her, sacrificing his own happiness in the process. Charlene didn’t think she could watch him do that. No, she’d rather spend her last months seeing her son happy.

“Thank you,” Charlene sniffed, wiping her eyes. “I-I don’t think I can tell Noah right now though.”

“Gloria…”

“He’s so happy,” Charlene told her. “After four years he finally has a home again, friends, and—a boyfriend.” Emma’s eyes widened upon hearing the word “boyfriend”. “Yes,” Charlene said with a smile, “Noah and Luke are together. I saw them last night when I got home from work. They were kissing so they didn’t know I was home yet. It was the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen. The boys are in love. But if I tell Noah about me he’ll throw it all away and I don’t want him to do that.”

“But, Gloria, he has the right to know,” Emma insisted. “He’ll want to spend more time with you—take care of you. You shouldn’t deny him of that.”
“I can let him do those things without telling him right now,” Charlene countered. “And I know I won’t be able to keep this from him forever, but I want to protect him as long as I can. Please understand.”

Before Emma could respond, a middle aged African American woman with stylishly short hair entered the room. This had to be Dr. Robinson. Charlene quickly steeled herself for more bad news.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Anita Robinson,” she said, slipping into the chair that Dr. Hughes had vacated.

“I’m Gloria,” Charlene spoke up. “And this is my dear friend, Emma Snyder.”

“It’s nice to meet you both,” the doctor replied. “I’m just sorry it has to be under these circumstances.”

“Me too,” Charlene murmured.

“Dr. Hughes has explained to you the findings we’ve made and what they mean for your prognosis. He indicated to me that you aren’t interested in pursuing aggressive treatment, given how slim the chances are that it would give you much more time with any real quality of life. I can assure you, though, that I’m going to do everything in my power to make you as comfortable as possible for as long as we can,” Dr. Robinson told her.

“I want to stay out of the hospital,” Charlene said.

“Most terminal patients do. I will do my best to see that it happens but, of course, I can’t make any promises. There will be meds that I will prescribe for the pain,” Dr. Robinson explained. “The hospital does offer home hospice service so it’s possible that someone can come to your home to care for you when it becomes necessary.”

Prescription medications, home nursing service—all of this should sound reassuring, but all she could think about was the cost. There was no way she’d ever be able to afford it and she didn’t want to leave Noah with astronomical medical bills. Noah needed to be thinking about going to college one day, not paying off the debt she’d leave behind.

“I don’t have any insurance,” Charlene admitted. “I’m not going to be able to afford any of this.”

“Don’t worry about the cost,” Emma spoke up. “We’ll take care of it.”

“No, I won’t do that to you.”

“I know some influential people who will be more than willing to help out a good cause.”

“Gloria, you need to focus on yourself right now,” Dr. Robinson told her. “You need to eat properly, get plenty of rest, and do all you can to keep stress to a minimum.”

“Is that all?” Charlene asked, not bothering to hide her sarcasm. The doctor had no idea of how dire her situation was.

“I know this is a lot to take in,” Dr. Robinson replied, sympathetically.

Charlene nodded, not trusting her voice.

Dr. Robinson went on to explain what Charlene could expect as the cancer continued to spread. It was a good thing that Emma was there with her because she was only half listening to the doctor. All she could think about was Noah. She needed to make sure that he would be taken care of once
she was gone.

“Did you have any questions?” Dr. Robinson asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Charlene murmured.

“All right. I'm giving you my contact number and I urge you to call at any time if you have any questions. I’d like to follow up with you in a month.” Dr. Robinson handed Charlene her card as well as some sheets from her prescription pad. “So if I don't hear from you in the meantime, I will see you then. Unless you have any other concerns?”

Other than dying?

Charlene was certain she knew everything she needed to know. She only had a few months to live. A few more months with her baby.

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Emma sat with Gloria in the waiting area while Gloria’s meds were being filled. Neither had said too much since leaving Dr. Hughes’ office. Emma had said every prayer she could think of asking for the strength to help her friend through this terrible time. She’d wanted to shed tears of her own when Dr. Hughes told Gloria she only had months to live, but she knew that Gloria needed her so she had to be strong. There would be plenty of time for tears later.

“Emma, there’s something I really need to tell you,” Charlene quietly admitted.

“What is it?” Emma asked, turning in her chair so that she could get a better look at Gloria whose eyes were bloodshot from crying. She seemed so frail—almost like a scared little girl.

Gloria took a deep breath. “My names isn’t Gloria Carlson. It’s Charlene Mayer. My husband didn’t die. He’s alive. He’s a colonel in the US Army, but he was abusive to me and to Noah. The last time he beat Noah he put him in the hospital with a concussion so that was when I packed Noah up and ran away. We’ve been running for over four years now—lived in ten different states using different names so he wouldn’t be able to find us because if he did, he’d probably kill us,” she explained as tears streamed down her face. “I should have told you all of this sooner, but Winston Mayer is a very dangerous man and I didn’t want to put you or your family at risk. I’m so sorry…so sorry.” The last word had come out a loud sob as Charlene broke down.

Finally, Gloria—Charlene—had admitted the truth, which was even more horrific than she’d imagined.

Emma gathered Charlene in her arms, hoping to make some of the pain go away. Charlene didn’t need to worry anymore. She was among friends who’d protect her and Noah forever. “My dear sweet girl,” she murmured. “I’m so happy that you finally confided in me. I’ve always suspected that there was more to your story.”

“You have?” she sniffed.

“Yes. Over the years I’ve become quite good at reading people.”

“But you never said anything.”
“I figured that you’d tell me when you felt comfortable.” Emma reached into her purse and pulled out some tissues, handing them to Charlene. “I understand why you’d be reluctant to trust people after everything you and Noah have gone through.” “Noah.” Charlene’s lip quivered. “I’m so worried about him. If Winston ever found out that he’s gay, he’d kill him. I’m certain of it. He was always so hard on Noah. The poor boy never could do anything right. Winston tried so hard to make what he considered a man out of Noah, but he couldn’t live up to his expectations. And when he failed…”

Emma’s heart was breaking. It was unfathomable to imagine someone hurting Noah. He was such a dear sweet boy. She would make sure that Charlene’s worries about her son never came to fruition. Noah would be taken care of by her and the rest of her family. “Noah will be looked after,” Emma reassured her as she took Charlene’s hand. “He will have a home with me. We’ll take care of him. Even if things don’t work out with Luke, I want you to know that Noah will always have a home. He’ll be family. You have my word.”

“Thank you.”

“I really think you should tell him about the cancer,” Emma gently pressed.

Charlene vehemently shook her head. “No…no…not now. I just can’t do that to him. Please don’t tell him.”

“Okay.” Emma rubbed Charlene’s back. “I won’t say anything. It’s your decision and I’ll support you.”

“I don’t think I’d be able to get through this without you,” Charlene murmured.

“You’re not in this alone,” Emma did her best to comfort her. At this point it was all she could do for Charlene.

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Emma was exhausted when she finally got home—both physically and mentally. When she’d received the phone call from Bob this morning she never would have imagined that he would be giving Charlene (it was still a bit strange not thinking of her as Gloria) a death sentence.

Charlene was just too young to die.

And Noah was going to lose his mom—the only family he’s ever really, truly had. This just wasn’t fair.

Emma always had a strong sense of faith, but for once it was lost. The God she prayed to couldn’t be so cruel as to take away Noah’s mom— not when he was finally finding true happiness. She slumped into one of the kitchen chairs, burying her head in her hands and sobbing. It had been a long time since she felt so despondent—so helpless. Her friend was dying and there was nothing she could do about it.
Chapter 48

Ever since Jade was a little girl she’d dreamed of being treated like a princess—living in a lavish castle, having beautiful clothes and expensive things as well as the perfect prince who doted on her. Jade thought those dreams would come true after taking up permanent residence with her rich Aunt Lily. She’d expected to be well taken care of like Luke. Her darling cousin had everything handed to him on a silver platter. He didn’t have to work like she did or pay for anything. All he had to do was go to school and play basketball. Sometimes he had to babysit but that was the extent of his “job”.

Big deal.

Jade had to work and buy her own things. The car that Lily and Holden helped her buy was a glorified piece of shit—a very far cry from Luke’s shiny Mustang. It wasn’t fair.

Heaving a loud, exasperated sigh, Jade tugged her tight, black, Crash t-shirt over her head. The only good thing about going to work was seeing Will. And even that wasn’t so great since he was determined to stay married to his loser of a wife.

There was a soft knock on the door. “Can I come in?” Lily’s voice came from the other side of it.

Jade knew this wasn’t a request. “Sure.”

Lily breezed into the room like she was the queen of the manor. “I’m glad I was able to catch you before you left for work. I’ve wanted to talk to you, but we seem to be missing each other.”

Little did Lily know that was by design. Jade had felt a distinctive chill in the air after Lily had caught her fighting with Luke so she’s been making herself pretty scarce. She’d hoped the less her aunt and uncle saw of her the more inclined they’d be to forget Luke’s hissy fit.

“I’ve been working a lot of shifts,” Jade casually replied. “Christmas is coming so I need the extra money.” Especially since you never give me any, she silently added.

“Good.” Lily nodded.

“Actually, I should be going,” Jade said, heading toward the door, but Lily caught her arm before she could escape.

“Not so fast. We need to talk.”


Lily sat down on Jade’s bed, patting the empty space next to her. “Please, sit.”

This couldn’t be good. The way Lily was looking at her unnerved Jade. The determination that burned in Lily’s eyes was unmistakable. There was something on her aunt’s mind and she was about to find out what.

“There’s no easy way to say this, Jade,” Lily said, lips pursing. “I think it’s time for you to find your own place.”

This was her worst nightmare. Lily couldn’t make her leave. Luke must have gone crying to his
parents about her. God only knows what he told them. She needed to find a way to change Lily’s mind—play on her weaknesses. “But I don’t understand? Why?” Jade asked innocently. “Did I do something wrong?”

“This was never meant to be a permanent living situation. I just think it’s best for everyone if you found a place of your own,” Lily replied. “I’ll help you find something and even put down the deposit for you.”

“I thought we were family, Aunt Lily. I’m Rose’s daughter. I thought she wanted you to look out for me,” Jade pleaded, praying that pulling the family card would do the trick. And bringing her mom into it would hopefully seal the deal. Jade knew how much Lily loved her twin sister.

Lily placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Of course, you’re family,” she tried to reassure her. “I’ll always look out for you, but right now I don’t think I’m doing you any favors by letting you live here.”

It was time for the tears. Jade forced a couple to trickle down her cheeks. “I really love it here,” she sniffed. “I’m sorry that I was arguing with Luke the other night. It was just a silly little fight…”

Lily rubbed her back. “I know. And I know that this is all scary, but you’ll be happy to have your independence back.”

Jade dabbed her eyes. “I feel like I’m being punished.”

“You’re not.”

“Then you should let me stay.”

Lily sadly shook her head. “I’m afraid it’s not possible. I think you’ll enjoy having a place that’s not overrun by kids.” She smiled softly. “We’ll go out this weekend and find an apartment for you. It’s going to be great. You’ll see.”

Jade reluctantly resigned herself to the fact that the battle was lost. But she wasn’t about to give up on the war. Her aunt’s change of heart had Luke’s name written all over it. This was his fault. She’d never forgive Luke for this.

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Noah checked his appearance in the mirror in his bedroom for what seemed like the hundredth time. He was wearing the green sweater he’d bought during his big shopping excursion. Underneath it he had on a gray t-shirt along with his best pair of jeans. His ensemble was completed with his new, black boxer briefs which Luke would probably wouldn’t even know that he had on, but wearing them kinda made him feel sexy. He’s never felt remotely sexy before. And he certainly never thought he looked good until now. Hopefully Luke would think so too.

Noah dabbed on some cologne. Okay…now he was ready for his second date with Luke. Tonight he was attending Luke’s first basketball game of the season. Afterwards Luke had suggested that they go out to dinner at the infamous Bennidito’s Pizzeria—just the two of them. Casey and Maddie were picking him up and attending the game with him. Noah was grateful that he would have his friends there. He couldn’t wait to see Luke play in a real game.
A short while later Casey and Maddie were there to pick him up. Maddie beamed at him as he stepped out onto the porch.

“Noah, you look so nice,” she gushed. “Doesn’t he look nice, Casey?”

Noah’s cheeks flushed. He hated it when attention was drawn to him. He’d much rather blend into the background.


“Come on,” Maddie said, heading toward Casey’s car. “We want to get there early. Noah needs to get a good seat so he can see Luke.”

“We’re going to Oakdale High not the United Center,” Casey grumbled. “Any seat is going to be decent.”

“We need better than decent,” Maddie insisted.

“Guys, anything is fine—really,” Noah finally spoke up. He was just happy to be going to the game.

They piled into Casey’s silver Grand Am. Maddie looked over her shoulder into the backseat where Noah sat. “Noah, you need better than fine. You’re Luke’s boyfriend and you need to be in prime boyfriend viewing zone,” she excitedly replied. “Luke’s been waiting for this moment for a long time. He’s so excited that you’re coming to the game.”

Luke was excited about him coming to watch him play. Even though Noah knew that Luke liked him he still found it hard to believe that Luke could possibly feel as strongly about him as he felt about Luke.

“Did he say that?” Noah asked hopefully.

“He didn’t have to say anything. Luke’s been floating on cloud nine ever since you guys became an item,” Maddie explained. “I swear I’ve never seen him happier.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“The dude is happy,” Casey conceded. “And it’s about time. He’s been way too mopey for far too long.”

A small smile crept to Noah’s lips. He made Luke happy. The Colonel had convinced him long ago that he couldn’t do a single thing right—let alone make anyone happy, not even his mom. The Colonel would whisper to him that it was his fault that his mother got beaten—he never had to hit her until Noah came into the picture. Noah didn’t want to believe it was true, but the Colonel had this way of making the absurd believable. The Colonel couldn’t hurt him anymore. He couldn’t take away Noah’s happiness. Not this time.

The gym at Oakdale High School wasn’t too crowded when they arrived, which made Maddie very happy. She picked out seats for them center court about halfway up the bleachers, assuring Noah that he wouldn’t miss a thing. Of course, Casey just rolled his eyes. Maddie situated herself between Noah and Casey so she could most likely talk to him about Luke during the game.

The Snyder clan arrived a little while later. Faith saw him and waved before following her parents
up into the bleachers. Luke was so lucky to have his entire family there to support him. He deserved the largest cheering section in the gym.

“I think someone has a crush on you, dude,” Casey snorted. “Do you have all of the Snyders fighting over you?”


“Yeah, heartbreaker,” Casey snickered.

“Casey,” Maddie nudged him, “cut it out.”

“It’s okay,” Noah said, glancing at both of them. “I can handle a little friendly ribbing.”

“See, Noah’s a big boy,” Casey said, nudging her back. “He knows I’m just messing around. No harm, no foul.”

“Just play nice,” Maddie instructed.

Noah’s attention was drawn to the basketball court as the team filed into the gym. Luke trotted out onto the court wearing a yellow basketball uniform trimmed in purple with Warriors sprawled across his chest above the number 18. Damn…he looked hot. His uniform accentuated some of Luke’s finer attributes—his toned arms and legs along with his broad chest. Noah could swear that he could detect a few wisps of chest hair poking out from the neck of the tank top. So far basketball was pretty awesome.

“You should wave,” Maddie encouraged him.

“He can’t wave,” Casey insisted. “It will break Luke’s concentration. He’s in the zone right now. You don’t mess with that.”

“Casey’s right,” Noah said, forcing himself to stop staring at Luke for a moment. “It’s best that I don’t draw attention to myself. He knows I’m going to be here. I just want him to play well.”

“He’ll do great,” Maddie declared. “His boyfriend is going to be watching him.”

“You really like calling Noah that,” Casey replied.

“I do. It’s so sweet,” she admitted.

“But it’s still a secret,” Noah gently reminded her. “And I’d like to keep it that way for now.”

“That’s Noah’s nice way of saying don’t be a blabbermouth,” Casey chuckled, draping his arm around Maddie.

“I’m not,” Maddie insisted. “My lips are sealed tighter than Ft. Knox.” This comment got a huge snort from Casey, who promptly received an elbow into the ribs. “Not funny, Hughes.”

Noah held back his snicker since he didn’t want to incur Maddie’s wrath. “I’m not worried,” he told her.

Craning his neck, Noah did a quick scan of the bleachers, hoping he wouldn’t see the smug face of Kevin Davis. He wanted tonight to be perfect for Luke and having Kevin in attendance could put a damper on things since Noah wouldn’t put it past the asshole to do something obnoxious or stupid.

“Have you guys seen Kevin?” he casually asked.
“No, I don’t think he’ll be here,” Maddie replied. “He’s not exactly Mr. School Spirit.”

“He better not be,” Noah muttered.

Maddie crinkled her brows. “You don’t think he’d show up just to harass Luke?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Casey piped up.


“Well, that won’t happen on my watch,” Casey declared.

Noah was happy that Casey was ready to kick some ass if needed. He was a good friend to Luke. “Mine too,” Noah agreed. “If Kevin knows what’s good for him he’ll stay away.”

“I think he’d rather go get drunk somewhere instead of watching high school basketball,” Maddie told them.

“He better,” Casey grumbled.

A buzzer sounded, signaling the end of warm-ups. Luke trotted over to the sidelines, his eyes darting up toward the bleachers and locking with Noah’s. A quick smile played on his lips before he joined his teammates in the huddle. Noah could feel his cheeks burning. He quickly ducked his head so no one would notice. But it was too late.


This only made his blush deepen. But he realized that it didn’t matter. He was among friends. And it felt pretty damn good.

Once the game started Noah was positively mesmerized. He knew firsthand that Luke was a good basketball player, but he hadn’t realized just how talented he was until he got to see him in action with his teammates. It was a thrill seeing Luke in his element—making baskets, blocking shots—basically kicking the Sawyer Stallions collective asses.

Casey reached over, smacking Noah’s leg. “Careful there or else we might have to wipe the drool off your chin.”

_Fuck. Am I being that obvious?_ Noah’s hand immediately flew to his chin but discovered that there wasn’t any drool there.

“Psych!” Casey snorted.

“Ugh!” Noah grunted, burying his face in his hands.

“I swear I’m dating a twelve year old,” Maddie sighed.

When the final buzzer sounded the Oakdale Warriors had come out victorious over the Sawyer Stallions. The final score was 64-48. Luke Snyder was responsible for scoring 23 of those points. Luke was amazing. Noah couldn’t wait to tell him.

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Noah was waiting for him outside the locker room. Luke’s first instinct was to dash over to him and plant a nice, juicy kiss on his lips. But he couldn’t even though Noah was standing with Maddie and Casey. Their relationship was still a secret to the general public. Oakdale was a small enough town that one wrong move would somehow get back to his family or Noah’s mom.

But it was okay. Noah was his boyfriend. And his boyfriend had been in the bleachers watching him play tonight. Luke was waiting for him with a large grin on his face. He had taken the world’s quickest shower and threw on his black dress pants and olive green striped shirt. He didn’t bother putting his necktie back on, instead he’d just shoved it into the pocket of his dress pants anxious to meet up with Noah.

Luke loved Noah so much which was why he would respect Noah’s wishes to keep their relationship a secret for the time being. He’d do anything for his Noah.

Luke grinned. *His Noah.* Yeah, he really liked the sound of that.


“Thanks.” Luke untangled himself from her grip and turned to Noah who was standing there with his hands shoved inside the pockets of his winter coat. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Noah murmured, eyes twinkling.

“Awww,” Maddie cooed.

“Maddie,” Casey hissed. “Cut the fangirling.”

“Sorry. I just can’t help myself.”

“Luke!” Natalie called, running toward him with Faith, both of his grandmothers, and his parents in tow.

“Hi, ladybug,” Luke said as she flung herself against him.

“You were the bestest player out there,” she said, peering up at him.

Luke ruffled her hair. “You’re so sweet.”

Luke’s family surrounded him, offering their congratulations. Normally he’d be basking in their praise, but all he wanted to do was grab Noah’s hand and get the hell out of there. He desperately wanted to be alone with his boyfriend.

“Luke, let us take you out to eat to celebrate your victory,” Lily suggested.

He couldn’t go out with his family. Not tonight. “I…uh…Noah and I already have plans to grab a bite to eat.”

“Lily,” Holden said, slipping his arm around her waist, “Luke doesn’t want to be seen out on a Friday night with his family. He much rather spend it with his friends.”
“We can celebrate another time,” Emma spoke up. “You boys go have fun.”

“Mama’s right,” Holden agreed. “Go have fun, but just be home before 12:30.

“I will,” Luke replied. “I’m glad you guys came to the game.”

“It’s always a pleasure to watch my grandson play,” Lucinda declared.

“And it’s a pleasure to have you here, Grandmother.”

Holden gave Luke a pat on the back. “We’ll see you later. Great game, son.”

Luke said good-bye to his family. He felt a little guilty for practically pushing them out the door since they’d taken the time to come watch him play. On the other hand, he only had a few hours to spend with Noah before his curfew and he wanted to make the most of them.


“Starving,” Casey replied, rubbing his stomach.

Luke shook his head, laughing. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

“Geez…we bring Noah here and watch you play. Now you’re ready to ditch us,” Casey grumbled.

“Yup, that about sums it up,” Luke teased. “Your duty is done—now get out of here.”

“I’m so hurt,” Casey feigned utter despair.

Maddie took her boyfriend’s hand. “Come on, I’ll make you feel better. We don’t need these two.” She winked at Luke.

“See ya.” Casey grinned as Maddie ushered toward the exit.

“Are you ready to get out of here?” Luke asked.

“Definitely.” Noah grinned.

As they strolled out to Luke’s car, Luke reminded himself that he needed to keep his hands to himself. His first instinct had been to just take Noah’s hand, but it wasn’t allowed. Instead he stuffed his hands into his coat pocket to ensure that he wouldn’t give into the temptation.

*It’s temporary. It won’t always be like this,* he reminded himself.

Even when they were finally alone in his Mustang, Luke was hesitant to do anything because they were still parked in the high school lot. He hated having to hold back. It just wasn’t in his nature.

“I…uh…really wish I could kiss you right now,” Noah shyly confessed.

Luke melted on the spot. He couldn’t be mad at Noah, especially when he was so fucking sweet and adorable. “Me too. Let’s get out of here.”

“Good idea.”

“Did you still want to go get pizza?”

“Yeah, I’m actually starving.”
“So am I, but I always am after a game.” Luke cast a quick glance at him. “I’m so happy that you came tonight.”

“Me too,” Noah replied, his smile practically lighting up the dark interior of the car. He placed his hand on Luke’s thigh as Luke backed the car out of its parking space. “You were amazing tonight. I…uh…couldn’t take my eyes off of you.”

Luke gripped the stick shift. _Oh. My. God._ He swallowed and then replied, “I wanted to impress my boyfriend.”

“He’s very impressed,” Noah breathed.

“Did you have a good time then?”

“Yeah, it was great. I’d never been to a basketball game before.”

Luke couldn’t imagine going eighteen years and never attending one basketball game. But then again, after hearing about some aspects of Noah’s life he shouldn’t be too surprised. Noah probably had never stepped foot inside a high school until tonight. Most likely there were a lot of things that Luke took for granted that Noah had never got to experience.

“You picked a good one,” Luke teased.

“I hope to get to go to more games.”

Oh hell yeah. Luke wanted his boyfriend at every game if possible. Having Noah in the stands watching him had brought out the best in him. Luke had pushed himself to play his finest game.

“Me too. You’re my good luck charm.”

“It’s pretty cool that your family came tonight.”

“They try to get to as many games as possible,” Luke said as he shifted the car into the next gear. “My Grandma Lucinda is one of my biggest and my most critical fans. Besides the coach, she’s the first one to tell me if my game is off.”

“Really?” Noah chuckled.

“When I started playing in junior high I’d never expected her to step foot into a school gym, but she surprised me. She’s a remarkable woman.” Luke turned on the radio and then slipped his fingers through Noah’s, giving his hand a squeeze. This was really nice.

Bennidito’s Pizzeria’s parking lot wasn’t too crowded when Luke pulled into it. Luke hoped that there wouldn’t be a lot kids from school here. The hot spots after games tended to be Al’s or the McDonald’s that was just down the road from the school. He longed for the day when he could just stroll into Al’s holding Noah’s hand. He wanted to show off his gorgeous boyfriend.

“Finally, I get to try the infamous Bennidito’s,” Noah said once the car was parked.

“I would have ordered it when we babysat the kids, but they don’t deliver,” Luke replied. “I hope it lives up to your expectations.”

“I have a feeling that it will.”

The restaurant was about half full so they were able to be seated right away. The hostess selected a booth in the corner for them. As Luke picked up his menu, he noticed Noah taking in the ambiance
of the restaurant, which Bennidito’s had in spades—dim lighting, tables draped in red and white checkered tablecloths, Chianti bottles that served as candle holders, and Italian music playing softly throughout the restaurant.

“This is really something,” Noah finally said as he opened the menu.

“Yeah, kinda looks like a place you might see in one of your old movies.”

Noah grinned. “I’m waiting for some Italian guy with a big mustache to come serenade us.”

“This place is a bit kitschy but not that kitschy.”

“Are we gonna just get a pizza?” Noah asked, scanning the menu.

“Unless you’d rather get something else. All of their food is amazing.”

“Pizza sounds good tonight.”

“We’ll have to get an order of their cheesy breadsticks,” Luke told him. “They’re a party in your mouth.”

“I’m not about to turn down a party in my mouth.”

“Oh?” Luke raised his eyebrows. He could think of some parties he’d like to have in Noah’s mouth.

Noah blushed. “That kinda came out weird.” He buried his head further inside the menu to hide his embarrassment. “So what did you want to get on the pizza?”


“Even anchovies?”


“I don’t. I like my fish big.”

“I bet you do,” Luke smirked, not being able to help himself. Noah had served that one up on a silver platter. And he loved it when Noah blushed. It was so damn cute.

“A supreme sounds good,” Noah said from behind his menu. “I think we should go with that one.”

“Whatever you want.”

The waiter came over took their orders and collected the menus. Luke scanned the restaurant and only saw a couple of people he knew from school. They weren’t anyone he’s had a problem with so he relaxed into the red vinyl booth. Hopefully, it would stay that way. He wanted a nice, stress free night out with Noah.

Luke tentatively stretched his legs out underneath the table, his feet seeking out Noah’s. He kept his attention focused on Noah, searching for any sign of discomfort. Being so close to Noah and not be able to touch him the way he wanted to was hell. This was the next best thing. Hopefully, Noah felt the same way.

A grin broke out across Noah’s face as Luke carefully stroked Noah’s calf with his foot. Score!

Tonight seemed like his lucky night. He hoped that it would continue to hold out, especially after
dinner.

The waiter came by, dropping off their drinks and plates for the food. Luke had expected Noah to pull his feet away from his, but he didn’t. Another victory—albeit a small one—but Luke would take what he could get. Every step Noah took whether it was a giant or baby was a very good thing.

Noah unwrapped his straw. “Do you have any plans for tomorrow night?”

“No, I don’t,” Luke did his best to sound casual.

“Would you…uh…like to go out to dinner and a movie?” Noah asked, gazing at him hopefully.

“Yeah, that would be great.” Luke smiled broadly.

“Great.” Noah nodded. He picked up the wrapper from his straw and began to fiddle with it. “So… did…uh…anyone give you a hard time during the game?”

Luke had a pretty good idea of what Noah was referring to but he needed Noah to come out and say it. No more beating around the bush when it came to the gay thing. “What do you mean?” he asked, taking a sip of his Coke.

“I know you said that your teammates are cool, but did anyone from the other team give you a trouble.”

“No,” Noah sighed, studying his hands, eyebrows knitting together.

Luke forced himself to remain quiet. He’d given Noah a nudge, but now he needed to take the step. Please let him take the step.

Noah leaned across the table, the candlelight illuminating his handsome face. But it also made him look so vulnerable. Luke just wanted to reach across the table and tell him that everything was okay. “Did they give you crap for being gay?” he finally whispered.

“No, I don’t think they know. It’s not like there was a countywide bulletin announcing it,” Luke replied. Then he shrugged. “I’m sure word will eventually get out. I’ll deal with that when it happens. I know my teammates will have my back, so no worries.”

“I will too.”

Luke’s lips turned up into a small grin. “Do you plan on jumping onto the court and kicking ass and taking names?”


Luke really wanted to believe it. A few minutes later the waiter delivered the pizza and breadsticks. They both looked and smelled delicious. He knew they’d taste that way too. He couldn’t wait to dig into the hot, cheesy goodness.


“I will.” Noah smiled.

As Luke bit into the slice he could feel Noah staring at him. Actually, this wasn’t the first time Noah was watching him eat. Luke decided to make the most of it. He allowed his tongue to dart out
across his lips to lick up any stray sauce. Noah gaped at him, his mouth slightly open, pupils wide.

“God…this…is…so…amazing,” Luke let out an exaggerated moan, playing it up to the hilt.

Noah picked up his piece and took a bite. "Wow,” he said with a mouthful of pizza.

“Yeah?”

Noah nodded enthusiastically. “Uh hun.”

They were pretty quiet as they devoured their first slice of pizza. He always enjoyed the comfortable silence that he shared with Noah, which said a lot since Luke had a tendency to talk just to hear the sound of his voice.

“I guess we were both pretty hungry,” Noah chuckled after he chewed his last bite of crust.

“I’m far from done,” Luke said, picking up his second slice. “I swear I can polish off a small by myself. This stuff is like cracknot that I know what crack tastes like.”

They consumed the pizza and breadsticks, leaving their table looking like it had been ransacked. Luke was content. His belly was full and he was in the company of his gorgeous boyfriend. Life was pretty damn good. Noah looked equally sated.

When the bill came, Noah tried to pay but Luke wouldn’t allow it since he’d asked Noah out. Noah could pay for their next date.

“Do you have to be home at a certain time?” Luke asked as they headed toward the car.

“No.”

“Did you want to hang out for a little while?”

“Yeah, that would be great.”

Luke grinned. “I know just the place we can go.”

It was the perfect place. Pine Road was a small, dead end, dirt road that led to the Jensen farm, which has been tied up in probate court for years. The farm has been deserted since Robert Jensen died of a heart attack without a will, leaving his children squabbling over the land. Some wanted to sell it off, but his eldest daughter wanted to hang on to it. According to his grandma it was quite a mess. But it had left Pine Road as the perfect makeout spot since no one used it. Luke remembered Aaron mentioning its endless possibilities and had filed away the information just in case he ever needed a spot to be alone with someone.

Luke drove down to the dead end and put the car in park. “Is this okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Noah licked his lips.

His lips were perfect, just made for kissing. Luke had been longing to kiss him the entire night. Now they were finally alone.

Luke unfastened his seatbelt and turned toward Noah who was staring at him anxiously. “I’ve wanted to kiss you…”

“Then do it,” Noah breathed, leaning over the console.
Luke captured Noah’s lips in his, cupping the sides of Noah’s face with his hands. Slowly they explored each other, but it wasn’t enough for Luke. He needed more—needed to feel more of Noah pressed against him. Luke shifted forward, trying to fulfill his need but banged his thigh into the stick shift instead.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

“You okay?”

“Just wanna get close.”

“Me too.”

There had to be a way to make this work. The backseat was far too cramped for both of them. Think…think…think. And then it came to him.

“Your seat reclines so you could put it back all the way and I could…uh…join you over there if you…”

“Yeah,” Noah said, already searching for the level that would recline the seat. Finding it, he slowly eased it until he was lying down.

Luke took off his coat so that he’d have as little clothing between him and Noah as possible. Then he gingerly climbed over the console careful not to hit anything vital against the stick shift. Noah wiggled out of his jacket, staring up at Luke expectantly with those deep blue eyes. Luke couldn’t wait to get lost in him.

Luke lowered himself on top of Noah, his lips quickly making contact with Noah’s. Much better. Noah’s mouth was so wet and wanting. Kissing Noah made him ache. Every time Noah’s tongue tangled with his Luke felt it in his cock.

“Did I tell you how gorgeous you look tonight?” Noah asked when they came up for air.

Luke suddenly felt shy. He wasn’t used to such compliments coming from the object of his affection. Kevin never was one to boost his ego. He usually found a way to rag on Luke. When it came down to it, Kevin might have once been his best friend, but he was never a good friend—never good for Luke.


“Thanks.”


Oh hell yeah. Noah could do whatever he wanted to him. “Yeah.”

Ever-so-carefully Noah unbuttoned Luke’s shirt, as if he were unwrapping a precious gift. Luke had often fantasized about Noah undressing him. In the darkness of his bedroom he’d imagine how incredible it would feel. Now he knew.

Once Luke’s shirt was unbuttoned, Noah raked his fingers through Luke’s chest hair. Noah stared at his chest, completely mesmerized. It felt so good to have Noah’s fingers roaming over his skin.

Luke’s breath was coming out in short gasps. He slid his fingers into Noah’s hair as Noah’s mouth latched around one of his nipples, teasing and nibbling it. “Oh…Noah,” he groaned. If Noah kept it up he wouldn’t be surprised if he came. Luke had no idea that his nipples were so fucking sensitive.

Noah licked his way up Luke’s chest, over his neck and onto his chin. He placed butterfly kisses on Luke’s face before becoming reacquainted with Luke’s lips. Mmmm…there was nothing like Noah’s hot, deep kisses.

Coming was pretty fucking good too.

And Luke wanted to make Noah come.

Luke shifted slightly so that he was only half lying on top of Noah. There was no mistaking that Noah was very excited. The bulge in his jeans was quite large. Luke’s mouth practically watered at the sight. But he still wanted to see more—feel more.

His fingers traced along Noah’s hard length. Luke knew Noah was big, but fully aroused he was just fucking huge. All Luke wanted to do was get inside Noah’s pants and get him off.

“I wanna use my hand on you,” Luke murmured, gazing at Noah whose lips were slightly parted and eyes half lidded. “Can I?”

“Please.”

This was Luke took a deep breath. He’d been waiting for this moment for so long. He didn’t want to fuck this up. With a slightly trembling hand, Luke unbuttoned Noah’s jeans. Noah seemed to be holding his breath as Luke reached for his zipper. A big step for both of them.


“Uh…yeah.”


Instead of just reaching inside Noah’s underwear, Luke pulled them down. He wanted to see Noah in all of his glory—see what he’d spent endless nights jerking off to.

Fuck. Noah’s dick was even more beautiful than he remembered it—long, thick, hard and leaking. Luke’s first instinct was to just dive in and take Noah into his mouth. But he held back since they were taking it slow. One step at a time. Finally being able to wrap his hand around Noah’s cock was going to be a fucking amazing step.

Luke wanted to savor this first for both of them so instead of gripping Noah’s dick he slowly trailed a couple of fingers along the hard, silky length. A shuddering breath escaped from Noah’s lips. Just the reaction Luke wanted from him, which was a nice start. Luke swiped the precome that had pooled at the head with his finger. He wanted to lick it off to see how Noah tasted.

But he didn’t. Luke didn’t want Noah to think he was some sort of freak. It was so early in their relationship. They were still discovering so much about each other. And now he was going to see
Luke wrapped his hand around Noah’s cock, gripping it tightly. He marveled at how it pulsed in his hand. Luke’s gaze shifted from Noah’s dick to his face. Noah’s eyes were screwed shut as Luke slowly stroked him.


“God…Luke…”

Luke quickened his pace, rubbing and twisting, making Noah pant. What an incredible feeling it was being able to bring Noah to this point. He swore that he had to be just as turned on as Noah. It only took a couple of more strokes before Noah was coming, biting his lip to stifle his moan. Come spurted over Luke’s hand and down his wrist.

Noah’s load seemed endless. And it was so fucking hot.


“Was it okay?” Luke asked hopefully.

“Okay no. Phenomenal? Hell yes,” Noah replied with a content smile.

“Yes!”

Noah glanced down at his lap. “I’ve made quite a mess.”

Luke reached over, opening the console. “No problem. I’ll take care of you.” He snatched a handful of napkins and shut it, placing the majority of the stack on top of it. He wiped the come off his hand and then attended to Noah, mopping up the rest. Luke tossed the dirty napkins in the backseat and then kissed Noah softly. “See.”

“Mmmhmmm…” Noah purred.

Luke smiled into the kiss. “Mmm…so nice.” And so hard. Luke needed to come. He rocked his hips against Noah, rubbing his erection against Noah’s thigh. It wouldn’t take long for him to get off at this rate.

“Let me take care of you,” Noah murmured.

“Okay.”

“I hope I can do as good as a job as you did.” Noah reached for Luke’s belt buckle.

“I have complete faith in you,” Luke breathed as he shifted so Noah would have better access to his cock. Actually, he was so damn horny that he was pretty sure he was going to come the moment Noah touched him. Just the thought of Noah’s hand on his dick made him want to shoot.

Noah made quick work of Luke’s pants and underwear, pushing them both down. Now he was staring at Luke’s dick, which was pressed up against his belly. Luke felt a little self conscious, hoping that Noah wasn’t disappointed. Not that he should be because Luke knew that he was pretty damn well hung. A few quick glances around the locker room through the years had confirmed this fact.

“Noah,” Luke groaned as Noah’s calloused hand slowly jacked him. The friction was mind-blowingly wonderful. He clutched Noah as he got closer and closer to total ecstasy. *Noah is jacking me off* was the one thought the permeated his thoughts. And then all too soon he was coming. Hard and loud. Good thing that they were alone on a deserted road or else he’d have some explaining to do.

“Okay?”


“Stars are good.” Noah grinned.

“And you are amazing,” Luke murmured, seeking out Noah’s mouth. He couldn’t wait for the next evening so they could do this all over again.

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Charlene was jolted awake by the sound of a car door slamming. Blinking at the TV, which was had on some late night talk show, she gingerly sat up. She hadn’t planned on falling asleep while watching it, but it had been quite a busy night at work. Al’s had been packed with high schoolers celebrating Oakdale’s basketball victory. She wasn’t too surprised that Noah and Luke weren’t among them. They probably went someplace where Noah wouldn’t be under the scrutiny of his mother. Not that she could blame them. When she was Noah’s age she wouldn’t have wanted to go out on a date to the place where her mother worked—assuming that the boys were out on a date.

One thing she knew for sure was that Luke had played very well. A lot of the kids were talking about it as she passed by their tables. Most of the talk was positive. But there was one boy who couldn’t believe that “the fag could play basketball so well”. She *accidentally* spilled the chocolate milkshake she’d been carrying on him.

No one said nasty things about Noah’s boyfriend.

Ever-so-slowly the door to the cabin opened and Noah tiptoed inside. He was quiet as a mouse, probably so he didn’t wake her. Too late for that. Charlene cleared her throat which made Noah jump.

“H-hi, Mom,” he stammered as he slipped off his jacket and hung it up on the coat rack.

“Hi, string bean. Did you have fun tonight?”

“Yeah, it was great.” Noah grinned, sauntering toward the sofa.

As he got closer Charlene noticed his disheveled state—hair a bit out of place, his gray t-shirt sticking out from underneath his sweater, and his lips a bit bee stung. She had a pretty good idea why Noah was getting home so late. But she wouldn’t say anything about it to him. Charlene trusted him. Hopefully, he’d trust her with his secret soon.

Charlene glanced up at him, smiling. “Glad to hear it.”

Noah sat down next to her. “Are you okay, Mom? You look really tired.” He pressed his hand to her forehead for good measure.
“Yes, I’m fine,” she tried to reassure him. “Al’s was just really busy tonight because of the basketball game.”

He bit his lip. “I’ve seen you after a busy shift at work. This is different. You were in the hospital less than a week ago,” Noah pressed. “I don’t want you to end up back there because you’re pushing yourself too much.”

“I don’t want to end up back in the hospital either,” she replied, choosing her words very carefully. Noah needed to stop worrying about her. She had to be strong for him. “I’ve been following doctor’s orders. I don’t work tomorrow so I’ll have plenty of time to rest and recharge my batteries. Everything is going to be fine.” Charlene wrapped her arm around Noah, giving him a loving squeeze. “Now tell me about the basketball game. I heard they won.”

“Yeah, Luke was amazing. He’s the reason why they won. He scored the most points tonight. He’s so talented—the best player on the team,” Noah gushed. “I’m happy that I got to see him play. We went out for pizza afterwards to celebrate. It was so much fun.”

“Sounds like it was. I like Luke. He’s a very sweet boy. It was so nice of him and his sisters to make the ornaments for us and then help decorate the tree,” Charlene told him. She wanted Noah to know that she approved of Luke so hopefully he’d see that it was okay to tell her about everything.

“He’s pretty great,” Noah dreamily replied.

“Yes, he is,” Charlene agreed.

“It’s nice having such a good friend. All of the Snyders have been so great.” Noah rested his head against her shoulder. “We’re so lucky that we ended up here.”

“Yes we are.” Their situation could be so much worse. At least they were in a place where Noah would have people to look after him once she was gone. He could have been alone. But now he wouldn’t be.
Luke wrote down the last movie choice before powering down his laptop. Tonight Noah was taking him out to dinner and a movie. Earlier Noah had sent him a text asking him if he could look up their movie options at The Gem. He knew Noah loved old movies, but he didn’t know what other types of movies he enjoyed watching. Luke had always leaned toward the blockbusters—fun popcorn movies. He loved to be entertained. He had no doubt that whichever movie they decided on he’d be entertained because he’d be watching it with Noah. Maybe, just maybe, they could get away with holding hands in the dark.

Tonight was definitely going to be enjoyable—dinner, a movie, and most likely more alone time. Luke really loved alone time—touching, kissing, and coming. It really couldn’t get much better.

Well, okay it could. They’ve only scratched the surface. There was still so much to explore. They would. Luke didn’t doubt it.

Pocketing the movie list, Luke slipped on his jacket and pulled out his cell phone. He needed to let Noah know what their movie options were so they could finalize their plans for this evening. He stepped outside so he could have some privacy which was always a must when talking to Noah these days.


“Hey, boyfriend.”

Noah chuckled, “You just love calling me that.”

Luke strolled toward the center of the patio. “I do because I have the best boyfriend ever.”

“I’m the first boyfriend you’ve ever had.”

“And you’ve already convinced me that no one would ever be as great as you.”


Noah cleared his throat. “Did you look up our movie options?”

Luke dug into his pocket, pulling out the list. “I’ve got it right here. We’ve got Casino Royale, Turistas, Van Wilder, and The Santa Claus 3.”

“Do you have any preferences?”


“I wouldn’t call myself a snob,” Noah replied. “My favorites might be the classics, but I enjoy all movies.”

“Even a mindless action flick?”

“Is this your way of saying that you want to see Casino Royale?”
Noah was already figuring him out...even over the phone. “Yeah,” he said, kicking a stray rock toward the shrubs.

“What time does it start?”

“9:15.”

“That will give us plenty of time for dinner then,” Noah said. “I was thinking we could do Chinese if that’s okay with you.”

Luke loved Chinese. This date was getting better already. “That would be great.”

“I’ll swing by and pick you up at 6:30 then.”

Luke wished it were already 6:30 so he could see Noah. Hopefully, the rest of the afternoon would pass by quickly. He needed to figure out what he was going to wear tonight so that should kill some time. “Looking forward to seeing you, Noah, my amazing boyfriend,” he said, grinning.

“You too,” Noah said, before hanging up.

“Jade. Oh fuck...fuck...fuck.”

Luke couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. All he wanted to do was disappear—preferably back in time so he could take the last couple of minutes back. He’d made the mother of all mistakes. Noah was going to—god—Noah was going to fucking freak right out. He had promised Noah that he would keep their relationship a secret and he’d failed just a week into it.


He took a deep breath, praying that he could somehow find a way out of this disaster. “Jade…”

Jade stopped in front of him, folding her arms across her chest. An evil smirk played on her lips. “So you’re getting it on with the stable boy?”

“Jade, no,” Luke pleaded with her. She was already trying to spin this into something ugly which it wasn’t. There was nothing wrong with his relationship with Noah.

“Are you embarrassed that you’ve been slumming?”

Luke could feel his blood begin to boil. Noah was a sweet, incredible guy and he was lucky that Noah was his boyfriend. And proud—so fucking proud. He couldn’t wait to announce it to the world when Noah was ready, which wasn’t right now.

“I haven’t been slumming,” he countered.

“Oh?” Jade raised her eyebrows. “I know how desperate you’ve been to get into Noah’s pants since he first darkened our doorstep. I thought you’d take a full page ad in The Intruder to announce that you finally have a boyfriend. Since you’re being so quiet about it I think you must be embarrassed.”

“You don’t know shit.”

“Please, enlighten me,” she replied, gesturing grandly. “I thought you were out and proud. I thought you didn’t lie anymore. But it turns out it’s all bullshit. I wonder what everyone is going to say
when they find out the truth. I can’t imagine that your parents are going to be happy that you’ve been diddling the stable boy.”

Luke took a moment to collect himself. Being all pissy and flying off the handle wasn’t going to work. It would only egg Jade on. God knows there didn’t need to be any more fuel added to this inferno. Instead, he needed to try to reason with her. Hopefully, she had a heart in there somewhere.

“Jade, there’s a good reason why we’ve been keeping this a secret,” Luke quietly admitted. “Noah isn’t ready to come out yet. His mom has been sick and he’s worried about upsetting her.”

“Isn’t that touching?” Sarcasm dripped from her lips. “I bet his mommy would love to know what he’s been up to.”

Luke shook his head. “Don’t do this.”

“Do what? Tell the truth? Mr. Holier Than Thou Snyder wouldn’t want me to lie,” Jade insisted. “You’re always telling me to be honest with people. You know, stop the lies and the games. Turns out that you and your boyfriend are the biggest game players of them all. I say game over.”

He wasn’t going to go down without a fight. There had to be a way to make Jade see that ratting them out would be wrong. Not so long ago he and Jade were as thick as thieves.

“Why do you insist on being so cruel?” Luke calmly asked. “Once upon a time we were pretty close. We were friends—good friends. I guess it no longer suits you since it doesn’t seem to benefit you anymore. I’ve always had your back, but you stopped having mine. I stick by the people I care about. I don’t try to destroy them.”

“Really? Because that’s not how I see it,” Jade hissed, hands firmly planted on her hips. “Your mom threw me out because you pitched a hissy fit.”

“I didn’t tell my mom to ask you to move out.”

“You didn’t have to,” Jade countered. “All you had to do was bat your big brown eyes at her and sniffle about how I’ve been so mean and nasty to you. Poor picked on Luke.”

This approach wasn’t working. He’d have to try another method and pray that it worked or else he and Noah would be fucked—without lube.

“Fine…you win,” Luke conceded. “If you’re so hell bent on fucking with Noah and me then I’ll call Noah right now and tell him that you know about us. I’ll tell him that we need to come out sooner than we planned. I’ll promise to stand by him - even when he tells his mom because she’s a good woman who doesn’t deserve to be blindsided with this. What I won’t do is abandon him because he’ll need me.”

“That’s really touching,” Jade mocked him.

“I’ll also be sure to tell my family and friends that you threatened to out Noah before he was ready to come out,” he declared, his eyes locking hers. Luke meant business and wasn’t about to back down from his cousin. “If you think my mom was pissed because you and I had a fight you haven’t seen nothing yet. My dad…well…he thinks the world of Noah. And me—you’ll be dead to me because no one fucks with my boyfriend. No one.” He was practically shaking by the time he got this all out. Luke hoped he wouldn’t have to make good on his threats, but he would if he had to. Luke meant what he said—no one fucked with Noah.

Jade bit her lip. The sarcastic reply he’d been expecting didn’t come. “Fine,” she muttered.
“Fine?” he asked, not quite sure she’d actually agreed. He’d expected more blood to be spilled.

“I won’t say anything about Noah.”

“Thank you,” he quietly replied, keeping his game face on. Luke wasn’t about to show her just how relieved he was that she’d agreed to keep quiet. Disaster averted.

“Don’t get too warm and fuzzy with me because things between us aren’t kosher.” Jade started to walk away from him, but Luke grabbed her arm.

“Why is that, Jade?” Luke demanded. “Why ever since Noah came to town have you been hell bent on making me miserable?”

Jade rolled her eyes and huffed out a reply, “You’re exaggerating as usual, drama queen.”

“I should have known trying to talk to you would be pointless,” Luke sighed. “You know it all, right?”

“I know that this family treats me like a second class citizen,” Jade spat, eyes narrowing. “I know that I’ve had to fight for everything in my life. Nothing was handed to me on a silver platter. All I want is what I’m entitled to.”

Luke sadly shook his head, disappointed that all Jade could see was what was wrong. Or at least what she perceived to be wrong with her life. She was so focused on her perception of the negatives that she couldn’t see that there were so many positives.

“Jade, everyone in this family loves you—me included. I thought we were more than family. At one point you were one of my best friends,” he explained. “But for some reason you would never let me get too close to you. Our friendship became one sided. You just took and took. I’m just done with being used by you.”

“Wow…tell me how you really feel,” Jade chuckled ruefully as she slumped into one of the chairs on the patio.

“I just wanted to give you something to think about.” Luke sat down in the chair next to her. “Actually, I was hoping to come to some sort of understanding.”

“I told you that I’d keep my mouth shut about Noah.”

“This isn’t about Noah right now. It’s about us.”

“What do you want from me, Luke?”

“Respect. Compassion,” he replied. “You really do have a family that loves you. My parents could have sent you packing after they found out about the lies you told when you first came to town, but they didn’t. Instead, they gave you a home.”

For once Jade was speechless. She sat there, absorbing everything he was telling her. Hopefully she’d take it to heart.

“And it’s going to be awhile for things to heal between us,” Luke admitted. “I’m not even sure our relationship can be fully mended because you broke my trust. But I don’t want to be enemies either. You’re my cousin, Jade.”

Jade pursed her lips. “I suppose we can find a way to co-exist. It should be much easier with me
“Hey,” Luke said, placing his hand on his arm. “Just think of all of the hot guys you can bring home once you have your own place. You’ll be able to do what you want and won’t have to answer to anyone. You know that my mom will have you over for dinner all the time. We’re all family. You’re stuck with us.”

Finally, Jade cracked a smile. “I suppose there are worse things.”

Luke was grateful that the worst case scenario had been avoided. He really hoped that he’d find a way to possibly be Jade’s friend again. But they had a long road ahead of them.

********

Noah eased the truck around the Snyders’ circular driveway and shifted it into park. Luke had texted him earlier, requesting that Noah pick him up at the front door instead of coming inside. Noah didn’t question it since Luke must have his reasons. He was just excited to finally be able to take Luke out for a change. It seemed like Luke was the one who constantly paid for things. However, their relationship needed to be an equal split. Noah was used to carrying his own weight.

More than anything he wanted this date to go well. So far his track record with dates he had initiated was pretty dismal, but he hadn’t really wanted to go on those dates in the first place. They were more out of duty, trying so hard to be something that he obviously wasn’t.

Being with Luke was natural. And so much fucking fun—especially when they were alone.

Last night had been…well…

Noah didn’t think he could come up with enough words to describe just how incredible it was. Luke’s chest alone was worth at least a hundred different adjectives. Finally being able to run his fingers through Luke’s chest hair and kiss it as well as suck on one of his nipples—god—Noah thought he was going to come on the spot.

Just remembering it was making him horny. Not having to go inside to get Luke was turning into the best idea Luke has ever had. Well, at least one of them.

Luke wanting to give him a hand job was definitely another one. So much better than doing it to himself. Fast and hard. Perfect—this was also the first word that came to mind when he thought about Luke’s cock. There had to be about a gazillion more. Big. Beautiful. Amazing. And so on. Noah wasn’t the one who was good with words. That would be Luke.

Noah bet that Luke could probably think up a ton of adjectives since he was so damn smart. Not to mention vocal. Boy was Luke ever vocal when it came to messing around. Noah never had to guess if he was doing something Luke enjoyed. So far it seemed like he was doing a very good job of pleasing his boyfriend which was a huge relief since he’d had zero experience.

Things were pretty fucking amazing between them. He hoped they’d be able to go back to Pine Road after the movie. Noah wanted to jerk Luke off again. Oh how he loved having…

Noah’s thoughts were interrupted by a loud knock on the passenger’s side window. Luke. Shit. He was supposed to text Luke once he’d gotten there. Leaning across the bench seat, Noah unlocked
the door. “Hey,” he said with a smile as Luke opened it.

“Have you been here long?” Luke asked as he climbed into the pickup truck.

“No, just a few minutes.”

“I was waiting for your text, but then I looked out the window and saw you were already here.”

“I-I-I was,” he stammered, “but you were out here before I could.”

Luke raised his eyebrows. “Hmmm…you seemed to be lost in another world before I knocked.”

“I was just thinking about our date tonight,” Noah replied, which was true. Kinda.

“I’ve been thinking about it all day,” Luke admitted as he fastened his seatbelt. “Six thirty couldn’t get here fast enough.”

“Yeah?” Noah flashed him a shy smile.

“Yeah.” Luke’s grin matched his. “Let’s get out of here so I can hold your hand.”

“You got it.”

Luke reached over and took his hand as soon as Noah pulled out of the Snyders’ driveway. “I hope you don’t mind that I didn’t have you come to the door,” he said, giving Noah’s hand a squeeze.

“No, it’s fine.” Noah replied, stroking Luke’s palm with his thumb.

“I’m afraid that if my parents see us together they’ll be able to figure out how I feel about you,” Luke quietly confessed. “I tend to wear my emotions on my sleeve and…”

“Hey, it’s better safe than sorry, right?”

“Right,” Luke sighed. “And I know the girls would beg us to take them along. It was just easier this way.”

Noah nodded. “I agree.”

But it still sucked that he’d put Luke in this situation. Luke had to lie to his family because of him. It really wasn’t fair. And it couldn’t keep going on.

It won’t, he tried to reassure himself. You’re gonna to tell your mom. You just have to wait for the right time.

“I appreciate it,” Noah said, casting a sidelong glance at Luke who was staring out the passenger’s side window. “I’m going to tell her.”

“I know,” Luke replied. His tone didn’t match his words. There was doubt lingering, which saddened Noah to hear. And Luke was still not looking at him.

Noah really hated this part. Lies and secrecy had been a part of his life for far too long.

“It will be soon. I promise.” Noah took a deep breath. “Luke, I know how much you hate all of this secrecy. I do too. I’m trying so hard not to be afraid…”

Luke finally glanced at him, his handsome features soft and understanding. “Hey, there’s nothing
“It was something that kinda just came to me when I was thinking about—things.”

Things. There was no doubt that Luke had been thinking about the same things, which made Noah blush.

Luke played with Noah’s hand that he’d been holding. “Even though my parents know that I’m gay I just have this feeling that they kinda think of me as asexual since I’ve never had a boyfriend. I think it makes it easier for them to deal with since they don’t have to think of the…uh…intimate aspects of being gay. It’s not something we’ve ever discussed.”

Gay sex. Noah thought he’d die on the spot if he had to discuss that with his mom. Coming out was going to be difficult enough.

“But I don’t care,” Luke defiantly declared. “No one will ever make me feel bad about my feelings for you, Noah. Nothing has ever felt so right to me. And if my parents end up having a problem then they’ll have to find a way to deal.”

“They might not be too thrilled that you’re involved with the stable boy,” Noah quietly admitted.

Luke vehemently shook his head. “No, the fact that you work for my dad won’t make a difference to them. They’re not all caught up on a person’s pedigree, especially my dad. My parents adore you. If they have a problem with me having a boyfriend it wouldn’t be because of you.” He brought Noah’s hand to his lips, kissing it. “Trust me.”

“I do.”

The topic was dropped as Luke directed him to Wing Wah, which was located in the same strip mall as Target. The restaurant looked pretty unassuming from the outside sandwiched between a Dollar Tree and Hallmark store. Noah discovered the inside was almost magical—an elaborate fountain in the lobby filled with pennies, the dim dining room lit by a rainbow of paper lanterns which was accented with lotus flowers and bamboo. He felt as if he had been transported to an exotic garden.

The hostess seated them at a booth on the far side of the restaurant. Noah glanced around the restaurant and it looked like they were the youngest people there. Hopefully, none of Luke’s less than desirable classmates would show up.

Noah scanned the menu. It had been so long since he had Chinese food. He wanted to try everything on the menu. “Do you know what you’re going to get?”

“Probably Beef & Broccoli. What about you?”

“The Sesame Chicken sounds good.”
Luke put down his menu. “It’s amazing. My dad always gets it. I usually end up eating half of it.”

“Did you want to share?” Noah asked, closing his menu.


The waitress returned and took their orders. Noah made sure that they went all out—wanton soup, eggrolls, and pot stickers. His stomach had been rumbling since he’d left to pick up Luke.

“How is your mom doing?” Luke cautiously asked after the waitress delivered their Cokes and soup.

Noah’s first instinct was to snap at Luke for prying, but he bit back his curt reply. Luke obviously genuinely cared about Noah’s mom’s health. It might be nice to share his concerns with him because he was still worried about her. Maybe talking to Luke would help ease his anxiety.

“She doesn’t look good,” Noah quietly admitted, stirring his soup. “I’ve never seen her so frail and worn out.”

“Have you talked to her about it?”

“Yeah, she keeps telling me that she’s okay. There’s always an excuse whether it’s a long shift at Al’s or not getting a good night’s sleep.”

“But you’re not buying it.”

“No,” Noah sighed. “She was just in the hospital and kept it from me. I’m worried about her.”

“They didn’t keep her overnight though,” Luke pointed out. “Trust me, if it was something serious they would have kept her there.”

Noah chuckled ruefully, “Yeah, that’s what she told me.”

“See.” Luke peered up from his Won Ton soup.

Noah nodded even though it didn’t feel right in his gut. No one knew his mom like he did. Something was wrong. He couldn’t shake the feeling no matter how hard he tried.

“When is your next basketball game?” he asked, deciding to change the subject to something a bit more pleasant. Spending the night obsessing about his mom’s health would probably ruin the date. And it wouldn’t do any good right now either. He’d just have to continue to keep a sharp eye on her.


“Is it far away?”

“About a half hour south of here.”

“That’s not too far.”

Luke raised his eyebrows. “You’d travel a half hour to see me?”


“Cool.”
Noah leaned across the table. “I love to watch my boyfriend play,” he quietly confessed.

“I love having my boyfriend watch me play,” he countered.

“Cool.”

Luke pushed his soup bowl to the edge of the table. “I wouldn’t object if you came to all of my games. But I understand if you’d rather not. People might talk if I suddenly got my own personal cheering section, especially someone as hot as you.”

Noah blushed, still not used to being considered “hot”. He knew that Luke meant it because he often seen the desire that burned in Luke’s eyes. The feeling was mutual. Luke was so gorgeous.


“We’ll see,” he offered weakly. God…he really was pathetic.


Noah was relieved when the meals arrived so they could focus on eating. All was quickly forgotten as they filled their plates with steaming food.

“Thank you for dinner,” Luke murmured, leaning across the seat and kissing Noah on the cheek. “So far this has been a great date.” He hoped that the little kiss wouldn’t freak Noah out since they were still parked in the lot outside of the restaurant even though Luke had made sure that no one was around before he made his move.

“You’re welcome.” Noah grinned at him, cheeks flushed. “I’m sorry that I couldn’t pick you up in something a bit fancier than this old truck.”

“Noah, there’s nothing wrong with the truck,” Luke reassured him. “Bench seats—I think that says it all.”

Noah chuckled, “Bench seats are good.”


Very good indeed.

“A trip back to that deserted road might be in order after the movie—if we have time,” Noah said, glancing shyly at him.

“We’ll make time,” Luke eagerly informed him. He just had to get back into Noah’s pants again. It had felt so incredible gripping Noah’s thick cock and stroking him to an orgasm.

“I was hoping that you’d say that,” Noah admitted as he started the truck.

“I’m never going to turn down an opportunity for some alone time with you,” Luke said, placing his
hand on Noah’s thigh.

Noah swallowed. “Duly noted.”

Luke was tempted to suggested skipping the movie and driving straight to Pine Rd. to park, but he knew that going to the movies was important to Noah. And, of course, sitting with Noah in the dark for a couple of hours, watching a movie would be amazing. He’d always longed to have a boyfriend to go to the movies with. Actually, there were so many things he wanted to do with Noah—teach him to ride, swim in the pond, hang out at Java, go camping, buy comics together, skate on the frozen pond, go sledding—he could keep going. And, of course, make love which deserved to be on a list by itself since it was so special.

Noah parked the truck in the lot behind the movie theater. As they strolled toward the building Luke forced himself to keep ample distance between them which was harder than he thought. He was drawn to Noah like a magnet. His hands were firmly stuffed in his coat pockets so he wouldn’t accidently take Noah’s hand.

Temporary. Luke kept repeating the word over and over in his mind.

“Did you want any popcorn?” Noah asked as they entered the lobby of The Gem after he bought their movie tickets.

“I don’t know if I have room.”

“There’s always room for popcorn,” Noah said, giving him a playful nudge. “And it’s still my treat.”

Noah’s sweet smile made him melt. How could he turn him down? Well…he couldn’t. A little bit of popcorn wouldn’t hurt either. Sharing a bucket meant fingers brushing together as they reached for the popcorn, which was always pleasant. “Sure,” he replied. “Can I have a Coke too?”

“You may have whatever you like,” Noah flirted as they got in line for the concession stand.

Luke couldn’t suppress his grin. Noah was flirting with him in public. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he countered.

After their refreshments were purchased (one tub of buttered popcorn to share and Cokes for each), Noah led the way into the theater that was showing *Casino Royale*.

“Do you have a preference of where you like to sit?” Noah asked.

Luke had a feeling that Noah did. Noah’s giddiness about being inside a movie theater hadn’t gone unnoticed by Luke. He was like a kid in a candy store. “I’ll be happy with wherever you pick.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m sure you know the perfect spot.”

Noah led him halfway down the aisle, choosing two seats dead center. He should have known that Noah would want dead center. They situated themselves in their seats, shirking off jackets, balancing drinks, as the Gem’s seats didn’t have cupholders. But Noah didn’t seem to mind. He tuckered between his legs and perched the tub of popcorn on his thigh.

“Mmmm,” Noah groaned, chewing his first handful of popcorn. “I almost forgot how delicious movie theater popcorn tastes.”
Right, of course, Noah probably never got to the movies after his mom took him on the run. Luke was hit with a pang of sadness as he realized that the boy who loved movies probably hadn’t been inside a theater in years. There was so much that Luke took for granted that Noah had been denied due to his circumstances.

Luke grabbed some popcorn. “This place has the best popcorn,” he agreed. “I think they might use real butter.”

“It’s been so long,” Noah murmured, staring down at his Coke. “I didn’t even enjoy the last couple of times I went to the movies.”

Was Noah about to open up a bit more about his past? There were a few questions that Luke was ready to fire his way, but he knew better. Noah would share things at his own pace.

“Oh?”

“When I tried dating before I’d do the movie thing because it meant that I didn’t have to talk much,” Noah quietly confessed. “I spent most of the movie worrying about after the movie. She’d expect a kiss. It was so messed up.”

“I understand. I’ve been there.”

Noah nodded. “I’m just so happy I don’t have to pretend anymore.”

But Noah was still pretending. This time it was with his mom. Luke kept his mouth shut though. He didn’t want to ruin their perfect night out. Deep down Noah must know that he was still hiding to some degree so he didn’t need Luke to point out the obvious.

The house lights dimmed and the coming attractions began to play. Throughout them Luke was torn as to whether or not he should take Noah’s hand. Luke didn’t want to pressure him, but he also really wanted to hold his boyfriend’s hand.

Fuck.

About ten minutes into the movie Luke felt Noah’s fingers snake through his, which brought a huge smile to his face. He gave Noah’s hand a squeeze as he continued to stare at the screen.

Another step.

Noah never ceased to amaze him.

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Luke and Noah left the theater with smiles on their faces. Ever since the house lights came up Noah had been talking a mile a minute about the film—directing, camera angles, cinematography, editing—all things Luke had never given a second thought. He loved hearing Noah dissect the film. It was both adorable and hot, which is how he’d describe Noah.

“Seeing a movie with you, Mayer, is definitely a unique experience,” Luke chuckled as they sauntered toward the truck.

Noah grabbed Luke’s arm, stopping him. There was a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes. “Is that
your polite way of calling me,” he breathed, his lips mere inches from Luke’s, “a geek?”

Before Luke could respond, he was grabbed from behind, yanked away from Noah. Luke struggled to get free, but his arms were pinned behind his back.

“I think cocksucker is a better term,” Kevin sneered, gripping him tightly.

“Let him—” Noah never got the rest of the words out of his mouth because out of nowhere Mark and Chad appeared. Chad making the most of their element of surprise by landing a sucker punch to Noah’s cheek, knocking him to the pavement. Noah lay in a crumpled heap, unaware of what had hit him.

“Paybacks are a bitch, fag,” Mark leered, stepping over Noah and delivering a swift kick to the ribs.

Chad kicked Noah in the gut. “Time to pay, fairy.”

“No, don’t!” Luke screamed in horror, struggling to break free from Kevin’s vice grip. “Leave him alone you fuckers!”

Mark and Chad just laughed as they continued to relentlessly kick Noah, making sure he suffered.
Chapter 50

Luke screamed as Chad landed a swift, hard kick to Noah’s gut. The sound of Chad’s foot smashing into Noah was sickening. Luke struggled, trying to break free from Kevin’s grip. He needed to get to Noah—to protect him from these monsters.

Mark’s foot struck Noah’s back with a loud thud. Noah hadn’t tried to get up, he just lay there moaning. Chad and Mark showed no signs of stopping. Luke had never seen such hatred in their eyes which were cold as the eyes of a great white shark. They were going to kill him.

There was no way in hell that he’d just stand by and watch Noah while got beaten to death. Summing all of his strength, Luke raised his foot and stomped down hard on Kevin’s. Startled Kevin cried out, loosening his grip just enough for Luke to escape. Spinning around, Luke swung and connected with Kevin’s nose, sending him staggering backward. With Kevin off balance, Luke launched himself at Mark, knocking him to the ground and more importantly away from Noah.


“Get off him you crazy little faggot!” Chad yelled, grabbing Luke’s shoulders, trying to pull him off of Mark.


“Come on, let’s get out of here,” Kevin barked, hand covering his bloody nose. “These two queers aren’t worth it.”

Luke rolled off Mark who staggered to his feet, following Chad and Kevin as they ran off into the darkness. He peered up at his saviors—Dusty and Lucy. Boy was he ever happy to see them. Dusty had his cell phone pressed to his ear while Lucy jogged toward Noah in full out rescue mode.

Noah.

Noah hadn’t said a word since Chad punched him. Please let him be all right. He scrambled over to Noah, who lay curled in the fetal position. Blood oozed from his left eyebrow.


“Luke,” Lucy said, kneeling next to Noah. “Don’t move him. We need to be very careful since we don’t know the extent of his injuries. I’m going to take a quick look at him. I promise not to hurt him, okay?”

He slipped his fingers through Noah’s, wanting to reassure his boyfriend that he hadn’t been abandoned. “Please tell me that he’s going to be all right,” Luke begged his cousin.

“I’m sure he will be,” Lucy said, gently turning Noah onto his back so she could examine him better. “We’ll know for sure once we get him to the hospital.”


“Let me be the judge of that,” Lucy told him.
“No…no hospital.” Noah struggled to sit up, but Lucy kept a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Hey…hey…be still. I’m a doctor. You can trust me,” Lucy said. “I just want to see if anything is broken and make sure you don’t have a concussion.”

Luke squeezed Noah’s hand. “It’s okay. Lucy is great. She’s my cousin. She’ll take good care of you,” he whispered as tears trickled down his cheeks. “It’s okay.” If he kept saying it then it might make it so. Noah just had to be okay.


“Me neither. I’m so sorry…”

“Hey, nothing to be sorry about.”

But Noah was so wrong. It was Luke’s fault that he’d been attacked. Kevin and his asshole friends hated Luke so they took it out on Noah, because they knew it would hurt him. Cut him to the core actually. Luke should never have put Noah in this position.

“Can you tell me what happened to you?” Lucy asked gently.

“I think I was punched in the face,” Noah tentatively replied, eyes darting at Luke for confirmation.

“Chad and Mark jumped you.”

“Can you tell me your name?” Lucy asked, studying Noah’s eyes.

“Noah.”

“What year is it?”

“2006.”

“Good.” Lucy smiled. “Do you have a headache?”

“No.”

“Very good. Now I’m going to press on your abdomen, Noah,” Lucy explained. “I want you to tell me on a scale of one to ten how bad the pain is—ten being the worst. You need to be honest with me. There aren’t any bonus points for trying to be all macho, okay?”

Noah nodded weakly.

Luke kept hold of Noah’s hand, hoping that Noah would squeeze it if the pain got to be too much for him. But he didn’t. Noah gutted it out as Lucy examined him. All he did was respond when asked a question. Luke could see the pain in Noah’s eyes, but other than that he was cool and collected. In fact, Noah had yet to shed a single tear unlike him. Luke was a fucking mess—crying and snotting all over the place.

Noah’s collected composure was due to years of practice Luke quickly deducted. Noah’s father had hit him for god knows how long. He’d probably learned to deal with the pain. Maybe even compartmentalize it. The mere thought of it brought a fresh set of tears to his eyes.

Dusty brought a napkin over to him. “Here,” he said, handing it to Luke. “Put it on the cut. It will stop the bleeding until you can put a bandage on it.”
“Thanks.” Luke took the napkin from him and applied it to Noah’s wound.

“No!” Noah exclaimed with such a force it nearly knocked Luke back onto his heels. “We can’t call the police.”

“Those guys deserve to pay for what they did to you,” Dusty countered.


Shit. The Colonel. The police would have a ton of questions for Noah—questions that he wouldn’t be able to answer, specifically his name. Lying to the police wasn’t a good idea, but the truth could also bring on a whole new set of problems. He wouldn’t allow Noah and his mom to be potentially put into danger.

“He’s right,” Luke said, looking up at a thunderstruck Dusty. “We don’t want to get the police involved. It’s just easier this way.”

“Easier?” Dusty gaped at them. “You just can’t let them get away with this.”

Luke could feel Noah tense next to him. There was no way in hell he was going to put Noah and his mom in danger—especially over Kevin Davis and his asshole friends. “No,” Luke insisted. “We’re not going to press charges. That’s final, Dusty. We appreciate your help but we need to handle this by ourselves.”


“I won’t. We’re not going to go after them to seek revenge,” he promised.

“Okay,” Dusty relented. “We’ll handle it your way, but you get to explain it to your father.”

“Agreed.”

“Thanks for looking out for me,” Noah murmured.

But Luke had done no such thing. He should have been more aware of their surroundings. His guard never should have been down. Not for one single second. He was so stupid. And now Noah was hurt because of it.

********

Holden hadn’t been expecting the sight he encountered in the parking lot. When he’d seen Dusty Donovan’s name on his caller ID he’d been reluctant to answer the phone. But Holden quickly deducted that it must be important to call after midnight so he answered. Dusty had explained that Luke and Noah had been in a fight in Old Town and were a little banged up. Holden had been prepared to see blood, scrapes, and bruises.

But not this.  

*Definitely not this.*

Noah was sprawled across the pavement battered and bleeding. And Luke…Luke knelt next to him,
holding Noah’s hand while his other caressed—lovingly caressed Noah’s hair. Luke was crying, murmuring things he couldn’t quite make out.

Luke and Noah…

Holy cow! When did this happen?

Holden quickly shook the thought out of his head. Right now he needed to focus on making sure the boys were okay and finding out who was responsible for this. The rest could be dealt with later.

“What happened here?” Holden asked finally finding his voice as he marched toward them.

Luke stared up at him like a deer caught in headlights, but he kept hold of Noah’s hand and said nothing. Holden wasn’t the only one who’d been caught off guard.

“There were some boys attacking them when we got here,” Dusty called from the car he was leaning against.

“What provoked this fight?” he asked Luke.

Luke’s eyes narrowed. “Nothing, not a thing,” he insisted. “Noah and I were just minding our own business. We weren’t doing anything wrong.”

“Luke, weren’t those the same bigoted jerks that were giving you grief the night of the ball?” Dusty asked.

This had happened before. To say that Holden was surprised would have been an understatement. He hadn’t a clue that Luke had been harassed in the past. His son had never said a word. He was angry with himself for not figuring it out on his own. As Luke’s father he should know when his son is being picked on.

Holden squatted down next to Luke. “So you know who did this to you?” he carefully asked him.


“Kevin as in Kevin Davis?” Holden asked, completely stunned. He’d been under the impression that Kevin had come to terms with Luke’s sexuality. Kevin had been grateful for Luke saving his life at Raven Lake. This didn’t make any sense.

Luke nodded, casting his eyes downward.

“I thought he was—”

“No, he’s not—definitely not,” Luke cut him off. “His friends aren’t okay with it either.”

Holden shifted his gaze to Noah, who was holding a napkin above his left eye. An ugly bruise seemed to be forming on his left cheek. The poor kid looked like he’d gone a couple of rounds with Rocky Balboa and lost.

“How are you doing?” he asked Noah.

“Fine. I don’t need to go to the hospital.”

Holden looked over to Lucy. “Does he?”

“No. I don’t think his injuries are serious. His ribs aren’t broken and I didn’t detect any internal
injuries, but he’s going to be very sore for a few days,” she replied.

“My mom can’t see me like this,” Noah pleaded. “She’ll freak out.”

“Dad, can Noah stay with us tonight?” Luke asked, glancing up at him hopefully. “Please.”

Holden was torn. As a parent he knew that he’d want to know right away if Luke had been hurt in a fight. But he could also remember what it was like to be a teenager, having gotten into a few scrapes himself. Mama hadn’t been pleased. And she never had to deal with him being a victim of a hate crime. It enraged him to think that Luke and Noah had been attacked because the boys were gay.

His eyes met Noah’s frightened ones. The boy was absolutely terrified. All too well he remembered how afraid Luke had been to come out. “Okay,” Holden relented. “You can stay, but we need to tell your mother where you’re going to be.”

“Yes, sir,” Noah replied. “I can call her. She got a cell phone a few days ago.”

Holden had to shake his head. Even after going through a hellish ordeal, Noah still had impeccable manners.


It suddenly dawned on him that there were some very important people missing. “Where are the police?” Holden asked, surveying the scene.

“They haven’t been called,” Dusty replied.

Leave it to Dusty Donovan to fuck things up. “Why the hell not?”

“Because I didn’t want them called,” Luke interjected.

This night was getting more curious by the minute. Luke out of all people should want to make sure that Kevin was punished. “Why not?”


“Enlighten me.”

Luke quickly glanced from Lucy to Dusty before resting his gaze on Holden, biting his lip, his eyes wide and glistening. “Dad…”

“Okay.” He understood. Luke didn’t want to discuss his problems in front of Lucy and Dusty and quite possibly even Noah. “We’ll talk later.”

Luke nodded. “All right.”

One issue dealt with, on to the next. Holden needed to get the boys home so Noah could get bandaged up. Hopefully, they’d be able to put this awful ordeal behind them. Noah was obviously in no condition to drive—either was Luke for that matter. He hadn’t seen his son this rattled since Damian had tried to spirit him away to Malta this past summer.

“I don’t think either of the boys should be driving.” Before Luke could speak up, Holden turned to Lucy. “Do you think you can drive Noah to our place in the truck the boys came in?” Holden asked. “Dusty can follow so you have a ride back home.”

“Sure.”
“I think it’s time we got out of here then.” He turned to Dusty and took a deep breath, pushing all of his animosity toward him aside. At least for the moment. “I’m glad you and Lucy came along when you did. This probably could have been much worse.”

“They’re good kids,” Dusty replied evenly. “If they change their mind about pressing charges let me know. I’ll be happy to testify.”

“Thank you.”

Lucy and Luke had Noah up on his feet. The boy still looked a bit dazed. A good night’s sleep would do him a world of good. Holden helped them get Noah into the truck, but when Luke tried to get in as well he stopped him.

“You’re coming with me,” he said, placing a firm hand on Luke’s shoulder

“But, Dad—”

“Don’t ‘but, Dad’ me,” he replied. “Come on.”

“I’ll see you in a little bit,” Luke quietly told Noah before he dutifully followed Holden to his pickup. Holden could sense that Luke’s mind was on Noah as they settled into the truck. His son’s gaze fixed on the old farm truck that Gloria had borrowed. He acted as if he’d never see Noah again.

Young love.

Yes, that’s what it was. Holden was certain of it. His son had found love—real love, not some unrequited crush like Kevin Davis. Holden never liked that kid—not even before he suspected that Luke had developed feelings for him. Holden never bought into Kevin’s Eddie Haskell routine, but he put up with it since he was Luke’s best friend.

Some best friend he turned out to be.

Holden couldn’t believe that he bought the line of bullshit Kevin had fed him after Raven Lake about being sorry for calling Luke a faggot. Shame on him for wanting to believe the best in that kid.

“Has Kevin been giving you a hard time for being gay?” he asked.

“Do we really have to do this?” Luke asked, staring down at his hands which were resting on his lap.

“Luke, I need to understand what is going on here.”

“Kevin—among other people—has been a jerk to me ever since the school year began,” Luke quietly admitted.

So Luke had been getting harassed the past three months and he hadn’t a clue. Great. Holden wondered if there was anything else Luke had been keeping from him. “How come this is the first I’m hearing about this?”

“I didn’t see the point in telling you.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s my problem.”

Damn stubborn kid. Holden didn’t know if he should shake Luke or hug him. He loved his son so
much. He’d been the very first person to hold Luke after he was born. The bond between them was instantaneous. It didn’t matter that he was Damian Grimaldi’s biological son. Holden just loved the little baby that he helped bring into the world on that stormy May night.

“That’s your opinion,” Holden informed him. “Anything that involves your well being is my problem too. If you’re being bullied I need to know these things.”

“Why? So you can swoop in and fight my battles?” Luke countered. “No thanks. I don’t want to be labeled as the pathetic faggot.”

“You’re neither of those things.” Hearing Luke talk that way about himself was difficult because all he saw was a bright, loving boy. His heart ached knowing that there were people in the world who hated his son just because he was gay. “You have the right to attend school without being harassed. You need to report what Kevin did to you.”

“No.”

“Luke—”


“Luke, is Noah your boyfriend?” Holden asked, casting a sidelong glance at Luke who had his arms wrapped around his chest as he gazed forlornly out the window.

Luke immediately tensed. “Dad, please…please don’t ask me that question.”

“I won’t be mad if he is—”

“Please,” Luke pleaded. “I can’t answer that question. Can’t we just drop this?”

Luke had already answered it even without admitting it aloud. His emotions said it all. Luke felt everything to the nth degree and had a difficult time masking his feelings. It was one of the many special things about his son. Luke just cared so much. Obviously Noah meant a lot to him.

“You know, you can always talk to me about anything,” Holden replied evenly. “I love you and nothing will change that.”

“I know but…” Luke’s voice hitched. “It’s just not up to me. I can’t—”

“I understand. You don’t want to break Noah’s confidence.” Holden could see Luke’s internal struggle. He wanted to talk to him but Luke also didn’t want to betray Noah. “Look, it’s obvious to me that you and Noah are together—or at the very least you have strong feelings for him. And I’m going to guess that it isn’t one sided—”


“Hey…hey…hey,” Holden said, resting his hand on Luke’s thigh trying to soothe him. “It’s going to be all right.” He wished he wasn’t driving so he could give Luke a big hug. The kid has been through hell. Luke has suffered far too much this past year. Holden wanted to make it stop once and for all.

“It was just so hard seeing him get attacked,” Luke sniffed. “I was helpless.”

“Thankfully Noah wasn’t seriously injured.”
“Maybe not physically—”

“Are you afraid that he’s going to stay in the closet because of this?” Holden ventured.

“I never said he was gay,” Luke insisted.

“I know. You didn’t have to say a thing,” Holden reassured him. “I figured it out on my own. You didn’t betray anyone’s trust.”

Luke was silent for what seemed like an eternity, especially since his son is so damn talkative. “Yeah,” he quietly admitted. “I’m afraid that he’ll change his mind about a lot of things.”

“He can’t change who he is.”

“No, but he could go back to trying to deny it.”

“Try not to borrow trouble, okay? Let’s just deal with one thing at a time.”

“All right.”

Holden was pretty sure that Luke had only agreed with him so the topic would be dropped. Luke would undoubtedly worry until he had reason not to do so. Maybe it was time for a little parental intervention. Noah undoubtedly would need someone to talk to tonight. Holden planed on lending him ear and offering some sage advice. It was the least he could do for young love.

********

Noah sat in the Snyder’s kitchen dazed. He was still trying to wrap his head around what had happened an hour ago. One minute he was about to kiss Luke and the next he was on the pavement getting the shit beat out of him.

Dammit. He should have seen it coming.

Kevin and his goons probably had been planning this since the night of the ball. He should never have let his guard down not when the enemy was still out there seeking revenge. It was basic tactical procedure. He knew this from growing up with the Colonel.

His thoughts drifted to his mom. He hated phoning her so late at night, especially when she needed her rest and then lying on top of it. He wasn’t going to be able to hide the fact that he’d been in a fight from her. One good look at his face would give it away. He was going to have some serious explaining to do in the morning.

But could he tell her the whole truth?

“Hey,” Luke said, strolling into the room carrying peroxide, cotton balls, and bandages. “How are you doing?”

“Fine.”

Luke set the supplies down on the kitchen table. “I’m so sorry, Noah. This is all my fault—”

“No, it’s not,” Noah insisted. He couldn’t believe that Luke of all people was trying to take the
blame for this. “I should have been paying better attention.”

“But Kevin and those guys only came after you because of me,” Luke countered.


“You’d never be involved in any of this if it wasn’t for me,” Luke insisted. “If I were capable of fighting my own battles then none of this would have happened.”

“You are capable of fighting your own battles.”

“Then how come you have to rescue me like I’m so fucking damsel in distress?” Luke countered.

This argument was making his head hurt. They were never going to see eye to eye on this. Well, at least not tonight. “Can we just agree to disagree about this right now?” he sighed.

“Gladly,” Luke said, reaching for a cotton ball and the peroxide. “Now let’s get you cleaned up.”


Luke smiled shyly. “You know, if you wanted to play doctor this was kinda overkill. All you had to do was ask.” He dabbed Noah’s cut with the peroxide.

Damn…that stung.

“Ouch,” Noah winced, slightly pulling away from him.

“Oh, baby, I’m sorry about that,” Luke murmured, caressing his cheek.

Whoa…wait…baby? Noah just gaped at him, utterly surprised by the pet name. He never fathomed that anyone besides his mother would use terms of endearment with him.

“Ahh…that kinda just slipped out,” Luke said in one rushed breath. “I’m so—”


Luke rested his forehead against Noah’s, grinning. “Baby.” He kissed the tip of Noah’s nose. Luke put the cotton ball on the kitchen table and grabbed a bandage. “Now if you’re really good I’ll give you a lollipop.”

Noah could think of something else he’d like to suck on which made his cheeks flush. “Okay.”

The sound of footsteps coming down the back staircase made Luke spring to his feet. He quickly began to gather up the supplies he used to patch up Noah.

“The truck is back at the cabin and the guest room is ready for you, Noah,” Holden said, sauntering into the kitchen. “Luke, why don’t you try to find something for Noah to sleep in and I’ll show him to his room.”

Luke flashed a helpless look at Noah and then replied, “Yeah, sure.”

Noah wanted to follow Luke. He was safe with Luke. God only knew how Holden felt about him at the moment. It was because of the fight Holden had to come out in the middle of the night to take care of him and Luke. If the Colonel had gotten such a call…
Noah shuddered at the thought. He’d most likely be back in the hospital, because the Colonel would have finished the beating that Chad and Mark had started. A real man never would have allowed himself to get jumped.

“Come on, Noah,” Holden said, heading toward the stairs. “I’ll show you where you’ll be staying tonight.”

“Yes, sir.” Noah dutifully followed him, trying to ignore his racing heart. The mere thought that he probably let Holden down made him sick to his stomach.

They ascended the staircase in silence. Noah followed sluggishly behind him; his feet felt as him they had cinderblocks attached to them. Holden showed him into a room two doors down from Luke’s bedroom, leaving the door only slightly ajar after Noah entered the room.

“How are you really doing, Noah?” Holden asked, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“F-f-f-fine, sir,” Noah stammered. Shit…there was no way in hell Holden was going to believe that lame response.

Holden patted the mattress. “Relax, sit down.”

If only it were that simple, but Noah did as he was told. He sat down next to Holden, but he sure as hell wasn’t relaxed. Far from it. “I’m sorry for—”

“You have nothing to apologize about,” Holden interrupted him. “I’m sorry that you and Luke had to get attacked. I really wish you guys would reconsider pressing charges, but I understand that Luke doesn’t want to make his situation at school worse than it is already. I don’t agree with it, but I will respect it for the time being.”

Noah certainly didn’t expect that reaction.

“Luke doesn’t deserve to be harassed by them,” Noah replied evenly.

“Neither do you.”

Noah shrugged, not quite sure how he was supposed to respond to him. It was probably best if he say as little as possible. Less of a chance of saying the wrong thing.

“I guess time will tell if I’m doing the right thing by not insisting that the police are brought into this matter,” Holden told him. “But if I’m wrong it wouldn’t be the first time I made a mistake as far as Luke is concerned.”

“Really?” Noah’s curiosity was piqued. The notion of a father admitting that he had made mistakes was completely mind boggling to him. The Colonel was always right. Mistake was a word that wasn’t in his vocabulary.

Unless it came to Noah.

“Really. I’ve made plenty of mistakes as a husband, father, and even as a human being,” Holden admitted. “I’m far from perfect.”


“Actually, I handled Luke’s coming out all wrong. I wish I could have done it differently.”

Noah froze. Why was Holden talking to him about this? Did he know? Had Luke told him? It
took everything in his power not to get up and run right out of the room, never looking back. But he stayed, compelled to hear what Holden had to say.

“I had suspected that Luke might be gay, but I didn’t say anything to him. I thought he’d come to me when he was ready,” Holden said sadly shaking his head. “I honestly had no idea how badly keeping his secret was affecting Luke. It tore him up. He drank—he lied—all because he thought we’d hate him. Lily and I would never hate any of our children. Never. I don’t think any parent could ever hate their own child.”

Noah knew someone who would hate their kid. Winston Mayer. The Colonel hated his son who was nothing but a constant disappointment—so weak and pathetic—far from the man he wanted to call his son.

“But Luke said that his mom didn’t handle the news well,” Noah said quietly.

“No, she didn’t,” Holden admitted. “But she didn’t see it coming unlike me. It took her some time to adjust. She had all of these dreams for Luke and she thought they’d never come true. They still can though. They’ll just happen a little differently. I can assure you though that she never stopped loving Luke. Not for one minute.”


Holden tentatively placed his hand on Noah’s shoulder. “You know, there’s a pretty good chance that your mom already knows.”

Noah’s head snapped up. “W-w-what?” he stammered. “I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know about you and Luke.”

Noah gaped at him as his blood turned to ice. This can’t be happening. Luke promised he wouldn’t tell anyone. “I-I-I…” was all he could manage to sputter.

Holden gently squeezed Noah’s shoulder. “Hey…it’s okay.”

Noah squeezed his eyes shut. “Did Luke…?”

“No…I-I-I…Luke didn’t tell me,” Holden assured him. “I have eyes. I could see tonight that Luke cares about you very much. I asked him if you were his boyfriend, but he wouldn’t answer.”


“Do you think maybe you should tell your mom?” Holden asked.

“I’m so scared…” Noah’s voice cracked. Shit. The last thing he wanted to do was break down in front of Holden. He didn’t want him to think he was weak. He’d already gotten the snot beat out of him tonight. Crying like a baby shouldn’t be added to the list.

Holden gathered in into a big, warm bear hug. “It’s okay,” he soothed him. “This is a huge step to take, but I know you can do it.”

Tears just poured from Noah’s eyes as Holden hugged him. Never in Noah’s life had his own father given him a hug like this. Noah had craved one from him ever since he could remember. Now he finally knew what unconditional love from a father felt like.
God…it felt so damn good.

“...I can go with you when you talk to her or I’m sure Luke would too.”

The Snyders were such good people. He was so lucky to have met them. But this was something he needed to do on his own. He had to be a man about this. Noah untangled himself from Holden’s embrace. “Thank you, but I have to talk to her by myself,” he said, wiping his eyes.

“Are you sure?”

Noah nodded. “Yeah.”

“Your mom loves you and she’s not going to stop loving you because you’re gay,” Holden said, smiling at him softly.

“I hope so.”

“I know so.” Holden stood up. “Now you should probably try to get some sleep. You have a big day ahead of you tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sure Luke will be by with some clothes for you to sleep in,” Holden said as he headed toward the door. “Actually, I wouldn’t be surprised if he was out in the hall listening in.” He opened the door to reveal a sheepish Luke holding a pair of dark gray sweats and a t-shirt.


“Don’t stay too long,” Holden told Luke as he stepped into the hallway. “Noah needs his rest.”

“Hey,” Luke said, sauntering into the room dressed for bed. He had on a pair of black sweats and a gray Chicago White Sox t-shirt. His feet were bare and his hair a bit tussled.

“Hey,” Noah replied, offering a little smile.

“I…uh…found something for you to wear. The pants might be a little short, but I promise not to point and laugh,” Luke said, handing him the clothes.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Luke swallowed, shifting slightly. “I kinda heard some of the conversation you had with my dad,” he admitted. “Are you really going to come out to your mom?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m so sorry that my dad found out about us. I really tried to—”

“Luke,” Noah promptly cut him off. “I know you tried to keep it from him. I should never have asked you to lie to your family about us. It wasn’t fair.”

Luke knelt in front of him so that they were eye level, taking both of Noah’s hands in his. “Noah, I would do anything for you.”

For probably the hundredth time he wondered how in the hell someone like Luke could care about him. “Lying isn’t going to be one of those things anymore.”
“I’m here if you need me—for anything.”

“I’ll probably need to talk after I tell my mom.”

“You better call me.”

“I will,” Noah promised.

“I wish I could sleep in here with you tonight,” Luke whispered, gazing deeply into his eyes.

“Your parents would—”

“I know, but maybe someday.”

“Yeah someday,” Noah agreed already imagining being wrapped around Luke snug in his bed.

Luke leaned forward, brushing his lips softly against his. “Sweet dreams, baby,” he murmured.

A flood of warmth washed through Noah. Already he loved his new nickname. “You too.”

Reluctantly Luke got to his feet. “I better get back to my room before my dad comes and drags me out of here by my ear.”

Noah chuckled at the mental imagine of Luke being dragged away (most likely kicking and screaming) by his dad. “I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“See you in the morning.”

“Yeah,” Noah murmured, staring after Luke as he strolled out of the room, closing the door behind him.

He prayed that Holden would be right—that his mom would love him—straight or gay.
Chapter 51

Nervous didn’t even begin to cover how Noah felt as he approached the cabin. The breakfast he’d eaten at the Snyders was now sitting uneasily in his stomach. He prayed that he could keep it there.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, hoping to calm his nerves. Noah tried to remember Holden’s reassuring voice. Holden had seemed so convinced that Noah’s mom would love him no matter what. Noah really wanted to believe it. He needed his mom now more than ever.

Maybe she would still love him. But would she also be disappointed in him? After all, he wasn’t the son she’d most likely envisioned. His mom probably had dreams for him and he was sure none of them involved him being gay. Noah didn’t think he could bear it if she was disappointed. He’d lived most of his life being a disappointment to the Colonel.

Noah forced his feet to move forward. He could do this. Hadn’t he been through much worse in his life? The beatings, beratings—he’d endured both so he could most likely handle whatever his mom’s reaction would be to his big announcement. He really wanted to believe what Holden had told him—that his mom wouldn’t stop loving him no matter what he told her. Parents loved their children unconditionally.

Well, most parents.

“Please…please…please,” he murmured, before opening the door to the cabin and stepping inside. The cabin was warm, smelling of faintly of buttered toast with a hint of cinnamon. “Hi, Mom,” he said as brightly as he could muster, slipping out of his jacket and hanging it up on the coat rack.

“Hi, string bean,” she called from the kitchen. “Did you have fun last night with Luke?”

“Yeah,” he replied, ducking his head. Noah knew he was only putting off the inevitable. His mom would have to be blind not to notice the big purple bruise on his cheek as well as the bandage over his left eye.

“I’m so happy that—” the words died in Charlene’s throat as she turned and saw Noah’s face. “What happened?” she demanded, marching over to him.

“It looks worse than it is,” he offered lamely.

“You didn’t answer my question, Noah.”

He bit his lip. “I…uh…kinda got into a fight.”

“Did this happen last night?” she asked, frowning. “Is this why you stayed the night at the Snyders?”

Noah nodded, his heart sinking when he saw the disappointment on his mother’s face. He’d lied to her—something she frowned on immensely.

“I can’t believe you lied to me,” Charlene said, planting her hands on her hips. “I thought I raised you better than that. You had to know that I was going to find out. I don’t understand—”

“Mom, please,” Noah begged. He needed to get this out before he lost his nerve. The urge to hide in his bedroom and never come out was strong. “I-I-I really need to talk to you…” his voice faltered.
Charlene’s expression softened, the anger was replaced by genuine concern. “What is it, string bean?”

Would he still be her string bean after she knew the truth? Noah had always thought the nickname was silly. And he hated it when she used it in front of other people. But the mere thought of never hearing her call him that again made his heart ache.

“I think we should sit down,” Noah decided, heading toward the sofa.

“Okay.” Charlene joined him, placing her hand on his leg. “You know you can tell me anything,” she said gently.

Tell her…just fucking tell her…

“I hope so,” he murmured.

Charlene took Noah’s hand. “What is it?”

Noah could feel the tears welling up in his eyes. God…this was harder than he imagined. Two words. That was all he needed to get out but they were trapped in his throat.

Luke did this so can you, he reminded himself. All of the lies need to stop.

“Noah?”

“I’m gay,” he choked out. “I’m sorry…I know—” The rest of his sentence was swallowed up by a sob. But then a thin pair of arms was wrapped around him, pulling him close.

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” Charlene said, hugging him tightly. “Nothing. Do you hear me, Noah?”

He did, but it couldn’t be this easy. Nothing in his life was ever simple. There were always consequences. “But I wanted you to be proud of me. And—”

Charlene pulled back slightly so she could look him in the eyes. “I am proud of you, Noah,” she said, stroking his hair. “It doesn’t matter to me whether you’re straight or gay. I just want you to be happy.”

“Really?”

She smiled, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Yes. I can see how happy you’ve been since we’ve been here.”

“Yeah,” he sniffed, wiping the tears from his eyes.

“I’m glad you finally told me,” Charlene admitted.

Wait…finally told me? All this time…

Noah blinked at her. “Did you know?”

“I had good idea, but I wasn’t completely sure until I saw you and Luke together.”

“I wasn’t spying on you,” Charlene tried to reassure him. “I saw you kissing Luke when I came home from work that night he was over helping decorate the Christmas tree.”

Noah buried his head in his hands. His mom saw them kissing.

Charlene rubbed his back. “Hey, look at me. There’s no reason to be ashamed.” Reluctantly Noah lifted his head, cheeks flushed. “I didn’t say anything because I wanted you to come to me when you were ready. You know, you were the happiest I’d ever seen you that night. The smile on your face was as bright as the lights on the Christmas tree.”

Even though his mom had seen him with Luke it still felt strange to talk to her about him. He was so used to keeping his relationship with Luke a secret. “I like spending time with Luke,” he shyly admitted.

“How long has he been your boyfriend?” she asked. “Luke is your boyfriend, right?”

“Yeah, he is,” Noah admitted, a grin creeping to his cheeks despite himself. Just talking to Luke had that affect on him. “It hasn’t been long. We went on our first date that day after the ball.”

“Is he your first boyfriend?”

“Mom!” His mother was really out to mortify him. He prayed that this was going to be the only embarrassing question.

“I’m just curious. I’m not trying to pry,” she tried to reassure him. “You don’t have to answer the question if it makes you uncomfortable. I’m just so happy that you finally told me.”

His mom had mentioned that she hadn’t seen him as happy as he was with Luke. Now he was seeing a truly joyous smile on his mother’s face. It really was total acceptance.

“Luke is my first boyfriend,” he quietly admitted. “And I’m his—it’s kinda perfect actually.”

“You love him.”

Was he really that transparent?

“I do, but I haven’t told him and he hasn’t said anything to me,” he replied. It was still very early in their relationship so he was trying to keep those feelings close to the vest. At least for now. He hoped that Luke one day Luke would tell him that he loved him because Noah loved Luke so damn much.

“I think he does,” Charlene said, grinning broadly.

Talking so openly with his mom was a bit surreal. In the past they’d always shared practically everything. But now talking to her about his biggest secret was such a relief. The albatross had been lifted, leaving him feeling as if he could soar through the sky.

She took one of his hands in hers and squeezed it, her smile fading. “Tell me about the fight,” she said quietly.

“Oh that?”

“Yes, that. Did you think you’d get out of it by telling me that you’re gay?” she teased.

“I was kinda hoping,” Noah sheepishly admitted.
“Think again.”

Telling his mom about the fight should be a piece of cake now. Noah took a deep breath. “I had taken Luke to the movies. We were heading back to the truck just joking around and having fun,” he carefully explained. “The next thing I knew I was on the ground. T-t-they were kicking me and I couldn’t get up. I didn’t think they’d ever stop. And Luke was screaming at them, but it didn’t matter…”

“Oh my god…”

“Then it stopped. I think Luke might have gotten to them…I don’t know for sure.” The details were still pretty fuzzy. He and Luke hadn’t really talked about it too much. “Then his cousin was there with her boyfriend. The guys took off when they saw them.”

“Who were they?”

Noah hesitated. Luke felt terrible and responsible—this much Noah did know, but he wasn’t and he didn’t want his mom to think it was Luke’s fault either. Luke had done nothing to provoke this kind of hatred.

“Noah,” Charlene gently pressed.

“They were some classmates of Luke who’ve been giving him a hard time since they found out he was gay,” he blurted out. “When Luke and I went to that street fair on Halloween they tried to pick a fight with him. I got mad and punched one of them.” Noah held up his hand to silence the response he knew would be coming from his mom. For obvious reasons she abhorred violence. “And before you say anything, you should have heard all of the disgusting things they were saying to him. If I didn’t act first, Luke might have been the one who got hurt and I just couldn’t stand by and watch that not after—not after watching what Dad…”

Charlene gathered him in her arms. “Hey, hey, I understand. I know how helpless you felt growing up. You thought a lot of those beatings were your fault, but they weren’t. Your father was an angry, violent man and he was impossible to please. And I’d rather him hit me than you. I’m your mother. I will protect you forever.”

“I know, Mom,” Noah sniffed. “I just couldn’t watch someone I love get attacked.”

“Of course you couldn’t. Were the police called last night?”

“No.”

“How come?”

Noah pulled away from her. “Because they’d ask questions that I wouldn’t be able to truthfully answer,” he admitted, casting his eyes downward. “Luke knew this so he went along with me to protect me. He…uh…knows about us. I couldn’t lie to him anymore. I hope you’re not mad.”

She tilted his chin so that he was looking her in the eyes. “I’m not mad. I wouldn’t want you to lie to Luke. It’s definitely not the way to start out a new relationship. I like Luke. You couldn’t have picked a better boyfriend.”

“He’s pretty incredible.”

“I have a confession too,” Charlene said quietly.
“What is it?”

“I told Emma about us,” she admitted. “She’s such a good person and I hated lying to her.”

Noah smiled. “I’m glad you told her. I hated lying to her too.”

Charlene gingerly touched Noah’s bruised cheek. “I hate seeing bruises on you. You’ve already had enough of them to last a lifetime.”

“I’m okay, Mom.”

“It’s never going to be okay for me to see you get hurt.” Her fingers moved from his cheek to the bandage covering his eyebrow. “You’ll always be my little boy—even if you’re all grown up now and have a boyfriend,” she murmured, blinking back some tears.

Noah hated to see his mom cry. It always made him feel so helpless like he’d been when he was a kid. “Mom,” he gulped.

“I’m sorry but a mother should never see her child hurt. And I’ve seen you hurt so much…”

Noah bit his lip as a few tears managed to trickle down his cheeks. “You did your best, Mom. You got me away from him. And you showed me how to protect the people that you love.”

Charlene hugged him tightly. “Please promise me that you’ll be careful. I don’t want to see another bruise on you.”

“I will. Promise.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “I love you, string bean. You make me so proud every day. Never forget that.”

“Have I told you lately that you’re the best mom ever?”

“If you have, I wouldn’t mind hearing it again.”

Noah grinned. “You’re the best mom ever.”

And he meant it with all of his heart. Noah couldn’t imagine anyone else doing just a good job of taking care of him as she had. She protected him, loved him, and was proud of him no matter what.

********

Luke had sequestered himself in his bedroom after Noah left. His nerves immediately on edge the minute Noah stepped out the door. The last thing he needed was to be watched by his parents like he was some sort of science experiment. He also knew that he’d snap if one of his sisters asked him a dumb question. A pointless fight with his siblings would only bring more attention to him since this parents hated when they fought.

Please let Noah’s mom react better than mine.

There was a knock on his bedroom door. “Luke, can I come in?” Holden asked.
It wasn’t a rhetorical question. His dad wanted to talk to him whether Luke felt like it or not. So much for trying to lay low. “Sure,” he replied, sitting up and leaning against the headboard of his bed.

Holden slipped into the room, shutting the door behind him. “How are you doing?”

“Fine.”

Holden raised his eyebrows as he sat down on the bed. Obviously he knew there was something bothering Luke which was why he was there. “You know, Noah’s going to be okay. I think his mom will handle the news well.”

“I want to think so too,” Luke admitted, picking at an invisible fleck on his jeans. “I even told him that I thought she’d be okay with it, but what if I’m wrong? Look at how Mom reacted.”

“Noah’s mom and your mom are two different people.”

His dad had no idea of just how different. “Yeah,” Luke sighed. “I just wish he would have let me go with him.”

“You and Noah are pretty serious, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” Luke studied his father, trying to figure out where Holden was going with this.

“You and Noah are still pretty young so there’s no hurry to rush into things,” Holden said, shifting a bit uneasily.

Oh god. His dad wasn’t going to give him the sex talk. They’d already had it a few years ago when his father thought he was straight. It was awkward then and the prospect of his dad trying to muddle through a gay sex talk was downright scary. A possible train wreck. “Dad…”

“Luke, I know what you’re going through. I was once young too. I know the feelings. I know the desires…”

“Dad,” Luke interrupted him. “I haven’t…Noah and I haven’t…neither of us have ever…” He prayed he wouldn’t have to actually come out and say the dreaded “v” word.

Holden nodded. “I just want what is best for you. There’s no hurry. I don’t want you to rush into anything that you’re not ready for. You only have one first time in your life. I’m your father. I only want what is best for you.”

“Would you be saying the same thing if we were talking about my girlfriend instead of my boyfriend?”

“Yes,” Holden replied. “This has nothing to do with you being gay. I would be saying the same thing to any of my children.”

“So it doesn’t make you uncomfortable thinking about me being with another guy?” Luke countered.

“Luke, I don’t try to think about it, but not because I think it’s wrong because it’s really not my business,” Holden said with a smile. “And I’m pretty sure I would have just a hard time if it were one of your sisters and some boy.”

“Fair enough.”

Holden grabbed Luke’s foot and shook it. “Please just promise me that you’ll be careful when the
time comes. I know you know about safe sex so…”

“I do,” Luke quickly reassured him. “I promise that I will be careful and I’ll be sure it’s the right thing to do.”

“I knew I raised a smart son,” Holden said, standing up and patting Luke’s leg. “If you ever need to talk about anything—and I mean anything—you can come to me. I was young once. I know it might be hard for you to imagine.”

Luke couldn’t imagine running to his dad with relationship problems, but at least he’d have the option. His father was pretty amazing. He wondered how many fathers would have even have tried to make the effort with their gay son. Noah would never have been able to have a talk like this with his father. He shuddered to think of what would happen if the Colonel ever found out about Noah. Sometimes Luke forgot how lucky he was that Holden Snyder was his dad.

********

Lily sat in the living room, savoring the quiet while she fed Ethan a bottle. The girls were in the family room, hunkered down with a movie and Luke had gone up to his room after Noah had gone home. Sundays were her favorite day of the week because it was usually spent with Holden and the kids. She loved having her family around her even if they were off doing their own thing. It was nice knowing that they were still close by. After being in the coma, Lily had vowed that she never take for granted a single day of her kids’ lives.

Glancing up, she saw a blur of stripes and blonde hair flying toward the closet in the front foyer. “Luke, what are you doing?” she called to him.

“I’m going to Noah’s,” he replied, slipping on his jacket and heading toward the front door.

“But, Luke, you just—”

“I can’t talk now. I gotta go!” And with that Luke was gone just as quickly as he’d come.

Lily stared bewilderedly at the door Luke had disappeared from. He’d just seen Noah a couple of hours ago. What could be so important that he needed to see him again so soon?

Holden came into view in the foyer, sauntering into it in the easy manner she had fallen in love with. He was her cowboy, her hero, her love—her everything. She’d never forget the first time she saw him—open shirt which revealed a toned, tanned, sweaty chest, ocean blue eyes, and long brown hair. Holden was so ruggedly handsome and cocky. He infuriated her at first, because he was such a contrast to Dusty at the time.

*My how things have changed.*

“Holden,” she called to him.

He looked over, smiling still as handsome as that first day. Maybe even more so since he lost the ‘80s mullet.

“How’s our little guy doing?” he asked, strolling into the living room.
“Hungry as usual,” she replied. “We need to talk about our other son.”


“Yes, Luke. I want to know what happened last night with him and Noah,” Lily said. This morning Holden had warned her that the boys had gotten into a “little bit of a scuffle” which was putting it mildly given Noah’s bruised cheek and cut above his eye. It was difficult not to gasp out loud when she saw the boy’s injuries.

“They were attacked by Kevin Davis and some other boys from school,” Holden said as he sat down next to her on the sofa.

“Because Luke is gay?”

“Yes.”

Lily closed her eyes, hoping to block out the tears. Her baby had been attacked. But—wait—Luke didn’t have a scratch on him. It was Noah who had been beaten up. This didn’t make any sense.

“Noah was the one who was hurt though.”

“According to Luke, Noah was jumped by two guys while Kevin held him back.”

“But Luke is the one who is gay so why didn’t they try to hurt him?” she asked. Holden pursed his lips, glancing away from her. “Holden, what aren’t you telling me?”

“Noah is gay.”

Noah…gay. Lily tried to wrap her head around the revelation. She never would have guessed, but then again she never would have guessed that her own son was gay. It’s nice that Luke had a gay friend this way he’d have someone to relate to.

They were just friends, weren’t they?

“There’s more,” Holden’s voice cut through her thoughts.

“More?” Lily didn’t know if she could handle more. She’d been given a lot to deal with this year as it was—Luke’s sexuality, a long lost niece, Damian and his lies, the coma…

“Noah is also Luke’s boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” Lily practically exclaimed which startled Ethan. She took a breath. “Sorry, little guy. Mommy didn’t mean to scare you,” she soothed. Once she got Ethan calmed down, Lily glanced at Holden. “How long have you known about this?” she hissed.

“I just found out last night.”

“Luke is too young to have a boyfriend.”

“Lily, Luke is about the same age you were when we were first together,” he gently reminded her.

“And look at all of the mistakes we made,” Lily countered. “I let my mother manipulate me because she didn’t like you. I ran to Dusty when things got too tough. I let him be my first when it should have been you. I don’t want to see Luke suffer so much heartache.”

“Whoa…wait a second,” Holden said, placing his hand on her shoulder. “Luke’s a smart kid. He won’t necessarily make the same mistakes we made. He’s crazy about Noah—in love actually.”
Lily shook her head. “No, he can’t be. He’s just a kid.”

“How come I get the feeling that we wouldn’t be having this conversation if we were talking about Luke dating some girl?”

Lily stilled. “Are you accusing me of being some sort of homophobe?”

“No, of course not,” he replied. “I know that you’ve come to terms with Luke being gay. But now that he has a boyfriend it changes things. It makes it more real.”

Holden was right. Everything was different now. Her son had a boyfriend which meant dates, kissing, and—and things she’d rather not think about. Because when she did…

Tears filled her eyes. She slowly shook her head. “He can’t…”

Holden draped his arm around her. “Noah is good for him. He’s a really sweet kid. We couldn’t have picked anyone better for Luke,” he told her. “And Luke’s been so happy since they started dating. Don’t you want our son to be happy?”

“Of course I do,” Lily sniffed. “But I also don’t want him attacked for being gay. If he has a boyfriend and they go out, it could happen again.”

“It could happen if he doesn’t have a boyfriend.”

Yes, this was true. Hatred and bigotry were everywhere. How could anyone hate her sweet Luke? He hasn’t done anything wrong.

“I know, but I just want to protect him.”

“So do I, but he’s all grown up now.”

“Well, at least we know who hurt the boys so they’ll get locked up and won’t be able to do it again.” Thankfully Luke had been able to recognize his attackers. She knew Jack and Margo would make sure the boys who hurt her baby would be punished.

“They weren’t arrested,” Holden cautiously replied.

What? This was crazy. How could the attackers not have been caught? Holden said it had been Kevin Davis. Lily knew where he lived. She’d drag Jack over to the Davis’ house if she had to.

“Why not?”

“The boys didn’t want them called.”

“I don’t understand.”

Holden took a deep breath. “Luke told me last night that he’s been picked on by these guys since the school year started. He doesn’t want any more trouble.”

Luke’s logic didn’t make any sense to her. A seventeen year old boy shouldn’t be dictating whether or not the police should be called. “There wouldn’t be any because those animals would be in jail.”

“Lily, it’s not that easy,” Holden tried to reason with her. “There would need to be a trial and while we waited for a trial they’d most likely be free and pretty upset with Luke.”

“We can protect him,” Lily insisted.
“He wants to handle this his way. I’m going to respect his decision for now. Luke doesn’t want to be seen as weak.” Holden rested his cheek against hers. “I know none of this is easy, but we need to have some faith.”

“He’s too young to be faced with so much hate.”

“I know, but he’s strong. He’s a Snyder.”

“And a Walsh.”

“And a Walsh,” Holden echoed. “It’s one heck of a combination.”

“I still don’t know about this boyfriend thing,” she quietly admitted. “Two boys with all of those raging hormones…”

“He’s still a virgin. Actually, they both are,” Holden replied, stroking her long hair. “I told him that there wasn’t any rush, but when the time came he needed to be careful.”

“Did you hand him a box of condoms for his troubles? Book them a suite at the Lakeview?”

“Lily, we can’t stop Luke from being in love and having sex,” Holden reminded her. “You don’t want to do what your mother tried to do to us.”

Lucinda had hated Holden. He wasn’t good enough for her darling princess and it didn’t matter that Lily loved Holden more than life itself. Her mother schemed and lied which led to so much heartbreak. She couldn’t do that to Luke and Noah. “No, I don’t want to repeat that mistake.”

“I’m sure we’ll make plenty of our own.”

Unfortunately, Holden was probably right.

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Noah anxiously paced the floor of the cabin, waiting for Luke to arrive. His mom was working the lunch shift at Al’s. Before she had left for work, she had once again said how proud she was of him for being so brave. Noah hasn’t stopped smiling since she left. Luke was going to be thrilled that his confession had gone so well. Finally there were no more secrets.

The loud knock on the door made Noah’s grin broaden. Luke was here. Noah opened the door and Luke began speaking in one rushed breath, “Oh my god. I told you that she’d be okay with it. I’m so happy that I was right. I was beginning to worry that maybe I pushed too hard or—”

The rest of Luke’s sentence was swallowed by Noah’s tongue invading his mouth. He’d pulled Luke inside the cabin, crushing his mouth against Luke’s, because sometimes words were really overrated.


“I’m so happy.”

“I just…” Noah hesitated. Coming up with the right words to explain all of the emotions he’d been feeling the past couple of hours were next to impossible, but he wanted to try. Luke didn’t really know what it was like growing up with so much fear—fear of everything. “I feel alive. I’m so happy and relieved. It’s almost like the boogeyman is gone. I don’t know if this makes any sense but—”


Noah swallowed, hoping that he’d be able to keep it together. “I don’t have anything to be afraid of anymore. My life is pretty damn perfect thanks to you.”

“I can’t take all of the credit. You’re the one who found the courage to talk to your mom.”

“You gave me reason to,” Noah said, tugging on Luke’s jacket. “Are you going to take off your coat and stay awhile?”

“That was the plan, but my boyfriend jumped me before I could.”

“What an animal.”

“I know,” Luke replied with a dimpled grin. “I love…uh…it.” He shrugged out of his jacket and hung it up on the coat rack.

Noah let out the breath he’d been holding. For a second there, he thought Luke was going to tell him that he loved him. Noah quickly pushed the tinge of disappointment he was feeling aside. He’d hear those words from Luke one day. It was still too soon.


“Was your mom surprised when you told her or did she already know?” Luke asked, plopping down on the couch.

Noah settled next to him, snaking his fingers through Luke’s. “She knew. She…uh…saw us kissing.”

“Oh.”

“But she was happy for me—for us,” Noah admitting, stroking Luke’s palm with his thumb. “She told me that she was proud of me and that she’s never seen me so happy. And she’s right.”

Luke leaned closer, placing a soft kiss on Noah’s lips. “You’re not the only one who’s never been this happy.”

“You know, we never made it to Pine Road last night.”

“How long is your mom going to be gone?”

“A few hours.”

Luke raised his eyebrows. “Ohhh…that’s plenty of time.” He pulled Noah down on top of him.

“Ow,” Noah winced as their bodies collided. His ribs were still tender from the attack.


“I’m okay now,” Noah reassured him, threading his fingers through Luke’s hair. “You kinda took
me by surprise. We just need to be careful.”

“It’s not the first time I heard that today,” Luke murmured.

“What?”

“My dad tried to give me a sex talk after you left,” Luke sighed, rolling his eyes.

“Oh.”

“He didn’t pull out any charts or manuals so it wasn’t too horrific. He meant well.”

“It’s better than getting the talk from your mom,” Noah countered still playing with Luke’s hair.

“She even gave me condoms.”


“This was a couple of months ago, before she knew about us.”

The smile vanished. “Oh.”

“The talk was pretty mortifying.”

“But you did get condoms out of the deal,” Luke replied, his lips brushing against Noah’s. “It’s always good to be prepared—just in case.”

“Yeah,” Noah breathed, deepening the kiss. He could feel Luke’s erection rubbing against his crotch. It was nice to know that all of this chatter about parental sex talks hadn’t killed the mood.

He slipped his hand between them, allowing it to rest on Luke’s groin. Through the denim Noah could feel Luke’s rock hard dick. Damn it was so hot. Noah rubbed his palm along the length.

“Fuck…” Luke gasped, hips lifting off the sofa.

Noah’s fingers rested on the button of Luke’s jeans. His eyes darted to meet Luke’s silently asking for permission to continue.


Noah was about to finally get a really good look at Luke’s cock right there in the broad daylight. No more shadows and darkness. He popped open Luke’s jeans and eased down the zipper, revealing gray underwear.

Noah slid his hand inside, grasping Luke’s dick. It was heavy in his hand, the tip wet with precome. Noah loved it. Luke was so hard and longing beneath him. His eyes were all pupil, mouth parted and panting—the desire just rolling off Luke in waves, washing over Noah.

He did this to Luke, he made him all hot and wanting. It was powerful. Noah never held such power over another human being. And it wasn’t a cruel vicious power like the Colonel held over him and his mom. This power was born out of love. Noah loved making Luke feel so much.

And then a phone began to ring. Noah froze, his eyes darting to the coffee table where his cell lay.

“Mine,” Luke grumbled, reaching into the front pocket of his jeans. He glanced at the display. “Shit…my parents.”
Parents.

Noah quickly pulled his hand out of Luke’s underwear, sitting back on his heels. His heart was racing, breathing labored.

“Hello,” Luke said, phone to his ear. “Do I have to?” He rolled his eyes as he listened to whichever parent had the worst timing ever. “Okay…okay…I’ll be there in a few. Bye,” Luke snapped his phone shut. “That was my mom. We’re supposed to go to Grandmother’s today and my presence is required.”

Noah quickly plastered a smile on his face to mask to his disappointment. Over the years he’d gotten pretty damn good at hiding his real emotions. “I understand. You need to be with your family.”

“But I’d rather be with you.”

“It’s okay. We’ll get together some other time.”

“I know,” Luke sighed. “But we had the place to ourselves.”

Noah kissed him. “We’ll figure out a way to be alone again.”

“Promise?” Luke gazed up at him with big brown cow eyes.

“Promise.” It was one Noah intended to keep.

Luke zipped up his jeans and then stood up, adjusting his sweater. “I really have to go.”

Noah escorted him to the door. “Just call me when you get a chance.”

Luke grabbed his jacket from the coat rack. “I will.” He planted a quick kiss on Noah’s lips. “Talk to you soon,” he said before disappearing out the door.

“Oh man…” Noah groaned, leaning against the door. Luke had left him in an undeniably horny state. Tentatively he brought the hand that had been down Luke’s pants to his face, sniffing it.

Oh man… Noah’s eyes fluttered close. The musky smell of Luke still lingered on his hand. Noah wet his lips and then his tongue darted out over his fingertips. The faint bitterness of Luke permeated his taste buds, which made his cock ache. He wanted Luke so badly.

But there was nothing he could do about it right now. Well, there was another solution.

Noah marched into his bedroom, shutting the door behind him. Even though his mom was at work and shouldn’t be home for a couple of more hours he didn’t want to take any chances. His jeans were off in a flash, boxers quickly followed. He sprawled out on his bed, wrapping his hand firmly around his leaking dick.

Closing his eyes, Noah imagined it was Luke’s cock that he had in his hand…

Luke’s perfect cock—so long, so hard, so incredibly wonderful…

Noah couldn’t get enough of it. He loved stroking it, feeling the silky skin which seemed to be stretched over marble. Luke moaned, bucking his hips because Luke loved the way Noah touched him. Noah could make him come.
He needed to make Luke come. He wanted to feel it pour all over his hand. And he wanted to lick it off and...

Noah bit his lip, quietly groaning as he shot all over his hand. It wasn’t as good as the real thing but it wasn’t too bad either. They’d find a way to be alone again. Hopefully, it would be very soon.
Chapter 52

Luke had been uneasy about coming to school. The uncertainty of how Kevin, Mark and Chad were going to react to him gnawed at him for the remainder of the weekend. He hadn't shared this with Noah, because he didn't want his boyfriend feeling worse about the situation. Luke was used to dealing with these assholes on his own.

Getting from class to class was a challenge. He kept his guard up, scanning every hallway, double checking the restroom. Luke hated being the scared, little bunny. He hated being the victim. This whole situation really sucked, but he needed to figure out a way to deal without the police being brought into it.

So Luke held his head up high, burying his fear and insecurities. He was a Snyder, a Walsh—hell, even a Grimaldi. Damian certainly wouldn’t take shit from anyone. And Luke wouldn’t either.

Well, at least it was the plan.

Someone must have been looking out for him, because he went the entire morning without running into the terrible trio. But lunch was going to be tricky at best. Even though Luke didn’t have any visible scars from the attack he wouldn’t be able to hide it from Maddie. She’d figure it out. She always did. And then there was Kevin who always seemed to use their lunch hour to take his jabs at him. Today probably wouldn’t be any different.

Luke slipped into his usual seat across from Maddie quickly digging into his brown paper lunch bag. “How are you doing?” he asked.

“You know it’s Monday so I’m as good as it can be expected,” Maddie replied, snacking on a piece of celery. “You must have been busy all weekend since I didn’t hear from you Saturday or Sunday.”

“Yeah,” Luke said, keeping his eyes focused on his can of Coke.

“Were you busy with your boyfriend?”

Luke nodded, still avoiding her gaze. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Mark swaggering toward their table.

Fuck…fuck…fuck…

“Well…well…well…look who had the balls to show up today,” Mark leered, parking himself next to Luke’s chair. “Oh wait…you’re a little pussy, so you don’t have any balls.”

“Get out of here, Mark,” Maddie sneered.

“Sweet,” Mark drawled. “You’re other bitch isn’t here to fight your battles, so you got this psycho to do your dirty work.”

Luke was not about to let the asshole insult Maddie. “Fuck you,” he growled, glaring up at Mark.

Mark waved his finger at him. “Now…now…little faggot, I’ve told you that I don’t like a dick up my ass. That’s your department.”

Before Luke could respond Kevin was marching over bandaged nose and all, pulling Mark away. “Come on, he’s not worth it.”
“What?” Mark demanded, digging in his heels. “You can’t be serious, Davis. Please don’t tell me that you’re afraid of this—this cocksucker.”

“Of course not,” Kevin spat. “He’s just not worth my energy and you shouldn’t be wasting yours on him or his pathetic boyfriend.”

“What…the…hell?” Mark sputtered as he was dragged off by Kevin.

“I was just about to ask the same thing,” Maddie said, leaning across the table. “What the hell, Luke? What was that all about?”

Luke stared after Kevin and Mark who still seemed to be arguing. Kevin Davis possibly having a change of heart—it didn’t make sense. He didn’t know if he should be relieved or terrified. This might only be the calm before the category five hurricane.


“Sorry,” he murmured, forcing himself to look away from Kevin and Mark. “I don’t know what that was about.”

Maddie wasn’t going to let his go. She was in full protective, kick ass mode. “Something happened over the weekend, didn’t it?”


“Oh my god.”

Luke swallowed, wishing he could forget the image of his boyfriend—his sweet Noah lying crumpled on the pavement as he was repeatedly kicked by those assholes. “Noah…he…uh…never stood a chance. Chad sucker punched him. Then he and Mark just kept kicking him while Kevin held me back. I’d never felt so helpless…”

“I can imagine,” Maddie whispered.

“But I couldn’t let them keep hurting Noah. Somehow I got away from Kevin. It was kinda like I turned into the Hulk or something. I punched Kevin which I think shocked the shit out of him.”

Maddie smiled wickedly. “So the nose was your handiwork?”

“Guilty.”

“That’s my Luke.”

He wrapped his arms around his chest. Why was it suddenly so cold in the cafeteria? It felt like he was sitting in a freezer. Luke shivered as he remembered that awful night. “I tried to get to Noah as quickly as I could. They were hurting him and Noah couldn’t defend himself. I managed to punch Mark.”

“Damn. You really were the Hulk.”

“I had to help Noah.”

“Of course you did.”

“Lucy and Dusty showed up just in time. Dusty was yelling at them and then they were gone,”
Luke said, rubbing his arms hoping to warm himself up again. “I don’t even want to think of what would have happened if they hadn’t come along when they did.”

“Is Noah okay?”

“Yeah, he got a cut and some bruises but nothing was broken. Thank God.”

“Thank God,” Maddie murmured. “But I don’t understand why those assholes aren’t in jail.”

Luke shifted uncomfortably. “We didn’t call the police.”

“Why the hell not?” Maddie demanded.

“It’s complicated.”

“Luke…”

As much as he loved and trusted Maddie, Luke couldn’t tell her the truth. Noah had sworn him to secrecy about his true identity (wow…Noah was sounding like some sort of superhero). “I’m sorry,” Luke replied, reaching out and taking one of Maddie’s hands, “but you just need to trust me on this one. Please.”

“I’m worried about you, Luke. I don’t think those guys are done with you and Noah.”

“We’ll be careful.”

“Careful might not be enough,” Maddie said, sadly shaking her head.

Deep down he knew she was right. And it terrified him, but he couldn’t let it show. Luke was a fighter. He cleared his throat. “The…uh…weekend wasn’t all bad.”

“Oh?” Maddie immediately perked up. “Did you two…?”

“No…no not yet,” Luke quickly replied, cheeks flushing. “But Noah came out to his mom and she was okay with it. He’s so happy right now. I’m so proud of him.”

“It’s great that he finally came out. It must be such a huge relief for both of you,” Maddie said, smiling.

“I’m glad that I don’t have to hide the fact that he’s my boyfriend. Even if it means that we’ll get a hard time from people like Kevin.” Luke had faith that there were more good people in the world than bad.

“Don’t let people like Kevin and those assholes get you down. You and Noah are both incredible. I’m proud to call both of you my friends.”

Luke shook his head, eyes misting. “You’re determined to make me cry, aren’t you?”

“Who me?” Maddie asked innocently, batting her eyes like a Southern Belle.

He picked up his untouched sandwich. “Oh don’t you go trying to be all innocent with me, Maddie Coleman.”

“I just love you, Luke Snyder,” she said, springing up from her chair and dashing over to him, hugging him from behind. “And anyone else who doesn’t can just go to the devil.”
If only it were so easy…

But Luke had Noah and Maddie and Casey and his dad and…

The list just went on and on. Luke had a lot of people in his corner. And a lot of love in his life.
“So did you win or lose tonight?” Noah asked, lying on his bed, cell phone pressed to his ear. He was already wearing his pajamas which consisted of black sweats and old gray Red Wings t-shirt.


Noah had been hoping for better news. He knew how important basketball was to Luke. “Sorry to hear that,” Noah replied. “Did you lose by a lot?”

“Six points. Defensively we sucked. And we missed way too many free throws,” Luke explained, disappointment filling his voice. “I missed four which is just unacceptable.”

Four missed free throws didn’t sound too bad to him but, then again, he really didn’t know too much about basketball so he figured it was just best to keep his opinion to himself. “How many points did you get?”

“Fifteen.”

“Sounds like you played pretty well,” he said, hoping that Luke would see the positives from the loss. Unfortunately, Luke wouldn’t be able to see the grin on Noah’s face, but it was there. Even though Luke’s team lost he was so proud of his boyfriend.

Noah wished he could have been at the game to see it, but they’d both agreed that Noah would stick to the home games for the time being. Luke’s parents hadn’t even planned on making the trip to Tyler.

“I did okay, but not nearly as good as the first game when you were there watching me,” Luke replied a bit wistfully.

“I know. That was a shitty thing to say. I was the one who told you not to come.”

“But it’s how you feel,” Noah countered. He didn’t want Luke to start censoring himself just so he wouldn’t hurt his feelings. “I wish I could see you right now.”

“You know I wish I could have been there,” Noah sighed.

“I know. That was a shitty thing to say. I was the one who told you not to come.”

“But it’s how you feel,” Noah countered. He didn’t want Luke to start censoring himself just so he wouldn’t hurt his feelings. “I wish I could see you right now.”

“Me too,” Luke groaned. “But my parents won’t let me go out now. It’s too late and it’s a school night. They think I should be locked away like Rapunzel. If I don’t see you soon I think I’m going to go crazy.”

They hadn’t seen each other since their brief visit on Sunday which had been interrupted before things could get too heated between them. Noah intended to make good on his promise to find a way to be alone. Since that day he’d pondered and plotted. He thought he might have come up with a plan, but he was going to have to run it by Luke before he could put it into motion.

“Same here,” Noah agreed. “Do you have any free time this week?” He’d discovered that it was difficult to see Luke during the week between his basketball practice, homework and family obligations. Noah had thought he’d be seeing more of Luke since he came out not less.

“I have a chem test that I need to study for tomorrow night, but I’d be free after practice on Thursday.”
“Did you want to get together?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Do you know anything about that small building near the cabin?” Noah asked, a plan quickly formulating in his mind.

“You mean the pump house?”


“No, it’s not,” Luke said full of excitement. “And there’s plenty of space in there too.”

Luke was on the same page as him. The pump house might just be the perfect place to be alone. It might not be a posh room at the Lakeview but spending some quality time together was the only thing that mattered to him. He’d go anywhere to be with Luke. “Do you think we could meet there after you’re done with basketball practice Thursday evening?”

“Definitely.”

“Good. I’ll see you then.”


He hung up his cell phone, placing it on the nightstand. Two more days. Noah really couldn’t wait to see Luke. Talking to him was great. Every night they’ve spoken on the phone. Sometimes over the past few days he’d get a random text from Luke—whether it was a “miss u” or a smiley face—the texts made Noah smile. A lot.

Noah’s been doing that a great deal lately—smiling. He was even smiling now here alone in his bedroom. It felt incredible being so happy without a worry in the world. Well, except figure out the details of his rendezvous at the pump house with Luke. But it was a good problem to have.

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The old wood pump house was about 500 feet from the cabin. The white paint was dirty and peeling. The small building sat at the edge of what looked like the field where Emma had once grown her crops. Now the land was a mixture of dirt and weeds. This area was well past its former glory just like the cabin had been before they fixed it up, but Noah could still see the beauty in the land.

As Noah approached the door, he glanced around making sure that no one would see where he was going. He and Luke really needed this time alone. They needed to pick up where they left off before Luke’s mom called the other afternoon. He wasn’t sure just how far things would progress.

So far everything they’d done Noah has enjoyed. Quite a bit actually. But the thought of “going all the way” still frightened him to some degree. He was still so clueless when it came to gay sex. Luke had been a great teacher—so patient.

Stepping into the dark building, Noah was assaulted with a musty, stale odor. Maybe this wasn’t the
best location after all. However, his mom was home so the cabin was out of the question. Luke’s parents were most likely home too. There was always the barn, but Noah wasn’t sure how private it would be since it was Holden’s place of business. He’d just die if Luke’s dad walked in on them—or more.

The floorboards creaked as Noah entered the pump house, closing the door behind him. He felt along the wall, finding the switch that turned on the single bulb which illuminated the room. There was a web of pipes in front of him, rising from the floor. Past the plumbing was an empty space that had just enough room for them to spread out in (if they needed to). In the far corner Noah spotted a black and red plaid blanket folded up.

This had to be Luke’s touch. It looked like his boyfriend had also put some thought into their rendezvous as well. Noah wondered when Luke found the time to sneak over here with the blanket. He was happy that Luke did, because it would probably come in handy.

Grinning, Noah snatched the blanket and spread it out over the old wood floor. Perfect.

Noah didn’t know if he should sit on the blanket and wait for him or what. However, he didn’t have time to contemplate it. The door opened slowly and Luke peeked inside.

“Hey.” Luke grinned, shutting the door. He had his messenger bag slung over his shoulder. Noah figured that Luke must have some straight from school but couldn’t figure out why he’d bring the bag in here.

“Hey.”

Luke sauntered over to him, draping his arms across Noah’s shoulders. “How about a proper hello, boyfriend?”

“You bet,” Noah said with a smile. He was more than happy to tilt his head down to meet Luke’s anxious, waiting lips. Mmmm….he really missed kissing Luke. They needed to make a vow never to go three days without kissing again.

“So,” Luke said, slipping his messenger bag from his shoulder. “I….uh…kinda brought along some entertainment if you’re interested.”

This could be interesting. Noah raised his eyebrows. “Entertainment?”

“Well, you said that you’ve never had any access to the Internet or seen any porn so I…” Luke stammered, cheeks flushed. “I brought my laptop and a DVD—*The Pizza Boy*.”

“Porn?”

“Yeah, but we don’t have to watch it if you don’t want to. We can just hang out and talk or…”

“I do—wanna watch it I mean.”

“Cool.” Luke knelt down, pulling out his laptop from the messenger bag. “I have to warn you that the production values are pretty subpar. The guys aren’t even that hot, but I’ve found it educational.”

“I definitely could use some education.”

“Yeah.”

Luke had warned him about the poor quality, but Noah couldn’t help but mentally critique the DVD. The lighting was weak, the set low budget, and the acting (if it could even be considered it) cheesy. The guys weren’t all that attractive, but Noah figured he wasn’t supposed to be looking at their faces.

So he didn’t.

Noah focused on their bodies which were pretty damn good he discovered as the two guys began to strip. The delivery boy had been asked in and was going to work for an extra tip. Noah tried not to roll his eyes at the predictable plot.

As the delivery boy sunk to his knees and licked the other guy’s dick, Noah could feel his cheeks begin to burn as well as his cock twitch. So this was what a blow job really looked like.

The delivery boy took his customer’s dick in his mouth. Damn. He almost swallowed it. Noah wondered what it would feel like to have Luke’s cock inside his mouth—Luke’s fingers in his hair—or Luke’s mouth around his dick…

Noah was pretty fucking hard right now. He shifted, trying to get a little bit more comfortable since his jeans had become quite snug. He stole a glance at Luke who seemed as equally turned on.

When Noah returned his attention to the screen, the customer was being bent over the table, the delivery boy right behind him, his dick slowly sinking into the customer’s ass. Noah thought he was going to spontaneous combust.

“Noah,” Luke’s voice was raw.

“Yeah?” Noah tore his eyes from the computer screen.

“I really want to use my mouth on you,” he confessed.


Oh hell yes he could! Luke wanted to wrap his incredible lips around his dick. “Yeah,” he croaked.

Luke reached over, shutting off the DVD. The loud moaning and groaning that had been coming from the porn disappeared, now the only noise that filled the room was the sound of their heavy breathing. Noah unfolded his legs, stretching them out and opening them up so Luke could fit between them. He leaned back on his elbows, his coat falling open as Luke settled between his legs. Luke surprised him. Instead of unbuckling his belt, Luke pushed Noah’s sweatshirt up enough to reveal his bare stomach. Noah stared at Luke as Luke pressed a kiss to his bellybutton, then he dragged his tongue along the thin trail of hair that lead toward his dick.

Noah hadn’t realized that something could feel so amazing. He wanted more.

Luke rubbed his cheek against Noah’s denim clad cock, his eyes closed with a smile on his face. Noah practically held his breath waiting for Luke’s next move. It felt as if time had stopped. Luke’s eyes met his, so full of lust that it almost made Noah feel dizzy.

Luke finally unbuckled Noah’s belt. He took his time unzipping Noah’s jeans and pushing his boxer briefs past his hips. Once his dick was free from its confines, Luke wrapped his mouth around the
head. His mouth was such a contrast to the cold air that permeated the pump house. Luke’s lips and
tongue were so warm and tight.

Fuck…oh fuck…

This had to be the best feeling in the world. He wanted more—he wanted Luke to just swallow his
dick. Noah balled his hands up into fists so he wouldn’t force Luke to take his entire dick in his
mouth. He wouldn’t push Luke. There was no need because Luke was doing a fucking-fantastic
job.

He’d expected Luke to mimic what they’d just seen on Luke’s laptop, but Luke had other ideas.
Luke developed his own technique—bobbing and licking, working his cock halfway into his mouth.

Luke glanced up, wiping the come that he hadn’t managed to swallow from his chin. Fuck…Luke
swallowed. Noah was still having a hard time comprehending everything that had just transpired
between them when Luke touched his cheek.

“Baby, are you okay?” Luke asked wide eyed.

The tears. Oh god….Luke could see that he was totally wrecked.

Why couldn’t he just react normally? This certainly wasn’t the proper reaction to a blow job.
Neither of the guys in the video fucking cried when they came.

“Noah?”

“Who cries after having an orgasm?” Noah asked, wiping his eyes. “I’m such a head case. This
isn’t normal…”

“Hey, hey, it was more than just an orgasm,” Luke said, smiling gently at him. “You finally really,
truly let go. You allowed yourself to just feel and not think. This is a very good thing. You’re
definitely not a head case.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. I’ve been waiting for this moment—for you to really trust me. You sound so hot when you
come,” Luke murmured, brushing his lips against Noah’s.

Noah stilled, tasting himself on his lips. It was such an odd mixture but a good one. He felt so
connected to Luke. “I didn’t mean to hold back with you,” he confessed. “I just…I don’t know…I
guess I was kinda afraid. I’m so used to hiding to protect myself from getting hurt.”

Luke rested his forehead against Noah’s, gazing deeply into his eyes. “You don’t have to hold back
with me. I’ll always keep you safe.”

Tears now threatened to spill for an entirely different reason, but Noah kept them in check. He
didn’t want to turn into a blubbering mess in front of Luke. “Okay,” he finally managed to get out.


“It’s my turn.”


“Oh yeah,” Noah breathed, kissing him deeply. He just hoped that he could do half as good of a job
as Luke had done. When Luke rolled onto his back there was no mistaking the massive erection that
was straining against his jeans. Noah quickly hiked up his underwear and jeans so he wouldn’t freeze his ass off.

“Good because my dick is so hard that it could be considered a lethal weapon.”

Noah burst out laughing. “Did you get that line from watching porn?”


“Or cheesy,” Noah smirked.

“You’re lucky that I already blew you.”

“Yes, I am.” So very lucky indeed.

Under Luke’s watchful eye, Noah willed his hands not to shake as he undid Luke’s belt. In every fantasy he’d ever had, Noah never allowed himself to get to this point. Noah wanted this badly. He didn’t realize just how much until this moment. If he couldn’t tell Luke how much he loved him right now, he would show him.


He was really going to do this.

Closing his eyes, Noah dragged his tongue from the base of Luke’s cock all the way to the tip. Luke whimpered as Noah licked him. He really liked the sound of it so Noah licked down to the base and up again, causing Luke to make more noise—something like a half whine, half moan. Whatever it was Noah wanted to hear more of it.

Noah just wanted more—period. More moaning, talking, and much more of Luke’s dick. Noah swiped his tongue across the head, tasting the precome that had been leaking from it. The flavor was strong—salty and slightly bitter, but Noah was definitely getting used to it. Maybe even liking it.

A lot.

The need to keep licking and tasting consumed him. **More…more…more.** Noah sunk his mouth down Luke’s shaft, careful to cover his teeth so he wouldn’t scrap the sensitive flesh. However, in doing so Noah forgot to pay attention to how deep he was taking Luke’s dick into his mouth.

Too deep. He quickly discovered when the tip hit the back of his throat, kicking in his gag reflex.
Noah pulled back, gasping and coughing.

“Sorry,” Luke breathed, staring up at him with lust filled eyes.

“There’s no need to apologize for having a big dick. I’ll get the hang of this.” Noah tried again. This time he only took half of it, focusing hard on keeping his lips tight around Luke’s length as he bobbed his head in a steady rhythm.

“Oh, Noah,” Luke groaned. “This feels so fucking good. Oh god. Please don’t stop. I think I’ll die if you do.”

Luke couldn’t have said it better. Noah liked giving a blow job just as much as he’d like getting one. Luke’s fingers found their way back into Noah’s hair, making the connection between them stronger.

“Noah…baby…I’m gonna…” Luke tried to pry Noah’s mouth from his dick, but Noah wouldn’t have it. He wanted this. When it came to Luke he didn’t want to do anything halfway—especially something as important and intimate as this.

“Fuck,” Luke gasped as the hot liquid hit the back of Noah’s throat.

Swallow…swallow…swallow. Most of the come went down his throat, but there was so much of it. Some trickled from his mouth as Noah coughed.

That was fucking intense.

Noah wiped the remnants from his lips. “Oh my,” he murmured.

“C’mere,” Luke reached for him, drawing him into a kiss. His tongue eagerly explored Noah’s mouth, licking up all the traces of come.

Noah’s mind was officially blown. Fuck. Noah caressed Luke’s cheek, gazing at his beautiful boyfriend.


Noah grinned. “I’m just so incredibly happy. You have no idea.”

“Thank you for doing this. You’re such a life saver,” Noah said, clutching his mochachino as Maddie slipped into the chair across from him at Java where he’d been waiting to meet her. Noah had ridden to Old Town with his mom since she was working the lunch shift at Al’s.

Ever since he and Luke had officially become boyfriends, Noah began to fret about what he should get Luke for Christmas. The gift needed to be special just like his boyfriend. Unfortunately, his budget was limited. His mother’s sweater still needed to be paid off and he also wanted to get her another small gift. Noah was also trying to spend the money he made working with Holden wisely — just in case of an emergency.

This is where Maddie came in. She was one of Luke’s best friends so she would be able to help him figure out something perfect to get him. Maddie had done such a great job of helping him find the sweater for his mom. And she’d also become one of his best friends as well. Maddie really seemed to understand him, even when he had a hard time understanding himself. Noah had felt connected to her that first evening in Emma’s kitchen when they talked about their love of film.

Their friendship went beyond movies. Maddie had his back whether it was trying to help Luke find the perfect birthday present for him or listening to him when he needed an ear. She never pushed or pried. Maddie was just there for him, supporting him, being completely awesome. Like now.

“I’m thrilled to be able to help,” she excitedly replied. “It’s going to be so much fun.” Maddie peered at his mug. “Hey, is that a mochachino?”

“Yes, I’m officially hooked,” Noah admitted. But he needed steered her back on track. They had a mission that needed to be completed. “I’m glad you think shopping is going to be fun because I really have my doubts. Have you seen how busy it is out there?”

“There’s nothing like the hustle and bustle of the holiday season,” Maddie gushed. “Just think of it as Miracle on 34th Street.”

“You’re not going to get me to sit on Santa’s lap,” Noah chuckled.

“Awww…I can totally see you giving his whiskers a tug.”

“Not today,” Noah smiled weakly, quickly pushing away the memories of his mother trying to sneak him out to see Santa and the repercussions of the visit once his father found out.

One of the baristas came over to check on them and Noah ordered mochachinos for both of them. He figured it was best to formulate a plan of attack in the warm confines of Java instead of outside in the mist of the holiday insanity.

“Do you have any ideas of what you want to get Luke?”

“Something special…really spectacular.”

Maddie leaned forward, her dark locks cascading over her shoulders, brows furrowing. “You know, Luke isn’t the kind of guy who expects some big expensive gift.” Noah began to speak but Maddie held up her hand to silence him. “Yes, he comes from a wealthy family and drives a fancy car, but he’s as down to earth as they come. He’s not your typical rich kid.”

“No, he’s not,” he agreed. Once Noah had gotten to know Luke better, he’d realized that Luke was
just another kid who helped his grandmother around her farm, babysat his siblings, and cared deeply about his friends and family.

“You don’t have to spend your life’s savings on Luke’s Christmas present. Just get him something from the heart and he’ll treasure it forever—just like that journal you got him.”

“You know about that?”


Noah’s face went up in flames as the barista delivered their drinks. “Everything?” he squeaked afraid that the lovely young lady sitting across from him knew every single detail about his alone time with Luke.


“Good.”

“I think the Book Emporium might be a good place to start. You could get him something by his favorite author,” Maddie suggested. “His horse is named Whitman so he must like his stuff.”

“Yeah, he does.” Noah smiled, remembering the day he sat in Emma’s kitchen reciting Walt Whitman with Luke. It was the first time he thought that maybe they might be able to be friends. “Maybe I could get him a book of his poetry or do you think that’s too girly?”

“I think Luke would love it especially coming from you.”

“Sounds like we have a plan then.”

They finished up their drinks. Noah insisted on paying for Maddie’s mochachino since she was helping him out with his shopping endeavor. Once the bill was settled, they headed out into cool, busy Old Town. The smell of pine filled the air along with Nat King Cole’s The Christmas Song. For the first time in quite awhile he was excited about Christmas.

Maddie navigated the bustling streets with the precision of a race car driver. Noah was along for the ride, following her as she paved a clear path for them so they were able to arrive at the store unscathed. It seemed like everyone was buying books as gifts. There seemed to be more people in the store than had been outside on the sidewalks.

“I think we’ll find old Walt in this section,” Maddie said, guiding him toward one of the shelves on the far wall. “Now let’s see where he is...” Her eyes scanned the books and selected one. “How about this one? The Selected Poems.”

Noah took the book from her, leafing through it. “This is good.” He spotted another book—Walt Whitman: A Gay Life. He wanted to pick it put, but he wasn’t sure if he could give a book like that to Luke.

Before he could make his decision about the other book, Maddie snatched it from the shelf. “I bet this is an interesting read.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he said, peering over her shoulder as she thumbed through some of the pages.

Maddie snapped the book shut, handing it to him. “Luke will love this one too.”

“I don’t know…”
“Noah, it’s no big secret that Luke’s gay,” she said as if reading his mind. “Just get him the book.”

Maddie was right. He was being silly and overanalyzing things. It was just a book and Luke would most likely enjoy it which was the point of buying it in the first place.

“Okay, I’ll get it,” he decided. “Do you know if they have a writing section?”

“Sure. I think it’s over this way,” she said, heading down the aisle. “What are you looking for?”

“You’ll see.”

They ended up on the other side of the store with Maddie eyeing him questioningly as he searched for the book he had in mind. A title jumped out at him—*Writing Movies: The Practical Guide to Creating Stellar Screenplays*. He smiled as he pulled it from the shelf. If he was going to make movies, he wanted Luke to write them for him.

“You’d make a great team,” Maddie said, playfully nudging him.

“I’d like to think so.”

“Have you read anything Luke’s written?”

“No.”

“He’s really good. I’ve read some stuff he’s written for his Creative Writing class,” she told him. “The boy has talent. You’ll have to convince him to let you read some of his work.”

Yes, he would.

“Would you like to go to lunch after I pay for this?” Noah asked.

“Burgers at Al’s?”

“If that’s what you’d like.”

“I’d love it.”

When they finally got out of the Book Emporium, they slowly made their way to Al’s, which was buzzing with the same amount of excitement as Old Town. Noah and Maddie were lucky enough to find the last empty table in the diner. The diner smelled of fries, which made Noah’s stomach growl. He hadn’t realized just how hungry he was until they sat down at the table.

Noah spotted his mom on the other side of the restaurant, delivering an order. He was taken aback by how worn out she looked—much paler than she had only a couple of hours ago. She’d probably been running ragged since she started her shift. He wished she didn’t work so hard. He’d have to talk to her about cutting back her hours.

“I’m so hungry I think I can eat everything on the menu,” Maddie declared.

Noah tore his eyes from his mom. “Yeah, me too, but I think I’ll settle on the Bacon Swiss Burger and fries.”

“Ohhh…count me in,” Maddie said, closing her menu.

“Madeline!” A beautiful brunet exclaimed as she breezed over to their table. “It’s so nice to see you! Did you trade Casey in for this handsome young man?”
“No,” Maddie giggled. “This is my friend, Noah. Noah this is Vienna, my brother’s girlfriend.”

“Noah? You wouldn’t happen to be Gloria’s Noah, would you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“This calls for our special on the house discount,” Vienna declared. “What would you two darlings like?”

“A couple of Bacon Swiss Burgers.”

“Burgers? Madeline, are you sure you don’t want a nice salad?” she asked, exasperated.

“Yes, I’m quite sure and I’ll take a diet Coke,” Maddie replied.

“And I’ll have a regular one,” Noah added.

“Coming right up!” Vienna fluttered away in the whirlwind fashion she’d appeared.

“She’s really something,” Maddie explained. “Henry adores her. They’re quite the pair.”

“My mom enjoys working for them. She’s told me a few entertaining stories about them.”

“Only a few?” Maddie giggled. “They’re a regular Burns and Allen. I’m sure it’s never a dull moment here.”

Noah glanced up, spotting his mother approaching with their drinks. He fought the urge to jump up and grab them from her because he didn’t want her working any harder than necessary.

“Vienna told me that we had some special customers here today,” Charlene said, placing a drink in front of each of them. “It’s so nice to see you, Maddie.”

“You too.”

“Did you have any luck today?” Charlene asked.

“Yes, I did.”

“You must be thrilled that she approves of your boyfriend,” Maddie said as she unwrapped her straw.

“It was such a relief,” Noah wistfully replied. “When I told her about everything she said she was proud of me and wanted me to be happy.”

“Just like a good parent should.”

His mom was a great parent. The best.

********

The holiday shoppers and Christmas music that assaulted Old Town annoyed the fuck out of Mark Vero. He didn’t care about Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer or the Little Drummer Boy. All he wanted was a fucking burger at Al’s.
“It looks packed in there,” Kevin griped, peering through the window of the diner. “Let’s just grab something at McDonald’s.”

“Fuck McDonald’s,” Mark replied. “I want a good burger preferably served to me by that hot, Swedish piece of ass that works here.”

He was getting really sick of Kevin being such a pussy lately. It all started when he stopped him from harassing Luke earlier in the week. Kevin’s change of heart as far as the little fag was concerned was troubling to say the least. However, Mark had let it go, figuring it was Kevin just being a little charitable toward his former friend.

“Come on, let’s just get out of here,” Kevin insisted.

Mark looked through the window and saw Luke’s cocksucking boyfriend eating with that piece of white trash Maddie Coleman. This was too perfect. He was practically salivating at all of the havoc he could wreak on those two losers. Maybe there really was a Santa Claus after all.

“No way,” Mark replied with a sinister chuckle. “Snyder’s love is in there. I’m not passing this up. I think he needs to be reminded that he’s not safe anywhere in this town.”

“I think the ass kicking you gave him last weekend drove the point home,” Kevin replied. “He’s not worth it—neither of them are. I’ve got better things to do than waste my time with Snyder and his boyfriend.”

“Since when did you turn fag lover?”

“I’m not,” Kevin insisted. “Look, my parents were pissed when I came home with a busted nose that night. My dad is threatening fucking military school and not paying for college if I don’t get my act together. He said he’s sick of the drinking and now the fighting. I can’t make any more waves.”

“All the more reason to make those fags pay,” Mark hissed.

“I don’t think I’d do that if I were you,” a deep voice cautioned.

Mark whipped around to see a middle aged man with buzzed brown hair, glaring at them. He looked vaguely familiar but he couldn’t place where he’d seen this man before.

“Why don’t you?” Mark demanded. He really didn’t need some stranger telling him what to do—especially some fag lover.

“Why don’t you?” the man countered.

“Excuse me?” Mark couldn’t believe the audacity of this guy.

The stranger stepped closer to him. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way,” he threatened.

“Come on, Mark,” Kevin said, tugging at his sleeve. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Stop being such a fucking pussy,” Mark spat at Kevin who was quaking in his Nikes. He turned back to man. “Who the fuck are you and why should I give a shit what you have to say?”

“My name is Dusty Donovan,” he smugly replied. “Not only am I a friend of Luke’s mother, but I also saw you guys attack him and his friend the other night. You’re very lucky the boys decided not to press charges. I might not be so forgiving though. Actually, I have no qualms about calling the cops on your sorry asses.”
Fuck. That’s where he recognized this guy from. Not only he was he the guy from the night they beat up Noah, but he was also there when they were harassing Luke outside of the Lakeview.

“We’re not going to bother Luke and Noah anymore,” Kevin piped up in full pussy mode. “Right, Mark?”

Mark hated backing down. It went against his nature. But he also didn’t need any problems with the cops. He wouldn’t put it past this fucker to make good on his promise.

“Right,” he finally relented.

Dusty stood toe to toe with him, his blue eyes crazy intense. “See that it stays that way. If I hear that you so much have said one more derogatory thing to either of those boys I’ll make sure that your asses end up in jail—that also goes for your other little friend who has been harassing them as well. And you know what happens to young boys in jail, don’t you?”

“We won’t,” Mark replied through gritted teeth.

“Good,” Dusty said, stepping away from them. “Enjoy the rest of your day, boys.”

“I told you they weren’t worth it,” Kevin muttered. “Dusty Donovan is bad news. I’m not about to cross him. You better not either because I don’t want to get up in jail or worse.”

“Fine,” Mark hissed. “Let’s get the fuck out of here. Those fags are dead to me.”

He wasn’t about to become someone’s bitch in jail because of them. As far as he was concerned they had won. Snyder had to watch his precious cock sucker get the fuck beat out of him. Mark would never forget how good it felt when his fist connected with Noah’s face or each time his foot hit his flesh.

Pure euphoria.

As was the sound of that little faggot Snyder crying over his boyfriend. No one would ever take away those pleasant memories.
Chapter 55

Noah had been over for dinner before so it shouldn’t be a big deal that he was coming over again. But it was. It was huge. Noah was his boyfriend now which changed everything.

Luke had been leery when his parents suggested inviting Noah over for dinner. He didn’t want Noah to be judged. Noah had been through a lot so he didn’t need to be put through the wringer by his parents.

Truth be told he wasn’t worried about both his parents—just his mom. It was hard to tell how she felt about him having a boyfriend. Whenever Luke mentioned Noah, his mother’s smile seemed a bit too forced, her comments stilted. He tried not to let it get to him. Nothing was going to ruin his happiness with Noah. His mom would just have to learn to deal with it, because he wasn’t going to allow Noah to feel the slightest bit uncomfortable or unwelcomed.

Luke knew two people who would be welcoming Noah quite enthusiastically this evening—his little sisters. They’d been over the moon when they’d learned that Noah was his boyfriend. Faith tried to claim that she’d known it all along. Luke preferred to think he’d managed to outwit an eleven year old.

“I want to sit next to Noah,” Natalie announced from her perch on the sofa.

“No way. You sat next to him last time,” Faith said, socking her sister in the arm. “Mom said I could the next time Noah came over for dinner so it’s my turn now.”

“Nah-uh…I can sit next to Noah if I want to!” Natalie insisted.

“Stop it, you two,” Luke sighed. He wasn’t in the mood for his sisters bickering. “He’s my boyfriend and he’ll be sitting next to me. And I won’t have you harassing him while he’s here either. Not one single irritating word.”

“What’s going on in here?” Lily demanded, marching into the family room.


“They’re being annoying,” Luke countered. “Could someone please remind them that Noah is my boyfriend and not theirs? Noah isn’t coming over here to get harassed by these two crazy little girls.”

“Luke, that’s enough,” Lily admonished him. “We’re all going to have a nice dinner as a family and I won’t have you belittling your sisters. If this is how you get when you have friends over then we can put an end to it.”

“He’s more than my friend, Mom,” Luke replied. “He’s my boyfriend. Why can’t you say it?”


“Natalie, that’s enough,” Lily scolded her.

Luke wasn’t sure if his mom was reprimanding his sister because she was being annoying or because she didn’t want to listen to a song about her son kissing another boy in a tree.

Amidst the chaos there was a knock on the door. Noah.

“He’s here,” Luke announced. “Can everyone just act normal please?” He dashed over to the door
to answer it, praying that this wasn’t going to be the dinner from hell. Luke put on his biggest and brightest smile which would hopefully mask the bundle of nerves he’d was thanks to his family.


One smile from his boyfriend immediately righted all of the wrongs in the universe.

“Hey, Noah,” he replied, fighting the urge to plant a big kiss on Noah’s lips since they had an audience. Part of him wanted to say fuck it and do it anyway. Noah would probably die on the spot if he laid a juicy one on him in front of his family. Luke stepped aside so Noah could come in, which exposed him to the over enthusiastic little sisters.

“Noah!” the girls exclaimed, jumping up from the couch.


“It’s okay,” Noah chuckled.

“Please don’t enable them or else they’ll be unbearable.”

“Hello, Noah,” Lily called to him in a friendly but businesslike tone.

“Hi, Mrs. Snyder. It’s nice to see you again.”

“Lily, I think your chicken is ready,” Holden called from the kitchen.

“I’ll be there in a minute!” His mom seemed a bit reluctant to leave them. “Why don’t you guys take a seat in the kitchen?” she suggested. “I’ll have dinner on the table in a few minutes.”

“Is Luke really your boyfriend?” Faith asked once Lily left the room.

“Yes, he is,” Noah happily replied, taking off his coat and handing it to Luke.

“But he’s so annoying,” Natalie whined.

Luke bit his tongue determined not to get into a childish fight with his sisters. This dinner was liable to be stressful enough without him snarking at his sisters.

“Your brother is pretty incredible,” Noah told them.

Luke wanted to grab Noah and kiss him senseless. He had the best boyfriend in the entire world. No one would ever be able to convince him otherwise. “See…Noah thinks I rock and you should too,” he said, mussing up Natalie’s hair.

“Kids…dinner’s ready!” Lily called.

“Coming!” Luke herded everyone into the kitchen before his mother sent out the hounds to find them.

“Something smells delicious, Mrs. Snyder,” Noah said, following Luke into the room.

“It’s chicken pepperoni,” Lily replied, placing the steaming dish on the table. “I hope you like it.”

“Aurora’s chicken pepperoni,” Noah softly chuckled as he sat down next to Luke.
“Hun?” he asked, turning toward his boyfriend. Once again Noah had totally lost him, which had to mean that it was probably some obscure movie reference.

“Seems Like Old Times—1980—Goldie Hawn, Chevy Chase, Charles Grodin,” Noah enthusiastically explained. “It’s one of my mom’s favorite movies. I should try to pick it up for her for Christmas. It’s probably been ages since she’s seen it.”

“Is that the one with all of the dogs?” Holden asked, sitting down at the head of the table once he got Ethan situated in his bouncy chair next to the table.

Noah’s eyes lit up. “Yes, it is,” he excitedly replied. “Chevy Chase was Goldie Hawn’s ex husband and she was married to the DA that was trying to convict him of armed robbery. Aurora was their housekeeper and her famous dish was Chicken Pepperoni.”

“I remember,” Holden chuckled. “She was supposed to make for a dinner party for they were throwing for the governor but couldn’t because she was having her feet scraped.”

“That’s right. The governor loved Aurora’s chicken pepperoni.”

“I had no idea that it was so infamous when I decided to cook it tonight,” Lily said, unfolding a napkin and placing it on her lap. “I hope it lives up to the movie hype.”

“I’m sure it will be great,” Noah said with a smile. “After seeing that movie I always wanted to try it.”

Luke studied his mother, not she if she was being flippant. If she had been, Noah certainly hadn’t seemed to pick up on it which was the important thing. One parent was on his side—this he knew for sure. His dad actually recognizing the movie Noah was talking about was pretty cool.

Noah loved the Chicken Pepperoni which got a smile out of his mother. She was polite to Noah. And Noah was the perfect dinner guest—humoring the girls, respectfully answering all of his mom’s questions. Luke was just relieved when they were finished eating so he could get Noah away from his mom (just to be safe).


“You’ll do no such thing,” Lily snapped.

“Why not?” Luke challenged her. “We’ve gone up to my room before.” He turned to his father—his incredibly reasonable father. “Dad…”

“You and Noah can hang out in the family room,” Holden replied, picking Ethan up from his bouncy chair.


“Why don’t you and Noah play a game with your sisters,” Lily suggested as she cleared the dishes from the table.


“I’ll go set up the game.” Faith dashed from the room without bothering to wait for anyone else’s
“I’ll help.” Natalie followed, hot on her trail.

“You don’t have to do this,” Luke whispered. This wasn’t the evening he’d envisioned. He’d thought for sure they be able to steal a little quality time together even if it was just to hang out and talk and…well…kiss a little bit.

“I want to. Really.”

Luke gazed at Noah, who was smiling at him warmly. Noah actually didn’t mind playing with his sisters. And then it hit him—Noah was making up for all of the family moments he was never able to experience.

“Only if you’re on my team,” he relented.

Noah raised an eyebrow. “Is that fair?”

“Didn’t they collectively kick your butt the last time you played with them?”

“You’re right,” Noah chuckled. “Let’s go get ’em.”

If only it were that easy…

Faith and Natalie eagerly paired up for a girls vs. boys match. And they happily won all three games that were played. His little sisters got a huge kick out of ganging up on Luke even when it made no sense strategically. They just wanted to try to put their big brother in his place.

To add to his misery, Luke’s mom would venture into the family room with various excuses—she misplaced her cell phone, needed the book she’d been reading, and wanted to see if she could get refreshments for the game players. It annoyed Luke to no end. He knew what she was doing—making sure that he and Noah were “behaving” themselves. As if they’d just throw the Sorry board aside and go at it right on the coffee table in front of his little sisters.

But Luke hid his irritation. Everyone was having a good time and he wasn’t about to spoil it.

“Girls still rule,” Faith declared after the final game was won.

“Yes. We. Do!” Natalie sang and danced around the coffee table.

Noah threw his hands up in defeat. “I’m done,” he declared, unfolding himself and standing, stretching those long sexy limbs. “I should really get going.”

“Are you sure?” Luke asked, scrambling to his feet.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “I’m kinda worried about my mom. She’s still looking a bit run down. I think I should go spend some time with her…make sure she’s getting some rest.”

“Okay.” Luke wasn’t about to come between Noah and his mom. He knew how important she was to him.

“I still plan on coming to your game on Tuesday.”


Noah shook his head as he headed toward the door. “I highly doubt it.”
Luke got Noah’s coat out of the closet and handed it to him. “Remember, you’re my good luck charm,” he murmured.

“Noah, are you leaving?” Lily asked as she did the hundredth walk through of the night. “Yes, I am, ma’am,” he replied, slipping on his jacket. It was really delicious.”

“You’re welcome. I hope we see you again soon,” Lily smiled.

“Yes, Noah!” Natalie exclaimed. “You need to come and play more games with us. It was so much fun!”

“You just like beating me,” Noah laughed.

“Next time you can be my partner,” Faith suggested. “I’ll make sure you win.”

“We’ll see about that,” Luke called over his shoulder as he put his coat on.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Lily asked, frowning.

“I was going to walk Noah outside,” he quickly countered.

“Don’t be too long,” she replied. “I’m sure you have homework that needs to be finished.”

“I won’t,” Luke said, ushering Noah outside. “I’m sorry about tonight,” he said once they were safely outside on the patio.

“Sorry about what?” Noah was completely baffled.

“You probably didn’t envision a night filled with board games with little sisters and nosy parents.”

“I was with you,” Noah countered with a crooked grin. “That’s all that really matters.”

Best boyfriend ever. Seriously. It took a special person to deal with his family. There should be some sort of medal for accomplishing it.

Luke draped his arms across Noah’s shoulders. “You are so amazing. Have I told you that lately?”

“Maybe you could show me?” Noah shyly countered.


Just as they were about to connect, the porch light blinked on which made Luke jump. There was no way in hell he was going to let a little light come between him and Noah’s lips. He’d endured way too many family hardships not to be rewarded with at least one kiss from his boyfriend.

Luke drew Noah closer, feeling Noah’s hot breath on his face. Yes, finally.

But before their lips could meet the entire patio became a blaze of white light. Every light on it was now burning brightly.

Son of a bitch.


“Bye.”
Luke stood there, staring after Noah as he slipped through the patio gate and into the darkness. He knew who was behind the electric light show. And it made him seethe. He stormed inside the house, shutting the door behind him and spinning to face his parents who were standing in the family—not that he was surprised that they were there lingering, probably trying to spy on him to make sure that things didn’t get too out of hand with Noah. This had his mother’s signature all over it. He was a volcano that was going to blow in five…four…three…two…

“Can’t I have any privacy?” Luke demanded, shirking off his coat and tossing it over the desk chair.

“No one was bothering you,” Lily innocently answered.

“You guys turned on every flippin’ light out there,” Luke seethed, planting his hands on his hips. “It was brighter than Soldier Field. Were you afraid that we were just going to do it on the chaise lounge out there?”


Luke didn’t listen. He knew who was behind it all. His mom, whom it looked like still had issues with his sexuality. “You’re just bound and determined to keep me a virgin! Aren’t you, Mom?” he hissed, fists clenched to keep himself in check because he was so fucking angry. He wanted to punch the wall, knock over a chair, smash a vase—something that would unleash his rage.

“What’s a virgin?” Natalie piped up from the sofa where she was sitting with Faith.

“Something I’m going to be for the rest of my life if Mom has her way,” Luke snarked.


He was beyond caring at this point. “It’s true,” Luke insisted. “She just hates the fact that I have a boyfriend.”

“Luke, I don’t know what you’re talking about?” Lily asked, exasperated.

“The hell you do!” Luke spat, marching past his parents. “You just can’t accept who I am. Why don’t you just admit it?”


But he didn’t dare stop. His dad was pissed. Luke knew he’d pushed too hard, but he didn’t really give a shit at the moment. The lies and pretending just needed to stop. Luke high tailed it out of the family room straight up to his room, slamming the door behind him.

It didn’t stay closed for long though.

His very angry parents burst into the room ready for round two. Bring it on. He was used to battling—whether it was Kevin and his asshole friends or even his own family.

“You better get yourself under control right now, young man,” Holden said. “I will not have you talking like to your mother and in front of your little sisters no less.”

Logic would dictate that he’d back down and try to have a rational discussion with his parents. But Luke wasn’t always logical. Tonight he must have had a death wish because he refused to cool off and listen.

“Why? You don’t want them to know that their mom wishes she had a straight son who’d just be a
good boy and date girls?” Luke countered.

“You know that’s not true!” Lily cried. “I love you. I want you to be happy.”

“Just as long as it doesn’t involve another guy.”

“Luke, we are treating you the same way we would if you had a girlfriend over.” Holden stepped in between them trying to keep the peace. He was the ultimate referee after all. “Your mother and I wouldn’t allow you to have your girlfriend up in your room. There isn’t a double standard here. We’ve already talked about this, Luke.”

“Okay, fine.” He threw up his hands. He’d give his parents that one. Entertaining girlfriends in his room probably wouldn’t be welcomed. There was more to it though. The patio incident proved it. “But can’t I have five minutes alone with Noah on the patio?”

“Of course you can,” Lily replied a bit too defensively.

Luke raised his eyebrows, folding his arms across his chest. This was going to be good. “Really?”

“Luke, there isn’t some big conspiracy against you and Noah,” Holden said, backing up his wife.

“Could have fooled me,” he muttered.

“I didn’t think you should be out of the patio kissing your boyfriend with the girls in the next room,” Lily admitted.

“That’s pretty weak, Mom,” Luke said, sadly shaking his head. “What are you so afraid that they’ll see? Is it so wrong for them to see two people who genuinely care about each other?”

“No, but…”

Luke wasn’t about to listen to her lame excuses. “But it is wrong when it’s two guys kissing.”

Tears filled Lily’s eyes. “Luke, honey,” she whispered, slowly approaching him as if he were some wild tiger that would claw her apart if she got too close. “I’m trying here—honestly—I’m really trying.”

Luke bit his lip. God he hated seeing his mother upset. “Sometimes it doesn’t feel like it,” he mumbled.

“Noah is a great kid,” Holden, keeper of the peace, added. “We couldn’t have picked a better boyfriend for you.”

“Unless it was a girl.”

“No,” Holden insisted. “Your mother and I want you to be happy. We know that being with a guy—with Noah—is what makes you happy. We accept it.”

“It doesn’t always seem that way.” Luke cast his eyes downward, scuffing his foot against the carpeting.

Lily gently wrapped her arms around him. “I love you, baby,” she sniffed. “I really do want to see you happy. And I know I’m not perfect. I’m probably going to make more mistakes. Please bear with me. I think we can make it through this together.” She squeezed him tightly. “I love you for who you are. Got it?”
Tears were streaming down Luke’s cheeks as he untangled himself from their embrace. “Yeah,” he sniveled, wiping his eyes. “I’m sorry that I’ve been giving you such a hard time.”

Holden placed a hand on Luke’s shoulder. “We’ve all made mistakes, but the important thing is to learn from them. We’re on your side, Luke.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Lily kissed his cheek. “Now make sure that you have all of your homework done.”

“I will.”

After some more quick hugs and kisses, Luke was finally left alone. He’d felt as if he’d been through the wringer. He really wanted to believe that his mother was on his side and accepted Noah as his boyfriend.

Noah was so important to him. He couldn’t even bring himself to think of what life would be like without Noah in his life. How had he managed before Noah showed up his grandmother’s doorstep?

Luke flopped down on his bed and picked up his phone off the nightstand, flipping it open. His fingers flew across the keys. Then he hesitated, staring at the screen.

I luv u

His finger hovered over the SEND key. Oh it was so true. The love he felt for Noah practically had him bursting at the seams. “Shit,” he muttered, shutting his phone, leaving the message unsent.

Soon. He’d tell Noah soon.
Charlene had been hanging on by a thread—the cancer coupled with the long hours she’d been working at the diner were taking an enormous toll on her. She knew she wasn’t going to be able to fool Noah for much longer. Her worn down condition hadn’t gone unnoticed by him. Every day for the past week and a half he’d gone out of his way to take care of her. There was always hot tea waiting for her when she got home from her shifts, the cabin always spotless and Noah cooked as often as he could. He’d even asked her to cut back on her hours, citing that he could pick up the slack financially. Charlene had politely refused his offer. She wanted her son to be a kid as long as possible because all too soon he would be facing a mammoth burden that no teenager should have to endure. Her son had gone through way too much in his eighteen years. Charlene wanted to protect him as long as she could.

However, fate seemed to have other plans.

One minute Charlene had been serving burgers and fries and then the next the world seemed to tilt on its axis. Somehow she had managed to stumble back to the small break room to try to get her wits about her. But Charlene’s shakiness hadn’t gone unnoticed. Henry had followed her, steadying her before she toppled over.

Despite Charlene’s protests, Emma was called to come collect her. After a hushed conversation between Emma, Henry, and Vienna it was decided that she’d be put on temporary leave until after the New Year. Charlene had been too weak to protest. Instead, she allowed Emma to whisk her back to the farm. There had been a pit in her stomach as she left the diner because she knew that she’d worked her final shift at Al’s.

The sands of the hour glass were quickly disappearing. Dr. Hughes had told her she’d only have possibly four months to live, but she knew she wasn’t going to make it that long. Today had been a harsh reminder of that fact. She just needed to survive through the holidays—just one last Christmas with Noah.

“I can’t believe you managed to work this long,” Emma said sadly shaking her head as she ushered Charlene into kitchen of the farmhouse.

“I needed to,” Charlene feebly protested, sinking into one of the chairs at the kitchen table. “Noah would wonder why I wasn’t working.”

“When do you plan on telling him?” Emma asked, placing her hand on Charlene’s shoulder. “Surely he must suspect something is wrong.”

“He does,” she sighed. If she had a dollar for every time Noah has asked about her well being she’d be a very rich woman by now. “I’ve managed to blame it on long hours.”

“You need to tell him.”

“I will—after the holidays.”

“He’s going to notice that you’re not working anymore,” Emma gently pointed out.

“I know,” she murmured, rubbing her temples trying to make the throbbing headache go away which was going to be nearly impossible. Her situation had just gotten a lot more complicated. Lying to Noah was awful and she hated doing it, but it was only for a couple of more weeks. “I’m going to tell Noah that I’m taking time off to try to shake this bug—get my strength back.”
“Charlene…”

She buried her face in her hands. “Please, I just need a little more time.” Even as the words tumbled from her lips she knew how pathetic she sounded. Time was something she didn’t have. It was as precious as the Hope Diamond or the Heart of the Ocean (Noah would love that little movie reference even if the movie had been made in 1997).

Emma rubbed Charlene’s back. “Okay, okay, but please tell me how I can help you.”

Charlene lifted her head, revealing her tear stained face. “I just want Noah to have the best Christmas ever,” she sniffed. “I love seeing him so happy.”

“I want you two to celebrate Christmas here with us,” Emma told her. “The family gets together on Christmas Day and it’s one big, crazy, chaotic celebration but I wouldn’t have it any other way. You and Noah are part of this family so you need to be here to share it with us.”

Charlene nodded, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “Noah is going to need to be reminded of that because when he finds out…” She couldn’t finish the sentence because she was hit with a fresh wave of tears. Noah’s reaction was going to be…god…she didn’t even want to go there yet. Her poor string bean.

Emma momentarily left her side to get a box of tissues which she placed on the kitchen table and sat down next to her. “We’re all going to be here for Noah. I promise that he’ll be well taken care of. I love that boy as if he were one of my grandsons. And I know the rest of the family is very fond of him.”

Charlene took one of the tissues and blew her nose. “Thank you,” she murmured. “He’s going to need all of the love he can get.”

“Don’t worry,” Emma reassured her. “You just need to focus on resting and taking care of yourself.”

“I’m trying,” she sighed. “I had hoped that Noah and I could have a nice dinner and open our gifts together on Christmas Eve. He never had a truly happy Christmas in his own home and I wanted to give him that memory.”

“Your husband wasn’t a big fan of Christmas?” Emma gently prodded.

“He wasn’t a big fan of anything,” Charlene admitted. Sadly she wasn’t really exaggerating. All Winston Mayer really cared about were appearances. He wanted the perfect family—a wife who looked like a million bucks and would do his bidding no questions asked as well as a son who was the ideal little soldier—tough and obedient.

“Did you celebrate Christmas?”

“We did but it was by Winston’s rules—no Santa Claus and no sissy gifts for Noah. He only wanted Noah to have one gift, but I tried to sneak him a few more when I could,” Charlene explained, conjuring up visions of Christmas past which were Dickens bleak, rattling chains and all. “When he was little I tried to take him to see Santa Claus but when Winston found out…”

Emma took Charlene’s hands, squeezing them. “We’re going to replace those horrible memories with good ones.”

Charlene didn’t doubt that Emma would make good on her promise. And she clung to that thought a couple of hours later as she rested on the sofa once she’d gotten the strength to return to the cabin.
Emma had been reluctant to leave her, but Charlene had assured her that she’d call if she needed help.

“Mom!” Noah exclaimed, immediately noticing her curled up on the sofa the moment he’d stepped through the door. “What are you doing home? Are you okay?” He knelt next to her, placing a cool hand on her forehead.

“Better now, string bean,” she sighed, blinking up at him. “It was a rough day. I’ve been burning the candle at both ends and it’s finally caught up with me.”

“What happened?”

“I got pretty woozy at the diner. Emma came and got me, put me back to rights and conspired with Henry and Vienna to give me the rest of the month off.”

“I like that plan,” Noah replied, stroking her hair like she’d often do to him when he wasn’t feeling well or was upset. “Don’t worry about money. I’ve been saving and there’s plenty for us to get by.”

It didn’t surprise her one bit that Noah had been socking money away. Even now when they had a real home Noah still wouldn’t allow himself to get too complacent. Charlene wasn’t sure if she should be sad that he still didn’t feel safe or proud that he was so responsible.

“I’m not worried,” she said, smiling weakly at him. “You’ve never ever let me down.”

“What would you like for dinner?” Noah asked. “I can whip us up something.”

“Surprise me.”

“That could be risky,” Noah chuckled.

“How would you like to help me bake Christmas cookies this weekend?” she suggested. “We haven’t done that since you were a little boy.” A very little boy. The last time they made Christmas cookies was when Winston had been over in Iraq. She wondered if Noah even remembered it.

“I’d like that.”

“Really?” The joy on Noah’s face was unmistakable. Any pain she’d been feeling disappeared. Noah’s smile was the perfect medicine for her.

“Yes. I want to get to know Luke better. He seems like such a nice boy.”

“He’s the greatest.”

“We can have an early dinner and then tackle the cookies,” Charlene suggested. “I was thinking Saturday night if it’s okay with you. This way it will give me plenty of time to rest up and figure out which cookies we should bake.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” he gushed. “I’ll have to check with Luke to see if he’s available.”

She leaned over, kissing his cheek. “You do that and let me know what he says.”

“I will,” Noah said, scrambling to his feet. “Just keep resting while I make dinner. I promise not to burn it.”

“I’m not worried,” she called after him as he headed off to the kitchen.
But deep down in her soul she was terrified of destroying Noah’s world.

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The cabin had become Luke’s favorite place to visit on his grandma’s farm after Noah and his mom had moved in. The old cabin which had been abandoned for years was now a warm and cozy home, filled with so much love. Luke was happy to be visiting there again, having accepted Noah’s sweet invitation to spend a Saturday evening having dinner and helping bake Christmas cookies with his mom. Noah had worried that Luke would think it was a lame way to spend a weekend night, but Luke was touched by the offer.

Luke stole a quick kiss on the cheek when Noah greeted him at the door. The cabin seemed extra homey with a roaring fire in the fireplace, the Christmas tree he’d helped decorate brightly lit, and the aroma of dinner baking in the oven. “Thanks for inviting me over,” he murmured, taking off his coat and handing it to Noah.

“I’m glad you wanted to come.”


“I thought you might rather do…”

“Luke!” Charlene exclaimed, strolling over to them with a dish towel thrown over her shoulder. “I’m so glad that you’re brave enough to help us make some cookies.”

Luke was taken aback by how frail Charlene looked. He’d thought she’d looked like she’d lost weight around Thanksgiving, but she seemed even thinner and paler now like a fragile china doll. He fought the urge to rush her over to the sofa to rest. Instead he plastered his best smile on his face and chuckled, “You and Noah are the brave ones. I’m not that much of a cook. I once lit a wooden spoon on fire trying to make Macaroni and Cheese.”

“It’s a good thing we don’t have a gas stove,” she laughed, placing her hand on his arm.

“I think we’d better play it safe and keep him from the oven,” Noah snickered.

“In my defense the spoon incident was a few years ago,” Luke protested.

“Maybe we’ll be daring a let you use the mixer then,” Charlene said, giving his arm a squeeze before she returned to the kitchen.

“Can I help with anything?” Luke asked, looking after her.

“Noah’s been doing most of the heavy lifting,” Charlene said. “We’ve got it covered. You’re our guest. Just relax. We’ll be putting you to work soon enough.”

“Are you sure?” he persisted.

“Yeah,” Noah replied. “Dinner’s almost ready. Did you want a Coke to drink?” He headed toward the kitchen where Charlene was scooping mashed potatoes into a serving bowl.

Instead of sitting in the living room, Luke parked his butt in one of the kitchen chairs, wanting to be close just in case extra help was needed. He didn’t feel right being waited on—guest or not, but he
also didn’t want to press the issue either.

“Dinner smells wonderful,” Luke said, watching Noah help his mother. He took the bowl of potatoes and placed them on the table before she could move from the kitchen.

“I hope you like meat loaf,” Charlene replied as she opened the oven and pulled the main course from it.

“I do.”

“Mom, I can handle the rest,” Noah said once he’d returned to his mother’s side. “Sit down and keep our guest company.”

“Yeah,” Luke piped up. “You can tell me embarrassing stories about Noah.”

“Now that’s a tempting offer,” she chuckled.

“Just don’t tell him anything too mortifying,” Noah warned her good-naturedly.

Charlene sat down at the kitchen table, letting out a small sigh. Luke was grateful for her company. Not only was she off her feet, but he hoped that he’d get a story or two out of her about Noah. He’d love to learn more about his boyfriend from his mother’s point of view.

“Hmmm…let me see what I can come up with,” she mischievously replied. A smile quickly spread across her lips. “Ohhh…I have one! When Noah was potty trained he’d always sing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star when he used the bathroom but instead of singing ‘twinkle’, he’d sing ‘tinkle’.”

Luke burst out laughing as Noah gasped, “Mom, that is very mortifying!”

“I thought I heard singing coming from my grandma’s bathroom,” Luke teased. “Now I know the culprit.”

“Very funny,” Noah mumbled, putting the meat loaf down on the center of the table, his cheeks a blazing crimson. “Mom, I don’t remember ever doing anything like that.”

“You did and you were adorable,” she said, glancing up at her son.

“I bet his was,” Luke chimed in. “I’d love to see some baby pictures if you have any.”

“I’m sure I can find some for you to look at.”

“So much for not embarrassing me to death,” Noah muttered as he returned to the kitchen to get the rest of the side dishes.

“He was cute from day one,” Charlene said, ignoring Noah’s comment.

Luke grinned. “He still is.”

“Hello, I’m right here.” Noah slid into the chair across from Luke and closest to the kitchen.

“Please, Luke, help yourself,” Charlene said, reaching over and handing him the plate of meatloaf.

Luke took it from her. “Thank you.”

“You’ve made quite the basketball fan out of Noah,” she told him as he passed her the meatloaf.
“Mom,” Noah groaned, hiding his face in his hands.

“Well, he has,” she insisted. “There’s nothing wrong with it. Luke is your boyfriend so it’s not some big secret that you enjoy watching him play.”

“I love having him there,” Luke said, dishing some mashed potatoes onto his plate. “He’s my good luck charm.”

“You’re a great player with or without me there,” Noah replied.

“But better with you—trust me.” Luke took a bite of the meatloaf that almost rivaled his grandma’s which was saying something because Emma Snyder was a phenomenal cook. “Mmmm…this is amazing.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Charlene said, smiling. “It’s your grandma’s recipe with my own little twist to it.”

“You did her proud,” Luke told her.

“I think that’s the ultimate compliment,” Noah said, his face fully returned to its normal color. He speared a piece of meatloaf with his fork. “And I have to agree—this is really yummy.”

The rest of the dinner conversation stayed embarrassment free. Charlene talked to Luke about his horse and her grandparents whom also had a horse farm. Luke was impressed with her knowledge of horses. Talking to her was so easy. He could tell that she truly accepted that he was Noah’s boyfriend.

“Have the boys that attacked you and Noah given you any more trouble?” Charlene asked as they finished up their meal.

“No. All has been quiet on the harassment front,” Luke replied. He hadn’t heard a peep from any of the terrible trio since Kevin had pulled Mark away from his lunch table last week. For the life of him he couldn’t figure out why the bullying had stopped. It was almost too good to be true.

“Good,” Charlene said, setting down her fork. “I feel badly that you didn’t press charges on our account.”


“Me too,” she murmured.

“Luke, do you think you could help me with the cleanup?” Noah asked, standing up.

“Yes, of course.” Luke jumped up, grabbing his plate.


“I want to help,” Luke insisted as he took her dirty plate.

Noah began to clear the food from the table. “Mom, go relax,” he urged her.

“You can formulate our plan of attack for the cookie baking,” Luke added.

“Okay, I can take a hint,” Charlene relented, slowly getting to her feet. “I’ll leave you guys to get the kitchen back in order for the baking.”
Luke turned to Noah once they were left to clean. “I’ll wash, you dry,” he suggested, sauntering over to the sink not waiting for an answer. He got the dish soap out of the cupboard

“Just go easy on the soap, cowboy,” Noah said as he gathered up the rest of the dirty dishes. “Remember a little goes a long way.”

Luke tried to go easy on the dish soap only using enough to make a mound of sudsy goodness. They worked through the stack of dirty dishes quickly. He was a regular dish washing machine, so good that Noah was unable to keep up. Luke fished a clean towel out of the drawer to help Noah finish drying.

“See, you can’t keep up with the master,” Luke joked, snapping Noah with the towel.

The flippant reply he’d expected never came. Noah froze instead—the smile he’d been sporting was replaced by a thin, tense line. At first, Luke didn’t understand the change in demeanor. Then the light bulb clicked on above his head.

Noah’s father—the abuse…

Fuck.

“Noah, I’m sorry,” Luke whispered, throwing down the dish towel and reaching for his hand. “I’m such an idiot.”


“You don’t…”

Noah silenced Luke with a kiss on his hand. “I am—really. Let’s get these dishes put away so we can start making the cookies.”

“Okay.” Luke was reluctant to let go of Noah’s hand, but he did. After all, they needed both hands to finish up in the kitchen.

By the time Charlene ventured back into the kitchen it was spic and span. His grandma would have been so proud, especially since cleaning wasn’t his forte. Making messes was more like it. She’d always say that it was easy to tell when Luke had been in a room. But you couldn’t tell he’d been here.

“You two did such a nice job of cleaning up,” Charlene said, surveying the room. “It’s a shame that we have to mess it up again.”

“No worries. Noah and I can get it back into shape again,” Luke declared. This really was love if he was volunteering to do the dishes twice in one evening.

“You are so sweet, Luke.” Charlene smiled as she placed her hand on his arm. “But I’m still not going to let you near that stove,” she teased, which garnered quite a hardy laugh out of Noah.

*Paybacks are a bitch, Mayer,* he made a silent vow to his boyfriend.

“Just tell me what I can do and I’ll do it,” he replied.

“Same here,” Noah piped up. “This is your project, Mom, consider us your elves.”

“Elves are getting bigger these days,” she laughed. “I have a few recipes I wanted to make—sugar, candy cane, and cornflake wreaths.”
“I remember your candy cane cookies,” Noah wistfully replied.

“You do?” Charlene’s eyes brightened. “You were just a little boy the last time I made them.”

“Yeah, it was just us. He was in Iraq,” Noah said, chewing his bottom lip.

“They must be awesome cookies.” Luke felt the need to try to lighten the mood. He hated that just the mere mention of Noah’s father could suck the light out of his boyfriend. Tonight was supposed to be fun and he wanted to make sure that it stayed that way.

And just like that the smile was back. “Yeah, they are and they’re like the best Christmas cookies ever. I can’t wait for you to try them.”

“I had Emma help me find the recipe because I didn’t quite remember it,” Charlene said as she placed a couple of pieces of paper on the counter. “I think it should be pretty close to the one I used.”

“We should start with that one,” Luke decided.

“I think someone is anxious to try them,” Noah teased.


“No pressure,” Charlene chuckled as she began to get out all of the ingredients they’d need to make the candy cane cookies.

She took charge of the situation, delegating Luke and Noah to twisting duty (the red and white dough needed to be shaped together in a candy cane form). The radio was soon tuned to a station that played all Christmas music. Charlene sang along to *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*. Luke cast a sidelong glance at Noah who shifted nervously in his chair, which made him shake his head. His boyfriend tended to needlessly worry about appearances. Luke put himself in Noah’s shoes, deciding that he might be a bit uncomfortable if his mom broke out into song too. Luke had a plan that would hopefully put Noah at ease even if he needed to embarrass himself in the process.

“Make the Yule-tide gay, From now on our troubles will be miles away,” Luke sang off key at the top of his lungs. A singer he was not, but he’d sing Christmas songs the rest of the night if it would make Noah relax.

“Here we are as in olden days. Happy golden days of yore,” Noah joined them which put a big smile on Luke’s face.

Mission accomplished.

“You know, that song is from the 1944 musical *Meet Me in St. Louis,*” Noah declared as he placed a candy cane cookie on the cookie sheet.

Only Noah would find a way to work a movie reference into a Christmas song. “You are such a geek,” Luke snickered.

Noah playfully nudged him. “Says the guy who just belted out a Judy Garland song at the top of his lungs.”

“You joined me.”

“Someone had to try to drown you out,” Noah teased. “I think it was a manner of moments before
dogs started to howl.”


“Good thing,” Noah chuckled as he took the candy cane filled cookie sheet over to the oven for baking.

“Don’t listen to him,” Charlene called over her shoulder. “I thought it was lovely.”


“She didn’t say anything about your singing voice,” Noah quickly added.

“You’re so going to get it, Mayer.” Of course Luke was totally kidding. He was thrilled to see Noah’s relaxed playful side come out.

From the candy cane cookies, they moved on to sugar cookies. Charlene whipped up the batter with their assistance. Noah did a lot of measuring while Luke fetched the ingredients. They probably figured he’d do the least amount of damage with this task.

Once all of the candy canes were done baking, the sugar cookies were put into the oven. The aroma that filled the cabin smelled delicious. He kinda felt like he was part of some old Christmas movie that Noah loved. There was the tree, the fire, the music, and now it even smelled like Christmas to him. It was kinda romantic even with Noah’s mom there.

Luke was delegated to red hot duty for the corn flake wreaths far away from the stove. “Guess you guys aren’t taking any chances,” he joked.

“Nope,” Noah replied as he formed the wreaths for Luke to decorate with the red hots. “I don’t want to end up sleeping in the barn because you burned our house down.”


Any sarcastic remark that Luke might have spit out quickly died in his throat. Noah’s mom was so incredibly sweet. Luke didn’t feel like she was judging him or sticking around to protect Noah’s virtue. This is how Luke had wanted to feel when Noah had dinner over at his house last week. But Luke’s mom had ruined that.

“Did you want to watch a movie while we wait for the cookies to bake and cool?” Noah asked.

“What did you have in mind?”

Noah led him over to the TV. “These are our options,” he said, gesturing toward the DVDs that were lined up on the shelf underneath the DVD player.

Luke remembered memorizing the collection so he could buy Noah the perfect birthday gift. Unfortunately, he hadn’t heeded Maddie’s advice (he’d never make that mistake again), but seeing his gift on display with the rest of the DVDs did make him smile. “I’m game for anything.”

“I’m sure you’ve already seen Dead Poets Society.”

Noah should know by now that he should never assume anything with Luke when it came to movies. “No. Is that one of your musty old black and white movies?”

Noah shook his head, chuckling. “No, it isn’t. It’s from 1989. I thought for sure you must have seen it—especially since it’s in color.”
“I was one when the movie came out.”

“Well, they do have this nifty invention called the DVD as well as cable.”

Luke rolled his eyes. “Ha…ha…I’m well aware of both,” he replied. “What is the movie about?”

“It takes place in this all boys’ boarding school…”


Noah leaned closer to him and lowered his voice. “It’s not _that_ kind of movie.”

“Still—all those guys—sounds kind of entertaining to me,” he said mischievously.

“ _Dead Poets Society_ it is then,” Noah said, grabbing the DVD.

“I don’t want to intrude,” she called from the kitchen.

“You won’t be intruding,” Noah replied.

“Are you sure?” she asked, poking her head around the corner.


“I’ll only stick around until the cookies are done,” she decided.

Luke made himself comfortable at the far end of the sofa while Noah got the movie ready. The music that had been playing on the radio disappeared. Charlene strolled into the living room with a couple of candy cane cookies in hand.

“They’re still a little warm,” she said, handing one to Luke.

“Warm cookies are the best,” he replied, taking a bite of it.

Noah was right. This was one amazing Christmas cookie. It ranked right up there with the cookies his grandma made.


Noah took the other cookie from Charlene. “Mmmm…even better than I remembered,” he said, sinking down close to Luke on the couch so that Charlene would have room to sit.

She sat down next to Noah. “I can’t take all of the credit. These great elves helped me out.”

“Noah and I will give those Keebler elves a run for their money,” Luke snickered.


Luke was so thrilled that Noah was holding his hand that he allowed his boyfriend to one up him. Only a month ago Noah couldn’t even admit that he was gay, but now he was holding his hand in front of his mom. Luke was so proud of him.

A triumphant Noah started the movie. It didn’t take long for Luke to become immersed in the lives of the boys at the prestigious Welton Academy. The references to Walt Whitman made him grin and he found himself wishing he had a teacher as cool as Mr. Keating.

The best part of the movie was Noah, sitting there with his thigh pressed against his and his thumb
caressing Luke’s palm. Noah hadn’t let go of his hand once. It took every ounce of willpower not
to crawl into Noah’s lap and kiss him senseless.

Charlene called it a night after the last batch of cookies were taken from the oven. “Enjoy the rest of
your movie,” she said, kissing Noah on the cheek and then giving Luke’s shoulder a squeeze.
“Thank you for helping us tonight, Luke.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied, smiling up at her. “I had a lot of fun.”

They said their goodnights and then Charlene left them alone. As soon as the door clicked shut,
Noah slipped his arm around Luke’s shoulders. Much better. Luke snuggled against his boyfriend
to watch the remainder of the movie.

And what a movie it was—it made Luke laugh and cry. The final scene of the movie gave him
goosebumps.

“Wow,” Luke murmured, wiping the remainder of the tears from his eyes.

“Did you like it?”

“Yeah, but you need to stop picking movies that make me cry,” Luke replied. “My boyfriend is
going to start thinking I’m a big wuss.”

“Nah, he thinks you’re pretty amazing,” Noah said, gazing into his eyes.

That did it. Luke couldn’t hold back any longer. He pounced on Noah, pushing him down on the
sofa and kissing him hard. Ever since he’d stepped through the door, Luke had been aching to kiss
Noah like this—deep with lots of tongue. Kisses he could feel right down to his toes. Kisses that
made him hard—was he ever hard right now.


“God…Noah,” Luke breathed into his ear. “I want your cock in my mouth again. It’s all I can think
about.”

He hadn’t had Noah’s dick in this mouth since that evening in the pump house. It wasn’t for lack of
trying on both of their parts. The night before they’d parked on Pine Road after Luke’s home
basketball game. Luke had been so excited about properly celebrating his win over the Earlville Red
Raiders. Nothing says victory like a good blow job.

However, they quickly discovered that the Mustang wasn’t a good place for blow jobs. They tried—
oh did they ever try—to find a way to make it work but they failed. Well, not failed entirely. They
had managed to engage in a couple of mind blowing hand jobs so it wasn’t a total bust. Luke had
decided that an orgasm with Noah no matter how it was achieved was pretty fucking phenomenal.

“Me too, but…”

Noah didn’t have to finish his sentence. Luke knew they couldn’t not when Noah’s mom was in the
next room and could make an unexpected appearance. She may be accepting of their relationship,
but Luke was quite sure she wouldn’t appreciate seeing her son’s cock in Luke’s mouth.

“I know,” Luke nibbled his ear. “We can’t, but I still want you. I always want you.”

Noah moaned, burying his face in the crook of Luke’s neck. Luke kissed the top of Noah’s head
and then forced himself to put the brakes on, sitting up and putting a little distance between him and
Noah.

“I should probably turn off the movie,” Noah said, reaching for the remote and shutting it off. “Do you mind if I put the radio back on? I kinda like the Christmas music.”

“Okay, but I’m not going to sing this time.”

“Better yet.”

Luke shook his head as Noah disappeared into the kitchen to turn the radio on. The cabin was soon filled with the soft melody of Silent Night. Noah returned with a sugar cookie and wreath for both of them.

“Thought you might like a snack,” he said, handing Luke the cookies.

“Mmmm…thanks.”

“So, you really liked the movie?”

“Yes, I did—even though it made me cry. Just so you know I’m going to make you pay for that.”

There was a faraway look in Noah’s eyes as he munched on his sugar cookie. Luke wondered if he’d said something wrong. Just as he was about to ask, Noah spoke, “Do you think Neil was gay?”

“What?” Luke was a little thrown by Noah’s question.

“Neil from the movie—I kinda always wondered if his character was supposed to be gay and that he really killed himself because he knew that his father would freak out,” Noah carefully explained, staring at the darkened TV set. “Maybe it’s just me seeing what my life could have been like if we didn’t get away from the Colonel.”


“I don’t know. The Colonel hates to lose.” Noah glanced over at Luke, offering him a weak smile. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to get all melancholy on you.”

Luke kissed his cheek. “No need to apologize. I know you just can’t forget everything you’ve been through.”

“I’d like to try.”

“I think you’re doing a great job. I’m enjoying getting to know you better, Noah,” Luke said, resting his chin on Noah’s shoulder. “I loved hanging out with you and your mom tonight. She’s really cool.”

“You know, you have a cool mom too,” Noah replied, squeezing Luke’s thigh.

“I suppose,” he sighed. Once upon a time he would have readily agreed with Noah, but even after his last talk with his parents he still wondered if his mother would ever accept him one hundred percent. With all of his heart he wanted to believe she would, but it was still difficult.

“Did something happen between you two?”

“I don’t think she’s too happy that I have a boyfriend,” Luke admitted.
Next to him Noah stiffened. “Oh.”

“It’s not you,” Luke quickly reassured him. “Noah, they think you’re great—really they do. I think my mom wouldn’t be happy with me dating anyone with a penis.”

“I thought she was cool with everything.”

“We kinda had it out last weekend after you left,” Luke explained, seeking out Noah’s hand and lacing his fingers through it. “She said she’s trying. And I really want to believe it.”

“Then believe it.”

“I want to,” Luke sighed. “At least I know my dad has my back so he’ll help her deal. My dad has always been there for me. I know he won’t let me down.”

Noah gently pushed the bangs from Luke’s eyes. “He won’t,” he whispered. “Everything is going to be okay.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” Noah murmured, kissing him.
Chapter 57

Christmas never had been a holiday Noah looked forward to. For him it always seemed to drive home the fact that his father was an evil bastard. It didn’t bother him that he never was lavished with gifts. The way the Colonel treated Noah’s mother was what absolutely crushed him. She constantly had to pay the price for trying to give him a Christmas that any child would love.

In the years they’d been on the run, Christmas was a modest affair which was just fine with Noah because his mother had given him the gift of freedom. He couldn’t ask for a better present. Sometimes there wasn’t extra money for gifts or a nice dinner, but it didn’t matter to Noah. He was with his mom and they were away from the Colonel.

This year Noah felt as if he’d stepped into a Capra film. He had a real home—there was a beautiful tree, cookies, music, and he was going to be surrounded by people he loved. It couldn’t get much better. As a little boy, he’d dream of Christmases like this. By the time Noah became a teenager, he’d given up on the dream because he’d become convinced that dreams only came true in the movies. Noah was never so happy to be wrong.

While Noah was looking forward to spending Christmas with Luke and giving him his gifts, he was also happy that his mom had suggested sharing a quiet Christmas Eve together so they could exchange their presents privately. His mom was making spaghetti for dinner. She had insisted on cooking for him so Noah had picked a menu that would be easy to prepare.

Noah snuck into his bedroom to get out the gifts he’d purchased for his mom while she was busy in the kitchen making dinner. He felt like Santa Claus placing the wrapped presents under the tree. This was so cool. He couldn’t wait to see his mom’s face when she opened up his gifts.

“Dinner is almost ready!” Charlene called from the kitchen.

Noah stopped admiring his handiwork and joined his mom in the kitchen. He got a couple of plates out of the cupboard so he could finish setting the table while his mom drained the pasta. Between the two of them, everything was on the table in a few minutes.

“I know we don’t usually do this, but I think we should say grace,” Charlene said once they both settled in their chairs.

“I agree. We have a lot to be thankful for this year.”

Charlene folded her hands and bowed her head. “Dear lord, thank you for delivering us safely to Oakdale. We’re thankful for the incredible friends we met here, especially the Snyders. Amen.”

“Amen,” Noah murmured. He was very grateful for a certain Luke Snyder. Lifting his head, he noticed there were tears in his mom’s eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, these are happy tears,” she said, dabbing her eyes. “It’s so nice to be able to spend Christmas Eve with you in our own home.”

“It’s pretty incredible. I’m looking forward to making our own traditions now,” Noah admitted. “We can start with Christmas Eve spaghetti dinners.”

“Sounds good to me,” Charlene’s voice cracked a bit.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”
“Yes,” she insisted, smiling. “We’ve both been through so much and it’s just a dream come true for me to be able to give you a real Christmas.”

Would his mom ever stop putting him first? A lump formed in Noah’s throat. Now it was his turn to get all emotional. His mom loved him so much that it made up for the lack of love he got from the Colonel. Sometimes it was a bit overwhelming when he realized that she’d do almost anything for him. Her love was so big and unconditional.

“I’m glad that you’re getting one too,” Noah said after he got his emotions in check. “I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. Just saying I love you doesn’t seem enough.”

“It is, Noah. It’s more than enough.”

Somehow he knew she’d say something like that. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, string bean.”

“Are you ever going to stop calling that?” Noah asked as he piled some spaghetti onto his plate.

“Never.”

“That’s what I thought,” Noah chuckled, shaking his head. He ate a couple of bites of spaghetti before he spoke again. “Luke asked me out for New Year’s Eve,” he blurted out. “There’s a party at this teen club—Crash—that he wants to take me to. Suit and tie—the whole nine yards.”

“Sounds like a new suit is in order for you then.”

“No, they aren’t,” Noah replied. They couldn’t be wasting money on a new suit for him. His mom was going to be off work for probably another ten days. “The suit Mrs. Snyder gave me will work out just fine.”

“Luke seems to think I look pretty okay in the suit I have,” he said, shifting in his chair as he twirled some spaghetti around his fork.

“Luke can’t take his eyes off you no matter what you wear.”

“Mom,” Noah gasped, a bit mortified. His mother wasn’t supposed to notice things like that. But he had to admit that it thrilled him to hear that about Luke. He hoped it wasn’t just his mother exaggerating things.

“I have eyes, Noah. I know what I’ve seen,” she said matter-of-factly. “And I think it’s adorable. He’s in love.”

“He hasn’t said it to me yet,” Noah quietly admitted.

“Have you told him?”
“No, but I do love him.”

She stopped eating and stared at him positively exasperated. “What are you waiting for? Just tell him. He’ll be thrilled.”

“I didn’t want to say it too soon and freak him out.”

“You’re not going to freak him out,” Charlene countered. “There’s nothing wrong with saying what is in your heart.”

Noah tore the crust off his garlic bread so he could use it to sop up some extra spaghetti sauce on his plate. “I suppose…”

“Sometimes you need to take a chance,” Charlene reminded him as she took a sip of her soda.

Noah remembered the last time someone told him to take a chance. He’d scoffed at the notion of the old fortune teller knowing anything, but had he ever been wrong. It might not hurt to listen to his mom. She’d always had his best interests at heart and would never steer him wrong. “Maybe,” he murmured.

After they finished eating, Noah insisted on doing the cleanup so his mom could relax for a little while. She didn’t put up too much of a fuss for being delegated to the living room. His mom seemed to be doing better since taking the leave of absence from Al’s. There was a bit more energy in her step and color in her cheeks. Hopefully, all of this holiday food would put some weight back onto her thin frame.

Doing the dishes alone paled in comparison to when Luke helped him with them. There wasn’t a Mt. Everest of soap suds in the sink or Luke’s infectious laughter. He couldn’t wait to see Luke tomorrow so he could spend Christmas with his boyfriend. Luke was going to his grandmother’s (the rich one that owned half the town) for dinner this evening. Noah had been tempted to call him, but he had a feeling that Lucinda Walsh might frown on her celebration being interrupted by Luke’s ringing cell phone. And truth be told, even though he’d only met her once she still intimidated the hell out of him so he preferred to stay on her good side if possible. Even without speaking to Luke, this would be a special Christmas Eve.

Noah put the last dish away and then turned on the radio, filling the cabin with Bing Crosby dreaming of a White Christmas. The song fit the mood perfectly. There was a nice blanket of snow covering the farm, making it look like something out of a film from the 1940s. The pond was frozen ready for skating. Noah thought the Snyder farm was even better than the one in Christmas in Connecticut which was saying a lot because he’d fantasized about spending Christmas there after he saw the movie as a kid. There was no other place in the world that he’d rather spend Christmas with everyone he loved.

The presents under the tree had multiplied by the time Noah joined his mom in the living room. Looked like he wasn’t the only one trying to be sneaky.

“Santa came while you were doing dishes,” Charlene said, smiling up at him.

“He’s quite stealth and fireproof,” Noah replied, nodding toward the fire blazing in the fireplace.

“Santa is very resourceful,” she said, gingerly rising from the sofa. “It looks like someone was a good boy this year.”

Noah had never seen so many wrapped gifts under their tree—not even when they were still living with the Colonel. Even with the few gifts he’d bought his mother there were a lot more boxes than
he’d expected to see. “These can’t all be for us,” he murmured, eyes fixed on the tree.

“There are a few for the Snyders, but I think most of them are yours.”

“Mom, we don’t have the…”

“Noah,” Charlene quickly interrupted him, “I told you that Santa thought you were an extra good boy this year.”

“There isn’t a Santa,” he grumbled. His mom probably had spent way more money that she should have. He didn’t need a bunch of gifts from her. He was just happy being able to spend the holiday safely in their new home without worrying about the Colonel finding them.

“But there is,” she insisted. “I know you’ve seen Miracle on 34th Street.”

Noah sighed. There was no use arguing with her. And it was Christmas after all.

Charlene knelt down next to the tree. “Now, let’s see what kinds of goodies we have here.” She pulled out gift after gift, placing them in a neat pile by her side.

“There are a few under there for you too,” Noah said as he approached the tree and fished out the presents for his mom.

“Noah, you better not have spent all of your money on me,” she told him.

“Who said anything about me? You’re the one said that Santa Claus was here,” he teased as he placed her gifts on the coffee table.

Charlene ruffled his hair. “Smart aleck.”

Noah helped his mom to her feet and she gathered up the gifts she’d gotten from underneath the tree. She placed her stack next to his, leaving the coffee table buried beneath a pile of bows and Christmas paper. Noah picked up a box covered in red foil with a big silver bow on it and handed it to his mom.

“I want you to go first. Merry Christmas.”

“This almost looks too pretty to open.”

Noah had to admit that the lady at Fashions did an incredible job wrapping the gift. “Open it. And don’t you even think about trying to save the paper.”

“Okay….okay,” she laughed as she slipped the silver ribbon from the package. Once the bow was set to the side, she tore the paper from the box. Charlene opened the box, pushing the white tissue aside. “Oh….Noah,” she gasped, lifting the red cashmere sweater from the box.

“Do you like it?”

“I love it,” she gasped. “It’s beautiful, but it must have cost a fortune. You shouldn’t have spent so much money on me.”

“I wanted you to have something that’s as pretty as you are.”

Blinking back some tears, Charlene placed the sweater back into the box and then threw her arms around Noah. “You are the best son a mother could ever ask for. I love you so much, string bean. I’m going to wear it tomorrow.”
“I love you too, Mom,” he murmured into her neck. “You have some more presents to open.”

“Noah, this was more than enough.

“Santa didn’t seem to think so,” Noah said, handing her another gift to open. He knew he got her there.

“Santa must be making up for all of those years that he couldn’t find us.”

“Must be.”

Charlene opened the next gift which was a *Seems Like Old Times* DVD. “I love this movie!” she exclaimed as giddy as a child. “I haven’t seen it in such a long time! Santa must think we need to expand our DVD collection.”

“We do. I think I might be able to recite almost all of our movies by heart.” Noah handed his mom her last gift which was in a small little square box. “Here’s one more for you and don’t you dare say it’s too much.”

“Okay,” she sighed.

“You deserve nice gifts,” Noah told her. Finally he was able to get her something that he didn’t have to make, find in a dollar store or at the PX on base when he was old enough to go there on his own. His father never took him shopping so that he could get his mom a gift. As Noah got older, he began to think that his father felt he was in competition with Noah for her affection. The Colonel always had a present for her while most times Noah only had a drawing he’d made for his mom.

“I’ve always cherished everything you’ve ever given me,” Charlene said, patting his leg. “I had saved every picture you ever drew. I wish I’d been able to take them with us, but I knew we had such limited space.”

“It’s okay,” he reassured her. “You brought the important stuff.”

“I tried.” She opened the tiny box and gasped. “Noah, this is so pretty,” she said, lifting a diamond snowflake pin from the box.

“The diamonds aren’t real,” he confessed. “I wish they were.”

“It’s still lovely,” she said, gazing at it. “I think it will go perfectly with my new sweater too.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I love everything, string bean.” Charlene leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Thank you so much.”

“I wish it could have been more.”

“It’s more than enough. You did a great job,” she said. The smile on her face was huge which thrilled him to no end. “It’s your turn!” She handed him a package wrapped in snowman paper to open.

Noah knew he’d love whatever was under the wrapping paper, but he couldn’t wait to see what it was. He ripped the paper, revealing a book titled *On Film-making: An Introduction to the Craft of the Director*. “This is so cool,” he said, glancing up from the book.

“I’m glad you like it.”
Noah opened the book and noticed that there was something written on the inside cover:

Noah, I want you to make your dream come true. Never forget how proud I am of you.
Love, Mom

Noah shut the book, too choked up to speak. He wanted to say something, but the words just wouldn’t come out. Instead he blinked at his mother, hoping she’d understand just how much her gift meant to him.

“I mean every word,” she told him. “Just be sure to thank me when you win your first Academy Award.”

“Deal,” he sniffed. “It looks like a great book. I can’t wait to read it.”

“I hope it will be helpful to you,” Charlene said as she handed him another gift.

It felt like another book. And it was—The Making of Casablanca: Bogart, Bergman, and World War II. This book didn’t have an inscription that brought tears to his eyes, which was probably a good thing because Noah didn’t know if he’d be able to take another emotional message from his mom no matter how sweet.

“This looks like a great book,” he said, paging through it.

“Hopefully, some of it will be new to you,” she chuckled. “I’m not so sure it will be since you seem to know everything about those old movies.”

Noah set the book down on the coffee table. “I don’t know everything.”

“Pretty much,” she teased. “But that’s part of your charm.”

The next present Noah opened was a light blue dress shirt and a blue striped tie. He already knew when he’d be wearing those—New Year’s Eve with Luke. His mom had even commented that they’d look great with a new midnight blue suit. Before he could protest she reminded him that he’d agreed to a new suit over dinner. She was so sneaky.

The last gift Noah opened was All About Eve, which made him positively giddy. It was one of his favorite movies, but he hadn’t seen it in a few years. “Thank you so much!” he exclaimed. He couldn’t wait to show Luke this movie even though he’d probably complain that it was in black and white and older than his grandma.

“You’re welcome.”

“You really outdid yourself, Mom.”

“Christmas only comes once a year and I’ve waited so long to spoil you,” she said as she slowly stood up from the sofa. “How about some dessert? WOAK is showing It’s a Wonderful Life. We can watch it while we have some cookies and coffee.”

“I can’t think of a better way to end our Christmas celebration.”

While Noah cleaned up the wrapping paper, Charlene got out the Christmas cookies and coffee. They were seated back on the couch with their Christmas snacks just as the movie began.
Noah was so engrossed in George Bailey’s trip through the Potterville that he nearly had a heart attack when his cell phone beeped, singling that he had a new text message. His heart was already racing at the prospect of it being Luke. Of course hearing from any of his friends would be nice, but he really, really wanted it to be Luke.

And it was.

Merry xmas!!!! Cant wait 2 c u 2morrow!!!

Grinning ear to ear, Noah quickly typed back:

Merry xmas! Cant wait 2 see u 2!


“Yeah, he wished me a Merry Christmas,” he replied as he hit send.

“I figured you’d hear from him sooner or later,” she said with a knowing smile.

Noah clutched his phone. “Yeah.” His phone beeped again.

Be warned…Gram has mistletoe & I plan on using it ;)

Noah giggled as he typed his reply:

Consider me warned & happy

“I love how Luke can make you smile without even being here,” she told him. “You have the prettiest smile.”

“Mom,” Noah said, feeling his cheeks flush.

“You do,” she insisted. “I always love to see you smile. I wish you’d had more reasons to smile in your life.”

“You’ve given me plenty,” Noah reassured her.

“It will never be enough,” she murmured, stroking the back of his hair.

“So far this has been the best Christmas,” Noah said, glancing at her. “And it’s not because of the
nice gifts you gave me tonight. I just enjoyed being here with you in such a nice place watching this movie and eating cookies. It’s really perfect.”

“I’ve enjoyed it too, string bean. Tomorrow is going to be pretty special too. You’ll get to spend the day with Luke and meet the rest of his family.”

“Yeah and I’m glad that you’re going to be there with me,” he told her. “It wouldn’t be Christmas without you.” Noah could have sworn he saw tears in his mom’s eyes but before he could ask, she pulled him into a tight hug. He felt just like George Bailey—the luckiest man in the world.
Chapter 58

The Snyder kitchen was bustling with activity when Noah and Charlene entered it. Music was playing and dishes were clanking amongst a sea of mostly unfamiliar faces. Noah knew that Luke came from a big family, but he’d hoped that there was going to be family members present that he’d already met. Suddenly, he was very nervous. Noah wasn’t comfortable around a bunch of strangers. Words tended to get jumbled which made him come across like a loser. Noah didn’t want to embarrass Luke in front of his family.

“Merry Christmas!” Charlene called out as they stepped inside.

“Merry Christmas!” Emma sang, floating over to welcome them with a warm hug. “Come in and join the mayhem! What a lovely sweater and pin you have on!”

“They were gifts from Noah,” she proudly answered.

“Noah, you have such good taste,” Emma declared.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Luke!” Emma shouted so that she could be heard over the bedlam. “Noah’s here!”

In a flash, Luke decked out in a green and gray striped sweater was weaving his way through the crowd. “Coming!”

While Emma took Charlene’s coat, Noah set the bag of gifts he’d been holding down and took off his jacket. “I’ll take your coats,” she said, reaching for Noah’s jacket. “Noah, Luke can show you were you can put the gifts while I steal your mother away.”


Noah felt much better. Luke was at his side. “Okay.”

“We’ll get the presents under the tree and then I’ll introduce you to the clan.”

“I’m never going to remember everyone’s name,” Noah murmured.

“Don’t worry. There won’t be a test,” Luke replied, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze and leading him into the parlor which was where the kids were hiding out.

The parlor was all decked out for Christmas. The tree that they had picked out stood in the corner by the fireplace brightly lit and decorated. Fresh greens covered the mantel of the fireplace with a nativity scene in the center of it.

Faith and Natalie sat at the coffee table engrossed with some sort of board game. There was another girl who looked close to Faith’s age and a couple of boys in their early teens that he’d never met playing the game with them. They were probably Luke’s cousins. A slight pang of regret washed through him. He’d always wanted cousins to play with. Often he wondered if he had any out there that he wasn’t aware of. Sadly, he’d probably never know.

“Noah!” Faith exclaimed, glancing up from the game. Lightning quick she was on her feet rushing over to him with her little sister trailing behind her.
Noah let go of Luke’s hand so he could hug Luke’s sisters which garnered a bit of grumbling from Luke. Something about delusional sisters and his boyfriend—whatever it was for sure, it was cute that Luke allowed his sisters to get him so riled up.

“Hello, girls!” He bent down to greet them.

“You have to play a game with me and my cousins,” Natalie insisted, tugging his hand. “We’re playin’ Chutes and Ladders!”

Luke quickly intervened. “No way,” he said, prying Natalie’s hand from Noah’s. “How many times do I have to tell you that he’s my boyfriend?”

“Luke thinks he’s so cool because he has a boyfriend,” Faith informed her cousins with a dramatic eye roll.

“I am super cool,” Luke said, taking Noah’s hand. “And this is my super cool boyfriend, Noah. Noah these are my cousins. The lovely young lady is Sage and those are her two brothers—JJ and Parker.”

“Hi.” Noah waved.

“Hi,” the cousins replied and then immediately returned to their game.

“Let me put the presents under the tree,” Noah said, reaching for the bag. “I don’t want to you peek.”


“Yes,” Noah chuckled, “you seem like the type that tries to guess what his gifts are.”

“Guilty as charged. I’ve been known to shake a box or two.”

Noah was surprised that Jade wasn’t around. Luke had told him about his big fight with his cousin and how they had eventually come to a truce. Noah wasn’t so sure how he felt about her, especially after the way she’d treated Luke. But if Luke was willing to give her another chance, he would too.

“Is Jade coming?” Noah asked.

“No. She was at Grandmother’s last night,” Luke explained. “I’m happy to report that she was on her best behavior.”

“Good to hear.” Noah just hoped it would stay that way.

Emma definitely had a full house. The ladies were helping out in the kitchen while the men stood around drinking beer and joking. Noah was happy to help Luke set the table, which allowed him to blend in with everyone else. He was hoping that he wouldn’t have to field the usual questions about school and where he was from. The less he had to talk about himself the better.

Everyone banded together when it was time to get dinner on the table. Noah was in charge of the green bean casserole. There wasn’t any discussion as to who was going to sit next to Noah. He had a feeling that Luke had already warned his sisters not to ask if they could sit next to his boyfriend.

Noah was happy to be sandwiched between the two people he loved most in the world—his mom and Luke.

Holden stood up, holding a glass of wine and tapping it with his fork to get everyone’s attention.
“It’s nice to see so many people around Mama’s table this year. Christmas is a time for celebrating love with friends and family,” he said, looking from one end of the table to the other. “This year we welcomed some new members into the Snyder family—our little Ethan, Katie who is brave enough to be dating Brad, as well as Gloria and Noah. Each addition has been its own blessing.”

Luke sought out Noah’s hand underneath the table and squeezed it. Noah could feel the heat radiating from his cheeks. Surely everyone at the table had to know what was going on beneath the poinsettia table cloth.

“We’ve also gone through some rough times but thankfully we made it through them with faith and love. Now let’s all raise our glasses to give thanks for our blessings as well as hope for a happy, healthy New Year for all.”

Noah picked up his glass of Coke, clinking it with a mass of others above the center of the table, but also making sure that he connected with his mom’s and Luke’s.

Emma said grace before encouraging everyone to dig in and pass the food to the left. Reluctantly Noah had to let go of Luke’s hand since he needed to eat with. The food was delicious, which wasn’t a surprise. And there was a lot of it. Emma’s sweet potatoes were truly a gift from heaven. Noah helped himself to two platefuls much to Emma’s delight. Luke was doing a good job of putting away the food as well. Noah had lost count of how many biscuits Luke had sneaked. Noah’s mom even had some extra stuffing which made him happy. He was thrilled that it looked like she was continuing to get better. There had been a permanent smile on her face for the past few days.

The kitchen was filled with lively chatter, laughter, and a few embarrassing stories which always seemed to star Brad, who seemed like a bit of a goofball. He was quite the opposite of his serious brother Jack. Luke tried to include Noah as much as he could, but Noah enjoyed sitting back and just taking it all in. He wanted every Christmas dinner to be just like this one.

Everyone was too stuffed for dessert so clean up commenced with the promise of pie and coffee after the gifts were opened. Then everyone went to work clearing the table. Even Natalie helped, gathering the cloth napkins to put with the dirty laundry. Noah just followed Luke’s lead, taking empty plates over to the sink where Holden was filling it with hot, soapy water.

“It’s Snyder tradition that the men do the dishes and clean up the kitchen so Gram and the other ladies can relax before we open the gifts,” Luke informed him as he stacked the plates on the counter.

“Good plan.” Actually, Noah really loved it. Seeing all of the men pitch in was so refreshing because the Colonel never helped with “women’s work”. This just made him love Luke’s family even more.

Luke leaned closer to him. “Whatever you do just don’t let Brad dry the dishes. He tends to break ‘em.”

“Got it.” Noah nodded.

“Luke, Noah, grab a towel and help with the drying,” Holden called over his shoulder. “Brad, you can wipe down the table and help put away the leftovers with Parker and JJ. Jack, you get to be on put away duty since you know where Mama keeps everything.”

It was impressive how everyone rallied, following Holden’s orders. Noah had expected some protesting but besides a few grumbles out of JJ and Parker which were quickly silenced by Jack everyone got right to work. A camera flash almost made Noah drop the wine glass he was drying.
“Aunt Emma!” Parker moaned.

“I just want a few pictures of all my elves hard at work,” Emma replied, hiding behind the camera. And after a few more flashes (and Brad making bunny ears over Jack’s head), she was gone.

“Get used to a million pictures, Noah,” JJ told him as he stashed a couple of Tupperware containers into the small refrigerator. “This family is crazy about pictures—especially Aunt Emma. Everything is for the family album.”


“No, it isn’t,” Holden quickly replied. “Mama would love to show Noah the album. It’s her pride and joy.”

“Dad, there are pictures in there that should never been seen again,” Luke hissed through gritted teeth.

“Sounds like someone has something to hide,” Brad chuckled. “Are you afraid the BF will find out what a geek you are?”

“I’m sure we can find some incriminating pictures to show Katie,” Jack said as he placed a clean stack of plates in the cupboard. “I remember the year you insisted on wearing your white parachute pants to Christmas dinner.”

“What are parachute pants?” Parker asked, wrinkling his nose.


“Hey, I rocked those pants hard, bro,” Brad insisted. “The chicks loved them.”

Noah found it hard to believe, but he decided to keep his mouth shut and continue to dry. Maybe one day there would be embarrassing stories about him. Hopefully he’d be around for a very long time for it to happen. He’d take some ribbing if it meant always being a part of Luke’s life.

Once the kitchen was sparkling clean, Holden herded everyone into the parlor so they could start opening presents. Luke took his hand, leading him to an empty spot on the floor. Noah was amazed that everyone had found a place to sit.

Well, almost everyone. Emma was missing. They couldn’t open the gifts without her.

“Okay, everyone, it’s time to finish decorating the tree,” Emma announced, strolling into the room holding a red box. “I saved all of your very special ornaments.”

“Not all of them, Gram,” Luke said, scrambling to his feet. “We have two more to add to the collection.” He snatched a small gift bag from under the tree and brought it over to Emma, whispering in her ear before handing it to her.

“For those of you who have never spent Christmas on the farm I want to fill you in on a tradition we have,” she explained. “Before we open our gifts everyone puts their own special ornament on the tree. I’d like to start with the newest members of the Snyder family—Gloria and Noah.” Emma reached into the bad, pulling out a director’s clapboard. “Noah, this one looks like it belongs to you.”
“Don’t be shy,” Emma said, motioning for him to join her.

Noah got up, making his way across the room to take his ornament from Emma. “Thank you,” he said. “It’s perfect.”

“One of my special elves helped me out with it.”

Luke was a very special elf indeed.

“Should I just put it anywhere?” Noah asked.

“Yeah, just find an empty branch,” Luke said with a twinkle in his eye as he returned to the spot they’d claimed on the floor and sat down to watch him.

Noah found a place midway up the tree toward the front. He hung his ornament and then joined Luke. “You already got me an ornament. You didn’t need to get me another one,” he whispered to Luke.

“Gram got you this one. I just helped her pick it out,” he whispered back. “This is a special family one because you’re family, dork.”

“Gloria, this is yours,” Emma said, holding up a red ceramic apple. An apple for the teacher.


Luke was next because he was the oldest grandchild in attendance. Noah expected him to have some sort of horse ornament but instead Emma handed him a small green tree that looked like it was made out of Popsicle sticks. Luke hung it right next to his ornament which made Noah’s heart soar.

“Did you make yours?” Noah asked when Luke sat down next to him.

“Yeah, when I was about Natalie’s age Gram helped me make it—said it was a work of art and had me hang it on the tree,” Luke explained.

The Colonel would have tossed something like that in the trash. If it wasn’t perfect, it didn’t belong in his home. Noah had seen many of his craft projects tossed into the garbage by that man.

“I bet you were adorable all covered in glue,” Noah murmured.

“I’m sure there’s a picture of it somewhere.”

Noah made a mental note to find this picture. Surely Emma would share it with him. Luke was so lucky that she was his grandmother. He wondered if he realized just how lucky he was. Luke didn’t know anything different—just love and acceptance.

One by one, each member of the Snyder family stepped forward to take their ornament from Emma. Brad even dragged Katie along to help him put his football ornament on the tree. Luke did his best to try to explain the significance of each one. Holden went last placing a rocking horse toward the bottom of the tree.

Emma then rounded everyone up for a family photo. Charlene had offered to take the picture, but Emma insisted that she be in it. Jack had gotten the tripod out of the front closet and set the timer on the camera so everyone could be a part of it. Luke slipped his arm around Noah’s waist, pulling him close while Charlene stood on the other side of him with her hand resting on his shoulder. Noah was
truly surrounded by love.

Everyone dispersed once the picture was taken, returning to their spot to open gifts. Brad put on the Santa hat to pass out the presents (another Snyder tradition—boy did they have a lot of them). Noah was surprised by the amount of gifts that got stacked in front of him. He’d expected something from Luke, but not his family. Scanning the tags, he discovered that Luke’s parents, the girls, and Emma all had gotten him gifts.

“There’s a certain order you need to open them in,” Luke said, leaning over and stacking the boxes just so.

What could possibly be in the boxes? Now he was really curious.

“I didn’t realize it would be so complex,” Noah joked.

“Just stick to the order and you’ll be fine.”

“I want to see you open your gifts first,” Noah replied. He was nervous that maybe Luke wouldn’t like what he got him. Maybe books were a bad idea after all.

“Okay,” Luke said, picking up one of the presents and tearing into it. “Whitman! This is great.” He was holding the book of poetry.

“You don’t have that one?”

“No, I don’t. Thank you so much!”

“You have a couple of more,” Noah said, nodding toward his stack.

The next one Luke opened was the Walt Whitman biography. “I think you might have a theme going on here,” he chuckled. “I like it. And I’ve never read this book. I’m sure it’s going to be really interesting.”

“I wouldn’t mind borrowing it from you after you’ve read it.”


“I…uh…kinda wrote something in there,” Noah said as a blush crept to his cheeks.


“Me too.”

“Noah!”

Faith and Natalie rushed over to him with the gifts he’d gotten them in their hands. Natalie clutched a small stuffed ladybug and Faith held *The Little Princess* DVD from 1939 starring Shirley Temple.

“Thankyousomuch for the lady bug! I love it!” Natalie gushed, throwing her arms around Noah’s neck and planting a big kiss on his cheek.

“You’re welcome, sweetie,” he replied, giving her a big squeeze.
“Thank you for the movie, Noah,” Faith said once her sister untangled herself from him. “I’ve never seen it before, but it looks good.”

“It’s a classic. I hope you like it.”

“I’m sure I will—especially since you picked it out,” she gushed. “You’re so smart when it comes to movies.”


“Stop it, Luke!” Faith spat, giving him a sock in the arm. “You’re not funny!”

“You’ll have to let me know when you want to watch it. Maybe we can all watch it together,” Noah suggested.

“Oh yes!” Faith exclaimed and then gave him a quick hug before she trotted over to the other side of the room where Sage was at.

“Movie night with the girls,” Luke said, resting his chin on Noah’s shoulder. “You’re quite brave.”

“They’re sweet kids. I like spending time with them.”

“That’s because you don’t live with them,” Luke replied before giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Your gifts for them were very clever and thoughtful. I love mine too.”

“I’m glad.”

“Now open yours.” Luke leaned forward, grabbing a flat rectangular box which looked like it was probably a DVD.

The first gift was from Emma. Noah tore off the paper to discover it was *White Christmas*. “This is great!” he exclaimed. “I love this movie.”

His enthusiasm got Emma’s attention. “I’m so glad! It’s one of my favorites!”

“It was directed by Michael Curtiz who also directed *Casablanca*,” Noah excitedly explained.

“You are such a geek,” Luke murmured, shaking his head.

“We’ll have to watch it later on this evening,” Emma told him. “We’ll show Luke that there are a lot of good classic Christmas movies out there.”


“A Christmas Story doesn’t count as a classic.”

“But it’s still good. The Bumpus hounds rocked.” Luke handed him another gift to open. “This one is from me.”

His first Christmas gift from his boyfriend—for the longest time he thought he’d never have a boyfriend let alone be celebrating Christmas with his family and exchanging gifts. He ripped the paper off, revealing a simple, white, rectangular box. Inside the box underneath the tissue was a brown striped winter scarf—so soft—just like the sweater he’d gotten for his mom.

“How come I’m not surprised that it’s striped?” Noah chuckled, pulling it from the box.
“I figured that way you’d always remember who got it for you,” Luke teased, taking the scarf from him and draping it around Noah’s neck. “Looks great on you if I may say so myself.”

Noah fingered the soft material. He loved the idea of being able to wear something Luke had picked out for him. It was a way of always having his boyfriend close to him. “I love it—it’s perfect.”

“Now you have to open this one,” Luke said, handing him a medium size square box. “It’s from me and my parents.”

Suddenly the room quieted down a bit and all eyes seemed to be on him. Noah really hated being the center of attention. Even after being accepted by his mom and making new friends, Noah still felt awkward in social situations. He didn’t want to make a fool out of himself by acting like a freak or saying the wrong thing.

Would he ever be completely normal?

Granted, he was better than before but the voices of uncertainty and his father still hadn’t completely disappeared.

Noah pulled the wrapping paper off the box, his jaw dropping once he realized what was underneath—a Sony HDR-UX1 camcorder. “Oh my god,” he murmured, staring at the box totally overcome by emotion. He’d always wanted a video camera so he could make movies and now he finally had one thanks to Luke and his parents.

“A great director needs a great camera,” Luke said, placing his hand on the box. “It records in HD to DVD. The guy at the store said that was a pretty good feature. I hope it’s something you’ll be able to use.”

High definition—this camera must have cost a fortune. Never in his wildest dreams did he ever think he’d own a video camera that was so fancy. He didn’t deserve something this nice and expensive.

“I can’t accept this,” Noah sniffed. “It’s too much.”

“Yes you can,” Luke said, putting his arm around him. “I’m a spoiled trust fund brat. Please let me do some good with my money.”

“We want you to have it,” Lily told him. “Everyone deserves to have a chance to make their dreams come true.”

“I know you’ll make us proud, Noah,” Holden added.

“Thank you,” Noah croaked.

“It’s such a generous gift,” Charlene said. “I always wanted to get one for Noah but we never had the extra money. I can’t thank you enough for doing this for him.”

“Noah is the best worker I’ve ever had,” Holden said. “He’s been a lifesaver these past couple of months. We all just wanted to show him how much we appreciate him.”

Noah wiped the stray tears that had managed to slip down his cheeks. He didn’t want to cry in front of Luke and his family. They probably would never truly understand just how much this gift meant to him. Not even Luke knew all of the horrors of his life. And he may never know. Noah wasn’t sure if he’d ever be able to tell Luke everything.

“You can thank us by remembering us when you win your first Oscar,” Lily said, smiling at him.
“I’ll never forget this—never,” Noah promised.

“Don’t forget to open our present,” Faith called to him.

Noah was happy to open his last gift. Hopefully it wouldn’t make him cry again. Digging inside the gift bag that Luke had put in front of him, Noah discovered a pack of recordable DVDs. He pulled them out, holding them up for all to see. “Now I can make a lot of movies,” he chuckled.

“I want to see every single one,” Luke told him.

“Me too!” Natalie sang.

“I can’t wait to use the camera,” Noah said, putting the DVDs back into the gift bag. He turned to Luke. “You better start writing some scripts for me to shoot.”

“I’ll get crackin’.”

While everyone finished opening their gifts, Noah couldn’t help staring at his new camcorder. He never owned anything so expensive in his life. Part of him was afraid he’d wake up to discover that it had all been a dream.

After the last gift was opened, the cleanup commenced. Wrapping paper was thrown into a large black trash bag and bows were put into a box so they could be used next year. Noah stood up, making his way over to Emma.

“Thank you so much,” he said, hugging her. “I love the movie you picked out.”

“You’re very welcome, my dear,” she said, squeezing him tightly. “Once it clears out after dessert we’ll watch it.”

“Sounds great.”

Noah sought out Holden and Lily so he could thank them again. He got big warm hugs from both. Then the girls tackled him with more hugs. Luke was patiently waiting, standing off to the side silently watching him with Faith and Natalie.

“I can’t thank you enough for the incredible gifts,” Noah said quietly. He wanted to kiss him, but he knew it was out of the question with Luke’s family around. There was a chance they might not be bothered by it but Noah wasn’t comfortable enough to make such a grand gesture in front of them.

Luke pulled him into a tight hug. “You’re welcome, baby,” he whispered into his ear. “You deserve the best.”

“Come on, everyone!” Emma called. “It’s time for dessert! We have pie, cookies, egg nog, and coffee.”

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There were a lot of hugs and kisses as everyone said goodbye. Noah hung back in the shadows watching the outpouring of love. His mom sauntered over and put her arm around him.

“Are you having a good Christmas?” she asked.
“It was best Christmas ever. I’ll never forget it.”

“I’m glad,” she murmured, squeezing his shoulder. “I’m so glad.”

“A Snyder goodbye takes forever,” Luke explained after he finished doling out his hugs and kisses. “It’s always wise to plan on an extra fifteen minutes before you leave. You can never get out of here after the holidays or before a trip without being slobbered all over.”

“Sounds pretty great to me having all of those people care about you,” Noah quietly admitted.

“Yeah, it is.”

“I believe we have a movie to watch,” Emma announced after the last Snyder walked out the door.

“We need to make popcorn,” Luke decided.

“Haven’t you had enough to eat?” Emma asked. “How could you possibly have room for more?”

“You can’t watch a movie without popcorn,” Luke insisted. “Noah and I can make some while you get the movie set up.”

“It’s sitting with my gifts, Mrs. Snyder,” Noah added. “I can get it for you…”

“No… no… you boys make the popcorn. Your mom and I will go sit down and relax,” Emma decided.

“Good idea,” Charlene agreed. “It’s been quite a day.” She followed Emma into the parlor.

Finally, they were alone—the first time it had happened all day. Noah was beginning to give up hope that they’d ever get a few minutes to themselves.

“Help me find the popcorn. I think it’s in the pantry.”


A smile crept to Noah’s lips. “You did.”

“Now you know why I wanted to make popcorn so badly,” Luke quietly confessed as he slowly closed the space between them. “The prospect of getting you alone with some mistletoe was way too tempting.

It was a winning combination. And Luke never looked more beautiful—his eyes so wide and full of desire, lips pink—just begging to be kissed. Noah’s heart was hammering in his chest.

Take a chance…

“Luke… I… uh… I… uh…” God this wasn’t going how he wanted. He should have known he’d get tongue tied.

“What is it?” Luke asked softly, placing a hand on Noah’s cheek.

Oh. My. God. Surely, he was going to die of a heart attack at any moment. “My heart is beating so fast.”
Luke cupped Noah’s face, gazing deeply into his eyes. “Just breathe, baby.”

“I’ll try,” he murmured as Luke caressed his face. Noah was completely mesmerized by his boyfriend. Luke’s face seemed to be mirroring what Noah was feeling—so much love and desire.


“I’m so lucky to have you in my life, Noah,” Luke breathed, resting his forehead against Noah’s. “When I first came out I was so lonely. I never thought I’d ever have anyone to love me and then you came along. Not a day goes by where I’m not thankful that you’re in my life. You’re the sweetest, kindest, most amazing boyfriend. I love you, Noah. I’ve loved you for so long. I love everything about you. I—”


“I wish I had your way with words,” Noah gasped.

“This works pretty well too,” Luke murmured with a slight smile.

“Being with you has made me happier than I’ve ever been,” Noah said, placing another kiss on Luke’s lips.


Luke loved him. This was definitely the best Christmas ever.
Long ago Holden had decided that his mama’s leftovers were a gift straight from heaven. There was nothing like a turkey sandwich the day after a big holiday dinner. It was one of his favorite meals—much better than lobster tail at the Old Mill Inn or filet mignon at the Black Duck. He’d hoped that Noah would join him since there were plenty of leftovers to go around, but Noah said he was going to have lunch with his mom.

Holden got a sinking feeling when he thought about Gloria Carlson. He’d been taken aback by how frail she looked the day before. The change seemed so drastic since the last time he’d seen her. Holden wasn’t alone with his observation. Lily had also expressed her concern about Gloria’s health. They both wondered if she was sick but knew that Christmas dinner wasn’t the place to voice their concerns.

Holden had his mama alone, which was rare since the farmhouse always seemed to be bustling with family members or guests. She was the one person besides Noah who would know what was going on with Gloria. If there was something wrong with her, he wanted to help her out.

“There’s been something that’s been on my mind since yesterday,” Holden said as he assembled his sandwich on the island in the kitchen.

Emma pulled a couple of Tupperware containers out of the refrigerator and placing them next to Holden. “What’s that?”

“Is there something wrong with Gloria?”

Emma stilled next to him. “Why do you ask?”

“She’s lost a lot of weight. I thought she looked thin at Thanksgiving, but she’s practically a skeleton now.” Holden put the finishing touches on his sandwich and then spooned some leftover pretzel Jell-O onto his plate. “Is she sick?”

Emma turned away from him quickly busying herself at the sink. “I thought she looked pretty in that lovely sweater Noah got her.”

“Mama…”

“She’s been working very hard,” Emma replied, staring out the kitchen window. “A little too hard so Henry and Vienna let her take the rest of the month off.”

There was something that she wasn’t telling him. Holden knew the difference between exhaustion and illness. “Has she been to a doctor?” he pressed.

“Yes she has.” Emma brushed past him, bustling over to the island to fix a plate of food for herself. “Noah really liked his movie camera. I’m sure he’s going to put it to good use. I hope he can get into the film program at Oakdale University. He’s such a sweet boy.”

“Yes, he is,” Holden agreed. “I couldn’t ask for a better boyfriend for my son or a better worker. He’s a kind, conscientious young man. He’s come a long way since he first got here. I swear that boy was afraid of his own shadow but that’s all changed.”

“I think he’s beginning to feel part of the family.”
“I hope so, because he is part of it,” Holden replied, carrying his lunch over to the kitchen table. “I meant what I said in my toast yesterday—both Noah and Gloria are family.”

“I’m glad you feel that way.” Emma smiled weakly as she joined him at the table.

Holden saw right through her forced smile. There was fear lingering in her eyes.

“Noah’s going to need a family, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he will,” she murmured, glancing down at her plate.

She didn’t need to say any more. His fears had just been confirmed. Holden knew that there was something seriously wrong with Gloria. Even though his mama had said nothing, he could feel it in his bones. Holden knew better than to press the issue. Emma Snyder was a woman of her word. She’d never break Gloria’s confidence. Holden admired that trait about his mother—among other things.

Gloria had become a dear friend to Mama. Holden had lost count of the number of times he’d go over to the farm to find Gloria and Mama having a cup of coffee. Sometimes they’d be playing a game—Scrabble or Gin Rummy. Other times, he’d find them eating pie or coffee cake, giggling like a couple of schoolgirls. The sight always made him smile. Mama always loved the company.

Holden had so many questions, but he kept them to himself. This wasn’t the time for them. Instead, he changed the subject, telling her about his New Year’s Eve plans with Lily because his mama loved romance. They were going all out this year, attending the gala ball at the Lakeview and spending the night in one of the suites. They’d been through a lot this year—remarrying, a long lost niece appearing on their doorstep, Luke coming out, Lily almost dying, and the birth of Ethan. Lucinda agreed to keep the kids overnight since Luke had plans with Noah.

Holden finished up his lunch and headed back to the stables where Noah was already back to work. The kid had a work ethic that was starting to make Holden look bad.

“Are you back early or am I late?” Holden asked.

“I’m…uh…early, sir,” Noah sheepishly admitted.

“You know, you really can take a full hour for lunch.”

“I know,” Noah replied, grabbing a broom and sweeping the floor. “I was hoping that I might be able to come back later with my video camera and shoot some footage of the horses. If it’s not okay, I understand, sir. This is your place of business and—”

“Of course it is. You don’t have to ask, Noah. This is your home. Feel free to come and go as you please,” Holden told him. Noah was still so formal with him and that needed to stop. “And would you please start calling me Holden?”

Noah stopped sweeping. “Oh…uh…I…”

You would have thought he’d ask Noah to commit an act of treason. Holden shook his head, placing his hand on Noah’s arm. “Noah, I meant what I said yesterday. You and your mom are part of the family. And family doesn’t need to be so formal with each other.”

Holden could almost see Noah’s internal struggle before he answered him. “Okay…it’s going to take some getting used to,” Noah admitted.
“I know, some habits are hard to break,” Holden replied. “I’m surprised that Luke isn’t lurking around here since he’s off school this week.”

Blushing, Noah ducked his head. “He…uh…wanted to come over and help out, but I told him that probably wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“I wouldn’t be opposed to Luke lending a hand while he’s on Christmas break, but he’d need to be here to work—not distract you,” Holden told him. Luke was a good worker but Holden could see him being more interested in mooning over Noah than helping out with the chores.

“I wouldn’t be distracted, sir…er…Holden.”

“Now you’ve gone and made me a knight,” he chuckled, clapping his hand on Noah’s back. “I’m not worried about you. I just know how my son can be, but I’m willing to give him a shot.”

Noah’s eyes lit up. “Great.”

“Let’s get the horses fed and then you can get out of here,” Holden said, heading to the dry boxes where the oats were stored. “I’m sure Luke would like to help you out with your new camera if you’d like the company.”

“I’ll call him as soon as I get home,” Noah happily decided. He stopped sweeping. “I really can’t thank you enough for the digicam. I hope that I can make everyone proud.”

Holden fought the urge to hug him. One step at a time. This time a smile would do. “You do, Noah, every day.”

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Luke was thrilled that Noah had invited him along to test out his Christmas present. He’d wrongly assumed that Noah would have used the digicam the moment he’d gotten home but that hadn’t been the case. Noah had told him that he wanted Luke with him the first time he used it. Luke was glad that he was going to be there the very first time Noah took a step closer to living out his dream.

Noah had suggested meeting in the stables. This gave Luke an opportunity to visit with Whitman. His busy schedule was still prohibiting him from seeing Whitman as often as he’d like. He was half expecting his horse to give him the cold shoulder. But Whitman was a sweetie, enthusiastically greeting him, which may have been in part to the carrots Luke held as a peace offering.

“How’s my poor, neglected boy?” Luke asked, offering him a carrot, which Whitman quickly gobbled down. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around, but I know that Noah has been keeping you company for me.”

“I certainly have,” Noah said, stepping up behind him.

“Hey.” Luke quickly planted a kiss on Noah’s lips. “You’re just in time to tell Whitman that I’m not a complete shit.”

“Whitman, we’re both lucky to have Luke in our lives,” Noah said, taking a carrot from Luke and feeding it to Whitman. “I’m sorry that I’ve been taking up so much of his time.”
“I’m not. I wish you and I got to spend more time together.”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” Noah quickly replied. “I love spending time with you, but I just…”

Luke placed a finger to Noah’s lips to silence him. “I know what you meant. And it’s my fault that I can’t get my ass down here more often.”

Noah stroked Whitman’s mane. “Whit understands. Don’t ya, buddy?”

“My dad said that I could help out around here during my break,” Luke said, leaving out that fact that his father also warned him that he’d really have to work and not spend the entire time swooning over his boyfriend. “So you’ll both be seeing more of me this week. Some barn chores will probably do me some good instead of lounging around all day like a big lump.”

“I’ve been waiting a long time to see you muck out a stall, Snyder,” Noah teased.

“Trust me, I can muck with the best of them. I’ve been doing it since I was a kid.”

“I’d love to hear some stories about hanging out here when you were little,” Noah said, glancing down at his digicam.

“Did you want to film me?”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind. I thought you could tell me about what it was like growing up with the horses and then maybe tell Whitman’s story again. I’d love to get some shots of him and the other horses.”

A smile crept to Luke’s lips as his writer’s brain kicked into high gear. The farm held a lot of stories not just the horses, but the pond, the land, and the farmhouse all were enriched with so much history. Not to mention all of the crazy Snyder traditions that was also part of the land. Noah could very well have the makings of a good movie in his own backyard.

“I like this idea,” Luke said. “You could even talk to my dad and Gram. They’d love to share stories.”

“I don’t know about that,” Noah stammered. “I’m just kinda messing around right now. I wouldn’t want to bother anyone.”

Luke draped his arm around his boyfriend’s shoulders. “You wouldn’t be bothering anyone. Just think about it, okay?” He wished Noah would start considering himself family instead of the hired help. Christmas was supposed to rectify it, but it looked like he still had some work to do in that department.

“I will.”

“I’m ready to start whenever you are. Just tell me what you want me to do, director.”

As Noah glanced around the barn, Luke could see his wheels turning. He imagined that Noah was trying to figure out the best place to begin, what would make for an interesting background. Luke had ideas, but he forced himself to keep quiet. This was Noah’s project.

“Let’s go outside,” Noah finally decided. “I’d like to get a shot of the barn and then you in front of it.”
“Great idea.”

For the next couple of hours Luke was in awe of Noah as he put Luke through his paces—interviewing him about living so close to his grandma’s farm, learning to ride, and then his rescue of Whitman. Noah was defiantly in his element. There was an air of confidence and excitement about him as he composed shots—some with Luke, others without. It was magic.
Chapter 60

Luke was finally going out on another date with Noah. It was hard to believe the last time they went out was that awful night Kevin and his minions attacked them. Just remembering Noah all battered and bruised was enough to make Luke’s stomach turn. He’d be forever grateful for Lucy and Dusty showing up when they had because things could have been so much worse.

Tonight they weren’t going out to dinner or to a movie. Well, they actually kinda were, but it would be at Casey’s house instead of in Old Town. On the way over, they had stopped at Bennidito’s to pick up a large pizza, leaving Maddie and Casey in charge of selecting the movie they were going to watch which was kinda scary. Noah didn’t seem to think so, though. But he was probably banking on Maddie being the one that selected the movie, not Casey.

Luke had originally planned on taking Noah out tonight, but when Casey told him that his parents were out of town everything changed. He was not about to pass up an opportunity for some long overdue “alone time” with Noah. They both needed it something fierce. Calluses were going to start forming on his right hand from all of the jacking off he’d been doing the past couple of weeks. All he could think about was how incredible it had felt to finally give Noah a blow job as well as how hot and wet Noah’s mouth had been wrapped around his cock.

Luke cast a sidelong glance at Noah who was holding the pizza on his lap as they drove to the Hughes’. His boyfriend was so damn hot. Noah still didn’t seem to realize it, but that was one of the things he loved about him. And Noah loved him too. He’d told him so under the mistletoe. It was so romantic and perfect.

“I can’t believe Casey’s parents left him alone,” Noah said, rapping his fingers on the top of the pizza box. “Isn’t it like leaving the mouse with the cheese?”

“Yeah it kinda is,” Luke chuckled. “Let’s just hope that they don’t come home early.”

“Do you think they would?”

“No,” Luke replied as he steered the car in the subdivision where the Hughes family lived. “They had to run his brother, Daniel, back to his boarding school. I think it’s in Ohio or Pennsylvania. I’m not sure which one. They left this afternoon so they won’t be back until sometime tomorrow. No worries.”

“No worries.”

Luke parked his car next to Maddie’s in the driveway. “We can always take off early if you’re not having a good time.”

“We’ll have a great time,” Noah reassured him. “I like Maddie and Casey. We have pizza, hopefully a good movie, and…maybe…we’ll get some time alone,” he added hopefully.

“We’ll get some time alone.” Luke grinned. He knew that Casey would also be taking advantage of his parents’ absence. After the movie, he didn’t expect them to break into a game of charades. Actually, he’d be surprised if they made it through the movie, knowing his horn dog friend.

Casey greeted them at the door, immediately snatching the pizza out of Noah’s hands and ushering them inside. Maddie flew over, greeting them with hugs and kisses. She took their coats like the perfect hostess while Casey deposited the pizza on the table and then headed into the kitchen.
“Noah, did you want a beer?” Casey called to him.

“Noah!” Maddie exclaimed. “You don’t need to drink tonight.”

While he appreciated Maddie’s concern, Luke hated that his friends felt they needed to act differently around him. He wasn’t constantly jonsing for a drink. Alcohol was just his crutch when his life got out of control which it most definitely wasn’t right now. His life was filled with so much happiness.

“Case, it’s okay,” Luke quickly spoke up. “You can drink if you want to. It won’t bother me.”

“See.” Casey flashed Maddie a smug look. “Can I get one for you, Noah?”

“Oh…no…thanks.”

“You can have a drink if you want to,” Luke whispered to him. He didn’t want Noah to think that he could never have alcohol in front of him. Drinking was his problem, not Noah’s.

Noah shook his head. “I’ll have a Coke if you have some,” he spoke up.

Casey opened the refrigerator, peering inside it. “We have Pepsi. Will that work?”

“Yeah, it’s great,” Noah said.

“I’ll have one too,” Luke chimed in.

“Make that three,” Maddie added, heading toward the kitchen. “Make yourselves comfortable. I’ll help Casey with the drinks.”

“Are you sure we can’t do anything?” Noah asked, not budging from his spot.

“You can get take the paper plates and napkins over by the pizza,” Casey said. “I figured we could just eat in front of the TV.”

“Casey,” Maddie said, smacking his arm. “Noah and Luke are our guests you shouldn’t be putting them to work.”

Casey rolled his eyes. “This isn’t some fancy dinner and Luke isn’t a guest, he’s been here a million times.”

Luke snatched the paper plates and napkins that Casey had set on the counter. “He’s right. There’s no need for formalities.”

“You and Noah can help yourselves to the pizza first,” Maddie informed them. Before Casey could protest like Luke knew he would she added, “You guys are guests here. I don’t care what Casey says.” She handed them their drinks.

“I won’t argue with that,” Luke said, opening the pizza box and digging in. The delicious smell of the pizza had been tormenting him since they’d picked it up.

“Just leave some for me!” Casey called, sauntering out of the kitchen.

There was plenty of pizza left so Casey needn’t have worried. Luke and Noah sat on the floor in front of the coffee table, leaving Casey and Maddie the sofa to sit on. Already Luke was looking forward to having the lights dimmed so he could cuddle with his boyfriend. He almost didn’t care what movie they’d be watching, but he was still curious.
“So who picked out the movie?” Luke asked, glancing up from his pizza.

“I did,” Maddie happily replied. “I wanted to show you and Casey that there are other movies out there besides overblown special effects films.”

“I enjoyed the movie we watched the last time we all got together,” Noah piped up.

“See, I told you that I can pick out a good movie,” Casey said with a mouthful of pizza.

“That X-Men film was hardly a classic,” Maddie informed him. “And you can say how you really feel now, Noah. Luke’s your boyfriend, there’s no need to try to woo him.”

“So it was all a ruse, Mayer?” Luke teased.

“No, I really enjoyed the movie,” Noah insisted.

Maddie grinned. “It must be true love.”

Luke’s eyes locked with Noah’s. “It is.”

“I knew it!” Maddie exclaimed. “I knew it from the first night we met Noah that you two were perfect for each other. It’s just like something out of a movie.”

“Please don’t tell me that you two are going giving each other the googly eyes all the time,” Casey groaned.

“No more than you give Maddie,” Noah chuckled.

Luke was impressed. Noah may be a bit shy, but he had some great one liners. It was nice to see him so relaxed around Casey and Maddie that he could let some zingers fly.

“Whatever happened to the good old days where you barely said two words?” Casey countered.

“Oh stop it, Casey,” Maddie groaned. “Don’t listen to him, Noah. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I wanted to get *Top Hat*, but Casey put his foot down. I figured that *Psycho* is a good compromise.”

“You chose well. I think they’ll like it,” Noah agreed.

“It’s not going to make me cry, is it?” Luke whispered. It was bad enough to cry over a movie in front of Noah, but Casey—no fucking way. Casey already had many years worth of ammunition to tease him with. He didn’t need any more.

“No,” Noah snickered. “But you might get so scared that you’ll need me to protect you.” He suggestively waggled his eyebrows at him.

Luke batted his eyes at him. “My big, tough boyfriend.”


“He better not be,” Maddie piped up. “You know I’m not chopped liver.”

“Sweetheart, you are prime rib,” Casey declared, kissing her cheek with a loud smack, which made them all laugh.
Maddie put the movie on while Casey turned off the lights. “You guys are going to love this movie. Trust me,” she said, snuggling up to Casey on the sofa.

Luke felt like the cat that ate the canary. Finally he wasn’t the odd man out. All of those movie nights with Casey, Maddie, Will, and Gwen where he was alone were a thing of the past now. For the longest time, he’d given up hope that he’d ever have someone who got excited when he walked into the room. He’d been convinced that he’d be forced to walk the Earth alone like Bruce Banner.

But he wasn’t alone anymore. Luke was surrounded by so much love.

He shouldn’t have been surprised when the Paramount Pictures logo came up in black and white. He’d hoped that maybe—just maybe—Maddie would have picked an old movie that was actually in color. They had to exist, right? But no such luck.


“You’ll like it,” Noah whispered back, lacing his fingers through Luke’s.

“We’ll see.”

“Shhhhh!” Maddie hissed, smacking Luke in the back of the head. “Watch the movie.”

There was a lot that Luke wanted to say, but he held his tongue in fear that Maddie would seriously kick his ass. This was really a win/win situation he was in because even if the movie sucked (which he hoped it didn’t) he still got to cuddle with his boyfriend.

The movie didn’t suck. Luke actually got sucked into the story. The shower scene was scary and it would have been unexpected if Maddie and Noah hadn’t gone on and on about it at their last movie night. He’d definitely be a bit uneasy the next time he stepped into his shower. Too bad he couldn’t take Noah with him.

“So?” Maddie asked the moment the movie ended.

“It was no Scream,” Casey said, “but I enjoyed it.”

“Tell me he didn’t just say that?” Noah groaned, staring up at the ceiling.

Luke kissed the top of Noah’s head. “He did.”

“Where do you think they got the idea to kill off Drew Barrymore at the beginning of Scream?” Noah asked, craning his neck so he could see Casey. “Hitchcock killing off Janet Leigh was brilliant. No one saw it coming at the time.”

“I didn’t see Drew biting it in Scream,” Casey countered.

“He’s hopeless, Noah,” Maddie said, patting Casey’s leg. “But I love him anyway.”

“I thought it was good,” Luke said, squeezing Noah’s hand.

“I know you thought it was scary,” Noah chuckled. “I think I’m going to have the bruise marks to prove it.”

“Snyder, you’re such a pussy,” Casey laughed.

Noah’s cheeks flushed. “Sorry.”

“No worries. I still love you,” Luke said, caressing Noah’s hand with his thumb. He couldn’t imagine Noah doing anything that would make him stop loving him. If Noah were to cheat on him that might be a different story, but in his heart of hearts he could never see Noah doing anything like that. He was too damn sweet.

“Okay,” Casey sighed, hauling himself off the sofa and offering his hand to Maddie. “This is where Maddie and I head off to the boudoir.”

“Casey, that’s so rude,” Maddie said as Casey pulled her to her feet.

“I’m not kicking them out. Now that would be rude,” Casey protested. “They can stay and do what they do—just don’t leave any evidence behind if you know what I’m saying.” He tugged Maddie out of the room. “See you guys later!”

“Bye!” Maddie called over her shoulder.

Noah carefully untangled himself from Luke’s embrace, standing up slowly and stretching. Luke appreciated when Noah would stretch his arms high above his head accentuating his long lean body. It was really a thing of beauty—something Luke knew he’d never tire of gazing at.

“I…uh…need to use the bathroom,” Noah confessed. “Can you point me in the right direction?”

“It’s through the archway over there and to the right. You can’t miss it.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Luke watched Noah leave the room and then hauled himself up from the floor. Stretching his limbs felt good. His ass was also getting a little sore from sitting on the carpet. He also needed to pee. For a brief moment he contemplated running upstairs and using the bathroom up there, but he quickly nixed that idea not wanting to go anywhere near Casey’s bedroom at the moment.

“My turn,” Luke said once Noah returned to the room. He dashed away before Noah could reply. He pissed, washed his hands, and primped as fast as possible so he could take advantage of the couple of hours they had to actually be alone before Luke needed to be home for his curfew.

Noah was sitting on the sofa when Luke returned to the family room. Alone at last. Luke only hesitated for a second before he sauntered over to Noah, straddling his lap. Noah gazed up at him a bit bewildered, undoubtedly surprised to have his boyfriend in his lap.


“Is this okay?” he asked, his lips hovering over Noah’s.

Noah responded with a kiss. Luke cupped Noah’s face in his hands, deepening the kiss. Noah moaned as their tongues made contact which sent a shudder through Luke’s body. He loved that sound. It made him hard. Noah wanted to hear more of it. All it took was one roll of his hips for it to happen. Very nice.

Noah broke the kiss. “Are you sure Casey’s parents aren’t coming home tonight?”

“What about Casey and Maddie?”

While Luke could appreciate Noah’s concern about being interrupted, he was a bit frustrated since there were better things they could be doing like more kissing for insistence. “Trust me. They’re busy like we should be.” He kissed Noah to prove his point.

Luke was happy that Noah seemed satisfied with his response and was now more concerned with kissing and touching. Noah slipped his hands underneath the back of Luke’s sweater, caressing his skin. Noah’s fingers on his flesh were instant electricity. He still hadn’t gotten used to the sensation of Noah touching him without any hesitation. His body hummed. All he could think was more… more…more.

Reluctantly, Luke came up for air. Damn the need to breathe. Noah’s lips glistened with his saliva and his eyes were all pupil. So fucking sexy.

Luke licked his lips as he pushed himself off Noah’s lap, sinking to his knees. He could see that Noah was just as hard as he was and he planned on taking care of it. A couple of weeks had passed since the one and only blow job he’d given Noah.

Noah stared at him with a combination of lust and awe as Luke unfastened Noah’s belt. Luke was more excited about getting into Noah’s pants than he’d been opening any of his Christmas presents. The sight of Noah’s erect cock trapped inside his gray boxer briefs made him whimper.


“I’ve been thinking about doing this again ever since the first time.”

“Same here.”

Luke had every intention of savoring this moment, but the sight of Noah’s dick hard and leaking made those plans go right out the window. Now all he wanted to do was taste, lick, and suck. He wanted Noah to come hard and loud which he knew was going to be a challenge since they weren’t completely alone. Luke always loved a challenge, especially one as fun as this.

Luke swiped his tongue along the head, lapping up the precome that had pooled there. So fucking incredible. He licked and moaned, loving every glorious inch of his boyfriend’s cock. He wasn’t the only one enjoying this. Luke could hear Noah’s ragged breathing, his enthusiastic groans. He could also feel Noah’s fingers carding through his hair. They were so connected—so close.

More…more…more…

He took Noah’s dick deeper into his mouth. His gag reflex still prevented him from taking in the entire shaft. Regardless, his mouth was full of Noah’s cock and it was pure bliss. He kept his lips wrapped tightly around Noah’s length, slowly bobbing his head.


Luke quickened his pace, wanting to get Noah off. He knew his boyfriend was close. Deeper and faster. Noah was getting louder now, beginning to lose control—gripping Luke’s hair tighter, lifting his hips from the couch.

“I’m—” was the only word Noah managed to utter before he came.
Luke held on as Noah’s come hit the back of his throat. And he swallowed, not pulling off until every drop was gone. When Luke finally let his cock slip from his mouth, Noah’s head was resting against the back of the sofa. His head tilted toward the ceiling, breathing heavily. Absolutely gorgeous.


“I told you we wouldn’t get interrupted.” Luke just had to say it. He prided himself on being right.

“We’re not done yet, Snyder.”

And in one fell swoop, Noah had Luke on his back in the middle of the Hughes’ family room. Needless to say Luke was pleasantly surprised with this turn of events. An aggressive Noah was one hot Noah.

“Oh? Is there something else you’d like to do?” Luke asked all wide-eyed and innocent.

“I can think of a thing or two,” Noah breathed, pressing his body against Luke’s.

Luke shamelessly rutted up against him. He’d spent countless nights fantasizing about what it would be like to have a hot guy on top of him—feeling a broad, flat chest against his and, most importantly, a cock rubbing against his.

Noah placed a quick kiss on his lips and then went straight for Luke’s belt. He felt as if he were going to come from just having Noah’s hands brush over his aching erection. Luke closed his eyes, relishing in the feeling of Noah undoing his jeans. Soon Noah’s mouth would be on his dick. At least he hoped Noah’s mouth would be on it.

“Oh, baby, please…” Luke moaned once Noah had gotten his underwear past his hips. He needed to be touched—whether it was Noah’s hand or mouth—he didn’t care at this point. Release was what he needed. He was so fucking hard.


Having his balls sucked was almost as good as a blow job. Noah definitely got extra credit for this move. He was about to protest when Noah stopped, but his boyfriend had moved on to his cock, dragging his tongue along the shaft.

Luke was on fucking fire—five alarm, all units at the scene. He wanted shove his dick deeply into Noah’s mouth. He clenched his hands into fists to stop himself from doing so. Noah would get there. He just needed to be patient. But the teasing was driving him mad.

Good lord, where did Noah learn to tease like this? It was both delicious and maddening.

“Please…” Luke finally whimpered, desperately needing to come.

Noah complied, taking him into his hot, wet mouth. Definitely worth the wait. Noah eagerly sucked him, taking him a little deeper than he had the first time. This was the most intense feeling in the world. Oh yeah…it wouldn’t be long before he came.

“Suck me, baby,” Luke groaned, his head rolling to one side.
And Noah did, which elicited one hell of a climax from Luke. His orgasm seemed to go on and on. It would be a miracle of Maddie and Casey didn’t hear him. But he really didn’t give a fuck at the moment because it felt *that* good.

“Damn, Snyder,” Noah gasped, wiping away the come that had trickled from his mouth.


The self-satisfied grin on Noah’s face was priceless and well worth any ribbing he might get from Casey (if he did hear the orgasm of the century).


Noah almost protested but seemed to think better of it; instead he filled Luke’s waiting arms. “You know they probably heard us.”

Luke kissed the top of his head. “Yup.”

“Think they’ll be jealous?”

Luke burst out laughing. Noah never ceased to amaze him, which was another reason why he loved him so much.
Chapter 61

Noah slipped on his midnight blue suit jacket, stepping toward the full length mirror that hung on the back of his bedroom door. The new suit that his mom had bought for him fit perfectly. He felt a little like Cary Grant in *To Catch a Thief*—suave and debonair. But he also felt a bit nervous about the party for a couple of reasons. He couldn’t dance and he was worried that maybe Kevin and his cronies would also be there. This night was too important to him. He didn’t want anything or anyone to ruin it for him and Luke.

He headed over to the dresser to get his tie just as there was a knock on his bedroom door. “Can I come in?” Charlene asked.

“Sure.”

The door opened slowly and his mom stepped inside his room. “Oh, Noah,” she said, smiling. “You look so handsome.”

Noah snatched the necktie from his dresser as a blush crept to his cheeks. “Thanks.”

“Did you need help with that?” she asked, motioning toward the tie in his hand.

“Yes, please.”

Charlene took the tie from him, draping it around his neck and tying the perfect knot. Then she smoothed the creases out of his jacket, making sure that he looked his best. “There…you’re going to knock ‘em dead.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I do. Trust me.” Charlene took a couple of steps back, gazing at him with a warm smile. “You look so handsome, string bean. You’ve gone and grown up on me.”

“Mom…”

She placed her hand on his cheek. “I’m so proud of you, Noah. I’ve always been proud of you and always will be.”

“Mom, I’m just going out for New Year’s Eve,” Noah said, shoving his hands in the pockets of his dress pants and scuffing his foot against the wood floor. “It’s not like Luke and I are running off to get married.”

“You’re right. I guess the prospect of starting a new year is getting me all emotional,” she said, dismissively waving her hand. “You’re going to have a great time with Luke and your friends tonight.”

“Are you sure that you don’t want me to stick around?” Noah asked. He felt guilty for leaving his mom on New Year’s Eve. They’d spent so many together and it almost didn’t seem right leaving her.

“Yes,” she insisted. “I’m going to head over to Emma’s. We’re going to play some Scrabble and maybe watch a movie before the ball drops at midnight. I think we’ll both be lucky if we can stay up that late.” Charlene laughed.
Knowing his mom would be with Emma put him at ease. The ladies would have a good time together. “You’ll make it. You always do,” he reassured her. He couldn’t remember a year that she fell asleep before midnight. And when they lived with the Colonel he’d always taken Charlene to the Officer’s Club to celebrate, leaving Noah with a babysitter.

“Could you be home by two? There are going to be a lot of crazies on the road tonight so I want you to be as safe as possible.”

“I will. Don’t worry,” Noah replied. Then there was a loud knock on the front door. “That’s Luke.” He darted out of the room to answer the door. When he opened it he was rendered speechless. Luke looked positively beautiful in his black suit with the same olive green dress shirt that had he’d worn after his first basketball game. The top few buttons were left undone which showed off Luke’s incredible chest.


Noah blushed. “My mom did it for me. Is it too much? You’re not wearing a tie. I don’t want to be overdressed.”


“Hi.”

“You boys have a good time tonight,” she told them as Noah put on his coat. “Just remember, I want you home before two.”

“I’ll make sure he’s home safely,” Luke assured her.

Noah gave his mom a quick hug goodbye before following Luke out the door. “Are you sure I shouldn’t ditch the tie?” he asked as he got into the car.

“Positive,” Luke reached over and took his hand. “Just so you know, I happen to have a special fondness for you in a tie.”

Of course. Their first kiss.

Luke let go of his hand so he could start the car. “Ready to rock ‘n roll?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Noah replied. His stomach was still a bit uneasy at the thought of being totally out tonight. He wasn’t ashamed of who he was or of his relationship with Luke, but he was worried about how others might react. Even if by some miracle Kevin wasn’t there it didn’t mean that there wouldn’t be some other asshole who’d give them a hard time.

“That doesn’t sound too convincing,” Luke said, quickly glancing at him as he pulled out onto the main road.

“Do you know who’s all going to be there tonight?” Noah asked, fiddling with his seatbelt.

“Casey, Maddie, Will, Gwen…”

“Do you think Kevin or those other assholes will be there?”

Luke drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “I don’t know for sure,” he sighed. “I wouldn’t
think so because Crash doesn’t serve alcohol. Trust me, Kevin likes his booze too much to go without it on New Year’s Eve. My guess is that they’ll all be holed up somewhere getting drunk.”

Noah nodded. Luke’s answer made him feel a little bit better, but there was still that fear of the unknown. “Okay.”

“Would you rather not go? We don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

He knew how important this night was to Luke. It was all he’d been talking about since they’d decided to go to the party. There was no way that he was going to let Luke down. “I want to go. It will be fun.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, but I have to remind you that I’m not much of a dancer.”

“I have to beg to differ there, Mayer,” Luke chuckled. “I saw you dancing with Maddie. You looked pretty good to me.”

“That was a slow dance. I’m a mess when it comes to fast dancing.”

“I’m no Justin Timberlake so don’t worry about it.”

Noah wondered if there was ever a time when he wouldn’t be worrying about something. It seemed to be his M.O. “I just don’t want to embarrass you.”

“You’re not going to embarrass me,” Luke reassured him. “We’re going to be with friends, just having a good time.”

That’s what Noah was counting on.

Crash was pretty crowded when they arrived. The small club reminded him of an eclectic study. There was a bar area (for lack of a better word) near the front by the door they’d entered through. At the back of the club was a stage where a DJ was set up. And along the far wall was a row of tables set up for a buffet. Noah grinned when he spotted Maddie who waved them over to their table where there were two empty chairs waiting for them. He felt better already.

They slipped off their coats, hanging them on the back of their chairs. Luke introduced him to Will and Gwen. He’d only briefly met Will at the Hobble Gobble Ball and had never officially met his wife. They were both really friendly. Across the room Noah spotted Jade dressed in black mini-skirt and a black Crash t-shirt.

Shit.

“Your cousin is working tonight,” Noah whispered.

“She won’t give us any trouble,” Luke said, taking his hand. “We called a truce, remember?”

“I just hope she remembers,” Noah muttered.

Luke squeezed his hand. “No worries.”

Much to Noah’s relief, Jade wasn’t their waitress. She did spot Luke from across the room, offering him a quick wave, but she didn’t come over. Casey was doing a good job of keeping the table entertained with one outrageous story after the other. Thankfully, he didn’t once again bring up hearing them the other night. Casey and Maddie had already teased them enough about it the next
day. Noah had been pretty mortified, but Luke had laughed it off.

After dinner Casey, Maddie, Will, and Gwen hit the dance floor while Luke went to get them a couple of Cokes. Noah watched his boyfriend at the bar, reveling in the fact that the hottest guy in the place belong to him.

“Would you like to dance?”

Noah glanced up, completely gobsmacked to see a beautiful young lady standing there. Surely, she couldn’t be talking to him. “Excuse me?” he asked.

“Would you like to dance?”

“I’m gay—very gay and a really bad dancer,” Noah stammered.

“Okay,” she nervously chuckled. “I just saw that you were alone and I figured I’d ask…”

“Actually, I’m here with my boyfriend. He’s getting us something to drink.”

“He’s right here,” Luke said, returning to the table with a couple of Cokes. “Thanks for keeping my boyfriend company.” He placed a protective hand on Noah’s shoulder.

“No problem. See you later.” She turned on her heel, marching across the room where her friends were waiting for her.

Noah felt bad that he had to turn her down even if it was the right thing to do. He just hated disappointing people which probably went back to the fact that he was never able to please his father.

Luke slipped into the chair next to Noah. “I can’t leave you alone for five minutes without some hot chick hitting on you,” he teased.

“I wasn’t expecting it. I told her that I was gay right away.”

Luke grinned. “Just a month ago you couldn’t tell anyone you were gay and now you’re telling complete strangers. You’ve come such a long way, baby.” He kissed Noah on the cheek.

“I don’t want any more lies in my life.”

“Let’s go dance,” Luke said, getting up from his chair.

Noah had hoped that they’d avoid the dance floor. Public humiliation wasn’t something he enjoyed. “Luke…”

“Come on, it’s a slow song. I want to show off my boyfriend,” Luke said, giving him his best puppy dog look, which never failed to make Noah melt.

Bastard.

“Okay,” Noah relented. There was no use trying to say no to Luke. He wondered if he’d ever be able to deny him anything. “One dance.”

“We’ll see about that,” Luke said, getting up from his seat and taking Noah’s hand.

As Luke dragged him out onto the dance floor, Noah scanned the crowd. All of the couples were boy/girl which was to be expected. There was a good chance that these people had never seen two
guys slow dance together. He never thought of himself as someone who did groundbreaking things—blending in was more his style. Tonight he definitely would be sticking out.

Luke turned to him once they got onto the dance floor and frowned. “You look like I just led you to your execution.”

Noah didn’t want to disappoint Luke. “I’m fine.”

Luke raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

“This is all just kinda new to me.”

“Me too.”

“I…uh…kinda feel like I’m earning a gay merit badge,” Noah confessed.

“Ohhh.” Luke’s eyes widened as a mischievous smile played across his lips. “I like the sound of that.” He tugged on Noah’s tie. “We’re already earned a couple. I think we’re both due for another one.”

Noah blew out a long breath. It was just a dance. Luke would be right there with him. “I have just one question though.”

“What’s that?” Luke asked, closing the space between them. His voice was low and sexy.

“Who leads?”

Luke grinned, slipping his arm around Noah’s waist. “You can lead me anywhere you want, Mayer.”

At first it was a bit awkward, like they were a couple of junior high kids at their first dance. Even though he said Noah could lead, Luke seemed to trying to take control which didn’t surprise him. As Beyonce’s *Irreplaceable* played on, they fell into sync. This felt right. No one seemed to be giving them a second look. Maddie even caught Noah’s eye and gave him an enthusiastic thumbs up. She was so fucking awesome like that.

Luke rested his head against Noah’s shoulder, which seemed like the most natural thing in the world. He just held Luke tighter as they swayed to the music. Heaven.

Noah was extra thrilled when the song faded into another ballad. He wasn’t ready to let go of Luke just yet. He wanted to hold him all night. Earning gay merit badges was quite enjoyable.

Then the music picked up and Noah reluctantly let go of Luke. He turned to head off the dance floor, but Luke grabbed his shoulder.

“Not so fast, Mayer.”


“You haven’t quite earned your merit badge yet,” he said, swaying his hips. “You can do it.”

Noah tried to rock his body just like the song instructed, but he felt really self-conscious. Luke, on the other hand, looked like he didn’t give a shit. He was bumping and grinding as he moved to the music. Noah wished he would have thought to practice his dancing in front of his mirror in his bedroom. Even Ronald Miller in *Can’t Buy Me Love* had the sense to practice before the big dance. But at least Noah knew better than to bust a move to the African Ant Eater Ritual unlike Ronald who
hadn’t know the difference between American Band Stand and PBS African Cultural Hour. Noah did his best to try to feel the music, raising his hands above his head as he stepped to the beat.

Casey and Maddie danced their way over to them. Noah wasn’t sure if he wanted his friends to have a front row seat for this debacle.

“You guys certainly dispel the stereotype that all gays are good dancers,” Casey laughed, giving Luke a nudge.

“Casey!” Maddie smacked his arm.

“Sorry, but it’s true,” Casey smirked with a shrug.

“Don’t listen to him, Noah,” Luke said over the music. “We’re cutting quite the rug.”


Luke shook his head. “Are you having fun?”

“Yes.” It was the truth. He was having fun even if he looked like a complete fool.


His boyfriend was right.

Much to Noah’s surprise the spent most of the night dancing, which earned him a big ole gay merit badge. He wondered how many more were out there. There was one left for sure. The big one.

“It’s almost midnight everyone,” the DJ announced. “Grab your loved one to ring in the New Year!”


“Here we go!” the DJ exclaimed. "Ten…nine… eight…seven…six…five…four…three…two… one! Happy New Year!”

Noah pulled Luke into a long, hot kiss. He didn’t care that they were in a room full of people. As far as he was concerned it was just them, savoring this perfect moment. Luke broke the kiss, gazing up at him completely mystified. Undoubtedly he’d been expecting a chaste kiss in public. Noah loved surprising him.

“Happy New Year, Luke.”

“Happy New Year, Noah,” Luke said, playing with Noah’s tie. “Do you want to go somewhere else—somewhere a little more private?”

“Yeah.” Noah grinned.

“Yeah,” Luke murmured, smiling up at him. He took Noah’s hand, leading him back to the table so they could get their coats and leave.

2007 was already holding so many possibilities for them.
Somewhere a little more private turned out to be Luke’s parents’ house. Noah had been expecting Pine Road, but this was a whole lot better. The leather couch in the family room was sinfully comfortable and offered a lot more room to maneuver than Luke’s Mustang.

“Are you sure your parents are gone for the night?” Noah asked. He’d learned early in life that if it seemed too good to be true it usually was.

“This is their big romantic night out,” Luke explained, slipping off his suit jacket and tossing it onto one of the armchairs. “Not that I really want to think about that.” He wrinkled his nose. “But I am happy they want to be alone. They deserve it—do they ever deserve it—you have no idea.”

“It’s pretty cool,” Noah admitted. “I wish my mom could find someone as great as your dad.”

“Me too,” Luke murmured, untying Noah’s necktie. “But I think we need to focus on other things right now. Having this house to ourselves is nothing short of a miracle.”

Noah nodded, gazing at Luke as he slipped the tie from his neck. There was something about the combination of Luke and a tie that made him incredibly horny. The simple acting of tying a necktie had led to their first kiss. Would untying one lead to something else tonight?

As Luke planted a searing kiss on his lips, Noah shrugged out of his suit coat. Blindly he reached for the buttons on Luke’s dress shirt, undoing each one as Luke licked the roof of his mouth. It was a wonder that he managed to get them unbuttoned because Noah was almost positive that his mind was completely blown.


“I…”

Noah wasn’t able to finish his sentence because his cell phone started to ring. Fuck.

“Do you have to get that?” Luke asked, kissing his neck.

Noah pulled his phone from his pants pocket. “Yeah, but I’ll make it quick. I promise.”

“Hello?”

“Noah, it’s Emma. I’m afraid that I have some bad news.”

Noah’s world came to a screeching halt. “What is it?”

“It’s your mother,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “She’s in the hospital. You need to get here right away.”

And then his heart stopped. Oh god…not my mom…

“What’s wrong?”

“Just get here, darling. I’ll explain then.”

“I will,” he managed to promise, then hung up his phone and shoved it back into his pocket.
Noah was completely numb. His mom was in the hospital. It seemed like something out of his worst nightmare. It just couldn’t be possible. She was fine when he’d left this evening. There had to be some sort of mistake, right? Emma somehow got the wrong information. *Something.* His mom couldn’t be…

“Who was it?” Luke asked, gently placing his hand on Noah’s arm.

“Your grandma...” Noah choked out. “My mom’s in the hospital.”
Chapter 62

Noah didn’t want to think the worst but it was hard—very hard. Over the past couple of months his mom has been slowly wasting away to nothing. A fact that he could no longer ignore. Now she was in the hospital. Again.

“It’s going to be okay,” Luke said, casting him a sidelong glance as they sped toward the hospital in his Mustang.

“You don’t know that,” Noah replied, staring out the window. Luke didn’t know his mother before—before they went on the run—before she started losing a ton of weight…

“No, I don’t, but you’re mom is young and…”

“Tell me you weren’t going to say healthy, because obviously she isn’t healthy or else she wouldn’t be in the hospital,” Noah spat. Deep down he knew that Luke was only trying to help but right now his attempts to make him feel better were just setting him on edge.

“Noah…”

“Just please get me to the hospital.” He needed to see his mom. She was all he could think about.

Thankfully, Luke didn’t press the issue. He sped up the Mustang, safely getting them to the hospital, parking the car in the lot adjacent to the emergency room. The feeling of dread intensified as Noah got out of Luke’s car, staring up at the imposing building.

The last time Noah was at a hospital was when he was a patient. He’d been terrified then too. His father had given him one hell of a beating. It wasn’t his fault that his bike had been stolen. He could have sworn he’d locked it like he’d done every day. But the Colonel wouldn’t listen to him. As far as he was concerned it was Noah’s fault.

Noah couldn’t remember how many times the Colonel had hit him that day. It felt like he’d never stop. When he finally did Noah felt nauseous. The Colonel had seen Noah’s vomiting as a sign of weakness, not the concussion he’d given his son. Thankfully, his mom had known better, insisting that they get him to the hospital right away. She never let him down.

Never.

Noah couldn’t say the same. He saw her wasting away the past couple of months. His mom had been sick the night they arrived in Oakdale. He should have known that it was serious. But he didn’t want to see it, so he chose not to. When she’d ended up in the hospital Noah didn’t question her flimsy explanation. He should have done something. But Noah didn’t—just buried his head in the sand like a fucking coward.

“Come on,” Luke said, taking his hand and leading him into the Emergency room. “We’ll find out what’s going on.”

Noah allowed Luke to lead him inside, trying his best to brace himself for what he was about to face. He wished that Emma would have told him why his mom was in the hospital. Was his mom just really sick or was it worse?

Through the chaos of the ER Noah managed to spot Emma. Tugging his hand free from Luke’s grasp, Noah dashed over to her. “Where’s my mom? Is she okay? Can you tell me what is wrong
Emma gathered him into a warm hug. “The doctor is looking at her right now. She collapsed just after midnight.”

“But she’s going to be all right,” Luke spoke up from behind him.

Noah pulled away only, staring at Emma’s tear stained face. She didn’t even need to answer him. It was bad. “She’s not, is she?” he whispered.

Emma gently touched his cheek. “You need to see her, dear.” Noah pushed down the tears that were threatening to spill. He needed to be strong for his mom. She needed him. “Yes, I want to see her.”

Emma flagged down a doctor. “Dr. Stewart, this is Gloria’s son, Noah.”

Dr. Stewart regarded him with kind eyes. “Hello, Noah. Your mom hasn’t been checked into a room yet. Dr. Robinson has already been in to see her. I can assure you that she’s getting the best possible care. If you come with me I can take you to her.”

Noah wasn’t sure who Dr. Robinson was, but obviously this doctor thought he should know. Everything was such a mess. “Thank you, ma’am,” he said, following after her.

“Noah!” Luke called. “I want to come with you!”

Noah didn’t turn around. Luke’s words didn’t register with him. All he could think about was finding his mom and making sure that she was all right.

Dr. Stewart led him down the hall. “Your mom will be happy to see you. She’s been asking for you since she regained consciousness.”

“String bean…” Charlene murmured, gazing up at him as he slowly approached her bed.

Noah took her hand which was like ice. “Hey, Mom,” he said, gently squeezing her hand.

“I’m sorry to ruin your night.”

“Don’t be. I want to be here for you.”

“You are always such a good boy.”

“You’re really sick, aren’t you?” Noah managed to choke out, still keeping his tears at bay. He needed to be strong for his mom.

“I’m sorry, Noah. I—”

Noah quickly silenced her. “There’s nothing to be sorry about.” She didn’t have any reason to be sorry. This wasn’t her fault. It was his. He should have taken charge, insisted that his mom get medical help when he noticed that there was something wrong with her.

She blinked up at him. “Yes, there is. I’ve been keeping a terrible secret from you.”

Noah felt as if all of the air had been sucked out of the room. “What is it?” he fearfully asked.

“You know that I haven’t been feeling well lately. I told you that I was just working too hard, but that’s not entirely true,” she quietly explained, glancing down at their joined hands. “The truth is I
haven’t been feeling well for awhile—since before we even got to Oakdale.”

Noah shut his eyes, fearing where this might be going. He didn’t want his mom to be sick. After everything she’d been through with the Colonel she deserved a happy ending. Just like in the movies. Noah blew out a deep, calming breath. If she was sick, he’d help her fight whatever it was. They could beat it together. He and his mom against the world just like always.

Charlene squeezed his hand. “I thought the pain I was feeling was nothing—just a sign of getting a little older, but it didn’t go away. I didn’t want to go to the doctor because I was afraid of what they’d tell me. But it was only a matter of time before the truth caught up with me.”

“W-w-what is the truth?” Noah asked, biting his lip.

“I have cancer—terminal cancer,” she whispered. “There’s nothing they can do for me…”

Noah vehemently shook his head. “No….No…there has to be some sort of mistake. They can help you here—fix you up good as new.”

“No, honey. They can’t,” she tearfully replied. “I have terminal endometrial cancer which has spread to my organs. I don’t have much longer.”

“No,” Noah protested, although deep in his heart he knew it was the truth. “You can’t die. I still need you, Mom.”

“You’re strong, Noah….so strong,” she murmured, caressing his wet cheek.

“No, I’m not,” he sniffed as a couple of tears slid down his cheeks.

A soft smile played on Charlene’s dry lips. “You are, string bean.”

He certainly didn’t feel strong right now—shattered was more like it—locked in some sort of horrendous nightmare. Noah needed to get a grip—toughen up. Taking a deep breath, Noah tried to collect himself. “What can I do?” he finally asked.

“Just seeing you so happy this past month has been the best medicine.”

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Something was off. “Just how long have you known about the cancer?”

Charlene glanced away from him. “I found out after Thanksgiving…”

Noah couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “The time you were taken to the hospital?” She nodded. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked completely flabbergasted. His mom had always been so adamant about being truthful, but she’d been lying to him—keeping the horrible truth from him for over a month. There was so much time wasted—time he should have spent with her.

“I wanted to see you happy because you deserve it. I love seeing how Luke makes your eyes light up. I was thrilled that you were finally able to go out and do fun, teenage things,” she quietly explained. “I also wanted you to have the perfect Christmas.”

“I should have been taking care of you,” he insisted. But he hadn’t been, instead he’d been pissing away his money on frivolous things—like dinner out, clothes, mochachinos. His money should have gone toward a good doctor for his mom.

“You have been and so has Emma. Between the two of you I’ve been in very good hands.”
“Did she know?” Noah asked, wide-eyed.

Charlene nodded, averting her eyes.

Emma had known all this time, but had said nothing to him. Were there others? Possibly Holden? Had the digicam been a sympathy present from the Snyders—something to make him feel better about the impending loss of his mother? Noah’s blood ran cold as the next thought crossed his mind.

Did Luke know? Noah was sickened to think that his boyfriend might be in on it too. Their entire relationship could be one big, fat lie. “W-w-what about Luke?” he managed to sputter.

“Oh, honey, no….no…Luke doesn’t know. Emma is the only other person who knew,” she explained. “She wanted me to tell you, but I insisted that I wanted to wait. I just wanted to protect you. I hope you can forgive me, string bean. I did what I thought was best.”

Noah kissed his mother’s hand. “It’s okay, Mom. I love you. I’ll take care of you now.”

But it really wasn’t all right. His mom was dying and no one told him. Months had been wasted now. He could tell just by looking at her that she didn’t have too much longer—weeks if he was lucky. Noah pushed the anger he was feeling aside. He didn’t want to be angry with her. She had only done what has come natural to her his entire life—protect him.

He didn’t know how long they were sitting there before a doctor arrived. Charlene introduced Dr. Robinson to him. She was his mother’s Oncologist. The doctor brought Noah up to speed on his mother’s condition—the cancer had spread as far as her lungs. There was fluid on there that needed to be removed which would help with her breathing. The doctor was also going to increase her meds so his mom wouldn’t be in pain.

“After we remove the fluid I’d like to admit you,” Dr. Robinson told Charlene.

Charlene slowly shook her head. “No, I don’t want to live out my last days in a hospital.”

“Maybe you should do what the doctor says,” Noah suggested, wanting to prolong his mother’s life as long as possible. He wasn’t ready to let her go. He never would be.

“I’m not going to stay here.”

“Mom,” Noah pleaded with her.

“Honey, I want to go back to the farm. I want to be with you and Emma surrounded by love, not stuck here in a sterile hospital.”

“I can’t force you to be admitted, but I’d like to get the fluid off your lungs before you go anywhere, okay?” Dr. Robinson said. “And then we can talk about your options for care at home.”

“Okay,” Charlene agreed.

Dr. Robinson turned to him. “Noah, could you please step out for a few minutes while we take care of your mom? I promise that we’ll get you as soon as we’re done.”

“Sure.” He kissed his mom’s cheek before leaving the curtained off room.

Noah wiped his eyes as one of the nurses led him back to the waiting area where Luke and Emma were sitting. The moment Luke spotted him; he sprung up from his chair and rushed over to him.

“Noah!” Luke launched himself at him, pulling Noah into a tight, suffocating hug. “How’s she
Noah stiffed in Luke’s arms, not returning the embrace, his eyes sought out Emma’s which were filled with tears. The anger he’d been suppressing bubbled toward the surface as she approached them.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Noah asked, his eyes locking with hers.

Luke glanced up at him, brown eyes wide. “Tell you what?”

“He’s talking to me, Luke,” Emma said, placing her hand on her grandson’s shoulder.


“I wanted to, Noah. Believe me I did. I tried to convince your mom to tell you, but she wouldn’t have it.”

“What’s going on?” Luke asked, looking from Emma to Noah.

“My mom has terminal cancer. She’s dying.”


“Don’t…just don’t.”


“You can leave me alone and just go home, Luke,” Noah replied. Right now seeing Luke only reminded him of all of the time he wasted with his mom. Instead of being out with Luke, he should have been taking care of her. He’d never get those days back. Never.

“Noah, I want to help you. Please let me…”

“If you really wanted to help, you’d leave me alone right now.” He tried not to let the stricken look on Luke’s face change his mind. His mom needed to come first now. He had to think about how he was going to care for her when they got home. She needed to be as comfortable as possible. No more pain. She’d had too much of that.

“Luke, it’s probably best if you go home,” Emma spoke up. “We don’t know when they’re going to release Noah’s mom.”


Noah nodded. “Yeah. I think it’s for the best.”

“Call me—text me—whatever. I’ll be there for you,” Luke said and then turned on his heel and slunk out of the hospital with his hands stuffed in his coat pockets.

Noah took a deep breath. “My mom wants to go home. The doctor thinks she should stay, but she won’t listen. They’re going to drain some fluid from her lungs and then she should be able to leave. I’ll take care of her until she…” His voice faltered. He couldn’t bring himself to say the word.

Emma gathered him in her arms. Noah didn’t fight her embrace. He just sobbed. The floodgates had been opened. Thank god Luke wasn’t around to see him like this—a blubbering mess.

“You and your mom can stay with me. We can arrange for hospice care so she’ll be well taken care
of,” Emma explained, rubbing his back.

“Okay,” he sniffed.

“Noah, your mom loves you so much. She thought she was doing what was best for you.”

“I feel like I let her down.”

“Oh no, dear. You’d never let her down.”

Noah took a shuddering breath, calming himself. No more tears. His mom had told him he was strong. It was time for him to start acting the part.

*******

Luke had driven home in a daze. Noah’s mom was dying and there was nothing anyone could do. All he’d wanted was to hold Noah and try to shield him from the hurt. But Noah had pushed him away—demanded that he leave. His grandma had even agreed. Luke didn’t understand why he’d all of the sudden become the bad guy in all of this.

The house was still deserted when he returned to it. His parents and siblings wouldn’t be home for awhile. Luke welcomed the silence, but not the complete solitude. Noah was supposed to be with him. They’d had such a wonderful night together—the perfect New Year’s Eve celebration. He was so proud to dance with Noah in the crowded club. It was a slice of heaven. Noah had relaxed and was having fun. All of his worries seemed a million miles away. And then there was the kissing—at midnight followed by the hot kisses on the family room sofa.

That seemed so long ago…

Luke slipped off his coat, tossing it over the desk chair in the family room. He was about to head up to bed when something caught his eye. Noah’s tie lay in a crumpled heap on the sofa. Luke’s eyes filled with tears, his stomach twisting into knots.

Noah…

Tears spilled down his cheeks as he picked up the tie and curled up on the couch. He didn’t understand why Noah was pushing him away when his boyfriend needed him most. It didn’t make any sense.

And it hurt. Badly.

Luke thought Noah trusted him—believed in him, but when it came down to it Noah chose Luke’s grandma over him. He didn’t understand. Weren’t they a team now? Luke could have sworn they were. The thought of the not being one…

More tears. Luke was surprised that he had any left to shed. He’d been crying ever since he left the hospital. Seeing Noah so…so…lost (was the even the right word?). It just killed him.

He pulled out his cell phone, typing a quick text:
I’m here 4 u baby. Call me


He’ll contact me. He will. Noah loves me. He does…

Luke clung to those thoughts as sleep finally overtook his grief.
“Mom! Dad! I think there’s something wrong with Luke!”

Faith’s obnoxious yelling, yanked Luke from his fitful slumber. Fucking great. This was the last thing he needed.

Luke blinking up at his sister, eyes burning. “Go away, brat,” he muttered.

“Why are you holding a tie?” Natalie asked.

He was still holding Noah’s tie. Christ he was pathetic. “Go. Away.”

But they didn’t. There they stood with inquisitive eyes, waiting for a proper answer which he wasn’t about to give them.

“Have you been crying?” Faith asked, peering down at him.

“Baby, what’s going on?” Lily asked, joining the girls with Ethan in her arms. Even his baby brother blinked at him with curious eyes.

Great. Now all he needed was his dad to see him in this state so his embarrassment could be complete. Luke buried his face in the throw pillow. “Can you just get them out of here?”

“Luke…” Holden warned but was quickly cut off by Lily.

“Holden, can you take Ethan and the girls and go unpack or something. I want to have a talk with Luke.”

There was a few moments silence before Holden agreed. Luke could imagine him sizing up the situation. Surely he must be quite a sight, lying there in his suit with Noah’s tie in his hands. But he was happy to hear his sisters get herded out of the room, leaving him alone with his mom. He knew it was pointless to try to convince her to leave as well.

“Scoot over,” Lily said, tapping his leg. “We need to talk.”

Luke was about to grumble some smart ass reply, but then he was hit with the realization that Noah wouldn’t be able to have talks with his mother for much longer. Noah was going to lose Charlene, the one person who has done her best to protect him throughout his life. A big lump formed in his throat as he hauled himself up to a sitting position to make room for his mom.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” Lily asked, stroking his hair. “Did you and Noah have a fight?”

“I don’t know if you’d call it a fight,” Luke murmured, staring down at the necktie in his hands. “We had so much fun last night but then…” his voice caught as he remembered how quickly the night changed.

“What?”

“Grandma called Noah and told him that his mom was in the hospital. She said that he needed to get there right away,” he quietly explained. “When we got there I wanted to go with him to see her, but he left me in the waiting room with Gram.”

“That’s understandable, Luke. Noah just wanted to see his mom and make sure that she was okay.”
Luke turned to her, those damn tears filling his eyes. “But she’s not. He came out a little while later and told us that she’s dying of cancer.”

“Oh my god,” Lily gasped, her hand covering her mouth.

“It’s awful,” Luke sniffed. “I just wanted to hold Noah and be there for him, but he didn’t want me near him. I begged him to let me help him. I know he needs me. He wouldn’t listen though—told me to go home. Even Gram agreed that I should leave. It felt like a slap in the face. I don’t understand. All I want to do is help Noah. He’s my boyfriend.” His voice cracked on the word, succumbing to the tears that had been streaming down his face.

Lily hugged him tightly. “Luke, it’s going to be okay. Noah just needs some time to wrap his head around this. It has to be such a terrible blow for him.”

“He…needs…me,” Luke insisted through his sorrow.

Lily kissed his cheek before pulling away enough to look her son in the eyes. “I don’t know if you’re really hearing what you’re saying. So far I’ve heard a lot of I’s, but this isn’t about you. It’s about Noah and his grief.”

“But I want to help him.”

“It doesn’t sound like that’s what Noah wants right now. His world has been turned upside down. He must be devastated.”

Luke leaned forward, picking up his discarded cell phone from the coffee table. Flipping it open, he checked to see if Noah had tried to contact him. His heart dropped. Nothing. “Yes, but he won’t even respond to the text I sent him last night.” Luke frantically began to compose a text:

I love u. Please call me.

Before he could hit the SEND button, his mom snatched the phone from his hands. “He’s going to need some time,” Lily said, flipping his phone shut leaving the message unsent. She placed it on the end table next to the sofa which was out of Luke’s reach. “Noah will contact you when he’s ready.”

“But we love each other,” Luke countered. “When you love someone you don’t shut them out, you let them help. Maybe Noah changed his mind about me. Maybe…”

“When you love someone you also give them space if they need it.”

“This just feels so wrong to me.”

Lily put her arm around Luke. “You can show Noah how much you love him by being there when he’s ready to lean on someone.”

Luke slowly nodded. Even though he didn’t necessarily like what his mom was telling him she was probably right. He didn’t know how long he would be able to keep his distance from Noah. It went against all of his instincts. Needing to help Noah was like breathing.

“She’s such a great lady,” Luke murmured. “I wish this weren’t happening to her. She accepts Noah and loves him for who he is. He’d been so afraid to come out to her, but he needn’t have
worried. This isn’t fair.”

“I know it isn’t. It’s awful, but we’ll all be there for Noah when’s he’s ready. And we’ll be there for
Gloria too.”

“How long do you think that will take before he’s ready?”

“I don’t know,” Lily sighed. “Everyone deals with grief in their own way. Some people like to be
left alone so they can sort through their feelings. Others want to surround themselves with friends
and family.”

“I wouldn’t push Noah away,” Luke muttered, staring at Noah’s tie which was crumpled up next to
him on the couch.

“Maybe…maybe not, but the important thing right now is that you respect Noah’s wishes.” Lily
kissed his cheek. “Now I think you should go upstairs take a shower and put on some comfortable
clothes. When you’re done I’ll have breakfast ready.”

“Not hungry,” Luke grumbled. Food was the last thing he wanted. He couldn’t eat when Noah’s
mom was dying.

“There will still be some food for you if you change your mind,” Lily said, rising from the sofa.

Sighing, Luke grabbed Noah’s tie and headed up to his room, still feeling helpless. He hated feeling
helpless, especially when it came to the people he loved. His love for Noah was so intense which
made this situation unbearable for him.

But he’d try to give Noah space.

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Noah had been in a haze ever since Luke had left the hospital. He hadn’t been able to deal with
Luke. Truth was he’d been holding on by a thread since his mom told him about her condition. If
Emma hadn’t been there for him, he didn’t know what he would have done.

Emma had known what to do. She’d asked the right questions, arranged for hospice, and made sure
that Charlene was comfortable both on the ride home and once they got to the farmhouse. Emma
had insisted that Charlene live out her final days in her guest room instead of at the cabin. Then
she’d made sure that Noah went home to change out of his suit while Emma and the hospice nurse
got Charlene settled.

When he returned to the cabin, Noah tried not to think about his mom never returning here. The
thought was quickly pushed from his mind. Noah focused on the task at hand.

Clothes.

Noah changed into old jeans and a sweat shirt, laying his suit on the bed. It would need to be dry
cleaned before…

Squeezing his eyes shut to block the impending tears, Noah took a deep calming breath. Stay strong
—be a man. He couldn’t break down now. There would be plenty of time for that after…
Noah fished his cell phone out of the pocket of his dress pants. Flipping it open, he wasn’t surprised to find a text from Luke.

**Im here 4 u baby. Call me**


He found his old duffle bag, packing it with his bed clothes, underwear, socks, a pair of jeans, and his green sweater. Then he went into his mom’s room to get her pajamas. He wanted her to be as comfortable as possible. His last stop was the bathroom where he gathered his toiletries. He thought he’d collected everything they needed. If he hadn’t, the cabin wasn’t far away.

But it felt like it as he hiked over to the farmhouse. He used the time to psych himself up. Even though his mom had been losing weight for the past few months, it had still been a shock to see her in such bad condition at the hospital. He didn’t understand what had happened between the time Luke had picked him up and Emma’s phone call.

Emma greeted him in the kitchen with a warm hug. “The nurse is up with your mom right now. She’s happy to be back here instead of in the hospital.”

“I brought her pajamas.”

Emma smiled warmly, patting his cheek. “You’re so thoughtful. If you give them to me I can run them upstairs and we can get her changed.”

Noah set his duffle bag down on one of the kitchen chairs and unzipped it. His mom’s pajamas were on the top so they were easy to find. “Here you go,” he said, handing them to her.

“I’ll let you know once she’s changed. There are some leftovers in the refrigerator if you wanted to get a bite to eat in the meantime.”

Noah didn’t go near the refrigerator. He just paced back and forth, waiting for Emma to return. This all still seemed like some sort of bizarre nightmare he was having and couldn’t wake up from. Everything was happening so fast—too fast. He wanted to stop time so he could keep his mom with him. If anyone should be dying it should be the Colonel who was such a cruel man, filled with so much hatred.

Emma poked her head out of the doorway that led upstairs. “Your mom is ready to see you.”

Noah followed Emma upstairs and into the guest room where his mom had stayed their first night in Oakdale. He was surprised to see a rollaway bed set up at the foot of the queen size bed his mom was resting in.

“I had Jack bring this old rollaway up from the basement,” Emma explained. “You can sleep here or else you can use Aaron’s old room.”

Noah had forgotten that Luke’s brother, Aaron, had moved to an apartment in Oakdale just before Christmas. “Thank you, ma’am. I appreciate it.”

The nurse who’d been sitting at Charlene’s bedside stood up. She was dressed in pale pink scrubs
and looked like she was in her mid-thirties. Her dishwater blonde hair was pulled back into a long ponytail which showed off her kind features. “I’m Joyce. I’m the day nurse that will be looking after your mom. You must be Noah. I’ve already heard so much about you.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Noah said, shaking her hand. “Thank you for helping us out.”

“You’re quite welcome.” She smiled. “I’m going to let you catch up with your mom. If you need anything, just holler and I’ll be right up.”

“We will,” Charlene said, her voice was still weak like it had been in the hospital.

“We’ll be downstairs,” Emma told them. “Did you get something to eat, Noah?”

“Not yet. I’ll get something later.” Maybe he would. He couldn’t see his appetite returning anytime soon.

Thankfully, Emma didn’t push him, but her concern was radiating from her eyes. She ushered the nurse from the room, leaving Noah alone with his mom.

Noah sat down in the chair that Joyce had vacated, taking Charlene’s hand in his. “Are you comfortable? Is there anything I can get you?”

“I’m fine, string bean,” she said, squeezing his hand. “I want to hear about your New Year’s Eve. Did you and Luke have a good time?”

Had his date with Luke only been the night before? It seemed so long ago now dancing with Luke, kissing Luke—just being completely happy. He really didn’t want to sit around gushing about Luke. He wanted to take care of his mom like he should have been doing all along.

“Are you sure there’s nothing I can’t get you?” Noah asked. “Are you in any pain? Or did you need to nap?”

“I’ll need to you to tell me about your date. I don’t want to spend the rest of our time together with you worrying and waiting for me to—”

“Mom, please,” Noah begged, not wanting her to talk about dying. He couldn’t take it.

“I want to spend the time we have together living,” Charlene told him. “Hearing about you doing fun things like going out on a date with Luke makes me happy. I want to hear all about it. Did you have a good time?”

“It was pretty great,” Noah admitted. “Luke even convinced me to dance with him. I was much better with the slow dancing than the fast, but I had fun doing both.”

Charlene smiled. “I’m happy to hear it. I knew you’d have a good time.”

“I should have been home with you, though.”

“No,” her voice was firm. “I wanted you to go out with Luke and your friends.”

“But I’ve missed so much time with you!”

“You haven’t, string bean,” Charlene said, her eyes pleading with him to understand. “It’s been you and me against the world since the day you were born. All I’ve ever wanted for you was to finally have a normal life which happened once we got here. You have a boyfriend. We’ve both made friends and have been taken in by the Snyders who are such wonderful people. We’re so lucky.”
Noah didn’t feel lucky. His mom was going to die. “I should have done something to help you, though.”

“I don’t want to see you beat yourself up over this. You didn’t do anything wrong. You’ve been taking care of me since you were five years old.”

“It wasn’t enough.”

“It was for me,” Charlene told him. “I don’t think I’d be here today if it wasn’t for you.” She offered him a weak smile. “This medication is making me so sleepy. Would you mind if I closed my eyes for a little while?”

“Go ahead, Mom,” Noah murmured, fighting to keep the tears out of his voice. “I’ll be right here.”

Noah sat watching his mom as she slept. His eyes were focused her chest, making sure that it continued to rise and fall. He wasn’t ready to let go of her yet.

Emma and Joyce returned a little while later. Emma coaxed him from the room while Joyce checked Charlene’s vitals. She forced some chicken soup down his throat and sat quietly with him as he ate. He appreciated the silence.

After he finished the soup, Noah went back up to his mom’s room. She was still asleep. Joyce reassured him that her vitals were good and his mom wasn’t in any pain.

“You look like you’re about to drop,” the nurse told him.

“I’m fine.”

“The meds are going to keep your mom out for awhile,” Joyce explained. “Take this time to get some rest.”

“Okay,” Noah finally relented. He kicked off his shoes and curled up on the rollaway bed so he could be near. Just in case.

Before exhaustion claimed him, Noah’s last thought was: Please let my mom be alive when I wake up.
Chapter 64

Luke didn’t want to be here. He’d tried to beg off school but his parents wouldn’t have it. They knew he wasn’t sick—just heartbroken. He’d spent the past two days waiting to hear from Noah, but he never did. Although he’d been tempted to try to contact Noah again, he had heeded his mother’s advice and did nothing, hating every moment of it. Noah’s silence was making him crazy. He’d spent most the evening frantically writing in his journal, hoping it would make him feel better.

But it didn’t.

Luke didn’t know how long he could go without hearing from his boyfriend. It had only been two days, but it felt like weeks to him. Noah needed him. He wasn’t going to stop believing it.

Maddie was waiting for him at their usual lunch table. She was going to want details…details…details. Noah and he had bailed on the party right after midnight so, knowing her, she probably assumed they’d had one hot and heavy private New Year’s celebration.

If only…

Fuck. Luke wasn’t ready to deal. Maybe he could just high-tail it out of there before she spotted him.

“Luke!” She waved excitedly at him.

Too late.

Taking a deep breath and plastering a smile on his face, he marched over to the table and slid into his seat. “Hi,” he said as brightly as his dark mood would allow.

“I can’t believe you and Noah took off right after midnight. Well, maybe I can since you had an empty house at your disposal. Does this mean that you guys finally did the deed?”

“Maddie…”

“Please tell me yes, because—” Maddie gushed.

Good lord he could not handle this today. “Maddie.” Luke needed to stop her. His New Years hardly had the picture perfect ending she imagined.

“What?”

“We haven’t, okay?”

Maddie’s face fell. “I’m sorry. I just assumed…”

“Well, please don’t,” Luke curtly replied, snatching his can of Coke and opening it. He tried to look distracted, but he knew Maddie wasn’t going to just leave things lie. They were a lot alike in this department, which was rather unfortunate right now.

“Is something wrong?”

“Noah’s mom is dying and he won’t talk to me, but other than that everything is just peachy,” his voice was laced with bitterness and sarcasm. He hadn’t wanted to take his frustration out on Maddie. She didn’t deserve it. Unfortunately, he had a tendency to lash out when he was hurt.
Poor Maddie was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. And, of course, he knew he could get away with it. She could handle him when he got his bitch on.

“Oh my god,” Maddie gasped, eyes wide and glistening. “He must be devastated. Poor Noah. I can’t even imagine what he’d going through.”

His poor, sweet, amazing Noah. Fuck. Noah didn’t deserve this…

Luke willed himself not to break down. Not right there in the cafeteria for all to see. No one in the school needed any more ammo to use against him, especially Kevin and his asshole friends. Even though they hadn’t really bothered him since their last encounter in Old Town Luke wasn’t going to let his guard down.

“I wish I knew how he felt,” he sighed.

Maddie reached over and took his hand. “Noah just needs some time to sort through everything. Everyone handles their grief differently.”

“Now you sound like my mom,” Luke snorted. He was so fucking sick of hearing that answer. “I thought you’d be on my side.”

“I am on your side and I’m also on Noah’s. But I don’t think there are any sides to choose in this situation.”

“All I want to do is help him,” Luke insisted. He was getting frustrated that no one really seemed to get that he has Noah’s best interests at heart. His love for Noah knows no bounds. “I know he needs me.”

“It sounds to me that he wants to be focused on his mom,” Maddie countered.

“I’m not trying to take him away from his mom,” Luke tried to calmly explain. “I’d never want to do that. I know he needs to spend as much time with her as he can, but he shouldn’t be going through this alone. I know I would want him with me if I were in his situation. I need to call him. I can’t handle not knowing if he’s okay.”

Maddie squeezed his hand, fixing her gaze on his. “Luke, Noah is wired differently than you are. Just because you’d want him at your side doesn’t mean he’d necessarily want the same thing. It doesn’t mean that he doesn’t love you.”

This wasn’t what he wanted to hear. He wanted Maddie to tell him to call, text—fuck—even send a smoke signal to Noah if that’s what it took to finally get a hold of his boyfriend. But no, she had to be so damn calm and rational.

“I don’t know how much longer I can go without speaking to him,” Luke sighed.

“It’s only been a couple of days,” Maddie pointed out. “You need to keep busy—focus on school and basketball.”

“Fuck!” Luke groaned. “This Friday is a home game. Noah has never missed one. I can’t imagine playing without him.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth Luke realized how selfish he sounded. Noah’s mom had god knows how many days left and he was worried about a stupid basketball game. “Shit. I really need to get a grip here. Of course, I can play without Noah there. I would never want him to leave his mom’s side for one of my basketball games—not now.”

“I know.”
“His mom is so cool. They have such an amazing relationship. I wish I got along with my mom as well as Noah does with his. Noah had no reason to worry about how his mom would react to him being gay. She’s just so proud of him. You have no idea…” Luke was trying to do his best to explain what an incredible lady Charlene Mayer is, but he feared that he was failing miserably. “I want to see her again. I really enjoyed spending time with her and Noah. She didn’t seem one bit wigged out that Noah had a boyfriend. I want her to know how much I love Noah and that I’ll take care of him,” Luke’s voice faltered. Noah was going to need more than just Luke after his mom was gone.

“I hope you get to see her,” Maddie said, offering him a reassuring smile. “I’m sure she’d love to hear that.”

Luke prayed he’d get his chance to tell her.

********

Noah was exhausted. Sleep had been fitful and sporadic since he’d learned about his mother’s terminal condition a few days ago. He was so afraid of closing his eyes—afraid that his mom would be gone the next time he opened them. Emma had tried to get him to sleep in Aaron’s old room, but he wouldn’t have it. He needed to be right there just in case his mom needed him. He’d make up for all of those moments that he missed. Noah would never let her down again.

Emma had told him that Holden wanted him to take all the time off he needed. It was a relief not to worry about work. She relayed that Holden and the rest of his family felt terrible about his mom. Even though Emma hadn’t come out and said it, he knew this included Luke. He still wasn’t ready to talk to Luke. He’d been doing his damnedest to push all thoughts of him from his mind.

Noah had succeeded for the most part like when he was watching a movie with his mom. She’d compiled a list of movies she’d never seen so Emma had helped Noah out by picking them up for him at the local Blockbuster. Watching movies with his mom was easy. He could almost forget that there was anything wrong.

But when she was sleeping—something she did quite a bit—it was difficult. This was when Luke haunted his thoughts. He missed his boyfriend. And he knew if he contacted Luke, he’d be there in a heartbeat, which he didn’t need. Noah didn’t need Luke there to hold his hand. He could deal with all of this on his own.

“Have you eaten, string bean?” Charlene asked, wearily looking over at him.

Noah was sitting in an old rocking chair that Emma had brought into the room. He was thankful for the special place to sit. The rocking motion helped to soothe his frayed nerves. More often than not he was in the chair, rocking so much he swore he was going to wear a hole into the hardwood floor.

“I’ve had something,” he replied. “Something” was actually a piece of toast that Emma had insisted that he eat before she would let him back up to see his mom after he’d ran back to the cabin for a quick shower and a fresh set of clothes.

“You need to eat.”

“So do you,” Noah countered. “You need to keep up your strength.”
It was getting difficult for her to keep what food she managed to eat down. Joyce had told him that it was a sign of the cancer progressing, which was the delicate way of saying that she was one step closer to death.

“I hate to break it to you but I’m not going to be running a marathon anytime soon,” she said, forcing a weak laugh.

His mom tried so hard to act like there was nothing wrong—like she wasn’t dying. Here she was so sick—so weak and she was still trying to protect him.

“It’s a little cold and snowy outside for a marathon. Maybe you’ll be ready by springtime.” He forced himself to try to joke with her. It was for her sake. Noah didn’t want her to worry about him.

“You’re going to be okay, Noah,” Charlene said quietly. “You won’t be alone after I’m gone…”

Noah squeezed his eyes shut. He didn’t want to talk about this. Talking about it would make it real and—god—he didn’t want it to be real. “Mom, please…”

“Noah,” her voice took on a stern tone that he hadn’t heard in quite awhile. It was jarring. “We need to discuss this. It’s important.”

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. “All right.”

She reached for his hand, but Noah had to scoot the chair so he could take it. It was so cold—fingers practically bone covered flesh. “Noah honey, I know you’re scared. It’s only natural. But, string bean, you won’t be alone. Emma and I talked when I first found out about the cancer. I asked her if she’d look after you.”

Noah cut her off. “I don’t want to burden anyone. I’m an adult.”

“Emma adores you,” Charlene firmly interjected. “She said that you have a home here no matter what. As far as she’s concerned you’re one of the family.”

Noah wanted to believe it. There were times he felt as if it were true. Christmas had been pretty amazing. “I’d be honored to be considered a family member. I think she’s pretty great.”

“Me too. She’s become my dearest friend. I’ll always be grateful to her for opening up her home to us.” Charlene yawned. “Pardon me. I’m getting sleepy. I think I’m going to take a nap for a little while. While I’m sleeping I want you to go downstairs and eat a decent meal.”

“I’m fine…”

“No, you’re not. You need food. Go.”

“Okay,” Noah relented. He gave his mom a quick kiss on the cheek before heading downstairs.

He wasn’t surprised to find Emma in the kitchen. It seemed like that’s where she always was these days (if she wasn’t up with Charlene). He suspected Emma wanted to stay close to her friend as she could while giving Noah precious time alone with his mom. The kitchen also offered her a place to keep busy, making cookies, pies, soup—you name it.

Emma stopped wiping down the island countertop. “How is she doing?”

“About the same as yesterday,” he sighed. “She wants to take a nap and insisted that I eat something.”
Emma smiled. “Your mom is a very wise woman.”

“I think she’d say the same about you.”

She bustled over to the refrigerator. “What can I fix for you?”

“You don’t have to go through any trouble. I can find something.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” she insisted. “I have some leftover chicken salad. I could make you a sandwich.”

Although he didn’t feel like eating, he figured he’d better try to eat a little something, especially since his mom would ask if he’d had dinner after she woke from her nap. He didn’t want to lie to her. “Sounds good.”

“Dear, will you please sit down before you fall down? I’ll bring your lunch to you.”

Noah didn’t protest. He sat at the kitchen table, resting his head against his hand. Wow…was he ever exhausted. Maybe the food would help wake him up. He needed to stay alert.

Emma placed a plate with a chicken salad sandwich along with some potato chips on it and a can of root beer in front of him. “Thank you,” he said, forcing a smile and glancing up at her.

She sat down next to him. “Did your mom talk to you about anything special today?”

Noah opened the root beer. “Like what’s going to happen to me after she…” The final word just wouldn’t come out, stuck like a lump in his throat. His hands began to shake. Hoping to stop them from trembling, Noah balled them up into fists.

Damn it.

Emma placed her hand on top of one of the fists he’d made, trying to calm him. “One thing you don’t have to worry about is where you’ll live. I want you to stay here with me. You can have the room that Aaron used for as long as you’d like.”

“I don’t want to…”

“Noah, I know what you’re going to say and I don’t want to hear it,” she firmly replied. “It’s no trouble. I think of you like another grandson. You are part of the Snyder family now and forever—even if for some reason things don’t work out between you and Luke.”


Emma rubbed his hand. “And I know that Luke loves you too. Everyone in this family does. Everyone was so sorry to hear about your mom. They’re also concerned about you. All you have to do is say the word and you’ll be surrounded by more Snyders than you’d know what to do with.”

A wave of panic washed through Noah at the prospect of all those people seeing him so weak—especially Luke. No way. He’d deal with this on his own. No more distractions—stay focused on his mom.

“No, please. I’d rather deal with this on my own.”

“You know that you don’t have to.”
Noah nodded. “I know, but this is how I want to do it. I just need time.”

“You don’t have to explain it to me. You’re dealing with a lot. I want you to do what is right for you.”

Noah relaxed. Thank god for Emma. She’s been so supportive. Actually, he would have probably fallen apart if it hadn’t been for her support. She understood him and didn’t push. “I just want to spend as much time with my mom as I can. I don’t want any other distractions.”

Distractions equaled Luke. Even though Emma hadn’t said anything she probably figured it out. She was a smart lady.

“There’s something that would make me really happy,” Emma said, gently touching his forearm.

“What’s that?” he asked, cautiously. Noah would do just about anything for Emma. Hopefully her request didn’t involve Luke, because he just couldn’t see him yet.

“I’d like you to call me Emma. Mrs. Snyder is way too formal, don’t you think?”

“I guess it is,” Noah said with a slight grin. “I’d be honored to call you Emma.”

Emma gave his arm a quick squeeze. “Good. Now that we have the formalities out of the way, did you want to move your things into Aaron’s old room? It would save you from running back and forth to the cabin every day.”

Noah picked at his sandwich. “No, that’s okay. I’d rather wait.” He just couldn’t bear the thought of moving. The cabin was his home. Moving from there…it would make things…god…he just couldn’t do it. Not yet.

Emma stood up. “Just let me know when you’re ready.”

Noah wasn’t sure if he’d ever be ready.
A week had passed. One full, fucking week and Luke still hadn’t heard a peep from Noah. He was going out of his mind. He’d thought he’d hear from Noah by now. Luke had done everything he was supposed to—give Noah his space, not contact him, just wait patiently like a good boyfriend.

Luke wasn’t waiting patiently. Maddie could attest to that. She’d talked him off plenty of ledges this past week. She even stole his cell phone before he could call or text Noah, telling him to just hang in there—that Noah wasn’t lost forever.

Maddie was his rock. After his shitty performance in Friday’s home game, Maddie and Casey had been there to take him to Bennidito’s. Unfortunately, Bennidito’s reminded him of Noah. It was where they went for their second date. They also ate it at their last movie night with Maddie and Casey right before New Year’s. Noah loved Bennidito’s pizza. It was one of his favorite foods in Oakdale besides Al’s burgers and his grandma’s cooking.

Maddie and Casey—even Will and Gwen all rallied around him, trying their best to keep him distracted the entire weekend. Despite their best efforts, he still couldn’t get Noah out of his head. He loved him so much. Luke needed to see Noah just so he could see how he was hanging in there.

His grandma had given him a couple of updates. Noah was coping the best he could and Charlene was holding her own. The news should have made him feel better, but it didn’t. Luke missed Noah even more if that were possible.

Luke had also spent countless night pouring out his heart into his journal—the journal Noah had given him. All of his ramblings were about Noah—how he loved him, missed him, even some of his favorite moments with him. But it didn’t make him feel any better.

He was a mess without Noah. He couldn’t eat, sleep, study, or even play a decent basketball game. The tie Noah had worn on New Year’s Eve sat on his nightstand. Luke would hold it every night before he tried to sleep. It had lost its Noah smell, but it still felt like his closest link to Noah right now.

He was so pathetic.

Fuck this. He wasn’t going to go another minute without talking to Noah. He didn’t care what his parents, grandma or even Maddie said. He was going to talk to his boyfriend. Luke pulled out his cell, pressing 1 on his speed dial. Noah’s phone rang five times before going to voicemail.

Fuck…fuck…fuck…

Luke took a deep breath and then left his message. “Hey, Noah, I was just calling to see how you’re doing. I miss you so much. I’m here for you and love you. Please call me.” Sighing, he disconnected the call. All wasn’t lost. Maybe Noah would respond to a text.

I miss u. Im here 4 u. Please call. Luv u.

Luke sat on his bed staring at his cell phone waiting for it to ring or beep. But nothing happened.
Damn it.

Something needed to give. He couldn’t go on like this one day longer. Luke needed to see Noah now. No one was going to stop him.

Snatching Noah’s tie from his nightstand, Luke quickly formulated a plan. He’d return Noah’s neck tie to him. It was a weak excuse at best, but it was something. And right now it was all Luke had.

Luke crept down the stairs, digging his coat out of the closet in the main foyer. Slipping it on and stuffing Noah’s tie in the pocket, he snuck out the front door not wanting to risk being seen by anyone in his family—especially his parents. They’d only try to convince Luke not to go to the farm. He’d hear the old ‘Noah would contact him when he was ready’ speech. The same old shit he’s heard the past week.

Well, he was done listening. Now he was going to fucking do something which is what he should have done in the first place. No one knew Noah like he did.

Luke went the long way around the house ensuring that he wouldn’t be seen by anyone. All of this sneaking around was making him feel like he was doing something wrong. But he wasn’t. He was just going to be a loving and supportive boyfriend which is what Noah needed right now.

As he trekked through the backyard toward the path in the woods that led to his grandma’s farm, Luke tried to figure out what he was going to say. Hopefully, Noah would be happy to see him.

*Of course he will. You’re his boyfriend. He loves you.*

Right.

Everything was going to be okay. He was doing the right thing. He was—really.

Luke checked his phone one last time as he approached the farmhouse. Still nothing from Noah. But it was okay. He was going to finally see Noah.

Cautiously Luke let himself into the kitchen which was quite a change from his usual noisy entrance. His heart stopped. Noah was sitting at the kitchen table, pushing some food around on his plate.


Noah dropped the fork he was holding, clanking loudly against the plate. “What are you doing here?”

Noah’s voice was cold, accusing—so un-Noahlike. It stopped Luke dead in his tracks. He wasn’t expecting this.

“I…uh…” he reached into his pocket, producing Noah’s tie. “You forgot this.” It was such a lame explanation. Luke should have planned for a reaction like this.

Noah stared at him as if he’d grown another head.

“I…uh…thought you might want it back,” he said, slowing approaching Noah as if he were a wounded animal that might snap to protect itself.

Noah grabbed it from him and tossed it onto the kitchen table. “Right. I’ll need something to wear from my mother’s funeral.”
“Oh no! I didn’t mean it like that. Not at all,” Luke said in one rushed breath. “I’ve been worried about you. You haven’t responded to my texts or the message I left you.”

“What do I have to talk about? Except for ‘hi, my mom is still dying of terminal cancer’!”

“Please, Noah. I’m not going to leave until you talk to me.”

“Fine,” he sighed. “Let’s go down to the pond.”

Noah marched over, pulling his jacket from the coat rack and putting it on. Wordlessly they headed out into the cold January night. Normally, the icy silence would have made Luke batshit crazy, but he was using it to try to figure out how to get through to Noah. The guy walking next to him seemed like a mere shell of his boyfriend. Noah had been through hell this past week and it wasn’t going to get any better. This was why Noah needed him. Luke would find a way to make him see this.

The pond was frozen over with a large space shoveled free of the snow by his dad, leaving a good size skating area. Luke hadn’t been out here yet, but his dad had taken the girls over the weekend. He had hoped that he’d get Noah out on the ice one day.

Noah stood there next to the snow covered picnic table, hands stuffed in his coat pockets as frozen as the ice that covered the pond. It was breaking Luke’s heart to see Noah in such a state—so distant, so lost. He had to get through to him, make Noah realize that he didn’t have to go through this terrible time on his own.

*Go big or go home,* Luke silently decided.

Luke decided to go big. He threw his arms around Noah, squeezing him tightly. “I’m so sorry, Noah. I can’t even begin to imagine what you’ve been going through…” Luke had hoped Noah would return the embrace, but he didn’t. Noah’s hands stayed in his pockets, leaving Luke with a pit the size of the Grand Canyon in his stomach.

“No, you don’t have a fucking clue,” Noah said, pulling away from him.

Luke bit his lip. “I just want to help you. I hate that you’re going through this by yourself.”

Noah shook his head. “I’m not by myself. I have my mom.”

Luke fought the urge to touch Noah. “I know you do, but you don’t have to bear this burden by yourself.”

Noah’s eyes narrowed. “My mother isn’t a burden.”

Fuck. He was digging himself deeper and deeper into this hole. At this rate, he’d end up in China within the hour.

“That’s not what I meant. I’d never think that way. I only meant that you need someone else to lean on during this difficult time. I know you have my grandma, but I want to be there for you too.”

“This is something I need to do on my own. I have to stay focused on my mom,” Noah said, turning away from Luke and staring at the pond.

The distance between him and Noah was widening by the second. It felt like he was slowly losing Noah, which sent Luke into full blown panic mode. He couldn’t let Noah slip away from him. Stepping up behind Noah, Luke gently placed his hands on Noah’s shoulders.
“Please let me help you,” Luke begged.

Noah stepped away, still not looking at him. “You can’t.”

Dammit. This wasn’t right. He hasn’t done anything wrong, but Noah still won’t open up to him.

“This isn’t fair what you’re doing to me. I’m being pushed away when I should be standing at your side. I’m your boyfriend. I love you so much. When you love someone you take care of them.”

“That’s what I’m doing,” Noah insisted. “I’m taking care of my mom. I don’t need anyone else. I’ve wasted too much time being selfish.” He finally turned to Luke, his face still hard. “Do you know that my mom knew she was dying for over a month, but she didn’t tell me?”

“I had no idea,” Luke whispered.

“Do you know why she didn’t tell me? Because of you!” Noah hissed, slamming his fist against the picnic table. “Shit,” he muttered, rubbing his hand.

“Noah…” Luke reached for his hand, but Noah brushed him away.


The only other time Luke had seen Noah so upset was when he’d fought with Kevin. Now this anger was directed toward him. He couldn’t comprehend why. “I don’t understand why you’re so angry.” Luke was positively flabbergasted.

“That’s not fair, Noah. It was your mom’s choice not to tell you,” Luke insisted. “I didn’t know.”

“My mom thought spending time with you made me happy. She didn’t want to ruin it. I can’t believe I pissed away so much precious time with my mom because I was with you!”

Ouch…that stung. Big time. But Luke wasn’t going to give up. “She wouldn’t want you to push me away.”

Noah threw up his hands, completely exasperated. “All you can think about is yourself! My mom is dying.”

No…no…that wasn’t true. All he was thinking about was Noah. He wanted to protect him, take care of him. He hated seeing Noah in this state. “All I want to do is help you,” Luke said, reaching for Noah, hoping to calm him. “I love your mom too.”

Noah wouldn’t have it, dodging Luke before he could make contact. “You don’t even know her! You’ve only seen her a handful of times. Don’t you dare try to patronize me! I don’t need it. And I don’t need your pity. I can’t deal with you right now, Luke. I feel like my world is coming to an end. I just need to handle this by myself.”

Luke wouldn’t be dismissed. He was going to stay and fight for Noah. “Don’t punish me for loving you!”

Noah pushed past him. “I can’t do this anymore.”

Luke spun around, his stomach knotting up. “What do you mean by that?”

Noah stopped. “I need a break from you.”
“No! That’s the last thing you need,” Luke insisted, marching over to him and getting right up in Noah’s face. He placed his hand on Noah’s cheek, ignoring his flinch when he touched him. “There’s nothing that we can’t get through when we’re together. You gotta believe it.”

“No, I can’t be with you while my mom is dying,” Noah’s voice hitched.

Luke’s eyes filled with tears. God no…


“After?” Noah scoffed, eyes wide. “After? What? Do you want an exact date? Maybe my mom can hurry up and die for you!”


“Save it, Luke,” Noah spat. “You haven’t heard one fucking word I’ve said. All you can think about is yourself. I can’t believe that I could have loved someone so selfish. I’m done.”

Luke couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Done?”

“Yeah, done. I don’t want to see you anymore.”

Without another word, Noah turned on his heel and jogged back toward the farmhouse, never once looking back. Luke stared after him, his vision blurring from the tears that spilled down his cheeks.

Chapter 66

Luke wanted to run after Noah so he could beg him to listen to him. This was one big, fucked up misunderstanding. Almost everything Luke had said came out wrong. He needed to try to make it right with Noah. It would be a mistake to push Noah tonight. He should have listened to everyone because they’d been right.

This was a disaster. Luke never fathomed that Noah would break up with him. Just like that. He didn’t seem to think twice about his decision. It was extreme—no discussion—no nothing, just Noah’s shitty decision. It hurt so fucking much. He felt as if he were being slowly ripped to shreds with a dull knife.

A fresh wave of tears streamed down his cheeks. What was he going to do without Noah?

Luke shouldn’t have to wonder about that. They belonged together. Noah’s reason for breaking up with him was weak. It angered Luke that Noah didn’t even want to talk about it. Ending their relationship was easier. Luke was just something that could be simply tossed aside. All their declarations of love seemed long forgotten. This fucking sucked.

My mom is dying.

Luke felt like such a shit. He shouldn’t be pissed at Noah. Noah’s mom was dying. But still, did Noah have to take it out on him? Luke was only guilty of trying to take care of his boyfriend. When did that become a crime?

He just couldn’t win.

Reaching into his coat pocket, he grabbed his cell phone. There was one person he could count on. And she wouldn’t say I told you so even if he deserved hearing it.


“Luke, what is it? Did Noah’s mom…?”

“No, no, it’s not that,” he quickly reassured her as he headed toward the path that led home, not wanting to be tempted to go to the farmhouse. “Noah—he broke up with me.”

“Oh, Luke, that doesn’t make any sense. Did he just call out of the blue to break up with you?”

Luke closed his eyes. It was confession time. Where was that Delorean when you needed one? Damn it. He finally came up with a movie reference and Noah wasn’t here to hear it.

“No, it didn’t quite happen like that,” he quietly admitted.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened?” Maddie gently pressed in that comforting tone Luke loved.

“I…uh…I just couldn’t stand not talking to him…”


“It had been a week. A week, Maddie.” Luke tried to justify his actions. A week was a long time to wait to hear from his boyfriend. He’d done what anyone else would have done in his situation. “I was worried about him. I needed to see him. He’s my boyfriend. Well…he was at the time.”
“And I take it that Noah wasn’t ready to see you.”

“No,” Luke sighed into the phone. “We got into this terrible fight. He twisted my words around and before I knew it he was telling me that he didn’t want to see me anymore. It doesn’t make any sense! Who breaks up with their boyfriend just because he wants to help him?”

“Someone whose mom is dying.”

“I know, but that shouldn’t give him an excuse to treat me like shit.”

“You aren’t in his shoes so you don’t know what he’s been going through this past week.”

“That’s because he wouldn’t talk to me,” Luke replied. If Noah would have just let him help or at least listen to him rationally, everything would be different.

“I can understand why you’d be mad at him…”

“I don’t want to be. He’s going through the worst time in his life, but it fucking hurts that he broke up with me…” He hated that he felt this way.

“I know it does, but try to cut Noah a little slack.”

“I don’t know what to do, Maddie. I love him so much!”


“For how long?”

“For as long as it takes.”

“I don’t think I can do that,” Luke admitted. What if Noah never talked to him again? He’d called him selfish…said he didn’t know how he could have loved…loved…past tense…him.

“You have to, Luke,” Maddie insisted. “You’ve got to give him the space he needs right now. Got it?”

He didn’t like it but it didn’t seem like he had any other choice at the moment. “Got it,” he sighed.

“Right now, Noah is going through something neither of us can fully comprehend. His mom is his only family. I know your family will be there for him, but it’s still not the same. He has to be terrified.”

“He is,” Luke sniffed. “Noah hasn’t said it, but he’s so scared. I can tell and I just want to…”

“I know, Luke,” Maddie gently cut him off. “But right now the only way you can help him is to be there for him when he’s ready.”

“What if he never is?” Luke prayed it wouldn’t happen, but after tonight he wasn’t ruling anything out. Noah was so angry.

“He will be. You need to have a little faith.”

“I’ll try.”

“Yeah?”

“I need you to promise me that you’ll try not let the things Noah said to you tonight take you to a dark place,” Maddie said, her voice full of concern. “Noah is going to need you. You’re going to need to be strong for him when he’s ready.”

Luke hadn’t thought about drinking. It was practically a miracle that his thoughts didn’t go right to the liquor. Maybe he was making some progress after all. But he wasn’t going to kid himself into thinking that the temptation had completely disappeared, because deep down he knew that his thoughts would have eventually gone there. When Luke got home, he probably would have started plotting a way to sneak into the liquor cabinet so he could dull the terrible pain he was in. Leave it to Maddie to know him better than himself.


“Or yourself.”

“Or myself.”

“You’ll call me if you feel like you’re starting to slip?” Maddie wasn’t quite satisfied. She was a pit bull that way.

“I will. Day or night at any hour of the day.”

“Good.” She seemed content that he wasn’t going to wallow in whatever booze he could get his hands on. “I know I’ve told you this before, but I think it bears repeating. You are a strong guy, Luke. You can get through this.”

“I don’t feel very strong right now,” he admitted as he emerged from the woods into his backyard.

“That’s why you have me,” Maddie playfully replied. “I’m here to tell you how great you are.”

“You’re pretty great yourself.”

“Please feel free to tell Casey that the next time you see him,” she chuckled. “I think he needs to be reminded now and then.”

“It’s a deal.”

Maddie’s tone turned serious. “Are you going to be okay tonight?”

“I will be now. Thanks.”

“Hang in there, Luke. I’ll see you tomorrow at school.”

Luke pocketed his cell. This time he’d listen to Maddie. He wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.

********

Noah had been at Charlene’s side every day since he’d found out about the cancer. He always sat in the old rocking chair, rocking at various speeds which tended to reflect his mood. Lately, it had been a slow, steady place—melancholy. She could see he was trying to stay strong for her, but the stress
was taking its toll on him. He was thinner, tired, and on edge. Oh, he tried to hide it from her, but she knew her son. There were very few things he could hide from her.

A few nights ago she’d heard Noah and Luke downstairs, voices raised, but she couldn’t quite make out the words. Noah returned a little while later visibly shaken. She’d tried to get him to talk, but the walls were up, drawbridge raised, moat filled with killer alligators. It was so frustrating when he shut down like this. She had hoped that he would eventually open up while they were watching one of the DVDs from her wish list, but it hadn’t happened. Under normal circumstances she’d keep at him until he talked.

But Charlene was exhausted. She didn’t have the energy to fight with Noah. Breathing has become difficult so she was forced to go on oxygen the day before as well as an IV. Time was precious. There was so little of it now.

There was another way to find out what was going on with Noah without pushing him. She’d talk to Luke. And she knew exactly how to get Luke alone.

“String bean, I have a big favor to ask you,” she said, reaching for Noah’s hand.

Noah stopped rocking. “What is it?”

“I’m craving a chocolate malt from Al’s in the worst way.”

Her plan was for Noah to get it for her which would probably take an hour, leaving her time to talk to Luke. Earlier she’d convinced Emma to go to Bingo tonight. Emma had barely left the farm since she brought Charlene home from the hospital.

“Really? Do you think you can keep it down?” Noah asked, perking up a bit.

“I’d like to try.” It was the truth too. Charlene had always loved the malts at Al’s. “Do you think you can get one for me?”

“I don’t want to leave you alone.”

She expected a reaction like this, but it wasn’t going to work. “Andrea is here. She can sit with me while you’re gone.”

Andrea was the night nurse who worked from 7pm to 7am. She was a year out of nursing school with a bubbly personality that reminded her of the boys’ friend Maddie.

Noah hesitated for a moment. “Okay,” he replied, rising from the rocking chair. “Did you need anything else while I’m out?”

“I can’t think of anything.”

“I won’t be long.”

“Just be careful. Remember, you don’t have a valid driver’s license.”

“I will.” He kissed her cheek. “I love you. I’ll send Andrea up.”

“I love you too.”

Noah paused at the door for a minute before leaving her. Charlene knew how he hated leaving her. He was so damn afraid. It broke her heart. This was her baby who was still suffering eighteen years later.
“So you sent Noah out on an Al’s run,” Andrea said, sauntering into the room. “I think a malt might do you some good.”

“I hope so,” Charlene sighed. “But I have to admit I had an ulterior motive.”

“Oh?”

“I have to talk to Noah’s boyfriend. I think something happened between the two of them the other day and I need to get to the bottom of it.”

Andrea grabbed the cell phone that was sitting on the nightstand. “Is his number in here?”

“Yes. It’s Luke.”

Andrea punched a couple of buttons and then handed it to her.

Thankfully, Luke answered on the second ring. “Hello,” his voice was full of sadness.


“Hi,” his voice perked up a bit.

“Do you think you can come over? I wanted to talk to you.”

“Sure.”

“Can you be here soon?”

“I’ll leave right now.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate it. See you shortly.” Charlene hung up the phone and handed it back to Andrea. “I hope Noah will forgive me for going behind his back.”

The minutes seemed to crawl by before Luke appeared in the doorway, looking a little apprehensive and disheveled. “Hi,” he said a bit out of breath. “I got here as fast as I could. Is everything okay? That was a stupid question. I’m so sorry. I can’t say anything right lately.”

At that moment Luke reminded her of Noah. He was so quick to beat himself up. This wasn’t the Luke Snyder she was used to seeing.

“Luke, it’s okay,” she tried to reassure him. “Please come in and sit down.”

“I’ll just wait downstairs,” Andrea said, heading for the door. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Is Noah around?” Luke had only taken a couple of steps into the room. He was still hesitant—and shaken. Charlene was hardly the same person he’d seen on New Year’s Eve—so frail, hooked up to an IV and on oxygen. It was a lot to take in.

“I sent him on an errand so that we would be able to talk privately.”

“I don’t think he’d like that,” he said, still rooted in place, eyeing her warily.

“Please, Luke,” she coaxed him. “It will be okay. I’ll make sure that Noah knows this was my idea. I would never want him to be angry with you.”

“Is everything okay between you and Noah?”

“No, everything is so messed up,” he sighed. “When I heard about you…god…all I wanted to do was help him. You know, be there for him to lean on, but he pushed me away. I don’t understand why he’s doing that. I thought being there for each other was part of being in a relationship. The other day I forced the issue and it was a disaster. Noah just lost it. He was furious. He’s so mad at me…”

“No,” Charlene interrupted him. “If Noah’s mad at anyone it’s me. He’s just taking it out on you.”

Luke shook his head. “No, he couldn’t be mad at you.”

He really had no idea how Noah’s mind worked. Hopefully, she’d be able to give him some insight. “You couldn’t be more wrong. Noah is very angry with me, but he’d never come out and say it—not now. I wish he wasn’t taking it out on you, though. You don’t deserve it.”


“I kept a terrible secret from him. He feels like I’ve cheated him out of time with me,” Charlene explained, hoping that maybe Luke would understand why she had chosen to keep the truth from Noah. “But I know if I would have told him sooner he would have done the exactly what he’s doing right now. He would have pulled away from you and spent every day hovering over me. I didn’t want him to do that. For the first time ever Noah was so happy. Being here in Oakdale, working with your dad, and dating you are the best things that have ever happened to him.

“And if I had to do it all over again, I still wouldn’t have told him any earlier. I hate seeing him like this. It reminds me of the worst days with the Colonel,” she sighed. “You have no idea of what Noah has been through.”

“I know some of it,” Luke admitted. “He told me how the Colonel was abusive to you and beat him. I know about the concussion he got because of the stolen bike. But he always insisted that you did your best to protect him.”

“I tried. I would have given my life to keep him from being harmed.”

“You have,” Luke said, brows knitting together. “Taking him from the hospital and going on the run was a gutsy move. You risked so much to keep him safe. Moving from town to town, not knowing if you’d find work or a place to live couldn’t have been easy.”

Luke was a smart young man. She was happy that Noah had found him. Her son just needed to realize that it was okay to let people see him at his worst.

“It was worth it.”

“Even though…”

“Yes, even though I’m going to die soon,” Charlene admitted. “The path we took led Noah here to you and your family. I know he’ll be all right here.”


She smiled. “I know you do, sweetie.”

“He broke up with me,” Luke said, glancing away from her and wiping his eyes. “He said he doesn’t want to see me anymore.”
Oh no. Charlene had hoped something like this wouldn’t happen. Luke didn’t need to tell her when it occurred because she knew. It was the other night when she heard their loud voices.

“I’m sorry, Luke,” she said, mustering up enough strength to reach for his hand.


Maybe Luke pushed Noah. She was only hearing one side of the story. Charlene also knew how Noah dealt with certain issues. It was important to her that Luke learned a little more about Noah. Some of it he might already know, some he may not.


“I hope so,” he murmured.

“Noah tends to withdraw in stressful situations. He’s done it since he was a little boy. It’s his self defense mechanism,” Charlene explained. “Noah started doing this when he discovered that Winston beat me. When I’d find out that he’d hurt Noah, I’d call him out on it which always led to a slap or two. Noah hated that I’d get hurt because of him so he’d tried to hide it when it happened to him. When Noah pulls away, it’s best to give him his space because I’ve learned the more I’d try to get close to him in those situations the more he’d shut down.

“Noah also isn’t used to being able to count on anyone but me, so counting on you is a foreign and scary concept. For the last four years it’s just been Noah and me,” she explained, hoping that this would give Luke some hope for his future with Noah. “Whenever we went to a new town we kept to ourselves for the most part. There were kids that Noah worked with, but he was never really friends with them. Everyone was always held at arm’s length. Of course, it didn’t help that I kept drilling home the fact that he needed to be careful. Noah being Noah took it to the nth degree—until he met you.”

Luke nodded. “Yeah, he was pretty guarded when we met.”

“He’s come a long way since then.”

“I guess he has.”

“You’re going to need to give Noah his space, but he’s also going to need to know that you still care about him. He’s going to need you,” Charlene told him. She could almost see Luke mentally cataloguing every little bit of information she told him. “Right now, Noah is completely focused on me. He isn’t taking the time to deal with his feelings. They’re just building and building—eventually everything is going to come to a head. He’s going to feel so alone after I’m gone.”

“He won’t be,” Luke’s voice was thick with emotion.

“I know. Noah has so many people here who love him. I know he’ll be well taken care of here.”

The Sndyers would keep Noah safe. He’d be surrounded by so much love too. Noah would have a good life in Oakdale. He’d have the extended family he’s longed for.

“I just want him to understand that he can lean on me.”

“Thanks to his father, Noah has a tainted view of what it is to be a man. Winston always stressed being tough, not crying or being needy,” she said sadly. “I’ve tried so hard to let Noah know that
wasn’t true, but I’m afraid that his father has left a lot of emotional scars. Some of them run pretty deep.”

“I can’t imagine what it must have been like growing up with someone like that.” A tear slipped from Luke’s eye. “Sometimes I forget how lucky I am.”

“I wish I could have gotten Noah away from him sooner…”

“Oh no! I wasn’t trying to insinuate that you did anything wrong. Noah’s told me how much you’ve sacrificed for him,” Luke gasped. He buried his head in his free hand. “I really need to learn to keep my mouth shut.”

Charlene squeezed his hand. “Hey, I know you weren’t placing any blame.”

Luke nodded and then glanced at her. “Noah’s very lucky to have you for a mom. You’ve done a great job raising him. He’s one of the sweetest people I know. He was a great boyfriend…” his voice hitched.

“Noah’s so lucky to have you in his life. He’s going to need you and your family.”

“I won’t give up on him,” Luke sniffed.

“I’m glad,” she said, smiling weakly. “I want Noah to live the life he never thought he could. I hope he can go to college to study film making. He just loves movies so much and I know that he can make great ones of his own someday.”

“I think so too.”

“Noah will need you in his corner. He’s still somewhat insecure, but he’s been getting better since living here. I think you have a lot to do with that.”

Luke shrugged. “I don’t know…”

“I do,” she insisted. “Noah respects and admires you so much.”

“You don’t have to worry about him. My family will take care of him.”

“I know,” she replied, glancing at the alarm clock on the nightstand. “Noah should be home soon.”

“I better get going then,” Luke said, rising from the rocking chair. “I don’t want to upset him any more than he already is right now.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek. When he pulled away, his eyes brimmed with tears. “I…uh…”

“It’s going to be okay, Luke,” she promised, hoping to ease his fears.

He nodded and then hurried out of the room.

Luke was a good young man—kind and loving. She’d always wanted Noah to meet someone who cared about him just as much as she did. She couldn’t let Noah throw it all away now.
Noah hadn’t wanted to leave his mom, especially to go all the way into Oakdale. He hadn’t left the
farm since they’d brought her home from the hospital. Emma had tried to get him to take a breather,
but Noah wouldn’t have it. The only reason he was at Al’s was because his mom had asked him.
Noah would do anything for his mom.

Well, practically anything.

When he’d returned from the pond after his awful fight with Luke, his mom had suspected that
something was wrong. He denied it of course, chalked it up to being tired. Noah just couldn’t tell
her that he’d broken up with Luke. She wouldn’t understand that it was for the best in the long run.
He’d be able to focus on her without Luke distracting him. Noah tried to tell himself that it wouldn’t
have worked out. And he refused to acknowledge that his heart ached from losing Luke.

Noah had wanted it this way, though. He was used to it being just him and his mom. It would be
the two of them until the end.

And then…

Noah couldn’t bring himself to think about what would happen after.

He just couldn’t go there. Noah needed to get in and out of Al’s as quickly as possible, but fate had
other ideas.

Al’s was packed when he got there so Noah had to wait longer than he liked for his carryout order—
two chocolate malts. He couldn’t let his mom drink alone.

“Noah?” a familiar female voice came from behind him.

Noah turned to find Maddie and Casey standing in the entrance way of the diner. Immediately, he
went into high alert. His first thought was that Luke had sent them after him which made his blood
boil.

“Hi,” he said half expecting Luke to show up at any minute for another ambush.

Maddie placed her hand on his arm. “How are you? How’s your mom?”

“Fine,” he curtly replied.

“‘I’m just so sorry to hear about your mom,’” Maddie said, throwing her arms around his neck and
hugging him tightly. She pulled away, staring up at him with kind, caring eyes. She was such a
nice, genuine person. He felt a little bad about assuming the worst.

“Henry and Vienna have nothing but sweet things to say about her.”

Even Casey had lost some of his bravado. “Yeah…uh…I can’t even imagine…”

The walls Noah had erected, crumbled a little. This is what it meant to have friends. “Thanks,” he
murmured.

“Is there anything we can do for you or your mom?” Maddie asked, placing a hand on his arm.

“Thanks, but no. I’ve got it covered. My mom wanted a malt so here I am. We’ll probably watch a
movie when I get back. We’ve been doing a lot of that lately.”

“You sure we can’t do anything?” Casey asked. “Maddie has some of those old movies she could
lend you—you know in case you need some different DVDs to watch.”
“I think we’re all set, but I’ll let you know if that changes.”

“Luke told me that you guys broke up,” Maddie said cautiously.

“Maddie,” Casey muttered, “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Look,” Maddie sighed. “I know I’m probably overstepping my bounds.”

“Then don’t,” Noah replied. He really didn’t want to hear this. God only knows what Luke told her.

Casey folded his arms across his chest. “See? He doesn’t want to talk about it. Just leave him be.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that.” Maddie planted her hands on her hips. “Luke and Noah are both my friends. I owe it to both of them to say this.” Her tone softened, “Noah, Luke meant well. Really he did. And I know he can push—hard, but it’s only because he cares. I also know that you need your space right now…”

“So give it to him,” Casey said under his breath.

“I will. In a minute,” Maddie assured him and then returned her attention to Noah. “Noah, just remember how much Luke loves you. And so do Casey and I. We’re here if you need us. Anytime.”

“Order for Noah,” the lady behind the counter called.

“I gotta get that. I’ll see you guys later.” He didn’t wait for a response, marching over to the counter to get his order and pay. Thankfully, Maddie just let him go.

And while he appreciated her offer, Noah wouldn’t be taking her up on it. His mom and he had made it this far. They could make it the rest of the way.

********

“Mmmm…this is yummy,” Charlene said after taking a small sip from the chocolate malt Noah had brought back for her. Instead of taking another, she held the Styrofoam cup on her lap. “I’m glad you got one for yourself.”

Noah hoped she’d drink more than just one sip, but this was a start. He took a big sip of his. The chocolaty, malty goodness was delicious. “I forgot how much I miss these. This was a good idea.”

“I’m glad you think so.” She took another baby sip.

“I’m sorry I took so long. Al’s was packed,” Noah apologized. His quick trip had taken over an hour. He hated that he’d been gone longer than expected. The fear that she might not be there when he returned lurked in the back of his mind for the entire duration of the errand. “I hope Andrea was able to keep you company.”

Charlene took a deep breath. “Actually, I had another visitor.”

Noah’s grip on his malt tightened. “Oh?” He hoped that it was anyone but him. He wouldn’t do that. Not after he told Luke to leave him alone. No…it was probably Holden or maybe Lily.

“Why was he here?” he struggled to keep the anger out of his voice. Not in front of his mom. He could let it out later.

“I asked him to come over.”

Noah’s eyes widened. “You? Why?” He couldn’t believe that his mom would betray him like this. She didn’t know that we broke up, he quickly tried to reason with himself.

But still...


“Luke hasn’t been around since I was released from the hospital. I thought it was strange given how close you two have become. When I saw how upset you were the other night, I thought something might have happened between you two.”

“You should have asked me.”

“I did,” Charlene gently reminded him, “but you said nothing was wrong. I know you, string bean. You weren’t going to open up to me so I had to find someone who would. I was worried about you.”

“I wish you wouldn’t have contacted him,” Noah said quietly, glancing down at his malt.

“I’m glad I did,” she said, placing the cup on the nightstand. “You never would have told me that you broke up with Luke. You would have kept it from me.”

She was right. Noah didn’t plan on ever telling her about his breakup because she would have told him he was making a mistake. But Noah knew he’d done the right thing, his mom couldn’t tell him otherwise.

Charlene reached for his hand. “Why did you do it?”

“I’m sure he already told you.”

“I want to hear it from you,” her voice was firm. Even as weak as she’d become she could still muster the strength to show him that she meant business.

“It just wasn’t working out. I’d never be who he wanted me to be,” he explained. “I wanted space—and time. Luke wouldn’t have it. He just kept pushing me and pushing me. I couldn’t handle it anymore.”

“Luke said that he just wanted to be there for you to lean on.”

“I don’t need him.” Noah squeezed her hand. “Remember, it’s you and me against the world—just like the song you sung to me when I was little.”

“You remember that?” she asked, raising her eyebrows. “You must have been four years old when I sung that to you.”

It was a memory he clung to since it wasn’t often that his mom had been allowed into his room to
comfort him at night. The Colonel had always expected him to tough out nasty thunderstorms or scary dreams. His mom took advantage of the Colonel’s absence. She’d make sure that he’d have his stuffed puppy, Patches, and then she’d sing him the old Helen Reddy song which never failed to calm him and allow him to fall asleep.

“Yes, I do.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way anymore. You have people here who love you—especially Luke. It’s okay to accept his love and support. You deserve it.”

“I’m doing fine,” Noah insisted. “I was fine before he came into my life and I’ll be okay without him.”

“I want you to be more than okay,” Charlene countered. “I want you to be happy. I want you to live the life you always dreamed about. I want you to get your GED or high school diploma so you’ll be able to go to college. You can make movies, and you can have a wonderful boyfriend who loves you so much—if it’s not Luke than someone else who can see just how amazing you are. And I want you to live your life as Noah Mayer. No more hiding.”

“What about the Colonel?” Noah gasped. All this time they’d been hiding and running because of him. She’d always drilled the point home how careful they needed to be—how they could never let their guard down. Now she was suggested going against everything she told him. He couldn’t believe it.

“He may or may not be looking for us. It’s difficult to know for sure. You’re legally an adult now so he can’t make you go with him even if he does find you. You need to just be you. Could you please do that for me?” She gazed up at him with hopeful eyes.

“I’ll try.”

“I also have another favor to ask you.”

Noah was almost afraid to ask but he did. “What is it?”

“I want to be buried as Charlene Mayer…”

“Mom,” Noah promptly cut her off. “Please, let’s not talk about this now.”

She squeezed his hand. “String bean, we can’t put this off anymore. I know this is difficult for you, but we need to talk about it.”

Noah nodded, willing the tears that were prickling in his eyes not to fall. “Okay.”

“I’m also done running from your father. I don’t want to lie anymore.” She offered him a weak smile.

“Are you sure you don’t want it to be Charlene Wilson? Mayer is his name and he’s been nothing but terrible to us.”

“Mayer is also my name. And as awful as your father is he also gave me you—the very best thing in my life. I couldn’t have asked for a better gift, string bean. I want to be remembered as your mom—Charlene Mayer. Will you please do that for me?”

“I will. I promise.”
Noah understood her reasoning as he remembered what a relief it had been to tell Luke the truth. She needed to finally be free. There would be no more hiding—for either of them.
Chapter 67

Getting through the past week had been a struggle for Charlene. Every day was another fight for survival. She hadn’t been ready to let go yet. Noah still needed her. And she wanted to make sure that he was going to be okay after she was gone.

Charlene hoped that Noah would tell her that he’d reconciled with Luke, but so far he hasn’t said a word. Over a week had passed since her talk with Noah. She hadn’t seen Luke nor heard a peep about him. She was disappointed that Noah hadn’t taken their talk to heart. He still barely let her out of his sight. He’d been sleeping at the foot of her bed on the rollaway since her first day home. Noah was to the point where he didn’t want to leave to shower or eat, which worried her. Before her eyes her son was slowly falling apart.

“Noah, please go shower and get something for lunch.” Noah opened his mouth to protest, but she held up in her to silence him. “Joyce needs to give me my meds soon so I won’t be alone. And Emma’s here. I’d love to have a little visit with her while you go get cleaned up.”

“Okay,” Noah sighed somewhat defeated.

“We haven’t watched *Foul Play* together in awhile. Why don’t you bring it back so we can watch it later?”

This brought a smile to Noah’s face. “Great idea. I won’t be long. I promise.” He kissed her cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you too, string bean.”

“I’ll send Joyce up,” Noah said before heading out of the room.

For a few minutes Charlene was completely alone, which was a rare occurrence. The brief solitude allowed her to focus on herself which was something she avoided doing. Focusing on Noah, trying to be strong for him masked the fact that each day she was weaker, more tired, and that it took higher doses of meds to dull the pain. Charlene didn’t know how much longer she could hold on.

But she needed to know that Noah was going to be okay.

“Can you send Emma up please?” Charlene asked once Joyce had finished her morning checkup.

“Sure.”

Charlene closed her eyes, collecting her thoughts. Emma was going to be taking care of her baby soon. Although Noah was legally an adult, he was still going to need someone to look after him. He’d need so much love. Thankfully, Emma and the rest of the Snyders would give it to him.

“Hello, dear,” Emma said, strolling into the room. “I see that you managed to get Noah to leave your side.”

“It’s never easy,” she sighed.

Emma sat down in the rocking chair. “I know. He’s hanging on by a thread these days.”

“I’m worried what will happen when he snaps. It’s going to happen soon.”

“I’ll be there to help him pick up the pieces. I know Luke will be too,” Emma reassured her.
Charlene nodded. Noah would be in good hands. Eventually, he would be all right. It would help if Emma had a bit more insight into Noah—just like she’d given Luke.

“I think it might be helpful if you knew some things about Noah.” Charlene gazed up at Emma who had been her pillar of strength. It had been quite a long time since she had a close friend. Actually, it was before she married Winston. After they’d married, he made sure that her friends were a thing of the past. He needed to be the center of her universe. Winston was such a selfish man. She should have seen the signs, but if she had she wouldn’t have her Noah.

“Should I go get a pen and paper?” Emma’s eyes twinkled. Charlene could appreciate her friend trying to keep things light even as her own light was quickly fading.

“I think you’ll be able to remember.” She managed a weak smile and then took a deep breath. “As you can see Noah tends to shut down during rough times. A lot of it has to do with his father…” Tears pooled in her eyes as she thought about all of the terrible things Winston had done to their son—not to mention what she probably didn’t know about as well. “Winston was always jealous of Noah—ever since he was a baby. He hated that Noah took attention away from him. Noah couldn’t live up to his expectations of what it meant to be a good son. It didn’t matter that Noah was sweet, thoughtful, and loving. Winston wanted a tough guy—someone who liked to hunt, play sports—someone who wanted to emulate him. Noah was none of those things. Thank god.”

“So they never had a good relationship?”

“Never,” Charlene sighed. “Even before I took Noah away I was the only person he could depend on. While we were living with Winston, there was no one else we could turn to. He was so well respected in the Army. His connections were limitless. No one would have believed that he was abusive to us. It was Noah and I against the world. I was the only one who protected Noah—loved him.”

“It’s understandable that Noah would have a difficult time trusting people.”

“I’m pretty sure he trusts Luke for the most part. And you as well as Holden,” she replied. “Holden has been like the father he’s always wanted. I hope Holden can still be a positive influence on Noah.”

“He will be,” Emma reassured her. “I know Holden sees Noah as another son. He adores him.”

Charlene nodded. She figured as much, but it was still comforting to hear. It was one less thing to worry about. There was more that Emma needed to know. “I regret that Noah was forced to grow up too quickly. In these past few months, he was finally able to do things that a lot of teenagers take for granted—movies, basketball games, hanging out with friends, and dating.” Things that Noah pushed to the wayside since finding out that she was dying. “I want Noah to do these things again. I don’t want him to sit around and mourn me forever. He needs to live his life and enjoy it.”

Emma took her hand, gently squeezing it. “I won’t let Noah give up. There will be plenty of fun things for him to do here. Either Holden or Luke will want to teach him how to ride. There’s also skating on the pond. And when summer comes the kids love to swim in the pond. We have big picnics on Memorial Day, July 4th and Labor Day.”

“He’ll love to do all of those things.” Charlene smiled. Everything Emma had listed was at the farm. There was also a big world outside of the farm for Noah to explore which she’d hoped that he’d be able to do one day. “I don’t want anything to hold Noah back. I want him to go everywhere and do anything. I’ve told Noah that I want him to live the rest of his life as Noah Mayer. His real birth certificate is in my room at the cabin inside the box with some old photo albums.”
“I’ll find it.”

“I don’t know if Winston has given up looking for us, but I don’t want Noah to live in fear the rest of his life…”

“We’ll keep him safe,” Emma promised. “We won’t let him stop living. I’ll make sure that he gets his GED so he can go to college. Noah will have a future here in Oakdale if he wants to stay.”

“He will. He loves it here. And you’re the grandmother Noah always wished he had.”

“I’m honored.”

Charlene could have sworn that Emma was blushing. “You’ve also won over his stomach,” she shared. “He can’t get enough of your sweet potatoes. I tried to make them for him, but mine didn’t compare to yours.”

“I’ll be sure he gets a lot of sweet potatoes.”

“And spaghetti. He loves spaghetti too,” Charlene added. “Noah’s favorite color is blue. His favorite ice cream is mint chocolate chip. Storms have made him nervous ever since he was a little boy. Movies have always been his escape. His favorite is Casablanca, but his feel good movie is Houseboat. I always meant to pick up that DVD for him.”

“I’ll get it for him. It’s a lovely movie—one of my favorites.”

Charlene closed her eyes. Oh there were so many more things she wanted to tell her about Noah, but there wasn’t enough time. It didn’t help that her brain wasn’t working as quickly as she’d like. She was just so tired…

“Maybe I should let you get some rest,” Emma said, gently touching Charlene’s shoulder.

Charlene wasn’t ready to be alone yet. She opened her eyes, looking up at Emma. “Please stay until Noah gets back.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I wish I wasn’t,” Charlene quietly admitted. Tears slowly filled her eyes. She hadn’t cried or felt sorry for herself since she first found out about the cancer. But now knowing that time was so precious it was really hitting home. “I don’t want to leave Noah,” she choked out.

“I know you don’t.”

“I’m going to miss so many important moments in his life,” she murmured as tears spilled down her cheeks. “I won’t see him graduate from college—have a family. Noah is going to be a great father some day.”

“Yes, he will,” Emma agreed. “He’s such a loving young man.”

“I hope that he has the opportunity to get married. It would be great if he and Luke could do that when they get older. They’re so young and the odds are stacked against them, but I know Noah loves Luke so much. I believe my son has a singular heart so when he falls in love it’s probably going to be forever.”

Emma smiled. “Lily and Holden fell in love when they were the boys’ age so it could happen.”

“If it doesn’t work out for them, I just want him to be happy.”
“So do I and I promise you that I’ll do everything in my power to make sure that he has the best possible life.”

“I know you will,” Charlene sniffed. She closed to her eyes so she could gather herself together. Noah would be home soon and he couldn’t see her like this. It was rough enough on him as it was at this point. Emma would stay true to her word. Her son would have the best possible care.

“I’m back and I didn’t forget Foul Play,” Noah’s voice cut through her thoughts.

Opening her eyes, she discovered that he was standing in the doorway. Even though his new clothes looked a little too big for his thin frame and his eyes were now accented with dark circles, her string bean was still handsome. She was so incredibly proud of her son—always was and always would be.

“Great.” Charlene smiled.

“I’ll let you two watch your movie,” Emma said, slowly rising from the rocking chair. She bent down and whispered into Charlene’s ear, “Don’t worry. Noah will be okay.”

Overcome with emotion, Charlene couldn’t speak. Instead she nodded so she wouldn’t upset Noah. She wanted him to enjoy their movie. Every moment with Noah was precious.

“You’re welcome to stay,” Noah said.

“Maybe next time.” Emma smiled warmly.

“Thank you, Emma,” Charlene called before her friend left the room.

Emma stopped and turned, her eyes shiny and bright. “You’re welcome.”

Thank you didn’t seem like enough to say to her best friend, savior, and the woman who was going to take care of her son. Emma seemed to understand because she was such an incredible woman.

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Noah bit his lip, willing the tears not to form as he stood in the doorway, staring at his mom. He needed to stay strong. He couldn’t break down now—not even when his mom was dying right before his eyes. The IV, meds and oxygen were helping her, but he wasn’t sure how much long she could keep hanging on. Noah wasn’t ready to let her go yet. Not ever.

“Why don’t you put the movie in?” she suggested.

“Good idea.” Noah strolled over to the DVD player and put the movie in it. He turned on the TV and grabbed the remote from the nightstand.

“Sit with me on the bed.” Charlene patted the mattress.

“I probably shouldn’t. There isn’t enough room.”

She chuckled softly. “This is a queen size bed. There’s plenty of room for you, string bean. Can you just help me move over a little bit?” Her request wasn’t rhetorical.
Noah put the remote down on the nightstand. “Sure.” Ever so carefully he assisted his mother. She was like a pile of feathers hardly weighing a thing. Noah stretched out next to her on the bed.

“This reminds me of when I used to read to you when your father was serving in Iraq.”

“Those were good times.”

Charlene gently stroked his hair. “We’ve had a lot of good times.”

Noah swallowed. “We have.”

“Why don’t you start the movie?”

Noah picked up the remote and hit play. He’s lost count of how many times he’s watched this movie with his mom. One thing he remembered was how the comedy/mystery made her smile. His mother’s smile was one of the most beautiful things in the world too. Noah stole a quick glance at her and, sure enough, there was one on her face just as lovely as ever.

He laced his fingers through hers, careful not to squeeze too hard as he held her hand. “You’re not going to make me sing the song, are you?” Noah teased when the opening strands of Ready to Take a Chance Again played as Gloria left Tony standing dumbfounded after his failed attempt to pick her up at the her friend’s party.

“No, I’ll let you off the hook this time.”

“Good.” Noah grinned, watching Gloria’s yellow VW Beetle convertible drive along the California coast. He always thought it was a beautifully shot opening credit sequence.

“I always wanted to drive along Highway One just like Gloria. It’s so breathtaking,” Charlene sighed. “Promise me that when you make it to California one day you’ll do it for me whether you’re there on vacation or out there directing movies.”

“I will,” Noah promised, wishing that they could have made the trip together.

“Maybe Luke will be with you and you can make your way down to Hollywood to see the sign and stay at the famous Beverly Hills Hotel where all of your old movie stars stayed.”


Noah quickly squelched the longing he felt when he heard his ex-boyfriend’s name. He didn’t want to talk about Luke. “Mom…”

“I take it you haven’t talked to Luke.”

“No,” he replied, staring straight ahead because he didn’t want to see the disappointment on her face. His mom adored Luke. She’d made this fact crystal clear. But it was also because of Luke that he was kept in the dark about his mother’s illness.

“Noah…”

“He’s probably moved on,” he promptly cut her off. “I wouldn’t blame him if he did.” Luke deserved a boyfriend without an airport full of baggage.

“He hasn’t,” she insisted. “Luke loves you so much and I know you still love him.”

“It doesn’t matter.”
“But it does,” Charlene insisted. “Please don’t give up on love like that.”

“You’re missing the movie,” Noah said, fighting to keep the emotion out of his voice.

“I just don’t want you to miss the opportunity to be loved. You deserve it, string bean. Please promise me that you’ll talk to Luke soon.”

“Promise?” she pressed.

Noah nodded. “Promise.”

Charlene brought their entwined hands to her lips, softly kissing Noah’s hand. “Thank you. I love you, Noah.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

Noah had seen this movie so much that he could probably recite it word for word. He also knew the precise moment when Tony would fall off the slippery dock, how many times “beware of the dwarf” was uttered, and the different places that Gloria would run into the bumbling Stanley Tibbits throughout the film. But it never got old watching this ‘70s movie with his mom because of the joy in brought her—even during this dire time.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the smile on her face as the movie neared its climatic finish. This really had been the perfect choice to watch. He almost felt as if they were holed away in one of the motels they’d called home, escaping all of their woes. Noah wanted to capture this moment forever.

As Tony and Gloria took their final bows at the San Francisco Opera House and Ready to Take a Chance Again began to play one last time, Noah gave his mom’s hand a squeeze. “Tony and Gloria managed to save the day again,” he said already knowing what his mom’s response would be because she always said it after they watched Foul Play together.

“I never get tired of that movie.”

But it didn’t come. There was just silence.

Noah’s heart plummeted. Oh no…please no…

He turned to find his mom completely still—eyes closed. Maybe she’s just sleeping, he tried to reason with himself. She’s been so tired lately.

“Mom…Mom…Mom!” he pleaded, gently shaking her. “Please wake up. Mom!!”

However, she didn’t stir. His mom lay there motionless. Something was wrong. If she’d been sleeping surely she would have woken up by now which meant…

No…she couldn’t be gone. They were just watching the movie. Everything was fine.

“Mom!” Noah cried, kneeling next to her. She still wasn’t moving which terrified him. “Please, Mom…don’t leave me!!”

“What’s going on?” Joyce asked, dashing into the room with Emma right behind her.

“My mom won’t wake up,” he said, voice trembling. “Please help me. She…can’t…oh my god…she can’t be…”
Joyce approached the bed. “Let me take a look at her.”

Noah didn’t move. “You’ve got to help her.”

“Noah, honey, let’s give Joyce some space,” Emma said, placing her hand on Noah’s shoulder.

“I don’t want to leave.”

Please come stand with me out of the way,” Emma said gently.

Noah reluctantly got off the bed and stood in the corner with Emma as Joyce pulled out her pen light. “Charlene, can you hear me?” Joyce asked, opening one of Charlene’s eyes and shining the bright light into it. She clicked it off and took out her stethoscope to check for a heartbeat. Frowning, she removed the stethoscope from her ears, turning to Noah and Emma, her face grim. “I’m sorry, but she’s gone.”

“No!” Noah protested. “We were just watching the movie. You just can’t let her die. You haven’t even tried CPR! You have to do something!”

Emma wrapped her arm around Noah. “That isn’t what your mom wanted. She wanted to go peacefully. She isn’t hurting anymore.”

Noah shook his head. “She was fine. You saw her. You talked to her. She was fine!”

“Mrs. Snyder is right,” Joyce said. “Your mom hung on as long as she could to be with you.” She went over to Noah and gently placed her hand on his arm. “I know this isn’t easy for you, but she went peacefully which is what she wanted. I’m going to need to step out for a few moments to make a couple of calls. If you’d like, Noah, you can have a few minutes alone with your mom.”

“Is this what you want, Noah?” Emma asked. Noah nodded. “I’m going to go downstairs with Joyce so I can call the funeral home.”

Noah stood frozen in place, staring at his mom. He couldn’t believe that she wasn’t going to wake up—that he’d never hear her sweet voice again. There would be no more “string beans”. No more of her gentle nagging. No more hugs and “I love you’s”.

God…he couldn’t deal with this.

He wasn’t strong like she claimed. He was a weak, coward just like the Colonel had always said. And then Noah did what weak, pathetic, cowards did. He ran—from the room, down the front staircase, through the parlor and out of the front door.

And Noah didn’t stop.
Chapter 68

Luke had come to despise the weekend. A once celebrated time was now a harsh reminder that Noah had broken up with him. Weekends had meant spending time with Noah whether it was just hanging out or an actual date. Luke missed it all terribly.

His talk with Charlene had given him hope that Noah might come around soon, but he hadn’t heard a peep from him. He was starting to lose faith that it would ever happen. Maybe he was selfish like Noah said. Here he was wallowing in his own misery while Noah was going through a nightmare.

Luke tossed the journal he’d been holding aside. He’d finally run out of words. There wasn’t anything else he could say about his current situation with Noah. It just flat out sucked.

Sighing, Luke stared up at his bedroom ceiling. Maybe he should have taken Will up on his offer to grab a cup of coffee at Java. It might have been a nice diversion, but Luke seriously doubted it. Nothing was going to get his mind off Noah at this point.

His cell phone rang, quickly yanking him out of his trance. Pulling it from his pocket and checking the display, he was surprised to see that it was his Grandma Emma. She only called him directly on his cell in the rarest of occasions. Usually, it was an emergency.

Oh no…

Luke’s stomach twisted up like a pretzel. She was calling with very bad news.

“Grandma?”

“Luke, by any chance have you seen Noah?” Emma’s usually calm, soothing voice was strained with worry.

“No, I haven’t seen him in a week,” Luke replied, jumping up from his bed. “Did his mom…?”

“Yes,” Emma sniffed. “It happened about a half hour ago. Noah’s not taking it well. The nurse and I left him alone with his mother after she passed, but when we returned to the room he was gone. I’d go look for him but…”


“Thank you, dear.”

Luke’s heart truly broke for Noah. His boyfriend—ex-boyfriend—had to be an absolute wreck.

“He’s going to feel so alone after I’m gone.”


He was so focused on figuring out where Noah could be that he almost ran into his dad at the bottom of the stairs.

“Hey, where’s the fire?” Holden asked, reaching out and steadying Luke.


“Oh no…”
“Grandma called,” Luke said, biting his lip. “It happened just a little while ago, but Noah’s gone missing. I think I know where he’s at so I’m going to find him.”

“I’m going to make sure that your mom can stay with the kids and then head to the farm.” Holden put his arm around Luke. “Mama is going to need help. There are arrangements to make and she’s just lost one of her best friends.”

Leave it to his dad to know just what to do. Luke hugged his father extra tightly. “I love you, Dad,” he choked out.

“We’ll take care of Noah. Don’t worry.”

Luke pulled away, wiping his eyes. “I just hope he lets us.” He grabbed his old coat that was in the closet in the foyer, shoving his cell phone into the pocket. He wanted to avoid the rest of the family because he wouldn’t be able to keep it together if he had to tell them about Noah’s mom. “I’m gonna slip out the front door.”

“Understandable.” Holden nodded. “Call us when you find him. I’m sure Mama is worried about him.”

She wasn’t the only one. He needed to get to Noah fast. The thought of Noah all alone killed him.

Luke jogged through the woods, pushing aside his own grief as he neared the farm. He’d lost count how many times his family told him how he was strong—especially when he went through his kidney transplant. Now it was time to dig deep.

Ever since he was a little boy Luke had sought refuge at the pond. It was the perfect place for escape. Countless hours had been spent here throughout his life sorting through his problems. Snyder Pond was the perfect safe haven. Its natural beauty calmed Luke on many occasions. Luke prayed that it would be able to offer Noah the same comfort as it offered him.

Luke didn’t stop running until he reached the pond and then he just stopped—completely dumbfounded. Noah wasn’t here. The picnic table was empty, covered in a thin layer of fresh snow. The only footprints he saw were his. Noah had never been there.

Well, most likely not since the breakup.

He’d been so certain this is where he’d find Noah. The pond had always offered Luke solace in his worst moments. It was his escape—his refuge.

But Noah wasn’t Luke. And that’s when it hit him. He knew where Noah was at this time there was no doubt.

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Luke practically held his breath as he entered the barn. It was eerily quiet except for the occasional neighing from some of the horses. He fought the urge to call out for Noah. He didn’t want to scare him off. Noah was definitely here. He’d want to be with someone who’d never let him down.

Whitman.

Noah loved Luke’s horse. He’d confided in Whitman long before he got the courage to do the same with Luke. Whitman probably knew more about Noah than he did. Hopefully, that would change
someday.

Luke wanted to pick up the pieces, which he needed to do with the utmost care. Every instinct in his body urged him to run over to Noah and hug him. Lately, his instincts had been so far off base. Luke wasn’t quite sure what he should do.

“You’re going to need to give Noah his space, but he’s also going to need to know that you still care about him. He’s going to need you.”

Luke closed his eyes and took a deep breath, summoning every ounce of strength he could muster. God knows he was going to need it.

“Noah,” he said cautiously approaching him.

Noah slowly lifted his head, blinking at Luke. His eyes were swollen and bloodshot, cheeks wet from the tears that still fell, and his nose runny, but Noah didn’t seem to notice since was so too consumed with grief. Luke had never seen someone who was so completely lost and defeated. He willed his own tears to stay in check.


“What are you doing here?” Noah whispered.

Luke didn’t move. “I came to find you. Everyone is worried about you.”

“But why you?”

“Because I love you,” he simply replied.

Noah stared at him as tears spilled from his eyes. “I thought you’d hate me after I said those awful things to you.”

Luke took a few more steps, stopping right in front of Noah. He crouched down so that they were eye level. “I could never hate you.”

Noah nodded, lip quivering. “She’s gone,” his voice cracked. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. I’m all alone now.”

Oh Noah was so wrong. He’d never be alone. Never. He was surrounded by people who loved and cared about him. It broke Luke’s heart that Noah would think such a thing. “No, you’re not,” Luke quietly reassured him. “I’m here—my family is here. We’re going to take care of you.”

“I already miss her so much I…” The rest of Noah’s sentence was lost in a sob.

Luke quickly gathered Noah in his arms, resting his cheek against the top of Noah’s head. He was slightly rattled by how thin Noah had become. It felt like he was hugging a skeleton.

Poor Noah was also chilled to the bone. Luke held him tightly, hoping to warm and comfort him. Words escaped Luke. There was nothing that he could say that would make Noah feel better. Luke didn’t tell him that it was okay because it wasn’t. Noah’s mom was dead. Luke did the only thing he could think of and just held him as Noah fell apart in his arms—weeping loudly, body trembling—completely wrecked. His jacket was damp with Noah’s endless tears.

Luke’s cell phone rang. Fuck. He was supposed to call his dad when he found Noah. “I gotta get this,” he said, slightly pulling away from Noah so he could reach into his pocket to retrieve his
phone.

It was his grandma.

“Found him,” he quickly told her.

“Thank goodness.”

“We’re in the barn.”

“How is he?”


“Did you want me or your father to come out there?”

“No, I’ve got him.”

“Let us know if you change your mind.”

“I will.” Luke pocketed his phone and slipped his arm around Noah, holding him close again. “My grandma wanted to make sure that I found you.”

“Sorry…for…worrying…her,” Noah gulped.

Luke kissed the top of Noah’s head. “There’s no need to apologize.”

“Yes…there is,” Noah said, untangling himself from Luke’s embrace. “Not only did I worry your grandma. I’ve been a jerk to you. I’m so sorry.”

Luke stared at Noah’s tear stained face. He was touched that Noah was taking the time to apologize, but he wasn’t the only one to blame for their predicament. “I never should have pushed you. I was like a bull in a china shop,” he admitted. “It really hit home today that we’re different. The first place I looked for you was the pond because that’s where I would have gone, but you’re not me.”

“No, I’m not.” Noah looked away.

Luke carefully touched Noah’s damp cheek. “But it’s okay. It’s good that we’re different. We can balance each other out. It was wrong for me to assume that you’d deal with things the same way I would.”

“I still shouldn’t have…”

Luke placed a finger on Noah’s lips. “Shhh…I’m sorry. God…I’m so sorry for everything you’ve been going through these past few weeks and now…”


“You can’t get rid of me that easily. I love you too much.”

“I love you too.”

Luke caressed Noah’s back, his fingers tracing small circles over Noah’s sweatshirt. “You must be freezing,” he said. “Let’s go back to the house so you can warm up.”

Luke reluctantly let go of him so that they both could get to their feet. Luke glanced at Whitman, who’d been silently watching them this entire time. “Thanks for looking after him, Whit.”

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Noah was relieved that Luke had come looking for him. Having Luke hold and comfort him made him feel a little less alone. Luke had showed him that he could count on him even after the terrible way Noah had treated him. His life seemed slightly less hopeless with Luke by his side.

As they strolled out of the barn, Noah reached over and took Luke’s hand, squeezing it. Luke was uncharacteristically quiet as they headed toward the farmhouse, but Noah could feel his strength. He’d need it because he didn’t know how he was going to carry on without his mom.

“Oh, Noah,” Emma said, rushing over to him and pulling him into a warm, crushing hug when they entered the kitchen. “You gave us such a fright.”

“Sorry,” Noah murmured. Really he hadn’t meant to scare the Snyders with his freak out. He’d thought he’d needed to be alone, but he’d been wrong. Very wrong.

Holden patted Noah’s back. “We’re here for you, Noah—anything you need.”

Over Emma’s shoulder he could see Luke still standing by the door. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. When Luke noticed that he’d been found out by Noah, he quickly wiped them away with the back of his hand, moving out of Noah’s line of sight.

“Is my mom still here?” Noah asked, stepping away from Emma.

“Yes. I called the funeral home, but they won’t come out until you’re ready for them,” Emma said.

“Thank you,” Noah replied, glancing at the door that led to the back staircase. “I…uh…I’d like to go up and see her.”

Emma rubbed his back. “Anything you want, dear. Take as long as you need.”

Noah looked to Luke who was now standing next to Holden. “Luke, will you come with me?”

“Sure thing,” Luke said, coming over and taking his hand.

Together they headed upstairs. Noah clutched Luke’s hand tightly. He could do this. He needed to do this.

“I can wait out in the hall if you’d like,” Luke said once they reached the door to the guestroom that Charlene occupied.

Noah appreciated that Luke was trying to give him his space. But he didn’t want it. “Can you come in with me?” he asked. Then he quickly realized that Luke might not be comfortable being there with him. “I understand if you’d rather not.”

“I’ll go in with you—whatever you want, Noah.”
Noah was surprised to find Joyce in the room. She was sitting in the rocking chair next to the bed, filling out some paperwork. “Hi, Noah,” she said, glancing up at him.

“Hi, Joyce. This is my boyfriend, Luke,” he said without really thinking about it. Hopefully Luke still wanted to be his boyfriend.

“Hi, Luke,” she said, rising from the rocking chair and extending her hand.


“I’m sorry for the way I acted earlier,” Noah started to apologize.

“Noah, it’s okay. I understand,” she reassured him. “This is a terrible time for you. Please let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“I’d…uh…like a few minutes with her if it’s possible.”

“Of course it is.” Joyce gave him a quick hug. “I’ll be downstairs if you need me.”

“Thank you. Thank you for everything you’ve done.”

His mom was still lying on the bed, eyes closed as if she were asleep. Gone were the oxygen and IV. She seemed at peace. Next to him was Luke, standing tall and strong still holding his hand. He was with the two people he loved most in the world.

“I’m back, Mom,” Noah said, touching her hand with his fingertips. It was cold—a harsh reminder that she was really gone. “Luke is with me. I know that must make you happy…” He took a deep breath. “I hope there’s really a heaven because I want you to be in a better place. A place where there’s no pain, no suffering—just love and happiness…” his voice cracked as he began to cry.

“You won’t have to worry about Noah,” Luke spoke up. “My family and I will take care of him. We love him so much, but you already know that. We loved you too. We’ll never forget you.”

Noah wiped his eyes with his free hand. “Thank you, Mom, for everything you’ve done for me. Thank you for saving me and giving me the best possible life.” He leaned over and placed a kiss on her cheek. “I love you. I’ll always miss you.”

Noah was so overcome with emotion that just lost it, tears spilled unabashedly down his cheeks. Luke wrapped his arms around him, hugging him tightly. “I’m here, baby. I’m here…”

Luke held him as he cried until he had no more tears left to shed. His eyes burned, his throat raw—Noah was downright exhausted.

“I think I’m ready,” Noah finally said.

Noah cast one last look at his mom before he followed Luke out the door. He wasn’t in this alone. The Snyders would help him. And he’d let them because that’s what his mom would have wanted.

“We can call the funeral home so they can come get her now,” Noah told Emma once they returned to the kitchen.

“I can handle that,” Holden offered.

Noah felt a bit wobbly on his feet. “I think I need to lie down.”

“Your room is all made up for you upstairs,” Emma said.
“Luke, can you come with me?” Noah asked hopefully. He didn’t want to be alone.

“I can sit with you until you fall asleep,” Luke said. Then he looked to Emma and added, “If that’s okay with you, Grandma.”

“Yes. Go get some rest, Noah.”

Noah allowed Luke to lead him upstairs and into Aaron’s old bedroom. It was still strange to think of this room as his. He loved his room at the cabin which he was going to miss. He’d never been in there until now. This bedroom was a little smaller than the guest room where he’d been spending the past few weeks with his mom. Gray plaid wallpaper covered the walls of the homey room. There was a full size bed with an iron headboard that had one of Emma’s homemade quilts covering it. Mismatched nightstands flanked each side of the bed and there was a long dresser along the far wall.

As Luke closed the door behind them, Noah tugged his sweatshirt over his head and kicked off his sneakers. “This is probably the only time my grandma will allow us in your room alone with the door closed,” Luke said. “She’s pretty old fashioned.”

“I’d never want to do anything to upset her. You don’t have to stay.”

“It’s okay,” Luke reassured him. “She knows that you need a friend.”

“I want you to be more than that,” Noah whispered, hugging himself.


Noah nodded, unzipping his jeans as Luke pulled back the covers on the bed exposing gray flannel sheets covered with little sheep. Kicking aside his jeans, Noah slipped into bed and allowed Luke to tuck him in.


Noah slowly opened his eyes as he sat up in the bed—an unfamiliar bed. Blinking, he scanned his surroundings and as the fog of sleep cleared everything came rushing back to him. This was his new bedroom. Luke had been sitting with him because he didn’t want to be alone. And he was alone because…

Oh god…she was really gone. His mom was dead.

Noah wrapped his arms around his chest, rocking slowly back and forth. He was alone—so alone. There was a big hole in his heart that his mother’s love had once filled. It was still hard to believe that she was really gone. He wanted her to be in the next room waiting for him so they could watch another movie. He’d watch *Foul Play* a hundred more times. He’d even sing Ready to Take a Chance Again at the top of his lungs because his mom loved that song so much. Noah would do anything to make his mom happy.

It was pointless now. She was gone.

A lump formed in his throat as he quickly willed the tears away. Noah didn’t want to cry because if he started to cry he wasn’t sure he’d be able to get the tears to stop. He needed to stay in control of his emotions—find something positive to cling to.

His mom was free from the Colonel. He’d never find her, never hurt her again. Noah tried to seek comfort with this thought. He wanted something to take away the pain he was feeling, the loneliness, and the helplessness.

It was no use though. He was alone. Noah hadn’t slept in a room by himself since before New Years. He’d spent the past few weeks sleeping at the foot of her bed. It was comforting to know that she was near.

Noah ran his hand along the spot on the mattress where Luke had been sitting, wondering how long Luke had stayed with him. Did he leave right after he fell asleep or did he linger to watch over him? Noah wished that Luke was with him right now.

There was one way to rectify that. Noah got out of bed, glancing at the alarm clock on the nightstand as he did so. It was 9am. He was shocked that he’d slept for well over 12 hours. His stomach let out a loud rumble which reminded him that he hadn’t eaten since lunch the day before.

The wood floor was cool against his bare feet. Noah noticed that the clothes he’d shed before going to bed were gone. Then he noticed over on the dresser was a pair of jeans, his green sweater neatly folded on top of them as well as a pair of socks and underwear. Emma was already taking care of him. This looked like one of her touches.

Noah padded over to the dresser and grabbed the pile of clothes, continuing out the door of the bedroom. Besides being hungry, he had to pee really badly so he made a beeline to the bathroom. Inside he discovered all of his toiletries sitting on the bathroom vanity. He was especially thankful to see his own toothbrush and deodorant.

After Noah relieved himself, he decided to take a quick shower. The hot water made him feel somewhat human, but he knew it would take a lot more than a shower to rejuvenate him. Once his body was cleaned and hair washed, Noah stepped out of the shower, toweled off and put on the clean, gray boxer briefs that were laid out with his clothes. Noah grabbed his jeans and pulled them
on, followed by his sweater and socks. He was thankful that the steam covered mirror blocked his reflection because he had to look like shit.

When Noah stepped out of the bathroom, the aroma of bacon lured him downstairs into the kitchen where Emma was standing at the sink washing dishes while Luke sat at the table eating. Luke looked up from his plate, spotting Noah.

“Hey,” Luke said, scrambling to his feet. His arms were around Noah in a matter of seconds, holding him tightly.


“I see you found the clean clothes that I laid out for you,” Emma said, placing her hand on Noah’s back.

Noah stepped away from Luke, glancing at Emma. “Yes, thank you.”

“I made breakfast. It’s still warm. Why don’t you sit down and I’ll fix you a plate?”

“You don’t have to wait on me. I can get it.”

Emma smiled warmly. “It’s no trouble,” she reassured him. “Just tell me what you’d like. I made pancakes, bacon, and scrambled eggs. I can also make some toast for you.”

“Pancakes and bacon would be great.”

Emma headed toward the kitchen. “Coming right up.”

Luke took his hand, tugging him over to the kitchen table. “Sit,” he gently instructed. “What would you like to drink? Milk, juice, coffee?”

A jolt of caffeine would probably help him get through the day. “Coffee—black please.” He sat down at the kitchen table, feeling uncomfortable having Emma and Luke fussing over him.

Luke shook his head. “I don’t know how you do it. I can’t drink the stuff unless there’s cream and sugar involved.”

“Here you go, dear.” Emma placed a plate filled with pancakes and bacon.

“Thank you.”

“And your coffee,” Luke said, placing a steaming mug in front of Noah and then sitting in the chair next to him so Luke could finish his breakfast.

Noah tried not to feel self-conscious as he buttered his pancakes, but it was hard because it seemed like Emma and Luke were watching him, just waiting for him to fall apart at any moment. And it didn’t help that Luke was suddenly uncharacteristically quiet.

“The pancakes taste great,” Noah said after taking his first bite.

“There’s plenty more if you want some,” Emma called from the kitchen.

Noah wasn’t surprised that she was trying to fatten him up. He’d barely eaten since he’d found out…shit…tears formed in his eyes, which he tried to will away. He took a deep breath, pushing his grief aside. “I can’t believe I slept so long,” he said, stabbing a forkful of pancakes.
Luke’s fingertips brushed against Noah’s thigh. “You were exhausted. You needed it.”

Noah nodded, taking another bite of his breakfast.

Emma joined them at the table, coffee cup in hand. “Noah, I know this is very difficult for you, but we’re going to need to make arrangements for your mother,” she explained. “I hope you don’t mind, but I talked to the minister at my church today after the service and he can perform a memorial service for us…”

“Grandma,” Luke interrupted her. “Noah’s not even finished with breakfast yet. And—”

“Luke, it’s okay.” Noah said. “She’s right. I need to make plans.” He wished that he didn’t have to do it, but he’d rather get it done instead of putting it off. The longer he waited, the harder it would be. But there was just one problem. Money which was something he didn’t have a lot of—certainly not enough to pay to bury his mother. “Do you think they’ll do a payment plan? I don’t have enough money to pay the funeral home now.”

“Oh, Noah,” Emma said placing her hand on his arm. “Don’t you worry about the cost. Lily and Holden are going to cover the expenses.”

The Snyders had already done so much for him and his mother since they’d arrived in Oakdale. He couldn’t imagine asking for more from them. “I can’t let them do that.”

“They’re going to insist,” Luke said. “They’re stubborn that way.”


“Okay,” Noah relented. His mom wouldn’t have wanted him to go into debt for her. He’d work extra hard for Holden. Maybe he could even babysit the kids for Lily. It was the least he could do.

“You don’t have to do a memorial service if you don’t want to,” Emma said, placing her hand on his arm. “I just wanted to see if the minister would be available if we need him.”

“Do you think we could have the service tomorrow?”

“So soon?” Emma asked.

Noah nodded. “Yes, if we can. I really don’t want to wait longer than we absolutely need to.”

“I can call the funeral home to see if we can come by after you finish eating breakfast,” Emma suggested.

“I would appreciate it.”

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” Luke asked as Emma excused herself to make the phone call.

“I need to do this, Luke,” Noah said, glancing at his boyfriend. “And…uh…I’d like you to come too.” Luke’s eyes widened, obviously the request had taken him by surprise so Noah quickly added, “But if you don’t want to—”

“Yes, I do.” Luke took his hand. “I just didn’t think you’d want me to. I’m here for whatever you need, Noah.”

“I appreciate you sitting with me last night and being here this morning. I wasn’t sure if you would still be here when I woke up.”
“I spent the night on Grandma’s sofa,” Luke admitted. “I wanted to be close just in case you might need me.”

“The funeral director said that we can come by whenever you’d like, Noah,” Emma said after she hung up the phone.

Noah set down his fork. “We can go now,” he decided.

“You haven’t finished your breakfast,” Emma said, peering over his shoulder.

He’d only eaten half of it, but it was enough. He could have a bigger lunch or dinner. Right now he just wanted to get this over with. “I’m done. I can’t eat another bite.” He stood up and took his plate over to the garbage where he scraped the remains of his breakfast into it before depositing the plate and silverware into the sink.

“Did you want me to go to town and pick out something for your mom to be buried in?” Emma asked.

“Thanks, but that won’t be necessary. I thought she could wear the sweater I got her for Christmas.”

“That’s a perfect idea.”

Noah was glad Emma approved but this would mean that he’d need to go get the sweater from the cabin. The thought of going back there right now made him sick to his stomach.

Luke must have noticed his unease because he was at his side in an instant, slipping his hand into Noah’s. “What is it?” Luke quietly asked.

“I just…” Noah chewed his lip, embarrassed that something as simple as a quick trip to the cabin was causing him so much turmoil.

“Would you like me to go get the clothes for you?” Emma asked.

“Could you?” Noah looked at her hopefully. “If it’s not too much trouble…”

“It will be no trouble at all. I’ll run over there now and then we can go to the funeral home if you’re ready.”

“Yes, that sounds good.” Noah replied. He waited until Emma was out the door before he turned to Luke. “I don’t know I’m ever going to repay your family,” he admitted, feeling humbled and overwhelmed all at the same time.

Luke pulled him into a hug. “Don’t worry about it. My whole family loves you. You’re one of us and we take care of our own.”

Countless times he’s been told that he’s “one of the Snyder family”. At first, Noah thought they were just being nice, but now he knew otherwise. Emma hadn’t had to take care of his mom once she became too ill to care for herself. Luke’s parents didn’t have to pay for a funeral. They did those things because they truly cared.

“I love them, too,” he murmured, “especially you.”


Noah moved to the sink and filled it with water.
“What are you doing?” Luke asked, coming up behind him. “You don’t need to do the dishes.”

“I need to do something, Luke. I feel so helpless.”

“I’ll dry…you wash,” Luke said, pulling a dishtowel out of the drawer.

Noah had expected Luke to protest, to tell him just to take it easy. Thankfully, he hadn’t. Luke seemed to know exactly what Noah needed right now—doing something as simple as washing dishes while they waited for Emma to return helped give him a sense of purpose. He wanted to show everyone that he was still capable of contributing. There were only a couple of dishes to do since Emma had cleaned up most of the mess. The last dish had been dried when Emma returned with a bag in her hand.

“I think I have everything we’ll need,” Emma announced, shutting the kitchen door behind her. “I talked to Lily and Holden and they’ll meet us at the funeral home.” She reached into the bag, pulling out the diamond snowflake pin. “I remembered how lovely this pin looked with the sweater. I wasn’t sure if you wanted to put it with your mom or keep it.”

Noah swallowed. He remembered how happy he was picking out the pin for his mom. He never dreamed she’d only wear it once, that it would be their last Christmas together. “I want you to have it,” he decided. “I think it would make my mom happy.”

Emma blinked back tears. “Thank you so much, Noah. I’ll cherish this.”

Noah knew he made the right decision. Whenever he saw the pin on Emma he’d remember the best Christmas of his life. And his mom. Noah never wanted to forget his mom.
Chapter 70

Yesterday had been one of the most difficult days of Noah’s life. He wouldn’t have made it through the day without the help of the Snyders. They had handled making all of the funeral arrangements for him. All he had to do was tell them what he wanted and his wishes for his mom were carried out. Noah had no idea that so much went into planning even a small memorial service with a brief showing beforehand.

There was music to select which was beyond Noah as he wasn’t familiar with a lot of hymns, since they didn’t attend church. Noah trusted Emma’s judgment with the music, but he did ask that Nearer My God to Thee be sung, which was one of the few spiritual songs he did know.

There were also readings that needed to be selected. Emma had already volunteered to read Psalm 23 —The Lord Is My Shepherd. Noah remembered his mom telling him about a passage she’d like read at her funeral. They’d been watching Footloose one snowy afternoon in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Ren McCormak had just read a passage in the book of Ecclesiastes to the city council from the bible Ariel had lent him. At the time, he’d brushed it off since he figured his mom would live to be a very old woman. Unfortunately fate had other ideas.

Noah wanted to honor his mother by reading the passage, but he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to get through it. Luke had stepped up and volunteered to read it if Noah didn’t mind. Mind? Noah was relieved and he knew that his mother would have loved the idea too.

Once the plans for the service were squared away, they focused on the burial. His mom would be buried in Oaklawn Cemetery which was on the outskirts of Oakdale. It was the same place Emma’s husband was buried. Her headstone, which he picked out, would read:

**Beloved Mother**

**Charlene Anne Mayer**

**April 17, 1962 – January 20, 2007**

Noah would carry out her wish that she be buried under her real name. He’d also live the rest of his life as Noah Mayer because he was proud to be her son.

The memorial service was starting in a little over an hour, so Noah needed to get a move on. He had already eaten a little bit of breakfast and showered. Now, he just needed to get dressed.

Noah tore the plastic that covered his freshly dry cleaned suit. The last time he had worn it was on New Years. Leave it to Emma to make sure that he’d be properly dressed. He hadn’t even thought about his suit until now. Behind his suit was his clean blue dress shirt and tie. Noah’s fingers ran over the material of the midnight blue suit. His mom had known when she helped him pick this out that he’d be wearing it for her funeral.

Is that why she had suggested blue? She had always said it was his best color because it brought out his eyes.

A tear slipped down Noah’s cheek which he quickly wiped away with the back of his hand. He
needed to be strong. He owed it to his mom.

Noah stripped out of his black sweats and gray t-shirt. Then he took a deep breath and dressed in his suit. Emma had even made sure that he had his dress shoes and socks. He’d be all set—if he could just manage to tie his neck tie. With trembling fingers, Noah slipped it around his neck.

There was a knock on the door. “Noah?” Luke’s voice filtered through it. “Can I come in?”

“Sure, it’s open,” Noah managed to keep his voice steady.

The door opened, revealing a somber Luke dressed in a black suit with a crisp gray shirt and solid black tie. “Did you need some help with that?” Luke asked, motioning toward Noah’s tie.

“Yeah,” Noah sighed. “I really need to learn how to tie it properly.”

Luke offered a small smile. “I don’t mind helping you out.”

“I’m not used to anyone but my mom taking care of me,” Noah quietly confessed, casting his eyes downward.

Luke tied Noah’s necktie with a practiced ease that Noah hoped he’d possess someday. “You’re going to have to get used to it because you’re so lovable, Noah Mayer.”

“I need to be strong,” Noah said, his eyes finally meeting Luke’s.

“You are strong.” Luke touched Noah’s cheek. “Needing help—needing people you love doesn’t make you weak.”

Noah wanted to believe what Luke was telling him, but he didn’t feel strong. Actually, quite the contrary. “I don’t…”

Luke launched himself at Noah, pulling him into a bone crushing, patented Luke Snyder hug. Luke’s hugs were the best in the world. Well, there was one person whose hugs he loved more, but he’d never get another one from his mom.

He had Luke, though. Noah was so thankful for his boyfriend.

“You are—trust me—you are,” Luke murmured, caressing Noah’s back. “We’re all here to support you today. Please let us, okay?”

Noah just closed his eyes and clung to him. Luke didn’t say a word. He didn’t press him, push him or prod him. Luke just held him until Noah felt strong enough to speak.

“I’ll try.”


“I need to get something from the other room and then I’ll meet you downstairs. It will just take a couple of minutes.”


Noah made a quick detour into the guest room that his mom had occupied. Immediately he spotted what he needed, slipping it into his pocket. He left the room, shutting the door behind him and then took a deep breath before heading downstairs.
The kitchen was full of Snyders—Emma, Luke’s parents and sisters as well as Lucinda, Jack and Aaron. The girls were quiet, gazing at him with sad eyes. Noah was surprised to see them there. Actually, he hadn’t expected such a crowd. He thought it that only Emma and Luke’s parents would be going to the memorial service.

Lily stepped forward, giving him a warm hug. “We’re here for you, sweetie.”

“Thank you.” Lily’s hug was so much like his mother’s that it made Noah ache.

Emma placed a warm hand on his arm. “We should leave.”

Luke took his hand, leading him out of the farmhouse to the driveway where a black limousine was waiting. A lump formed in his throat as he remembered the last time he was in a limousine. It had been a joyful occasion. He’d finally worked up the courage to kiss Luke. His mom was all dressed up for the ball, looking so beautiful and happy. Noah was grateful that she was able to experience such a glamorous night out.

There would be no champagne toasts in the limo today. Just sadness. Noah sat next to Luke, still holding his hand. He prayed that he’d be able to make it through the next few hours.

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The funeral director had told Noah that he could have a few moments alone with his mother before he allowed anyone else in the church’s sanctuary where his mom was laid out. But now as he approached the coffin he wished he wasn’t alone. Noah was afraid of what he’d see when he looked inside it. Seeing his mom in there would bring everything back—the weeks of suffering she endured, finding her dead next to him. He wasn’t sure if he’d be able to handle reliving all of those emotions.

Noah knew he’d regret it if he didn’t see her again. There were enough regrets in his life, he didn’t need one more. Taking a deep breath, Noah willed himself over to the oak casket and peered inside. Surprisingly, his mom looked more like she did before she got really sick. There was color in her cheeks and her hair was nicely styled. Noah almost expected her to open her eyes and say, “Good morning, string bean.”

Almost.

There would be no miracle. This wasn’t the movies, or even TV.

Tears filled his eyes as he extended a shaky hand toward his mom. “Hi, Mom,” he managed to get out. “The Snyders have been taking good care of me. Luke and I made up. He’s been great…” Noah’s voice cracked. “I just miss you so much. No one will ever take your place.” He wiped the tears from his cheeks with the back of his hand. “I love you.”

Reaching into the pocket of his suit jacket, Noah pulled out the DVD of Foul Play. He vividly remembered the day that his mom found it at the local Wal-mart. His mom had been so excited. They watched it twice when they returned to the motel room that day. This movie had gotten them through some rough times. It always made his mom smile though. Noah wanted to make sure that his mom was smiling up in heaven. He carefully slid the DVD so it was nestled in the crook of his mother’s elbow.
Noah dug his fingertips into the fabric lined edge of the casket, swallowing thickly. “Enjoy the movie, Mom.”

Noah stepped away from the casket, doing his best to compose himself before he joined the Snyders who were standing in the vestibule, just beyond the doors that led in to the sanctuary. Luke met Noah halfway, giving him a much needed hug.


Noah had lost track of how many hugs he’d gotten from Luke since his mom died, but he’d needed each and every one of them. Around him, he could hear the quiet voices of the Snyders. He probably should say something to them, but he didn’t know what. He’d never been to a funeral before so he wasn’t sure how he should act.

Noah felt a small set of arms wrap around his leg. He didn’t even need to look to see who it was.

“Hey, ladybug,” Noah said.

“Hi, Noah. I’m sorry you’re so sad,” she said, peering up at him.

“Natalie.” Luke pulled away from Noah. “You should be by Mom and Dad.”


“It does?”

“Yes, it does.” Noah kissed her cheek. “Thank you for being here.”

“Welcome,” Natalie said and then scampered back over to Lily.

“I’m sorry about that,” Luke said, taking Noah’s hand. “I know that the last thing you need is one of my sisters bugging you.”

“It’s sweet that your entire family is here.”

“We rally around each other in a crisis. It’s the Snyder way.”

“Noah,” Maddie said, flying through the doorway with Casey in tow. Before Noah could get a word out she was enveloping him into a bear hug. “I’m so sorry about your mom. If there’s anything I can do…”

“You’re here—that means the world to me.”

Maddie gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before letting go of him. “Always, sweetie.”

“Sorry, man,” Casey said, giving him a surprisingly tight, heartfelt hug. “Anything you need.”

Noah nodded, willing himself not to get choked up. For so long, he’d wished that he had close friends that he could count on. Maddie and Casey weren’t his friends because he was Luke’s boyfriend. They genuinely liked him and would be there for him in good times as well as bad.

Maddie and Casey weren’t the last people to show up to support him. He hadn’t expected a turnout like this. He and his mom had only been in Oakdale a few months. They’d been in other places longer but never had any friends like they did here.

Noah was overwhelmed by all of the people that showed up for the memorial service. Besides
Casey and Maddie, Henry and Vienna were there as well as a few waitresses from Al’s that Charlene had worked with. All of the hospice nurses who cared for his mom were also there. Everyone offered hugs and condolences. Noah heard so many good things about his mom. She was definitely well loved in Oakdale.

Noah stood in the front pew flanked by Emma and Luke, trying to focus on the hymnal Luke held between them. When he opened his mouth to sing Nearer My God to Thee, nothing was coming out. Luke and Emma as well as everyone else were singing loud enough to hide his silence. The service was designed to celebrate his mom’s life. Unfortunately Noah didn’t feel like celebrating anything. His heart felt so empty. This ache was never going away. Nothing that hurt so badly could ever completely disappear. Noah was sure of it.

Noah was thankful to sit after the song. The minister stood at the front of the church speaking of sacrifice, love and heaven. He tried to seek comfort in the minister’s words, but all he could think about was how he’d never see his mom again. He wanted to believe that she was in a better place. He needed to believe in something.

Emma patted Noah’s leg and stood up, taking her place behind the lectern on the altar. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever,” Emma read in her calm soothing voice. “I know our Lord is looking over Charlene. She was a dear friend to me. I’m going to miss her terribly, but I’m thankful for the much too short time she was in my life. She left behind an incredible young man who I’m so honored to have as part of my family.” Emma dabbed her eyes as she stepped away from the lectern.

Noah could feel his own tears streaming down his cheeks. He clutched Luke’s hand because if he wasn’t holding on to it he was sure he’d run out of the church—try to run from his grief because it was unbearable.

“I’m up,” Luke whispered, letting go of Noah’s hand. “I’ll be right back.”

Noah nodded, wiping his eyes.

Luke stepped up to the lectern. “This is a reading from Ecclesiastes 3: 1-4,” he said in a loud, clear voice. “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.”

Luke glanced up from the paper. “Noah loves movies so much. He got that love from his mom, which is why this passage is special because it was in Footloose—a movie his mom was quite fond of. Charlene was a special lady. She loved her son so much.” He looked up at the ceiling and said, “Charlene, we love your string bean just as much as you do.”


“I’m no Kevin Bacon, but I hope your mom liked it.”

Noah forced a smile. “She did.”
When he turned his attention to the altar, Noah saw that Holden stood behind the lectern. Noah was surprised that Holden was going to speak.

“Charlene loved her son, Noah. Anyone who’d ever seen them together could easily see this. She was very proud of him as she should be,” Holden said, looking at Noah. “She raised a sweet, conscientious boy who’ve I’ve been fortunate to work with these past few months. Charlene may be gone, but she left behind the best parts of herself in her son Noah. Her legacy will live on through him.”

Everyone’s words touched Noah. Hearing all of the nice things that were said about his mom took a tiny bit of the ache away. Emma, Luke, and Holden had all done a wonderful job honoring his mother. Noah couldn’t let the service end without doing the same.

“I’d like to speak,” Noah said, standing up. He willed his hands not to shake as he made his way up to the altar. Luke wasn’t next to him to keep him steady. He was on his own.

He could do this.

“Many of you knew my mom as Gloria, but by now you’ve learned that wasn’t her real name. It was the name of the female character in her favorite movie, *Foul Play*. For the past four years we’d used aliases because we were on the run from my father,” Noah explained in a shaky voice. “He wasn’t a good man. He hurt both of us for years. And after he hurt me really badly one day she got me away from him. She sacrificed so much for me—you have no idea.”

Noah took a deep breath. “She was an incredible lady. My mom never complained—not even when we had to live in crummy motel rooms, keep moving from state to state, and eat cold Spaghetti-Os when money got scarce. My mom loved the bouquets of weeds I’d pick for her when I was little. She’d read to me whenever she could because she wanted to share her passion for books with me. She was a teacher before I was born—before my father made her quit. When we were on the run she made sure that my education didn’t suffer. She taught me so much. I got my love of movies from my mother although she enjoyed movies from the ‘70’s and ‘80’s while I preferred the classics. She’d argue that the movies she loved were classics in their own right. I’ll never forget the day she bought us a DVD player so we could watch our favorite movies all the time. My mom had scrimped and saved to make it happen. She was always doing sweet things for me. She’d go without so I wouldn’t have to.”

Noah wiped away the tears that slid down his cheeks. “Luke referred to me as ‘string bean’ which was a nickname my mom came up with a few summers ago because I shot up four inches. The nickname embarrassed me, but I’d give anything to hear her call me it again.” He stopped for a moment, closing his eyes to collect himself. “My mom was a strong woman—whether it was standing up to my father to protect me, leaving everything behind for a life on the run, or facing the cancer. She loved me no matter what—even when I told her I was gay. I’ll always be grateful for the time we had together. She was the best mom. Thank you all for coming to help me honor her. My mom had also found a best friend in Emma Snyder. I’m grateful to Emma and the rest of the Snyder family for making the last few months of her life happy. Thank you so much.”

Noah had hoped that he did his mother’s memory justice. He hadn’t meant to babble, but he’d wanted everyone in the church to know what a special woman his mother was. With his head down, Noah shuffled back to the pew. He was relieved to be back with Luke where he felt safe.


“I just wanted to make her proud.”
“You always do.”

“We’re going to end this service with a song that was special to Charlene and her son,” the minister said.

The church filled with the melody of the Helen Reddy song *You and Me Against the World*. Noah closed his eyes, imagining that his mom was singing it to him just like she had when he was a little boy.

*You and me against the world*

*Sometimes it seems like you and me against the world*

*When all the others turn their backs and walked away*

*You can count on me to stay*

*Remember when the circus came to town*

*How you were frightened by the clown*

*Wasn’t it nice to be around someone that you knew*

*Someone who was big and strong and looking out for*

*You and me against the world*

*Sometimes it seems like you and me against the world*

*And for all the times we've cried I always felt that*

*God was on our side.*

*And when one of us is gone*

*And one of us is left to carry on*

*Then remembering will have to do*

*Our memories alone will get us through*

*Think about the days of me and you*

*Of you and me against the world.*

*Life can be circus*

*They underpay and overwork us*
Though we seldom get our due
And when each day is through
I bring my tired body home
And look around for you

You and me against the world
It feels like you and me against the world
And for all the times we've cried
I've always felt that God was on our side
And when one of us is gone
And one is left alone to carry on
Then remembering will have to do
Memories alone will get us through
Think about the days of me and you
You and me against the world.

There wasn’t a dry eye in church as the song ended. A squeeze to Noah’s hand reminded him that he wasn’t alone. Luke was there—next to him. Their hands entwined as if they’d become one person.

The funeral director walked over to Noah. “I’m going to ask the guests to file into the vestibule,” he said quietly. “I’ll give you a few moments alone with your mother, so you can say your final goodbyes.”

“Okay.” Noah nodded.

Luke gave his shoulder a squeeze. “I’ll be waiting for you.” He started to walk away but Noah grabbed his hand.

“Please…stay.” Noah wasn’t sure if he could do this alone. This was going to be the last time he ever saw his mom.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

The sanctuary slowly emptied out, leaving Noah and Luke alone.

“I don’t think I can do this,” Noah whispered, eyes filling with tears. “I don’t want to say goodbye…”

Luke gently touched Noah’s cheek. “I know you don’t, baby. You’re mom will always be in your heart. I know it’s not the same, though. And I think that if you don’t go over there one more time you’ll regret it.” Noah cast a sidelong glance at the casket. “You’re right.”

He didn’t want any regrets. And throughout his life, there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for his mom. He wanted to keep it that way. “Can you go over there with me?”

“Anything you want.”

Hand in hand they strolled over to the casket. Tears formed in Noah’s eyes the closer the got to it. He willed them not to fall. He needed to stay strong. Through blurred vision he took one last look at his mom. They’d been through hell together, but now she was in heaven.
Luke reached inside the coffin to touch Charlene’s hand. “Thank you for bringing Noah into my life.”

“I’m not ready to say goodbye to you,” Noah sniffed. “You were taken away from me way too soon. I’m going to do my best to make sure that you’re always proud of me.” Noah kissed his fingertips and then placed them on his mom’s cheek. “I love you…” Noah’s voice faltered as he back away from the casket. Quickly, he wiped his eyes. “I should be stronger.”

Luke hugged him. “It’s okay to cry. You don’t have to be strong right now. I can be strong enough for the both of us.”

“I might have to take you up on that offer.”

“Please do.”

Noah composed himself and let go of Luke. “I’m ready to go now.”
Chapter 71

Noah sat at a table in the church basement engulfed in a fog as he picked at the lunch that had been served by the Ladies Aid. He felt guilty for not having an appetite but even as delicious as the food smelled, he just couldn’t bring himself to eat it. His stomach was knotted so tight he doubted it would ever get untangled.

Around him everyone seemed to be enjoying the lunch as if they were at some sort of party or celebration. Noah didn’t understand how they could carry on as if everything was all right, because it wasn’t. His mom was dead.

The Snyders had tried to coax him in to the conversation but had been unsuccessful. The brief service at the cemetery had been rough. All he could think about was the fact that after they left his mom would be buried and then she’d be gone forever. He would never see her face again unless it was in a photo or his memory.

There was a gentle hand on Noah’s shoulder. “Noah.”

He glanced up from his plate to discover Henry and Vienna standing by the table. “Hi,” he said, forcing a smile.

“Vienna and I were talking with some of the waitresses and we decided to do a fundraiser in honor of your mom,” Henry explained. “All of the tips raised would go to you for funeral expenses or into a college fund for you.”

“Your mom was very popular,” Vienna added. “Her co-workers wanted to do something to help and so did we.”

Noah was flabbergasted. His mom had only worked at Al’s for a couple of months before she had to quit because she’d gotten too ill to continue. The kindness of the residents of Oakdale was overwhelming. He had no idea that his mom had touched so many people in such a short time. “I don’t know what to say…”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Henry said with tears in his eyes. “Your mom was a special lady. We were lucky to have her at Al’s.”

“Can you let us know when it is so we can stop by?” Luke’s voice surprised him. Noah hadn’t realized that he’d been listening.

“Of course,” Vienna replied with a warm smile. “We’d love to have you there.”

Noah fought the urge to tell them that they didn’t need to do the fundraiser. He could almost hear his mom telling him that it was okay to let people help out. “Thank you,” he simply said.

“You’re welcome. It’s the least we could do,” Henry replied.

Vienna leaned down, placing a quick kiss on Noah’s cheek. “Come by soon,” she said. “Your meal will be on the house.”

“Now, my little pepperkaker, there’s no need to give away the farm here,” Henry could be heard saying as he escorted Vienna toward the door.

“Noah dear, you haven’t touched your food,” Emma said, placing a gentle hand on Noah’s arm.
“You barely ate anything at breakfast.”

“Grandma, if Noah isn’t hungry he doesn’t need to eat,” Luke countered.

“He really should try to eat something,” Lily piped up from across the table. “Noah needs to keep his strength up.”

“I’ll try,” Noah said, jabbing some mostaccioli with his fork. Even though his appetite was nonexistent he couldn’t bring himself to say so. The Snyders had done so much for him and his mom. He couldn’t repay them by being difficult.

“Noah, you don’t have to,” Luke said quietly.

Noah shrugged. “Maybe I should eat something.” He took a few bites of the now cold pasta, forcing himself to swallow it. His gesture earned a couple of smiles from the Snyder women. Just as he was about to make himself take another bite Maddie and Casey rescued him.

“Hey, Noah.” Maddie offered him a soft, reassuring smile.

“Hey.” Noah scrambled to his feet.

“Casey and I are going to get going,” she told Noah as she pulled him into a bone crushing hug.

Noah held onto her, finding solace in her arms. She smelled of vanilla which reminded him of the cabin—home. His mom loved to burn vanilla candles and did so quite often. “Thank you for coming,” he murmured. “I appreciate it.”

Maddie blinked up at him, her brown eyes wide and wet. “If you need anything. I mean anything please let me know. I have every awesome classic movie on DVD that you can think of and I’m willing to share them with you. You can think of me as your own personal Blockbuster, but with a much better selection.”

“I think I might take you up on that offer.”

“Please do,” Casey piped up. “Then maybe I can finally see a movie that’s in color.”

Maddie rolled her eyes. “He’s exaggerating.”

Casey shook his head, mouthing “no, I’m not!” which made Noah smile for a brief moment.

“You can text or call me day or night,” Maddie said. “Got it?”

“Got it.”

Maddie gave him a quick hug and Casey did the same before they headed toward the door. Noah took a slow breath before sitting down.

“They’re pretty great,” Noah said, casting a quick glance at Luke.

“Yes, they are.” Luke pulled Noah’s plate of food away. “You don’t have to eat this. There will be plenty of food at Gram’s if you get hungry later on.”

Noah nodded, relieved to have Luke looking out for him. His boyfriend seemed to know exactly what he needed. Leaning back in his chair, Noah closed his eyes. He just wanted this day to be over. But that would also mean the beginning of his life without his mom, which practically sent him into full blown panic mode. He didn’t know how he was going to do it—even with the help of the
The limo ride back to the farm seemed like it took an eternity. Emma and Lily had continued their mother-henning. Emma had suggested a nap. Lily countered with a walk to the pond. Luke told them to give Noah his space. All of the attention had made Noah uncomfortable. He was relieved to finally be back at the farm after a long, emotional day.

Noah came to an abrupt halt when they got inside the screen porch at the farmhouse, not following the rest of Luke’s family inside. He loved the Snyders—dearly. They’d done so much to help him the past couple of days. He’d be forever grateful to them.

But it was so overwhelming having all of them hovering over him, making sure that he wasn’t about to go off the deep end. He wasn’t used to so much attention from so many different people all at once. Noah just wanted a chance to fucking breathe for a few minutes.

“What is it?” Luke whispered as the rest of his family disappeared inside.

“I’d like to go change clothes,” Noah said, glancing at Luke who had already taken his tie off and stuffed it in his pants’ pocket during the ride to the farm. “I don’t have anything clean here so I’ll need to go back to the cabin. Do you think you can come with me?” While he wanted some space he didn’t want to be completely alone, especially going to the cabin which held so many memories of his mom.

“Sure,” Luke said, rubbing Noah’s arm. “Let me just tell my parents where we’re going so they don’t worry.” He gave Noah a quick kiss on the cheek before heading into the farmhouse.

Noah wrapped his arms around himself as he paced around the porch, praying that Luke wouldn’t be long. He’d gone over three weeks without being with Luke and now he was having a difficult time waiting out three minutes. Luke was his rock.

Noah was also looking forward to changing into some comfortable clothes. But after that—he didn’t know and it fucking terrified him.

“Okay,” Luke said, shutting the door to the farmhouse behind him as he stepped onto the porch. “I told them that we wouldn’t be long. I think Grandma is going to try to stuff us with pie later on.” He slid his hand back into Noah’s, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

Luke had been doing this a lot—holding Noah’s hand. Ever since finding him in the barn a couple of days ago, Luke’s hand always seemed to be in his. Noah needed the connection. He drew from Luke’s strength.

“Thanks for coming with me,” Noah said as they stepped outside. “I don’t think I could have gone back there alone.”

“You don’t need to keep thanking me. We’re in this together. Boyfriends, remember?”


“I wish I didn’t have to go to school tomorrow,” Luke sighed, kicking a stone from the gravel.
driveway. “I should be here with you.”

“You need to go back to school though. You have a game tomorrow night, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but right now I don’t care if I play the rest of the season…”

“Luke, I don’t want to you give up everything for me. I’ll be fine.” At least he hoped he would be fine. One thing he knew for certain was that he couldn’t have Luke quitting the basketball team before the season was finished. Basketball was important to Luke. Noah didn’t want him to make a decision that he’d regret.

“I know but I just…”

“I know you do.” He really did. Luke has shown him countless times just how much he loves him. Noah didn’t doubt that Luke would do anything for him—all he had to do was ask, but he wouldn’t. Not this time. Noah would make it through the next day without leaning on Luke—at least that was his grand plan.

Luke offered him a little smile. “Okay, but I’ll just be a phone call away.”

“Your grandma will be here and I’ll be working with your dad during the day,” Noah told him. He was assuming that he’d still be working with Holden. He hadn’t been told otherwise. Spending the day in the barn working would be good for his soul and it would hopefully keep his mind busy so he wouldn’t have time to miss his mom.

“I’m sure my dad doesn’t expect you to return to work so soon.”

“I want to though,” Noah insisted. He needed to keep busy. And he also wanted to start paying Holden back for his generosity. But he didn’t tell Luke this because Luke would insist that he didn’t need to do such a thing.

Thankfully, Luke didn’t push. “In that case my dad will be happy to have you back. He’s missed you. He says that the horses have missed you too—especially Whitman.”

“I missed everyone too,” Noah admitted. “I can’t believe how attached I became to the horses. I was never allowed to have any pets and now I feel like I have a whole barn full of them. I know they’re not pets and they’re not mine…”

“Whit might disagree. You’re going to have to take him out for a spin someday.”

“I’ll have to learn how to ride first,” Noah said, casting a sidelong glance at Luke.

“I’ll teach you when you’re ready. Whit and I will be gentle with you.” Luke flashed him the most reassuring smile.

Thoughts of Luke teaching him to ride vanished when he was hit with the harsh reality of arriving at the cabin. Noah froze. Maybe this was a mistake. He could always send Luke inside to get him a change of clothes and pack some things for him so he wouldn’t have to go in there for a long time…

“You don’t have to do this,” Luke said, picking up on his unease. “Just tell me what you need.”

He could take Luke up on his offer—take the easy way out—keep putting off returning to his deserted home. But the longer he waited the harder it would be. The Snyders would eventually be the ones who packed up the cabin. Noah couldn’t let that happen. He needed to see his home again no matter how difficult it might be on him.

“Consider me glue.”

Noah fished his keys out of his coat pocket, selecting the one that would unlock the cabin. Taking a deep breath, he put it in the lock and turned. It was now or never.

Now.

Noah opened the door cautiously stepping inside the cabin. He was hit with an incredible sense of loss. A tsunami of sorrow crashed over him so strong that he was rendered still. Even though he hadn’t been actually living here for the past month or so this had always been home to him and his mom. He could still see her cooking in the kitchen or curled up on the sofa watching one of the DVDs from their movie collection. She’d always been quick to ask him about his day when he got home from working or hanging out with Luke.

And now she was gone.

He squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to cry again. Noah had shed an ocean of tears today. He never wanted to cry again.

“Noah, if this is too hard for you I can get your clothes for you,” Luke said, rubbing Noah’s back. “You don’t have to do this. You’ve dealt with so much today.”

He swallowed. “No, I need to do this.”

“Okay.”

Noah took in his surroundings. The Christmas tree was long gone and with it all of the joy that it had brought him and his mom. She had enjoyed sitting in the dark staring at the tree, listening to Christmas carols on the radio. Sometimes she’d sing along and on rare occasions she’d convince Noah to sing too.

Noah wished he would have sung with her every time she’d asked. It was too late now. He wasn’t sure who cleaned it up. Most likely Holden or Emma, because it seemed like something either of them would do—taking the time to make Noah’s life a little easier. In the corner the boxes of ornaments were neatly stacked. So many memories in them. He hoped one day they wouldn’t be so painful.

“It’s so empty here without her,” Noah murmured, taking off his winter coat and hanging it up on the coat rack.

Luke hung up his jacket next to Noah’s. “She really helped breathe life into this old cabin.”

“It was home.”

“The farm is still your home,” Luke reassured him. “You’ll just be living in another part of it.”

It was still going to be just as difficult living in the farmhouse. Emma’s home held a potpourri of emotions—good and bad. Foremost in his mind was the fact it was the place where his mom died.

The cabin was also crammed with reminders. Everywhere he looked there were pieces of his mom—the picture she had taken of him when he was little with his stuffed puppy (she had said it was one of her favorites of him), the DVD collection that had kept them sane during some rough times, the kitchen where she’d baked Christmas cookies with him and Luke, and the sofa where they’d had
many heart to hearts. Every part of the cabin and its contents held so many dear memories.

His mom had always been his entire universe and now she was gone. And just like the song he was left to carry on, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to do it. Noah had always heard about heartbreak, but now he felt it. His entire body ached with it. Such a gut wrenching pain wouldn’t go away easily—if ever. Noah was sure of it.

“There’s so much stuff,” Noah murmured. “I don’t even know where to start…”

“You don’t have to pack everything up this instant,” Luke said, rubbing Noah’s back. “There isn’t any rush. You can go through everything when you’re ready. And if you need help I’ll be there for you so will the rest of my family if you need them.”

Nodding, Noah numbly wandered into his bedroom which hadn’t been used in weeks. The bed was still neatly made just as it had been before he headed out to celebrate New Year’s Eve with Luke. The night had begun with so much promise and had ended in such despair.

“Let’s get you something to change into,” Luke said, marching over to the dresser. He sounded more like a glorified babysitter than Noah’s boyfriend.

They hadn’t really acted like boyfriends since New Year’s Eve. It was Noah’s fault though. He’d pushed Luke away, said some awful things, but Luke still wanted him—loved him. Luke had been taking care of him since his mom died. He was so loving, caring, sweet, and patient.

Noah just stood there, watching as Luke laid a pair of jeans on the bed and a navy t-shirt. Then he went over to the closet, selecting a red and blue plaid shirt which he placed with the other clothes he had picked out. Noah took off his suit coat, tossing it on the bed. His fingers brushed against the knot of his neck tie, fumbling to undo it.

“Here, let me,” Luke said softly, placing a steady hand on top of his.

And there was Luke so beautiful, standing so close to him, but he wasn’t close enough. Noah needed to feel him. He needed to feel something else besides this intense grief that strangled him.

“Noah…” His boyfriend’s name was thick in his throat. Noah was surprised by the degree of emotion in his voice.

Luke’s eyes locked with his as he slid Noah’s tie from his neck. “I think I like taking a tie off of you just as much as I love putting it on you.”


Luke opened his mouth to speak, but Noah’s mouth crashed against it, his tongue demanding entrance to which Luke willingly yielded, moaning as he did so. Noah had missed a connection of this intensity with Luke during their estrangement. Luke’s moan made Noah hold him tighter, never wanting to let him go. If he did, he’d be lost without Luke. He didn’t realize just how much he’d missed this connection with Luke until this moment.

But as intense and amazing as the kiss was, it still wasn’t sufficient for Noah. He needed to be even closer to Luke. “I need you,” he murmured, licking the shell of Luke’s ear. “I need to be close to you.” It didn’t matter that his body was pressed up tightly against Luke’s because it wasn’t enough. He needed more. Now.

Luke groaned, snaking his fingers through Noah’s hair. “Noah…”

“I’m right here, baby,” Luke reassured him, caressing Noah’s cheek.

Noah trailed his fingers through Luke’s chest hair. “I need to feel you inside of me,” he breathed

Luke stared at him, lips wet and bee-stung, eyes wide. “Noah…”

“Noah…” Noah prayed this one word would convey how much he wanted Luke. Finally he was beginning to feel something other than the emptiness that’s been in his heart. Luke could make him feel more—much, much more. Noah cupped Luke’s balls through his pants which made Luke groan. His boyfriend was hard. And so was Noah. “Please…” he softly repeated, untucking Luke’s dress shirt and peeling it off his body.

Luke’s eyes darkened as he began to frantically unbutton Noah’s shirt. Noah moved his trembling fingers to Luke’s belt buckle. He was nervous and excited. This moment had been a long time coming. Noah was determined to stay in the moment so he could remember every last detail.

Luke kicked off his shoes and socks as Noah unzipped Luke’s pants. Luke didn’t have to tell Noah that he also wanted him. It was something he could see as Luke’s pants fell to his knees. Luke’s cock was hard beneath his black boxer briefs. The damp spot on the front of them only emphasized this point. Noah tugged down Luke’s underwear and Luke promptly kicked them off along with his pants which left him completely naked.

Many times Noah wished for this moment, thinking that it could never happen. But now Luke stood before him nude. Noah couldn’t help himself; he allowed his eyes to hungrily roam over Luke’s body taking in every glorious inch of it. Luke’s fingers twitched at his sides as if he were unsure of whether or not he should cover up.

“You’re so beautiful,” Noah murmured, his eyes finally meeting Luke’s. “Everything about you is so beautiful.”

“Noah,” Luke said quietly as his cheeks flushed. “You are overdressed. I can’t be the only naked one here.”

Noah ducked his head. “Sorry.”

“It’s a situation that can be easily remedied.”

Luke carefully unbuckled Noah’s pants under his watchful eye. Noah toed off his shoes and socks; his heart was beating like a jackhammer. Then in one fell swoop his pants and boxers were on the floor. Now he was as naked as Luke.

Their eyes met again and Noah grabbed the back of Luke’s head, pulling him into another deep kiss, needing the connection between them again. As long as he was kissing Luke—holding Luke, he was feeling and not thinking.

God…he couldn’t allow himself to think right now. Must feel—love, warmth, passion…everything that encompassed Luke.

Not breaking the kiss, Noah backed Luke toward the bed until they tumbled onto the mattress in a tangled heap.

“Sorry.”


Noah carded his fingers through Luke’s hair. “I bet it will feel even better when you’re inside of me.”

“Is that really what you want?”

Wanted? Noah needed it like he needed to breath at this point. “Yes.” Noah nodded.

“I…uh…have a packet of lube in my wallet. I’ll get it,” Luke said, starting to roll off him.

Noah stopped him before he could do so. Luke couldn’t go anywhere—not even for a minute. “No…don’t leave me,” he begged. “I have some in my nightstand. I can get it.” Blindly, Noah reached over and opened the drawer to the nightstand, reaching inside his hand came in contact with the tube of lube he had purchased over a month ago—just in case.

“Here.” He thrust the tube into Luke’s hand.

“Condoms?”

“I need to feel you,” Noah pleaded. “You said that you’ve never been with anyone and I swear I’ve never been with anyone. I’ve only kissed a couple of girls. I…”

Luke placed a finger on his lips. “I believe you. I know you’d never lie to me.”


Luke brushed his lips against Noah’s. “Okay.”

Not taking his eyes off of Noah, Luke sat back on his haunches, flipped open the cap of the lube, and squirted an ample amount onto his fingers. Noah parted his legs so Luke could have easy access to him. Luke took a deep breath as he hooked a leg over Noah’s, partially stretching himself over him.


“Hey.”


Whoa…fuck…

“Ahhh…” he groaned.

“Do you want me to stop?” Luke asked.

“No, feels good.” In fact it felt incredibly good.

Carefully Luke stroked him with his finger—in and out, in and out—and then Noah was jolted with a thousand bolts of electricity as Luke’s finger found the perfect spot.
“Holy shit!” Noah cried out.

“Was that good?” Luke asked with a sly smile.

“Please do that again…”

“My pleasure.”

The pleasure was definitely all Noah’s. There was no way that Luke could be feeling this good right now. If a finger felt good, more had to be better. He needed to be filled fuller—feel more.

“More…more…more…” Noah found himself chanting.

Luke complied with another finger. There was a little more stretch, but the warm rush he’d been experiencing was still there. Noah wanted to feel hot—and he still needed more of Luke.

“Need your cock…”

Noah expected to feel Luke’s fingers slip out of him but instead Luke plundered his mouth with a wet, probing kiss filled with so much passion. He was practically drunk with lust when Luke lifted his mouth from Noah’s, a thin trail of spit stretching between them.

“I love you so much, Noah.” Luke’s eyes were almost black with intensity.

“Same here,” was all Noah could manage.

Luke reached for the lube, popping it open again and squirting a generous amount into his palm which he used to slick up his dick. He squeezed more onto his fingers and smeared it around Noah’s opening. “I hope this is enough,” Luke muttered under his breath.

So did Noah.

Logic told him that it was going to hurt, but he didn’t think anything could hurt more than the pain he’d endured the past couple of days. And nothing could be worse than having his father beat him and put him in the hospital. All of the love he was suppose to get from that man was filled with so much hatred and loathing.

Nothing could hurt more than those things.

Luke moved between Noah’s legs, adjusting them so that Noah’s heels rested on his shoulders. Once Noah was in the perfect position, Luke aligned his cock against Noah’s hole. “This is probably going to hurt so if you want to stop at anytime…”


Luke laced his fingers through Noah’s. Noah gave Luke’s hand a squeeze and blew out a calming breath. Deep in his heart he knew Luke could never hurt him. This moment was about love and just feeling.

Noah bit down on his lip as Luke’s cock slid past the tight ring of muscle. He wouldn’t cry out as he was being slowly stretched. Luke didn’t need to think that he was hurting him because he wasn’t—not really, not intentionally. One look into Luke’s eyes could tell him that. There was so much love there. Noah held onto it, allowing it to swallow him up.

Noah kept breathing…deep breaths….and focusing…focusing on Luke’s face which was the picture of bliss. Luke filled him with one last gentle thrust, making them one. Their breathing was in sync, noses centimeters apart, eyes fixed on each other. At that moment it was hard for Noah to tell where he ended and Luke began—so lost in everything that was his boyfriend.


“Yes.”

Luke placed a soft kiss on Noah’s lips as he wrapped his hand around Noah’s cock, giving it a couple of tugs which took the edge off a bit. “You feel so incredible. God…you have no idea…”

“Show me.”

Slowly Luke eased out of him and gently pushed back inside as Luke did this an entirely different sensation took over. Gone was the discomfort and in its place was such an intensity that it shook him to the core. Noah rocked his hips to meet with Luke’s thrusts, squeezing Luke’s hand tightly as he did so.

“Don’t stop,” Noah moaned.


Noah’s eyes rolled back when Luke’s cock slid over that magical spot. He felt so alive—every part of his body was alive. This feeling needed to last forever. Luke was above him, thrusting, panting, and murmuring words of love. Noah wanted to remember this feeling forever—lock it away in a vault so he could retrieve it when he needed it.


The dual sensations made Noah’s head spin. Holy fuck…

When Noah came all of the pain, sorrow, loneliness disappeared. All he could feel was Luke’s love. Noah’s gaze was fixed on Luke as his boyfriend climaxed so loud Noah swore that it came from his soul. This was truly what love was all about. He’d been so afraid he’d never feel it again.


“Yeah,” was all Noah could managed, utterly spent, allowing his legs to fall onto the mattress with a soft thud. The past days of stress, weeks of sleepless nights and worry all came rushing back to him.

Luke placed a kiss on the tip of his nose. “You really have a way with words, Mayer.” Then he ever-so-carefully pulled out of Noah and rolled off of him. He gathered Noah in his arms, hugging Noah to his chest.

“Please don’t leave me,” Noah murmured sleepily against Luke’s chest.


Noah drifted asleep clinging to the fact that he’d never be alone. He was still loved.
Luke opened his eyes with a slow, satisfied smile. Noah was fast asleep naked, head resting on Luke’s chest. He placed a soft kiss on the top of Noah’s head. His boyfriend looked so peaceful which made Luke happy. The past couple of days of Noah’s life had been hell. Luke couldn’t imagine how difficult it must be to lose a mom.

Toying with the strands of hair at the nape of Noah’s neck, Luke placed another kiss on top of Noah’s head. Luke loved him so much. He hoped that Noah would get the sense of peace he needed. And he prayed that Noah wouldn’t regret their hasty decision to have sex.

Luke certainly didn’t. While it was far from how he envisioned their first time, he still thought it was perfect—intense but filled with so much love. Being inside of Noah had been the most incredible feeling in the world. He wished he could find better words to describe it but at the moment his mind was still blown. Maybe he’d do the experience justice when he wrote about it in his journal later.

Noah stirred in his arms, lifting his head and glancing up at Luke. His boyfriend was a bit sleepy-eyed, but he was still gorgeous. “Hey,” Noah said, voice tinged with sandpaper.


“I think I should probably get dressed,” Noah said, unwrapping himself from Luke. He slid out of bed, quickly picking up his discarded boxers and slipping them on.

This wasn’t quite the reaction he’d expected from Noah. Another kiss yes. Not this.

“I…uh…gotta use the bathroom,” Luke mumbled. He got up, spotted his underwear and tugged them on, leaving Noah alone in his room.

Luke stepped into the bathroom. He didn’t really need to pee, but he wanted to get out of Noah’s room before he said or did something stupid like he had when he pushed Noah a few weeks ago.

Luke steadied himself in front of the sink. Deep breaths. Try not to panic. Noah has been twisted through the emotional wringer today. He obviously needed some space which Luke was going to give to him. Luke wasn’t going to panic. Definitely not.

Glancing up he caught his reflection in the mirror. Would everyone be able to tell that he was no longer a virgin? Did he look different?

Luke felt different. He was more in love with Noah than he’d even been. He also felt closer to Noah like they had this special bond that no one could ever come between.

But what if Noah thought losing his virginity was a mistake once he had a few minutes to think about it?

Closing his eyes, Luke hung his head. Maybe I should have put the brakes on. Noah just buried his mom. He couldn't have been thinking clearly...


Luke jumped, surprised to see Noah standing the doorway of the bathroom wearing jeans and holding the t-shirt Luke had picked out for him. Noah’s hand rested on the doorjamb as he eyed Luke anxiously.

“Noah…hey,” Luke said suddenly feeling very vulnerable dressed in only his boxer briefs.
“Hey.”

“Are you okay?” Luke asked and then realized what a stupid question it was because there was no way the Noah could be okay. “Sorry,” he cringed.

“I was going to ask you if you were okay,” Noah said, taking a small step toward Luke. “I know this wasn’t how you probably pictured our first time—your first time…”

_Could Noah be just was worried as I am?_ Luke took Noah’s hand. “It was perfect, Noah. I was afraid that you were having regrets.”

“No, I never felt closer to you.” Noah closed the space between them. “And I needed to be close to you.”

Luke let out the breath he’d been holding. “Oh thank god. I was worried.”

Noah wrapped his arms around him. “I love you so much, Luke. I never would have made it through all this without you.”

Luke squeezed him tightly. “I love you too. I don’t think you’re out of the woods though. You’re probably going to have some rough days ahead of you, but I’ll be there for you if you need me.”

“I might be taking you up on that offer.”

They held each other until the sound of the front door opening, made them jump apart. Luke was kidding himself if he thought that having a little distance between them would absolve them of any guilt because he was standing there in only his underwear and Noah was also half dressed albeit more than Luke. He could have slammed the door to shield himself, but he wasn’t about to leave Noah hung out to dry either.

“Dammit,” Aaron groaned. “I was hoping that I wouldn’t walk in on something like this.”

_Oh thank god it’s only Aaron_, Luke breathed an inner sigh of relief. His brother he could deal with. His parents or grandma—not so much.

“I…uh…I was…uh…just changing clothes,” Noah stammered.

“Noah, it’s okay,” Luke said, resting his hand on Noah’s arm. “I can handle this. You can go finish getting dressed.”

“You might want to cover yourself too, little bro,” Aaron suggested.

Luke rolled his eyes. “It’s not what you think,” he said after Noah was safely tucked away in his old bedroom.

“I didn’t know you made a habit of hanging out in your underwear.”

“Look,” Luke said, lowering his voice. “Noah’s been through hell. He needed me—we needed each other and…”

Aaron held up his hand to silence him. “Please, say no more. You’re damn lucky that it was me who came in here looking for you. Grandma, Dad, and Lily were starting to wonder so me, being the kickass brother that I am, I volunteered for the recon mission.”

Luke shuddered to think of how they would have dealt with anyone but Aaron showing up unannounced. “Thank you.”
“That’s more like it.” Aaron grinned.

“Did you want to wait for us?”

“No, I need to get out of here and go bleach my brain,” Aaron grumbled as he marched toward the door. “The image of my little brother having sex is not something that I want to be stuck with all day. Just hurry up and get your asses to the house though.”


Not looking back, Aaron lifted his hand above his head bidding Luke farewell with his middle finger. Nice.

Shaking his head, Luke sauntered over to Noah’s bedroom and rapped lightly on the closed door. “Hey, can I come in?”

“Sure.”

Noah was fully dressed now, sitting on his bed tying his sneakers. “I can’t believe he caught us.”


“But still…”

Luke sat next to him. “It’s okay. And we’re okay, right?”

“Definitely.”

Luke placed a quick kiss on Noah’s cheek and then stood up. “I better get dressed before they sic the bloodhounds after us.”

********

“There you two are,” Emma said as Luke and Noah entered the kitchen. His mother and Aaron sat at the kitchen table while his dad and grandma stood at the kitchen island. The girls and Ethan were nowhere to be seen which meant that his Grandma Lucinda must have taken them home.

Noah had his duffle bag filled with the essential clothing he’d need until he was ready to fully move his things to the farmhouse. As the eyes of his family fell upon them, Luke wondered if they suspected his and Noah’s special secret. Casting a sly glance at his boyfriend, Luke also wondered if Noah could still feel him inside him. Noah’s touch still lingered on his body. He never wanted it to go away.


“Noah, you can go put your clothes up in your room and then come down and join us,” Emma suggested. “We were just about to have some pie and ice cream.”

Luke looked to Noah, a little unsure if he’d be up for ice cream with the family, especially after all he’d been through today. “Noah, are you up for it?”

Noah thought for a moment. “Yeah, I think I’m in the mood for something sweet.”
“Would you like pie, ice cream or both?” Emma asked.

“Both. You can’t have too much of a good thing.”

Luke hoped there would be many, many good things in Noah’s future.
Holden had insisted that Noah sleep in and then show up to the stables by 11am. Initially he had told Noah not to come at all, suggesting that he take a few days to rest and decompress. It was only after Noah, with the help of Luke, had successfully pleaded his case that he finally relented.

However, Noah’s usual work hadn’t been on the agenda when he arrived. Instead, Holden whisked him off on a trip to Newberry for a visit to Hamilton’s Feed Store. At least that’s where Noah thought they were going until they pulled into the parking lot of Knapp’s Dairy Bar.

“Sir?” Noah glanced at Holden, questioning their destination.

“It’s Holden,” he gently reminded him.

Noah cringed having forgotten the promise to drop the ‘sir’. “Right…sorry.”

Holden patted Noah’s leg, smiling at him warmly. “There’s nothing to apologize for. It’s been awhile since we’ve worked together.”

Noah might not have been working the past few weeks but he knew that lunch at the dairy bar wasn’t part of the routine. “This doesn’t seem like work though. I thought we were going to Hamilton’s.”

“Nope. We’ve got something more important on the agenda.”

“What?” He couldn’t think of what could be more important than placing an order for the stables. Surely there had to be plenty of work to be done. Holden had been without an assistant for almost a month.


“I suppose you’re wondering why we’re here and not mucking out some stalls back at the farm,” Holden said, unwrapping the straw for his recently delivered chocolate malt. Noah nodded and Holden continued, “There was something that I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” Noah shifted uncomfortably. His stomach sickened with the fleeting thought that Holden might not want Noah to work with him anymore. Although it wasn’t his dream job Noah cherished his time at the stables.

Or what if—god—Noah didn’t want to even try to fathom his next thought…

What if Holden had figured out why they’d been up to while they were at the cabin? Noah had tried to be as casual as possible when they returned to the farmhouse. And Aaron wouldn’t have told on them. Even when Noah had arrived at the stables a half hour ago he did his damnedest to mask the fact that the burn in his ass still lingered from the day before. He didn’t want Holden to suspect that he could still feel Luke inside of him.
“Hey, hey,” Holden immediately picked up on Noah’s unease. “It’s nothing to worry about. I just wanted you to know that I know what you’re going through firsthand. I lost my father when I was eleven. I still had my mom, but it was very difficult for me since I was close to my dad. He was my hero. His death just tore me up inside.”

Noah never realized that Holden had been so young when he lost his dad. Maybe there was someone who really understood what he was going through. Luke tried, which Noah appreciated, but he didn’t know the constant ache that has been with him since his mother died.

“Does the hurt ever go away?” Noah asked, brows knitting together.

“It dulls,” Holden sighed, “but it’s always there—kinda like how the moon is always in the sky but masked by the sun on a bright day.”

“Right now it does feel like I’ll ever have a bright day again,” Noah admitted, his finger trailing along the condensation on the glass of his chocolate malt.

“You will,” Holden reassured him. “It might be a cliché, but time does heal all wounds. I wanted to assure you that you’re not alone in this. If you ever need anyone to talk to, you can come to me or if you just need a shoulder to cry on. It’s okay to still shed tears for your mom. Sometimes out of nowhere I’ll still cry for my dad. You just never know when it’s going to sneak up on you.”

But Noah had cried so much already. He had to stop at some point.

“I need to start being strong.” His mom had been buried, so he should be focusing on moving forward with his life. He needed to pick himself up from the ashes, dust himself off and continue on.

“You have been strong, Noah,” Holden said, leaning forward. “I know some of the things you’ve been through. Some kids would fall apart; some would be bitter, but not you. You counted your blessings with your mom and made the most of your life. I have no doubt you’ll keep doing the same.”

He wondered just what Holden knew about his past. Most likely his mom had confided in Emma, who might have clued Holden in on beatings. “I’ll try.”

Noah’s cell phone beeped, singling that he had a new text message. He had to ball his hand up into a fist to stop himself from reaching for it. Checking his phone at the moment would be rude. Noah couldn’t be impolite to Holden, especially since he’d gone out of his way to try to make him feel better.


Noah nervously stirred the malt in front of him with his straw. “Probably.”

Holden nodded toward Noah. “Go ahead and check it.”

Even with Holden’s permission Noah still didn’t feel like he should check his message. “It can wait. Our lunch is probably going to be here any minute. I don’t want to be rude.”

Holden chuckled, “Knowing my son it can’t wait. He’ll probably send you ten more messages if he doesn’t hear from you soon.”

Nodding, Noah pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, flipping it open. Sure enough there was a text message from Luke which he immediately opened. The message made him smile and blush.
“I was right,” Holden said quickly picking up on Noah’s change of demeanor.


Same here

He quickly pocketed his phone. “Sorry about that.”

“There’s no need to apologize.”

Luke’s father was so unlike his own. The Colonel would never have allowed him to check his phone for a message from his boyfriend. But, then again, if the Colonel were still in his life he wouldn’t have a boyfriend. Noah never would have been able to be himself. Thank god his mom got him away from that man.

His mom…

The lump that formed in Noah’s throat threatened to choke him. He forced himself to push it aside and will the tears that were threatening away. Thankfully, the arrival of their burgers offered the perfect distraction. The food smelled incredible. And it tasted that way too.

Noah hadn’t realized that his appetite had come back in full force until he practically scarfed down his cheeseburger and fries in record time.

“It’s nice to see you eating again,” Holden said, looking up from his half eaten cheeseburger.

“I hadn’t realized that I was so hungry,” Noah sheepishly admitted as he wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“Mama will be happy to see that your appetite has returned.”

Noah nodded. One of the first things he learned about Emma was how much she liked to keep her brood well fed. “I’m sure she’s been thinking of ways to try to fatten me up.”

“Only because she cares,” Holden replied with a gentle smile. “We all care. Mama told me a little about your father, so I know he hurt you and your mom. I hope I can show you how a father should treat their son, because I’ve come to think of you as a son.”

Noah had always wanted a father like Holden. From the get-go he’d envied Luke’s relationship with his dad. They were so close. Holden seemed to be supportive of every aspect of Luke’s life. It still blew Noah away that Luke’s dad didn’t have a problem with him being gay. He just loved his son unconditionally.

Noah blinked back tears for the second time in less than an hour. “I-I-I’m honored,” he managed to choke out.
“I’m the one who should be honored that you’d want me as a father. I’m far from perfect,” Holden replied.

“So am I, but I know you have a big heart just like Luke.”

“My son’s big heart definitely belongs to you,” Holden informed him, which made Noah’s cheeks flush. “You’re good for him. You make him very happy. I’m going to tell you what I told him. I want you two to be careful and there’s no need to rush into anything.”

All Noah could do was nod because it was too late for that. They’d jumped in with both feet without a life preserver so to speak. He didn’t regret it though. He loved Luke and he knew that Luke loved him just as much.

“And I have to warn you that Luke can be a bit of a handful,” Holden said with a smirk which made also made Noah smile.

“Yeah, he can be, but I think he’s worth it.”

“I’m glad you think so. It’s only going to be a matter of time before he starts trying to convince you to go to Oakdale University in the fall.”

If only it were that easy. College still seemed like something that was out of his reach. “I don’t have a high school diploma,” he softly admitted.

“Once you get your GED you can apply to school,” Holden told him. “I know Luke would be more than happy to help you study for it.”

“But there are so many other factors to consider—namely money.”

Holden offered him a gentle smile. “Why don’t you concentrate on one thing at a time? First let’s make sure you get your GED and then we’ll worry about the next step. Sound like a plan?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I know you don’t want to work for me for the rest of your life,” Holden chuckled.

“I really enjoy it,” Noah insisted.

“But it’s not your dream and you deserve a shot to live out your dream.” Holden took one last sip of his malt. “Are you ready to head back so I can put you to work?”

“Yes, I am.”

Noah wanted to try to get back into his old routine. He hoped having a purpose would help. God knows he needed all of the help he could get.

********

“Did you get enough to eat?” Emma asked, placing a gentle hand on Noah’s shoulder. She had prepared quite the feast for Noah—pot roast, mashed sweet potatoes, rolls, and mixed vegetables.

“Yes, I did,” Noah replied as he stacked his silverware neatly on top of his plate. He’d actually had
two helpings of the potatoes which was one of his favorite Emma foods. “Everything was delicious.”

Emma took his plate from him. “Did you save room for dessert? I baked some oatmeal raisin cookies this afternoon.”

“I’m stuffed right now, but I might grab a cookie before bed,” Noah said, getting out of his seat. “Let me help you clean up.”

“Why don’t you start washing the dishes while I pack away the leftovers?”

Noah was relieved that she wasn’t coddling him. He wanted to be treated like normal because normal is what he desperately sought. He began to stack the dirty plates. “No problem.”

“I want you to feel at home here,” Emma said as she got some Tupperware out of the cupboard to put the leftovers into. “Feel free to help yourself to whatever is in the refrigerator. You can decorate your room any way you’d like. If you have pictures or posters you’d like to hang, please do.”

“Thank you,” he replied. There were some pictures he wanted to put on his nightstand, but he hadn’t taken them with him. He wasn’t ready to go back there alone. Hopefully that would change one day.

Emma packed away the leftovers into the refrigerator and then joined him at the sink to start drying them. “There are some house rules that I’d like to go over with you.”

“Okay,” Noah said, casting a sidelong glance at her.

“I know you’re eighteen, but I think you should have a curfew. One o’clock seems fair,” Emma said as she dried a plate.

One o’clock was Luke’s curfew so it worked out well for him. “Yes, it is.”

Emma took a deep breath. “I hope you think this is fair as well. If Luke is up in your room, the door needs to be wide open. I’m not just making this rule because you boys are gay,” she explained. “The same rule would apply if you had a girlfriend. I considered banning Luke from your room, but I thought that wouldn’t be fair to either of you. I’ll trust you as long as you don’t give me a reason not to.”

Noah nodded, keeping his eyes on the silverware he was washing. He was relieved that Emma trusted him. “I won’t let you down.”

Emma rubbed Noah’s back. “I know you won’t, sweetie. I want you to be happy here.”

“I will be.”

“Your mom told me where your birth certificate is so we can start making things official. You’ll need to get a driver’s license with your real name.”

His real name. The name his mom wanted him to use now. A chill coursed through his body. “I haven’t been Noah Mayer since I was thirteen,” he murmured.

“I also want you to think about getting your GED. You deserve to go to college so you can study filmmaking. I want you to live out your dream.”

“Holden said almost the same thing.”
Emma smiled. “I have a smart son. We all just want what is best for you.”

Noah nodded, getting a bit choked up. The Snyders really cared about him. He never thought that complete strangers could become his family. Ever since arriving in Oakdale Noah had learned so much about life and himself.

“Thank you for taking me in,” Noah said as he placed the last of the dishes on the counter. “I’ll make sure that you don’t regret it.”

“Oh, Noah,” Emma said, gently touching his cheek. “I’ll never regret my decision. I’m happy that I can help out. I know I’m not your mother, but I hope you can think of me as a grandmother.”

Noah threw his arms around her, showing her how much it meant to him that she felt that way by giving her a giant hug.

********

Luke sat at the usual lunch table, waiting for Maddie to arrive. He kept rereading Noah’s short text to him. Same here. Those two words meant so much to him. Noah meant so much to him. He hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d texted that he couldn’t stop thinking about Noah. And what they’d done at the cabin. He’d replayed every kiss, every caress. He had also written about it in his journal so to ensure that he’d never forget a moment of it.

“Hey, I didn’t expect to see you here today!” Maddie exclaimed, rushing over to the table.

Luke flipped his phone shut and pocketed it. “Trust me—I don’t want to be here, but I have a game tonight and Noah is working with my dad today…”

“How is Noah?” she asked, sliding into the chair across from him.

Luke’s cheeks flushed as a brief image of Noah naked beneath him flashed through his mind. “He’s…uh…hanging in there.”

“Luke, did something happen?” Maddie studied him for a moment. “Oh…my…you did, didn’t you?”

Shit. He did not want to have this conversation with Maddie right now. What he and Noah had shared was special even though it had been rushed and unplanned. Luke wanted to keep it special—keep it theirs.


“Oh my god!” she squealed. “Oh, Luke…”

“Can we just change to subject?” Luke asked, taking a bite of his sandwich.

“But I have so many questions. When? Where? Who…”

“We are not going there,” Luke insisted. No matter how dearly he loved Maddie he wasn’t going to
give her blow by blow details. And he definitely wasn’t going to satisfy her curiosity as to who
topped and who bottomed.

“Luke…”

“No. You already know too much.”

“But you’re one of my best friends.”

“And as such you need to respect my decision,” he countered. “I’m not going to kiss and tell. I
can’t do that to Noah. I love him way too much and he’s been through so much…”

Maddie held up her hand. “Okay…okay…I shouldn’t have asked. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, but if you’re so interested about the topic you should rent some gay porn then you can
see for yourself what goes where.”

“Not in this town,” Maddie laughed. Then she leaned across the table. “But I’m so—so happy for
you two.”

Luke couldn’t surprise his grin because he was pretty damn happy as well. “Thank you. I can’t wait
to see him again.”

“You guys need to go out on a date,” Maddie said as she unpacked her lunch. “He probably hasn’t
been out since…”

“New Years.”

“Oh, wow…”

Luke tapped the top of his Coke can. “Yeah, it’s been awhile. I’m not sure if he’s going to feel up
to going out.”

“You could always stay in and watch a movie,” Maddie suggested. “I have plenty of movies that
he’d love.”

“Let me think about it,” Luke murmured as various scenarios began to unfold in his head. Almost all
of them involved sex at some point. He shouldn’t be thinking about jumping his boyfriend when
said boyfriend had just lost his mom. Ugh…but he couldn’t help himself especially now that he
knew what it was like to fuck Noah.

“I’m here if you need any help or just anything.”

“You rock hard core, you know that?”

Maddie grinned broadly. “Yes, I do.”

********

Noah had been exhausted after cleaning up the kitchen, so he retired upstairs to his room. It had
been a busy day. He’d learned quickly that he wasn’t used to the manual labor at the stables. Even
though Holden had taken it easy on him the work had still taken its toll, especially coupled with all of
the emotion of the day—his first regular one without his mom.

Noah changed into a t-shirt and sweats and crawled underneath the covers of his bed. It felt so different from the one he had at the cabin. Actually, everything in the room had a different feel. He tried not to compare the two. Maybe he would take Emma up on her offer to add some personal touches to this room.

Yawning, he glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand. It was only eight o’clock. Somewhere Luke was on a basketball court at a high school whose name escaped him at the moment. Noah hoped that he was playing well. He felt bad that he wasn’t there to cheer him on like a good boyfriend. It had been ages since he’d been to one of Luke’s games. He’d definitely have to go to his next home game, which was next week according to Holden.

*I’ll find a way to make it up to Luke*, Noah decided as he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Noah was awakened a few hours later by his ringing cell phone. Blindly he grabbed it, flipping it open. “Hello,” he croaked.

“Shit. I woke you up, didn’t I?”


“We can talk tomorrow.”

“No…no…I wanna talk,” Noah quickly said as he propped himself up in bed. “How was your game?”

“We won, but I didn’t do so well—only five points.”

Luke didn’t have to say why he played badly. It was because of him. Noah closed his eyes. “Sorry.”

“Hey, don’t be,” Luke reassured him. “It was just one of those nights. We won which is the important thing. I’ll play better Friday. How are you?”

“I’m a little bit sore.”

“It was your first day back so it’s understandable.”

Noah was thankful that they were having this conversation over the phone so Luke couldn’t see how red his cheeks had become. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh….” The realization hit Luke.

“I hope we can do it again soon,” Noah told him.


“Yeah, it makes me feel close to you.”

“That’s so hot, Noah.”

“I hope we can do it again soon,” Noah told him.

“Thursday is Granma’s Bingo night. Maybe Jack will be working, or out, so we…”
“We can’t,” Noah cut him off. “Your grandma laid down some ground rules today. You’re only allowed in my room with the door wide open. I don’t want to betray her trust.”

“I think we need to have a date night then. How about Saturday? Grandma will allow us to go out on a date.”

“Dating is good and so is Saturday.”

“Great. We’ll come up with a plan before then—something that will give us some alone time. I need to let you get back to sleep,” Luke said. “I just wanted to hear your voice before I went to bed. I love you, baby.”

Noah smiled. “I love you, too.”

“Sweet dreams.”

“Same to you,” Noah said and then hung up the phone. He was already looking forward to Saturday.

*********

Luke drove to the farm—a large pizza from Bennidito’s, a six pack of Coke and a newly purchased DVD sitting in the passenger’s seat—ready for his date night at the cabin with Noah. He was still amazed that his grandma was allowing this to happen, given her rules about proper conduct in Noah’s bedroom. It did take some convincing on his part, not that he’d ever tell Noah how he had to pull out all the stops as well as the Snyder charm with his grandma. Good thing Emma Snyder couldn’t resist her grandson…

“What brings you here?” Emma asked, looking up from the sink. “Don’t you have school?”

“I do. I’m on my way there, but I wanted to talk to you first.”

Emma put down the dishrag she was holding and wiped her hands on her apron. “Is there something wrong?”

“No,” Luke said with his most angelic smile. “I just have a favor to ask you.”

“Something so important that brings you here at seven in the morning?”

“I think so. It’s about Noah.” Luke took a deep breath before plowing ahead. “I want to do something special for him. I was hoping that we could use the cabin for a movie night. And I know that you’ll suggest just watching a movie here, but I think this would be a good opportunity for Noah to have one last happy memory at the cabin.”


“Please…” Luke gave her his best puppy dog eyes. “Noah really needs this. I think it would do him a world of good. Maybe I can get him to start packing up the rest of their belongings. Please, Grandma…”
“Okay…just this once,” she finally relented. Emma placed a gentle hand on Luke’s arm. “The cabin isn’t a lovers’ retreat for you to use whenever you want. Noah will still have a curfew as I’m sure you will as well. Understand?”

Luke bit his lip in order to downplay his excitement. “Yes, just this one time.”

Emma smiled. “Noah’s mom told me that his feel good movie is Houseboat. It would probably be nice if you could rent it for him.”

His grandma was gold—24 karat.


“You’re welcome.” She gave his back a pat. “Now get to school. I don’t want you to be late.”

Noah seemed just excited as he was about their date, although his boyfriend wasn’t privy to the details of it yet. Luke wanted to surprise him with some alone time. Something they’d barely had since they’d had sex the day of Charlene’s funeral. Luke had gone to the farm for dinner after basketball practice one night. They hadn’t gone up to Noah’s room though because Luke knew he wouldn’t be able to behave himself. Luke never realized how difficult it was going to be being so close to Noah but have to keep his hormones in check.

Fucking torture.

Luke stopped off at the cabin before picking up Noah at the farmhouse. Using the borrowed key from his grandma, he unlocked it. He placed the pizza and the DVD on the kitchen table. Then he put the Coke in the refrigerator to keep it cold (although the cabin was chilly enough to do the job). Luke rectified this by turning up the thermostat.

Now to go pick up his boyfriend.

Luke felt a little silly driving his car across the farm, but he wanted to keep up the guise of going out on a date up for a little longer. He just hoped that Noah would be okay spending the evening at the cabin. There was a chance he might hate the idea, given all of the memories.

Telling his grandma that he wanted to make happy memories at the cabin for Noah hadn’t been a lie. Luke wanted Noah to focus on good times. He’d do anything to take Noah’s pain away.

Noah met Luke at the doorway, which was just fine with Luke, because he was sure if his grandma saw him this evening she’d figure out that he was up to no good. Well, probably no good in her eyes. Luke had a vastly different perspective on the situation.

“Hey,” Noah said, stepping outside and closing the door behind him. There was no denying the light in his boyfriend’s eyes.

And it was all for him, which made Luke smile so wide that his cheeks ached. “Hey.” He planted a quick kiss on Noah’s cheek before he took Noah’s hand, tugging him through the screen porch and out to his waiting car.

“So where are we going on this top secret date?”

“You’ll see,” Luke sing-songed as he let go of Noah’s hand so he could go around to the driver’s side of his car.
"I’m sure I’ll love whatever you have planned for us.”

Luke started the car. “Hope so.”

Noah glanced at Luke completely baffled as he parked the car in front of the cabin a few minutes later. “Luke, why are we here?”

“It’s…uh…where we’re going to have our date,” he said, nervously glancing at Noah. “There’s pizza from Bennidito’s inside waiting for us. I thought it would be nice to spend some time alone and…”

“What about Emma’s rules?”

“I cleared this with her,” Luke reassured him. “It’s a one shot deal though that expires at midnight.”

Noah frowned. “My curfew is one a.m. I thought yours was the same.”


“Yes, you are,” Noah said with a slight smile. “We should probably go inside so the pizza doesn’t get cold.”

“Oh my god—Houseboat,” Noah’s inner geek bubbled to the surface. “I love this movie! I always liked to watch this movie when I was feeling down.” His fingers played over the DVD as if it were a precious gem. “How did you know?” he asked, looking to Luke.


“Oh.” Noah’s eyes clouded over.

Luke pinched the bridge of his nose. “Shit. I probably should have picked something else. I wanted to cheer you up not make you upset.”

“No, Luke…no…I’m not upset. I was just wasn’t expecting your answer. I thought maybe Maddie had given you a suggestion since she knows my taste in movies. But I should know that my mom talked to Emma about me,” he said, setting the DVD back on the table. “I suppose it’s a good thing. It was sweet of your grandma to tell you about the movie.”

“I was going to ask Maddie if she had a copy, but if you love it so much I thought you should have one of your own.”


Noah squeezed him tightly. “You’ve done so much—god—you have no idea. Ummm…that pizza smells really good. Do you think we can eat now?”

Luke chuckled as he let go of Noah, relieved that Noah wanted to stay and eat. “Yeah. Did you want to eat at the table or in front of the TV while we watch the movie?”

“TV.”

“TV it is then. You can get the movie set up while I handle the food.”
The boys dealt with their tasks, meeting on the sofa a few minutes later ready to eat and enjoy the movie. They were huddled together with plates on their lap and cans of Coke in front of them on the coffee table—all the makings of an enjoyable evening together. Luke was happy to see that the smile had returned to Noah’s face.

Luke almost choked on his pizza when the opening credits appeared on the screen. “It’s in color?”

Noah slowly shook his head, obviously amused by his boyfriend. “Yes, you know there are plenty of great classic movies in color. Just because it’s old doesn’t mean it’s in black and white.”

“I thought you had an aversion to color films.”

“No I have an aversion to bad films.”

“Such a film snob.”

“Such a brat,” Noah countered, taking a bite of his pizza. He quickly swallowed his food. “Oh! That’s Carey Grant. He’s really great—handsome and suave. I always wished I could be more like him.”

“Is he gay?”

“There were rumors, but I don’t know for sure.”

“I think you’re much better looking than him and I love you just the way you are, Noah Mayer, so don’t try getting all suave and debonair on me.”

“I don’t think you’re going to have to worry about it,” Noah chuckled.

Once they were finished eating, they were able to do some serious cuddling on the sofa. Luke had his arm draped around Noah, allowing Noah to rest his head against him. Idly, Luke caressed Noah’s bicep while they watched the romantic comedy unfold. It was an enjoyable movie. He was surprised by how much he laughed during it. Maybe there was something to be said about the classics after all (although he wasn’t ready to admit this to Noah yet). He could see how the movie would lift Noah’s spirits with its humor, as well as the love story that unfolds (even if it was between a man and a woman).

“So?” Noah looked at him hopefully after the Carey Grant got his happy ending with Sophia Loren.

“I liked it.”

“I’m glad. I like being able to do this with you—share movies I love and see them through your eyes.”

“Even though I might have thought Carey Grant was a woman if I hadn’t seen him on screen?”


The kisses started out slow and teasing, allowing them to just enjoy being together. Noah slid his hand up the back of Luke’s sweater. Noah’s fingers on his skin were pure electricity. Moaning, Luke deepened their kiss. His cock was hard.

“Did you want to…?” Luke panted.
“Yeah.” Noah was already scrambling to his feet. “I do…”

Luke followed Noah into the bedroom; his heart was racing, just knowing that they were going to have sex again. This time he would make sure they took their time. He prayed that he would be able to last longer and not come so fucking fast, like he had the first time.

As Luke stepped inside the bedroom his eyes were drawn to the picture of him and Noah that Maddie took during the hayride at Noah’s birthday party—the same picture he had tacked up on his bulletin board. Noah’s photo of them was proudly displayed in the Popsicle frame that Faith had made him for his birthday. The quilt on Noah’s bed was still in disarray and the scent of sex lingered in the air. The smell made Luke incredibly horny. He just wanted to rip Noah’s clothes off, throw him on the bed and fuck him senseless.

So much for wanting to go slow…

Luke opened his mouth to say something—probably something profound, but before he could get the words out Noah was yanking Luke’s sweater over his head. Looked like he wasn’t the only horny one. Breathing heavily, Noah slowly raked his fingers through Luke’s chest hair. Noah really had a thing for his chest hair. Luke loved when he played it. His touch sent shivers through Luke’s body.


Noah’s eyes burned into his. “I want you too—inside me again.”

Luke whimpered. He couldn’t help himself. Hearing Noah speak remotely dirty was enough to make him spontaneously combust or come—he couldn’t decide which at the moment. He kicked off his shoes as he made short work of Noah’s jeans.

Noah loved seeing Noah hard for him. No one filled out pair of boxer briefs like his boyfriend. He was so damn lucky. He couldn’t wait to get Noah’s cock in his mouth.

Noah latched his mouth on Luke’s neck, his teeth grazing against his flesh. “Noah,” Luke moaned as his dick got even harder, which he thought wasn’t possible at this point. “My jeans are so fucking tight—need to get out of them.”

Taking Luke’s not so subtle hint, Noah released Luke from his suddenly uncomfortable jeans and underwear, allowing his leaking dick to bob free. Noah toed off his shoes as he took off his shirt and t-shirt while Luke attacked his underwear. Finally, they were naked.

Luke grabbed Noah’s hand and led him to the bed where they both laid down—Noah on his back and Luke stretched out next to him. This time Luke was going to worship every inch of Noah’s body. His eyes hungrily roamed over his boyfriend’s ultra long and lean body.


“You are—you don’t even realize how gorgeous you are. Just looking at you makes me hard.”

Luke started with a kiss on Noah’s lips but quickly licked a trail down his neck and to Noah’s nipple, teasing it with his teeth and tongue. He wanted to kiss every inch of Noah—remind Noah of how much he was loved. Kiss after kiss, Luke murmured how much he loved him. He dipped his tongue inside Noah’s navel before following Noah’s treasure trail which led to the ultimate gem. Noah’s large, perfect cock.
Luke licked a long, wet strip along Noah’s shaft which made his boyfriend moan—loudly. Luke liked loud. And he loved sucking Noah’s dick, but he needed to be careful not to make Noah come. Tonight he just wanted to make him extra hot before he fucked him. Noah slid his fingers through Luke’s hair, as Luke wrapped his lips around the head, lapping up the precome that was leaking from the slit.

“Luke…”

Noah was close enough. “I need lube,” Luke said, lifting his mouth from Noah’s dick.

The requested tube landed next to him with a soft thud. Luke wasted no time getting his fingers slicked up. He couldn’t wait to be buried balls deep inside Noah’s tight heat. Holy fuck was he ever tight. Carefully Luke eased a lubed finger inside Noah to loosen him up a bit.

“Do you think you can find that…?” Noah’s words were swallowed by a throaty groan.

“This spot?” Luke feigned innocence as he massaged Noah’s prostate. He loved how Noah’s eyes practically rolled into the back of his head.

Noah couldn’t answer. All he could do was moan and writhe as Luke was worked his magic. At least Noah thought it was magic. Luke hoped all of the studying he’d done on gay sex was paying off. He inserted another finger, doubling Noah’s pleasure from the sound of it.

“How are you doing?” Luke asked. “Are you ready for me?” He prayed the answer would be yes, because he was aching to get inside of him.

“Yes.”

Luke withdrew his fingers, snatching the lube and going to work on his cock making sure that it was nice and slick. “Did you want to try a different position?” he asked.

“Is it okay if we do it this way?” Noah asked. “I know it’s probably boring, but I want to see your face.”

“It’s definitely not boring. I don’t think it could ever get boring.” Luke positioned himself between Noah’s legs.

“Hope not.”

“Never,” Luke reassured him as he slowly slid his cock inside of Noah.

He swore this time felt better than the first, if it were even possible. Noah was still hot and tight around him, which made Luke want to come right that second. However, he willed himself not to. There was so much more to savor.

Opening his eyes, Luke gazed into Noah’s which were mostly pupil with a hint of vibrant sapphire blue. “Oh, Noah…” Luke was overcome with so much love for his boyfriend.

“Feels…so…good…” Noah groaned.

That was all Luke needed to hear. He began to make love to Noah with slow, long strokes. Noah’s hips lifted off the mattress to match his pace. Luke kept his eyes locked onto Noah’s as Noah wrapped his legs around Luke’s waist, pulling him deeper inside.
All thoughts of going slow vanished. Coming became Luke’s sole focus. He rocked his hips harder, getting ever closer to an orgasm. Reaching between them, he sought out Noah’s dick, pumping it in time with his thrusts until Noah cried out, shooting all over his stomach and Luke’s hand. Luke wasn’t far behind him, his own climax so long and intense.

This only confirmed what he’d told Noah before—sex would never get boring. He couldn’t imagine not wanting to share this feeling with Noah.

Luke pulled out of him, rolling to the side while Noah grabbed some tissues from the nightstand to clean them up with. Once most of the come was mopped up, Noah burrowed into Luke’s waiting arms.

“I love this—just laying here naked with you. It feels so perfect. I wish we could spend the night together,” Luke said, his fingers playing over Noah’s arm. “I’d love to hold you all night the way you held me in the truck when we were trapped in Wisconsin.”

“That wasn’t how I pictured spending the night with you.”

“Me neither. It was so cold.”

“The next time we spend the night together—and I promise you that there will be a next time—it will be in a warm bed with lots of covers.”

“Are you a cover hog?” Noah asked with a hint of amusement in his voice.

“I don’t know. I never shared a bed with anyone, but I like my fair share.”

“You’re a cover hog.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Luke teased.

“I’d love to know.”

“I bet you snore.”

“I do not. You probably drool.”

“You bet I do—all over my boyfriend’s hot body,” Luke snickered, placing a sloppy kiss on the top of Noah’s head.

Noah groaned. “Ugh…corny, Snyder…very corny.”

Luke smiled, so happy that Noah was relaxed and enjoying himself. He didn’t seem to be haunted by the memories of his mom, like he’d been the last time they were there. Maybe Noah was ready to take another step forward.

Luke took a deep breath. “You know, you can take some pictures and things back to the farmhouse with you. It might help make you feel more at home. You don’t have to pack up the entire place…”

“No,” Noah interrupted him. “I do have to pack everything. I’m ready. I’m ready to do it. It’s time to move forward.”

Luke kissed the top of Noah’s head—so proud of his boyfriend.
Chapter 73

Being back in Old Town felt good, especially since Noah was there hand in hand with Luke. It was busy with Sunday shoppers, milling about the cobblestone walkways. Today they weren’t there to shop—at least not at the moment, but Noah planned on persuading Luke to make a trip over to The Book Emporium afterward. The reason for their trip to Old Town was lunch at Al’s.

Noah was a bit uneasy about going to Al’s so soon after his mother’s passing. It was a place that he’d forever link with her. He knew that he couldn’t avoid going there, especially today. The fundraiser that Henry and Vienna had told him about at the funeral was taking place.

Noah’s first instinct had been not to go. He didn’t know if he could handle being in his mom’s former workplace surrounded by her co-workers, who were trying to raise money for him. He didn’t want to be pitied or put on display.

Luke had reassured him that neither of those things would happen. They’d meet Maddie and Casey for lunch just like any other day. No pressure—just a meal with friends.

Noah stopped short once they rounded the corner. There was a line out the door at Al’s. It couldn’t be because…

No, it couldn’t. Not a chance.

“Good thing we know the owners,” Luke said, giving Noah’s hand a squeeze. “Your mom was quite popular.”

“Yeah,” Noah murmured as they approached the diner. He was still trying to take it all in.

In the window of the Al’s hung a sign advertising the fundraiser for their beloved “Gloria” who would forever be in their hearts. The tips and proceeds from the event would go toward her son’s college fund. All these people were there to help and maybe even honor his mother’s memory.

Luke led a bewildered Noah through the waiting masses into a very crowded diner. Every seat was filled, including the ones at the counter. Noah had never seen it so busy and the reason why it was this way was overwhelming.

His mom. Mom the word still twisted into his heart like a dagger. It hurt so badly. Noah was sure the pain would never go away.

He had to keep it together though. A breakdown in the middle of Al’s was something that he wanted to avoid.

“Over here!” Maddie called, waving frantically in their direction as she vacated the half booth she was sitting in to greet them.

They wove their way over to Maddie and Casey’s table. “This place is crazy. I’m so glad you guys saved us a spot.”

“Noah’s mom was very popular,” Maddie said, throwing her arms around Noah and hugging him tightly. “I’m so happy you could make it.” She placed a kiss on his cheek.

“Hey, boyfriend here,” Casey spoke up.

Maddie rolled her eyes as she marched over to Luke, promptly hugging him and then giving him a kiss on the cheek as well.

“Hey, boyfriend still here,” Casey piped up again.

“And here,” Noah added as he slid into the half booth that Maddie had been sitting in.

“Don’t worry,” Luke said, flashing Noah a dimpled grin. “I could never forget about you.” He joined Noah on the bench seat while Maddie slid into the chair next to Casey. Luke laced his fingers through Noah’s as if to emphasize the point.

“How about me?” Casey asked, turning to Maddie. “Aren’t I unforgettable?”

Maddie bestowed him with a quick kiss. “You are a rare gem.”

Before Noah could pick up a menu, Vienna was at their table having fluttered her way through the packed diner with the grace of a butterfly.

“Noah dear, you’re here!” she exclaimed. Vienna gave him a loud kiss on the cheek which left behind a bright red lip print. “You’re our guest today—order whatever you like! That goes for all of you!” She gestured lavishly at the table.

“Don’t let Henry hear that,” Maddie said, peering up from her menu. “He’s liable to have a coronary.”

“You leave Henry to me,” Vienna smirked. “I picked up the cutest little French Maid outfit the other day…”

“Hot.” Casey grinned broadly.

“Please, say no more,” Maddie pleaded. “This is way more information than any of us needs to know.”

“Madelyn, there’s nothing wrong with a little adventure,” Vienna replied, flipping her long, dark locks over her shoulder. “What’s the saying—variety is the slice of life…”


“Spice.” Vienna nodded. “Henry and I definitely have the spice. He’s hotter than…”

“I think we should order,” Maddie quickly cut her off.

Noah was a little disappointed that she’d done that. He was mildly curious as to what Henry Coleman could possibly be hotter than. Maddie’s brother certainly didn’t come across as some wild sexual animal, more like a cuddly sort of flamboyant teddy bear. Looks must be deceiving in this case Noah decided.

“All right,” Vienna sighed. “I can take your order. Remember the sky is the limit.”

Vienna rushed off after taking their orders. Maddie breathed a sigh of relief upon her brother’s girlfriend’s departure as she placed her menu in the holder at the center of their table.

“Who would have thought good ole Henry was such a horn dog?” Casey chuckled which promptly triggered the stink eye from Maddie. “What? Henry likes the theatrics…big deal…it’s not like it’s
whips and chains…well…that we know of…”

“Casey,” Maddie hissed.

“I’m sure he’s not into that,” Luke added.

“Not you too,” Maddie groaned. Then she shot Noah a stern look. “Don’t you even think about it.”

Noah held up his free hand in mock surrender. “I didn’t say a word.”

"Make sure it stays that way.”

Luke had been right when he’d reassured Noah that coming here was a good idea. Noah had been so sure he’d be sad. He wasn’t though. Well…not any more than usual. How could he be miserable when he was surrounded by his friends as well as so much love?

Al’s was filled with people who wanted to help someone who’d ended up in Oakdale by accident. If their car hadn’t broken down he might be in Galesburg alone or god knows where. One thing he knew for certain he’d never would have had this—friends and a boyfriend.

Noah squeezed Luke’s hand. He didn’t even want to fathom what his life would have been like if he hadn’t met Luke Snyder. And he never wanted to find out.

********

The following week after the benefit at Al’s had been a whirlwind for Noah. Holden kept him busy at the stables, it being extra busy with Magic, whom he said would probably be foaling in a month and a half. Noah picked up the slack the best he could—receiving deliveries, handling some of the calls, and even making travel arrangements for Holden to attend a horse show in Kentucky. He was happy that Holden counted on him.

Noah had also attended Luke’s home basketball games on Tuesday and Friday. They lost on Tuesday, but won on Friday. Alone time during the week had been scarce. Luke had to go right home after the weekday game since it was a school night. The other nights, whether they were at Luke’s parents’ house or at the farm, there were constant interruptions—sisters, parents, grandmothers—even homework.

It was almost enough to throw Noah over the edge. Being with Luke again was all he could think about (at least for the most part when he wasn’t missing his mom). Only being able to hold Luke’s hand this past week was torture. Noah ached for more. He wanted to kiss Luke, touch him, and he really wanted to find out what it was like to fuck him. They still had so much to explore together.

After Luke’s basketball game the night before, they’d gone to El Perro de Risa for dinner. Luke had wanted to introduce him to a new restaurant in that wasn’t located in Old Town. The food was delicious, the atmosphere fun, but trying to steal some time alone with Luke had been foremost on his mind. Turned out it was on Luke’s mind too. So a trip to Pine Road was in order before their curfew.

Parked on the dark, deserted, dirt road the passenger’s seat was reclined, Luke was on top of him. Noah had his hand down Luke’s pants, wrapped around Luke’s hard cock while Luke sucked on Noah’s earlobe whispering about all the ways he wanted to get Noah off.
It was perfect.

Until headlights raked through Luke’s Mustang like a set of prying eyes. Luke had done his best to get back over to the driver’s side, but they were busted by none other than Detective Jack Snyder.

Noah was certain he’d never be able to look the man in the eyes again, even though Jack had been pretty cool about the situation, just telling them to get back to the farm and stay off Pine Road in the future.

So much for their special hideaway.

Now they were alone again. This time it was in the cabin in the middle of the day surrounded by empty boxes which were waiting to be filled—filled with everything that he and his mom had owned—filled with memories. Noah didn’t even know where to start. Actually he’d rather drag Luke over to the sofa and kiss him silly.

So…so…tempting…

Luke came up behind him, wrapping his arms around Noah’s waist and resting his chin on Noah’s shoulder. “Are you sure you’re up for this, baby?”

“Yeah.”

“It hasn’t been that long since your mom—if you wanted to wait, we can.” Luke placed a kiss on Noah’s shoulder.

“I want you to be happy. I want you to live the life you always dreamed about. I want you to get your GED or high school diploma. Then you’ll be able to go to college. You can make movies, and you can have a wonderful boyfriend who loves you so much…”

“She’d want me to get this done—live my life. Which I can’t really do as long our stuff is still here like nothing happened,” Noah said, leaning back into Luke’s chest, drawing from Luke’s strength.

“Okay.” Luke kissed his cheek and then let go of him. “We should probably pack the stuff according to whether you want to store it or use it at the farmhouse.”

“Good idea.”

Luke strolled over to the end table, picking up the framed photo of Noah when he was five. “This definitely needs to be displayed. I love this picture of you,” he said, gazing at the picture. “It’s too adorable to tuck away. Grandma will happily display it with the other family photographs.”

Noah looked over Luke’s shoulder at the picture. He’d love that stuffed puppy so much. It was the closest thing he’d had to a real one. “That’s Patches and me,” he quietly explained. “I loved that stuffed puppy to pieces.”


“My father hated it,” Noah found himself admitting aloud. “He didn’t think I should have it. My mother fought hard so I could keep it—it worked for a while, but then one day it disappeared…” his voice faltered.


“That man was such a monster,” Noah said through gritted teeth as he dropped onto the sofa. “I was
just a little kid, but he thought I should be a man—nothing I ever did was right…”

Luke put the photo on the coffee table and sat next to him, placing his hand on Noah’s thigh. “You didn’t do anything wrong and your mom got you away from him.”

“But what if she hadn’t?” Noah asked, turning toward Luke. “What if I grew up with him? What if I ended up stuck with him?” The mere thought of that horrid scenario made his chest tighten. “I-I never would have been able to admit that I was gay. He’d probably force me to enlist. And I never would have met you…”

Luke rested his forehead against Noah’s. “None of that happened though. You’re free from that awful man.”

Noah was free but so much damage still lingered. There were so many things he just didn’t understand. “Why didn’t he love me?” he choked, a tear rolling down his cheek.


But Luke pulled away. “We…need…to…stop,” he said, breathing heavily.

Noah gaped at him, a bit stunned. *Stop?* The word wasn’t registering.

Luke traced Noah’s swollen lips with his thumb. “I don’t want to stop. I want you,” he said, placing Noah’s hand on his jean clad erection. “I really want you, but my parents or grandma could come busting in here at any moment. We can’t risk that.”

“You’re right.” Noah mentally kicked himself for not being logical. The last thing he needed was to do something that would upset Luke’s family, especially since they’ve been so kind to him.

“We’ll find a way to be alone—really alone. I promise.”

Noah nodded. He trusted Luke. “We should probably start packing,” he said, hoisting himself up off the sofa. “Let’s start in this room.” He reached down and picked up the photograph from the coffee table. “I’d be honored if Emma put this out with her other pictures.”

Luke kissed his cheek. “She will.”

The boys buckled down and started packing. Noah put Luke to work on the DVDs and the DVD player which would definitely be heading to his room at the farmhouse. While Luke was busy in the living room, Noah was in his old bedroom packing up the rest of his clothes. Emma stopped by to give the kitchen one last go through, making sure all perishable food was dealt with as well as boxing up anything that was still useable. She had offered to take the linens from the bedrooms but, thankfully, Luke had his wits about him and told her that they’d take care of it. No need to have Emma dealing with come stained bedding from Noah’s room which could be quite embarrassing.

Before Emma left, she’d told them that Holden would be by later to help move the boxes to the farmhouse. There was one room left to tackle—his mom’s bedroom. Noah’s gut seized up at the prospect of going in there.

Noah stood in the doorway of his mom’s room, but not stepping inside of it. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he quietly confessed to Luke. “It’s not even like I spent time with my mom in
“But it’s still your mom’s room.”

“It’s still my mom’s room,” Noah echoed.

Luke took Noah’s hand. “Come on, I’ll be right there with you. If you need to talk I’ll listen. If you need to cry, I’ll hold you. You’re not alone.”

Nodding, Noah allowed Luke to lead him into the bedroom. The bed was made—there were a few empty boxes resting on it. Next to it on the nightstand were a couple of pictures—one of Noah from his most recent birthday and the other Lily had taken of them before the Hobble Gobble Ball. Both had been special days for him for different reasons.

Luke must have realized what Noah was looking at because he said, “Those are great pictures. We’ll have to find places to put them.”

“Yeah.”

“May I?” Luke asked, touching one of the frames. Noah nodded. “I’ll put these in the proper box.”

“Thanks,” Noah murmured, drifting toward the closet.

More like Pandora’s box.

Noah didn’t want to open it. His mom’s belongings were inside. Her clothes—the stuff she managed to take from their old life—things that made his mother his mom.

Noah placed his hand on the knob of the bifold door, closing his eyes, willing himself not to fall apart.

“Noah?”

“I just need a minute,” Noah snapped.

“I’m sorry. I can leave you alone.”

“No, I’m sorry. You’ve been nothing but wonderful. I’m an ass…”

“No.” Luke’s hand was on his back. “I know I wouldn’t be able to keep it together like you. You’re so strong, Noah.”

“If I’m so strong, how come I can’t open the damn closet door?”

“Because inside that closet is your last link to your mom.”

Yes, it was.

Noah needed to clean out this closet or else he’d never be able to move on. So before Luke could say another word, Noah opened the closet. The scent of his mom wafted out of it, knocking him back a couple of steps. It felt as if she were in the room with him, but it was impossible. She was gone—buried in the Oakdale Cemetery. Through tear-filled eyes Noah touched the sleeve of his mom’s faded navy blue sweater, which she’d had as long as he could remember. He brought the sleeve to his nose and inhaled, wanting to sear her aroma into his brain forever.

God…he missed her so—so much.
Noah let the sleeve slip from his fingers. “I-I…want to give her clothes…” He took a deep breath. “I want to give her clothes to Emma so she can donate them to the Ladies Aid at her church. They’ve done so much for my mom and me. I want to try to give back.”

“Are you sure?” Luke asked, rubbing Noah’s back. “Do you want to keep anything?”

“I-I’m sure. I want to donate all of it.”

“Gram is going to be happy. It’s such a nice gesture.”

Together they removed the clothes from the hangers, folding them and packing them away in the boxes. Glancing up at the shelf in the closet, Noah spotted a box, which he reached up and pulled down. Noah put the box on the bed next to the others.

“Do you know what’s in there?” Luke asked.

“I’m not sure,” Noah admitted. “I know my mom grabbed what she could before we left my father, but I really didn’t want to have anything to do with that life. I wanted to forget it—and him.”

“Understandable,” Luke said, sitting next to the box on the bed.

“I was with my mom so I had everything as far as I was concerned,” Noah said as he opened the box.

Inside sitting on top of a photo album was Ultimate Manilow, which was the CD that his mom had always made sure was queued up to Ready to Take a Chance Again before they embarked on their next adventure. He took it out of the box ready for the crack that was sure to come from Luke.

And it did.


“It wasn’t mine.”

“I certainly hope not.”

“There’s a song on here that my mom liked to sing—she made me join her before we headed to the next town,” Noah explained. “We sang it before we came here.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have…”

“No, it’s okay. I typically don’t listen to Barry Manilow.”

“Well…the CD is a keeper, just because.”

Noah smiled, happy that Luke understood. “Right…just because…” He set the CD on the bed.

The next item was an old cigar box that contained all their fake IDs—Luke Walker, Curt Henderson, Tony Carlson—names he’d never have to use again because he was Noah Mayer now. Amongst the IDs was a piece of paper which Noah unfolded. It was his birth certificate. His real birth certificate.

Noah Andrew Mayer.

“I’m going to need this,” Noah said, holding it up for Luke to see.

Noah rolled his eyes. “What’s your middle name?”


“Oh?” Noah raised his eyebrows.

“It’s Luciano Eduardo Snyder. Well…it was Grimaldi at first, but changed to Snyder when I was eight and Holden officially adopted me.”

“That’s quite a mouthful,” Noah replied. “Luciano—sounds like you should be a prince somewhere.”

“Damian wanted me to be his prince—his perfect heir—signet ring and all,” Luke explained. “But I’m a Snyder. Damian can’t change that or me.”

“Good, because I like you the way you are, Luke Snyder.”

“What else is in that box?” Luke asked quickly changing the subject.

“A photo album,” Noah said, lifting the old album out of the box, but something at the bottom of the box grabbed his attention before he could open the photo album.

A small brown stuffed puppy.

_Patches._

Noah put the photo album down and reached for the stuffed animal. “Oh my god,” he murmured.

“What is it?”

“It’s Patches,” he sniffed, tears spilling from his eyes.

“The stuffed dog from the picture?”

Noah nodded. “I thought he was gone. My mom must have saved him. I had no idea…” his voice faltered. Luke must think he was crazy getting so emotional over a stuffed animal. Patches was more to him than that though. He’d gotten Noah through some terrifying nights. “Wow,” he murmured, wiping his eyes.

“We’ll put him in the box that goes to your room,” Luke said, reaching across the box and touching Noah’s hand.

“I’m eighteen. I shouldn’t be hanging onto a silly stuffed animal,” Noah replied. If the Colonel had seen him react to Patches just now, his father would have come unhinged.

“Hey, there’s nothing silly about Patches. I can see how much he means to you.”

“When I was little I was afraid of thunderstorms. The Colonel forbade me from coming into their bedroom at night if I was scared. He wouldn’t even let my mom stay with me in my room,” Noah said, staring down at the stuffed puppy in his hands. “All I had was Patches to protect me.”

“Now he’ll keep protecting you.”

“Isn’t that your job?” Noah asked with a sly smile.
“I’m willing to share it with Patches.” Luke leaned across the box and gave him a quick kiss.

“Deal.”

Noah repacked the box which would definitely be going to his room at the farmhouse. The rest of the boxes in the room would be donated. As he sealed the final box in the bedroom, it felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He just hoped that his mom was smiling down on him.

“Hello?” Holden’s voice came from the other room.

“We’re in here, Dad!” Luke called.

Holden poked his head in the room. “Are you ready to start moving boxes?”

Luke glanced at Noah, allowing him to make the call.

“Ready,” Noah said.

********

“You want to do something with Noah and me today?”

There was no mistaking the surprise in Luke’s voice. Holden hadn’t thought it was such an off the wall suggestion. Noah had been working hard at the stables since his mom’s death. Holden also knew that packing up the cabin hadn’t been easy on him, but he’d gotten the job done with Luke’s help.

“I didn’t realize it was such an odd request,” Holden replied, taking a sip of his Sunday morning coffee.

“It’s not—not really.”

“Can I come too?” Faith asked, peering up from her pancakes.

“I think Daddy wants to do something just with the boys this time, sweetie,” Lily said, stroking Faith’s long hair. “But you, Natalie, and I can spend the day together. We can go shopping or to the movies...”

“What about Ethan?” Natalie piped up.

“I can see if one of your grandmother’s can look after him while we have a girl’s day,” Lily replied.

Holden set down his coffee mug. “Do you think you and your boyfriend can humor your old man for an afternoon?”

Luke smiled. “Yeah, I think we can, but I’ll have to check with Noah.” He got up from his chair, pulling his cell out of his pocket to call his boyfriend.

“I think it’s a great idea that you want to spend the day with the boys,” Lily said once Luke was out of the room. “It’s been awhile since you’ve done something fun with Luke.
“I also want to show Noah that I can be more than a boss to him.”

“You boss Noah around like Luke bosses me around?” Natalie asked wide-eyed.

“Hey,” Luke said, as he strolled back into the room, cell in hand. “I heard that.”

“It’s true,” Faith added. “You’ve very bossy, but I’m sure that Dad is much nicer to Noah.”

“I’ll remember that the next time you shrimps want me to take you out for ice cream,” Luke said, sliding back into his chair. “Noah would love to do something with us. I told him to come over.”

“Good.”

“What are your big plans?”

Holden folded his napkin and placed it on the table. “You’ll just have to wait until Noah gets here.”


Luke gave him what Holden liked to refer to as his little lost puppy look that usually worked with Mama or Lily. Not so much with him though. But, it had taken him awhile to build up an immunity to it, especially when Luke was small boy.

“Nope.” Holden grabbed his dirty plate, taking it over to the sink to rinse off.


How come Holden wasn’t surprised?

********

After Holden helped Lily clean up the kitchen, he found Luke and Noah huddled together on the sofa watching TV. Natalie was parked right next to Noah, chatting about one of the girls in her class while Noah listened intently. Faith had been relegated to one of the armchairs, but it hadn’t stopped her from adding her two cents. His girls had such a crush on Noah. It was sweet, even though he knew his son didn’t think so. All Luke could see was his pain in the ass sisters trying to muscle in on his precious time with his boyfriend. Holden knew how his son’s mind worked. It wasn’t any different than any other young man in love.

Ever since Noah came into their lives, Luke’s mind became focused on Noah. Luke was so in love. It was mutual with Noah. Holden would have to be blind not to see it. The looks they gave each other, the way names were spoken, and how they couldn’t seem to keep their hands off each other for long—even if it was a subtle brush here and there. They probably thought they were being quite sneaky.

Holden has noticed that now there’s an intimacy between them that hadn’t been there before. He didn’t have to worry about either of them getting pregnant—just broken hearts. They still seemed so young and innocent—especially Noah.

Noah put Luke up on a pedestal. Holden hoped that Luke wouldn’t crack under the pressure. His son is far from perfect. Luke had his demons, as well as made his far share of mistakes. Actually, no one was perfect, but Holden reckoned he’d have a difficult time trying to convince Noah otherwise.
“Hi, Noah,” Holden said as he approached the sofa.

Noah quickly put a couple of extra inches between him and Luke which almost made Holden chuckle aloud. He never understood why they didn’t think they could show any sort of affection in front of him or any other adult family members.

“Hi, Holden. Thank you for inviting me out with you and Luke. It was so nice of you,” Noah said in one long rushed sentence.

*It’s okay. Breathe, Noah,* Holden wanted to tell him.

“I’m happy you could join us,” he said instead.

“What are we doing, Dad?” Luke asked…more like whined.

“I wanted to take you guys to see the Bulls play today, but they’re in Portland playing the Trailblazers,” Holden explained.

“We should just hop on Grandmother’s jet and catch the game in Portland,” Luke joked.

Holden chuckled. “Very funny, but we need to be realistic about this.”


“We could still venture into the big city today. The Bulls might not be in town, but the Blackhawks are playing the Red Wings. There are three lower bowl tickets waiting for us at Will Call if you guys are game,” Holden told them.

“I’ve never been to a hockey game before,” Noah admitted. “I think it would be fun.” He glanced at Luke as if seeking his approval.

“Yeah, it sounds like a good time,” Luke agreed. “Can we get some deep dish pizza while we’re in the city?”

Holden grinned. “A trip to Chicago wouldn’t be complete without it.”

********

Holden decided to take Lily’s silver Cadillac CTS instead of his pickup. The Caddy would be more comfortable for the hour or so ride into downtown Chicago. Ideally, he would have taken the Yukon, but it had Ethan’s car seat and Natalie’s booster which Lily would need for her outing. Luke wasn’t happy when Holden insisted that Luke ride in the front seat instead of the back with Noah. You’d have thought he’d asked Luke to drive separately.

Before the game they went to Giordano’s for stuffed pizza. They had the special stuffed pizza along with an order of garlic bread. The boys and he finished everything on the table, leaving the restaurant stuffed to the gills.

Their seats at the United Center for the game were great—row 3 on the blue line. Noah was a bit awestruck by them, but Luke took their close proximity to the ice in stride.

“Are you going to root for the Red Wings?” Luke asked, giving Noah a friendly nudge with his
shoulder once they were situated in their seats. “I’ve seen you wearing a Wings t-shirt.”

“To sleep in.”

“It’s probably best you don’t root for the Red Wings. I’d hate to see you disappointed when they lose,” Luke teased.

“Care to place a friendly wager on that?” Noah challenged Luke.

“Only if the prize is something extra special,” Luke said in a low voice.

Holden quickly tuned out the rest of the conversation, not really wanting to know what the stakes were for the bet. He focused on the Blackhawks program he’d picked up, trying to familiarize himself with the team. Baseball was his sport of choice.

Holden had forgotten how much he enjoyed hockey. It didn’t take long for Luke and Noah to really get into the game, each cheering for a different team which led to a lot of trash talk between them. Holden even got in some good-natured jabs as well.

And even though the Blackhawks ended up losing to the Red Wings, they still had a wonderful time. There were laughs, a great game and some really delicious pizza. Holden didn’t feel like he’d spent the afternoon with his son and his son’s boyfriend—no—Noah also felt like his son as well. Holden now had four boys whom he loved dearly.

So much so that he allowed Luke to talk him into playing chauffeur so Luke could sit in the backseat with Noah. Maybe he wasn’t so immune to those brown eyes after all. As Holden drove along the highway with Billy Joel singing Just the Way You Are, he glanced in the rearview mirror discovering Luke and Noah snuggled together, sleeping like a couple of puppies in a basket, Luke’s head rested against Noah’s shoulder and Noah’s cheek laid on top of Luke’s head.

This wasn’t puppy love. It was first love. First love usually didn’t last though. He didn’t want to see something as special as this destroyed. Holden wanted Luke and Noah to last, but they were so young.

But, then again, so were he and Lily when they fell in love. Holden was still with his first true love. Mistakes were made, hearts broken, but they fought for each other. It had all been worth it.

“Always take care of each other,” Holden murmured to the sleeping boys in the backseat of the car.
Chapter 74

“I’m not going,” Luke said, folding his arms across his chest and digging his heels in for one hell of a fight with his parents. He was ready to stand his ground though. No matter what it took. His parents couldn’t make him spend his mid-winter break from school with them on a family vacation. They couldn’t expect him to leave Noah for four whole days. Noah still needed him.

“This is a family vacation,” Lily reminded him. “You’re still part of this family. You’re going. It’s tradition.”

There was no way in hell that Luke was going to northern Michigan with them. He didn’t care if it was tradition—traditions were usually broken at some point. Luke wanted to spend his mid-winter break with his boyfriend.

“I’m not leaving Noah,” Luke insisted, staring down his parents. “He’s family and he’s not going.”

“That’s because your father needs Noah to take care of things at the stables,” Lily countered. “We haven’t been away as a family in a long time. You really can’t expect us to allow you to stay here alone…”

“Lily.” Holden placed his hand on his wife’s shoulder. “Maybe this one time we can let Luke stay behind. Noah could probably use the extra help with the horses.”

Luke fought the urge to jump up and down like his name had just been called as a contestant on *The Price is Right*. Holden was the best dad ever. Still…he couldn’t celebrate quite yet. His mom has been known to be pretty stubborn.

“Next year Luke will be going to college,” Lily countered. “This could be our last chance for a family vacation.”

“There’s always the summer,” Luke lamely offered. Although he was pretty sure he wasn’t going to want to spend the last summer before he went to college vacationing with his family…well…unless maybe Noah was part of the equation.

“Maybe we could rent a cabin in Kentucky on that lake you like so much, Lily,” Holden suggested. “We could include Noah as well,” he added for Luke’s benefit which made him smile.

“Fine…fine.” Lily threw up her hands in defeat. “I’m going on record as not being thrilled with leaving you alone for an entire weekend.”

“Mom,” Luke whined, “I’m not a kid. I can take care of myself. I promise not to burn the house down while you guys are gone.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” Lily muttered, straightening the throw pillows on the family room sofa.

Right. Luke knew exactly what she was worried about—her son having a wild orgy with his boyfriend.

“Mama will be around to keep an eye on Luke,” Holden reminded her.

“I thought she was going to Chicago that weekend to see *Wicked* with her senior group?” Lily countered.
“It’s just a day trip. Don’t you worry,” Holden said.

“See, I won’t starve,” Luke said, trying but failing to keep all of the sarcasm out of his voice.

Lily glanced from her son to her husband, knowing that she was fighting a losing battle. “All right… all right,” she conceded, folding her arms across her chest. “I know when I’m out numbered.”

Luke threw his arms around his mom. “Thank you!”

“Don’t think this gets you out of a family vacation,” she told him, hugging him tightly. “This summer we will be going on one. No excuses.”

“No excuses,” he assured her. Luke made eye contact with his dad and mouthed a silent ‘thank you’ for his help.

********

Luke was convinced that his grandma was out to give him a fatal case of blue balls. He thought that once his parents were off on their ski trip Noah would be finally be naked in his bed. But Emma Snyder had other ideas…

“There’s no reason why you and Noah can’t watch a movie here at the farm,” Emma said when Luke showed up at the farmhouse to whisk Noah away for an evening of debauchery in Luke’s bedroom.

“She’s right,” Noah added much to Luke’s dismay. “We can watch The Empire Strikes Back or whatever you want. It will be fun.” He offered Luke a weak smile.

Traitor.

“But…” Luke was prepared to plead his case.

Emma wouldn’t have it though. “I have a big pot of spaghetti on the stove. You boys can have dinner and then enjoy your movie. I’ll even pop you some old fashioned popcorn.”

Noah was still smiling, his eyes begging Luke just let it go. Noah wasn’t about to make any waves with Emma, especially so soon after his mom’s death.

Luke sighed, knowing that he was defeated. “Sure, sounds great.”

“Good.” Emma smiled. “You boys can set the table while I finish preparing dinner.”

“Sorry,” Noah whispered once Emma was out of earshot.

“You’ll make it up to me,” Luke whispered back.

It took a bit of coaxing, but Luke managed to get Noah to cuddle on the sofa in the parlor. Holding Noah’s hand, playing with his long fingers was nice, but he’d much rather be sucking on Noah’s
cock. Being so close to Noah but not being able to do more was so fucking frustrating. The scent of Noah’s spicy cologne mixed with his natural aroma was almost enough to make him hard.

Almost.

His grandmother’s unannounced visits to the parlor managed to deter him from achieving full arousal. Every time she showed up with more popcorn or soda Noah practically leapt from the sofa like he was doing something wrong. Luke wished that Noah wouldn’t be so paranoid. His grandma knew that he was Luke’s boyfriend. As far as Luke was concerned they didn’t have anything to hide.

“You need to relax,” Luke murmured once they were left alone again.

“I-I don’t want to do anything to upset her,” Noah whispered.

“We’re not doing anything wrong.”

“But her rules…”

“We’re just watching a movie in the parlor which is allowed according to Emma Snyder’s code of conduct. We don’t have to hide how we feel about each other.”

Noah nodded, albeit a bit reluctantly, but he slipped his hand back into Luke’s. Some things still required baby steps. Luke needed to respect it if Noah wasn’t comfortable showing affection in front of his grandma. Hopefully, it will change in time.

“This is definitely the best of the Star Wars movies,” Luke said, stroking Noah’s palm with his thumb.

“I agree.”

“Sequels usually suck.”

“Technically it’s part of a trilogy so I don’t think you’d consider it a sequel per se.”

Noah was such a movie geek. He should have known that his little comment would get turned into a serious film discussion.

“Whatever.” Luke rolled his eyes. “It’s still better than the original in my opinion and that’s rare, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is—although many think that Godfather II was also better than the original.”

Geek…geek…geek…

If they were totally alone, Luke could have easily found a way to get Noah’s mind off of movies. One more day. He could make it.

“Would you like more popcorn?” Emma asked, poking her head into the parlor.

Or not. Blue balls—they were going to kill him for sure.

“Ahhh…” Noah stammered.

“We’re good,” Luke said, hoping this would be the last of her ‘check-ins’.
“If you need anything holler,” Emma told them.

“We will,” Noah called after her.

“Don’t you dare,” Luke muttered, resting his head against Noah’s arm. What he really wanted to do was crawl onto Noah’s lap, but Noah would probably have a stroke if he tried that maneuver.

“She’s just being nice.”

“Cockblocking,” Luke said under his breath which almost made Noah choke on his root beer.


“It’s true and you know it.”

“Let’s just finish watching the movie.” Noah decided to go all diplomatic on him. “It’s almost over.”

Luke held off on the snark, instead focusing on the arrival of the Millennium Falcon at Cloud City. Noah kissed Luke’s hand as a peace offering. It worked. Because Luke focused on the fact that he was cozied up to Noah in the dark watching a movie. They were together which wouldn’t have been the case if it had been up to his mother. He could have been on the ski slopes of Boyne Mountain instead of snug as a bug in a rug with Noah.

The movie wasn’t even finished five minutes before the parlor was flooded with light. Noah pulled away from Luke like his hand had been caught in the cookie jar, leaving Luke blinking up at his grandma.

“It’s getting late,” Emma announced. “You boys have a busy day at the stables ahead of you tomorrow. And I know how you like to sleep in, Luke.”

“I’ll be here bright and early.”

“Good, because I’m going to make a big breakfast before I leave for my trip.” Emma’s gaze was drawn to the front picture window. “That’s if I end up going.” Oh no…she had to go on her day trip to Chicago.

Luke had been clinging to knowing that his grandma would be gone for most of the day which would leave them with ample alone time (even with working in the stables).

“Why wouldn’t you go?” Luke asked, trying to keep the alarm out of his voice. She couldn’t know how much he’d been counting on her leaving them alone.

“There’s a big snow storm on its way.”

“I thought it was supposed to hit southern Illinois, not us or Chicago,” Noah spoke up much to Luke’s surprise.

“It isn’t, but you never know with the weather,” Emma sighed. “Sometimes it has a mind of its own.”

“I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about,” Luke chimed in.

Emma smiled and nodded. “You’re probably right. There’s no need to worry tonight. We’ll see what tomorrow brings.” She rubbed her hands together. “Now…I think we should all call it a night. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day for all of us.”
Luke reluctantly got to his feet, casting a sidelong glance at Noah, beckoning his boyfriend to join him. He was going to get a goodnight kiss, even if he had to steal one from Noah. Kisses were a must.

“...uh...will...walk you out.” Noah scrambled to his feet, taking the hand that Luke held out for him.

“Goodnight, Grandma.” Luke gave her a one-armed hug. “I’ll see you in the morning.” He tugged Noah out of the room before his grandma had a chance to properly respond.

He stopped at the coat rack to quickly put on his jacket so they could get out the door without his grandma finding a reason for Noah not to walk him out. They made it out onto the back porch without incident. Luke knew that he had to make it quick because any sort of alone time at the farmhouse was precious.


“I wish I didn’t have to leave you.”

“You’ll see me bright and early tomorrow.”

Nodding, Luke leaned in for a kiss and was met with a quick peck on the lips.

“I...uh...really should get back inside.” Noah stepped away from Luke. “See you soon.”

Cockblocked again and his grandma wasn’t even in the room. Luke needed to get out of there so he could go home and jerk off or he really would die from blue balls.

*********

Luke was welcomed by pancakes, bacon, eggs, and homemade cinnamon toast when he stepped through the door at the farmhouse early as promised. Even though he hated being up before sunrise it was worth it today because he’d be spending it with Noah.

Alone.

“Good morning, Luke.” Emma greeted him with a hug. “Please sit and have some breakfast.”

“Good morning.” Luke fixed himself a cup of coffee and then joined Noah at the kitchen table. “Hey, you,” he softly said to Noah.

“Hey.” Noah grinned at him.

As Luke stabbed a couple of pancakes and put them on his plate, he noticed Emma standing at the kitchen window, staring out of it with a frown. “Is everything all right, Grandma?”

“It’s snowing,” she replied, still gazing out the window.

“Just flurries—it’s nothing to worry about,” he quickly reassured her. She couldn’t back out now.
He and Noah were so close to total freedom that he could almost taste it.

“I’m not so sure.”

“You’ve been looking forward to this trip for quite some time. You deserve some time away with your friends.” Luke had to make sure that she got on that bus to Chicago.

“Eleanor would never let me hear the end of it if I backed out at the last minute,” Emma sighed. “But I just worry about you boys if the weather does take a turn for the worse, especially with your parents out of town.”

“If the weather gets bad—and I’m sure that it won’t—there are plenty of people here that can help if need be. There’s Jack who lives here, Aaron, Aunt Meg, and even Brad. We’ll be fine, right Noah?” Luke shot him a pointed look.

“Yes, definitely—nothing to worry about,” Noah piped up.

Emma wiped her hands on her apron. “Well then, I better go get gussied up for my big day on the town.” She headed up the back staircase.

“Do you think it’s really going to get bad out there?” Noah asked, brow furrowed. “What if the storm is tracking north now?”

Luke rolled his eyes. “It’s just a few snow flurries, Noah.”

“That’s what we thought in Wisconsin,” Noah said under his breath before taking a bite of his toast.

Luke shook his head. Everything was going to be fine. His grandma would see her play and he and Noah would finally get some much needed alone time.
Chapter 75

Noah was relieved that Emma was safely on her bus trip to Chicago to see Wicked and that he was now in the safe confines of the Snyder Stables. He loved being there. It was easy to lose himself in the manual labor that was necessary to keep the stables running. The horses that he’d once been afraid of were now his friends. Each was unique in their own right. He hated it when one was sold although he knew it was the nature of the business. Thankfully, Whitman would never leave.

When they first arrived at the stables Luke told him that this was Noah’s show to run so he’d do whatever Noah needed him to do. There were times he could tell that Luke was biting his tongue. It was no secret that Luke liked to be in charge. Luke’s sisters often called their brother bossy to which Noah had to silently agree.

Together they fed and watered the horses as well as mucked out the stalls. Noah took inventory of the supplies just to make sure that a Hamilton’s order didn’t need to be placed. Luke had taken a break from mucking to visit Whitman. Noah found him feeding Whit carrots.

“Slacking off, Snyder?” Noah teased.

Luke glanced at him with a dimpled smile. “Whitman wanted a carrot. I can’t say no to my baby.” He nuzzled his face against Whitman’s nose.

Noah sighed, “Not fair tugging on my heartstrings.”


“Right. You know I’m a sucker for my favorite boys.” Noah stroked Whitman’s nose.

Luke leaned over and kissed Noah. “Your favorite boys are suckers for you too,” he murmured as he gave Noah another kiss.

Noah melted into Luke’s arms, allowing himself to be walked backward until he was flush against the wall across from Whitman’s stall. Luke’s body was flush against his. Noah could feel Luke’s arousal pressing into his thigh. Gone was the rest of his mental “to do” list. He never wanted to let Luke out of his arms. As the kisses intensified, Noah rutted up against Luke. His own hard-on strained against his jeans. Noah was lost in Luke’s kisses—lost in the delicious friction they were achieving—so lost and happy.

Until Whitman whinnied loudly as if offering a reminder of things that needed to be taken care of before the workday could be considered complete.

“We still have a few more stalls to muck,” Noah breathed heavily.


“Just think.” Noah caressed Luke’s cheek. “Once we’re finished the rest of the day is ours.”

“And I know just how to fill the rest of the day. Well…until my grandma comes home tonight.”

“Let’s get to work then.”

Side by side they mucked out the remaining stalls. All joking was put aside as they worked to get
The promise of sex was all the incentive either of them needed.

“How about some lunch before we head over to my parents’ house?” Luke suggested. “I figured we can go over there that way we won’t have to worry about Jack or breaking any of Grandma’s rules.”

“I’m going to need to grab shower first.” Noah wanted to wash the barn stench off him. Showering after work was always a must for him.

Luke raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Sounds like that could be fun.”

“Yeah, but…”


“Sorry. I just wouldn’t feel right about it,” Noah explained, hoping that Luke would understand his reasoning. “For all we know Jack might be home. And if he isn’t what if he came home or someone else dropped by. I just don’t—”

Luke placed a finger over Noah’s lips. “Say no more. I get it. I don’t have to particularly like it, but I do understand. I also wouldn’t want to get caught. That’s why I plan on having my way with you at my parents’ house.”

“Okay.”


Noah went from the warm confines of the barn to the center of a snow globe. Large flakes were falling at a rapid pace. There had to be a few inches of fresh snow on the ground. “Holy shit!”

“Looks like the weather man was wrong.”

“You think?” Everywhere Noah looked was white—the ground, the sky, and everything in between.

“Let’s get inside the farmhouse,” Luke said, snatching his hand and dragging him away from the barn. “I can check the weather while you shower.”

Noah shook the snow off once they reached the house. Both of them were covered in the short trek from the barn to the farmhouse which made Noah wonder if the worst was yet to come. He was sure Luke would have a weather report for him once he was finished with his shower.

After he picked out some clean clothing, Noah hopped into the shower, washing away a morning’s worth of grime acquired in the stables. The hot water was always a welcomed relief after a hard day’s work. It was one of the most enjoyable days he’s spent at the stables. He and Luke worked well together. He hoped they’d be able to do it more often.

Noah threw on a clean pair of navy blue boxer briefs, clean jeans, and a blue pull-over fleece. For good measure he dabbed on a splash of aftershave before putting on his socks and shoes and headed downstairs to see if Luke had an update on the weather.

“Did you find out anything?” he asked once he entered the kitchen.

“We’re under a severe blizzard warning until early tomorrow morning,” Luke told him. “It extends north past Chicago just past the Wisconsin border. WOAK is calling it Snowmageddon.”

“They have a name for it?”
“Are you kidding?” Luke scoffed. “Weather people practically orgasm over this kind of thing. I think we should probably ride this out at my parents.”

He glanced out the kitchen window. The snowflakes seemed to have doubled in size. “I don’t know…”

Luke took Noah’s hand. “Noah, we are in desperate need of some alone time which I know won’t happen if we stay here—Grandma’s rules—not to mention the fact that this place can turn into Grand Central Station at any given moment. If we go to my parents’ house we are guaranteed to have the place to ourselves which would mean…”

Noah knew exactly what it meant. Sex. Lots of it. “Yeah, you’re right. That’s a good idea.”


“What about your grandmother?”

Luke glanced at his watch. “She should be at the theater now. There’s no way that they’re going to risk traveling in this mess. She’ll probably be stuck in Chicago until tomorrow at the earliest. Just be sure to bring your cell phone with you in case she calls.”

Noah headed upstairs and quickly packed his duffle bag with the essentials that he thought he might need for a short stay with Luke. It was still hard to believe that they might actually be able to spend the night together—all night. He couldn’t help but feel a little guilty for being happy that this snowstorm might give him a lot of alone time with Luke. It wasn’t like he actually wanted Emma to get trapped in Chicago. And, at this point, he wasn’t even sure that she would get stuck there.

His duffle bag was packed with clean jeans, underwear, socks, and various shirts. He even threw in a pair of sweats for good measure (not that he was entirely sure he’d need them for sleeping). A quick trip to the bathroom to gather his toiletries rounded out his packing. With his bag slung over his shoulder, Noah descended the stairs into the kitchen where Luke was putting the finishing touches on his note.

“What have you heard from anyone?” Noah asked.

“Not yet, but I’m sure my grandma will call once the show lets out.”

The snow hadn’t let up one bit. In fact, it looked worse. The snow seemed to be coming down sideways now. “How did you plan on getting to your house? You walked over here this morning so…”

Luke held up a set of keys. “One of Dad’s trucks.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea? It looks really bad out there.”

Luke rolled his eyes. “I’m not going to put us into a ditch. I promise. I’ll drive super slow and careful. If we try walking, we’ll both turn into abominable snowmen.”

Even though Noah wasn’t convinced that Luke’s plan was the best it was still better than the alternative. He just hoped it wouldn’t come back to haunt them. “Okay.”

Luke filled a Ziploc bag full of oatmeal raisin cookies. “There’s no need for these to go to waste.” He handed the baggie to Noah and then snatched his coat from the coat rack and tossed Noah’s to him. “Let’s get going.”
They were met with a cold blast when Luke pushed open the screen door. This was one serious storm. Maybe Snowmageddon wasn’t such a stretch after all.

“I hope we make it there in one piece,” Noah muttered.


Together they braved the blizzard-like conditions to get to the pickup truck. Noah swore for every step forward they took two steps back, but they kept trudging forward. They were on a mission with *alone time* being the ultimate prize. By the time they made it to the truck and got the windows cleared, they were both covered with snow looking as if they’d spent hours in the Arctic.

“This is going to be interesting,” Luke said as he put the key in the ignition and started the truck. “Are you ready to rock and roll?”

Noah set his duffle bag and cookies between them and put his seatbelt on. “How about a slow dance instead?”

“Done.”

Luke stayed true to his word, easing the truck cautiously down the driveway. Noah said a silent prayer that they weren’t making a very big mistake. When they reached the end of the driveway, Luke let out a deep breath.


“Maybe we should have taken Whitman instead,” Noah joked.

“I think we’d be better off with a team of sled dogs.”

“Or reindeer.”

It was hard to tell where the road was, but Luke finally spotted a faint set of tire tracks which he followed. The truck was silent as they slowly drove along the snow covered country road. The tension in the cab of the pickup truck was palpable. Luke had a firm grip on the steering wheel. Noah ventured to guess that Luke’s knuckles were white underneath his gloves because he had his own white knuckle thing going on as he held on tightly to the door handle.

Hours seemed to pass as the snow crunched underneath the tires of the truck, but it was only a mere half hour later when Luke inched the vehicle into the driveway of his parents’ house.

“A half hour for a five minute trip,” Luke muttered. “I never want to do that again.”

“We made it safely,” Noah said, letting out the breath he’d been holding. “That’s all that matters.”

Luke raised an eyebrow. “Was there ever a doubt?”

“Well…”


“Let’s get inside so you can take a shower.” Noah wrinkled his nose. “You smell like wet hay and horses.”

“I thought you found that sexy.”
“Even your sex appeal has its limits.”

“Ouch.”

Noah snatched Luke’s hand, giving it a playful squeeze. “But I still love you—stinky and all.”

They got out of the truck and trudged through a good eight inches of snow toward the front door of the mansion. Once safely inside, gloves, coats, and boots were discarded in the marble foyer.

“Why don’t you take a shower and I’ll fix us something for lunch?” Noah suggested.

“I smell that bad?”

“Yeah,” Noah chuckled.

“Oh, I won’t be long. There might be some leftover lasagna in the fridge, but you can help yourself to whatever you want—just make sure there’s enough for two.” Luke grabbed Noah’s duffle from the floor. “I’ll take this up to my room.

“Thanks.”

“Just don’t eat all of the cookies!” He called as he trekked up the stairs.

Laughing, Noah marched into the kitchen to see what he could scrape up for lunch. He set the bag of cookies on the island and opened the refrigerator to see what his options were. There was lasagna just like Luke had said, but it wouldn’t take long to warm up so he decided to save that for a dinner option instead. There was also lunch meat, but Noah was in the mood for something warm.

Noah searched the walk-in pantry hoping to find something he could whip together. High up on one of the shelves he spotted a box of good old Kraft Macaroni and Cheese. Noah hadn’t had boxed macaroni and cheese since he and his mom were hiding out in East Tawas, MI, which seemed like a lifetime ago. Many nights they dined on the cheapest store brand they could find, cooking it up in their small hot pot.

Noah smiled and grabbed the box, deciding that it would be the perfect lunch for them since it held so many dear memories for him. Even though he and his mom had been poor and always had to be on the lookout for the Colonel, Noah wouldn’t trade those years on the run with his mom for anything. Just one little random thought about his mom still left a pit in his stomach. Holden had warned him that it would take time for his pain to heal. Noah still doubted that it ever would.

Not a day had passed without him thinking about his mom whether it was wishing he could tell her something or missing one of her hugs. A snowy day like today would have been spent engrossed in a movie marathon, rotating between their favorites. Foul Play would have found its way into the rotation. His mom always looked for an excuse to watch it. He’d have to share it with Luke someday…well…once he found the strength to purchase another copy of it.

Noah blinked back a few tears. Stop it. You’ve got to pull it together, he chastised himself. She’s not coming back and you don’t need Luke finding you a blubbering mess.

Taking a deep breath, Noah commenced his search for a pot to boil the water for the macaroni and cheese. After opening a few cupboards, Noah found the right one. He filled the pot with water and waited for it to boil. Being alone in the kitchen at Luke’s parents’ house felt a bit bizarre—almost like he was Cinderella at the ball. He knew he was being silly. Luke and his family didn’t think of him as the hired help—that was his hang up. One he really needed to get over.
As soon as the water began to boil, Noah added the macaroni noodles to it and set the timer. Eight minutes. Hopefully Luke would be finished showering by then. A brief image of his boyfriend wet and naked flashed through his mind. Noah was behind him, pushing into Luke’s tight ass…


Noah spun around, a bit flushed and aroused from naughty thoughts of his boyfriend, to see the object of his desire standing a few feet away from him barefoot with damp hair, a plain gray tee clinging to his chest, and black sweats that hung low on his hips. If the sight before him wasn’t enough to make him hard, the fact that he could easily tell that Luke wasn’t wearing any underwear was doing the trick.

Holy fuck.

Luke was just…wow…fucking WOW.

Noah was sure that his jaw had to be on the floor in the middle of a puddle of his drool.

“Noah?” Luke knew he’d become Noah’s eye candy. The amusement was evident in his voice.

“Macaroni and cheese. I thought you were hot—would like something hot—for lunch,” Noah stumbled over his words, cheeks flaming as he did so.


Oh shit. Hadn’t Luke said that he could help himself to anything?

“I…uh…I just…”

Luke kissed his cheek. “I’m teasing, but watch out if the girls find out that you can make this stuff because you’ll get roped into doing it for them.” He toyed with the back of Noah’s hair. “They think you’re oh-so-cute.”

“I have no problem making mac and cheese for them sometime.”

“You may live to regret those words.”

“Nah.” Noah grabbed a spoon to stir the cooking pasta.

“We’ll see about that.” Luke perched himself on one of the chairs at the island so he had a bird’s eye view of Noah in action.

Noah liked the feeling of having Luke right there while he was fixing them lunch. It was comfortable—natural. He hoped there would be countless more meals like this for them in the future. Noah quickly learned that Luke was a backseat chef, telling him not to use too much milk because he didn’t like the sauce too runny and to use real butter, not margarine because margarine sucked.

“Luke’s so bossy.”

Noah could hear Faith’s voice in his mind clear as day, which made him quietly snicker, “He certainly is.”

“What was that? I didn’t catch what you said,” Luke said, leaning across the granite countertop of the island.
“I said no problem,” Noah fibbed. Really he didn’t mind that Luke was “bossy”. He kinda liked it—it was one of the things that made Luke “Luke, the boy he fell in love with and loved with all of his heart and soul”.

“Uh hun.” Luke didn’t sound too convinced, but he also didn’t prod any further. He hoped off the chair he was sitting on, strolling over to the refrigerator. “What would you like to drink? We have milk, water, Coke, and root beer.”

“Coke,” Noah replied. “I have a feeling I’m going to need the extra caffeine.”

Luke grinned. “Yes, you will.”

Noah put the finishing touches on the meal—just the right amount of milk and real Land O’ Lakes butter per Luke’s instructions. He hoped that the meal wouldn’t disappoint.

“Hope you like it,” Noah said, placing one of the steaming bowls in front of him and taking the other and sitting down next to Luke.


“Not too runny?”

“It’s perfect.”

Noah smiled. Perfect.
Chapter 76

Luke insisted on cleaning up after lunch since Noah cooked. Noah sat at the island his attention was split between his beautifully hot boyfriend and the raging blizzard outside. The wind gusts rattled the windows on a few occasions. He was thankful to be safe and warm with Luke. Hopefully, Emma was safe as well. They hadn’t heard from her yet. The play should be getting out soon.

“You don’t think your grandma’s senior group is going to try to come back in this do you?” Noah said, nervously glancing out the window. The roads couldn’t be anywhere near safe since the snow was coming down so fast—not to mention the high winds that were causing drifting. Luke had a hard time navigating them in a pickup so a bus would be a complete nightmare.

Luke shut the dishwasher and turned to Noah. “There’s no way they’re going to try to drive in this. I’m sure we’ll hear from her soon.”

“Hope so.”

A few minutes later Noah’s cell rang. It was Emma. “Hello.”

“Noah dear, I’m so glad I reached you,” she told him. “I tried calling the farmhouse but didn’t get an answer.”

“Sorry about that. Luke and I are at his parents’ house.”

“I’m glad you’re both safe. The weather here is absolutely terrible. Our group is being put up in a hotel for the night,” Emma explained. “Hopefully, we’ll be able to get home sometime tomorrow once the roads get cleared.”

“Did you enjoy Wicked?”

“It was wonderful. You and Luke have to see it sometime. You’ll see The Wizard of Oz in an entirely different light.”

“I’m glad you liked it.”

“I want you and Luke to stay safe.”

“We will. We’ve got everything we need here. We’re not going anywhere,” Noah assured her.

“I’ll call you when I know when we’re going to return to Oakdale.”

“Sounds good.”

“Take care and send Luke my love.”

“You too. And I will.”

Noah flipped his cell phone closed. “Your grandma sends her love. She’ll call when she’s on her way back to Oakdale which she thinks will be sometime tomorrow.”

A sly smile played on Luke’s lips as he sauntered over to Noah, swiveling the chair Noah was sitting on away from the countertop. “This means we have the rest of the day and night—alone.”

Noah was dizzy with the possibilities that rushed through his head. Alone. They were really going
to be alone for hours. “Yeah.”

Luke stepped between Noah’s legs, placing his hands on Noah’s shoulders. “I want you to fuck me in my bed. I want to finally feel you inside me.”

Time screeched to a halt at that moment. Inside Luke. He’d been hoping for this ever since their first time together. Noah licked his lips. “Yes.” He pulled Luke into a deep, hungry kiss.


“What do you think?”

Luke grabbed his hand, tugging him off the chair. They scrambled up the backstairs and into Luke’s room. Luke closed the door, locking it behind them.

“You’re really not taking any chances,” Noah chuckled.

“You can never be too safe when it comes to alone time.”

Noah reached out, grabbing a fistful of Luke’s t-shirt and pulling him into his arms. Luke’s eyes widened, surprised by Noah’s sudden aggressiveness. He almost apologized for his boldness, but then he noticed the heat radiating from Luke’s eyes. Noah’s mouth crashed against Luke’s. His need for Luke was overwhelming. Quality time alone had been scarce if not non-existent.

Noah hadn’t realized just how much he missed these intense kisses with Luke. He drank Luke in like a man who’d been stranded in the desert that had finally found water. One of his hands slipped underneath the elastic of Luke’s sweats, seeking out Luke’s erect length.


With his other hand, Noah pushed Luke’s t-shirt up his torso. Luke followed his lead, helping Noah remove the t-shirt. Then he pushed down the sweatpants and stepped out of them, leaving Luke completely naked.

“I want you so bad,” Noah breathed, absorbing the sight of his beautifully naked boyfriend.

“Missed this,” Luke murmured as he unbuttoned Noah’s jeans. “So much.” He added, nuzzling Noah’s neck as Noah continued the slow stroking of Luke’s cock. “Missed not being alone with you.” Luke got the jeans undone and shoved his hand into Noah’s boxer briefs. “Not having this.” Luke’s hand was now firmly wrapped around Noah’s hard, leaking dick. “Need to know what it’s like to have it inside me.”


Luke’s eyes scanned every inch of Noah’s body as a satisfied smile played on his lips. The hand that was once around Noah’s dick was tugging Noah toward Luke’s bed. Luke pushed back the comforter on the bed, exposing crisp navy blue sheets. He crawled onto the mattress, offering Noah a nice view of his perfect ass which made Noah want to kneel behind him and sink his cock inside it.

Such a raw, unabashed thought made Noah’s cheeks flush. A few months ago a thought like this wouldn’t have materialized. He was always so controlled. Being with Luke had allowed him to
slowly let go of his inhibitions.

Luke looked even more delicious as he stretched out to get the lube from the nightstand drawer. Noah sunk onto the mattress, lying on his side. Luke rolled over with lube in hand. When Noah reached for it, Luke pulled the tube away.

There was a hint of mischief in his eyes. “Not yet.” Noah opened his mouth to speak but before he could Luke continued, “Lie back,” he instructed.


“Trust you.” Noah rolled over onto his back.

In a flash Luke’s mouth was wrapped around Noah’s cock, eagerly licking and sucking it. This wasn’t what he was expecting, but it was oh-so-good. Too good because Noah was dangerously close to the edge.

“Luke…” Noah nudged his shoulder, hoping that he’d get the hint. “I’m…”

Luke ignored his feeble protest. He just kept up his masterful ministrations of Noah’s cock until Noah couldn’t hold back any longer, coming into Luke’s eager mouth. Luke glanced up at him, eyes shining, wiping the come that had dribble from his mouth.

“Needed to take the edge off. You’ll thank me for it,” Luke smirked, resting on his haunches.

“I’m definitely relaxed.” Noah propped himself up on an elbow. “Now it’s your turn to trust me.”

“Always. How do you want me?”

Every way possible.

But there was plenty of time for that. “On your back seems to work.”

Luke sprawled out on the mattress, his head on one of the pillows, cock hard against his stomach. So beautiful. Noah made sure that the tube was in grabbing distance for when he needed it. He knew what it was like to bottom so he wanted to make the most of his knowledge. Luke needed to be out of his mind horny. It was up to him to get Luke that way.

“Is this payback?” Luke asked when Noah’s tongue swiped the tip of his cock.

Noah’s eyes flicked up at him, his breath hot against Luke’s dick. “Would I do something like that?”

“I…uh…”

Luke was unable to finish the sentence due to Noah’s mouth being firmly latched around his dick which seemed to stupefy him. Leaving Luke speechless never failed to please Noah since it was a rare event. Noah made sure that he didn’t get Luke off—just ridiculously close. As soon as Luke was at this point, Noah reached for the lube. Time to venture into the unknown.


Noah squeezed a generous amount of lube onto his fingers. He wanted to be sure that he did this right. “Just try to relax,” Noah said, pressing a finger to Luke’s pucker. He didn’t push it in,
deciding to trace along the outside which elicited a whimper from Luke.

“Want you.”

“Yeah?” Noah continued to rub the outside of Luke’s hole.

“Fuck….yeah…”

Carefully Noah pressed his finger inside Luke’s snug opening. Wow was it ever tight. He couldn’t imagine what it would feel like to be buried balls deep inside him. Already his cock was beginning to come to life again at the mere thought. As his finger sought out that perfect spot Luke always managed to hit on him, Noah watched Luke eyes, listened to his breathing. He was on high alert for the slightest bit of discomfort. Searching…searching…until Luke’s eyes fluttered closed, a low groan escaping from his lips.


And beg. “Please, Noah…need you…”

Noah didn’t quite give Luke exactly what he wanted. He wasn’t ready—close though. Noah was going to bring him even closer, adding another finger to the one that was already inside Luke.

Luke’s hips came off the mattress. “Ohhhh…”

Noah continued to tease and stretch him, only adding a third finger when Luke pleaded for it. Soon that wasn’t enough for his boyfriend.

“Noah,” Luke’s voice was several octaves above normal.

Noah withdrew his fingers, grabbed the lube and quickly slicked up his now fully erect cock with a generous amount of it.

“Did you use the entire tube?” Luke teased, propping himself up on his elbows to get a better look at Noah.

Noah blushed. “No, just wanna do this right.”

“You will.”

Nodding, Noah moved between Luke’s outstretched legs. He took a deep breath. Slow—gotta take it slow. “You have to talk to me,” Noah began to which Luke raised his eyebrows. “Because it’s gonna hurt and if…”

“I’ve been waiting for this moment for months. Fuck me, Noah.” Luke lifted each leg so that they were resting against Noah’s shoulders.

Noah kissed one of Luke’s calves and then ever so carefully Noah guided his dick inside Luke’s tight hole. He knew Luke would be tight but…good god…this was…this was…wow…another level.

And then Luke whimpered. It wasn’t of the ‘give me more or I’ll explode’ variety that he’d heard minutes before. This was pain. Noah stilled.

“You’re in pain.”

“It’s part of it, isn’t it?”

“I want you to enjoy it.”

“I am…move.” Luke lifted his hips off the mattress to emphasize his point.

Noah moved…slowly…watching Luke’s face for any further discomfort. Luke’s breathing was coming in long, controlled breaths. Brown eyes replaced by black, shining with such intensity that allowed Noah to lose himself in them.

Fuck…he was lost in Luke period—so hot and tight. He was thankful that Luke had gotten him off earlier or it would be almost impossible to control the urge to just start fucking Luke right away.


“My god…you have no idea…” Noah gasped.


Luke had been in this very position a few weeks ago. And Noah in his. “Yeah, right…”


“Yeah?”

“Oh…wow.” Luke canted his hips upward. The switch had been flipped. “More…give me more.”

Noah gave it to him, quickening his pace which Luke met. They were getting better at this. Noah had no doubt that in the next twenty-four hours or so they’d be perfection. Luke slipped his legs from Noah’s shoulders, wrapping them around Noah’s waist, trying to draw Noah even closer to him. Their lips met for a heated kiss which seemed to last an eternity. Those were his favorite types of kisses.

Noah was getting dangerously close to climaxing. Luke needed to be right there with him. Reaching between them, Noah sought out Luke’s cock grasping it and stroking it in time with his thrusts.

Luke let out the most soulful, primal cry as he came. Ribbons upon ribbons of come coating Noah’s hand, Luke’s stomach and god only knows what else. Luke clung to him as Noah reached his own climax which was so intense that it left him in a trembling heap by the time it ended.


Noah wanted to say something, but he was completely wrecked at the moment. All he could do was nod, which garnered a soft chuckle from Luke. He knew he needed to move—pull out of Luke, but he wanted to hang onto the closeness they were sharing forever.
“That was definitely an out of body experience,” Luke murmured, kissing him softly on the lips.

Noah’s eyes widened. “That good?”


“Incredibly good...great...phenomenal...it was everything.”

“Yeah.”

“I should probably move.”

“Just as long as you don’t go far.” Luke caressed his cheek.

“Promise.” Noah carefully pulled out of Luke and then rolled onto his back. Luke’s stomach was quite a mess. He needed to take care of that. Noah swung his legs over the edge of the mattress and stood up.


“I’m going to get a washcloth so we can clean up a bit. I’ll be right back.”


Noah fought the urge to grab his boxer briefs so he could put them on for the short trek to Luke’s bathroom. He was with Luke—his boyfriend—his everything. He’d just been as close to Luke as two people can be. Covering up now was just silly. Casting a quick glance at Luke, he could easily see that Luke was enjoying the view. His dimpled smile spoke volumes.

When Noah returned to Luke’s bed, he had a warm washcloth in hand which he used to wipe off the come that was splattered all over Luke’s stomach. “See, I wasn’t gone long.”

“Feels good,” Luke murmured as Noah wiped small circles on his stomach.

“All clean,” Noah declared.

Luke took the washcloth from him and dropped it on the floor. Reaching underneath him, he pushed the blankets toward the foot of the bed so that he and Noah could get underneath them.

Luke draped the sheet and blankets over them. “Nice and cozy.”


“Good, because I don’t plan out letting you out of my bed until we do it a few more times.” Luke turned his head so that he could see Noah. “You gotta fuck me again.”

Noah definitely didn’t have a problem with fucking Luke. In fact, he really enjoyed it. Luke must have felt the same way. Would he always want to do it this way? Noah didn’t have any objections, but he also loved it when Luke was inside him. “Is one of us always supposed to top? Is that how it works?”

Luke leisurely dragged his fingers along Noah’s arm. “I suppose there are relationships that work like that, but we can just do what feels right to us. There isn’t a gay handbook that we have to follow—at least not that I know of.”

“Really?” Noah smirked. “There isn’t a gay handbook? How are we supposed to properly earn our
merit badges if we don't have a handbook to follow?"

“I never realized what I smartass you are, Mayer.”

“I have my moments.”

“You know, I’ve had so many fantasies about being with you—here,” Luke quietly confessed. “This blows them all away.”

That was the understatement of a lifetime. “It certainly does.”

“Oh?” Luke lifted his head from the pillow. His curiosity was definitely piqued.

Noah knew he wasn’t going to get away without sharing. Luke was all about sharing. “Yeah, I’d think about you but...”

“But?”

“It’s embarrassing.”


Noah could feel his cheeks flame. “I’d always come before we got really far.”

Luke reached up, threading his fingers through Noah’s hair. “I’m flattered.”

“That I can come in like two minutes?”

“I was thinking along the lines that you find me so hot in your fantasies that you can’t hold out.”

Luke’s hand drifted under the blankets, beneath Noah’s waist. “Mmmm...feels like someone is ready for another round.”

Yes, he was hard. Just mentioning fantasies with Luke was enough to arouse him and this was without even going into detail. “I’m game if you are,” Noah told him.

Luke slowly sat up, allowing the blankets to fall to his waist. “Please,” he practically scoffed, “You’re never going to hear me pass up sex with my hot boyfriend.”

Almost cat-like Luke extracted himself from the covers, offering Noah quite a view of his naked body. Noah gazed up at his boyfriend, who was now kneeling next to him, wondering what Luke had planned.

Then Luke, with a sly grin, straddled Noah. “You’ve never seen me ride.”

Oh?

Noah’s eyes widened as Luke grasped Noah’s cock. “Oh...” he groaned.

“I’m really good in the saddle.”

Noah soon found out just how good.

*******
Noah hadn’t slept this well in quite awhile—so snug and warm underneath a pile of blankets wrapped around the most amazing man in the entire world. His love, his Luke. He wished they could always spend the night together. It was going to be difficult to go back to sleeping alone—even after just one night. The past sixteen hours were pure bliss.

Just remembering how hot it was for Luke to have him that way aroused Noah. Not wanting to wake Luke with his cock poking into his boyfriend’s ass, Noah carefully extracted himself from the situation. Luke, free of his embrace, sighed, rolling onto his stomach. The blankets slipped down Luke’s back, revealing a good portion of the naked flesh beneath it. Luke was so sexy—even when he slept. Noah wanted nothing more than to kiss his was down the curve of Luke’s spine.

*Do it. He’s your boyfriend,* an inner voice urged. *Don’t be afraid—take a chance.*

Taking a deep breath, Noah carefully pulled the covers down Luke’s torso, exposing his perfect little ass. Luke stirred slightly, emitting a cute little sigh which went straight to Noah’s dick, filling out the remainder of his erection. The pull toward Luke’s spine was undeniable. Noah’s lips brushed the middle of Luke’s back, his tongue sneaking past his lips to lick the vertebrae—one by one traveling slowly down Luke’s spine toward the curve of his ass.

"Noah,” Luke moaned, raising his head slightly off the pillow.


He wasn’t about to stop now. The response he was getting from Luke was just the incentive he needed to keep going until he reached his destination—the small of Luke’s back. Noah kissed, licked, and even nipped the flesh there. His ministrations were undoing his boyfriend.

By now Noah was used to the different moans, groans, and whimpers that would come from Luke. But this—this was something entirely different. The noises Luke was making were coming from another plane of existence. It reminded him of *When Harry Met Sally* when Harry claimed to have once made a woman meow. Luke wasn’t quite meowing, but he didn’t know how else to describe it.


Noah lifted his head long enough to glance around from the lube which he thought had most likely ended up on the floor. He didn’t want to break the spell so he opted for a compromise. Saliva…lots of it. Noah sucked a couple of his fingers into his mouth coating them with ample amounts of spit.


“Not stopping—giving you more.” Noah demonstrated this point by pressing a wet finger to Luke’s hole.


“Fuck…holy…fuck,” Luke panted, rolling onto his back and gazing up at Noah. His hair was damp against his forehead, pupils blown.
His boyfriend was so sexy.

Reaching out, Luke wrapped his fingers around Noah’s hard cock. “Did I do this to you?” he asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

The word was barely out of his mouth before Luke pounced on him like a rambunctious puppy. Noah’s cock was quickly engulfed by Luke’s mouth. All coherent thought was lost as Luke’s mouth slid down Noah’s shaft. His boyfriend was really, really good at this. Noah threaded his fingers, holding on as Luke quickly got him off.

Luke glanced up from between Noah’s legs, a trace of come smeared on his bottom lip. “Good morning.”

Indeed it was a good morning.

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Hours later after a steamy shower with Luke (like he’d ever say no to that) and cereal for breakfast, Noah was stretched out on the leather sofa in the family room. It was no longer snowing, but there had to be at least a foot of snow on the ground. Emma had phoned to let them know she should be home by the evening. Luke’s parents had also checked in to make sure that they were all right. Noah was thankful to there were so many people who cared about them.

Luke knelt in front of the Snyder’s modest DVD collection. Luke was determined to find them a suitable movie to watch. “Why is almost every movie a Disney film?” he grumbled.

“Disney movies are good.”

“Sure, if you’re a ten year old girl.”

“List off our options. We’ll find something.”

“The Little Mermaid, Lady and the Tramp, Beauty and the Beast, Snow White, The Parent Trap…”

“Haley Mills or Lindsay Lohan?”

Luke pulled out the DVD, studying the cover. “Lindsay Lohan.”

Remake. Noah hated remakes. You just don’t mess with the classics. “Pass.”

“Escape to Witch Mountain.”

“Yeah, that one if it’s okay with you.”

Luke snatched the DVD from the shelf. “Yeah, sure. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this movie.”

Noah rolled his eyes. “Seriously? You’ve never watched it with your sisters?”

“I try to keep my movie watching with the shrimps to a minimum as you know they talk through the entire thing. You couldn’t have forgotten Valentine’s Day already,” Luke said as he inserted the disc
Much to Luke’s dismay Valentine’s Day was spent watching his sisters and Ethan instead of going out to dinner and a movie with Noah. Noah didn’t mind the change in plans because spending time with Luke was what really mattered to him—even if they weren’t alone. They exchanged cards that boasted declarations of love. Noah hoped it would be the first of many to follow. Their celebration was very PG rated, but they’d made up for it in spades in the past twenty-four hours.

Noah moved to sit upright as Luke approached the couch with the remote in hand so Luke would have a place to sit.

“You don’t have to move,” Luke told him.

Noah sat up anyway. “But you won’t have any place to sit.”

Luke plopped down on the end of the sofa and patted his lap. “You can rest your head here.” He sensed Noah’s hesitation and added, “I make a hell of a pillow.”

Noah settled his head on Luke’s lap, making sure that he could see the TV. “Yes you do—among other things.”

Luke chuckled softly and pressed PLAY. Noah hadn’t seen this movie in quite awhile. He and his mom might have been in Nebraska at the time—during their first year on the run from the Colonel. The old Disney film had hit home with him. A couple of kids on the run from a controlling man who was convinced he had their best interests at heart. When Noah first saw the movie, he wished that he had Tony or Tia’s special powers so he could protect his mom.

Sometime during the movie Luke had started to play with Noah’s hair. He continued to do so for the rest of the movie. Noah was in heaven. It was such a simple gesture, but it meant a lot to Noah. Luke had no idea just how much.

“It was a pretty good movie,” Luke said once the end credits began to roll.

“You sound surprised.”

“Well…”

“Are you ever going to trust my judgment when it comes to movies?” Noah sighed.

“So far you haven’t steered me wrong.”

Noah hoped that Luke wouldn’t want to get up. He could lay like this forever—his head on Luke’s lap while Luke’s fingers gently stroked his hair. His mom used to do this, especially when he was scared or sick. She’d caress his hair as she assured him how much she loved him and that everything would be okay. The effect was still the same. Luke made him feel so safe and loved. After his mom died, he wondered if he’d ever feel that way again.

“Like that,” Noah murmured.

“Like what?”

Noah turned his head so he was staring up at Luke. “This—the way you’re touching me.”


“Makes me feel safe—loved.”
“You are loved so—so much, Noah.” Luke took his hand. “It’s hard to believe now that I doubted you’d ever love me. You really took a chance when you kissed me and I’m so glad that you did or else we might not be together.”

*If you take a chance you’ll be rewarded…*

The fortune teller had it wrong. He wasn’t rewarded. He was loved—loved by the most incredible boy in the world. Luke. Luke Snyder loved him. And Noah loved Luke more than his own life.

“I hope we’re together forever,” Noah murmured. There were so many more chances to take with Luke. He wanted to take all of them.

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