| Rating: | Teen And Up Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings |
| Fandom: | 5 Seconds of Summer (Band) |
| Character: | Luke Hemmings, Ashton Irwin, Calum Hood, Michael Clifford |

**Stats:**
Published: 2016-08-14 Updated: 2017-09-10 Chapters: 40/? Words: 91713

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**Keeping Us Together**

by **Strength in pain**

**Summary**

Twenty-two year old Ashton Irwin is the older brother and guardian of his three younger brothers: Michael, Calum, and Luke. He and his brothers are coping with the death of his parents. Ashton has too much responsibility with bills, work, keeping the house in order, and being a full time parent. His three brothers aren't making it easier for him. Ashton is struggling to keep his family together.

**Notes**

See the end of the work for [notes](#)
"Ashton, thank you for staying with the boys tonight. I know that you wanted to go out with Holly, but we need you to stay with them." Ashton's Mother said as she put on her necklace. He was sitting in his parents bedroom watching her get ready for her 20th anniversary. His Dad wanted to take her somewhere special. Currently, His Dad was in Luke's room telling him, Calum, and Michael goodnight and to be good while he was away.

"Its fine mom. I really don't mind watching them, it's just that me and Holly wanted to go out tonight so we could have some time together before she heads off to college." Ashton said, helping his Mom put on her necklace. She turned to her eldest and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Baby, I know you want to spend time with your girlfriend and hang out with kids your age, but your little brothers are too young to be on their own. Michael's only twelve, and Calum is barley eleven and Luke is only seven. Besides its one night." She said while sliding on her shoes.

"Mom…They aren't that young. It's not like they really need me." Ashton said, trying to get out of watching his brothers.

"Ashton they do need you, more than you'll ever know. You're their big brother." She said. Then she looked at herself in the mirror.

"How do I look?" she asked. She was wearing her best dress with her pearl earrings and her pearl necklace. Her dress was red and she was wearing white heals.

"You look great Mom. So what time will you guys be back?" Ashton asked her. She walked out of the room and Ashton follow her. Calum was dancing on the couch with Luke sitting next to him. Calum was always doing something active. His Dad swore Calum was going to be a pro athlete someday.

"Around eleven thirty. Calum! How many times do I have to tell you not to jump on the sofa?" She says slapping his backside.

"Ow! Mom! I'm not jumping, I'm dancing."

"Oh I see. Well, dance on the floor please."

Their Dad walked in snickering with Michael by his side. He ruffled Michael's hair and playfully punched his side.

"You always know how to make me laugh, Mikey."

A proud smile stayed on Michael's face as his Dad went over to Luke and Calum to kiss them goodbye.


"I know you're probably going to want to strangle your brothers tonight, but try to resist, ay, Ash?"

"Sure thing Dad. No murdering my brothers, got it."

"Michael, I want you in bed by eleven and do not watch anything on the television that you wouldn't
watch when me and Dad are home." Their mom said, "Lukey, get your homework done and be in bed by ten. Calum, don't burn down the house. The three of you are to listen to Ashton and do what he asks you to. Got it?" she finishes. They all nodded and muttered "yes mom"

"You ready to go dear?"

"Yes. Goodbye boys. Thank you again, Ashton. "

"No problem, Mom. Have fun."

____________________

A knock on the door woke Ashton up that evening. He looked at his phone and saw the time was 2:03am. "Maybe Dad forgot his key" Ashton thought to himself as he got out of bed and went to the door. Standing outside in a uniform was a police man waiting by his door. "Hello, officer." Ashton said, extremely confused.

"Hello son. I have some bad news."

Ashtons heart was beating a mile a minute. A thousand thoughts raced through his mind. Police don't just show up at people's houses unless something really bad happened like someone is getting arrested or someone...

"Ashton? What's going on" Luke's little voice asked from behind. "I don't know. Go get Calum and Michael." Ashton said, not taking his eyes off the policeman.

A few minutes later the boys were surrounding the door, staring at the grim police officer.

"What's wrong? Is it about our Mom and Dad?" Ashton asked. That concern being the worst in his mind.

"I'm afraid there's been an accident. A drunken driver missed an overpass and your parents..." The officer took off his hat and placed it over his chest, "your parents are dead."

"Oh my God." Ashton said, feeling numb from the shock. "No, no, no. They can't be- they said they were coming back. They're suppose to be back."

"You're lying!" Michael screams at the police officer, tears in his eyes. "Take it back."

Luke bursted into tears along with Calum. "They can't be gone. They were suppose to come home. " Calum cried. "We're orphans! Ashton, they're going to take us to an orphanage."

"No please!" Luke was sobbing that over and over again, clutching onto his brothers like a lifeline.

"I'm not gonna let them take you." Ashton said, tears flowing freely down his face as he held his brothers. "We'll get through this..."

______________________________

Luke felt a tear slip down his cheek as he opened his eyes. It was pitch black, but he was pretty sure he was in his bed. That nightmare terrified him so badly, he screamed Ashton's name repeatedly. Suddenly, Ashton was at his side, pulling Luke onto his lap and crushing him in a hug.

"Shh, Lukey. Calm down. Tell me what's wrong." Luke continued to cry heavily, gasping for breaths. "Did you have that dream again?" Luke nodded his head against Ashton's shoulder. He was clutching Ashton's shirt and shaking with sobs.
"It's always about the night we found out Mom and Dad died." Luke cried brokenly into Ashton's chest. Carefully, Ashton rocked his eight year old baby brother back and fourth. "That was a year ago Lukey. You've been having these nightmares for a year now. Maybe it's time we get some help." Ashton offered, stroking Luke's soft blonde hair.

"No! That will cost money." It was true that therapy would cost too much and these days Ashton was saving every penny in order to put food in his brothers mouths. He was twenty two years old and he had to raise three kids, pay all the bills, work two jobs and do the household chores. It takes a lot of effort and a lot of money to do these things; Ashton found that out the hard way. But every ounce of sweat, blood, and tears was worth it because he got to keep the most important people in the world close to him. So yeah, people can say Ashton's in over his head, but he has something to fight for and that's family.
A day in the hectic life of Ashton.

Loud ringing. This is how every morning starts. The obnoxious, horrendously irritating alarm clock goes off at 5:30am. Groaning loudly, twenty two year old Ashton rolls over and slams his fist down on top of it, to shut the damn thing off. He quickly sits up, because he knows that he will fall back to sleep if he doesn't, and rubs his eyes tiredly. It was Monday morning and to any human being on planet Earth over the age of five, Monday's absolutely suck. But for Ashton, Monday's were extra sucky. For a few minutes, Ashton just sat on his bed and enjoyed the small amount of peace that he never usually has anymore.

Sighing, Ashton shifted out of bed and slowly walked to the bathroom in the hallway between his room and his younger brother, Michael's room. Ashton took off his shirt and threw it in the overflowing hamper. He really needed to do some laundry. Then he got completely undressed and turned on the shower. Even though it was cold at first, Ashton jumped in anyway. The cold would wake him up and besides he could only have ten minutes of hot water considering he could barely afford to pay the hot water bills this year. Once Ashton finished washing, he wrapped at towel around himself then went into Michael's room and woke him.

"Get dressed and get downstairs." Ashton said after Michael cracked open his green eyes. He left before Michael had time to say anything and he entered Calum's room, then Luke's. Finally, Ashton had time to dress himself and go downstairs to eat some breakfast before heading off to work. Eating a lot of breakfast was important because Ashton worked a grueling construction job which means he will be sweating his ass off as soon as he gets to work.

His three brothers were sitting at the table as soon as he got there. Luke and Michael were eating toast while Calum was brushing his teeth. Suddenly Calum bolts up the stairs to spit out his toothpaste. "Why don't you just stay upstairs in the bathroom while you brush your teeth, like a normal person would?" Ashton screamed.

"Cause Calum's never been normal." Michael said sprinkling his toast crumbs over top of Luke's hair.

"Stop!" The younger boy cried, reaching up to smack Michael's hand away.

"You're always so grouchy in the morning." Michael said giving Luke a shove.

"We all are." Luke muttered. Then Ashton added, "to summarize, we are the worst morning people on the planet. Now stop ruining your brother's hair, Michael. He had a nightmare last night and I don't want you to make his day any worse."

"Are we rationing on milk?" Calum asked searching the fridge.

"Yes, we are." Ashton picked up a bag of potato chips off the floor and realized he really needed to vacuum.
"Who left the play station on?" Michael shouted.

"It's not me. You play the play station all the time." Calum said, pouring himself a small glass of orange juice since they didn't have milk.

"It wasn't me." Luke said.

"Well, I know it wasn't me." Michael stated dryly. "It has to be one of you two. One of you guys left the play station on and I don't think it's right."

"It's your play station." Calum yelled.

"Yeah, but I haven't touched it"

"Guys, enough!" Ashton shouted, "get in the car, we're going to be late and I can't be late for work." Ashton was shoving the boys towards the door.

"I can't find my backpack!" Luke cried.


"Shut up! I don't know where I put it." Luke said searching under the piles of toys and clothes in the livingroom.

"It could be anywhere in this mess!" Ashton yelled trying to help Luke find it. "See this is why I tell you to put your backpack on the kitchen counter that way we know where it is"

"Ashton, we're gonna be late." Calum said looking at his phone for the time.

"This is why no one likes you, Luke."

"Michael stop being an ass to your brother!" Ashton scolded. He hurled a stuffed animal bird at the ground. "Great! Just fucking great. I'm going to be late for work for the third time this week all because you can't find your damn backpack."

Luke's lower lip wobbled. "I'm sorry." He began to cry, small tears dribbling down his red cheeks. Calum quickly went to Luke's side and rubbed his back. "It's gonna be ok. Ash is just mad about work. He doesn't hate you or anything." Calum said softly. "And I'm glad you're part of the family, so don't let Michael bug you. He's just teasing anyway."

Luke managed to wipe his eyes dry with the help of Calum and Ashton finally found the backpack. "Ok, let's go. Get in the car."

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"Three tardies equals a detention, Michael." The secretary at his school informed him as she handed him a blue slip. "It's not fair! I can't help it my loser brother can't find his backpack." The lady sighed, and shoved her glasses up. "No excuses young man."

"So I get detention because I'm thirteen but my brother doesn't because he's eight and goes to primary school. Yet I did nothing wrong and he did. Wow, sounds real fair to me."

"Go to class, Michael."
"Mr. Turner!" Ashton screamed running toward his boss. "I'm so sorry I'm late, my brother-"

"No excuses, Irwin. You're late again. If you weren't one of my best workers I'd fire you."

"No, please don't Mr-"

"Relax, I'm just going to cut down your pay check today."

That wasn't exactly music to Ashton's ears, but at least he still had a job. Some money is better than no money.

"Thank you, sir."

"Just get to work. This house isn't going to build itself."

Stripping off his shirt, ashton climbed up the latter and stood next to his friend, Ted.

"Today we're building and then putting up the scaffolds."

"Fun."

Four hours later sweat was falling down Ashton's face and he looks as if he just jumped into a pool. His muscles ached just like they did everyday. He was at an odd angle while he was putting up the scaffolds So now his back hurt."

"Irwin! You got a phone call. Seems like your brother cheated on a test."

"Damn it Michael!" Ashton shouted through the phone. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking I'm going to fail so I might as well cheat and get an A. It worked pretty well up until I got caught."

"You are NOT allowed to cheat. Just wait until I get up there. You are going to be so grounded."

"Would you rather me to fail."

"Goodbye Michael. We'll talk about this at home."

Unfortunately, when Ashton got home he was incredibly tired and sore; he was not ready to yell at Michael but he had to.

"I'm not fucking going! I quit school. It's unfair!" Michael screeched after listening to Ashton lecture him on cheating. Luke was sitting at the table trying to do his homework, but who can do that when world war three is occurring in your dining room. Luke put his book down; well he dropped his book down in shock at Michael's words. He was use to hearing his brother swear, but not at Ashton. It was weird for Luke to be the one listening, and not being yelled at. Luke was defiantly one to get yelled at often for his constant annoyingness and his clumsiness. Right now Michael was steaming mad and Luke doesn't think he ever saw him so mad in his entire life.

"Michael, I've had enough!" Ashton roared causing Luke to shrink his shoulders in fear. "You're going to go to school and you are going to behave and not cheat. And if they make you clean the cafeteria then you will!"

"I don't want to go to school! And I'm not cleaning the damn cafeteria! They can't make me!" Michael was livid.
"You don't have to like it. You're thirteen you legally have to go to school. And you will clean the cafeteria because that is your consequence for cheating and you have to own up and take responsibly when you screw up!"

"FUCK YOU!"

Luke was covering his ears. Meanwhile Calum sat in the living room on the couch listening to the whole thing. He was too scared to get up and go to his room in fear of one of his brothers exploding at him. Ashton wasn't a fan of cussing but he swears every once and a while. However, Calum's Mom and Dad never let them swear so Ashton didn't either. On top of that it was a lot of disrespect to Ashton. Ashton stormed over to the kitchen. Calum could hear banging of pots and pans.

"Get out here, Michael, now" Ashton was so loud he was going to make the house cave in. He walked out into the living room holding a cup. Calum knew it was their Dad's drink. He was going to swipe it on Michael's tongue. Michael hated it. It was worse than getting your mouth washed out with soap, and it was the closest thing to physically punishing them that Ashton ever used. He swiped the hot chili like goo on Michael's tongue.

"It's too hot" His eyes were watering.

Ashton wasn't looking at Michael, he couldn't bear to see the boy in pain.

"When I say I've had enough, I've had enough. You will go to school tomorrow, and you will be on your best behavior, and you will clean the cafeteria. If not I'll take dad's old leather belt and use it. Right now you are grounded for two days."

Michael had tears going down his face. "Ash, come on, it's too hot, He doesn't even like spicy food." Calum said softly.

"Go get milk, and brush your teeth."

"I hate you!" Michael hissed. Then he ran off to his room.


Luke shook his head. "Luke, remember what I told you about your grades. I want to see an improvement this year, ok?"

He was trying to pretend like Michaels words didn't hurt him by focusing on Luke.

"Go to bed, but take a glass of milk to your brother."

"I thought we were rationing on milk." Calum finally spoke.

"We are. But Michael needs some right now. So it's acceptable."

Luke did as he was told. He entered Michael's room and handed him the milk then sat on his lap.

"Michael, did you mean what you said? About hating Ashton?"

"No, I'm just pissed off. It isn't fair Luke. I always get in trouble for being late to school and it's not even my fault." He sighed with frustration. "It isn't right to do this to me. I can't stay locked up in my room for two days. I have to go out."

"But Ashton said you're not allowed."
"What Ashton doesn't know won't hurt him. You go get some sleep, Lukey. Let's keep this our little secret."
Bad move Michael, really bad move. Michael slapped his hands over his forehead. How was he going to get out of this one? Not only did this stuff not come out but now Ashton was going to know that he was out. A knock on the bathroom door startled Michael. He quickly grabbed a baseball cap that was lying on the tile floor and combed all his hair back. He took one final look at himself in the mirror before letting out a relaxed sigh. "There." He said softly to himself.

"Hey, Michael, breakfast is ready." Walking into the kitchen, Michael sat down next to Luke.

"What's with the hat?" Ashton asked which caused Luke to chuckle. Putting a hand over his mouth, Luke covered his huge smile. He could feel Michael's narrow eyes staring him down.

"I'm trying a new fashion statement."


"Excuse me guys I'm in the middle of a story." Calum said folding his arms over his chest.

"Go on Cal, I'm still listening." Ashton encouraged while calculating some bills.

"So this girl was all like, 'oh you got a 93%, I got a 99%' which was really annoying. And she always answers every single question and makes me feel stupid. So yesterday, I hit her with paper balls"

"Nice!" Michael exclaimed ruffling Calum's black hair. Luke was giggling along with Calum.

"You threw paper balls at her! Did she like yell at you?" Luke smiled widely.

"No, she just turned around and said 'don't you realize there are enough people to hate in this world without you putting in so much effort to give us another one."

"Wow, bitchy comment." Michael pointed out, shoveling the cereal in his mouth.

"I know, she has this quick wit thing with snarky comments."

"Guys we have to go." Ashton said while picking up his keys. As soon as those words left Ashton's mouth, Luke took off upstairs and slammed the door.

"I swear to God if he makes us late again-" Michael threatened through gritted teeth.

"Why doesn't he ever want to go to school." Calum asked Ashton.

"Dunno, but you two get in the car. I'll drag Luke there if I have to but he's going."

"Ah man! I want to see that." Michael shouted as he was shoved towards the car. "Are you going to make him cry?"

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"Late again, huh Ash?" Ted inquired after he fist pumped his construction buddy. "Yeah. Little brother keeps making me late. I threw him over my shoulder today and dragged him to school."
"Wow, sounds rough. But I know the feeling. When I was young, my little sister use to lock herself in her room and refuse to come out. She didn't want to go to dance class. But my dad made her go every week and now she's a professional dancer."

"Oh wow. So I guess she's not a little kid anymore."

"Na, she's like your age. Hey! You should meet her sometime you'd like her a lot."

"Huh, yeah I'd love to meet her sometime. That is, if I can find time."

After work, Ashton drove home rather quickly. He wanted to get a shower, but more importantly he felt like he was forgetting something. As soon as Ashton got home he went to check the calendar of all things he does in his life. This calendar was full of his work schedule, football practice, music lessons, and medical appointments. Sure enough, today was a doctor appointment for all three boys. Thankfully Ashton had scheduled a late appointment which means he didn't miss it. Good thing he scheduled it late; He knows himself so well. Frowning at the thought of telling his brothers they need to go, Ashton thought of several bribes to tell his crying brothers once he brought up the sensitive subject. He went upstairs to find the boys and deliver the bad news. A loud fit of laughter came from Calum's room catching Ashton's attention. The three boys were sitting on Calum's bed listening to a CD. Luke's homework was sprawled out on the floor along with Calum's dirty clothes and several other CDs.

"Hey guys." Ashton said knocking lightly on the open door.

"Hi Ash!" Luke yelled cheerily. He stood up and hugged his big brother.

"Did you hear Panic released a new song?" Michael asked in all seriousness. That was one thing Michael and Ashton always bonded on when growing up was music. In fact all of his brothers could bond with him over music.

"It's so funny Ash! It's like "if you love me let me goooooo" Luke sang in a very high tone. Calum and Michael chuckled. "No Luke, higher!" Michael urged. The young boy went as high as he could and at this point Ashton couldn't resist laughing. A doleful look replaced Ashton's smile and Michael could suddenly feel the tension.

"Oh no. What's wrong?"

"Are we in trouble?" Calum whimpered, sensing the gloomy atmosphere.

"No, no. It's nothing like that." Ashton sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "Look, guys. I'm sorry but today is your yearly well-child visit."

Tears pooled up in Luke's blue eyes just as Ashton expected. "Lukey, it'll be ok."

"I'm not going." The blonde boy said stomping his foot.

Ashton sighed and crouched down next to Luke. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Michael and Calum exchanging nervous glances, which wasn't normal for the two of them. Normally, only Luke feared the doctors.

"Hey, Lukey, look at me. I promise I will be with you the whole time and we are all going to get Ice cream afterwards so hang in there."

"Go get your shoes. We're leaving in fifteen minutes. Oh and Michael. Bring that CD, I want to hear this goofy song."

That made Michael smile. He scurried to find his shoes while clutching the CD. Ashton went to Luke's room and slipped the younger boy's shoes onto Luke's feet.

"Can pengy come too?"

"Absolutely." Ashton grabbed Luke's favorite stuffed penguin toy and handed it to him. He silently thanked his parents for buying that adorable plump toy a couple years ago. It brought Luke so much comfort and that black and white penguin has stopped nightmares, tantrums, and sadness. To Ashton, that penguin was a miracle worker.

"Are we all ready to go?"

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At the doctors office, Ashton was filling out some paperwork while the boys sat nervously together. Michael was rubbing his baseball cap while Luke chewed on his nails. Calum was fidgeting in his seat and watching the stupid movie that was playing in the waiting room. Doctors didn't usually make him nervous, but he wasn't in the mood for a shot. Just the thought of needles made Calum want to faint.

"Mr. Irwin?" A nurse, with thick, wavy, chocolate hair, called.

Luke let out a low whimper hugging his penguin tightly. The four of them stood up and went to the nurse. "Hello boys. Follow me."

They followed the nurse to a hall where she checked their height and weight. Then she lead the boys to a small room with light blue walls and several colorful fish on the walls. Calum and Luke proceeded to name each fish while the nurse checked Michael's blood pressure. After checking each child's blood pressure the nurse told the boys to strip to their boxers. Michael did as he was told, but he left his hat on.

"Mike, you're going to need to take the hat off."

"No I don't. He's not checking my head."

"Michael!"

"I want to leave it on."

"Michael take it off."

"No. Let me keep my last shred of dignity."

Ashton was about to argue more but Doctor Mars came in. He held a clipboard and had a white lab coat on with a stethoscope hanging around his neck. "Hello everybody"

Dr. Mars began questioning Ashton about how much milk the boys are drinking and what type of physical activities they are doing. He then turned to the boys and asked which one wanted to go first. Calum wanted to get the damn thing over with so he raised his hand.
"Ok Calum. Step up on the table." Dr. Mars listens to Calum's heart beat, checked his eyes, ears and mouth. He tapped Calum's knee with a rubber hammer then he laid Calum on his back and felt his stomach. Calum whimpered a little when Dr. Mars pulled down his boxers and inspected his private parts. But much to Calum's relief it was over fast. "Good job, buddy. Now I need you to stand up and touch your toes." After checking Calum's back, Dr. Mars have him a sticker.

Next, Luke went. Ashton begged Michael to go before Luke that way he could basically run out of the office after Luke is a crying suffering mess, but Michael insisted on going last. So now Luke was sitting up on the table with a penguin wrapped in his arms as Dr. Mars pressed the cold stethoscope against his back. So far Luke was doing well. He did well until Dr. Mars checked his ears. Luke claimed it hurt and he cried. Ashton was by Luke's side the rest of the check up. When Dr. Mars checked Luke's belly, the young boy practically sobbed. He was withering around on the table trying to avoid the invading hands. Ashton had to distract him by making pengy talk. As soon as Luke's underwear was down the boy lost it and fell into a screaming crying mess. "Shh, Luke. Dr. Mars just has to check down there real fast. It isn't going to hurt." Ashton tried to soothe, but to no avail. Bucking his hips up in an attempt to get away, Luke screamed and wiggled from the hands that were too invasive for comfort.

"There all done. You did so well, Lukey." Ashton praised pulling the boys underwear back up. Rubbing his brothers back, Ashton stood Luke up and helped him bend over so Dr. Mars could check his back.

Lastly, it was time for Michael to get examined. Dr. Mars smiled at him and politely asked him to remove his hat.

"Told you." Ashton said while he bounced Luke on his lap. He felt Calum go stiff beside him which was odd. Why would Calum fear Michael taking off his hat? Michael shook his head. "I don't see why I have to."

"I just need to check behind those ears." Dr. Mars said. Michael's eyes glistened and he looked ready to cry. Slowly he removed his hat. Dr. Mars chuckled. "Green. That's a nice color."

Michael didn't look at Ashton, but he could image the glowering face that was probably red with a vein popping out. Michael was in big trouble.
"What the hell is wrong with you? Green! You dyed your hair green?" Ashton slammed his fist into the steering wheel. "Are you fucking serious? What in the hell made you dye your hair green?" He had asked that question fifteen times already in the short ride home. "And worst of all, you were suppose to be grounded last night! So what does that mean? Did you sneak out? I guess you did. What's next, Michael? Are you going to tattoo your arm, or pierce your eyebrow?"

"I would pierce my lip." Luke offered. Unfortunately his opinion didn't seem to make Ashton any less mad. Michael was never more glad that Luke was in-between him and Ashton at the current moment.

"Do you realize how fucking ridiculous you look?"

"I think I look good." That was stupid especially since Michael knew it would just piss his brother off more.

"No you look like you are going to rob some convenient store. I don't know what you were thinking!" shouted Ashton. Witnessing the fight from the back seat, Calum wanted to end the argument. "He didn't want to tell you because he was scared you would get mad, Ash, Like you are right now."

Michael Clifford Irwin let me tell you something, if you're afraid to show me what you did to yourself chances are you shouldn't do it!"

Michael rolled his eyes, then suddenly a thought occurred to Ashton.

"Wait a second. Calum, did you know about this?"

Michael quickly intervened. "He was with me when I did it, but it wasn't his fault. I forced him to go out with me. And I wasn't afraid to show you what I did to myself. I just didn't want to see you over react."

"Isn't that like the same thing?"

"Shut up, Luke! Nobody asked for your fucking opinion."

"Over react huh? You just made me look like a fool in front of our yearly doctor. This man can call social services you know!"

"He's not going to call social services over green hair, Ash."

"Well he could! He probably thinks your some no good street rat, and I'm letting you throw your life away."

"People don't look at teenage kids with abnormal hair color and think they are messed up in the head. So shut up, Ashton. Other kids do it. It's cool. It's not like I hurt myself or someone else." Ashton pulled into a store parking lot.

"What are we doing?" Michael asked.

"We're getting dye and dying your hair back to a normal color." He hollered.

"No!" Now Michael was pist. Luke looked at his two brothers with wide eyes and Calum silently
prayed Ashton wouldn't punch Michael in the face. He looked ready to.

"Fine!" Ashton finally gave in. "Keep your damn hair green. But your explaining to the social worker that I had nothing to do with it and I tried to get you to dye it back."

"Deal" Michael concurred.

As soon as they arrived home, Ashton sent Michael to his room. "Don't come out until dinner!"

Dinner was silent. Everyone was walking on eggshells trying not to set off another fight about Michael's hair. Calum finally decided to talk about this girl in his history class. "So today, she was crying, like actually crying over a C+. I felt kinda bad, you know. I mean, she's ridiculous for crying over that, but it means a lot to her so I comforted her."

"What's her name, Cal?"

"Nia, why do you want to know?"

"You just talk about her a lot, I thought it would be nice to know her name." Ashton hummed.

"Well, yeah. She's Nia, and she's a really hard worker. We definitely have this competitive thing going."

After dinner, Ashton told Michael to do the dishes for a punishment. Reluctantly, he obeyed.

Ashton was in the middle of folding clothes while Michael was loading the dishwasher when the two heard a horrendous thud from upstairs. A moment of silence falls upon their ears before screams and loud heart-wrenching sobs fill the once silent house. Ashton was the first to take off running, Michael followed a few steps behind. Upstairs, in the hall, Luke sat bawling on the ground, a large bruise under his chin and eyebrow. Ashton crouched down next to the crying boy. Already, Luke's tears were subsiding. He held onto Ashton and absorbed all the affection.


"No! Don't yell at him. It's not his fault. Please don't." Luke cried. He seemed more flustered about the fact that his brother may be in trouble rather than the bruise on his head.

"Are you going to be ok, shrimp?" Michael questioned, kneeling next to Luke.

"Yes."

"Good."


"Aw, Ashton. Do I have to? It's a bruise not a cut."

"Alright. You don't have to. Just be careful, ok long legs."

"Ok."
Ashton smacked Calum's thigh. "Ow! What was that for?" Calum questioned rubbing the sting out of his thigh. When ashton took a step towards him, Calum backed up. "I told you to pick up your toys. Do it today or your grounded for a week."

"Ok, I'll do it, I'll do it." Calum whined. Ashton left his room hastily, and told Michael that he was going to a parent-teacher meeting tonight to discuss Michael's behavior. "I'll be back in a couple hours. Watch your brothers for me."

Michael finished doing the dishes and taking the garbage out so he decided to see what Calum was up to. Turns out the tan boy was shoving all his toys under his bed.

"Genius idea. Ashton will never think to look under your bed."

Calum looked up at his brother with teary eyes. "I can't do this," he wept. "There's too many things to put away! And I didn't mean to hurt Luke. Will you please help me."

"Hey, relax. It's gonna be ok. If your worried about Luke, don't be. He's fine. As for Ashton," Michael sighed. "He's just stressed."

"He's always stressed. Why does he have to be so mean when he is stressed. Why can't he be nice and stressed."

"What did he do?"

"Threatened to ground me for a week if I didn't clean up." Calum sniffled at the thought. Sitting on the ground, Michael joined his brother in the shoving-items-under-the-bed thing. He gently pulled Calum in a hug and carded his hands through the thick black hair. "Don't worry. He won't ground you. When Luke gets hurt, his defensive big brother side comes out. Remember what he did to those kids on our street who use to pick on Luke for following him around?"

Calum cracked a smile. "Yeah, I remember."

"But he would do the same for you too. So don't cry."

"Thanks Michael. It's just, sometimes I miss Ashton being our big brother instead of our dad, you know?"

"Oh trust me, I know. I miss that too. But he is still our brother, and he's just looking out for us. If it wasn't for him we wouldn't be together anymore."

Calum whimpered at that thought and hugged Michael tightly. "We really do need to start helping him around the house."

"Yeah. We do."

"I'll start putting this stuff back to where it belongs." Calum said.

"Good, and I'll be downstairs watching T.V. call me if you need any help."

"Will do."

Michael stood up and with a couple of strides he made it to the hall. The door to Luke's room was shut, but he could hear the sounds of swear words coming from behind the door. "Luke. Open up."
The door flung open and Luke pushed past Michael vigorously. "Hey, hold it right there. What's going on with you?"

"My stupid fucking chin won't stop hurting! I tried to put some cream on it, but that isn't working."

"Dumb ass, did you try ice?"

Luke stared blankly at Michael. A scowl plastered to his face. "Don't sass me! I didn't think of that, ok!"

"I'm not the one that's being sassy."

"Michael! You're so annoying."

"Oh, I'm annoying?" Michael retorted, "you're the most annoying person to ever exist. You shout random numbers when someone is counting! You signal a conversation is over by clamping your hands over your ears!"

"That's what you think!"

"You reply to everything someone says with 'that's what you think!'"

"Yeah! Well I would like to insult you, but the sad truth is you wouldn't understand me."

"Careful now, don't let your brains go to your head."

"Can you stop. I already have a headache and your stupid fucking sarcasm is getting on my nerves."

"One can't have a headache, if one doesn't have a head-"


"Ah, cold" Luke quavered jumping at the contact. Then as quietly as possible Luke whispered, "Cuddle?"

"You want me to cuddle you?" Michael snorted. He was about to burst into laughter, but when he saw Luke's pleading baby blue eyes he nodded. "Yeah, sure. I'll hug you."


"I love you, Mikey." Luke slurred before sleep overtook his whole body. Michael smiled fondly at his baby brother. "I love you too, Lukey."
A visit

It was Sunday evening and Ashton was out doing a bunch of errands. Since Sunday was the only day he got off all week, he used this time to buy clothes, go to the bank, and sometimes he would go to the pharmacy or the home improvement store depending what the family needed. While Ashton was out doing one of those errands, Luke sat at the dining room table doing his homework. Before Ashton left, he firmly warned Luke to start and finish his homework. To Luke this task felt impossible considering he hated geology. It was his worst subject; Luke felt completely clueless as he read the questions. Letting out an exasperated sigh, Luke threw his pencil down.

"I don't have time for this!" He shouted banging his head down on the table. Wrapping his arms over his head, Luke felt tears prick at the corner of his eyes. Vigorously, he wiped them away.

"I guess I'll just never play again! I'm going to be doing homework until I'm fifty so goodbye fun!" Luke said to no one in particular. He re-read the question two more times before giving up trying to do this on his own. He needed Ashton, but Ashton wasn't here. Maybe Calum would know. In the room right next door, Luke found Calum standing over a hot stove cooking something.

"Hey Calum, what are you doing?"

"I'm cooking dinner, what does it look like I'm doing."

"You're not suppose to use the stove when Ashton is gone." Luke remarked.

"Well, I'm not waiting for Ashton to come home. I'm starving and who knows when he's coming back." shot Calum.

"Whatever, it's your funeral." Luke muttered, "Anyway, I have a question."

"What" Calum whined.

"Can you help me with my homework? I need to know what the process of rocks changing from one form to another is called?"

"I don't know." Calum said rolling his eyes and focusing back on the burning food.

"Wait. I haven't read the options yet." Luke said. Calum put his face a few inches from the burning pot and inspected his meal.

"Huh, I wonder if it's suppose to turn black." Calum questioned to himself as he glanced at his black pot roast and mushy carrots.

"A. Mineral identification. B. The rock cycle. C. Luster, or D. The Mohs scale? I personally have no idea, but if I had to guess I would probably say the rock cycle. Just cause, you know, rocks changing from one form to another kinda sounds like a cycle." Luke rambled. Calum simply ignored the boy and went to add more carrots to the food. "Maybe I need milk." Calum pondered pushing Luke aside in order to reach the refrigerator.

Sighing, Luke left the kitchen to find Michael. When it comes to school, Michael was the worst at academics, but what choice did Luke have? Maybe Michael will surprise him.

Luke swung the door open without bothering to knock because they were brothers and they never knocked. But when Luke saw Michael his eyes widened and his mouth flew open. He wished he
had knocked. Michael definitely surprised him that's for sure.

"Oh God!" Michael screamed, pulling covers over his naked body. The girl underneath him gasped and shoved herself further under Michael in an attempt to hide.

"Whoa! Are you having sex?" Luke beamed. A wide smirk crossed his face as he watched his brothers cheeks and neck go completely red.

"Dammit Luke! Close the fucking door."

"I have so much black mail on you."

"Get out! Fucking hell." Michael seethed. He was now sitting up, protecting the naked girl behind him. She looked mortified to say the least.

"I'm gonna tell!" Luke taunted.

"If you do, I'll beat your ass!" Michael shouted, shaking a fist at Luke.

"Let me play your guitar and I won't tell."

"No fucking way."

Luke grabs his cell phone from his back pocket, waves it teasingly in the air, then darts down the hall. Curling his lip in a snarl, Michael jumps up and trips over the covers to chase after Luke. "I'm going fucking kill that kid."

Luke was halfway down the steps when Michael spotted him. He sped like lightning to reach his brother and yank the cell phone out of his hands. Unfortunately for him, Luke was faster. The two ran through the living room, knocking into a table. When Luke bumped it, papers flew everywhere and the lamp wobbled, but when Michael hit the table the lamp crashed to the floor. Luke ran into the kitchen where Calum was trying to stop an overflowing pot of boiling water. Michael ended up slipping over the excess water. He landed on the floor, but not without taking the pot roast with him. Messy, mushy, brownish orange meat/liquid hit the floor and splattered everywhere. Calum screamed, as some landed in his hair and on his face. Michael quickly got to his feet and continued to chase Luke back into the living room. He chased the boy around the couch a couple of times before scooping Luke up. "GOTCHA." Michael was about to rip the cell phone from Luke's hand but instead he froze. The front door had opened and in front of them stood Ashton and a social worker.

The social worker's eyes bugged out of his head. He furrowed his eyebrows and glared at Ashton. The sight was not pretty. Standing in the center of the room was a stark naked Michael who was holding his younger brother over his shoulder. Surrounding the pair was a broken lap, shattered glass, and a thousand scattered papers. Calum walked out of the kitchen with pot roast in his hair and tears in his eyes. He had at least two burns on his arms. Not to mention Luke had the bruises on his chin from the fall he had yesterday. To top it all off, a random girl walked downstairs with clothes on, but she picked up her bra off the floor and left the house with a mortified expression. Ashton smacked a hand over his face before sheepishly turning to the social worker and offering a weak smile. "And these are my brothers."

"Ashton, this does not look good. I hope you know." The social worker, Mr. Boward, said as he shut the door to the small home. They spent the past two hours answering Mr. Boward's intrusive questions which ranged from 'What jobs do you work.' To 'how do you handle your anger'. Also, he took the boys into a separate room and spoke with them privately asking how they were doing and
what their typical day was like. Of course, Mr. Boward asked more invasive things such as 'how
does your brother punish you, and are you happy.' As much as Ashton hated the visits, he
understood the reason for them. The answers to all those questions helped Mr. Boward learn who
they are. Ashton stood with his back to the dark sky and Mr. Boward stood with his back to the
house. Facing one another, Ashton offered an apology on behalf of his brothers. "They never usually
do this. I don't know what's gotten into them."

"You need to be more strict, Ashton." The social worker said writing something down on his
clipboard. "I know you love your brothers, but I need to make sure they are safe in this house. And
tonight you did not prove that. Calum could have burned down the house for God's sakes."

"I know. I'm sorry. I told him not to cook while I was gone."

"And obviously he didn't listen to you. This is why discipline is incredibly important. They need to
fear disobeying you." Ashton cringed at the words. "I know you want to be their friend, but as an
adult and a guardian, you need to be more strict. Now, I'm not saying abuse your brothers. Don't start
throwing punches or I will take them away. But you should get a little rougher. A little more physical
even. Take away their electronics. Give them a time out. Whatever you want just discipline them."

"I will. I promise."

"This is strike one, Ashton. Don't get three."

Bowing his head, Ashton looked at his feet in shame. Mr. Boward put a hand on his shoulder. "Are
you sure you want to keep doing this? I only want what's best for you and the kids. Maybe if you
give them up-"

"I'm not giving them up. I want to do this. If I need to be more strict then I will, sir. What I'm not
doing is giving up on them." Mr. Boward offered him a sympathetic smile. "You're doing fine,
Ashton. Determination is the key to success. I'll be back later. If all is good, I will forget about this
little mishap and erase the strike, sound good?"

"Yes sir."

With that, Mr. Boward excused himself and went on his way. Ashton stood on his porch for a long
time thinking of his parents and his brothers. It wasn't long before Ashton broke down into sobs.
What if he couldn't do this? What if he fails his brothers? What if he can't look after his brothers like
he promised his parents he would? Too many emotions were swirling around in Ashton's head.
Maybe it was all his fault. That's how Ashton's mind worked. He usually puts all the blame onto his
own shoulders. Why the fuck was he shaking? He needs to pull it together and be a man. Or maybe
he should just go out and get a drink. One shot of tequila couldn't hurt right?

__________________________

"Ashton's been gone for awhile" Luke whimpered, clutching his penguin to his chest.

"We really screwed up." Calum agreed while scrubbing the floor. "Stupid pot roast." He whined
trying to get rid of the disgusting blackish liquid from the tile floor.  

"Do you think we're going to be grounded?" Michael asked from his spot on the counter. Calum
tossed his rag down and shouted up at Michael, "yeah probably! We fucking deserve it!"

"Don't swear." Ashton's slurred voice came from behind the boys. 

"Hi Ashton. I'm glad you're back. Look, we're really sorry." Calum apologized.
"Yeah. But I'm not the one who wreaked the kitchen, just saying. So if you want to go easier on me-
"

"Oh my God! You are unbelievable!" Calum shouted throwing a rag at Michael's head.

"I'm just saying, if it wasn't for you trying to cook dinner maybe we would actually be eating something right now instead of starving."

"I hate you!" Calum screamed getting close to Michael's face.


"You're right, Luke. It's yours." Michael replied sending the youngest a glare.

"I'm not the one who decided to sleep with a stranger."

"Shut up, you annoying brat." Michael hissed.

"ENOUGH!" Ashton smacked the table in front of them hard with his fist. The blow busted the table and his knuckles. Luke physically jumped back. Michael stepped in front of Calum and Luke, eyeing Ashton warily. "Ashton. You're drunk." Michael choked out, his voice was shaky. He was trying to remind Ashton that he wouldn't normally be this angry. Ashton shook his head a couple of times before retreating back towards his room. All three boys sighed in relief. One of their biggest fears was that Ashton would turn to drinking instead of talking and dealing with his problems. In High school, Ashton drank a lot as a way to escape problems. It wasn't until his parents had a long talk with him that Ashton promised to never drink again. Tonight, that promise was broken. Michael stuck out his arm and said, "c'mere you two." Calum looped his arms around his brothers. He was shaking.

"Are you ok?" Michael asked them and they nodded.

"Do you think he's going to drink again?" Calum's concerned voice scared Luke.

"I don't know, Cal. Hopefully not."

"I'm going to pray." Luke said quietly.

"You do that, Lukey."

"Michael, I'm sorry for saying 'I hate you."

"It's ok, Calum. I don't hate you either."

All three boys went to bed hungry that night.
Pain shot through Ashton’s head when he woke up the next morning. His stomach felt nauseous from both the hangover and regret. Ashton stood up and felt a little dizzy, but he quickly regained his balance. Fixing his eyes on the door, Ashton walked gingerly to it. Every muscle protested, but he forced himself to move passed it. Once he was in the kitchen he took two Advil’s and a glass of water. Finally, Ashton was able to think about the previous evening and all the terrible events that went down. He wanted to erase it all; to pretend like nothing happened. But he knew it did and unfortunately he was to blame for scaring his brothers by drinking again. Why did he do that? It was too much stress. Everything bad was happening and he just wanted to... It doesn't matter. He's never going to drink again. His brothers need him to be strong and sober. Nothing hurt worse than the guilt Ashton felt towards his brothers. He needed to talk to them and tell them it will never happen again.

When all three boys entered the kitchen, Ashton sat down across from them and watched as they cautiously stood a few feet away from him. Dammit he screwed up.

"Guys. We need to talk." He started, his voice cracking. Everyone's eyes were on Ashton so he continued, "I'm sorry for drinking yesterday. I want to promise you guys that it will never happen again. I was really upset yesterday, but that's no excuse. You guys made mistakes yesterday and so did I. So how about we just forget yesterday."

Calum smiled. "That sounds good to me."


"Good. Now, let's get you ready for school." Ashton said relief washing over him.

"So, we're not in trouble?" Michael questioned.

"No. But if something like that ever happens again you will be."

Michael exhaled the breath he was holding. "Got it."

"I'm not going to school." Luke stated casually. Closing his eyes, Ashton rubbed his temples and tried to remain calm. Luke refusing to go to school was becoming a regular thing and it bothered Ashton. "Yes you are."

"But I don't want-"

"It doesn't matter what you want, Luke. It's a law so you have to go."

"But Ashton!"

"But nothing. You're going."

Luke rolled his eyes then heatedly walked in the direction of the garage. Ashton followed hot on his tail. Before Ashton could make it through the front door, Luke turned around and slammed it right in his face.

"Seriously, what's his problem?" Calum asked Michael as they watched Ashton rub his nose.
"I don't know. I guess the kid just doesn't want to go to school."

Satisfied with that response, Calum dropped the subject, but he couldn't help but feel like there was a good reason why Luke didn't want to go to school.

Doing a construction job with a hangover sounds easier than it actually is. Ashton felt nauseous every time he bent over. Using extra caution, Ashton hooked himself to a pulley system because he could barely balance on his own two feet let alone a latter. "Hey! Ashton!" His friend, Ted called from down below. On the ground, Ted stood with a small, thin, blonde. "C'mere, I want you to meet someone."

Slowly, Ashton crawled down the latter and went over to his friend. He was sweating profusely and his shirt was off sitting on the hood of his car.

"Hello." He greeted, extending his hand to the beautiful woman. "Hi" She took his hand and shook it. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Bryana. I've heard a lot of things about you."

"All good things I hope." Ashton replied.

"Oh yeah. Ted loves you." The two of them shared a smile. She had honey sweet lips and a gentle personality. Man, Ashton would be lying if he said he didn't dig her.

"Eggs, cheese, and bread." Michael read off the last items on the grocery list.

"Can we get ice cream?" Luke asked Ashton as they passed through the diary aisle of there local supermarket. "No, bud, I'm sorry." Ashton informed, running a hand though his own soft curly hair.

"We're rationing on things, remember." Calum chimed in. He was pushing the shopping cart with two meals and plenty of space. Children's laughter could be heard from the next aisle over. It made Calum happy to hear other kids having fun. His brown eyes searched through the various breads then stopped when he found the Italian one. Standing on his tippy-toes Calum reached the loaf of bread and happily placed it in the shopping cart. Calum took pride in helping his family, that's why he never cared about doing small errands like this. However, Luke and Michael found the tedious task a waste of time. Currently, Michael's headphones were draped around his ears as he hummed an All Time Low song. Luke, on the other hand, was walking aimlessly up and down the aisle trying to keep himself occupied. Occasionally, he would grab something the family needed, but most of the time he focused on all the items he couldn't have. Today, it was ice cream. Ashton returned to the cart with a 12 carton of eggs. "Thanks for helping me find the bread, Cal." Ashton ruffled the boy's hair playfully.

"No problem."

"Ok let's go get the marshmallows then- where's Luke?" Calum turned around to find that the aisle that once held Luke was now an empty aisle.

"Michael, I told you to watch him."

"He's eight years old! He shouldn't be getting lost in the first place." Michael spat.

"He's curious." Ashton defended.
"Curiosity killed the cat."

"I see him." Calum said leading his brothers through the store. Sitting criss-cross near the back of the store Luke held a white fluffy Samoyed dog. Squealing, Calum dropped to his knees to pet the adorable dog. "He's so cute! Can we keep him. Please."

Ashton needed this like he needed a hole in his head. "No, Calum. We can't."

"He doesn't have a collar." Luke pointed out. "What if he's a runaway!"

"What if he has rabies." Michael said in disgust.

"We should keep him."

"We're not keeping him." Ashton groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger.

"What should we name him?" Calum asked.

Looking around the store, Luke spotted an item and said, "we should call him Ketchup."

"Yeah! Ketchup." Calum shouted, kissing the dog's head.

Michael shook his head, "What the actual hell. It's a white dog and you name it ketchup? I think you have a few screws loose in your brain again, Luke."

"He's standing by a bottle of ketchup so naturally I think Ketchup suits this dog pretty well, thank you very much."

"Calum stop kissing it." Ashton demanded.

Stroking the soft fur, Calum rubbed his face against the beautiful white coat. "I want him. Please, Ashton. I've been good."

It hurt Ashton to deny Calum of what he wants. Truthfully, Calum deserved a huge reward for being such a helpful, sweet brother, but Ashton just didn't have the money. "I know you’ve been good, Cal. And I'm so proud of you." He sighed, "but we can't afford to take care of a dog right now."

"I can do more chores around the house." Calum suggested, squeezing the little dog with his warm hug. God, this was killing Ashton. "Buddy, I can barely afford to feed you let alone a dog."

"It's not fair! If I could get a job I would. It's not my fault stupid child labor laws won't let an eleven year old work."

"Come on, Calum. We need to grab the marshmallows and then head home."

"I want to bring Ketchup." He pleaded, wide brown eyes staring Ashton down.

"Cally, you can't." Ashton declared with a grave face.

"All my friends have dogs!"

"If all your friends jumped off a bridge would you do the same."

"I'm so sick of people using that dumb line. I get it. I'm not my friends, I shouldn't want what they want! But what's wrong with wanting a dog?"
Ashton felt himself growing frustrated at this point, he was tired and he just wanted to go home and end this conversation which was starting to gain some attention from the regular shopping folks. Sensing a tantrum, Ashton felt compelled to get out of that store as fast as possible. Calum clenched his jaw trying his best to look determined. Realizing that he was going to have to force Calum to leave the dog, Ashton stepped towards his brother and grabbed the boy's arm. "No, Ashton! Don't." Calum pleaded, squirming to free himself from Ashton's iron-like grip. "We need to go home." He said tugging Calum to the cash register. "Michael, take your brother to the car. Luke and I will check out."

Michael guided Calum out of the store and into the car. "It's not fair!" Calum cried. "I've always wanted a dog and we finally found one and now I can't have him."

"Look on the bright side, Cal, that dog probably belonged to someone anyway. Why else would it be in a grocery store." Michael explained.

"I know." Calum sniffled. "I'm being stupid. It's just sometimes, I feel like I'm not going to have a normal childhood. My older brother is my guardian, I'm always stressed, I always have to help do adult chores like mowing the grass, I have to worry about someone taking me away from my home and my family, and now I can't even have a dog."

Michael wrapped his arm around Calum's shoulder. "Life sucks. Trust me, It isn't fair. But if you keep the right attitude things will start to look up." Michael's green eyes sparkled as he looked out into the distance. Calum couldn't help but stare at Michael wordlessly. Sometimes his brother could be a real ass, but other times Michael can be really sweet and caring. "I think you should talk to Ashton about it."

"About what?"

"About how you feel. You know, the stresses of Life and all."

"Do you think he would understand?"

"I definitely do."

Not long after, Ashton and Luke piled into the car and they drove home.

10:30, the clock read. Tossing and turning, Calum couldn't find a comfortable position to fall asleep in. He was emotionally exhausted after having a long talk with Ashton about how his misses his parents. They both told funny stories about the past. Stories that needed to be heard just to bring back the memories of their parents. It scared Calum to death to think that he is slowly forgetting what his dad's voice sounded like. He wants to hug them so badly it hurts. Needless to say, the night ended in cathartic tears. Both Ashton and Calum felt happier after crying. Honestly, this was one of the first times they spoke about their parents since the accident. Now, Calum's starting to realize it's a good idea to talk about it, rather than avoid the pain he feels and pretend it never happened. Glancing at the clock again, Calum groaned when he realized it's only been a minute since he last checked. Someone knocked on his room door, "come in." Calum spoke quietly. Ashton walked in a few minutes later with a hand behind his back.

"Hi Ashton. What do you have?" Calum leaned to the right to try and peer behind Ashton. The older boy put a hand on Calum's shoulder.

"Listen, I feel terrible because I can't get you a dog." Suddenly, Ashton revealed his surprise. "So I
thought maybe a stuffed dog would be second best." Calum's eyes crinkled from the wide smile spread across his face. In front of him was a small white stuffed animal dog, with a name tag that said 'ketchup'.

"Oh Ashton. Thank you." Calum said jumping into his brother's arms.

"I know it's not as good as a real dog but-"

"I love him." Calum exclaimed. Relief flooded Ashton's veins and he let out a soft, "I'm glad." Ashton pulled the blankets to Calum's chin and tucked the raven haired boy in. He handed Calum the puppy then kissed his forehead. "Goodnight, Calum."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if this chapter isn't that good. I will be updating another one soon.
Chapter Notes

Quick warning, there is spanking in this chapter. It's near the end.

It's been two full weeks and Ashton has worked everyday straight from morning 'til dusk. Every evening he comes home exhausted and sore. All he wanted to do was go to bed, but he has to stay up and pay the heaps of bills and clean the messy house. Last night, Ashton forgot to run the dishwasher thus resulting in a lack of silverware and dishes the next morning. Luke was eating cereal on a paper plate when Ashton entered the dinning room. Their eyes met as Luke's tongue was hanging in the paper plate full of milk and Cheerios like a kitten. The two exchanged vacant stares. "No clean dishes?" Ashton asked, already going to the dishwasher to fill it up. "Nope." Came the obvious response.

"Ashton, do I have to go to school today? Can I please stay home?" Luke spoke softly from his place at the table.

"You have to go, Luke. What's with you constantly putting up a fuss about going? Is something happening? Do you want me to call the school and tell some teacher off for you?"

"No. I just don't want to go." Luke stated avoiding Ashton's brown eyes. The boy pulled at his shirt, trying to look busy while Ashton continued talking.

"That's not acceptable, kid. You know you have to go whether you like it or not."

"Fine." Luke gave in. Standing up, He went to the garbage to toss away his meal. Luke wondered upstairs to Michael's bedroom and found Michael talking on his cell phone, to one of his 'friends'. Sitting next to Michael, Luke pouted at his older brother. Michael knew that Luke hates his friends; he blames it on that fact that Luke wants attention and when Michael's with his friends he neglects Luke's attention. But Luke claims it was because his friends suck. They criticize Michael, they harass him and they ditch him at every cool party, but Michael still considers them his best pals. But every time they are over at the house, Luke feels the urge to punch them in the face.

"Hey, Cruz, hold on a sec, Luke's in my room." Michael whispered through the phone. "Yeah, yeah, I'll get rid of him." He took the phone away from his ear and spoke to Luke, "what do you want? Can't you see I'm on the phone?"

"Can we go to the gym later today?" Luke's plump lips were still in a pout. Not many people could resist Luke's puppy eyes and small pout. But unfortunately, Michael was one of the few that could. "Luke, you never go to they gym. Besides, You're too little."

"I want to be big like you. I can do it. I go running with Calum all the time." Luke insisted. Rolling up his sleeve, Luke flexed his small muscles. "See?"

"Speaking of which, why don't you go run with Calum right now?" Michael offered, pushing Luke out of the his room.

"But it's almost time to go to school." Luke shouted as he struggled to be released from Michael's
grip. Tossing Luke out of his room, Michael slammed the door in the blonde’s face causing him to fall back on his bum. “Michael! Open up!” Luke pounded on his brothers door. “I’m more fun then stupid Cruz! He’s trouble, Michael. Please play with me!” Luke begged as he stood at the closed door staring at the door handle in hopes of it opening. It never did.

Calum was downstairs already sitting in the car. He had his black hair combed back in a small quiff like look. Normally he just brushes his hair to the side and throws a beanie on. Instead of wearing a nirvana shirt, Calum wore a white t-shirt with a black vest overtop. “What’s your hurry?” Ashton asked when he spotted Calum in the car. “I have a special seat at lunch today. So I need to get to school asap if I don’t want to lose it.”

“Oh I see. Sounds exciting.”

“It is. Can you tell Michael and Luke to hurry up!”

“Ok, calm down. Lunch doesn’t start for another couple of hours anyway.” Ashton teased. Soon enough the group was off to school and work.

"Are you sure we won't get caught?" Michael stammered. He was starting to get cold feet about this prank Cruz wanted to do.

"Oh, don’t tell me you’re wimping out! Come on, Michael, this bitch deserves it for giving us those F’s." Cruz slapped a hand on Michael's shoulder and shook it for some motivation. "This is gonna be the greatest prank in Northwest history!"

Five more pieces. Ashton needed to cut five more pieces of wood and then he could go home. Finally, this was the first day in two weeks that he gets to go home early and boy does he need it. Aches were shooting up his back all week and his head felt like a never ended drum repeatedly beating all day long. He couldn’t wait to go home a relax. Well, as much as he could while paying bills but that definitely needed to be done considering the electric company was threatening to turn off the electricity if he didn’t pay the electric bill soon. Ashton groaned at the mere thought of sitting in a chair for hours and looking over all the financial taxes. His mind flashed to an article he read in high school about how too much stress could lead to a heart attack. A small laugh made its way to Ashton’s lips. At this rate he’s already destined for an early death. Closing his eyes, Ashton tried to take a few relaxing breaths. Remember, look for opportunities in life’s challenges. He repeated that to himself until he finished his job. Smiling widely, Ashton felt like leaping in the air and almost squealing like a fan-girl. That all crashed when his boss handed him a phone and said, "your brother was in a fight at school."

Calum sat on the bench outside the principal’s office waiting for Ashton to pick him up, yeah he wasn’t going to be happy at all that he’d gotten in trouble for fighting at school but he couldn’t help it, that kid Tony was just such a dickwad. The doors opened up and Ashton walked in, he glanced Calum's direction then walked past the bench in order to talk to the principal.

"Ah, Mr. Irwin, nice to see you."

"You too, sir. What did Calum do?"

"Well it seems Calum got in a fight with Tony Kertinger. According to Calum, Tony slapped a girl
named Nia Lovelis and Calum came to her rescue. Of course, Tony claims it was Calum who slapped the girl and he was the rescuer. We already sent Nia home, but her sister, Rena was sitting with her at lunch and luckily for Calum she claims Tony did instigate the fight." The principal let out an exasperated sigh, "nevertheless, Calum still punched someone; therefore, he is suspended for a day. Also, he will have Saturday detention. However, if he would have started the fight he would be given a week of suspension so in a way he's lucky."

"Thank you, principal Thompson." Ashton muttered, shaking the man's hand. Gesturing Calum to stand up, Ashton walked over to the boy and guided him outside. They were heading to Ashton's old, tatty, and a little worse for wear car when Ashton's cell phone rang.

"Hello." Ashton snapped, his hand fumbling around in his pocket searching for his keys.

"Hi, Is this Mr. Irwin?"

"Yeah that's me."

"Do you have a brother named Michael Clifford Irwin?"

"Fuck." Ashton whined. "I'm sorry, yes. I do, what did he do? And who is this?"

"I'm officer Stan from the county police. It seems your brother was caught vandalizing a car. I'm going to need you to come down here and pick him up." Ashton's face was burning red with rage, his jaw clenched and eyes narrow." I'll be right there." He said through gritted teeth.

Calum jumped in the back of the car. Hunching his shoulders, Calum tried to hide behind the seat of the car. He does not want to be the target of Ashton's anger. Driving with fury, Ashton sped though town to get to the police station. Calum grasped the seat in front of him and held on for dear life. He let out a relaxed sigh when his brother stopped at a red light. Breathing in and out to calm himself down, Ashton glanced around the community. Seeing familiar sights such as Dunkin Donuts and Lowe's was enough to loosen Ashton up. He smiled when he saw an old woman carrying flowers out of a shop and walking to the coffee shop. A little kid was sitting on a bench outside of the coffee shop. He was a cute kid with blonde hair...wait...It couldn't be... Could it? As Ashton drove closer to the kid his eyes popped out of his head. "LUKE!"

Luke's lips made an 'o' shape before he took off running down the street. Slamming on his breaks in the middle of the street, Ashton parked the car and ran after Luke. He followed his little brother into the grocery store, then backed Luke into an aisle. "Don't be mad." Luke pleaded, backing away from Ashton until he couldn't go back any farther. "I can not believe you ditched school!" Ashton snarled at the little boy.


"Hey, Cal, why are you home from school?"


Michael sat next to his buddy, Cruz, on the police bench. "When is his guardian going to get here?" Officer Henry yelled to the other officer. "Not for a while probably. This is what happens when kids watch kids." Officer Stan muttered. Finally, Ashton stormed in the office with his other two brothers. "Mr. Irvin, a word please." Officer Stan said gesturing Ashton to follow him back to the questioning
rooms. "In my line of work I see a lot of kids like your brothers. Good kids that get put in shitty situations and end up doing bad things. I have to say, I feel sorry for you because I knew your parents and they were good folks. I know it must be hard losing them. And I bet it would be hard to lose your brothers too. So I'm going to let this slide, but be warned, if I ever catch them doing something illegal again, social services will be called and I can guarantee you won't see them again." Ashton gulped. Everything this man said had Ashton physically shaking.

"Thank you for giving me a second chance sir." Ashton mumbled, his heart racing.

"No problem. Just make sure they're never on that bench again."

"Oh I will." Ashton promised. When he stepped back into the office, he saw Cruz's father yank him up by the arm and scream, "I've had it with you, Cruz. When we get home your backside is gonna be black and blue." Michael shot his friend a sad smile. Cruz merely rolled his eyes.

"That's not a bad idea." Ashton boomed causing Michael to jump. On the ride home, everyone was completely silent. All three boys could feel the boiling heat radiating off of Ashton. They knew he was close to exploding and no one wanted to set Ashton off. They pulled up into their garage. Ashton shut the engine off and shouted, "take a seat in the living room, NOW!"

Michael, Luke, and Calum scurried into the house, while Ashton followed them shutting the door behind him. He turned around to find them sitting on the couch like three, five year olds who got caught coloring on the walls. That's when it hit him. They crossed the line. They could be sitting at the social services office waiting to go to some group home if the principal or the cop wouldn't have given him a second chance. Thank God they had mercy on Ashton.

"I didn't mean to." Michael said sounding a lot tougher than he should.

"DIDN'T MEAN TO WHAT? huh Michael? Didn't mean to get caught?"

Calum grabbed Luke's hand because he knew the youngest was probably on the verge of tears. It was an actual miracle that Luke hadn't started crying yet.

"Well, you never caught me before." Michael mumbled before quickly adding, "I didn't mean to actually hurt her car. It was suppose to be a prank."

Ashton shook his head, and turned to Luke. "And you! You've been skipping school for a week! Where have you been going, the city? Do you have any idea how dangerous that is Luke? You could have been kidnapped, or hurt and I wouldn't have any idea where you were." Surprisingly, Luke rolled his eyes and leaned back against the couch with his arms crossed over his chest. Ashton yelled, frustrated beyond belief. "The guy was an asshole, he had it coming." Calum tried to defend himself, but he realized he was failing.

"And seriously, Calum, you got in a fight?" Ashton yelled, frustrated beyond belief. "The guy was an asshole, he had it coming." Calum tried to defend himself, but he realized he was failing.

"I'm not doing this boys! I'm not letting the social services pick you up! You three aren't going to go and get yourselves thrown in jail; it's not happening. I'm sick of you two disobeying me! I don't know what it's going to take to make you realize that I'm serious. Grounding isn't working." Ashton thought back to what Mr. Boward said. He does need to be more strict. 'What would mom and dad do?' Ashton looked to the ceiling for some advice. His brothers really crossed the line. Vandalizing was illegal and if his brother slashed tires, it could kill someone. Ashton knew that it was that Cruz kid's influence but it didn't matter. They had a choice and Ashton was sick and tired of this crap and it scared him to death to think that he could have lost them. They needed to understand that they weren't going to go wild. Ashton wasn't losing them. Looking over at the family portrait hanging on the kitchen wall, Ashton noticed on the kitchen counter there was a wooden spoon sitting out.
Ashton thought about what Cruz's father said about him being black and blue. Nothing else was working. They haven't been taking Ashton seriously. They have pushed him to far and they crossed the line. This was it, Ashton marched over to the kitchen counter and stood over the wooden spoon. His brothers eyes followed. Sighing, Ashton had to think this through. Did he really want to cause his brothers pain? If they cried it would be his fault. He would be to blame for taking away their smiles. But then, Ashton remembered the police officer's threat and he pushed his second thoughts away. As soon as Ashton picked up the wooden spoon, he noticed the nervousness in his brothers eyes.

"Ashton? What are you doing?" Michael whispered. He was backing into the couch as Ashton walked closer, holding the cooking utensil firmly in his right hand.

"Do you remember what dad did to the four of us the day he caught us throwing eggs at our neighbors house?"

The three nodded, and Michael gulped. Ashton frowned, "I'm going to give you a spanking." He said sternly.

"No!" Calum shrieked curling up against Michael for protection.

"Ashton we're sorry. We didn't mean to." Michael uttered his voice shaking.

"Yeah, we'll be good." Luke offered, fighting off tears. This was a nightmare that Luke wanted to wake up from. In a way, he felt like this wasn't really happening. He figured that's why he wasn't crying yet. Shaking his head, Ashton towered over his scared brothers. "You've had plenty of chances to improve your behavior. Maybe this will help keep it in your head."

"No." Michael protested his heart was pounding along with his head. He really just wanted to go to bed. "Yes, Michael. This is happening. C'mere Calum." Ashton said, pointing to the spot in front of him. Shaking his head rapidly, Calum's face turned a charisma red color. Ashton tugged the boy up off the couch and lead him to the arm chair where he sat down and put Calum between his legs. "No! Please!" Calum whined. Ashton unbuttons Calum's skinny jeans, making the 11year old whimper, and pulls them down. He then grabbed Calum's arm and pulled him down over his lap. "I don't want you too." Calum cried. "Your getting this for fighting someone." Ashton stated. He raised the wooden spoon high, then popped Calum's bum with force.

"Ow!" Calum screamed. Tears pricked at the corner of his eyes. "Ashton stop. I'm sorry. I won't fight again." Calum's pleas fell on deaf ears. Five more sharp slaps were delivered to Calum's burning backside. The boy cried out as the loud smacks echoed throughout the room. Michael and Luke were huddled in a ball on the couch, completely mortified. Luke was a crying mess along with Calum and Michael felt nerves racketing his body.

"What did you do wrong?" Ashton asked, resting the wooden spoon over Calum's burned rear. "Punched a kid. I'm sorry." Warm tears fell down Calum's face as Ashton continued to drive the lesson home. "That's right. Last five, Calum." Ashton warned, tipping the sobbing child over and landing the last five on his sensitive sit spots. Suddenly it was over, and Calum was sitting in Ashton's lap. "Shh, it's ok Calum. It's over." Ashton soothed. "I'm so sorry I had to do that but fighting could get you in a lot of trouble in school and in life."


"I'm going to make sure of that," Ashton said, landing a harsh smack on Luke's clothed bum. "Ow!" Luke screamed, kicking Ashton in the face. Wincing, Ashton bit back a curse word and tightened his grip on Luke, then put his leg over Luke's legs. Feeling trapped, Luke screamed and cried and thrashed with all his body weight. "Enough." Ashton yelled. "If you don't stop squirming, these pants and underwear are coming down." Luke stopped moving and laid still. He stared at the carpet and tried to anticipate when the sting was going to come. He felt the wooden spoon lift in the air and then crash against his delicate behind. The intense burn surprised him and he howled as more were added. "Stop, it hurts." Luke sobbed brokenly.

"It's suppose to hurt, Luke, it's a spanking." Ashton mumbled before continuing the onslaught. "Don't you ever scare me like that again, Luke! You could have been lost or hurt. When you are at school at least I know you are safe." He lectured.

"I'm sorry, Ashton. Please no more, I'm sorry I was bad." Luke cried thrashing on his lap full power. In one swift movement Ashton pulled Luke's pants and underwear down revealing his bright red bum. Michael and Calum winced, holding eachother tightly. Ashton almost stopped spanking Luke when he saw the red skin. It was one thing to punish the boys when he can't see the damage, but now he was watching the skin on his brother turn an angry red as he irritated the skin by repeatedly striking it. It made Ashton feel like a monster. Luke was sorry, and Ashton really wanted it to be over, so he decided to tilt the boy forward and end the assault with four harsh slaps to the boys sit spots. Luke's deep sobs could be heard as the wooden spoon made contact with the bare skin. Luke didn't even realize it was over, until Ashton was carding his hand though Luke's soft hair and whispering gentle "I love yous" in his ear. Tears continued to fall down Luke's face, and he couldn't help it. Ashton knew it was going to take a while for Luke to calm down. His body was trembling, his eyes were red rimmed and puffy and his cheeks were wet. Plus his face was in a large pout. Dropping Luke back off on the couch, Ashton pulled Michael to the chair. "Oh hell no." Michael yelled, pushing against Ashton. He tried to make a break for the door – why he did it, the boy wasn't quite sure, as it would only delay the inevitable. Ashton, however, moved quicker than a racing cheetah and before the thirteen-year-old could make good in his escape, his brother had his forearm in a strong grip. "Oh, no you don't," growled Ashton bringing the resisting teen over his lap.

"I know you understand why you're getting spanked, so let's just get this over with," Ashton said grimly, looping his left arm around his brother's slim waist and effectively locking him into position. He raised his hand and snapped it down, applying the first stinging swat. He used a little more force than he usually did to make up for the skinny pants Michael was wearing. Michael bit back a yelp as his brother connected the wooden spoon with his ass for the first time. The first painful swat started the descent of many more. Michael was soon squirming across his brother's knees as the blaze in his backside steadily intensified.

"OWWW...enough, Ashton..."

"Are you going to vandalize anything ever again, Michael?"

The green haired boys response was immediate. "No" He felt the first tears pricking behind his eyes when his brother paused to give his sensitive sit-spots some extra attention and he gave a whispered hiccupped sob. Finally, Ashton released his arm and Michael stumbled to his feet.

"Mikey..." Ashton began, but was cut off by the boy whispering a faint, "leave me alone" then curling up on the couch with his younger brothers. Calum was sniffling a little, but for the most part
he calmed down. Then there was Luke, who was sobbing like there was no tomorrow, and finally, Michael who was acting dejected.

Ashton took Calum by the hand and led him upstairs. He gave him a kiss on the forehead and clean PJ's then he turned on the bath water and instructed Calum to get in. "Ashton," Calum's soft voice rang in his ears. "Yeah, buddy?"

"I really am sorry for getting in a fight. I don't want to get us split up. I love you."

A warm smile crossed Ashton's face as he pulled Calum in for a hug. "I love you too, Calum. And I really don't want to hurt you, I just want you to be safe and happy."

"I get it, Ashton. I do. Daddy did the same thing and he was a good dad."

"The absolute best." Ashton agreed.

Downstairs, Ashton noticed Michael cuddling a crying Luke to his chest. He was crying himself as he rocked his baby brother.

"Hey you two." Ashton said softly.

"NO!" Luke screamed, hiding further into Michael's arms. Ashton was a taken back by the emotional response. The shaking eight year old was clutching Michael's neck like a life line. Ashton was confused until Luke uttered the words, "I don't want anymore."

Suddenly It made sense to Ashton. "Aw, Lukey, no bud. That's all done with. It's all over now. No more spankings, ok?"

"No more spankings?" Luke looked up at Ashton with hopeful eyes.

"Exactly baby. No more. Now, how about you come upstairs with me and we get you in the bath tub with Calum?"

Luke nodded slowly and untangled his arms from Michael's neck. He kissed Ashton's cheek and snuggled against his brother. "Love you, please don't be mad." Luke whimpered. He couldn't stand the thought of disappointing Ashton. Also, this may not be surprising, but Luke gets extremely cuddly after being hurt. He needs someone to hold him until he feels better. Luckily, Calum could do that while Ashton talks to Michael.

"I'm not mad, Lukey. And I love you very much." Ashton kissed Luke's forehead as he carried his brother upstairs. "Ashton, I don't like spankings." Luke mumbled into Ashton's neck. His breath was warm against his skin. "I know, Lukey, I know. Trust me, I don't like giving them either." Opening the bathroom door, Ashton helped take off Luke's clothes, not because Luke couldn't do it himself, but because the boy would likely break down at the loss of contact.

"Do you love me?" Luke knew the answer, but he desperately craved some reassurance. "Of course I do, baby. I love you so much. That's why I'm doing this. I'm strict with you because I love you and I don't want you to live the rest of your childhood in a group home or a foster home. I want you to have a stable place to grow and flourish. I want you to have the home you grew up in with the people you grew up with. I just want you to be happy, Lukey." Wrapping his brother in a hug, Ashton rubbed Luke's back before lifting the boy up and placing him in the tub. Wincing, Luke shifted positions trying to adjust to the warm water that kept stinging his raw bum. Sitting gingerly next to Calum, Luke splashed the tan boy and laughed as Calum got some water in his eye. An all out water war began so Ashton took this opportunity to leave and speak with Michael.
"Ok, tough guy, why the long face?" Ashton asked crouching in front of the couch Michael was laying on. "I know it's not from the punishment cause I've seen you take worse. So what's bothering you?"

Staring at Michael's glassy green eyes, Ashton tried to read them, but couldn't. He ruffled the messy green hair and planted a kiss on his forehead. He one hundred percent expected Michael to pull away from the touch and wipe the kiss off his forehead saying, 'don't kiss me, I'm not four.' But Michael didn't move. It was starting to worry Ashton so he continued to run a hand through the boy's hair.

"Is it because I've been so hard on you about dying your hair and sneaking out? Do you feel like I'm ganging up on you? Because I'm not tryi-"


"It's not that." Michael's breath shuttered and he let out a small hiccup, "but i definitely didn't like that. He's so little and sensitive..."

"Mikey, please tell me what's upsetting you." As soon as Ashton said that, the tears Michael was trying so hard to contain just exploded down his face. Soft sobs shook his body. "I..it's so stupid." He cried. "But I miss." He hiccupsed again gasping for air. "Shhh, Mikey, breathe."

"I miss mom and dad. I feel like I disappointed them today. And I wish I could talk to them, or touch them. I just want them to hug me again and tell me that it's gonna be ok. And they forgive me for screwing up. Why did they have to leave us, Ash? Why!!" Michael was letting every bottled up emotion out right now. He punched the pillow in front of him. For the first time in a long time, it felt ok for Michael to cry. He stopped hitting the pillow and fell back against the couch.

"I don't know, kid. But I have faith that they are somewhere better and someday we will see them again. And if we don't, we still have our memories."

Michael rubbed his hand over his eyes. "M'sorry for crying."

"Hey, don't ever be sorry for crying. It's not a sign of weakness, you know. Sometimes it's just your way of showing your emotions. It's As simple as that." For a while Michael cried, laying his head on Ashton's lap. When the last of his tears fell, he stood up and hugged Ashton then went upstairs to go to his room.

After watching Michael leave, Ashton gazed upon the heaping stack of bills stacked on the dinning room table. Groaning loudly, Ashton buried his head in a couch pillow. Reluctantly, he shifted over to the table to start the taxes and bills.
Michael woke once again to the sound of Luke's screams. He quickly sat up and tried to wake his brother. "Luke." he whispered. Luke continued to thrash around on the bed and wouldn't wake up. Michael tried again. "Lukey!" he yelled. Moments later, Ashton entered the room. His hair was wild, sticking up every which way, and was wearing only a pair of sweats. He rushed to the side of the bed and shook Luke.

"Luke, please wake up," Ashton pleaded. Sitting up straight in the bed, Luke gasped for air then curled into a ball. Ashton could hear him sniff but it turned into a broken sob making Michael look over at him to see him crying.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Ashton asked quietly crawling over to the other side of the bed as he wiped his tears away from under his eyes. Luke shook his head and held Ashton tighter. "Just don't leave me… Please" he croaked.

"I'm not going anywhere baby." Ashton said continuously rubbing Luke's back. Michael crawled in bed with them. "Me too."

A few minutes later, a bare chested Calum walked in with only boxers and his stuffed dog. "Hey, don't throw a family sleepover without me!" Calum complained, hopping into bed with his three other brothers. The only problem was Luke's bed was really small. It barely fit Ashton laying next to Luke, but they made it work. However, Michael and Calum, were laying on top of Luke and Ashton. "Ugh. Calum! Get your butt out of my face!" Ashton yelled. "Get your face out of my butt." He retorted. Michael smushed his body directly on top of Luke as if he were humping the boy. Of course, he wasn't but it sure looked that way.

"I'm so glad we can cuddle like this." Michael said, pushing all his weight on Luke.

Sunlight beat down on Ashton's eyes. Blinking twice, Ashton awoke with Calum directly on top of him and Luke curled up to his side. He guessed now was a good time to wake all his brothers at once.

"Dammit when is it going to be the weekend!" Michael groaned, standing up.

"Probably never." Calum said limping out of bed.

"Hey, what's wrong with you?" Ashton tugged Calum's arm to look at him in the eye.

"What do you mean? I just said it's probably never going to be the weekend."

"You're limping. Why are you limping."

"Oh. M'sore. But I'll be fine." Calum muttered, tugging his arm away. It took Ashton a second to realize Calum was inferring the spanking he got last night. Deciding not to comment, Ashton went over to Luke and tried to pull him up. "Come on baby, you have school."

"No!" Luke cried, wiggling his shoulders in an attempt to shake Ashton away. "I don't wanna go to school."

Sighing, Ashton stood Luke up and guided him to he closet. "Pick out some clothes."

Downstairs, Michael and Calum sat having a live debate over eating potato chips in the shower. "They get all wet and soggy." Calum stated, waving his hands in front of him for dramatic effect.

"Your not suppose to get them wet, you dumbass. Hold them outside of the shower."

"Why should I eat potato chips in the shower anyway?"

"Because it's an amazing experience every person should have."

Calum shook his head, throwing his hands up. "Whatever man, you win." Luke walked downstairs a few minutes later, tear tracks on his cheeks. "Luke? Have you ever tried to eat potato chips in the shower?" Michael asked as the boy sat down next to him. "No." He sniffled.
"Well it's a great idea. You should try it." Michael urged, ruffling the combed up soft hair.
"I don't want to go to school." He choked, tears dripping down his face.
"Why not?" Michael asked while shoving some potato chips into his mouth. "Do we have any salsa?"

Calum rolled his eyes at Michael. "No, it's part of the rationing."
"Fuck. How am I supposed to eat potato chips without-"
"They're gonna make fun of me." Luke shouted, slamming his fist on the table. Calum's eyebrows knitted in confusion.

"Who's gonna make fun of you?"
"That stupid girl in my class and her stupid brother. They always tease me about my parents leaving me. Apparently I'm the unloved orphan boy."

"No your not!" Calum loudly exclaimed. How dare someone make fun of his baby brother.
"Don't listen to 'em. They're just jealous." Michael said, chomping on the food.

"Jealous of what?" Luke figured this would happen. He knew no one would understand.
"Of your amazingly talented voice." Michael said lifting his brother and sitting him on his lap. Luke winced and began squirming, trying desperately to get off of Michael's lap.
"Ow." Luke yelped. His blue eyes were screwed tightly in pain.

"What? You don't want me to hug you?" Michael asked as Luke pushed him away.
"No, it hurts." Luke finally managed to pull away from Michael. "They're gonna make fun of me because I'm an orphan and now I can't sit." Michael heart twisted a little. He had the sudden urge to beat the hell out anyone who messed with Luke. "Shhh, just relax. I'll teach you how to throw spitballs at people. That way, if one of those bastards mess with you, you can hurl a spitball in their face!"

Luke cracked a smile, his eyes silently thanked Michael and he went to make himself some breakfast. Fifteen minutes later, Luke engaged in the conversation on potato chips. "Have you tried icecream in the shower?" Luke asked. Michael was about to answer but he heard thumping coming from the staircase. He quickly grabbed the bowls and threw them in the sink. Rushing downstairs, Ashton gathered his brothers and ran out the door with them. When Ashton dropped Luke off at school, Michael peered from the backseat and said, "good luck, don't forget I'll teach Ya how to defend yourself tonight." Luke pointed his finger at Michael and tisked. "Thanks bro." He said.

"They're gonna steal our food again." Brian, Luke's best friend, said while looking at the cool kids table in alarm.


"Well, well, well. If it isn't the two orphans." said Kenny, the coolest guy in school. Jessica and Kenny were leading the pack of kids. There was a long awkward silence as all the children looked each other up and down.

"Why do you dress so weird?" Jessica finally asked Luke and Brian, her nose wrinkling slightly. Both boys were dressed in black shirts. Luke had a blink-182 shirt that had a blue bunny on the front with a baseball bat and Brian had an AC/DC shirt on. Luke waited for Brian to invent some excellent come back, but Brian seemed to have gone into a state of shock, so Luke stepped forward instead. "Look who's talkin'," he said with as much attitude he could muster, copying Michaels stance and defiant look that Ashton had told him never to do. The girl looked slightly taken back, but recovered quickly. "I'm talking," she said proudly. "And I can say what I want." Luke was about to open his mouth when Brian cut in.

"Last time I checked, we didn't ask for your opinion."
"Was that your dad who dropped you off at school today, Luke?" Asked Toby, speaking for this first time.

"No," Luke said curtly, not wanting to get on to the subject of his parents. "It was my brother, you know I don't have any parents."

"Where's your mommy and daddy then?" Toby was obviously trying to get under Luke's skin.

"They've gone up in Heaven." Brian explained, ignoring the look Luke gave him. "So they can't look after him anymore."

"My mommy and Daddy would never do that," Toby said looking shocked.

"They didn't mean to, it just sort of happened." Luke tried desperately to explain. His hands were moving in the air, but he couldn't find more words.

"They'd still never me," Jessica continued to boast. "My parents love me."

That did it for Luke. He just had to shut this awful girl up. He leapt forward, grabbed onto the long brown hair, and tugged on as if his life depended on it.

"Fight!" Someone shouted and the whole cafeteria turned into hell.

Two hours later, Ashton sat down heavily on the worn out sofa, Luke stood shame faced and crying in front of him. The boy had been spanked for the afternoon's activities, not particularly hard as Ashton thought he'd been through quite enough in one day, but hard enough to reduce the child to tears and have him calling out heart-filled apologies. However, this is Luke, the boy who cries over lost puppies.

"Alright," he said, pulling Luke closer to him. "I think you'll think twice before getting into anymore fights don't you." He was greeted by a vigorous nod. "Ok then." He pulled Luke onto his lap but Luke pushed him away, staring at the wall in front of him. This was not normal behavior for Luke. Normally the boy would want to be comforted and would snuggle against Ashton's chest. But instead he held a grim face and stared at the wall.

"She said Mommy and Daddy didn't love us Ashton" Luke whispered avoiding eye contact. "She was so mean."

Ashton frowned. "I'm sorry she was mean, but you can't go around hitting people just because they are mean."

When Luke didn't respond or smile, Ashton asked him what he was thinking.

"I told you Ashton. I told you I'd hate it and I didn't want to go to school. I told you but you wouldn't listen. Now look what's happened. That bitch made fun of me and Brian and now the teachers are going to yell at me tomorrow. All because you didn't let me skip school."

"Luke, watch your mouth. Don't make me smack you again because You know I will."


"I'm sorry I didn't listen to you earlier," Ashton began, he felt Luke lean against him slightly. "It's just I had no choice.Honey, you have to go to school. But if you would have told me why you didn't
want to go, I could have helped you by calling the principal and the teachers. They could tell the other kids to knock it off and that it bothers you. I could even move your class, so you could be in a different room. Or you could eat food in a different room with Brian. You do understand don't you?"

Luke seemed to think for a minute, then nodded his head, and lent against Ashton's side happily. "M'sorry, Ashton. I promise I'll tell you more often. But can you promise to listen to me and not say your busy when I want to talk to you."

"Yes, Lukey, I promise."

"Ashy, can you please not spank me for the rest of the week. It really hurts." Luke wept.

"Shhh, let's go upstairs and give you some medicine, ok?"

"Yes, please." Luke wrapped his arms around Ashton's neck, ready to be carried upstairs. Luke quiets down with a small smile as Ashton lifts him up and carries him carefully to the bathroom, sitting his gingerly down on the counter by the sink. Luke shrieks at the coldness on his stinging ass, nearly jumping right back into Ashton's arms. "Hurts, Ash." He mumbles, keeping his arms securely locked around Ashton's neck.

“Shhh baby, you have to let me go so I can get something to make it hurt less.” Ashton tells him in a soft voice. Luke reluctantly lets him go. Ashton smiles, ruffling Luke’s messy hair before disappearing quickly and coming back in less than a minute with a bottle of aloe lotion. The older boy pulls Luke over his knee once more to apply the soothing cream. The sight of how red and raw Luke’s skin looks makes Ashton wince and bite his lip. He breathes out a soft apology before putting some lotion on his hands and gently rubbing it into Luke's sore skin. Luke feels instant relief and relaxes against Ashton's body. Finally, Ashton picked his youngest brother up and carried him to the kitchen where he made him a Ham and Cheese sandwich. "When's Calum coming home?" Luke questioned. "His football practice is over at 7:00, why?"

"Michael promised to play Mario Karts with us and I wanted to team up with Calum and kick Michael's butt."

"Speaking of which, where is Michael anyway?" Ashton asked.

"I thought he was in his room?" Luke said

"No, I checked and he wasnt there." and Ashton face palmed himself. "I swear if he does something bad..."
"Michael! Get the boards!" Cruz screamed, slapping Michael's back. "Yeah man, hurry up!" Josh, his other buddy, called out as he handed Cruz a cigarette.

The front door to the Irwin's house slammed open scaring Luke and Ashton. They watched Michael gallop up the stairs.

"Hey guys!" He called from his room. A lot of banging, thumping, and crashing was heard above Luke and Ashton's heads. A few seconds later Michael came racing down the stairs with three skateboards in his hands. "Bye." He yelled, slamming the door behind him.

Ashton chuckled and sipped his tea. "Well at least we know he's not up to any trouble." Luke frowned. He didn't trust Michael's so called 'friends'. They definitely weren't out of the woods just yet. Luke had a feeling they would be getting into some type of trouble.

"Can I keep and eye on Michael for you?" Luke asked Ashton, standing up from his spot at the table. Ashton wore a bemused expression on his face, but he nodded nonetheless. That's all the reassurance Luke needed to run after his big brother. He couldn't wait to skateboard with Michael. Usually, Luke fears skateboarding, but every time he does it with his big brother they always laugh and have a great time. Outside, on the street, Luke spotted Michael and his friends talking by Ashton's car. Luke stood behind Michael and overheard their conversation.

"She didn't want to. Then by the time we started kissing, Luke comes in the room and catches us. Here's the thing. We were both naked."

The group of older boys laughed and clasped Michael on the back. "Man that's good."

"Yeah, but like I said. She didn't want to do anything. She said something about being thirteen was too young. And I kinda agreed." Michael admitted.

"Aw... Isn't that sweet. But that's not something you should tell the guys at school, Mike." Cruz said, holding his cigarette hand in front of Michael chest.

"No, what you gotta say is, she was a real animal. You had to tame her and once you did boy was she a screamer!" The boys once again laughed like morons and Luke felt obligated to join in. Of course, his laughter was quite fake. Suddenly, he was only one laughing and everyone was looking at him. "Looks like the pipsqueak decided to get a lesson from the big boys." Cruz mocked, "hey kid, do us a favor and go back inside."Josh said, shooing Luke away like some fly.

"Seriously though, you should go for Angela. She's just about as easy as they come, and she's gonna look real trashy in a couple of years." Cruz added.

"What's so good about a girl looking like trash? Wouldn't you want her to look pretty, In like a nice dress and stuff?" Luke realized he obviously said something wrong when the boys shared irritated glances at eachother. "Geez, Mike, does your brother have to be out here?"
"Yeah man, can't you send him to the baby pen were trying to have a conversation here." Josh yelled, throwing his cigarette to the ground and stomping on it. Michael looked over his shoulder to see Luke biting his lip.

"He just wants to skateboard with us. It's not that big of a deal, right?" Michael said with a cheesy smile on his face.

"Dude. This ain't training camp. We're gonna be halfpiping and Alley-ooping all day long. We don't need a toddler." Cruz muttered pointing in Luke's direction.

"I'm eight years old!" Luke shouted, scrunching his face together to try and give Cruz a menacing look.

"Yeah, whatever. We don't need you so why don't you go-"

"He can stay and skate on the side court. That way he can still skate, and he won't be in our way." Michael compromised.

"Fine. I still don't see why the baby has to follow us around everywhere we go, thou." Josh muttered straightening himself off of Ashton's car and leading the group to the park.

"I call the first bluntslide." Cruz yelled running to the ramp.

"Mikey, will you skate with me?" Luke asked, tugging on Michael's ripped jean jacket. "No Luke. I'm hanging with my friends right now. And you know I hate when you follow me around, so why did you come? Huh?"

"I wanted to hang out with you." Luke sadly looked at his feet.

"Listen. I'll play with you later. Right now, you need to stay over here and skate by yourself."

"Fine." Luke huffed, throwing his skateboard on the ground. He had ran inside to get it while the group was leaving.

For the first ten minutes everything went fine. But Luke was lonely as he watched Michael and his friends have a good time skating so he decided to skate on their ramp.

"Luke! What the hell are you doing!?" Michael yelled. "I told you to stay over there!"

"I didn't want to." Luke said, skating around with Josh and Cruz. "Damn kid." Josh muttered as he landed at the top of the ramp where Michael was. "Bro, we were going to eat pizza at Carrie's party tonight and I was gonna invite you, but I'm not going to do that if your brother tags along." Josh said, shaking his head at Luke.

"Carrie Springer!" Michael shouted as Cruz popped up on the top of the ramp as well. "What about Carrie?" Cruz asked, taking his helmet off and giving Luke the middle finger.

"I told him about the party."

"Why would you do that Josh? He can't come."

"Why not, come on guys I want too." Michael begged. He looked deeply worried but Cruz had a big smile on his face.
"Handcuff your brother to the park bench and we'll let you come to the party." He smiled at Josh and the pair high fived.

"What?" Michael shook his head. "I'm not leaving Luke alone in a park."

"Why not? Come on Bro, he'll be fine. Besides if he's tied up here then he can't follow us to the party." Something about the way Cruz explained that made Michael think it was a good idea. Luke won't get hurt and he can go to an awesome high school party.

"Ok. But where are we going to get handcuffs?"

Cruz opened his black jaw-string backpack, that he always has with him, and tossed Michael a pair of metal handcuffs.

"My dad left these in the bedroom last month. I decided to keep them for Carrie's party. But I think this is a better idea." Examining the handcuffs beneath his fingers, Michael started feeling incertitude feelings towards this plan. "How am I suppose to do this?"

"God, Michael, if it's so hard for you then don't do it. We'll just leave without you." Cruz voiced. The two turned to leave, but Michael stopped them. "I'll do it. Just give me a second. Ugh." Michael groaned and walked over to Luke. "Hey, can I talk to you?"

"Sure." Luke was ecstatic Michael was actually paying attention to him, rather than his friends. "Let's sit on the bench." Michael suggested walking to the park bench and facing Luke. The handcuffs held firmly behind his back. "So...I was thinking. You and I should watch some old Batman re-runs tonight. And some Spider-Man. But first..." Michael moved as fast as a striking snake putting the handcuffs over Luke's wrist then the bench arm. "Mikey, what are you doing!" Luke cried, his face full of fright, terror, and panic. Seeing Luke's fearful face, Michael felt compunction about leaving his little brother tied to a bench. "I'm sorry, Luke. I promise I will watch T.V. With you tonight. You just can't follow me to the party."


Cruz smiled at Michael and gave him a thumbs up. "Alright! Let's party!"

Two blocks away, Halfway down the street, Michael stopped walking. Cruz was busy boasting about his girlfriend, when he noticed Michael's sudden stop. "Yo, Mike, party's this way." He said when Michael started walking the opposite direction.

"What the hell are you doing? Don't you want to see Carrie in her swimsuit?"

Michael spun around, "I don't give a fuck what Carrie looks like. I could care less if she was naked. The only thing that matters is That I just left my eight year old brother handcuffed to a park bench! Who the fuck does that!" Michael was panting like a dog, completely enraged and bitter. He felt stupid and dense.

"Whoa, Chill out bro."

"Do you know how dangerous that is?" Michael asked, throwing his arm out to the side. "Look at the sky! It's about to rain. It's about to rain, and Luke will be trapped outside in the rain for a good two or three hours while we're partying."
"So?"

"Oh my God! That's it." Michael started walking in the opposite direction again.

"Dude, if you miss Carrie's party because of your lame ass brother then I'm not going to hang out with you anymore. In fact, I won't be your friend anymore."

Michael paused. He contemplated this for a second. A feeling of betrayal flashed through his mind because he thought he was important, but now he knows he's not. He stood two feet away from Cruz's face and said, "that's fine. I'm not losing a friend, I just realized I never had one."

Warm, wet, August rain fell from the sky, drowning out Luke's cries. His wrist was bruised and bleeding as he continuously yanked it trying to get free. Luke has always been scared of storms, so right now he felt rather petrified. He heard a faint voice off in the distance. As the voice grew closer Luke recognized it to be Michael's. The summer sky was dark and vengeful. Steaming shrouds of cloud coiled and writhed. Then, the wind whips up into frenzy. Luke shrieks and tugs with all his might on the handcuffs. His hand snaps back out of the metal cuffs and Luke stumbles to the ground. Loud rain beats down on the gravel where he lays. Soon, he feels a hand on his back and he sees Michael picking him up and rocking him back and forth crying out apologizes. "It's ok." Luke says softly, too relieved to be in safe arms.

"Lukey, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me." He said again, kissing Luke's wet, flat hair.

"I forgive you." Luke said eyes still watery. Michael smiled, "oh kid. You've always been so forgiving. I don't deserve to have a brother like you." Michael said helping Luke to his feet. He took off his jacket and put it over Luke's head to cover the boy and keep him as dry as possible.


"Really!" Luke asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I guess you were right all along. They weren't really my friends, they were just using me for my popularity." Michael looked miserable so Luke stopped walking, bent down and plucked a flower. Actually, it was a dandelion so technically it was a weed, but to Luke it was a pretty yellow flower, and he handed it to Michael. "I'm sorry you lost your friends." Luke said. Tears rolled down Michael cheeks. "Thank you, Lukey." He choked out as he took a hold of the flower from his brothers raw wrist. "You know what? I do have a friend. And you know who he is? His name is Luke and he is super sweet. We're going to spend a lot of time together because we are more than best friends, we're brothers." If a smile could save a life, Luke would have saved ten thousand lives in that moment.

When the boys got home, Ashton was waiting for them in the livingroom along with Calum. As soon as they entered the house Ashton gasped at the sight in front of him. Michael and Luke were soaking wet, tear tracks down both of their faces and Luke was dripping blood on the floor. They had a lot of explaining to do.
Bright lightning flashed across the sky illuminating the small house for a second before fading back to a dimly lit room. Michael and Luke were shaking from the cold wet rain.

"Oh my God!" Ashton exclaimed, walking over to his wet, tear stained little brothers and glancing them over checking for wounds.

"Luke, your wrist is bleeding." Ashton's momma bear side was coming out as he gently dabbed the bloody wrist with his shirt.

"Oh so that's what this red sticky stuff is." Luke retorted. He knew there was no need for the excessive sarcasm, but right now he was hurt, angry, and sad and Ashton was pointing out the fucking obvious so forgive Luke for snapping at Ashton.

"What the hell happen!" Ashton screamed, scaring the sarcasm right out of Luke. Right now he just wanted to crawl under his covers and drink chocolate milk. But that wasn't gonna happen. No. Ashton was going to yell at Michael and possible punish him and Luke just didn't want his family to fight anymore. Deciding on the only possible solution, Luke responded before Michael could. "I tripped over a tree root and landed on my wrist." He lied, not looking at Ashton, but at the ground instead. It was much more fascinating than the look of pity in Ashton's eyes. Although, Luke felt pretty pitiful right now, enough to make him cry. But he wasn't going to do that. He was going to be strong. "Aw, Lukey." Ashton cooed, picking his baby brother up and cuddling him to his chest. Turning to Michael, Ashton asked, "I guess you helped Luke."

"Yep."

"why were you crying?"

"Um... I wasn't. The rain it got in my eyes." So Michael's lie was fictitiousness and Ashton knew it but he didn't pry. Instead he carried Luke to the kitchen and made him some hot chocolate. Browsing the kitchen cupboards, Ashton found the first aid kit. Using gauze, Ashton applied some pressure to Luke's wrist to stop the bleeding.

"Ow!" Yelped Luke, kicking Ashton's shin and watching as Ashton clean his wrist with warm soapy water. Next he grabbed some antibiotic ointment. "This is gonna sting a little" he warned, before dumping some on Luke's wound. The eight-year-old tried his best to remain quiet, only letting out occasional moans of pain. Finally, Ashton wrapped the boy's wrist in a sterile bandage.

"Cool." Luke said glancing at his signature mark of strength. Michael was watching from the doorway with Calum by his side.

Ashton ruffled Luke's hair then said, "You two need a bath and dry clothes."

"I wanna get one with them." Calum yelled a captivating smile on his face. When Ashton gave permission the three went upstairs and filled the bathtub. Michael was trying to keep an eye on Luke and be there for him because he felt so damn guilty. But Luke was avoiding Michael, purposely clinging to Calum to whole time.

"Does it hurt" Michael asked when he finally mustered up the courage to talk.

"No." Luke bluntly stated, teeth chattering from the cold clothes that Calum helped peel off.

"I was just concerned about you. You don't need to get all bitchy." Calum scoffed, pulling Luke close to him again. He could sense that Luke's happiness was wearing thin. The tan boy relaxed against the back of the tub letting the water shine off his exposed skin.

After the bath, Michael and Calum sat on the couch downstairs and started playing Fifa. The storm outside their window was whipping up and rain was pouring down buckets. Loud, treacherous, thunder rumbled in the night like a hungry lion. Michael was sure that Luke had the covers pulled up over his head in his bedroom right now. Personally, Michael and Calum were starting freak out themselves because the thunder was so ear-piercing. Earlier, Ashton went to bed, leaving the boys alone, which normally wouldn't be a problem except now there was a storm raging outside with the ability to strike down a tree. When another flash of lighting arrived, the thunder followed a second later and then suddenly the power went out. Everything in the house went dark and Michael's game died. A small, frightened cry for help rang though the silent pitch black house. "Luke." Michael muttered knowing that his brother was probably terrified wherever he was. "Luke." michael called out loudly this time. "We're downstairs, are you alright?"

"No!" Luke cried, "I can't see anything and I need my penguin."

"Hold on, Cal and I are trying to find the stairs."

"Dammit I can't even see where I set my phone." Calum whined, walking cautiously and feeling all of the tables in the house. When his hand bumped into something rectangular Calum yelled, "I think I found it."

He proceeded to turn on the flashlight. In no time, the pair was upstairs in Luke's room pulling back the covers.

"We're here." Michael soothed, hugging Luke, who was shaking like a leaf. Michael couldn't blame him, the storm was really bad tonight and honestly, Michael wanted to hug someone too. "Do you guys want to see Ashton."

Both responded with a yes, therefore; all three boys ended up in Ashton's bed cuddled under his arm.

The next morning was just as bad as last night, if not worse. The weather had went from thunderstorms to mini flooding hurricanes. Ok, so it wasn't that bad, but the lights were still out. Ashton crawled out of bed after kissing each brother's head, then checked his phone to make sure his work was canceled. He worked a construction job, therefore, they usually canceled if it rained, and today was no different. Ashton was relieved to have a day off even though he wouldn't get paid as much at the end of the week, at least he could actually relax: Something he hasn't done since he lost his parents.

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Around 10:00am the other boys woke up and now they were all playing charades to pass the time. "Ok, your turn, Ashton." Michael said, marking a point for himself since his team won the last round. Glancing at he card, Ashton smirked and said, "can I sing?"

"I don't see why not." Calum replied.

"I'm pretty sure we're playing the game wrong." Ashton stated, "I think no one is suppose to talk.
But we've been singing, rhyming, and drawing the whole time."

"Yeah, yeah, so it's a mix of pictionary and the heads up game, whatever, just go." Michael gestured Ashton to continue.

"Ok, I'm gonna sing. Do you want to build a snow-

"Frozen!" Calum screamed.

"Yes!" Ashton said jumping over to the sheet with all of their scores. "How many do we have?"

Michael rolled his eyes, "you and Calum have 13 and Luke and I still have 15."

"Not for long." Calum taunted. "Who's next?"

"Luke." Ashton said, patting he youngest on the back as he headed to the front. Luke bent down and held his pinky and index finger up along with his thumb and made a spssss sound. "Spider Man!" Michael shouted. "Yes!" Luke said strolling over to Michael and clapping his hand. "That's another point us! Beat that!"

"Oh we will." Calum walked over and read his card. "Easy." He said smiling, "expeliomous." He extended his right hand forward. "Harry potter!"

"Yep. Ha! Another point for gryffindor."

"Why do you get to be gryffindor?" Luke pouted.

"Because we are winners." Calum said standing by Ashton with his arms crossed.

"Don't worry, squirt, this one's easy." Michael patted Luke's shoulder then laid on his stomach and kicked his legs in the air.


"Now it's 17 to 15. Muke still in the lead."

"Mike, don't ship you and you're brother it just sounds wrong." Ashton said.

"Whatever you say team Cashton."

"Jesus, Michael!"

"Come on, it's your turn!" Luke pushed Ashton's back. "I'm going, I'm going." He chuckled.

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"He flies that way?" Luke belly laughed as Calum was flying his stuffed animal dog around the house on his hind legs. "He's not underdog." Luke could barely breathe he was laughing so hard. The four boys were eating dinner on the livingroom couch talking and laughing about everything in life, from sports to comics to girls, to favorite foods that they would love to eat someday when they have enough money and now stuffed animals.

Calum slapped his hand over Luke's mouth. "Shhh, you'll hurt his feelings. He thinks he's underdog."

"Seriously, though, I think we should have a Rottweiler stuffed animal and put it in the doorway that
way, when the mailman comes he will shit himself." Michael howled his body rocking. "You remember when we use to scare the hell out of the next door neighbors?" Ashton asked, "we would always blast music every time they came near the window."

"Yeah, we had fun. Speaking of which, we should listen to the rock albums in the basement.

"Oh my God! This is gonna be so much fun!" Luke practically screamed at the top of his lungs running for the basement door.

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Two hours later, after jamming and singing their hearts out, a person knocked on their door. Gloomy expressions filled the room. This was a knock from reality saying even though you had the best day of your life and forgot all of your troubles I'm hear to remind you that you still have troubles.
Knock, knock, knock.

"Who could that be?" Calum whispered to Michael as he glanced towards the door.

"Hopefully not who I'm thinking." Ashton muttered going to the door. Following Ashton, the three brothers stopped in front of the couch. "Does he think it's a social worker?" Calum asked Michael again, looking to the tall boy for answers.

"That's what I'm thinking." Michael said, then he pulled Luke to his side whispering in his ear, "Remember you tripped over a tree root and bruised your hand, ok. That's the story we're all going with." Michael told the boys. Luke nodded trying to see past Michael to notice who was standing at the door talking to Ashton.

"Hey." Ashton said a shy smile tugging on his lips. "Come in."

A beautiful lady walked in the house with honey blonde hair. "Boys, this is Bryana. Bryana, these are my brothers." Introducing the people, Ashton led Bryana to the kitchen and offered her a glass of water.

"Ted said you had a day off, so I thought maybe I should stop by and see you. I thought you might like some homemade cookies." She handed him a basket.

"Aw, thank you so much." Ashton's cheeks were turning red.

"Oh brother." Calum said, rolling his eyes dramatically. To his side, Michael was unsuccessfully trying to hold back laughter.

"Ashton's got a girlfriend." Luke chanted, laughing when Ashton's whole face flushed a deep shade of red. Walking over to the kitchen door, Ashton slammed it shut on his three annoying little brothers.

"Sorry about that." He said, as he made his way back over to the waiting woman.

"Oh, that's ok." She said, flipping her hair, "I have a brother too."

Chuckling, Ashton sheepishly smiled and put his hand on the back of his neck. "Yeah, Ted's your brother. Did he pick on you a lot?"

"Oh definitely. We wouldn't be siblings if he didn't." She said staring at him like one would stare at the moon. Admiration in her gorgeous eyes. "I bet you pick on your brothers too, huh?"

Memories of Ashton's childhood flooded back and a warm smile washed over his face for a second, "I use to pick on them a little. My parents wouldn't have much of that, though. These days, I can't afford to pick on them considering I'm their father figure now."

Bryana reached out for his hand. "Ted told me about your past. I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault." Ashton sighed. He tried to ignore the butterflies in his stomach as Bryana's soft hand gently massaged his hard calloused fingers. "Let's not talk about that. What's up in your life?"

"Well, I'm in my senior year of college; I'm just focusing on school for now. I would love to travel
abroad and I was thinking of doing it this year if it wasn't so expensive."

Ashton understood that. "Awesome. So what are you doing here?"

"Well... I was wondering if you wanted some company on your day off?"

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Standing on top of Michael's back, Luke firmly pressed his ear against the door that Ashton and Bryana were behind. Grunting, Michael was struggling to stay up on his hands and knees.

"Do you see anything?" Calum asked standing behind Luke, ready to catch him should he fall.

"No. Michael's too short." Luke said, which caused the green haired boy growl. "But I can hear them, sort of."

Michael's Knees and hands were shaking, "would you hurry up!" Michael hissed. "I can't hold your fat ass up much longer."

"Don't swear." Calum scolded.


"Ow!" Luke said, rubbing his leg.

Michael on the other hand was howling, "fuck, fuck, fuck! My knee hurts!" He complained loudly. Calum was laughing just as loudly. "I'm sorry, that was too funny" he said when Michael glared at him. "You were suppose to catch Luke." Michael reminded Calum as he continued to rub his aching knee.

"Shhh, guys, shut up." Luke hushed them, his ear still pressed against the door.

"Ashton says 'it's hard to watch us and sometimes we make him want to pull his hair out.' Luke whimpered. Michael and Calum were now leaning against the door with their ears pressed against the wood as well.

"He's leaving to go to dinner with Bryana." Calum exclaimed.

"Dude, not cool, what are we suppose to eat?" Michael said.

"What if he has more fun with her and he doesn't want to come home!" Luke yelled.

"Or worse, what if he moves in with her and sends us to a group home." Michael said, anger boiling inside him. "Lads, we can't let Ashton go out with Bryana." Brown and blue eyes met Michael's green ones as the looked to him for answers.

"How are we gonna do that?" Calum asked.

Smirking devilishly, Michael rubbed his hands together, "I have a plan."
"We're going to die." Calum whined as he handed Michael the chalk. "Ashton's going to bury us alive and dance on our graves!"

"Shhh!" Michael hissed as he carefully placed the chalk on the fan blades in the living room. They couldn't afford air conditioning so the family used a small cheap plastic fan like you see in school classrooms. "There. Now Bryana will think the plaster in our ceiling is falling and she'll want to go home." Michael smiled triumphantly at his work.

"And if that doesn't work, we already switched Ashton's ring tone to Beethoven's 5th symphony, so yeah. I think we're good."

"What about the water, Mikey? We're going to die!" Calum screamed, worry lacing his handsome features.

"Don't worry, Cal, that's only if they try to leave."

"We put a bucket full of water and clay above the front door! Ashton's going to kill us. He's going to beat us until we beg for death, but he'll leave us alive just so we can suffer our last moments in absolute agony, then he's going to cut out our eyes so we can watch as he buries our half dead bodies and dances on our grave-"

"Too many horror movies?" Michael asked bluntly, "No!" Calum yelled offended, "I just don't think."

"Bro, chill. If you're really that scared, Luke and I will take the blame. Right Lukey?"

"Yeah." Luke muttered, placing the last of the chalk on the fan.

"Aw man. If Luke's doing it, I have to do it too."

"No you don't."

"Yeah I do. He's eight and if he's not afraid of Ashton and I'm eleven and here I am wussing out then I have to do it."

"True, I was gonna tell you to grow a pair, but I figured that would've been uncalled for." Michael jeered.

"Yeah, it would of been, Thanks for not doing that." Calum sassed.

"No problem brah." Michael patted Calum's chest then leapt onto the couch. Luke followed Michael's lead, as always. He was like a lost puppy, always following his Master. In this case, Michael was his master. Then again, who was Calum to complain considering he was doing the exact same.

When Ashton walked in the room a few minutes later, he gave his causal brothers a skeptical glare. "What are you doing?" He asked cautiously. Standing behind him was Bryana. Shrugging, Michael lifted his feet off of the sofa and said, "nothing much. Just chillin."

"You? Chilling? All of you?" He gestured to Luke and Calum who had the exact pose as Michael which looked too fake casual to be true.
"Um. Yeah. Just chilling." Calum said a forced laugh following.

Michael wanted to slap Calum and tell him to shut up. Hopefully his glare gave Calum the message. Luke was practically giggling. "We're chillin' like ice."

Michael couldn't help but face palm himself over that one. A wide smirk crossed Ashton's face. "Uh huh, Look, Whatever it is you did just make sure you fix it before I get back ok."

"Where are you going?" Michael asked, a clear sense of over exaggerated sweetness in his voice. It made him sound arrogant.

"Out to dinner." He responded just as bitchy. Then to Luke and Calum he said in a normal caring tone, "I left you guys some frozen dinners to heat up. I'll be back before your bed time but if you could empty the dishwasher I would appreciate that."

"Can we stop rationing on chocolate if we do the dishes."


"Ok, ok," Ashton chuckled, "I get it. I'll buy more food."

"Hey Ashton, let's bring them back some dessert." Bryana said with a sweet smile. To bad Michael knew it was fake. She was purposely and evilly stealing Ashton away from his family and that's not something to smile about.

"Good idea, Bri."

He called her Bri? Oh man, this was worse than Michael thought. They're already using cute nicknames, what's next? A marriage proposal? He glanced at Luke and the boy looked back at him with the same weird expression he was using.

"What's the matter?" Ashton asked them, "don't you want dessert."

"Yes." Luke said at he same time Michael said, "not from her."

"What?" Quizzed Ashton.

He was about to say something else, but Michael stopped him. "It's fine. Go, eat, have a ball." Michael reached over and turned on the fan.

"Bye guys." Ashton began walking to the door but stopped when white powered fell on the floor. "What the..." He looked at the ceiling. "Please don't tell me the plasters cracking."

Bryana looked up with him. "I don't see anything." She said softly, her face rubbing against Ashton's shoulder. He smiled at her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

Rolling his eyes, Michael pulled out his cell phone and called Ashton.

Bursting into a loud melody of the 1770's, Ashton's phone started ringing and buzzing, which interrupted his moment with Bryana. She snickered at the music but quickly put a hand over her mouth. "Sorry," she said continuing to laugh. "I didn't know you were a Beethoven kind of guy."

"I'm not." Ashton muttered trying to shut his damn phone off. Once he shut it off he glared at his brothers. Michael waved with a cheery smile that Ashton wanted to knock off his face.

"It's fine, Ashton. I think Beethoven is.. cool?" She said unsure of herself. "You don't have to lie
about liking that kind of music."

"That's not the kind of music I like." He said, trying desperately to explain his own taste was a mix of the 80's music like Green Day and Blink 182.

She nodded just to agree even though it was obvious she thought he was lying.

"We're leaving now." Ashton intoned. Walking with a serious face to the door. Bryana was by his side when the door opened and a bucket of water and clay fell on top of their heads.

"Ah!" The girl gasped closing her eyes and flinging her arms out to shake off the wet dirt.

Ashton's face was beet red, either from embarrassment or anger; Michael wasn't sure which one.

"Boys!" Ashton screamed answering Michael's question.

"Run." Michael said to Luke and Calum. All three of them took off upstairs.

"I'm so sorry, Bryana, apparently my brothers don't want me to go out with you for some reason."

"Hey it's cool. At least I got to hang out with you for a day. That's too bad, though. I really wanted to get to know you more."

"Maybe we can someday. I really want to get to know you too. But right now, they're my main priority."

"I understand. You're a good big brother, Ashton. You'd make a fine father someday." Bryana blushed at her own words. "I'm going to leave now." She said awkwardly. Ashton loved her awkwardness. "Bye." He waved. She walked clumsily out the door, nearly bumping her dried up clay face on the door.

Once Bryana was gone, Ashton looked at the mess on his floor, and groaned. He thought about how he was going to approach his younger brothers about this. Strict Ashton or friendly Ashton?
"Don't let him in!" Michael cried when there was a knock on his bedroom door. Luke and Calum were standing near the locked door piled with a desk table, Michael's mattress and other heavy objects to keep their muscular brother away from them.

"I told you we were going to die." Calum mumbled as he placed the last heavy book against the blockade.

"That should keep him out." Michael proclaimed. He jumped back when Ashton pounded on the door. "Open up!" He yelled.

"Sorry Ashton, but we can't do that right now." Luke replied.

"If you don't open this door, I'm going to bust it down and if I have to do that then I will punish you."

The three looked at one another skeptically.

"It's a trick, it's gotta be." Michael complained as Calum chipped away at the barricade.

"He's going to catch us sooner or later. We might as well accept our fate now."

"That sound like giving up to me." Michael shouted.

"It sounds reasonable to me."

"Shut up, Luke" Michael shrieked rolling his eyes. But then he put Luke into a headlock and the two brothers wrestled on the floor.

Calum opened the door and gave a cheesy smile to an irritated Ashton.

"Hi there..." He said waving. Ashton pushed Calum aside gently. Sitting on the bed, Ashton told his brothers to sit on the bed as well. Gulping, Luke clung to Michael's side.

"I just want to talk." Ashton told Luke when he noticed the hesitation.

"That's what they all say." Muttered Michael.

"Michael!" Ashton gritted his teeth.

"Sorry." Michael mumbled raising his hands in defense and sitting next to the angry grizzle bear. Pondering what to say, Ashton scratched his lightly forming beard.

"Guys, what you did...you can't do." He began, "I don't know what you were thinking or why you don't want me to go out with Bryana but you can't pull pranks and make a mess of the house."

"How else were we suppose to stop you from going out with the witch." Michael asked bitterly.

"Mike? Why do you hate her, you don't even know her?"
"I don't need to know her. I already know what I need to know."

"And what's that?"


"So that's what this is about." Ashton confirmed. He wanted to laugh at the childish reason but based on his brothers faces it wasn't a ridiculous reason to them. In fact, it seemed beyond reasonable for Ashton to want to leave them.

"Guys I would never ditch you for anything or anyone. Don't you get it? I'm doing everything I possibly can to keep us together." He wrapped his brothers in a hug.

"I love you, Ashton." Luke breathed, accepting the comfort whole heartedly.

"I love you guys too." Ashton replied.

Just then another knock pounded on the door.

"What now." Ashton muttered standing up and walking to the livingroom. This time, the person standing behind the metal door was a tall social worker, Mr. Boward, standing in silence. Ashton wordlessly stared at the man a little shellshocked. Once again, this was not an opportune time for a social worker to show up. The house was a mess, Luke had a bruise and Ashton was receiving a lower income this week due to the rain.

"Mr. Boward, come on in sir."

The social worker walked in and glanced around the room. "Did your ceiling cave in?"

Ashton chuckled lightly, trying to ease everyone's nerves. "No.. My brothers were upset that I was dating this girl and they decided to- they sort of put chalk in a fan and a bucket of water and clay above the door and- never mind, let's say the roof caved in.

The look Mr. Boward gave Ashton was one of the dirtiest looks Ashton has ever seen. An eerie silence fell as Mr. Boward inspected the house as well as the brothers. He stopped in front of Luke and pulled the younger boy's wrist up for him to inspect.

"This looks painful, how did it happen?"

"Um, I tripped." Luke said hesitantly. He was unsure of how to answer and honestly, Luke was one of the worst liars on the planet.

"Mhm." The social worker hummed, scribbling something down. He then walked past Michael and into the kitchen.

"Frozen dinners?" He asked.

"Yeah, I was planning on going out."

"So you were going to let the boys cook while you were away."

"Only the microwave. And Michael's thirteen, he knows how to cook."

"Last time they almost burnt down the kitchen."

Ashton shit his eyes and tried to remain cool. "I'm not going out anymore, so I'll cook them real food."
Would you like to stay and watch that? Write that down in your little notebook."

Michael's wide eyes shot Ashton a glare. Luke giggled at the comment as a result Calum wrapped his hand around Luke's mouth.

"Calm down, Mr. Irwin. I was only asking." The social worked continued to inspect things, the finally he asked the brothers some questions.

"So he hits you?"

"No! Well I mean yes, but No!" Calum was struggling to explain how Luke got the bloody wrist and he was in the middle of talking about a punishment when the lights went out.

"Fuck." Ashton muttered flicking on his phone flashlight.

"I assume you haven't paid the electric bills yet?"

"Not yet." Ashton muttered and Michael slapped a hand over his face.

"That's all I need to know. Thank you. Oh and Ashton, until you start bringing up your income, I'm giving you strike two."

Ashton winced looking at his feet in shame. "Good night gentleman."

"Good night asshole." Michael whispered softly after Mr. Boward left.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone. Do you have any suggestions on what else you want to see happen? When I started writing this, I never had a much of a plan in mind, just cute random thoughts. If you have any, let me know.
"You have to eat your veggies, they are good for you."

Ashton was trying to get Calum to eat more because lately the kid was looking a little malnourished. The last thing Ashton needed was the school to call the social worker and tell him that Ashton was starving his brothers.

"I'm not hungry." Calum whined, pushing the plate away.

"Ashton. Can you help me with my math homework?" Luke asked, walking into the dining room where Calum and Ashton were sitting.

"Sure, bring it over here."

Luke shuffled through his backpack and found the items he was looking for.

"We're learning about multiplication and I have to memorize things!" The eight year old explained.

"Can I go?" Calum asked.

"Not until you finish your vegetables."

"But I'm not hungry."

"Eat Calum. You are lucky we have enough money that I can feed you, don't waste money by not eating."

"I didn't ask for vegetables."

"It's healthy, so eat them." Ashton said tiredly. Luke could tell his older brother was exhausted recently with all the social worker crap that was going down. Mr. Boward had called back a few nights later and told Ashton that someone saw Luke handcuffed to a bench. Mr. Boward took Ashton into the police station for questioning which caused Ashton to be late for work again which means he was left with the hardest job: welding. With all of this combined, Ashton was struggling to stay positive. He had snapped at Luke, forced Calum to stay at the dinner table until he ate his vegetables and Michael was grounded for mouthing off.

"Come on Luke, it's not that hard. Twelve times four?"

"I don't know. It's too big." Luke complained and Calum chimed in,

"Why does he need to know this when he can use a calculator."


"No. Bad idea. Luke needs to memorize this so he will know it in the future."

Groaning, Luke rolled his eyes and slouched in his chair.

"No. Not until you finish your food."

"But I'm not hungry."

"Then you can sit there."

A rapid knocking came from the door. Luke starting crying almost instantly because he was so use to bad thing happening when someone knocks at the door.

"Hey, Don't cry." Calum said, putting his hand in Luke's knee. "Maybe it will be something good, like we just won the lottery or something."

"When is it ever anything good." Luke sobbed.

At the door stood officer Stan with Michael in his tight grip. Ashton stared his brother down, and Michael looked away, ashamed.

"He wasn't doing nothing illegal, but he was outside after dark wondering around some dangerous streets. I thought I'd give him a ride back home to you."

"Thank you officer." Ashton said, pulling Michael inside.

"No problem. But maybe you should make a curfew for them. It's just a suggestion."

"Thank you officer Stan, I will do that." Ashton said waving goodbye. As soon as the officer was back in his car, Ashton closed the door and glared at Michael.

"What the hell, Michael. You were suppose to be in your bedroom, grounded."

"I got bored."

Ashton's blood level was rising. He needed to breath before he strangled his kid brother.

"That's the point of being grounded! I would tell you to go to your room, but you might try and sneak out. So now what am I going to do? Huh?"

In the dinning room, Luke covered his ears. He hated when his brothers fought, but recently that's all any of them have been doing.

During this distraction, Calum has taken advantage of this time to dump the remaining vegetables down the garbage disposal.

"Don't tell on me, okay."

Luke nodded in agreement, taking his hands away from his head.

"Why does Michael have to make Ashton mad?" The youngest boy asked. Calum shrugged.

"I don't know. I think he wants attention or at least that's what Miss Carol our teacher says."

"Do you think he's trying to make Ashton mad on purpose?"

"I think he knows what he's doing is wrong, but Michael is angry with the world. He thinks it took mommy and daddy away and now he has to get back at it. Does that make sense to you, Lukey?"

"Not really." Luke admitted. Calum sighed. "He doesn't want to make Ashton mad. He just wants to
"Is that why he's so mean to me sometimes?" Luke asked, putting his homework back in his backpack. There was no point in trying that worksheet tonight Ashton had his hands tied.

"Yeah. That's why he picks on you. But he loves you a lot too."


The boys snapped their heads in Michael and Ashton's direction when they heard something break. No doubt the two were throwing things at each other. This was going to end with Michael getting a sore butt. Calum could call it.

"Come on, Luke, let's go to bed. You can sleep with me tonight."


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The next day, Michael Calum and Luke met up at school and waited together for Ashton to pick them up. It was way past three o clock, and Michael was getting worried.

"Where is Ashton, it's freezing out here."

"I didn't even bring a coat." Calum complained shaking like a leaf.

"Michael Im cold." Luke blinked at his older brother expecting him to do something.

"Same." Michael responded.

Rolling his eyes, Luke snuggled under Calum's arm, soaking in his brothers warmth. A car passed by the school. It wasn't Ashton. A man walked past the school, but it wasn't Ashton. Something was wrong. Ashton was absentminded and irresponsible but he would never forget to pick his baby brothers up from school.

"Boys." A ladies voice came from behind and made the three of them jump.

"Hi Miss Rogers." Calum said waving at his music teacher. She was one of his favorite teachers.

"Hello, Calum. What are you doing out here?"

"Waiting for our brother to pick us up."

"It's almost six, shouldn't he be here by now? Don't tell me he forgot you."

When the boys didn't respond, Miss Rogers pulled out her cell phone. "What's his number."

"We already tried that." Michael responded.

"No luck?"

"We're still standing here, aren't we."

Calum nudged Michael in the side. Taking the hint, Michael dropped his attitude.

"Alright. I'll give him fifteen more minutes but then I'll have to call someone else to pick you up. Do you have grandparents?"
"No."
"Cousin? Aunt? uncle?"

"Nope."
"Step parents?"

"No one. We have no one else." Michael said softly.

"Then I'll have to call child services."

"No!" Michael shouted. "He's just late."

"Boys you can't wait out here all night, it's unsafe."

"But you can't call our social worker either, we'll have strike three." Luke yelled.

"We'll get taken away. Please don't call, please Miss Rogers." Calum begged, using his pleading puppy eyes.

What was Miss Rogers going to do.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the prompt.

I hope everyone enjoyed this chapter. :)}
"We can walk home, ma'am." Calum spoke softly, his skin tinted pink due to the wind whipping his cheeks.

"Nonsense. I'm not letting you three walk home in the dark. I'm calling the police."

"NO!" The three screamed at the same time. Miss Rogers freezes in place, her phone in her hand. Michael took this opportunity to lunge forward and snatch the phone from her grip. He threw it to his side, where it bounced off the sidewalk and flew in the middle of the parking lot where it shattered into a million pieces.

"Michael!" The lady shouted, placing her hands on her hips.

"You just broke my phone, do you know how much that cost?"

"499 dollars and 99 cents." Calum recited. Miss Rogers raised her eyebrow, and Calum chuckled.

"I wanted and iPhone for my birthday, but Ashton says it cost to much."

She ignored Calum's statement and went back to lecturing Michael.

"You can't break someone's phone. I would have you pay for it, but apparently your brother can't afford it and that won't teach you anything anyway. Instead you can spend Saturday detention with me."

"Ugh," Michael rolled his eyes. "Fine. Whatever, can you just leave us alone now."

"No. I have to find some other way to call the police."

"No don't!" Michael said in a high pitched voice. He sounds desperate, Miss Rogers thought.

"If you call the police they will call our social worker and he'll take us to a group home for sure."

"Or worse, the Foster system." Calum added.

"We don't want to leave our home." Luke pouted, "it's the only place I've ever known. All my memories are there. It may not be perfect, but it's safe and loving and I love it."

Miss Rogers didn't know what to say to the small blonde boy with large baby blue eyes, he was looking directly at her and she felt a motherly urge to wrap him in a hug and hold him. Luke's been know to have that affect on people.

Calum's teeth chattered when a hefty gust of wind blew by. Michael's pale skin was a shade of red, goosebumps all over his arms.

"Miss Rogers, please just let us go home. Whatever you do don't call the police, please." Calum pleaded.

The woman sighed, "it's not that simple. I have to call the police because they need to find your brother. If something happened to him-"

Luke let out a loud pitched cry.
"I'm not saying anything did happen, but if something did, the police could find him and take him to a hospital. Or maybe he's stuck somewhere on the highway out of gas. Or maybe he just forgot what time it was. Maybe he's sick."

"Miss, could you please stop talking, you're making my brothers hyperventilate." Michael explained.

"Oh, Sorry." She said quickly, noticing the stark white faces staring as if they've seen a ghost.
"Look, The point is the police can help you."

"They'll call-"

"Social services. Yes I know, but the social worker won't do anything. He'll just wait until your brother is found and then-"

"Where will we go until Ashton's found." Michael asked.

"We don't even know if he's missing!" Calum screamed.

"He's not here."

"It doesn't mean something bad happened."

"Your always so naive, Calum." Michael said shaking his head.

"Your always so negative."

Miss Rogers realize this was tiring into a full out argument so she clapped her hands.

"Listen.-"

"No you listen." Michael sassed, "we have had two check-ups already and we failed both. If we fail one more we are going to leave our home and I'm not okay with that. It doesn't matter if Ashton is like a mile away stuck on the highway, if Boward gets a call saying he's not here, then we are doomed."

"Don't you think that's a little dramatic." She said, but his eyes were dead serious. In her whole life of teaching, Miss Rogers had never seen such fear in a students eyes. All be it, she's only been teaching for three years, this situation was important to the kids in front of her. Calum looked ready to pass out from the cold and the youngest looked ready to cry.

"I need to call the police because it's part of my job. If I leave you I could get fired." She whispered. Luke began crying.

"Thanks a lot." Michael said, shoving his hands in his pockets and staring harshly at the ground.

Calum was comforting Luke. "Why are you crying this time?" He asked, wiping Luke's eyes with his thumb.

"It's just like before. The police will show up just like they did with mommy and daddy and then they will say Ashton is..."

"Shhh." Calum shushed his brother, "no, that's not going to happen. Ashton wouldn't leave us like that."

"Mommy and daddy didn't mean to leave us-"
"Luke stop. Ashton is fine. I know it." Calum said, squeezing Luke's hand. Calum's words were strong, but his eyes betrayed him. Tears flowed freely down his face as he thought about his oldest brother laying dead in a ditch.

Miss Rogers heart ached for this small family. She wanted to help, but what could she do? She decided to take a risk.

"Boys follow me." She said, leading the way down the sidewalk.

Three confused boys trotted behind her. She led them to a black minivan. "Get in." She said.

The three looked at each other, questioning this random act of kindness or trap they went sure which it was.

"Mom said never get in a strangers car." Calum said.

"She's not a stranger, she's Miss Rogers."

"Yeah but.."

"Come on, Calum. We need to go somewhere."

"I'm going to drive you to my house." She said hopping in the front seat, "from there I will call the police about your brother, and I will mention that you are safe with me so there is no need to send a social worker over, okay?"

Calum nodded, jumping in the car. They drive to Miss Rogers house in silence. She helped the boys out of her car and led them into the house.

"Wow!" Luke yelled looking at the large home. "It's so big." He said running around the living room. In all honesty the house was an average house with two bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom and a dinning room. The living room is decorated beautifully with a handmade mirror above the fireplace and pink flowers in white vases. There was a tan hardwood floor and white couch with pink flower pillows.

"Please don't knock anything over." She called after Calum darted around with Luke.

"I'll call the police, you can make yourselves at home." She said throwing her purse down and picking up her home phone. Suddenly, Michael felt very guilty about breaking the woman's phone.

"Hello. Hi, this is Marian Rogers, yes I was calling to let you know that three students that attend the Richmond school system were waiting for their older brother, but he never showed up. I took the boys to my house, so they are safe and waiting for their older brother to show up."

"Hello Miss, this is county police. What can I do for you."

"I just told you."

"How can we help?"

"Can you find their brother?"

"Who are 'they' and what's the brothers name."

"Irwin kids. Their brothers name is Ashton."
"Alright. Missing person is Ashton Irwin. We'll get a search out for you right away."

"Thank you." Miss Rogers sighed a breath of relief.

"We can look up a picture of him, but if you know anything specific about him that would help us find him like a distinctive birth mark or something, let us know."

"Ok. I don't know."

"Sounds good." The police woman hung up. Miss Rogers walked about into the livingroom to find her lamp laying on the floor shattered. Three guilty looking boys sat in the couch not moving an inch.

"We're sorry." Calum squealed. Miss Rogers couldn't help but laugh at the absolute absurdity of the night. What are the odds she finds three boys stranded, gets her phone smashed and now her lamp is broken and she has three kids that are not hers staying in her home. What a hilarious day.


"Yeah, but watch out it might be one of those sarcastic laughs. She's probably like, 'this is just great. These kids are ruining my life'."

"That sounds accurate." Calum replied quietly.

"It's fine." She said through a smile. "It only cost another 200 bucks, but what's money anyway, right?"

The boys stayed still.

"Never mind." She said, "why don't you go pick out a movie to watch. I have a drawer full of them."

---------------

"Can we watch Aladdin next?" Luke asked once the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles was almost over.

"Sure kid."

Miss Rogers was about to put it in when a knock at the door stopped her.

"Hello?" She asked. A police officer stood at the door.

"We found Ashton."
"We found Ashton." The police officer said to Miss Rogers.

"Oh thank goodness. Where is he?" She tried to look past the officers shoulder to see if he was behind him but she couldn't see anything.

"I'm sorry, ma'am but Ashton is not here, he's in the hospital."

"Oh no." She put her hand over her mouth.

"He had a welding accident at his job today. There is a large third degree burn on his left arm. He was fortunate enough that it wasn't anything worse. He will get better, but for the time being he will need to stay in the hospital for surgery and recovery. He will need blood circulation support, oral antibiotics for infections, antibacterial creams and a tetanus vaccine. It will take a full two weeks before he fully recovers and is able to go home."

"Oh my..." She trailed off.

"As for the children, I'm going to need to call their social worker."

Miss Rogers gasped. Her heart sank. "Are you sure you need to call the social worker?"

"Yes ma'am. The boys will need a temporary home to live in."

Miss Rogers said nothing, she couldn't find any words to say. The officer stepped inside and told the boys about Ashton.

"He's burned?" Calum cried.

"Unfortunately yes. But your brother is strong, I'm sure he'll get through the procedures easily."

The thought of Ashton not surviving surgery never even crossed Michael's mind until the police officer said that.

"Oh my God." He cried, standing there physically shaking. Michael was filled with emotions: sadness, fear, and anger. Especially anger. All he wanted to do is punch a wall. Turning his head, Michael faced away from his brothers and the police officer.

"Come on, I'll take you boys to see your brother in the hospital." The officer suggested, guiding the morbid kids to the car. Miss Rogers decided to join them. She had just promised these kids that she wouldn't call the social worker and that's exactly what's about to happen. Therefore she tagged along, just to tell them how sorry she is.

The hospital hallway was stuffy, the walls are white with serval scrapes due to he hundreds of
wheelchairs and trolleys that have bumped into them. A nurse called the small family back into the patient room. There Ashton laid in a curtain cubical bed waiting for more antibiotics. He had IV tubes in his hand and his arm was wrapped in a white bandage. Ashton's eyes were closed and his face was pale.

"Ashton?" Luke squeaked, slipping his little hand in Ashton's hand.

Opening his eyes, Ashton noticed a blurry head of blonde before realizing his brothers were all standing around him.

"Hey there, Lukey." Ashton croaked.


Ashton smiled, "I love you too, kid. I love all of you." He looked over at Michael and Calum gesturing them to give him a hug. Soon all four of them were squished together hugging for what seemed like an eternity.

"Please get better soon." Calum pleaded, kissing Ashton's forehead. "We don't like seeing you like this."

"Does it hurt?" Michael asked, staring at the bandages on his brothers arm. His fingers hovered over them slightly.

"No. That's the good part. Apparently I burned my nerves pretty badly so I can't feel anything."

"I guess that's good." Michael muttered rubbing Ashton's stomach. "I'm really sorry." Michael mumbled.

"For what little rebel?" Ashton asked, looking into Michael's greenish eyes.

"I'm sorry for being so bad and causing you so much stress. I shouldn't have snuck out last night. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, Michael. Your a rebellious little brat sometimes, but I know you just want to have fun. But I need you to understand that you need to follow the rules in order to keep you safe."

"I will. I promise I'll listen to you more."

"That's good little rebel." Ashton said, closing his eyes once again.

"You look like your in pain." Calum said sadly.

"No, bud, I just feel...tired."

A thirty minutes later the social worker Mr. Boward walked in.

"Boys it's time to go now." He said, walking over to Luke and Calum and grabbing them by the hand.

"No!" Luke shouted and Calum pulled out of the man's strong grip.

"We want to stay with Ashton."

"Ashton needs to rest." Mr. Boward explained.
"No he needs us." Luke said, kicking the social worker in the leg. Mr. Boward winced and released his grip on Luke. The youngest boy ran to Ashton, wrapping his arm around his neck.

"I need to take you to your house so you can pack your things and we can go."

"Go where?" Ashton asked.

"Mr. Irwin, you are in no condition to be taking care of three children. When you recover we can talk about possibly getting your brothers back, but as of now they are going to the group home for Foster kids."

"No." Ashton yelled, trying to sit up, "I'm not letting you take them."

"Mr. Irwin you can't even move let alone care for these kids. In two weeks we will talk-"

"In two weeks my brothers could be beaten or abused in that system. I'm not allowing my brothers to go to a place run by an institution with white walls that resemble a jail cell more than a bedroom and where there are rules against giving hugs!" Ashton was screaming at this point which was making his blood pressure rise.

"Ashton you need to calm down." Miss Rogers said noticing his heart rate increasing drastically.

"I'm not going to calm down, this asshole wants to take my brothers away - who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Miss Rogers, your brothers Music teacher. I teach all grades so I've had both Calum and Michael. But Luke's too young, so I haven't had him yet. I look forward to seeing him next year."

Ashton shook his head at the irrelevant information. "That's good." He mumbled, then he turned his attention to Mr. Boward, "I can't help that I got hurt, it's not fair to take them away from their home and town just because I had an accident."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Irwin, but if no one can watch the boys then I have no choice but to take them to a place that will."

Luke was now in bed with Ashton, curled at his side as if he's a sticker stuck to Ashton's skin. Michael was holding Ashton's hand until his knuckles turned white and Calum stood still, frozen by the news and unsure of what to do. Sadly, Calum watched the social worker peel Luke off of Ashton. He listened to his younger brother scream Ashton's name as he was ripped away. He saw his oldest brother get misty eyed as he angrily shouted at the social worker to put Luke down. Calum felt his own arm being pulled on. This action was the crack that broke the dam. Calum woke up from his daze of helpless watching and he decided to go into action. His feet scruffed against the ground as he stiffened his body. Mr. Boward sighed in frustration.

"Come on, Calum, don't make this worse." The man coaxed, but Calum refused to move. "Calum, if you do not come this instant I will..." He let the threat hang. When Mr. Boward grew tired of waiting and raised his hand, Ashton sprung out of bed and pulled his brother to his side before Mr. Boward could strike him.


"Ashton get back in bed." Miss Rogers ordered. "You are not suppose to be up."

Ashton shook his head, "not until this man hands me my baby brother."
Miss Rogers sighed and took Luke out of the Mr. Bowards hands. She held him, "he's okay, now please lay down."

Ashton hesitated, glancing from the social worker to his brothers. Finally he agreed to lay back down.

"I need to take him." Mr. Boward whispered, pointing to Luke. Miss Rogers shook her head.

"I'll watch the kids." She said, "if that's okay with Ashton."

Puzzled, Ashton pressed his lips in a thin line. He didn't know this woman at all. She was young looking, about 28 or 29, and she had a sweet smile, but what does Ashton really know about her? She's a music teacher. That's all he knew.

Calum was quick to comment, "say yes, Ashton." He begged.

"Yeah, she's nice." Michael said giving Ashton's hand a reassuring squeeze, "it's her or a group home."

Ashton nodded his head, "okay. She can watch them."

"Yay!" Calum shouted jumping up and down.

Mr. Boward rolled his eyes, "she's not a blood relative."

"Look man, I'm giving her permission. She's like a godmother." Ashton yelled, getting very flustered with this conversation.

"I'll take good care of them, sir. You can have my clearances and everything. As a school teacher I always have a copy of them on me."

Mr. Boward snorted. "Fine. I have to take the kids to their house so they can pack their things and bring them to your place."

"Sounds good." She said, "I'll come with you."

The social worker lead the way out of Ashton's hospital room. Before Miss Rogers exited Ashton said a sincere thank you.

"You're welcome. It's the least I can do. Your brothers are very talented, our school would be at a loss without them." She said with a gorgeous smile.

"I would be at a loss without them." Ashton's voice broke a little. "Please take care of them."

"Of course."

Ashton smiled despite the tears in his eyes, "their good kids, but they can could a lot of trouble. Don't be hard on them. They are coping with the death of our parents and they are incredibly sensitive."

Miss Rogers held up her hand. "Say no more. I promise I will tak good care of your brothers, Ashton. And when you're all better they'll be ready to give you a hard time."

Ashton laughed as tears rolled down his face. "Thank you." He whispered.
"I need my skateboard." Michael shouted looking around his messy room. Luke stood next to him, his penguin pressed against his chest.

"Don't just stand there, help me look." Michael yelled.

"I can't."

"Why not!"

"I can't swim though your ocean of messiness."

"Shut up, dork, my room isn't messy, I simply have everything on display. There's no point in hiding my clothes in a closest, they deserve to be out in the open."

"Yeah, okay." Luke said turning to walk away.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"I'm leaving you alone so you can appreciate your room in peace."

Downstairs Calum had a suitcase full of clothes and toys.


"Where's your suitcase?" Miss Rogers asked.

"I don't need one." Luke said, "all I need his my penguin." Miss Rogers stiffed a laugh. "Honey, you're going to need a little more. I'll help you pick out some clothes if you would like."

"If you want to. But I don't need anything else." Luke said and Miss Rogers nodded. "Of course not, dear."

"Thanks for reminding me to get Ketchup." Calum said patting Luke on the back.

"Oh, no, Calum I have Ketchup at my house." Miss Rogers said, "I have all kinds of food there, so no one needs to pack any food."


"I know, it's a condiment, but still -"

"What? Did someone say condom?" Michael asked as he walked into the room.

"No! I said condiment." Miss Rogers stated.

"What's a condom." Luke asked, pulling his penguins bow tie.

"Never mind that, let's get your things packed, yeah?"

Luke nodded and allowed Miss Rogers's to lead him upstairs.

When the boys were all packed, Miss Rogers and Mr. Boward drove to her house.

Setting the boys suitcases down, Miss Rogers showed them her guest room. "I only have one, so you kids will have to share a bed. Is that okay?"

"Totally." Calum said.
"Yeah, it's cool. We use to do it all the time." Michael admitted. "Before I was cool." He said.

"Mikey, we slept in the same bed last weekend when Luke had a nightmare."

"Shut up, Calum." Michael snapped.

Miss Rogers smiled at the three kids that she promised to watch and all she could think about was how she made the right decision.
Chapter Summary

my brother is annoying, my brother is a pain. If it was up to me I'd leave him outside in the rain. But don't you dare tease my brother or be mean to him at all cause I'll stick up for this little guy, cause he thinks I'm ten feet tall.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Three days, the kids have been at Miss Rogers house for three days and the woman was already going insane. She scrubbed exceptionally hard at the stain in her carpet. Why she even bought grape juice was beyond her. A pile of soaked purple paper towels laid next to her as she repeatedly broke more paper towels off of the role to wipe the stained carpet. Cookie crumbs laid everywhere, potato chips were crunched on her couch, her lamp was still broken and now the boys were running around the kitchen chasing Michael who stole Luke's paper.

"Michael, sit down and do your homework." She shouted when she heard the young boy knock into something. He let out a curse and rubbed his stinging elbow. Luke took this opportunity to snatch his paper from Michael's hands. He sat down and began to do his homework, but Michael did not.

"Do you have any disinfectant stuff?" He asked when Miss Rogers walked into the messy kitchen.

"Why? You're not bleeding are you? Oh you are!" She jumped back at the cut.

"I hate blood." She muttered as she hastily pulled another paper towel off the role and covered it over Michael's elbow. She then proceeded to lead him to the bathroom where she kept her medical supplies.

"Here." Miss Rogers handed him some Neosporin. Michael applied it carefully, wincing as the cold cream it made contact with his wound.

"Thanks." He said rolling his sleeve back down.

"No problem. Now will you please do your homework." She insisted.

"No." Michael ran out of the room and headed to the livingroom where Calum was.

Miss Rogers groaned, throwing her head back in exasperation. She walked back into the kitchen and smiled at Luke. The youngest was sitting quietly at the table doing his homework all by himself.

"Thank you, Luke, you're being good for me, huh?"

Luke nodded, wanting to please his future teacher and friend.

"I'm getting better at my times tables." Luke bragged.

"Good. So...what do you want for dinner?" Miss Rogers opened her refrigerator and scanned through her items.

"Luke, we've had that the past three nights."

"I like it." Luke said.

"Oh alright. I'll make you some, but I'm eating something else."


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"Ashton, a few visitors are here to see you." A nurse said peeking her head through the door. Ashton perked up at the information.

"Let them in." He said.

"Are you sure you feel well enough? You just had surgery yesterday."

"I'm fine. Let them in."

The nurse must of believed him because two people were walking though his door with balloons and stuffed animals.

"Ted! Bryana!" Ashton called a large smile on his face. "What's up with you guys."

"Hey, Ash, we've missed you at work, bro. Even the boss feels pretty bad about your accident." Ted said, giving Ashton a hug.

"I've missed you too. Do you know how boring it is just sitting in bed staring at white walls. Sometimes I'm blessed with TV, but that's only during the afternoon."

"Aw man, that sucks."

"I know. I can't wait to go home. I have so much to do and I can't do anything while I'm in here. It's driving me insane! I have bills to pay, a job to go to, and brothers to watch."

Bryana piped in, "what happened to your brothers? Did the social worker take them?"

"No. He almost did. This teacher, I don't even remember her name, but she is watching the kids."

"You don't even know her name?" Ted asked mouth hanging open.

"It's a long story. Anyway, can you two do me a favor and bring me my bills and check book? It would make me feel better to know I'm at least doing something."

"Sure man, say no more." Ted clapped Ashton's shoulder. "Are you gonna be alright, Ashton?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Be careful, okay. We can't have you breaking bones or burning bones every time you come to work."

Ashton laughed, "I'll be careful. Thanks Ted."

The older boy flashed Ashton a sympathetic smile before leaving him with Bryana.
"So." She said a blush creeping on her face.

"So..." He said. Ashton reached for her hand. "I finally have you alone."

Bryana giggled, "do you want to watch the Rolling Stones documentary on my phone."

"Please." Ashton laughed.

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"That's nice." The lady at the bakery said, handing Miss Rogers six bags of bagels.

"Yeah, I know. I figured it was the right thing to do. Ashton was so afraid of losing his brothers, if you saw his face you would've done the same thing."

The woman stood there staring at Miss Rogers like she had two heads. "Sure, that will be $5.99."

"But like I said, the boys are reckless, I'm afraid there going to burn down my house." She chuckled.

"Well you better get back to them." The lady said, faking a smile.

"Yeah, I better. Thank you." Miss Rogers waved goodbye. Driving home, she was listening to the radio when a classic Taylor Swift song came on, then a Paramore song blazed through the speakers. Needless to say, she sang along the whole way home.

Upon arriving at the house, Miss Rogers called the boys to the table for breakfast. She heard a bunch of little feet running down the stairs into the kitchen. Michael was always hungry same as Luke. But Calum didn't seem to want to eat as much. He was a picky eater. Nevertheless, Calum loved bagels so he ate the most this morning.

"Miss Rogers?" He asked quietly once he finished his bagel.

"Yeah, Hun?"

"Can we see Ashton?"

Michael and Luke quickly agreed that they all should see Ashton and soon all three were begging her to take them to the hospital.

"Yeah please, he's probably lonely." Luke said.

"He just wants to see us I'm sure." Michael added.

"Who cares what he wants. I want to see him." Calum explained. Michael slipped the back of his head.

"Boys, I can take you to the hospital after school. But I have to work and you have to go to classes."

"But Miss Rogers-"

"No honey, after school."

"Fine." Calum huffed, turning up his nose.

"Come on, grab your backpacks." Miss Rogers yelled. "I hope you did your homework, Michael."

"Ha! You wish." Michael responded.
The day was dragging on for both Ashton and the boys. Ashton continued to fall in and out of sleep. When he was awake he was doing his bills, or talking to Bryana if she was in the room at the time. Occasionally he would chat with the nurses in order to get a little extra jello for lunch.

Calum sat in class, staring at the clock waiting to see his older brother. He also wanted some ice-cream. He didn't know why, he was just craving chocolate ice-cream for some reason. Probably because he didn't have ice cream since his parents died. It's like Ashton cut off all sugar, happiness, and fun when his parents kicked the bucket. Calum realized he was dozing off too much and the teacher was trying to have a conversation with him which was not working out. He quickly snapped out of his daze and gave his teacher a cheeky smile.

"Sorry." He squeaked.

"Calum, I know it's early but you need to pay attention we have a test this Friday."

"Yes sir." Calum mumbled.

Luke shifted around in his chair in class. He was feeling oddly uncomfortable. His head started pounding on the right side, the lights in the room were nearly blinding. Luke's butt was aching for some strange reason and his nose felt stuffy. He let out a loud sneeze and he heard a few bless yous from students around him but their voices were muffled. Every sound seemed to echo in Luke's ears and it sounded muffled and hollow. He raised his hand, wanting the strange feeling to stop.

"Yes Luke?"

Luke opened his mouth to speak, but he could barely find the words. "Can I go to the nurse?" He managed to ask shakily.

"Of course, do you want someone to walk you down?"

Luke never got a chance to answer that question because he was out cold on the classroom floor in a matter of seconds.

"I heard some kid passed out in the younger grades." Cruz snickered, "what a whimp."

"Yeah, I heard that too. I think he was that boy that we saw handcuffed to a bench." Josh said looking directly at Michael with the largest smirk playing on his lips.

Michael squinted his eyes, "you two better be joking right now."

"Nope, sorry, but your brother is one of the biggest babies in the whole damn school. Stupid kid can't even sit up right." Cruz stated.

"Shut up." Michael's voice boomed like thundered.

"Whoa dude chill." Cruz said, putting his hands up in defense.

"Michael, is there a problem?" The teacher asked. Then Cruz leaned forward and whispered, "I'm sure the fat baby just wants some attention, so he faked his little accident like the pathetic kid he is."
In a split second Michael's fist connected harshly with Cruz's face, but Michael didn't stop there, he continued to punch Cruz until his own fist was bleeding. The teacher had been screaming and physically pulling Michele away from Cruz, but it was like some wild animal possessed Michael and he had no intention of stopping until Cruz was a bawling mess of snot, blood, and tears.

"Get him off me." Cruz screamed as Michael punched him again. "Ow!" Cruz sobbed.

When Michael was finally yanked away, he spat angrily, "who's the baby now?"

His teacher and two security guards took Michael to the principals office.

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"Why's Michael always so... Rambunctious?"

Ashton laughed at Bryana's choice of words.

"If your wondering why Michael is constantly causing trouble and rebelling I cant answer you completely, but from my understanding I think Michael is two things: one he is extremely protective over people he loves and things he believes in and that gets him into trouble sometimes. And two, he is bitter towards the world. He took the death of our parents hard. I think Michael feels like the world is against him. I think that's why he likes to challenge me so much. I also think that's why he messes with Luke so much. Cause Luke is obedient. He's young, sweet and innocent. Calum is all of those things as well, but Luke has a certain quality about him that makes it easy to pick on him in a playful way. He doesn't get offended when Michael does it. Calum would take it to heart if Michael insulted him."

"You have a close knitted family, don't you?"

"Definitely. What about you? You told me Ted use to pick on you when you were growing up. We're the two of you close?" Ashton asked.

"Um. Sort of. We were distant when we became teenagers. Your family is something I always wished my family could be."

"Aw, Bri."

"It's alright. Maybe someday I can hang out with you and your family a little more."

"I'd like that. I really would. I just have to get they boys on board and like I said, Michael's bitter towards any idea so..."

Bryana nodded. "Well see. It sounds like I need to get to know them a little more."

"That's not a bad idea." Ashton said.

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"HE WHAT?" Miss Rogers sounded like she was about to have a conniption.

"Michael got in a fight today. If you are watching him you need to come down here and pick him up." The principal yelled thought the phone.

"That's impossible. Michael's such a sweet boy. I had him in class two years ago, and even at my house he was acting polite."
"Yes well he wasn't polite when he was punching a boy repeatedly."

"Alright. I'm coming to get him. I'm just down the hall." Miss Rogers said putting the phone down.

She met Calum in the hallway. He was excited to see Ashton, but frowned when he saw Miss Rogers face.

"What's wrong now?" He asked concerned.

"Your brother decided to get in a fight today, so now I'm not sure if we will have time to visit Ashton." She fussed as she strutted down the hall.

"Miss Rogers!" Calum exclaimed, practically running to catch up to the angry woman.

"I'm sure we can still see Ashton later, right? I mean, this won't take very long, so we will have plenty of time."

Miss Rogers ignored Calum's statement and instead opened the door to the principals office. The secretary looked up from her computer.

"Hello Marian, what can I do for you? School's over, why aren't you on your way home?" She said when she saw Calum standing behind Miss Rogers.

"He's with me, Emily. I'm also here to pick up Michael."

"Oh. Are you babysitting?"

"Yeah pretty much." Miss Rogers uttered, "where's Michael?"

"I think he's with Principal Richardson." She said. Miss Rogers thanked her while walking into the back room. Calum followed her, glancing around at all the posters on the walls. Most of them were about education. Simple colorful posters caught his attention. For example, "practice makes progress not perfect." And "she did it first or he made me do it are not excuses. Have ownership of your actions." Both of these posters were in big colorful letters.

"Principal Richardson, I'm here to pick up Michael."

"He's in the waiting room." Principal Richardson said.

"No he's not. Emily said he was back here with you."

Mr. Richardson stood up and quickly walked to the waiting room. When he noticed the chairs were empty he turned to his secretary, "where's Michael?"

"I thought he was still back in the room with you."

"You mean you never saw him come out?"

"No sir."

"You lost a child." Miss Rogers snapped.

"No. He got lost himself."

Miss Rogers rolled her eyes and took Calum's hand. "Come on Calum, we'll find him." She began to pull him towards the door when Calum said an obvious question, "where's Luke?"
It was a good question. The youngest boy did not leave his last class to find her as she told him to do.

"Oh, yes, we got word that Luke's in the nurses office." Principal Richardson spills.

Miss Rogers clenched her jaw. "So you decide to tell me that Michael is in trouble, but you conveniently forget to mention Luke is hurt?"

"Well I needed you to pick Michael up."

"I need to pick Luke up too." She shouted.

"Calm down Miss Rogers. Don't get all excited over these kids, they're not even yours."

Turning her back to them, Miss Rogers left the room and headed to the nurses office. Sure enough Michael was sitting in there holding Luke's hand.

"Hey you two, how are you." Miss Rogers asked as she walked in.


"My head hurts." He said, falling into a fit of loud coughs.


"Don't cry, Lukey." He whispered as the boy shook violently.

"I don't like it." Luke cried into his shoulder.

The nurse came back in the room with a wet wash cloth. She's placed it against his head and said to Miss Rogers, "he has the flu. The really high fever cause him to pass out. Apparently he's having muscle aches because he's complained about his legs and butt hurting. He also has a headache and coughing. Poor lad needs to rest."

"Thank you for telling me." Miss Rogers said, smiling graciously.

"Come on Luke, honey, let's get you to a nice warm bed. I bet you'd like that wouldn't you?"

Luke sniffled and wiped his eyes. "I wanna go home." He said brokenly.

"We are going home right now, love."

"No, I wanna go Home." He whined. It took Miss Rogers a second but she realized he wanted to go to his real home.

"Oh Luke, you can't."

"Shh." Michael shushed Miss Rogers. "Don't tell him that."

"It's alright Luke, we can go home as soon as Ashton's better. Right now, let's go to Miss Rogers, okay?" Michael said sweetly, holding Luke's shaking frame loosely in his arms.

Luke nodded and clutched Michael's shirt as he helped him into a standing position. "Can you walk?" Luke nodded his head but his body swayed as he stood.
"Carful Luke." Miss Rogers called, catching the boy as he began to fall over. She helped guide the sick child to the car.

"Miss Rogers does this mean we can't see Ashton?" Calum asked as she buckled Luke in.

"I'm sorry Calum, maybe later tonight we can see Ashton, but Right now I have to get Luke taken care of."

"I understand." The black-haired boy whispered. Looking out the car window Calum sighed to himself. He loves Luke and he would do anything for the kid. But he loves Ashton too, and he really wants to see his oldest brother soon.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone,

Sorry if this chapter was a little difficult to follow. Have a happy thanksgiving if you celebrate it.
Luke was crying. He was spread out on the couch with a blanket over him. Cartoons were playing on the TV and a bowl of soup sat untouched in front of him on the livingroom tray-table. Michael was in the arm chair next to Luke and Miss Rogers was on the phone with Ashton.

"Did he throw up?" Ashton asked.

"No, it's just, his fever is really high." She said through the phone to Ashton.

"What's his temperature?" Ashton asked.

"The last I checked it was 103F. That's close to dangerous." She said.

"Give it a day, if it's still that high take him to the hospital."

"I was thinking of taking him there anyway because Calum wants to see you."

Ashton chuckled, "put Calum on the phone, I'll talk to him."

Miss Rogers pulled the phone away from her mouth and called Calum's name.

Running down the stairs, Calum grabbed the phone from Miss Rogers hands and yelled "Ashton!"

"Hey Cal, how have you been?"

"Good. I miss you." He replied.

"I miss you too buddy. I've got good news, my surgery went well. I should be making a full recovery."

"That is good news." Calum exclaimed. "I have good news too. I got an A on my math test."

"Good job Calum!" Ashton praised. Calum could picture his older brothers smiling face. He beamed with pride.

As Calum spoke to Ashton about school, movies and weird stuff, Miss Rogers was talking to Michael.

"You know punching that boy was wrong." She said, Michael avoided her eyes.

Luke continued to cry in distress. The rhythmic pounding headache felt as though his brain had split in half. His tender legs ached as if someone was putting pressure on them. Every time he moved his head in the slightest, pain shot through his skull. He felt absolutely miserable.

Michael was still avoiding Miss Rogers questions by staring at the book shelf in the back of the room.

"Michael, I'm trying to talk to you."

No response.
"Ashton said what you did today was unacceptable and you are in big trouble."

Michael's eyes snapped to hers.

"Do you want to talk to him?" She asked and Michael finally responded with a meek yes.

"Calum when you're done please hand the phone over to Michael."

Calum gave her a glance but then Ashton made a joke about a dinosaur.

"What's your favorite dinosaur, Ashton?"

"What's the one with the really big neck called?"

"A giraffe." Calum answered.

There was a pause.

"Calum you need to stay in school, ok." Ashton said a few minutes later. "But good job getting an A in math."

"Thanks. Luke helped me study." Calum felt a sharp push and soon the phone was snatched out of his hand by Michael.

"Hey!" Calum whined.

"Shhh. I've got important things to talk about." Michael muttered.

"Yeah, like your anger issues." Calum jeered.

Michael went to back slap him, but Calum dodged the hit. Putting the phone to his ear, Michael spoke.

"Hello, Ashton. It's me, Michael. So you heard about what happened I take it?"

"Yes." Ashton said sternly, "about that. What were you thinking Michael?"

"Listen, I actually have a good reason this time -"

"A good reason, or a good excuse."

Michael fake laughed, "that's really funny, Ash, but seriously, I had a good reason."

"So what was it?" Ashton asked.

"That kid, Cruz, you remembered him right?"

"Small face, slicked back brown hair, and a big mouth?"

"That's him!"

"I remember him."

"Well, Ya see, he was making fun of Luke so I had to put him in his place."

"Michael that's no reason -"
"Did you hear me? I said he was making fun of Luke. Like mocking him and saying cruel things about him. It pissed me off."

"Don't swear."

"He called him fat and I know Luke is insecure about that. He shouldn't be, he's like the skinniest kid in the school, but he is insecure, so what Cruz said was unacceptable. Then to make matters worse he said Luke faked passing out for attention, which I knew wasn't true and I was worried because I didn't know what was wrong with Luke, which obviously something was really wrong with him because he's laying over here crying his eyes out." Michael took a big breath to end his ramble. "So I had a good reason." He finished his rant and crossed his fingers. Now it was all up to Ashton to decide.

"Alright." Ashton said from the other side of the phone. "What you did was unacceptable, but you had a legitimate reason. Just don't do something like that again or I will punish you."

Michael nodded his head even though Ashton couldn't see. "You got it, Ash."

"I really should punish you." ashton said.

Michael then handed Miss Rogers the phone.

"ashton says I'm not in trouble." Michael sang to the lady an arrogant smile across his face.

Miss Rogers rolled her eyes. She began asking Ashton if what Michael said was true. Meanwhile, Calum had grabbed a wet rag and placed it over Luke's forehead. The crying child stopped wailing for a second. Reaching his arms out, he gave Calum a hug around his waist, expecting a hug in return.

"Ew, but your sick." Calum said, pushing Luke away. This action only made Luke cry harder.

Michael walked over, slapped Calum's head then sat down next to Luke.

"Ow." Calum whined. He proceeded to pick up a pillow and whack it across Michael's head.

"Stop it." Michael complained as he pulled Luke into his arms. "Shield me." He said to the youngest. Luke momentarily stopped crying in order to dodge the pillow that was coming for his head.

Suddenly, Calum stopped beating on his brothers. It wasn't entertaining anymore. He decided to turn the tv to a football station.

Michael could feel the heat radiating off of Luke's body. "Shh, poor kid, you really are sick."


"Why can't we see Ashton tonight?" Calum whined a few moments later. His football team was losing therefore, the game bore him.

"We might see him today. If not, we will definitely see him tomorrow." Michael responded. Calum sighed. In anger, he punched the carpet with his fist a few times. Sheepishly, he looked up at his two bothers who were sitting there staring at him as if he grew a second head.
"He always dances to music with me, and we go on drives around town together and he listens to me when I tell stories about Nia." Calum explained.

"I listen to you." Michael replied, then cocking an eyebrow he asked, "Who's Nia?"

Calum rolled his eyes, "a girl in my class." He muttered.

"Relax, I knew that." Michael said chuckling. "I'm only teasing you."

"Well stop. I'm seriously missing Ashton over here and all you can think about is how to annoy me."


"If you ask me, I think he gets too much attention." And then, in the softest voice Calum could muster he whispered, "maybe he is faking it."

Of course, Calum knew that was a lie. His brother would never do something like that, besides, Luke has too many real symptoms that he couldn't fake such as a fever, sweating, and stuffy nose. The comment came from a place of jealousy deep within Calum's heart. From the time Luke was born, Calum noticed how his parents doted on the child. He was the youngest, the baby, and usually that didn't bother Calum. But sometimes when Calum is hurt and Luke is hurt at the same time, everyone focuses on Luke more which is when it bothers Calum. Like right now, Ashton is in the hospital for third degree burns. That's serious stuff and yes Luke really is sick and yes it is serious as well, but Calum thinks both of his brothers should have equal attention. Which once again is obviously not the case.

Even though Calum whispered his comment, Michael still managed to hear it. Boiling with rage, Michael set his jaw, chomping down so hard he nearly broke his teeth. Considering that Cruz called Luke a faker today in class, and Michael punched him in the face for it, Calum's comment kind of rubbed Michael in the wrong direction.

"What did you just say?" Michael asked setting Luke to his side just incase this got ugly.

Right away Calum saw his mistake and he quickly tried to make amends.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Never mind. Let's just watch tv." Calum turned his face to the television screen.

"No, what did you mean?" Michael provoked. Calum groaned, ignoring his older brother.

"I asked you a question, brat." Michael said giving Calum's back a shove. Miss Rogers was still on the phone with Ashton and she was trying to cook dinner so the commotion in the livingroom was unknown to her.

Luke let out a painful cough, subconsciously clutching at his chest as he did so.

"Shh Luke, your too cute to cry." Michael whispered in a way knowing that it would set Calum off, which it did.
"Oh come on!" The raven-haired boy screamed. "He's not that amazing! You act like he's the most precious thing in the world."

"I don't act like that." Michael defended.

"Maybe not you, but mom certainly did. And now so does Ashton. Every single time we hang out he always has to be worried about something and Luke's usually always on his mind." Calum shouted, then pushing his face close to Luke's he yelled, "you cause people stress. You know that? Your like some termite, unwanted and worrisome."


"I didn't mean to get sick." Luke whimpered to Michael. The green-eyed boy cooed at Luke, then gently set his bother to the side as he stood up.

"Don't say shit like that." Michael ordered.

"I'll say what I want." Calum responded, "after all, that's what you say."

"Calum, man, don't test me right now. I don't know where all of this is coming from, but I have a feeling it has something to do with Ash in the hospital. What ever it is, don't take it out on us. You just made Luke really upset. I think you should apologize."

"Or what?" Calum challenged feeling brave.

"Or I'll make you." Michael threatened.

"Bring it on." Calum snarled, standing up from his spot on the floor. Michael smirked, "I warned you." He grabbed Calum's shirt collar with both hands and lifted him up. His toes barely touched the ground as he grabbed onto Michael's wrists for dear life.

"Let him go." Luke whined pathetically from his spot on the couch.

"Fine." Michael said dropping him directly on the ground. Calum yelped rubbing his butt. Seconds later he lunged at Michael, knocking the older boy over and making him land on the ground with a harsh thud. This new attack brought out the beast in Michael, he quickly grabbed Calum by the shoulders and rolled with him on the floor. Once Michael was on top he raised his fist ready to strike but Miss Rogers voice stopped him.

"Get off of him." She scolded. Then into the phone she said, "sorry, but your brother decided to attack Calum this time."

Ashton said something over the phone, but Michael couldn't tell what it was. The dark haired boy underneath him sat up and rubbed his back.

"Your such an ass." He muttered as he walked towards the hall.

"Calum, wait."

"Don't touch me!" Calum shouted quickly as if he was just burned.

"Calum, I'm sorry, but you were seriously being a jerk to Luke." 

"It's fine, Michael". Luke whispered. Michael ignored his youngest brother and instead never let his eyes off of Calum.
"Stay away!" Calum yelled as he tears his eyes away from Michael's. His wall had crumbled so he had no way of holding back his tears no matter how hard he tried.

Michael stopped advancing towards his brother. It was evident that Calum needed Ashton more than ever right now and Michael felt awful for starting the confrontation in the first place.

"I'm sorry bub." Michael shook his head, angry with himself. But when Luke whined for him, he remembered why he fought Calum.

"I know you love Ashton. We all do. But I know you two are extra close. It's okay, we can see him tonight." Michael explained, "but I love Luke and I know you do too, so please don't make our brother feel like shit, okay?"

Calum wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "Ok." He sniffled, "I'm sorry, Luke. It's just...I know Ashton has like a special place for you cause you're the baby. I guess I'm jealous."

"Don't be jealous." Luke said hoarsely, "if you were me you would get picked on all the time and hurt and sick and I'm not that great."

"Stop it." Calum scolded. "You are perfect, Luke."

"So are you Calum."

The three brothers were reunited and Miss Rogers stood by the door with the phone on speaker so Ashton could hear it all too.

"It would be better if you came over here and hugged me." Luke held out his arms and waited for Calum to politely insert his body into Luke's arms.

Michael stood behind them, petting their hair and rocking back and forth on his feet.

"Miss Rogers," said the voice of the boy on the other end of the phone, "you should let my brothers visit me tonight. I would love to see them. Plus, Luke's voice sounds really congested. I think he could use a check up"

"Sure thing." Miss Rogers said as she watched the three boys huddle up on the couch. "You got yourself a cute little family, Ashton."

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone. If any of you have finals coming up, like me, I wish you luck. I'm currently stressing about studying but when I sit down to study all of these ideas come to my mind so I had to write the next chapter :) Now it's back to work.
White lights were flickering above her head as Miss Rogers sat in the waiting room with the three boys. She was glad she brought them to see Ashton because Luke seemed to be getting worse with every passing second. Right now the boy was laying his sweaty head against her shoulder as he slumped over in a waiting room chair. He looked halfway unconscious. In his tiny hands was his stuffed penguin that his parents bought him. Luke held on to pengy for dear life even in his half conscious state. It became clear to Miss Rogers that his penguin would follow him for the rest of his life because it serves as some memorabilia.

"Miss Rogers, Ashton is ready to see you now. He just received his shot for the day so he might be in a small amount of pain." A nurse said.

"Thank you." Miss Rogers led the boys in the room. Immediately, Calum jumped onto Ashtons hospital bed and hugged his brother.

"I missed you." He whispered, snuggling into Ashton's arms.

"I missed you too buddy." Ashton winced.

"So when did you say you will be able to take us home?" Calum asked.

"If we're lucky, I might be able to do it this Saturday."

A courus of yays rang throughout the room. Ashton turned his attention to the other three people in the room. "Hey Michael, hey Luke, hey Miss Rogers."

They responded with a friendly hello.

"How's Luke feeling" he asked then, gesturing his brother over to his side. "How you feeling, Lukey?"


"I'm glad you two have been good for Miss Rogers."

Michael's mouth dropped open. Shaking his head in disbelief, Michael scrunched his face muttered a soft, "oh you little..." Instead of following his sentence with a steady flow of curse words, Michael restrained, letting his sentence drift off.

Ashton was rubbing Luke's back as he talked to Calum about his hospital adventures.
"The nurses are really nice here." He winked, "and cute."

Calum giggled. "Did you get someone's number?"

"Nah, they're not that interested, I can tell." Ashton paused, internally debating whether or not he should mention Bryana's visit to his brothers. He decided they might as well know. After all, family shouldn't keep secrets even though they already have kept secrets from each other and pretty much every other family on the earth probably has secrets as well, but Ashton wanted to be honest with his brothers. They need to trust one another.

"As a matter of fact, Bryana came here to see me."

"She did?" Calum looked at him puzzled.

"Yes. She and Ted came here to keep me company."

"Oh good. I thought you were going to be alone all day." Calum said, rubbing Ashton's back.

"Luckily that wasn't the case. Bryana and I were talking about you guys and we thought maybe the five of us should hang out sometime. You know, like, go out to a movie or something."

"Yeah!" Calum shouted, "that sounds like fun."

Ashton smiled at his friendly brown-eyed brother, but when his eyes met Michael the smile faded.

Standing with his arms crossed over his chest, Michael was staring daggers at Ashton. Calum might be gullible enough to fall for Ashton's cheap tricks, but Michael knew what 'hanging out with Bryana' meant. It meant that Ashton was going to go on a date with her and the other three boys were supposed to like her and then suddenly he will have a new sister-in-law. Well that's not going to happen. Michael's not going to let some girl tear his family apart. It feels as if they are already hanging on by a thread. If a girl comes into the picture then Ashton will have no reason to want to keep his younger brothers. He will want a house all to himself with just him and Bryana. Maybe he will want a baby of his own. All of these thoughts made Michael want to puke. This couldn't happen! He won't let Bryana steal his brother away.

"Michael..." Ashton began, "I think we should talk."

"I agree." Michael said through gritted teeth.

"Miss Rogers can you take Calum and Luke to the cafeteria? Get them a snack or something."

Miss Rogers bit her lip. "Are you sure you want to deal with this right now?" She asked, "I mean, you're still injured."

"I can contain Michael with one arm, he's 13."

If Michael wasn't angry before, he was livid now: Nostrils flaring, eyes burning.

"Ashton-" miss Rogers began, but Ashton snapped, "please take them."

Miss Rogers nodded and took Calum's hand. It was only then that they realized Luke had fallen asleep on Ashton's shoulder. Miss Rogers began gently shaking his shoulder.


Pale, lips dry and cracked, poor boy looked a mess. She continued trying to gently coax him awake
but became more and more worried when she still couldn't get him to open his eyes.

Ashton tried to wake him as well. He pressed his palm to Luke's cheek and was alarmed by how hot his skin was on his.

Then a few minutes later, that felt much longer then normal, Luke's eyes peeled halfway open. Ashton put both hands on either side of his face, looking into the his veiled blue eyes.

"There you go." He whispered. "How are you feeling baby?"

Luke couldn't believe how weak he felt even in this sleep, he barely had the strength of twig - he was so tired, his mouth felt like he'd been eating cotton and his joints ached. Just sitting up felt like a laborious task.

"'m tired." Luke said groggily.

"Okay, let's get some fluids in you." Miss Rogers said. "I'll take them to the cafeteria and buy him some orange juice." She informed.

"Miss Rogers," Ashton called.

"Yes?"

"If he gets worse tell a nurse to get him a room. I don't like how warm he is."

"Sure thing." She said and with that, they left Michael and Ashton alone.

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Standing in the brightly lit hospital room, Michael awkwardly scuffed his shoes against the white tile floor.

Smiling slightly, Ashton tried to find a gentle way to start this conversation. It wasn't like Michael to actually hurt people in school. In fact, Ashton knew there had to be an explanation because Michael was always trying to avoid conflicts. Then again, lately Michael hasn't been himself.

To Ashtons relief, Michael started the conversation for him. "I'm in a lot of trouble aren't I?" He asked not looking up from his feet.

"We gotta' talk rebel. Come over here."

Michael slowly walked over not looking at his brother. Ashton sat up on the bed hoping to get up to his eye level a little better.

"Look at me Michael." He ordered.

His eyes slowly dragged up but Ashton could tell he wasn't looking straight at him.

"What do I always tell you?"

Michael shook his head, not in the mood for Ashton's brain teasers and long messages. Instead he followed up with his jaded opinion. "You're going to get sick of it."

Ashton was confused. "Sick of what?"

Ashton took Michael's wrists and pulled him onto the bed to sit next to him.  

"Michael you three are my family. We're all going to get sick of each other at some point but no one is going to leave because of it."

"Yeah, but that's because Calum, Luke and I don't have an option. It's either this or a group home but you have a whole other family you can go to, one less dysfunctional. Bryana wants you and she can get you all to herself.

Ashton raised his eyebrow at him. "Are you serious? You think Bryana is a replacement family? Michael, she's my friend, potentially my girlfriend, but that's all she is. There's a reason I wanted Miss Rogers to watch you boys. There's a reason I'm still here in your life Michael."

"You'll like her better than us. She's easier to take care of. But you can't leave, you make Calum laugh. He hasn't laughed much since mom and dad died and you make him happy," Michael cried.

"Mikey, I'm not leaving you. You have to believe me. You have to trust that I'm not leaving."

Michael threw his arms around Ashton's waist, burying his face into Ashton's shirt.

Ashton sighed and pulled him back. "Michael, you know we need to talk about what you did today."

Wincing, Michael scratched the back of his head trying to ease the tension.

"Yeah...about that..ha." He laughed nervously, "I was trying to defend Luke."

"By beating another kid?"

"It wasn't just another kid, okay, this was Cruz. He's the biggest ass I know."

"I don't care who he was, Michael, you know damn well that your not allowed to punch someone. How would you like it if I started beating you."

"Oh please don't even joke about something like that." Michael said closing his eyes.

"Then why did you do it."

"I told you! Cruz was making fun of Luke. I was defending our kid brother."

"You can't defend someone who wasn't in the room with you."

"Whatever, I was showing Cruz that he can't make fun of my family, same thing."

"Look, what you did was wrong, but your reasons were sweet. But you know I can't let you get away with this."

Michael rolled his eyes, "yeah I know." He said dejectedly. "So what's my punishment?"

"I'll give you a choice. You can go back to Miss Rogers house and be grounded for one week. No video games, junk food, TV, and phone."

"Why don't you just rip my soul out."

"Or, you can get a spanking."

"If I take the spanking will I still be grounded?"
"No. Hence the choice you get."

Michael sighed. "I don't like this choice."

"What's it gonna be?"

"Will you go easy on me if you spank?"

"What do you think?"

"Do you have to take away the video games? Why the video games?"

"Michael."

"Okay okay, I'll...I don't know."

Ashton laughed, "you really love your video games."

"And Junk food! Why are you taking away junk food. That's like my life."

"I know. Hence the word punishment."

"Just spank me."

"Are you sure?" Ashton had to admit he was a little surprised.

"No." Michael said quickly, "maybe you should ground me. No, I don't want grounded. But I don't want to be hit either."

"Come here, Michael."

"Why?"

"I'll make the decision easier for you."

"No! I want to be grounded."

"Okay fine, your grounded."

Michael kicked the floor in defeat. "Your not cool, Ashton."

"Ow. That's a sting right to my heart." Ashton said playfully throwing a hand over his chest and acting like Michael's words hurt. But there was no denying the smile on his face.

"Shut up, misfit." Michael said giving his older brother a playful push.

"Alright go find Miss Rogers. I need to tell her you're grounded."

---------------------------------

Sitting in the empty hospital cafeteria, Miss Rogers cradled Luke in her arms, rocking the seriously ill boy back and forth.

"So... How much trouble do you think Michael's in?" Calum tried to make conversation with Luke, but the younger boy didn't feel like talking.

After being ignored for the third time, Calum settled on huffing and crossing his arms over his chest.
"I'm the one who should be spending time with Ashton right now, not Michael. Stupid older sibling always gets the special one on one time. I'm left with nothing."

"Calum who are you talking to?" Miss Rogers wondered.

Sighing, Calum spoke in an audible voice this time, "nothing. Never mind."

"Did you want something?" She asked.

Scoffing, he whispered, "yeah to change my birthday."

"What did you say? You're mumbling."

"Nothing. I said I want nothing."

"Are you sure? I see they have chocolate cake over in the corner."

"No thanks."

"Why are there birds in here?" Luke asked when Miss Rogers scooted back on the chair. She looked around to see what he was looking at, but there was nothing there. Great, he's hallucinating. Miss Rogers thought, but at least he was awake.

"I have some medicine for you," Miss Rogers stated, holding up two pills. She had brought the bottle of Advil along with her. "Do you think I can help you sit up to take them?"

"Don't want," he said weakly.

"I know, but you need to take them so you can get better," Miss Rogers replied.

"Tell the birds to leave my feet alone," Luke said groggily.

"Um..." Miss Rogers replied, unable to hide the worry on her face. Calum stared at his brother with fear.

"Has he gone mental?"

"He's delirious," Miss Rogers said, "probably from the fever." Then to Luke she said, "Take these pills, it will keep the birds away from you."

Luke nodded as if that made sense and sat up shakily, leaning on Miss Rogers once again for support. This time he opened his mouth without her urging and she popped the pills in his mouth and brought a bottle of water to his lips.

"That was my water." Calum complained.

"Oh, don't drink it or you'll get Luke's cold."

"No shit."

Miss Rogers gasped. "Calum, I've never heard say such foul language."

Instantly, Calum felt his face flush from embarrassment. "Sorry." He said eyes downcast.

Luke lifted his hand up to tilt the bottle further as he took several long gulps. Miss Rogers didn't realize how thirsty he might have been. She gave him the orange juice, but he is still thirsty. It made
sense though he did have a high fever. Fluids are important. She let him finish off the bottle before dropping the empty container to the floor. Finally he opened his eyes and looked up at her with confusion.

"Who are you?" He asked, and that was when Miss Rogers realized how far gone he was.

"It's Miss Rogers," she replied, not even trying to hide how scared she was for him.

"Want Calum." He whined.

"Okay," she said, pulling Calum toward Luke to provide comfort.

He looked up at him. "Why is your hair blue?" Luke asked.

"Um..." Calum tried to search for an answer to that. Clearly he was seeing things and he hoped that his fever would come down soon so he would at least start making some sense. "Don't worry about that right now. You need to rest and cool down."

"I like your hair." Luke giggled.

"It's not blue." Calum said flatly.

"It's pink!"

"Shut up or I will dump a bucket of ice on you."

"Calum!" Miss Rogers yelled.

"Don't drown me," Luke cried, pulling away from him as if he was going to hurt him.

"I'm not going to drown you," Calum reassured, but he was surprised to see him fairly awake and crawling off of Miss Rogers lap, looking at him with fear.

"It's going to be okay." Calum said, standing next to him. "I was teasing."

"You're trying to kill me," he stated, backing away, but his legs were shaking with the effort to stay upright.

"No Lukey, why would you say that? I'm your brother I would never hurt you." Calum said, hurt evident in his voice.

"I'm trying to help you," Miss Rogers said, reaching her hands out to catch him, if he happened to fall. She was amazed that he managed to have the strength to stand at all right now, but as she reached her hands out to him, he made his way around the other side of the chair and toward the hall. She slowly followed him toward the hall trying to convey that she was only here to help him. When he stood still, Miss Rogers scooped him up and carried him to a nurse.

"hi, I need to check in my... This child I'm babysitting. His name is Luke Irwin."

"You can call him Luke Hemmings." Calum said from behind.

"Calum! That's not his name." Miss Rogers scolded.

"I know, but when we were kids, we got in this fight and we didn't want to be brothers anymore so we gave eachother pretend last names. His is Luke Hemmings."
"Now is not the time, Calum." Miss Rogers said as she handed Luke to the nurse. "He's delirious and has a high fever."

"I'll get him in a room immediately. He needs an IV for sure."

"thank you ma'am."

Miss Rogers watched the nurse walk away before turning to Calum. "What's with the last name thing?"

"Luke obviously doesn't like me right now so I thought he would want to be called by his fake last name."

"Calum, of course Luke likes you. He asked for you when he was delirious, if that's not love I don't know what is."

"He thought I was going to kill him."

"Well you did threaten to drown him in ice water."

"Maybe I'm the one who wants to be a Calum Hood rather than an Irwin."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it's been a little while. I had a lot of tests and then my own body decided to get sick. Not as bad as Luke though. ;)

Luke opened his eyes just barley glancing at a woman in a white coat before turning toward the nurse standing on his other side.

"How did I get here?" he asked.

"Your babysitter brought you here. You have a terribly high fever sweetheart." The nurse said sweetly.

"Mmm, I feel hot." Luke admitted and the nurse couldn't help but laugh.

"He's going to need fluids because he is dehydrated." said the nurse to her partner.

"How do you feel?" Dr. Wilkins asked.


"I would imagine so," said Wilkins, pulling a thermometer out of her bag. "I need you to put this under your tongue."

"No, don't want to." Luke whined turning his face to the side in an attempt to avoid the object in Dr. Wilkins hand.

"We need to see what your body temperature is."

"Why?" he asked, suspicious.

"Just put it under your tongue, Luke" the younger boy knew that demanding tone. He smiled softly and turned his head to see that Ashton and Michael were sitting in front of his bed right by the door where the chairs were. "Come on Lukey, don't be difficult right now." Ashton coaxed, realizing his last comment was a little harsh.

"Fine," he choked out before coughing again. He moved his hand to his chest and opened his mouth so the doctor could put the thermometer under his tongue.

"Now close your mouth," Wilkins instructed.

"Why is he acting like he doesn't know what a thermometer is?" Michael whispered to Ashton. In return he earned an elbow to the gut. Michael put his hands up in surrender. "I was just asking." He emphasized.

Luke closed his mouth without another word still looking at Ashton and Michael. Neither of them spoke as the electric thermometer beeped noting that it was done. When Wilkins pulled the thermometer from Luke's mouth she read it out loud.

"103.4," she stated, reaching into her bag again. This time she pulled out a bottle of pills. Ashton watched as Luke began to dose off again.

"Luke, wake up," said the nurse, pushing against his shoulder. He grumbled and looked up at her. "I'm sorry, but we have to give you something to bring your fever down."
Dr. Wilkins handed the nurse a bottle of water and Tylenol. Before digging through her bag once again. The nurse just held the two items as she watched for what the doctor was looking for this time. She pulled out a small bendable tube and connected it to some fluid.

"Okay sweetie, this is going to feel like a small bee sting, alright? It will pinch for just a second." The nurse explained as the doctor pulled the needle out of the bag and connected it to the tube. Luke's eyes grew as wide as saucers and his blue eyes started glistening. Ashton sighed, rushed a hand threw his hair and made his way over to Luke's side. Michael followed lingering in the background.

"Is there going to be blood? I hate blood." Michael said, turning his gaze away and staring at the floor. "I might be sick if I have to watch this."

"Mike go sit in the hall then."

"What if Luke needs me?"

"I got him, you go."

Michael nodded, speeding out of the room. He was a tough guy, but blood makes him faint.


"I'm here, Lukey. Squeeze my hand." He said, grasping his younger brother's hand.

Luke jolted as the needle poked his skin. "Ow!" He screamed.

Doctor Wilkins shook her head, "you need to stay very still, or else we will have to keep doing it again. Hang on for one more pinch. Stay still."


"You did so well." The nurse praised pulling out a box of stickers.

Doctor Wilkins taped the tube and then took the needle out. "There Ya go. You're all set. Now you should get some fluids back in your system. Poor thing, you were starting to look like a skeleton: Pale white skin and bones.

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Out in the hall, Miss Rogers was sitting with a grumpy Calum and Michael. Both boys were sitting with their arms folded, slumped down in the chairs outside Luke's hospital room. For a while neither of them said anything, and Miss Rogers was perfectly fine with that. But then Calum just had to open his mouth.

"It's all Luke's fault that we have to stay here. The stupid brat just had to become sick and delirious."

Michael spun around in his chair like lighting. "What the fuck is your problem? Why have you been insulting Luke all day?!"

"Don't swear." Calum told him, copying what he knew Ashton would say.

"Calum!" Michael nearly screamed.

"What?"
"Why have you been such a dick to Luke. That's MY job. I'm suppose to mess with Luke and you're suppose to be the kind loving brother that you always are."

Calum scoffed. "I told you earlier, Luke gets away with everything! I don't see how you don't see it. He gets all the attention, like right now. Who is Ashton with? Oh yeah, LUKE."

"Because he has a fucking fever and is practically dying!"

"No, it's because he's Luke."

"Come on, bro, you know that if it was you or me with the fever Ashton would be right by our side."

"Not if Luke also had a fever. He'd choose Luke over the two of us."

Michael shook his head, "look, I think you're wrong, but even if you're right, who cares? So he gives Luke a little more attention, big deal. He still cares about us, Cal."

Calum huffed and slumped back against the chair. "If he wasn't born then I would get all the attention."

"Wow." Michael said, shaking his head in disappointment. "Jealousy does not look good on you Calum."

"Shut up, Michael! You're the one who's jealous over a stupid girl."

"What are you talking. -"

"Bryana?" Calum tilted his head and in a mocking tone said, "weren't you the one who said Bryana would ruin this family."

Michael glared, "that has nothing to do with Luke."

"Um yeah it does. You're jealous that bryana takes Ashton's attention from you and I'm jealous that Luke takes Ashton's attention from me."

"No Calum, it's still different. Luke is our BROTHER, Bryana is just some stranger."

"So what? The fact that they steal the attention is still the same."

Michael sat in silence for a second. He was staring into Calum's warm brown eyes, trying to find out where his happy-go-lucky brother went.

"It's like Ashton just told me." Michael began, "we are family. We're going to get sick of each other but no one is leaving."


That did it, Michael was on his feet in seconds, leaping over to Calum and grabbing his shirt collar.

"Michael!" Miss Rogers intervened.

"You don't mean that." Michael said as he released Calum's shirt. "Don't say shit like that. It could be more real than you think. A social worker was at our door a few days ago threatening to take us to a group home. Do you think we would be allowed to see eachother there? No, I bet we wouldn't. How would you like to never see Luke's stupid face again? Or mine? Or Ashton's? Cause that could happen! It really could."
"Michael calm down." Miss Rogers placed her hand on his shoulder and guided him back to his chair. "You're already grounded, don't make it worse for yourself."

Calum remained silent after his brothers outburst. Even if Michael had a point, which he did, it didn't take away the fact that Ashton had been discharged from the hospital and was ready to go home. They could be out of Miss Rogers house and back in their own beds, their own rooms by tonight if it wasn't for freaking Luke and his freaking problems.

The nurses surprised them all when they said Ashton could go home after they file his paperwork. Apparently Ashton made a speedy recovery last night and as long as he takes it easy at home, he was allowed to leave. But now he was sitting with Luke in another hospital room holding his hand and pampering him with affection. Calum threw his head back and stared at the brightly lit ceiling. Time was ticking slowly. If felt like hours before Ashton exited the room carrying a sleeping Luke.

"He's alright. His fever went down a few degrees. The doctors said he can go home and get some rest."

"So we can all go home?" Calum asked, "right now?"

"Yep! That's the good news." Ashton said smiling at his brothers. Then he turned his attention to Miss Rogers.

"Thank you so much for watching them these past three days."

"Oh it's been fun." She said standing up and shaking Ashton's hand.

"I'm actually gonna miss them." She said looking a bit sad. "If you ever need me to watch them again, just give me a call."

"Thanks. I kinda want to say I love you, but that would be highly inappropriate."

Miss Rogers laughed at the awkward tall dirty blonde. "are you going to come to my house to re-pack the boys things? They just brought a couple pairs of clothes and toothbrushes."

"Yeah, we can pick those up first." Ashton said walking towards his car. Then it dawned on him that his car was still at work. When the accident happened he was transported to the hospital by an ambulance.

"I can drive you."

"I can drive you."

"I can drive you."

"I can drive you."

"I can drive you."

"Thank you again. Geez, this is like the third time you saved my ass."

"I guess I'm your thanksgiving present." She teased.

"Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah? I mean it's a couple weeks early but I still made time to help another family out."

Ashton smiled, "thank you. The boys and I don't usually celebrate thanksgiving."

"Oh?" She asked, tilting her head, "can I ask why not? Or is that being rude? I'm sorry, just forget I asked." She rambled, cheeks turning red.

"Oh no, it's not a problem or anything. It's just, my parents are from Australia." Ashton explained.

"Get out? That's awesome!"
"I use to think it was pretty cool. Anyway, I was born in Aus, and so was Michael but we moved to the U.S. by the time Calum and Luke were born."

Miss Rogers nodded to show her understanding.

"It's actually pretty funny." Ashton said chuckling, "when we lived in Australia, my parents use to take trips to the U.S. all the time. Like every summer we came up to the states. So this place has always been like a second home to me, but once we moved here, my family started taking summer trips back down under."

She gave Ashton a smile that seemed so genuinely sweet with just the right touch of shyness. It was enough to give Ashton a warm feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Why did your family move to Vermont?" She asked, as she beeped her car headlights.

"My dad got fired back in Aus, and my mom had a promotion in Vermont, so my family figured, what the heck. We had nothing to lose, and it worked out well for us too."

"Yeah, until they died." Calum said as a wave of wind slapped each of their faces painting a grave moment of silence. The five of them froze in place, in front of her vehicle.

Ashton nodded, "until they died." He whispered.

"Here. Get in the car, I'll turn on the seat warmers." She said opening the backseat door to her red Honda Civic. Ashton dropped Luke off into the back seat and buckled him up. He then helped Calum in. Michael got in on the other side. Luke was squeezed in the middle of his two brothers. He rested his head on Calum's shoulder which made the tan boy grunt.


"So you don't celebrate Thanksgiving because your parents are from Australia?" Miss Rogers clarified as she sat in the driver seat.

"Basically yeah. Even though, the last few years my mom basically celebrated. We ate all the typical stuff like Turkey and Cranberries."

"Did you like it?"

"Hell yeah! That's why we did it the next year."

The corner of Miss Rogers lips curled and her high cheekbones were raised as a small amount of laughter escaped. Ashton laughed along. It just felt right.

"Do Luke and Calum know a lot about Australia?" Miss Rogers asked.

"Yeah, they do. Like I said, we took vacations down there all the time."

"It must have been hard for you to move from such a warm place to such a cold place."

"Vermont's nice in the summer. I liked the snow at first, but after I got my license I grew sick of it."

"I like the snow." Calum said quietly from the backseat.

"Oh my God. These three are the best part about winter." Ashton said his face as bright as a Christmas tree. "You should see Luke and Calum out in the snow. They eat it, they sled ride in it,
they build snowmen. It's hilarious."

"Aw, that sounds adorable."

"Man, I can't wait to see them this year when it snows."

Miss Rogers nodded at Ashton's enthusiasm. He sounded like such a proud older brother. It warmed her heart.

"I bet you guys are really excited for Christmas this year." She said.

"I am." Ashton said, but it was less enthusiastic, more subtle.

"Did I say something wrong? Oh no, do you not celebrate Christmas either? I'm so sorry, I keep doing this."

"It's fine, Miss Rogers. We do celebrate Christmas."

"Please call me Marian."

"Marian." Ashton said, testing it out on his own tongue. "That's a beautiful name."

"Thank you." She couldn't help herself, a blush formed on both of her cheeks. Damn the stupidly handsome, rugged, muscular, guy who is around her age and cares about his family. He even smelled nice. Marian mentally slapped herself. Was she actually smelling him? Oh God, she needed to get home so she could kick this family out of her house before she loses control and kisses the curly blonde haired boy. Snapping out of her daze, she could sense the tension in the air. It obviously had something to do with Christmas.

"If you guys celebrate, then what's the problem?"

Ashton sighed. "It's just, this will be our first Christmas without our parents."

Marian's frown deepened. "I'm so sorry. I didn't realize you lost them that recently."

"Just a year ago."

"If it's been a year, didn't you have Christmas once already?"

"They died in October. So yeah, technically we did have one Christmas without our parents, but we didn't even know it was Christmas." Ashton explained.

"We were in a funk." Michael added. "Plus we had a thousand people coming to the house at that time. It was too much. We didn't even know what day it was all we could think about was court dates and custody and paying bills, and keeping our house, and Ashton's college."

Marian looked at Ashton. "You dropped out." It wasn't a question it was a statement. She knew he chose his family over his education.

"Yeah I did. I had to in order to take care of my brothers. At first, they wouldn't let me keep my brothers. I had to fight to keep them. That's what all the court cases were about."

"Where were your brothers? And who wouldn't let you keep them?"

"The state. They said I didn't have enough money to watch them. So I ended up having to find a job as soon as possible. That's how I ended up in a dangerous construction job and a dangerous factory."
"You work in a factory?"

Ashton nodded, "part time. I had to get a decent income to keep them from going to a group home. The state said they would go into foster care from there. A Different home for each boy and a different family with different rules. They didn't deserve that. Just because our parents died doesn't mean my brothers deserve to be split up and taken to different homes. Family was the most important thing to my parents. I couldn't let them down."

"Your a strong man, Ashton. I don't think I could've done that. Honestly, if my parents died I wouldn't know what to do with my self. They mean the world to me as well."

"You'd move on. Keep pushing forward. That's all you can do."

"But to become an adult at such a young age. I'm still struggling to be one myself and I went to college and have a job now."

"Hey, it's alright. I try not to act too grown up. I'm still their big brother. I still rough house with them and play music with them. But I just have to be a little more strict with them."

"That's the not-so-fun part." Calum explained.

Marian smiled one last time before parking her car in her driveway.

"Well. We're here." She announced.

"Yeah." Ashton felt like he just lifted a heavy brick off his chest. Part of him hoped he didn't over kill Marian with information. But another half of him felt great for finally talking about it. And talking to someone who understands. Or at least It felt like she understood.

"Where are we?" Luke asked as Ashton picked him up out of the backseat of the car.

"We're just going to pick up your stuff okay?"

"Are we leaving Miss Rogers?"

"Yeah bud, we are. It's time to go home." Ashton said rubbing the back of Luke's head.


"Yeah baby. We're going home."

"You smell nice." He told Ashton. Miss Rogers shouted, "I know right? It's like a cinnamon vanilla smell." She immediately turned Scarlett red when she realized that she admitted to smelling him.

"I'd say it's more coconut." Luke said.

"No way, it's mint." Michael said from the other side of Ashton.

"You're all wrong. It's syrup. I spilled some on my shirt this morning". Ashton admitted wincing when they all shouted at him.

"I thought it was like this amazing cologne."

"You would spill syrup." Michael said, grinning up at his brother.

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"Alright, here we are at the construction lot." Marian parked her car and the four boys hopped out carrying three suitcases.

"Thanks again Marian. I'm sorry I made you drive us around at four o'clock in the morning."

"Oh it's fine. Tomorrow's a Saturday anyway." She said waving her hand. "It's been a fun night."

"It has. Goodbye. I'll call you if I even need you to watch them again."

"Yeah. Hey, if you want to celebrate Thanksgiving this year, you are welcome to come to my place."

"Thanks for the offer. I might take you up on it."


"Bye." The younger boys said, half exhausted.

"Come on, fellas, let's get you home".

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone. I'm trying to add some holiday vibes to this story, but I don't think I'll be able to fit in the Christmas chapter on actual Christmas. But it will come eventually.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Recap: Luke's fever made Calum even more jealous, and Calum's Jealousy made Michael mad. Ashton opened up to Miss Rogers about his parents.
It's been a day since the boys returned home. Things instantly fell back into place. Calum set his things back in his room. Michael was laying on the couch complaining about being bored and how it should be illegal to ground someone on the weekend. Then there was Luke who felt much better. His fever was gone and all that was left was the occasional sniffles and loud cough. Lastly, Ashton had found himself running around like a maniac trying to buy supplies they were out of, doing household chores, and finally paying off the last of his credit card bill. The good news is that he paid off all of his bills while in the hospital. The bad news is now he's broke. Money is a foreign object to his family now. Ashton needed to get back to work, but his doctor told him to rest at home for a while because he is finally starting to feel the pain of being burned with a 3,480 degree welding torch. Nevertheless, Ashton knew resting was not an option. Not when he needs to feed his brothers next week. Plus, Michael's birthday was in one week. He was going to have to buy his brother gift. Ashton figured he can grin and bear the pain at work. On Sunday, Ashton went to work at a retail shop.

"Don't forget to put in the mac'n'cheese at six, oh and if Luke happens to get his fever back, give him an Aspirin."

"I've been alone before, Ash. I'll be fine." Michael reassured.

"I know, but I don't usually work on Sunday's." Ashton said, feeling guilty.

"The day doesn't change anything." Michael said, pushing his brother out the door.

"Alright. Bye Michael." Ashton said leaving the house. He walked down the driveway to his car.

Michael smirked as he watched Ashton drive away.

"Finally." He muttered. Running towards the couch, Michael leapt over the back of it and slammed down on the plump cushions. Throwing his feet up on the table, Michael grabbed the remote and started playing Grand Theft Auto 5. He was in the middle of delivering stuff when he heard someone walk down the stairs.

"Michael?" Calum's voice was soft in the mid-Sunday afternoon.

"Yeah Cal?" Michael raised his eyebrow, not taking his eyes off of the game.

"Will Ashton be home soon?"

"He left at like one..." Michael trailed off hoping Calum would understand that Ashton was probably going to stay a full eight hour shift. The younger boy seemed to understand.

"That's what I thought." He said, then walking over to the couch, he sat down and whispered, "do you want to do something with me?"

"I'm kinda busy right now." Michael responded, not giving Calum the attention he craved. The younger boy sat staring at Michael like a lost puppy.

"You know, you're not even suppose to be playing video games. You're grounded remember."
Calum said.

"What Ashton doesn't know won't hurt him." Michael responded, pressing harshly on the remote controller.

"I could tell him, you know."

"But you won't".

"Only if you do something with me." Calum said mischievously.

"Fine. Grab a console." Michael said gesturing to the bag of video game supplies.

"No. I want to play football." Calum protested. In return, Michael groaned loudly.

"No, Calum. I don't feel like it."

"Your such a vampire, always staying in the house where it's dark. Come out into the sunlight Mikey. It's fun." Calum said in a sing-song voice.

"No, go get Luke to play with you."

Calum glared at Michael. "Fine." He said, "I will."

Luke and Calum were outside playing football, but Calum wasn't having as much fun as he would if he was playing with Ashton or Michael.

Luke hogs the ball. He tries to show off by doing asinine tricks that end up failing, and he just really pisses Calum off.

"Pass me the damn ball, Luke."

"In a minute. Watch this." Luke kicked the ball towards the net but it ended up missing the goal and rolling into the neighbors yard.

"Nice shot, Matt Murdock, maybe you should try handing me the ball next time."

"I was just warming up."

"For the eighth time?" Calum sassed. Luke shot Calum and glare before chasing after the ball.

"Let me try once more." Luke grabbed the ball and lined up for his 9th shot.

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It was Thursday night and the four boys were going over to Marian Rogers house for an early thanksgiving dinner. She had called Ashton Wednesday evening and told him that she would be at her parents house on the actual day of thanksgiving, but she wanted to keep her word so she invited them a week early. As the boys arrived at her house, Ashton reminded them to be polite and thank her for the meal.

"Hello everyone." She greeted as she opened the door.

"Marian, it's nice to see you." Ashton gave her a hug. She happily embraced him.

"Hi Miss Rogers." Calum said shaking her hand.
"Hello boys. I bought extra pumpkin pie because I thought someone might like that." She gave Calum a wink, causing him to beam.

"I love pie!" He exclaimed running into the house to check out her refrigerator. Since the boys actually lived here for a few days they felt like this was a second home.

"So the Turkey just came out of the oven, but I'm still waiting on the green beans. I also have to mash the potatoes. Marian told Ashton, leading him into her house.

"Can I play your fuse-ball game?" Michael asked, already walking down the hall to her game room.

"Sure." Miss Rogers said. Ashton gave Michael a pointed look, which was suppose to remind him to be polite, before turning to Miss Rogers.

"I'll help you with the mash potatoes." He scratched the back of his neck. Marian smiled and lead him to the kitchen. Luke and Calum went to the game room to watch some cartoons. Miss Rogers walked around the kitchen to give Ashton a potato peeler.

"So, how are things going with your arm?" She asked as she grabbed a potato.

"Good. Yeah, it's definitely sore, but I'm managing." Ashton explained. Rolling up his sleeve, he showed her the dark brown patch of skin that looked absolutely scorched.

"Oh ow. I bet it hurts, according to the doctors you shouldn't even be at home right now."

"I know." Ashton winced, "and I should be resting but I've had to work all week."

Marian gasped. "Ashton." She said smacking his rock solid stomach. "What the heck is wrong with you?"

"I need the money." He said defensively.

"Is it worth the risk of putting yourself back in the hospital?" She asked.

"Somewhat, yeah."

Marian raised an eyebrow, "you need the money that badly?"

"I paid a lot of bills".

"Oh..." She said quietly. "We're you in debt?"

"Hell yeah."

"Are you out of it?"

"Yeah. But now I have to worry about feeding my brothers."

Marian stopped peeling the potato. She looked up at him, a look of sympathy and worry plastered on her face. Ashton didn't want her to pity him. He didn't want her to look at him like that so he instantly changed the subject. "Enough about me. How about you? What have you been up to?"

"Oh you know, the typical grading school papers and creating lesson plans."

Ashton smiled, "ah, the secret life of a teacher."
"It's not very thrilling. I'm not much of an interesting person."

"Don't say that. I'm not doing anything great either."

There was a small amount of silence. Just the two of them peeling potatoes and enjoying each other's company: no tension, no awkward vibes.

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Calum and Luke were both sitting on the couch watching Charlie Brown and sneaking a couple pieces of pie. When Calum was in the kitchen he took the pie out of the refrigerator and Luke took the whip cream. Calum giggled as he took a bite of pumpkin pie, but glared when he saw Luke steal a piece of his pie.


Calum scowled. Instantly, he reached over and took Luke's can of whip cream.


"You took my pie, I'll take your whip cream"

"It's mine." Luke said angrily.

"Not anymore."

"Would you two shut up." Michael whisper yelled, "you're going to get us in trouble."

"Oh shut up Michael." Calum snorted, turning his attention to his brother. "Just go back to playing your video games. It's what you're good at."

"What is that suppose to mean?" Michael asked.

"Nothing. Go ahead, ignore me like you always do."

"Calum, what the hell has been crawling under your skin recently." Michael asked.


"Stop stealing my fucking food, you asshole."

Luke blinked in surprise. Michael yelled back, "don't swear. And stop being a jerk or I'll beat you."

"Oh really?" Calum laughed, "I'd like to see you try."

Michael clenched his jaw and told Calum through gritted teeth, "don't test me. I'm not in the mood for your little attitude today."

"Guys, Miss Rogers and Ashton are going to hear you." Luke whispered.

Ignoring Luke, the two boys continued bickering. "I do not have an attitude. I'm simply telling you that you are an ignorant dick who cares more about a stupid video game than actual civilization and I'm telling Luke he's an annoying asshole who gets away with everything."
"I do not!" Luke shouted.

Calum scoffed, "do too."

"Like when?"

"Since the day you were born."

Luke's mouth tightened in a thin line. Suddenly, he reached out and shoved a piece of pie in Calum's face. The tan boy grimaced, stood up and wiped his face with the back of his hand. Taking a fist hold of Luke's blonde locks, Calum pulled the hair until huge clumps of it were in his hand. Luke screamed when Calum did this, and Michael leapt forward and covered Luke's mouth.


"Oh I'm sorry. The next time someone violently rips my hair out I'll just stay silent."

"Good." Calum said, "maybe you should stay silent all the time."

"Shut up, Calum." Michael scolded. "Once again, you are letting your jealously get the best of you."

"What are you even jealous of?" Luke asked, honestly confused.

"IM NOT JEALOUS." Calum screamed.


"Shut up, Hemmings". Calum snapped.

Luke's mouth flung open. "What did you just call me?"

"Your fake last name. If you're going to be a brat and steal my food and my things then you are not my brother." Calum said, crossing his arms.


Michael rolled his eyes, "you two are being ridiculous."

"No you are, Mister I love my computer more than my family."

"Oh my God, Calum that is so not true. Stop being such an asshole." Michael said. Roughly, he shoved Calum's shoulder. Calum responded back with a powerful shove that knocked Michael backwards. Michael narrowed his eyes, stood up and pushed Calum once more, not holding back.

His rough shove had Calum frantically grabbing onto Luke trying to find his balance. However, it wasn't going how he planned. Instead of saving himself, he brought Luke down with him. The two fell back, landing right against the table and the whole thing toppled down, pumpkin pie falling all over the carpet.

"Look what you did." Michael yelled.

"What I did? It's Luke's fault he should have caught me". Calum said, smacking the back of Luke's head.

"It's not my fault you can't keep your balance".
Calum stood up and brought Luke to his feet. He began to grab Luke's shoulders so Luke grabbed Calum's and the two of them tried to put pressure on the other one. Michael joined in and there was a three way fight happening.

Ashton walked in as Michael kicked Calum and Luke. Luke was on the floor, with Calum on top of him, pulling his sensitive hair. Luke was biting Michael's arm and Michael was kicking both brothers.

Marian put a hand over her mouth to cover her surprised face. She quickly exited the room, allowing Ashton to deal with it himself. The eldest wasted no time pulling the boys off of each other and landing a harsh smack to the seat of their black skinny jeans.

"Ow!" Michael hissed as he was the first the receive the unexpected blow.

Luke and Calum saw it coming, but it didn't make it any less miserable.

Luke whimpered when he was released from Ashton's hold and ran into Michael's arms.

"WHAT ARE YOU THREE DOING?" Ashton screamed, so loud it echoed in a non-echoing room.

The three stood shivering in place, blushing and looking at the floor. Ashton looked really mad, and the thing with Ashton is he has a temper. So if you make him mad, he tends to be grumpy or hold a grudge. However, at the current moment, Ashton looked ready to explode. His face was boiling red with a vein popping out of his neck. It terrified the three boys.

"Calum's still being jealous, and he hit Luke." Michael said pointing a finger towards the small tan boy.

"Michael threatened to hit me first!" Calum yelled in defense.

All three broke out into a chorus of blame until Ashton clapped his hands loud enough to startle the boys into silence.

"I DON'T CARE WHO DID WHAT, OR WHAT YOU THREE ARE FIGHTING OVER. THE POINT IS YOU BROKE MISS ROGERS TABLE AND YOU STOLE PIE AND YOU HIT EACHOTHER! WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH YOU?" Ashton's tone matched that of a jackhammer.

"I'm sorry Ashton." Michael whimpered.

Ashton shook his head, trying to calm down. He was very fired up about his brothers actually hitting one another. That's something his parents NEVER allowed. They fought a lot as kids and they got along a lot as well. But as soon as someone raised a fist, his parents slammed down the hammer. They were a family first.

"How could you three fight each other? And Why would you fight while we are guests in this house?" Ashton puzzled, glaring daggers.

Luke flinched at his brothers harsh tone. He was chewing on his sweater paw trying to sink far away. Tears were already streaming down his face because Luke hated being yelled at, but the boy wasn't sobbing or anything.

"We just started fighting." Michael said, trying to play it off as something simple, "people said things and it escalated."
"YOU, MICHAEL, ARE IN SO MUCH TROUBLE. YOU HAVE BEEN IN TOO MANY FIGHTS RECENTLY. IT STOPS NOW!!!

Michael cringed, and took a step back leaving Calum and Luke closer to the explosive fire.

"AND YOU, LUKE, HAVE BEEN TESTING EVERYONE'S PATIENTS BY ACTING OUT."

"And getting away with it." Calum whispered.

"CALUM! YOU HAVE BEEN COMPLAINING ABOUT THIS FAMILY THE MOST."

"But Ashton, I just wanted you to spend time with me. You're always at work, or spending time with Luke or Michael. I feel left out."

Ashton took a second to breathe. He closed his eyes pinching the bridge of his nose. He said, "Calum, listen. I'm so sorry I haven't been paying attention to you. I've been busy, and I know that's a bad excuse but it's true. When Luke got sick I had to take care of him. We all have to make sacrifices for family. But I promise you, Cal, I would have spent more time with you this weekend if you just asked me. We could have spent time right now. Instead you decided to let the jealousy boil up and you ended up wrestling your brothers in another person's house."

"So your saying I handled this badly."

"Very badly." Ashton gritted out.

"I'm sorry." Calum tried, giving him the best puppy dog eyes he could.

Ashton was at a loss of what to do. He wanted to punish the hell out of them, but they were at Marian's house. He could take them home early, but they were looking forward to the dinner and that wouldn't be fair to Marian. If he waited to punish them they wouldn't learn anything. How was he even going to punish them? Ashton had no idea and he was pressed on time.

"Fine. Since you three want to hit each other so much..." Ashton trailed off. He gestured for the three of them to walk over to him. Slowly, Michael Calum and Luke made their way over to him. It was like walking a death march.

"Calum sit down." Ashton instructed.

Calum hesitantly obeyed, unsure of his brother's creative plan.

"Luke, lay over his lap."


"You heard me. Bend over."

"Ashton, your not gonna let Calum -"

"That's exactly what I'm going to do."


"Don't make me tell you again." Ashton warned.

Luke nervously leaned over Calum's lap.

"Ashton I can't."

"Sure you can."

"But..."

"But what?"

"He's..."

"He's what?"

"He's Luke."


Calum shook his head. "I can't."

"Why not?" Ashton pressed. Calum could find no real explanation for why he was reluctant to swat Luke.

After staring at Ashton for a while, Calum slowly lifted his hand and tapped Luke's butt. The younger boy still flinched even at the smallest slap.

"Oh come on. That's not the way to punish someone who gets away with everything. He just broke a table and got in a fight with you. Hit him harder."

What was Ashton doing. Michael wondered as he stood watching the scene play out. Why was he encouraging Calum to hurt Luke? It didn't make any sense to the thirteen year old. Michael smiled when Calum shook his head, refusing to hit Luke with force. That's right Calum, don't hurt our brother.

But Ashton grabbed Calum's hand into his own and raised it high. He helped Calum smack Luke hard.

"Ow!" The younger lad whined.


"Why not?" Ashton asked as he raised Calum's hand again and peppered Luke's butt. When the baby of the family started struggling and withering in pain Calum forcefully pushed against Ashton, trying to free his own hand. But it was no use. Ashton was forcing Calum to spank Luke.


"I'm trying to." Calum assured.

"Why?" Ashton urged.

"Why what?"

"Why are you trying to stop."
"Cause I don't want to spank Luke."

"Why?"

"Cause Luke's my brother." Calum said, panting at his effort to stop.

"And What does that mean?" Ashton asked.

"I don't want to cause Luke pain. I just want you to spend time with me!" Calum cried tears making their way down his face when he heard Luke sniffle.

Ashton stopped moving Calum's hand.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have blamed Luke. I should have talked to you I'm sorry." Calum was crying softly. He felt instant relief when his hand was freed and he was pulled into a hug by Ashton. Luke was shoved off Calum's lap, hissing as his butt hit the floor. He looked up at Ashton and Calum hugging with tears in his eyes. For once, he felt how Calum felt. He understood now, what Calum meant by being jealous. It wasn't fun to watch your brother comforting someone else, when you are in pain. Luke didn't realize he was crying loudly until Calum crouched down to him and wiped his tears.

"Shhh. Don't cry, Lukey. I'm sorry I was so mean to you." He pulled Luke into a big hug and Luke happily accepted.

"I - I shouldn't have taken your pie without asking." Luke whimpered apologetically. Shushing him, Calum rubbed Luke's hair. "It's alright. Your the baby, I have to accept the fact that you're going to be annoying." Calum teased.

Ashton smiled at them, but then he turned to Michael.

"I didn't forget about you." Ashton reassured.

Michael looked at Calum and said, "you see, Cal, sometimes I wish I was you. Because sometimes I wish Ashton would ignore me."

Ashton laughed and pulled Michael over his lap. It was fast but not painless. Calum tried distracting Luke, but they youngest basically ate his sweater paw alive as he listened to poor Michael cry.

"I'm sorry. I won't fight anyone ever again. Just please let me up." Michael begged. Luke couldn't take it, he pushed away Calum's arms and ran out of the room.

"Where are you going?" Calum shouted as he ran down the hall chasing Luke. Miss Rogers turned around with a pot of green-beans just in time for Luke to rush past her legs and nearly knocking her over. She caught her breath and put the beans down before Calum ran into her.

"Sorry." He said, running around her to follow Luke. Miss Rogers threw her head up to the ceiling as she leaned against the cabinets.

In the guest bedroom, Calum found Luke's bare feet sticking out from under the bed.

"What are you doing?" He asked sitting next to the feet. When Luke didn't respond Calum tickled his feet and said, "I know you're in here."

Luke pulled himself out from under he bed.

"You're blowing my cover".
"Oh I'm sorry." Calum said with a chuckle. "Do you mind telling me why your hiding?"

"I don't want Ashton to yell at me."

"He's not going to yell at you." Calum said, rubbing Luke's back. "He's done yelling."

"How do you know?"

"He already punished us. He has to stop yelling."

"He was yelling at Mikey while he got punished. That's a bad sign."

Calum scoffed, "Luke. Trust me. He's done yelling."

"Ashton is scary." Luke said crawling back under the bed.

"He's not scary. Come out of there."

"No! I don't want to see Michael sad."

"Is this about being yelled at or Michael?"

"Both."

"Michael will stop being sad and Ashton will stop being mad. Get it? It rhymes."

Luke wasn't amused.

"I'm scared." Luke sniffled.

"Lukey you have nothing to be afraid of. We're all going to eat dinner and be happy."

"Easy for you to say, your butt isn't on fire."

"Oh" Calum's lips formed an o shape. "I'm sorry about that."


"No. It's not. I didn't want to do that Luke. I'm really sorry."

"It's over." Luke stated, voice muffled from under the bed.

"Will you come out of there?"

"I don't want to be yelled at."

"You won't be."

"I don't want to see Michael sad."

Calum paused to come up with a response.

"We'll cover his face with a paper bag and draw a smily face on it."

There was a knock at the bedroom door. "Can I come in?" Ashton asked. Calum opened the door. "He thinks your gonna yell. He also doesn't want to see Michael crying."
"Michael's done crying. He's all better Luke."

"Not possible." Luke said simply. "I'm not okay, so Mikey's not okay."


"I won't bud. Come on. Let's go eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"Yeah, well you let the pie spoil your appetite." Ashton said as he carried Luke to the table. Calum followed behind.

"Hey Calum." Ashton said, "why don't you sit by me at the dinner table."

Calum smiled, "sounds good."

"Thank you for taking care of your brother."

"That's what brothers do. We sacrifice time for each other." Calum said.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know about this Chapter, I hope it wasn't too bad. Christmas Chapters will be coming up. I hope everyone had a great holiday.
Thanksgiving dinner with Marian Rogers was terrific! She provided good company and the food was marvelous. Miss Rogers gave them all the leftovers saying that they could use it considering she would have another thanksgiving meal at her parents house. With grace, Ashton accepted the leftovers. For one week, that's all the boys ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Turkey, mash potatoes, and cranberries for a solid week. It got annoying, but the leftovers saved Ashton from having to buy actual meals. Thanks to the leftovers he had enough money to buy Michael a couple of birthday gifts. So here they are on the 20th of November sitting around the table eating turkey and watching Michael open his presents.

"No way!" Michael squeaked, he pulled a rectangular box out of the package. "You finally got me Call of Duty: Black Ops. I love you." Michael screamed throwing his arms around Ashton. Smiling, Ashton wrapped his arms around his little brother.

"Open the next one." Luke said holding out a gift that was messily wrapped with construction paper.

"Thanks Luke." Michael said, shaking his head at the pictures of penguins Luke drew all over the paper. Michael tore open the present to find something that made his mouth drop open.

"What is it?" Calum asked excitedly.

"It's a couple of guitar picks that I really wanted. But that means that my last gift must be..."

"A guitar!" Calum shouted handing him the last gift.

"Ashton you shouldn't have."

"Hey now, your old guitar string's were breaking." The older boy said standing up to clear all the wrapping paper from the floor.

They all watched in awe as Michael unwrapped his minty green electric guitar.

"Can I play on it?" Luke asked immediately, typical Luke. Though Luke was catching on about his constant taking others things, Calum's blow up back at Miss Rogers house taught him that. Quickly, he apologized, saying that Michael could play the guitar first and that he didn't have to let Luke touch it.

Michael shrugged, "it's fine, you can play on it." Then he gave a stern warning, "just don't break it."

"Thanks Mikey." Luke squealed, ignoring the threats as he always does.

"I get to play the first song." Michael said.

Ashton finished collecting the wrapping paper and he put Michael's nerf gun and video game away.

"Okay, let's go down to the basement where my drums are and we can play a tune, sound good?" Ashton asked, walking towards the basement.

"Yeah that sounds great." Michael scurried to join his big brother.

"Are you two champs coming?" Ashton asked, playfully waving his arms in the direction of the basement. Luke and Calum ran over to him.
"It's official, music will always be my number one favorite thing to do." Michael announced. It was early in the morning on actual thanksgiving day. Luke and Calum were sleeping in from staying up late with Michael last night jamming out to AC/DC.

"I don't want you to get into the habit of staying up until 3am, but I'm glad you and your brothers are having fun this vacation."

"Yeah, Ash, I've been having a blast. Thanks for making my birthday really special."

Ashton beamed at his brother. "You deserve it, rebel."

The nickname caused Michael to think about all the times he rebelled against Ashton. From not wanting to go to school to dying his hair, Michael thought to himself and resized he didn't deserve anything.

"What do you mean you don't deserve anything?" Ashton shouted, alarmed.

"I really don't." Michael admitted, "I mean, I was so bad this year."

Jumping at the sudden hand on his wrist, Michael let out a tiny gasp of surprise when Ashton said, "you were bad this year."

"Thanks for confirming my thoughts." Michael mumbled, eyes downcasted.

"But that doesn't mean you don't deserve anything for your birthday." Ashton's eyes twinkled, "I was bad when I was thirteen but mom and dad still got me presents."

At the mentioning of his parents, Michael had to swallow a lump in his throat.

"And you've been through a lot this year, we all have. I know your not a bad kid Mikey. You just miss mom and dad."

Michael was trying really hard to keep it together. He broke eye contact with Ashton, not wanting his older brother to see him cry.

"I miss them too." Ashton continued, "but we will get through this together. So don't think you don't deserve a birthday present."

Michael nodded, too chocked up to speak because if he did the flood gates would open.

"Do you want to play AC/DC's highway to hell so loud that it wakes your brothers up?" Ashton said changing the subject.

"Yes." Michael said with a teary smile.

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For Thanksgiving, the boys didn't do much to celebrate, they already did that at Miss Rogers. Soon thanksgiving break was over and the boys had to go back to their dreaded school. Luke seemed to be fearing it again. He told Ashton about that stupid kid Toby who was making fun of him for wearing an old band t-shirt.
"It's not my fault I like old bands. He just doesn't get it." Luke explained. "He wants me to wear normal things like football hoodies and jeans that sag."

"Don't worry about what he says. Ignore him Lukey. We know why you wear things like that, and you know why you wear old band tees. Just let Toby think whatever he wants."

"I hate that guy." Luke pouted.

"Luke, hate is a strong word." Ashton reminded his brother.

It was three weeks until Christmas and Ashton had some bad news he had to tell his brothers. They were still at school whilst Ashton was sitting at the table contemplating how to tell his brother the news. Startling Ashton from his thoughts, the phone rang.

"Hello." The hazel eyed boy said holding the phone to his ear.

"Hi Ashton, it's Bryana."

"Oh hey, what's happening?"

"Well, I'm getting ready for Christmas and I thought maybe you would like to come with me to buy a Christmas tree."

"oh...um..." The question caught Ashton off guard. He honestly wasn't even thinking about celebrating Christmas this year. Especially with the bad news he has to tell the kids.

"it's okay, I'll pay for the tree, my treat." Bryana said cheerfully.

"No you don't have to do that." Ashton quickly said. He hates being pitied.

"No it's not a problem, really, you see there's this family that I always buy Christmas trees from. They don't have much money and their father is always at a bar getting drunk and their mom left them. So giving them money is my contribution to the Christmas spirit." Ashton.

"Oh, alright. Thanks Bryana. The boys and I can go on Tuesdays and Thursday's after four." Said Ashton.

"Awesome. I'll pick you up at four thirty." She said cheerily then hung up immediately.

Ashton stood frozen realizing that today was a Tuesday. Now he had to tell his brothers bad news about Christmas and then go shopping for a Christmas tree. Fun.

"He's coming over here again." Brian warned Luke during Lunch time.


"No he won't, cause your wearing a stupid punk shirt again." Brian said heatedly. "Why did you have to wear that? You know Toby hates when you wear shirts like that."

"I'm not about to change what I wear or what I like because of somebody else. If Toby doesn't like it then that's his problem."
"Luke! This isn't somebody. This is Toby Matthews. The biggest kid in the school."


"Okay, let me rephrase that, he's the biggest kid in the 3rd grade."

"Whatever, I'm not changing for him." Luke said stubbornly. Brian didn't have a chance to respond back. A tall dark shadow loomed over their table. Brain gulped, shaking in place.

"Look who it is, the little powderpuff girl." Toby laughed, giving Brain a shove. Neither boys said anything, Luke was totally fine with ignoring this monster as long as he only had petty insults to throw at them.

"And you," Toby scoffed, "wearing a Misfits shirt is a slap in the face to that iconic band. BABIES SHOULD NOT BE WEARING MISFIT SHIRTS."

The girl Jessica, who insulted Luke daily about not having parents, spoke up and said, "I bet you don't even know any of their albums."

Luke wanted to scream. He wanted to stand up and scream in their faces that he does know the albums and that his favorite memories with his parents were the ones where they all talked about punk, rock, and pop bands.

"You should be smacked for wearing a shirt like that." The other boy, Kenny said, crossing his arms. Toby took it a step further, "Fuck you, I should slit your throat for wearing something like that."

He ignored it. This was a typical thing that happened a lot. Luke always figured Toby was just an angry, mean person who was going to be that way his whole life and eventually end up in jail. It didn't matter to Luke, he wasn't going to let a jerk put him down. Nevertheless, Luke couldn't deny the comments hurt. He swallowed thickly, at the last comment, but remained quiet.

"See you later babies." Toby called out as he went on to torment some other poor unfortunate soul.

"It's okay, Luke. I think your shirt is cool." Brian said putting a hand on his friends shoulder. Luke weakly smiled. Part of him was angry that his brothers and parents had to like such unusual bands.

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"Hey fellas what's up?" Ashton asked when he picked his brothers up from school.


"I have ten thousand gallons of homework that I'm not going to do." Michael replied in a monotone voice.

"Our school choir concert is not going well at all." Calum said and then he went on to explain how some kids were late to class and the teacher yelled at them all.

"Then she said we need to practice singing our songs more."

"That's not a problem, you can sing at home with us Cal." Ashton said trying to smile.

"What's wrong with you?" Calum asked Ashton.

"I can never fool you can I?" Ashton asked.
"Sorry, but no. It's a brother thing."

Ashton shook his head smiling at his small family.

"I love you guys." He whispered subconsciously

"Oh no, is it that bad?" Calum cried. "Please tell me no one else died."

"No Calum no one died." Ashton sighed. "Can you at least wait until we get home for me to tell you?"

"No." All three of them said simultaneously.

Ashton groaned pulling up to a red light. "Alright. I'll tell you. Listen boys, the hospital bill came in a couple of weeks ago and it's going to cost me a lot of money to pay it off. I won't be able to buy you gifts this Christmas. And unfortunately Santa Claus won't be coming this year." He watched their expressions turn to utter shock and disappointment. It's something Ashton never wanted to see. It hurt ten times worse to know that he cause it.

"I'm sorry fellas." he said sadly.

"I don't understand." Luke said, voice close to tears, "why wouldn't Santa come? We were good this year. Weren't we?"

Ashton bit his lip, "yes, you we're. It's just...he..."

Michael helped Ashton out, "he doesn't know we are back in our real house. He probably thinks we're in a group home. Because you know, we almost got taken away when Ashton was in the hospital."

Luke's eyes watered. "So, we're not getting anything?"

"No baby, you're not." Ashton's own eyes were wet as he told them that. "But it's alright. Christmas isn't about the presents its about family. We're very lucky you boys are not in a group home. We can all be together this Christmas and that's what truly matters."

Luke nodded, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound selfish. I just really wanted a present."

"I know Lukey. It's alright. I'll make it up to you eventually. I promise."

"It's okay, Ashton. I love just being with you."

"And me!" Michael spoke up giving Luke a nudge.

"Yeah and you and Calum."

Calum, who had been silent the whole time, smiled at Luke and gave him a nudge as well.

"We're gonna be okay." Calum said softly. Ashton wasn't sure if he was saying it to Luke or to himself but it felt good to hear him say that.

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"Why do we have to get a tree if we're not gonna have presents underneath it?" Luke whined.
"Because Luke, it's festive and we could use some holiday cheer." Ashton tried to explain. Calum buttoned up his coat and answered the constant knocking door.

"Hi Bryana come on in." He said. She walked in shivering from the cold outside.

"I was knocking for fifteen minutes. I saw you guys inside, what were you doing?" She asked irritably.

"Do you really want to know?" Calum asked.

She nodded eagerly.

"We were fighting world war three with Ashton. None of us want to buy this stupid tree, but Ashton is persistent upon it. So he spent the past fifteen minutes trying to get us to behave so you don't find out that none of us want to go."

Bryan smacked her lips together. "Okay. I shouldn't have asked."

Calum nodded with a toothy smile. Coming down the steps, Ashton greeted Bryana with a hug.

"You look cozy in that pink sweater." He said.

"Oh yeah, I got this at north face."

"It looks nice." Ashton said, kissing her cheek. She blushes, staring at him with a foolish smile on her face.

Calum scrunched his face in disgust. "Gross."

"Alright. Let's go."

"Why do we have to get a tree again?" Luke whispered in Michael's ear as they walked around the empty stone-covered tree lot.

"Cause Ashton wants to get on Bryana's good side so he can get some later." Michael responded, his logic making sense to Luke for he did not question it. Luke, Michael, and Calum were walking around near the trailer house, looking at different types of trees. Bryana and Ashton were a few feet in front of them chatting about the types of trees. Personally, Luke thought they all looked the same. He clutched his penguin stuffy, that he brought with him, to his chest. The toy brought Luke a sense of comfort, he felt like his parents were there with him, helping him pick out a tree. Watching Michael and Calum circle a tall tree with stiff branches, Luke knew that his brothers wanted it. As Michael went to touch the tree, the trailer door opened and the owner's son walked out.

"Luke? What are you doing here?" The voice startled Luke, it sent a chill down his spine. He turned to see a familiar tall thin brunette boy standing a few feet in front of him.


"Who are you?" Michael demanded. The tall boy snorted, "are these your brothers?" He asked Luke.


"I asked you a question." Michael said cocking his eyebrow.
"I'm Toby. My dad owns this farm." The boy's eyes never left Luke's. "What are you doing here, powderpuff?"

"You better not be talking to Luke like that." Calum said angry.

The tall kid known as Toby stepped closer to the boys, "don't tell me you're buying a tree?"


"Ha. Don't you know that only kids with Mommies and Daddies get to celebrate Christmas." He spat. "No parents, no toys."

"That's not true." Calum said, then Michael put a hand on his shoulder, "it kinda is..." He said looking morbid.

"Mikey, not helping." Calum yelled.

"What's that?" Toby interjected noticing Luke's toy. "Is that a stuffed penguin?"

Luke's face flushed red. Before he had a chance to respond, Toby had ripped the stuffed animal out of his hands.

"Hey!" Luke shouted, reaching up to grab his penguin, but realizing he was too short to get it. Michael gave it a try, but realized, he too, was too short.

"Give it back." Michael yelled, "it's the last thing our parents gave to us, give it back."

"Aw, does little Lukey want his penguin?" Toby said mimicking the voice of a child.

"Dude, I'm not afraid to beat your ass, I'm older than you." Michael said.

A glint of something flashed through Toby's eyes and in a split second Pengy's head was ripped off his body. It was silent for a second as Luke stared in horror at his dead penguin. Then, Luke let out a blood curling scream, one that attracted Ashton's attention.

"Lukey it's okay," Calum tried to soothe, we can fix it. Luke wasn't having it, he began to see red. Lunging at Toby, Luke knocked the tall boy to the ground, trying to punch him. It took Toby a second to recover from the fall, but soon he had Luke flipped over on his back, fist raised, ready to strike, but Michael and Calum pulled him off of Luke.

"Let me at him." Toby screamed.

"What's going on over here?" Ashton asked, helping Luke to his feet.

"Ashton, Toby killed pengy! His head is torn off." Luke screamed, his voice rising five octaves.

Toby felt ashamed when Ashton glared at him. Gulping, the tall brunette weakly apologized.

"It's alright, Toby, dear." Bryana spoke up from the side. She handed the boy a big wad of cash and said, "I want that tree over there."

"This is way too much money." Toby said.

"Keep it. Just help me carry this tree please."

"Yes ma'am." He said politely, something that Luke gaped at. Toby's never polite.
"Ashton, my pengy is ruined." The boy sobbed, wiping his eyes with the back of his sleeve only to have more tears rush down his face.

"I'll fix it Lukey, please stop crying." Ashton pleaded, picking Luke up and wrapping the boys legs around his hip.

"Shhh." He whispered, giving Luke a kiss on his cheek.

"That stupid kid doesn't deserve forty bucks, he's mean to Luke!" Calum said. He hoped Ashton would understand that Toby is the bully and the money should be taken away from him. But instead, all Ashton did was defend the stupid brunette named Toby.

"I know Calum, but Toby needs the money."

"So do we, but you don't see us going around and picking on other kids." Calum explained, his eyes burning a hole in the back of Toby's head.

"Come on, Cal, let's help put our tree on the car and then we can go home, okay." Ashton grabbed his brother by the scruff of the neck gently guiding him towards the car.

"There." Ashton stood smiling at the beautifully lit Christmas tree, his little brothers standing around it. "Now doesn't that look nice?"

Michael nodded, mesmerized by the lights in the tree. Luke sniffled the last of his tears away as he held his newly sewed penguin in his hands. "I like them, Ashy." A part of Luke wanted to say 'daddy' because he always put up the tree with his father. Of course his mum and brothers helped too, but his dad always had a thing for putting up ordainments with Luke. Today, Luke felt Ashton slowly taking the place of his father and he didn't know how to feel about that. Michael and Calum told him before that Ashton will always be their big brother and no one will ever take daddy's place, but Luke wasn't so sure anymore.

"Alright. Homework time then dinner." Ashton said, clapping his hands. Groaning, the three boys left the lit tree in the living room.
There’s nothing good about Christmas, Ashton thought, as he shifted through a stack of papers on the counter, when all you have to think about is bills. Dragging his fingers to the hot pot on the stove, he eagerly grabbed the coffee, and poured himself another cup. Yes, coffee is good. These days it was like a drug; something to keep him awake and the troubles away. Unfortunately troubles found them even if Ashton drank twelve cups of coffee.

I need to make more money. Ashton sat in his armchair and laid his head back. Sergio Vellatti belted out the classic Christmas song "Mr. grinch" on the radio. The grinch had never been more right about Christmas. Ashton let himself sip the strong brown liquid sighing contently.

It was Christmas Eve. The night had come early and snow rained down. His eyes wandered to the mantle. Old dusty garland hung up along with stockings. Six, to be exact: one for Luke, one for Calum, one for Michael, one for himself…and one for Mom and another for Dad. It had been Calum's idea to hang up garlands, and get stockings. He had told Ashton he wanted to decorate the house like they use to.

Then there were the pictures. I should really take those down, Ashton thought. No one really liked to look at them, and when Luke or Calum paused to, there eyes would fill slightly with water. Even Michael would pause and stare for a while, gulping back emotions.

One was of Mom and Dad. They had been gone, almost a year now. The picture was of last Christmas, before the accident. Before their car had slipped on ice and crashed. Before they were gone for good.

The other was of Ashton's high school graduation. He wore a long blue robe and cap holding a diploma. Calum had slung his arm around Ashton, while Michael held Luke into a headlock. Dad was leaning against Ashton's shoulder, trying not to cry. He would have, if Calum hadn't stuck two fingers over Ashton's head making his father laugh. The pictures were just reminders that loved ones had disappeared, and there was not chance of finding them.

Ashton walked into the kitchen again to trade his coffee for some beer. He was going to be needing it to survive this holiday.

By the time the boys finished decorating that damn tree they were all bawling like babies. Ashton sipped his beer, staring at the tree. The memory of them all picking out a tree last year cut through him like a razor. I am going to bleed tears, he thought, weep blood like some weird Madonna painting. He felt his throat tightening a little, but no tears came.

Maybe the worst is over, he thought, maybe I can make it through this holiday. He'd try, just for the sake of his brothers if nothing else. Maybe they needed Christmas. But what was a Christmas without presents and parents? Some of their family was dead, how were they suppose to enjoy the holidays.

How can he do this? Ashton thought. How can he do this without cracking his heart?

Ashton nearly jumped out of his arm chair when he head a loud sobbing sound coming from upstairs. Luke. This has been a reoccurring thing that happened almost every night. Luke wakes up
with a terrible nightmare crying and shaking, needing his brothers to hold him until he falls back to sleep. Ashton had lost a lot of sleep because of it, they all have.

"Luke, bub, wake up." Ashton said, as he made his way into Luke's room, shaking his brother's shoulder.

Luke tossed and turned violently, eyes screwing in discomfort with whatever dream he was having.

"Daddy." He whimpered ever so quietly. Luke's arms reached out to Ashton, "daddy?" His voice said again, Luke's eyes were still closed. Ashton felt his heart snap. That was all he could take, the tears started flowing down his face even though he willed them not to.

"Ashton?" Luke's voice sounded less quiet, like he was now fully conscious. "Why are you crying?" He asked sitting up. After a few moments of taking in his surroundings Luke came to a conclusion, "I had another nightmare, didn't i?"

"Yes baby, you did." Ashton wiped his face with his sleeve, sniffling one last time.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to have a nightmare, please don't cry, Ashton, it's Christmas." Luke said ever so quietly, eyes as innocent as the sky.

Ashton smiles, "it is Christmas." He says standing up from the bed. Do you want to come downstairs and watch TV?"

"Yeah. We better do it before Michael wakes up. He'll want to play video games."

Ashton led Luke downstairs and gave him a snack. It was strawberry Santa hats. Something his mom use to make for the boys in the morning before they opened their presents. Basically it was just an upside down strawberry with whip cream at the top and the bottom is a marshmallow.

It was early morning, about four o'clock. The snow was falling softly, silently, and both Michael and Calum were still asleep. Ashton was wrapped in a blanket, sitting at the window, watching the powdery flakes flutter in the Christmas lights, with Luke laying on his chest when his front door vibrated with a pounding fist.

Alarmed, Ashton wondered who would stop by unannounced on a snowy Christmas Eve night. Well actually, it was Christmas morning. Ashton opened the door to find a group of strangers grinning from ear to ear, laid in their arms was boxes and bags.

Confused, but finding their joyous spirit contagious, Ashton grinned right back at them.

"Are you Ashton?" The man stepped forward as he held out a box for him.

Nodding stupidly, unable to find his voice, a Ashton reached out to accept the box.

"These are for you." The woman thrust another box at him with a huge, beaming smile. The porch light and the snow falling behind her cast a glow over her red hair, lending her an angelic appearance.

Ashton looked down into her box. It was filled to the top with delicious treats, a fat ham, and all the makings of a traditional Christmas dinner. Ashton's eyes filled with tears as the realization of why they were there washed over him. But how did these people know? Who were they?
Finally coming to his senses, Ashton found himself inviting them in. Following the husband were two children, staggering with the weight of their packages. The family introduced themselves and told him their packages were all gifts from the church. This wonderful, beautiful family, who were total strangers to Ashton, somehow knew exactly what he needed. They brought wrapped gifts for each of them, a full buffet for Ashton to make on Christmas Day, and many "extras" that Ashton could never afford. Visions of a beautiful, "normal" Christmas literally danced in his head. The desperate prayers of a boy who had suddenly become a single father had been heard, and Ashton knew right then that God had sent him these gifts. There was no other explanation. Even if Bryana or Marian had something to do with it, it was because they had such faith and kindness in the season and in the Lord.

The mysterious people then handed Ashton a white envelope, gave him another round of grins, and took turns hugging him. They wished both Luke and Ashton a Merry Christmas and disappeared into the night.

Amazed and deeply touched, Ashton looked around at the boxes and gifts strewn at his feet and felt the ache of depression suddenly being transformed into a childlike joy. He began to cry. Ashton cried hard, sobbing tears of the deepest gratitude. Ashton's heart was full. He fell to his knees among all the boxes and offered a heartfelt prayer of thanks.

Luke wrapped his arms around Ashton unsure of why his brother was crying again, Luke tried his best to console his big brother. Luke's action of love only made Ashton cry harder in joy. Knowing that he had his little brothers with him and they were all safe was enough to heal the pain of his past. Yes his parents were gone, but not really. Today proved to Ashton that his parents are still watching out for them. They wouldn't let any of their kids have a sad christmas.

Getting to his feet, Ashton wrapped Luke in a Scooby Doo blanket and sat once again to gaze out the window at the gently falling snow.

When the sun began to peek through the curtains, Michael and Calum were sluggishly walking downstairs.

"Hi Ashton." Michael said through a yawn. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas." Ashton said with a wide smile on his face.

Michael smiled, trying to act happy. He was happy to have his family together, but he wished his parents were there and that money wasn't such a problem. He smiled, ruffling Luke's hair. "How did you sleep, shrimp?"

"Ok." Luke said shrugging. The three boys jumped in alarm when they heard Calum scream. He came running by kitchen table yelling, "Santa did come!" Michael's eyes shot to Ashton wide with curiosity. He bolted into the livingroom and sure enough their were plies of presents under the tree.

"But how?" Michael asked. "I thought we were broke."

"We are." Ashton clarified, "but someone gave us these presents."

"Santa?" Calum asked.
"No it wasn't santa. It was someone even better." Ashton smiled.

"Who?"

"People from church."

"But we don't go to church."

"Mom and Dad did." Ashton whispered.

"So...it's like mom and dad...or..." Michael trailed off lost in thought and emotion.

"Are you boys happy?" Ashton asked.

"Yes!" They screamed in unison.

Suddenly, Ashton remembered the envelope. Like a child, he ripped it open and gasped at what he saw. A shower of green paper floated to the floor. Gathering them up, Ashton began to count the five, ten, and twenty-dollar bills. As his vision blurred with tears, Ashton counted the money, then recounted it to make sure he had it right. Sobbing again, he said it out loud: "One hundred dollars."

It wasn't like that would last them an eternity, but it was a start. It was enough to pay for the gas and dinner until Ashton worked more. He looked at his brothers laughing and giggling, opening gifts of soccer balls and DVDs. Through Ashton's tears, he smiled his first happy, free-of-worry smile in a long, long time. One visit from complete strangers had magically turned a painful day into a special one that they will always remember...with happiness.

Chapter End Notes

Happy late Christmas! I hope you liked this. If anyone has any ideas you want to see happen, let me know. I'm just interested in what you want to read. Thank you for leaving kudos/comments, or just reading, you rock!
Hey everyone,
I wrote this kinda fast so if there are any errors i'm sorry. In fact, I'm sorry for all the errors I have in like every chapter. It's a quick chapter but I didn't want to keep you waiting.
Enjoy.

This new year was good to Ashton, he still had three jobs but he was making more money. Aside from not being able to spend a lot of time at home, Ashton's life was good. When the boys took care of the chores while he was at work he had more time to spend with them so Calum has turned into the house maid. As a result, Ashton is keeping his end of the deal and is spending all his free time hanging out with Calum. That's not the only person whose been spotted playing games with Calum; Michael set up an entire day where he and Calum played scary video games together. It was their absolute favorite thing to do for two reasons. One Luke couldn't play them because they were too scary thus making the computer game a special thing only Calum and Michael could do together. Second, the game scares them to death which totally rocks. Luke found himself entertained with practicing to play Michael's guitar. It took a lot of concentration and practice. Two things Luke always lacked but is now slowly improving at.

So things were going well in the Irwin household.

It was a rainy Tuesday morning, the boys had to go to school. Ashton made sure everyone was up and ready. Food in their stomachs and homework in their backpacks. Ashton fully recovered from his welding accident and was ready to get back to welding and earning even more cash but the rain was in his way giving him an automatic day off. He decided to spend his time driving down to the bank to get our some money and pay for Calum's birthday gifts. At target, he spotted Bryana shopping. He smiled at her, but she didn't see him. Instead she focused on reading the labels of each band-aid package.

"Hey Bryana!" Ashton said rolling his cart next to hers. She finally looked up at him for a second before refocusing on the task at hand.

"Hi Ashton." It was a fast, irritable greeting.

"Are you okay?" Ashton asked.

"I'm fine." She muttered finally deciding to go with the bandages in her left hand.

"Okay. Why are you buying band-aids?"

She sighed, "I have this friend I'm looking after. Nevermind. I need to go."
"Okay. Have a good day." Ashton called as he watched Bryana leave.

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Calum and Michael were at home playing their new computer game and Ashton was at his factory job.

"Don't go in there. Don't go in there! HOLY SHIT I TOLD YOU NOT TO GO IN THERE!" Michael screamed at the top of his lungs giving Calum a heart attack.

"Bro, you gotta stop doing that." Calum complained. He held his ear wincing as it rang.

"Touch the doll." Michael ordered.

"No way, that's creepy." Calum cried.

"Do it." Michael insisted. Calum maneuvered his guy forward and suddenly he touched the doll and out of nowhere a ghost came and slashed the main character.

Both Calum and Michael screamed at the top of their lungs. When the screen went black the two started laughing their butts off. That is until they heard a scream come from down stairs.

Michael and Calum jumped up in a real panic. That wasn't Luke's voice.

"oh my God, someones in the house." Michael said, hands shaking violently.

Calum's lip trembled. "Why does Ashton have to be working." He said tears immediately going to his eyes.

The screaming from downstairs had stopped and the boys now heard Luke's voice talking.

"Oh my God. Luke's down there." Calum said.

"Why wasn't Luke screaming?" Michael said out loud. Even though he was skeptical, Michael refused to go down stairs and check it out. If it was a burglar then he wasn't putting himself in harms way.

"Where's your cell phone?" Michael asked Calum.

"In my room, what about you?"

"I think it's downstairs on the table."

"Alright." Calum said trying to stay calm, "let's go to my room slowly."

Michael nodded. The two boys creaked open the door and tip-toed down the hall. They tried their best not to make a sound. Calum tried not to breathe, fearing that noise alone was too loud.

"Guys."

Calum and Michael jumped a mile in the air screaming. Standing behind them was none other than Luke who had wide eyes and a look of awe at his two cowering brothers.
"Jesus Christ Luke! You scared me to death." Michael said placing a hand over his heart.

"What's wrong with you two?" Luke said, "I was just gonna ask if I could eat the rest of the peanut butter cookies."


"Mmmmm" Luke struggled to get free.

"Shut up." Michael whispered. "There's someone in the house."

"We have to call Ashton." Calum said.

"Mmmmmmm" Luke tried to get free, screaming over Michael's hand.


"You did what?" Michael screamed.

"Why would you do that?" Calum said, "ashton told you to never open the door for a stranger. Remember Mom and Dad even told us that."

"No, I didn't invite a stranger in the house. how stupid do you think I am?" Luke shouted. He was quite insulted by that comment. "I invited a kid from school to come here."

"Did you ask Ashton?" Michael asked.

"I think he'll be fine with it." Luke sassed.

"I think he's gonna be pist." Michael remarked.

"Look. I don't even want this stupid person in my house. I had no choice, I'm doing a stupid school project."

"Why can't you go to his house."

"Because he said I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. He just said he can't." Luke mumbled. "Can eat the damn peanut butter cookie or not?"

"No." Michael said just to be cruel.


"I'm sorry, my brothers are kinda angry I brought you here." Luke said to the tall boy with brown hair.

"I thought you said they'd be cool with it."

Luke shrugged, "I thought they would be. Hey Toby, can we just hurry this thing up."
"I can't believe I got paired with you." Toby huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "I have to spend my weekend with the baby rock star."

"Look, I pulled my notebook out." Luke said holding his red notebook in the air, "why don't you do the same thing so you can leave my house faster!"

"I can still beat your ass." Toby snarled, "so I'd watch that smart mouth of yours."

"I don't doubt you could Toby. Now on page 371 of the text book it talks about the scientific method."

Toby's eyes wondered around Luke's house. He noticed the tiny TV the piles of paper stacked on every table top and the small kitchen.

"You don't have much money, do you?" He asked Luke.

"That has nothing to do with the scientific method." Luke muttered, cheeks flushing red with embarrassment. Great just another thing for Toby to make fun of him for.

"Do you even own a bathroom or do you just take your dump in the sink." Toby said wickedly.

Luke tried not to let it hurt him. He tried so hard to be a man of steel like Ashton but Toby's constant berating hurt.

"Can we please just focus on the project." Luke said, voice cracking.

"Aw, is the itty bitty baby gonna cry?" And dammit Luke was crying. Frustrated with himself for crying, Luke cried harder.

Toby smiled in satisfaction for a few minutes before he realized Luke's tears didn't make him feel better about himself. In fact, Toby just felt even worse.

"would you stop crying already! Gosh, you're like eight years old grow up." Toby said trying to console Luke. However it seemed to have the opposite effect.

"Come on. Let's talk about the scientific method." Toby said taking a seat by Luke and opening the text book up.

"Okay, so we need a hypothesis." Toby informed the crying boy. "That's like an educated guess of prediction. I predict that you will stop crying when I leave your house." Toby said writing it down in his notebook. "alright, let's test it." Toby stood up and walked right out the door leaving Luke to do the entire experiment all by himself.
Mistakes Made

Chapter Summary

Luke makes a lot of mistakes. But he learns a lot too. Warning if anyone is triggered by mentions of abuse you may want to skip the third section. I'm dividing it by the dashed lines. But I tried not to get to descriptive so you hopefully can still read it. I bet I made people curious now...

Luke wasn't doing this science experiment all by himself. He wasn't going to allow Toby to get away with bullying him. Luke shoved his way through the classroom until he was standing by Toby's desk. The brunette had blue headphones in. Feeling extra mad and extra brave, Luke ripped the headphones out of Toby's ears.

"I'm telling Mrs. McKline on you, if you don't help with the project." Luke blurted out before the muscular boy had time to attack him.

"Look, you little thumb sucker, if I'm around you I'm just going to make your life hell so it's in your best interest to be a good baby and do the project by yourself."

"No."

"What did you just say?"

"I said no."

"No one says no to me." Toby stood up from his desk towering over Luke's small frame.

"Well I just did." It was a bold move. When Toby grasped Luke's shirt collar he realized it may have been too bold.

Cracking a cheeky smile, Luke chuckled to himself, "well this is awkward." He said, prying Toby's hands off his neck collar. "Look. If you come over to my house after school we can finish it there and you can be done with me."

"I can't come over today." Toby, looked at the floor.

"Why not."

Toby's hand connected with Luke's mouth. It was a slap, not a punch, but Luke was still visibly shocked that this kid was actually getting physical. He stepped back, knocking into Brain's table.

His friend jumped up as soon as the teacher walked in the room and screamed, "Mrs. Owen! Toby hit Luke."

Feeling slightly mortified, and slightly empowered Luke stood there and nodded to confirm his friends accusation.

"Toby!" She shouted, placing her hands on her hips. "Come with me, we are going to the principals office right now."
"No! Mrs. Owen please don't I'm sorry, he was taunting me!" Toby pleaded.

"Was not!" Luke said finally.

"It doesn't matter, we have a no hitting policy at this school." She tugged him by the arm out of the classroom. As soon as they were gone Brian started to clap. Other students joined and cheered Luke on.

"You go Luke!" And guy in the back said, "stand up for yourself. Besides he's a bully."

"Yeah! It's about time he gets what he deserves." Brian agreed.

Luke should be happy. He should be smiling. He just defeated his arch nemesis, but something in the pit of his stomach felt wrong. It was the way it happened, the way Toby looked. He looked...scared. All Luke wanted to do was get Toby to help him. The whole situation made him want to cry. Curse his sensitivity.

"Are you okay?" Brian asked, "if you're worried about Toby kicking your butt tomorrow, don't worry. I doubt he'll come to school." He put his hand on Luke's shoulder trying to reassure his buddy.

"Why?" Luke asked dumbfounded that Brian actually paid attention to Toby's attendance.

"I don't know. I mean he never usually comes to school when he gets in trouble."


"Hey, I'm sorry mate, don't yell at me." Brian said putting his hands up, "I'm not the one who gave you that mark on your face."

Luke touched his chin wincing as he hit the red mark.

Soon the teacher walked back in class and asked them to sit down and get out their books.

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Ashton sat at home watching Calum talk to his stuffed dog Ketchup. The poor kid woke up with a sore throat and it transformed into a high fever by late afternoon. Ashton came home after his first job then called off for his second job. Ted told Ashton that Bryana was going back to school next week which depressed Ashton a little. He wished his last moments with her weren't so negative. She basically ignored him. Ashton assumed Bryana was giving him a cold shoulder because she didn't want him to get to close to her. He doesn't blame her. He's got a lot of baggage. Three kids, a small house, no college education. It makes finding love a lot harder for him. In fact, love was the last thing on Ashton's mind, until he met Bryana.

"Ashton. Ketchup and I don't want to eat anything."

"Not even a little soup?" Ashton asked sweetly, coming out of his thoughts.

"No. We're not hungry." Calum petted Ketchup's head.

"Alright. But you need to drink fluids okay? Lots of water." Ashton said handing him a water bottle.

"Ketchup needs a bowl." Calum said, giving him big wide doe eyes.
"Ug, Calum." Ashton groaned, standing up to fetch him a bowl, "there's no point in having a fake dog, if we're going to treat him like a real one"

Calum's face lit up, "we're getting a Dog!"

"No, that's not what I meant." Ashton explained handing him the bowl. Calum's face fell.

"But Ketchup is staying forever." Ashton said, trying to cheer his little bro up. Holding the dog up to Calum's face, Ashton wiggled the dog all around making kissing nosies. The boy burst into giggles hiding his face in the couch.

"I love you Ashton."

"Aw, bub, I love you too." Ashton pulled Calum on his lap and held him to his chest.

"You boys need to stop getting sick." He said, bouncing Calum a little. Three o'clock rolled around, meaning Ashton had to pick up Michael and Luke. He left Calum at home with a glass of water in his hands and Calum's favorite TV program playing which was Star Wars Rebels.

When Ashton arrived at the school, Michael ran to his car with tears pouring down his face. Not good.

"Ashton." He sobbed, hugging Ashton tightly.

"Shh. Mikey what is it? We're in a school parking lot, aren't you worried about looking tough?" Ashton tried to joke a little, but Michael kept his firm grip on Ashton's neck.

"I looked everywhere for him. He wasn't in class, or outside, or even in the bathroom!"

Ashton had a feeling he knew the answer to this next question but he asked anyway, "who?"

"Luke."

Ashton knew it. All at once his skin turned ghostly white with fright. Where the hell was Luke? Ashton grew terrified of the thoughts running through his brain. What if Luke was kidnapped. But he was in school? Maybe he was waiting outside for Ashton to pick him up when some stranger pulled into the lot and dragged him away. What if Luke ran away from school like he did before and something happened to him? Maybe he got arrested for stealing at the grocery store. Ashton warned him about that. What if Luke was hurt somewhere or lost? Ashton's heart was leaping in his throat as he tried to remember how to breathe. Grabbing Michael's shoulders, Ashton looked him in the eye and said, "Michael, this is very important. What do you mean you can't find Luke?"

"I mean like he's missing! I searched all over the school."

Ashton felt tears prick the corner of his eyes, he darted into the school tugging Michael along with him. He ran to the principal and begged him to find Luke if he was still at the school.

"He's missing?" The principle repeated, the whole thing seemed unbelievable.

"Yes. Can you check the classrooms."

The principal of the school agreed and together they searched the school asking teachers and looking
in closets. In the end, the principal called the police, even though he did not want this negative image of his school in the papers, he needed to make sure one of his students was safe.

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Luke stood in front of the door to Toby's trailer house. He knew where Toby lived thanks to the Christmas tree shopping adventure. Before he knocked, Luke rehearsed what he was going to say. "Hey Toby, I'm sorry for getting you in trouble although if you wouldn't have hit me you wouldn't be in trouble in the first place." Cringing, Luke tried to reword it, "hey Toby, I'm sorry we got off on the wrong foot. Let's just put this aside and do our school project?"

Luke tugged on his black backpack straps. He was nervous about being here alone. Toby could totally beat his butt if he wanted to. Luke cursed his small size. "I wish I could be big and tall someday" he whispered to a flower that he plucked from the ground. He knew Michael would call him a sissy for believing in wishes on a flower, but his mom truly believed in wishes. "Speak out loud your wishes because words have power and God has ears" at least that's what his mother would say.

Luke nervously knocked on the door. He waited a few seconds, rocking back and forth on his feet before the door swung wide open. Toby with his strong body, looked surprisingly fragile as he stood behind the screen door.

"What are you doing here?" Toby whisper yelled.

"I came to apologize. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get you in trouble I just wanted you to do your fair share of work."

Toby sighed, "look, it's fine. I'll do the damn project with you. Now will you please get out of here." He sounded desperate.

"we can work on it here."

"NO WE CAN'T" Toby screamed. Apparently it was a bad move because he looked instantly regretful. Loud thunderous feet stormed through the house causing Toby to jump. "Luke, get out." He said, starting to close the door. It was too late though, a huge man with brown receding hair, a sweaty forehead, and shaky hands grabbed Toby by the bicep and slammed the door in Luke's face. Through the door Luke could hear the yelling.

"Didn't I tell you not to invite anyone over to our house?"

"Yes, but dad ."

Crack.

Luke jumped back away from the door. He heard Toby cry out in pain. It made him feel sick because Toby was tough. He was never a person to back out of a fight or cower out cause of pain.

"Dad I'm sorry please don't." Luke heard him beg desperately but the whacks continued.

Running around the house to the window, Luke peered in and saw Toby pressed against a wall, his father belting him. Luke cringed. That wasn't how Ashton spanked him. There were marks on Toby's legs and arms and the belt continued to fall all over the place, getting his back and occasionally his head. But Toby was smart, he was covering his head with his hands as if he knew
his dad would try to hit his head. Through the beating, Toby was staring out the window directly at Luke. As soon as it stopped, Toby raced outside and oh crap, Luke should run. He took off up the street, but Luke's small legs were no match for Toby's. He tackled Luke to the ground and held him there panting heavily.

"I'm sorry." Luke cried, freighting of the stronger boy.

"Luke. Listen to me. This is very important you can NOT tell anyone about this okay? Do you understand?" He asked shaking Luke's shoulders.


"No!" Toby shrieked. "If you tell someone they will call a social worker and they'll take me away to a foster home or a group home."

Suddenly it all made sense to Luke. Toby was just like him.

"I know all about social workers. I'm trying to not get taken away either."

"Good. Then you get me? So You won't tell right?"

Luke hesitated, Toby looked really hurt back there, a part of him wanted to at least tell Michael or Calum.

"Can I at least tell my brothers?"

"No! No one can know."

"Why do you still want to live with a dad that is hurting you?"

"He doesn't hurt me. Only when I'm bad and he's drunk. Most the time I deserve it anyway. Like today, I shouldn't have slapped you."


"Promise you won't tell?"

"I promise."

Toby finally let Luke up off the ground. "Now go home. I'll come by your house tomorrow after school and we can finish that stupid project."

Luke agreed then watched Toby head back inside his house before Luke headed back home.

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The lights in his house were on, Luke could see them perfectly due to the darkness that fell over him as he was walking home. Inside, Calum was sleeping on the couch and Ashton was talking on the phone to someone. Probably work related, Luke assumed. He causally walked in and his brother did something odd. He dropped the phone to the ground and pulled Luke in for a tight hug.

"Ashton what are you -"

"Oh thank God." Ashton breathed into Luke's blonde hair. He lifted Luke up and held him close, squeezing him tightly. Luke felt Michael's hand around his waist as well. Calum joined in and they were all having a family hug. Wow, Luke was expecting them to be angry but he's not complaining,
"We thought something bad happened to you." Ashton said, placing Luke down on the ground. "Where the hell were you."

So they are mad, Luke concluded. Ashton had a terrifying scowl in his face, a part of Luke wondered if Ashton would suddenly turn into Toby's dad. Luke took a few steps back, cautiously. Ashton viewed this as an escape attempt and he quickly secured Luke's wrist in his hand.

"You're not going anywhere until we talk about this." Ashton yelled, glaring down at his stubborn little brother. "I mean seriously, what were you thinking, Luke? Leaving school like that. I should spank you for a week. You are so bad, I can't believe you."

Of course that didn't settle very well with Luke. He yanked his arm back as if Ashton burnt him. "Don't hurt me," Luke whimpered pitifully.

Ashton frowned. "I'm not going to hurt you Luke. I would never hurt you. We just need to talk about where you were and why you can never leave school again."

Michael piped in, "oh and you need to call the police back."

Ashton nodded, "thank you Michael. I will after Luke tells me where he was."

All eyes were on Luke but the boy struggled with what to do. Does he tell the truth and leave out the Toby getting beat part? Luke assumed that was the best option.

"I went to Toby's house to ask him about the school project." Luke watched Ashton's eyes go wide, "m'sorry." He whimpered taking another step back.

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME!" Ashton roared. Maybe Luke should say yes? He didn't have a chance because Ashton decided to continue his rant. "YOU LEFT SCHOOL AND WALKED TEN MILES ALL BY YOURSELF? DO YOU KNOW HOW DANGEROUS THAT IS? YOU COULD HAVE BEEN KILLED OR KIDNAPPED."

"I walked on the sidewalk." Luke whispered. Ashton tugged at his own hair. "And you went to Toby's house? The boy you got in a fight with when we were Christmas tree shopping? How dumb are you."

That hurt. Luke began crying in the earnest. "I'm sorry." He repeated, feeling like that was the only thing he could say.

"And now the police are going to call the social workers and... You know what, Luke, just go to your room. You are grounded for a week. And no dinner tonight." Ashton said, pointing to the hall.

"Ashton I'm sorry." Luke said tears streaking his cheeks.

"Go!" Ashton shouted reaching out to grab Luke and drag him to his room, but Luke jumped back with a scream. "Please don't beat me. I'm sorry."

The room turned eerie quiet. All that could be heard was Luke's soft sniffles. The younger boy opened his eyes and saw all his brothers staring at him like he lost his mind.

"Luke..." Ashton began, "what on earth made you think I would beat you?"

Luke quivered, trying to nonchalantly shrug his shoulders but failing miserably.
"I would NEVER ever ever beat you. Okay?" Ashton asked. He slowly picked Luke back up to give him another hug. "Even if you're bad, you're still my little love bug." Ashton said tickling Luke's tummy. "Believe it or not, I'm trying to keep you from getting hurt by making these rules and punishing you. The last thing I want is you to be hurt by some stranger doing God knows what to you and I wouldn't be there to help."

"I'm sorry. I'll never do it again." Luke said tucking his head on Ashton's shoulder.

"You're damn right you won't. Now go to bed."

Luke pouted but agreed. He was so lucky to have a brother like Ashton. As he threw his pajamas on he wondered what Toby's life would be like if he had a brother. Maybe his brother wouldn't let their daddy beat them. Maybe Toby wouldn't pick on Luke if he had an older brother like Ashton. Then again, toby said his dad only beat him when he was drunk and Ashton has a bad temper when he's drunk so maybe there's not much of a difference. Luke had no idea. All he knows his he's lucky to have Ashton in his life.
Explosions

Chapter Summary

Luke learns that Science experiments can blow up in your face.

Ashton slammed the phone down on the kitchen counter. He couldn't do this anymore. The police harassed him all weekend about the situation. They were trying to get details as to why Luke left the school and when he came home and all of that bull. Time ticked away, but Ashton needed to utilize all of his time to prepare for his meeting with their social worker, Mr. Boward. Putting on a worn-out suit, Ashton placed papers in his father old brief case. At least he looked professional. If he finished going to the social workers meeting early, he was going to have to go to work. Ashton needed to make up the extra hours he lost due to Calum being sick. Then it's off to the grocery store because snacks are running low. This was probably the last week Ashton could buy them snacks; he needed to save the rest of his money in the bank where it can increase slowly due to interest. Right now all the kids were at school. Luke was probably still in the principals office. He was serving in school suspension for leaving without permission. Ashton thought the punishment was fair enough along with his grounding at home. Hopefully that will teach Luke to never run away again. Sometimes Ashton had a hard time punishing the baby of the family. His parents never punished them much, especially Luke. Surely Ashton wasn't being too hard on him, right? The boy stopped second guessing himself. "Luke will live." He told himself as he scrubbed his stubble with shaving cream. When Ashton finished shaving, he grabbed a cup of coffee off the table, and the car keys out of the bowl on the self, and then headed off to his meeting.

"I'm hungry." Luke whined in Calum's ear as they sat on the playground together.

"I know and I'm sick." Calum complained, poking the grass with a stick.

"You guys said that like twenty times." Brian said throwing his head back on the grass in an exasperated way. Luke watched as the sun beat down on Brian's face making it look red.

"I'm Sorry Brian." Luke said clutching his stomach, "it's just Ashton didn't let me eat dinner last night. Plus, we got up late so I didn't eat any breakfast."

"We just had lunch." Brian said sitting up, "why didn't you buy anything?"

"We don't have lunch money." Luke said watching Calum dig at the ground.

"We usually pack Lunch, but like Luke said, we woke up late." His older brother mumbled.

"I get it." Brian said sadly, "I just wish you guys were more in the mood to play."

"I'm sorry, Brian. You can play tag with Isabella?" Luke suggested.

"Nah, she's not as fast as you guys. It's too easy."

Luke gasped suddenly, "you should challenge her to a race, just so you can win."
Brian smirked, "good idea. I'll be back guys." Calum and Luke watched Brian run after a group of girls.

"I'm sorry you feel sick, Cal." the younger boy looked incredibly distressed.

Calum snickered, "come on, Hemmings, you don't need to apologize for everything."


"You're right. It's ham ham." Calum said.

"Luke Hammings?" The younger asked and Calum burst into a fit of laughter.

"Yeah that sounds better." Calum said, then he shook his head, "but Michael came up with Hemmings so we have to keep it."


Calum snorted, "yeah, cause you had just watched Robin Hood."

"Oh Shut up, your the person who names Michael after a dog." Luke sasssed.

"Clifford is a cool name." Calum said putting his hand to Luke's face.

"Get your germy hand away from me." Luke squeaked.

The boys laughed together, laying on the grass watching Brian chase girls around.

Ashton sat in a small room that looked similar to a guidance counselor's office. Mr. Boward was in front of him, arms crossed, ready to start the 'Child Protection Conference'.

"Hello Ashton," Mr. Boward smiled at him. "Before we start this meeting, I want to inform you that as a guardian you have the right to be informed and involved in what we do, participate in thinking and planning when it comes to concerns in the home, seek legal advice, ask for an explanation, or access your children's records. Do you understand Mr. Irwin?"

"Yes sir."

"Alright then let's begin. The reason this case has not been closed yet is because we are still unsure if your children are safe under your care due to financial troubles."

"Yes sir, I understand. But as I told you last meeting I managed to receive a raise in one of my jobs."

"Yes. That's a very good thing." Me. Boward praised, "But you must be working more, so who watches the kids while you are at work."

"Who watches them?" Ashton repeated slowly to himself.

"Yes. Do you have a babysitter or are they home alone?"

"I leave them alone."

"For how long." Mr. Boward scribbled something down in his notebook.
"Um, about...I don't know. I leave for work at four and I come back at nine."

"So for five hours they are alone." Mr. Boward asked.

"Yes sir. I guess... Is that a problem?"

"Considering your youngest just ran away from school i'd say it is. I think they need 24/7 supervision."

"What are you saying?"

"Have you thought about a babysitter?"

Ashton shook his head, "that will cost too much money."

"The state can provide you with money to pay for the sitter."

Ashton sat still, staring at the man. He was in shock. Still, Something about a babysitter watching his brothers made his stomach churn.

"In fact the state will provide you with a sitter. All you have to do is sign the papers and she or he will come to your house to watch your kids."

Ashton hesitated.

"Is something wrong?" Mr. Boward raised his eyebrows. The way the social worker said it made Ashton feel like he was being mocked.

"I don't like the idea of someone else watching them." He admitted truthfully.

"Why not? What are you afraid will happening?"

"I don't know. I guess I just want to make sure they're safe."

"That's why we are hiring a babysitter." Mr. Boward said sickeningly sweet, "Michael and Calum told me in our last interview that they were afraid someone broke into the house while you were gone. What if something like that happened? At least the babysitter would know what to do. Don't you want your kids to be safe?"

"Alright! I'll sign the paper." Ashton raised his voice a bit. Mr. Boward shoved the form in front of his desk and Ashton filled it out. "Thank you Mr. Irwin."

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The meeting went okay, but by the time Ashton got home from grocery shopping he had to deal with an annoying guest in his house: Toby.

"Hi Ashton." Luke greeted when Ashton walked though the door with four bags of groceries.

"A little help bud?" Ashton asked. Luke was quick to take a few bags from Ashton's hands.

"Thank you."

"Sure thing." Luke said as he immediately started rummaging through the bags.

"Hey. You'll spoil your dinner." Ashton stated.
Toby slide onto a stool by the kitchen counter and said, "you better let him eat. He's been whining about it all day."

"I was not whining." Luke defended.

"You sound like a fucking two year old."

"Oi, don't swear." Ashton said pointing a finger at Toby.

Luke smirked, "yeah Toby don't swear." He mocked.

"Luke!" His brothers voice made him wince, "don't be a jerk. And aren't you suppose to be in your room?"

"Don't worry, Ash. I'm doing homework. Trust me this is a worse punishment. I'd rather be grounded." Luke said while nodding to show how serious he was. His plan worked because Ashton simply laughed and told him to go to his room after he finished his project.

"You got it, Ash." Luke said enthusiastically. He waited for his brother to finish putting the groceries away and leave the room before he and Toby raided the fridge.

"Dude. You have chocolate ice cream! That's awesome." Toby said opening the carton.

"Yeah, we had to rationalize our milk supply so we chose to have ice cream in place of milk."

"What?"

"Never Mind." Luke swatted the idea away with his hand. "So, we should get back to testing the experiment."

"Okay. I still don't know how we're going to test soda though?"

"We're suppose to make soda by adding an acid with a base."

"Yeah but what acid and what base?" Toby asked.

"Seriously, you need to pay more attention." Luke huffed, "the acid is lemon juice and the base is baking soda."

"That sounds gross man."

"We're not gonna drink it." Luke said rolling his eyes. Toby gave him an irritated smile.

"I thought we were suppose to test centripetal force?" Toby said, as he stuffed a donut in his mouth. Luke wanted to laugh cause the white powder was all over his lip.

"We are. But we're also suppose to test the acid."

"Let's do the centripetal force, first." Toby suggested.

"Why?" The young blonde rolled his eyes.

"Cause I wanna see if it works."

"Yeah but it's too cold to go outside and spin a bucket of water over our heads."

"So we'll do it in here."
"Do you want me to die?" Luke asked. Frankly he didn't want to know the answer considering Toby might have that in mind.

"No. But spinning a bucket is more fun than making water sizzle."

"Yeah but getting water all over the floor is not fun."

"Fine! We'll make the stupid soda." Toby shouted.

They measured the ingredients, although they have no idea how much they are suppose to put in, and they tossed it into the water.

"Is it working?" Luke asked.

"It doesn't look like it." They both had their eyes glued to the glass.

"Maybe we should add more." Luke suggested.

"Okay." Toby tossed another spoonful of lemon juice. Luke grabbed a spoonful of vinegar and added that. Soon the water was fizzling and cracking all over the place.

"Aw, that is so cool." Toby said watching it fizzle. He added more baking soda to watch it rise.

"Awesome." Luke agreed adding more vinegar and lemon juice. Soon the water fizzled over the edge and dripped down into the counter.

"Ok we should probably stop it." Luke said as it continued to bubble over.

"Okay. How do you de-fizzle it?" Toby asked.

"I don't know."

Toby shot him a look. "What do you mean you don't know."

"Mrs. Owen didn't tell us how to stop!" Luke said while he watched the water spill more bubbles into his counter.

"Put it in the sink." Toby offered. Together they carried the fizzling glass to the sink. Another bubble popped causing some water to get on them.

"Dammit. Here, turn on the water and drain it out." As soon as Toby turned on the water which made the foaming go down. Feeling relief, Luke wiped his hand over his forehead then leaned back against the counter. Unfortunately his back knocked the whole bag of baking soda into the sink.

"Good job dumbass!" Toby shouted flailing his hand in the air.

"It's not my fault." Luke said, "at least there's no vinegar in there."

Toby's eyes went wide. "Oh shit."


"There was vinegar in there."

"What!" Luke shrieked, "how?"

"I poured it in the sink when we were done with it".
"Why would you do that?" Luke shouted.

Toby put a hand on Luke's shoulder. "This is an unfortunate accident, but if you look at the bright side at least we will have one hell of a picture to show our teacher."

Luke knew his sink was going to explode any minute now. The bubbles were already at a dangerously high level.

"Get the camera. I'm not destroying my kitchen for nothing." Luke said and Toby raced over to the counter to grab the camera.

"Hurry it's gonna blow!" Luke screamed as the foam rose to an extra high level. Soon the yellowish white foam burst over the edge of the sink, the bubbles that popped made the foam fly to the ceiling and all over the floor.

"Ahhhh" Luke screamed as the foam covered him.

"Oh my... I got the picture!" Toby shouted in glee. "I got it. Oh my gosh it's perfect! It's perfect!" Toby raced over to show Luke the picture.

"No way! That is awesome." Luke said as he stared at the picture.


"You are going to clean this room up and then we are going to have a nice little chat." Ashton said dangerously calm. Luke whimpered.

When Ashton left the room, Toby gulped watching Luke solemnly clean the floor. He quietly helped clean their mess.

"You don't have to help me." Luke said after a few minutes of silence.

"Nah, I do. I made the mess with you. It's my fault."

Luke chuckled, "you know what, I think we should've done the centripetal force experiment."

Toby smiled, "it's alright. Knowing us we probably would've spilled the whole bucket on the floor."

"Yeah." Luke said then he spotted two eyes peeking through the cracked door.

"Get out of here." He shouted towards his two brothers.

Michael opened the door completely. "Wow, you really did destroy the kitchen didn't you."

Calum burst into laughter. "It's all over your face. You look like an alien."

Michael shook his head, "nah, he just looks like an ugly fairy."

"Shut up." Luke said sticking his tongue out.

"Ashton's gonna kill you." He mocked.

"I guess you're really in for it, huh?" Toby asked, putting the last of the paper towels in the trash.

"Tell me about it." Luke said miserably.

"Don't think about it too much. Try to picture your favorite movie actor or actress. That's what I always do."

"For what?"

"When you're brother's beating you."

Luke shook his head, "Ashton doesn't beat me."

Toby looked at the ground, his cheeks turning pink, "oh." He whispered and then in the most arrogant tone he could muster, "I almost forgot you were a spoiled innocent baby who insults punk bands by pretending to know what pain is. Have a nice life, powderpuff." Toby walked out his front door and slammed it leaving Luke to feel even worse than he did before. Was he spoiled? Should Ashton be injuring him? Was that what his mom and dad would've done? Honestly, Luke can't even remember what his mom or dad would do.

Luke searched the house for Ashton, he found his brother upstairs holding a sleepy Calum while bugs bunny ran around on the TV screen.

"Is Calum feeling better?" Luke asked.

"I think so." Ashton said kissing Calum's head before slipping away from the sleeping boy. "Alright let's go. We need to talk."

Luke nodded, he agreed, they definitely needed to talk.

"Sit." Ashton said as he sat on a spiny chair and Luke sat on his bed crossing his legs. Luke's eyes focus on his plain white t-shirt as he wipes away the small remainder of foam still lingering on it.

Ashton sighed and pushed his long brownish blonde hair to the side while he waited for Luke to pay attention. When the younger boy refused to meet his eyes, Ashton snapped his fingers and said, "Luke, look at me."

Instantly, Luke's blue eyes snapped up at Ashton. He waited for Ashton to say something.

"Well, are you even going to try to explain why you flooded our kitchen?" Ashton asked.

"Oh. Yeah." Luke mumbled, "I was doing my science experiment like I told you."

"Ten times louder, I can't even hear you." Ashton snapped, becoming impatient. Luke clenched his jaw and dramatically raised his voice to the point where he was yelling, "I was doing my science experiment -"

"Stop it." Ashton scolded, pointing a dangerous finger near Luke's face. "You are being very disrespectful and bratty for someone who just flooded our kitchen. You are lucky I'm not extending your punishment for another week."

"You wouldn't ground me for another week." Luke yelled, indignantly.

"Oh yeah? Do you want to test me? How about we add a spanking along with that punishment because of your attitude."

Luke winced at Ashton's angry tone, tears pricked at his eyes as he said, "I didn't flood our kitchen I was doing the science experiment and I accidentally poured too much baking soda in the sink and it overflowed." Luke explained. "It was an accident. I didn't mean too."

Leaning back in his chair, Ashton stared at the ceiling. Luke was unsure how to read that behavior. Was Ashton angry? Sad? Stressed?


Luke watched his brother run a hand over his face, "no Luke, I'm not mad." He breathed out heavily, voice suggesting otherwise.

"Yeah. I guess, I just wish you would be more careful. But I can't be mad at you for doing homework." Then he shoved his hair back asking, "you cleaned it all up, right?"

Luke nodded, "are you sure your not mad?" He couldn't help but ask, it seemed unreal that Ashton would be okay with him blowing up the kitchen.

"Do you want me to be mad?" Ashton asked, "cause if you keep asking, I might just become angry."

Luke shook his head, "sorry." He whispered, unsure if Ashton heard him or not.

"Alright. Well you're still grounded for leaving the school without permission. So stay in here. I'll bring you dinner later tonight."

"You don't have to." Luke said, "I probably don't deserve to eat." Ashton was about to leave his room, but he retreated back to his spot in the spiny chair.

"Okay, where is this coming from." Ashton asked. Luke shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know. I just don't think I deserve..." Luke paused.

"To eat?" Ashton finished for him, cocking an eyebrow. "Luke that is ridiculous. I'm not starving you as a punishment. That's not a punishment that's abuse. And don't you dare say I abused you last night cause I sent you to bed without dinner. I knew you ate lunch and breakfast. I knew you would survive." Ashton said chuckling to himself, "anyway, you obviously deserve to eat so calm down."

"Ashton..." Luke wasn't sure how to word his question. His cheeks blushed a bright red as he thought about this subject. "Um...how do you know...if like...someone...i don't know. Do you know what I mean?"

"No, Luke, I have no idea what your trying to say."

"That makes two of us." Luke grimaced. Ashton went to put a hand on luke's leg to comfort his brother. It was obvious Luke wanted to ask something but was struggling for some reason. Nevertheless, Luke jumped back as Ashton reached out.

"Luke? Why are you acting so scared? I'm not even mad at you, bub." Ashton stated placing his hand on Luke's leg and rubbing it softly. "Don't pull away from me."

"I'm sorry." Luke looked at his blue bed spread. "How do you know if someone is being abused?"

Ashton tilted Luke's chin up so he could look at him, "why are you asking that? Luke do you know someone that's being abused?"

"No." Luke sneered, "I just wanted to know how you know? You know?"

Ashton smiled softly and kissed Luke's head, "alright. Sure. It's good if you know about this anyway. So basically, there's physical, verbal and um, a different type of abuse." Ashton didn't want to mention the word 'sexual' because Luke didn't really know what sex was yet. Verbal abuse is when someone says terrible thing to you that make you feel worthless. This other special type of abuse is when someone touches you in private places without your permission or they make you touch someone else's private places. Physical abuse is when someone punches you, or kicks you, or leaves bruises all over your body. Basically, if anyone harms you, its abuse."

Luke put a hand on Ashton's shoulder. "I have a few questions." He said matter-of-factly.
"Go for it."

"Well. First off, Mikey's punched me before, is he abusive?"

Ashton cringed, this was going to be difficult to explain. "No." He said quietly, "but punching is an abusive act. To punch someone is considered abuse, but Michael only did it a few times and I punished him for it. But that's why he gets punished because punching people is abusive and wrong. But Michael doesn't punch you anymore so he's not abusive anymore. Did that make sense?"

"Kinda, but it brings me to a different question. You punish us, is that abusive?"

Ashton's frown deepened, "no luke. I...some people might say it is. But I never ever hurt you for more than a few minutes right? The next morning when you wake up are you in pain?"

"No."

"Exactly, and I talk to you after and cuddle you and I make sure everything is alright. I never leave marks or bruises, other than a small amount of redness on your bottom. you boys are fine. Now I know it hurts you, but it doesn't injure you."

"Okay. I understand. That's what I thought in the first place but it's a confusing line." Luke said nodding his head, "and when Michael calls me mean names and makes me feel pathetic is he abusive."

"Sort of. Again, it's an abusive act, but he is your brother. Even though brothers can be abusive, but I think Michael just likes messing around with you and joking. But if it truly bothers you, you need to tell me."

"Why?"

"Because you always tell someone if you think you are being abused."

"Why?"

"So you can get help."

"but what if you smacked my arms and back? Is that abusive?"

"Yes."

Luke's eyes widened, "really? Why?"

"That could seriously hurt you." Ashton said, solemnly.

"What if...what if you don't do it often. Like how Michael did it to me once but he never does it often. That makes it non abusive right?"

"I'm not sure what you're asking. Are you talking about a brother beating on his little brother? Or a parent beating on their child?"

Luke scoffed, "what's the difference".

"Oh there's a huge difference. A brother is like a friend, it's not his responsibility to raise a child."

"But your my brother-"
"I'm your guardian, Luke, that's like a parent."

The younger boy shook his head, this was so confusing and Ashton continued, "a parent or guardian should never punch you or beat you. Not even once. That's because they are responsible for their child's health and well-being."

"But people make mistakes." Luke said, now crawling into Ashton's lap.

"Yes, but it's not good for a parent or guardian to do that. If I ever did that to you, I wouldn't deserve to keep you. I would want someone to take you away from me."

"No." Luke cried, clinging to Ashton's shirt. He pressed his face into Ashton's chest, "you deserve us. We're your brothers. We want you"

"Shh. I know Lukey, but if I hurt you like that I wouldn't want you to be near me."

"I would want to be near you." Luke said sniffing. Ashton wiped Luke's eyes with his thumb. "It's okay, Luke, because I'm never going to beat you so you don't have to worry about that."

Luke wanted to shout, "but what about Toby." But he refrained. He made a promise to not tell anyone and he intended to keep it.

"Are you okay?" Ashton asked, "because I need to cook dinner but I don't want to leave you if you're upset."

"M'okay."

"Good boy. Why don't you read a book or something to get your mind off of that scary thought."

"Can I listen to music."

"No. That's part of the punishment."

"I won't leave the school again. I learned my lesson can I please listen to music."

"Absolutely not."


"Do you want to make it two weeks?"


"Then I suggest you read or sleep."


Ashton left his room laughing quietly. He went to the kitchen and began heating up a few corn dogs.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, I'm sorry this is short. I hope you still enjoyed it. I had a rough last week, but it's getting better this weekend. As always, if you want to let me know if you have any
thoughts or opinions on what you want to see happen.
Chapter Summary

Ashton leaves the boys with a babysitter from the Agency.

"Boys! Can you come in here for a second." Ashton called from the dinning room table.

Michael slide off of the couch and grabbed his two younger brothers arms, "what do you think it is, report cards?"

Luke shook his head, "we haven't gotten those, yet."

"Could be about our basketball game and his car." Calum whispered shaking at the thought. Luke looked equally as pale.

"Okay, am I missing something?" Michael whisper yelled.

"We played basketball on Sunday and accidentally dented Ashton's car."

Dropping his mouth open, Michael stared at them in awe. "Yeahhhh that's definitely gonna get you an ass beating later."

Luke frowned at the terminology. "It's not a beating."

"Whatever short stuff, the point is, we don't know what Ashton's mad about, so nobody say anything. Let him tell us what's wrong."


Ashton called their names again and they scurried into the kitchen.

"Hi Ash." Luke said giving Ashton a hug. "Thanks for ending my punishment after the third day."

"Yeah well, I figured you learned your lesson. I know you won't leave school ever again."

"You got that right." Calum said for Luke.

Ashton nodded, "Cool. So. There's something we need to talk about."

The boys looked nervously at one another. Silently telling one another to remain calm.

"Relax, no ones in trouble."

"Oh thank God." Michael said wiping the sweat off his forehead. Ashton snickered at their antics.

"Listen bros, the social worker is hiring a babysitter for you guys."

"What!" Michael screamed in alarm. "Why?"

"Well apparently he thinks I leave you home alone too often."
Rolling his eyes, Michael muttered, "that's ridiculous."

"Actually, I think it's a good idea." Ashton said. He put a plate of carrots and celery in front of the boys.

Calum was the first to grab a carrot stick before listening to his two older brothers battle it out.

"Are you serious?" Michael asked.

"Yeah." Ashton shrugged, "I mean it's a good way to help you guys. Like, what if a thief broke into the house." Ashton immediately back-tracked when he saw Luke's lip wobble. "But Chances are no one will break into the house." He said petting Luke's hair which soothed the trembling boy.

"Then why hire a babysitter?" Michael asked.

"Because it was the social workers suggestion. I'm working a lot and since I won't be around someone else can help you with homework and do the dishes and help around the house."

Michael placed his hand on his hip, "what? Is she gonna tuck us in and read us bedtime stories."

"No Mikey, you're looking at this all wrong. It's just like having me in the house but instead it will be someone else."

"I don't see how that's much better."

"She won't treat you any differently than I would." Ashton offered Michael a piece of carrot.

"still not seeing the better part." Michael stated boldly. A flash of hurt fell across Ashton's eyes. "I'm sorry you feel that way, but the babysitter is coming over tonight."

"Why?" Calum asked, "where are you going tonight?"

"I'm leaving." Ashton said as he walked into the bedroom, "for the night to travel to Miami. I'm going to do job interview there. If I get the job, I won't have to work two and then I might be able to spend more time with you boys. But I'll be gone all night tonight."

"Cool! We can stay up late!" Michael shouted. "I think I'm going to watch the late night show."

"I can eat pizza and ice cream for dinner." Luke said smiling. Calum laughed. "I think I'll listen to music until the sun rises."

"This will be great!"

Knock knock knock.

"I'll get it!" The three kids shouted. "Maybe she'll be a hot blonde." Michael said right before he opened the door. "Hello -" Michael jumped back at the horrendous sight of a middle age women in a business suite holding a clipboard and glaring straight ahead with a permanent frown.

Calum quickly slammed the door in her face.

"Boys!" Ashton scolded, he walked passed them to open the door.

"No, Ashton, don't" Michael cried gripping his waist and holding him back. "She's evil!"
"Oh don't be dramatic." Ashton said rolling his eyes as Luke gripped his pant leg and Calum tugged his arm.


"Yeah stay with us."

"I can't. I'm sorry guys. Tomorrow morning I'll be home bright and early." Using all of his strength, Ashton managed to shake his brothers off of him and open the door.

"Hello, ma'am. I'm sorry about that. This is the first time my brothers ever had a babysitter. I was always there to watch them when my parents went out on dates."

"It's quite alright Mr. Irwin. I'm Gretchen Stein. The agency sent me. Pleased to make your acquaintance"

"Hello, Gretchen please call me Ashton. Um, so basically this is my house and these are my brothers. Michael, with the faded hair dye, Calum with the dark shirt on, and Luke with his penguin in his hand."

She nodded to the boys then grunted. "What are your rules."

Ashton blinked a few times, completely caught off guard, "oh, rules. Well...um...they go to bed at 10:00. I want dinner by six and yeah," he chuckled nervously, "that's about it."

"Hum." She grunted, tugging her blazer down. "You may leave whenever you are ready, Mr. Irwin. Your boys are in good hands."

Ashton nodded then gave his brothers a quick hug goodbye. "Don't forget to come back." Calum said, squeezing his brother tightly in his arms. Ashton almost felt guilty for leaving them with a stranger like this.

"Of course I'll come back, Cal. You three be good."

"Their good behavior is guaranteed.

With that, Ashton was out the door and the car engine started up.

The tension in the room was thick. Luke was coving his face with his penguin, feeling shy and insecure around this new stranger.

"Yeah. So, I'm going to go listen to some music." Calum started walking to the basement door when Gretchen grabbed him.

"No time for that."

Luke and Michael giggled at their brother's misfortune until Gretchen said.

"we will clean and dust!"

The two boys gasped and looked at each other. She led them all into the livingroom and assigned them chore tasks.

"But it's a Friday night!" Michael complained, "all the best cartoons are on. Pokemon is probably on!"
"Clean." She ordered strictly, slapping her hand the the table. All three of them jumped in surprise then quickly got to work. Dusting the floor, the ceiling and picking up clothes and empty chip bags off the floor as well as Pepsi cans. To get what he wants, Calum pulled out his phone and put on the 'cleaning the house playlist.'

"Anyway you want it that's the way you need it and way you want it." He sang out as he danced and cleaned. The pulled out the fake air guitars and started kicking their legs. After they finished cleaning, the boys sat around the table ready to eat dinner. Lightning flashed through the window.

"Wow, it's really storming out there." Calum said as he stared out the window. "I hope Ashton is okay."

"I'm starving." Michael complained covering his stomach as it growled. Too much cleaning, not enough nourishment. He thought to himself.

"So do you guys want hot fudge Sunday's before your milkshakes and Pizza?" Luke asked holding the home phone in his hand. He had a sheet of paper laid out in front of him. It was the paper that Ashton wrote all of the important numbers on. The first number was 911, then it was followed by a local police number, a doctors office, hair dresser, next door neighbor, then fast food places like Wendy's and Eaten Park and the Pizza shop. Luke was dialing the pizza number when the phone was snatched from his hand.

The babysitter, who stole his phone, decided to torture Luke more by placing a blob of gooey food on his plate. She did the same for the other boys. "dinner is served."

"Gross." Luke scrunched his nose in disgust. "What is it?"

"Green bean and carrot casserole."


"You will eat all of your food before leaving the table." Gretchen said sternly.

"Seriously?" Michael growled. "That's fucking great."

"No swearing." She said smacking the table. Michael jumped in shock. He knew Ashton didn't appreciate his foul language but at least Ashton tolerated it.

Realizing they weren't going anywhere until they ate, Luke slowly put the food in his mouth.

"It's alright." He said chewing slowly, "not as bad as I expected but it's definitely not as good as pizza and ice cream."

Michael shook his head at his younger brother, then poured a few spoonfuls of his food onto Luke's plate. Calum did the same.

"Oh come on guys." Luke complained.

"Eat your food Luke." Calum scolded with a giggle.

"I hate this family." Luke said frowning.

"Aw we love you too." Michael squeezed his cheek which earned him a slap on the hand.

"No swearing!" Gretchen nearly screamed.

"He hit me!" Michael said pointing fingers.

"After you put your food on my plate!"

"Silence!" Gretchen yelled. All the boys shrunk back. "You are all going to bed early since you can't behave."

"Oh come on! My favorite TV show is on tonight!" Michael complained as Gretchen led them upstairs.

Michael carried in his rant by saying, "Ashton always lets us watch TV. He says it's good for the brain. I suggest you let us watch TV before we go to bed or else you might have a riot on your hands, Miss Babysitter lady."

The woman grabbed him by the hand and tossed him into bed. She slammed the door on her way out.

"Wow. She really had a way with words," Calum said sassily.

"This is outrageous!" Michael shot up out of bed. "Are we going to let this babysitter tell us what to do? We're fourteen years old for fuck's sake."


"Yeah but -"

"Look! We're too independent for a babysitter. We've been on our own how many times?"

"About four." Calum guessed.

Michael rolled his eyes, "try four hundred. Come on. I don't know about you guys but I'm watching TV."

"Michael this really isn't a good idea." Calum said as he and Luke followed Michael to the livingroom.

"Yeah, what if she catches us? She's right in the kitchen."

"So what if she does. What's she gonna do?" Michael asked, "she's not our guardian. She can't do anything."

Luke bit his lip and glanced at the kitchen window. "But she's scary."

Michael ignored Luke's comment and turned on the TV to his favorite detective channel.

"Mike, I hate to say this, but I'm with Luke on this one." Calum said. "She's freaking terrifying. I'm not sure if we should test her. What if she has some cruel Chinese torture methods?"

Michael shushed his brothers as he focused on the TV show.

The black and white screen flashed to the butler of the house.

"My suspicions fell upon the butler when I found him snooping around in Mr. White's car. But he
has a solid alibi. The main could have easily covered up some of the evidence, but she did not. That leaves me to believe that the murderer is the babysitter!

Michael gasped, "I knew she was a criminal."

"Don't be ridiculous, Michael, it's just a TV show." Calum explained.

The woman on the TV dropped a doll and ran to the child's room. She picked up the Telephone and whispered, "they thought they could out smart me. But little do they know I set up a trap in the bedroom. As soon as detective Jim leaves the room a bomb will explode."

The boys gasped as thunder boomed outside their house.

"Shut it off." Luke whimpered, "I don't want to watch the Telly anymore."

Michael agreed and shut the TV set off. "That was creepily ironic."

"Boys!" Gretchen shouted as she walked out of the room. "What are you doing." She shouted walking towards them at a fast pace.

"Run!" Michael screamed. All three of them took off up the stairs.

"Boys!" Gretchen started to chase them but the phone went off. She decided to answer it.

"It's gotta be Ashton, quick we need to tell him." Michael said.

"Tell him what? She's not a criminal -"

"Hello," Gretchen said from downstairs. "they thought they could out smart me. But little do they know -"

All three boys screamed in terror. "Oh my God she is a killer." Calum cried.

"Quick, we have to get out of here." Michael ran down stairs straight for the door. He opened it and ran outside into the cold freezing rain. Calum and Luke followed quickly behind.

"Kids where are you going?" She yelled and she chased them outside.

"Run faster!" Michael said trying to look back behind him to make sure his brothers were there. Unfortunately Luke was the furthest behind.


"She got Luke!" Calum cried.

"Keep running." Michael said as he ran past his driveway and onto the street.

"Boys come back here." The killer babysitter called through the rain.

"Help! Anyone. Help!" Michael screamed, "there's a criminal in the house. She has Luke!"

"Michael. Michael watch out. She's in her car!" Calum screamed as the car stopped in front of them and the babysitter jumped out.

She managed to snatch them and throw them into the back of the car. Calum began crying. "We're gonna die." He wailed. "Please spare us." Michael pleaded to the woman, "we won't tell anyone
"Goodbye, Michael, I forgive you for everything." Calum said hugging his brother closely as the lady pulled up their driveway. She carried them inside and put them in the kitchen where Luke was.

"Luke!" They both exclaimed running to him and wrapping him in a wet hug. "We thought you were dead."

"No. She brought me in here and told me I could eat some cookies while she chased you guys."

"Don't eat those! They could be poisonous."

"They're not poisonous." Gretchen said rolling her eyes, "they were suppose to be your dessert if you three would have behaved yourself at dinner."

"You got us desert?" Calum questioned, staring at the Chips Ahoy cookie package.

"So does this mean you don't want to kill us?" Michael asked.

"Of course not. Where would you get such an idea."

"Um. You were on the phone and we heard you say...never mind." Michael looked at his feet in shame.

"I'm sorry. He whispered, "I got a little carried away."

"It's alright, child. I myself was getting carried away. I tried too hard to be a perfect babysitter. But I failed."

"No you didn't." Luke assured her, "we like you."

"We would've liked you more if you let us eat some snacks and watch TV." Calum slapped Michael's head.

"Ow." He hissed.

"But we should have ate your dinner and respected your rules." Calum said smiling at her. "We wanted too, it's just Michael over here has a problem with listening to authority."

Gretchen smiled for the first time. "Thank you for saying that, boys, it means very much to me. But it is not going to look good on my record that my children tried to runaway."

"No one has to know." Michael said. "If we promise not to tell anyone, will you let us eat cookies and watch TV?"

"As long as you are in bed by 10:00pm."

They boys looked to one another then said, "deal."

The next morning, it was still raining but Ashton was home as he promised.

When Luke came downstairs he saw Ashton and leaped into his arms. "Ash, I missed you." He said clinging to his older brother like a koala.

"Aw, bub, I missed you too." He pulled back from Luke and sat the boy on his lap. Putting a blanket over him and waiting for Calum and Michael to come downstairs.
"Ashton! You're back." Calum jumped on Ashton's lap as well. Gretchen smiled from her spot on the couch.

"Hey, Ash." Michael greeted, taking a seat over on the couch as well. "How was the trip?"

Ashton sighed, "it was long, boring, and I'm honestly not sure how well I did. But I tried."

Michael nodded, "that's all you can do, right?"

"Exactly. So how were you boys?"

"Good. Everything went well." Michael said giving Gretchen a smile.

"Did you like Gretchen?"

"Yeah. She was really nice."

"And did they behave for you?" Ashton asked fearing the answer.

"Yes. They were quite good."

"Oh. Wow." Ashton said, then he smiled, "good. That's really good."

"So will you have me again?"

"Of course. You can babysit anytime. "Here, we can come up with a schedule."

"Thank you, Mr. Irwin." Gretchen said appreciative. Michael scoffed, "mr. Irwin." He mocked, "it's so weird to here people call you that."

"Yeah. It's like your important or something." Calum said laughing as Ashton tickled his side. "Get up stairs and play something."
Ashton walked down the street with his head down. He was on his way to the construction sight but it was a cold and freezing day, the wind was whipping his face violently. On days like this, Ashton wished he didn't have to work and could just curl up under the covers at home with his brothers in his arms. He walked, watching his feet so he didn't slip on the bridge that connects the parking garage to his work sight. He noticed a minivan slow down as it drove next to him.

"Ashton Irwin? Is that you?" A guy in a silver van parked on the side of the road, and leaned his head out the window. He had music blaring in his car, the bass sound could be heard a mile away. He had long brown curly hair that was golden in the sun and large sunglasses covering his brown eyes. He was dressed for the beach even though it was the middle of January in Vermont.

"Matt Damion? No way, what are you doing up here, I thought you were in school?" Ashton said with a big smile on his face. Matt Damion was his best friend in High School. He came over to his house a few times during the school year to borrow notes, play hockey, and talk about girls. He was always a wild dude, a beach baby at heart. It didn't surprise Ashton the slightest when Matt got accepted to a California University.

"I left school for Christmas Vacation and I haven't gone back yet."

"Well what are you waiting for?" Ashton asked.

Matt shrugged, a frown formed on his face as he stared off into the distance. "I got a lot of shit going on, I'm not sure if I'm ever going back."

It was Ashton's turn to frown. In all his life, Matt never had a problem. He was always happy about everything. Burnt toast, no big deal. Broken leg, he drew on the cast. Failed a few tests, he'll try better next time. Broke up with a girl, it was her loss. Throughout all of high school's struggles Matt maintained his happy lifestyle of pop music, cars, and beach pictures all over his walls.

"Oh Matt, I'm sorry. If it makes you feel any better I never went to Uni either."

Matt furrowed his eyebrows, "Seriously? But that's all you talked about for months before graduation."

"Yeah," Ashton sighed, "but life happened."

"Shit man. Don't tell me you've been through hell too."

Ashton nodded, "unfortunately I think I walked through it a thousand times in a row."

"Bro." Matt shook his head, "that sucks. So where are you headed now?"

"Work."

"You have a job?"

"Don't sound so excited, it's nothing fun. I have a construction job."

"Really? Damn so you put bricks and cement together."

Ashton laughed out loud, "I guess you could say that."
"It's freezing, why don't you take a day off and have lunch with me."

Ashton shook his head, smiling at his old friend. "can't do that, Matt, I have to get all the money I can in order to take care of my brothers."

"What? You mean itty bitty Lukey and Wild Cal? Why do you need to take care of them?"

"Oh, I guess I should tell you why I didn't go to school. My parents died last year so I dropped out. I was already commuting, but when my parents died, I had to take care of them.

"Weren't you dating a high school girl?"

"Holly? Yeah, I was."

"I was dating a girl named Bryana. But recently I'm not so sure. She's been acting weird." Ashton nearly choked on thin air. He couldn't speak, couldn't breath.

"I guess she's upset over her Uncle. He's been acting like a real ass lately. Anyway, she freak out on me last night for coming home late."

"Y-you're, you're living with her?"

"Yes. Um. Are you okay, you look like a ghost."

Ashton shook his head, "I'm fine. Totally fine. Was the girl's name Bryana Holly?"

"Yeah. Not the same high school Holly you knew. Don't worry, I'm your best friend, I wouldn't steal your girl. No, this girl has a brother who works at a construction sight. Maybe you know him, his name is -"

"Tim." Ashton and Matt said his name simultaneously.

"You know him?"

Ashton smiled weakly, "yeah I do. Look, Matt, I have to go."

"Oh sure Ash, I'll see you around sometime. Give me a call okay."

"Sure."

Ashton finished his construction job without having to speak to Tim. As soon as he finished he walked back to his car freezing his ass off, he turned the heat on as high as it could go and drove to the Target he worked at. He threw on his work shirt in the car then walked in and began stalking shelves, reloading and unloading trucks. He didn't eat lunch but instead used that time to pay his cell phone bill online. He shopped online for a new coat for Luke because the kid was growing like wildfire.

"Ashton, we have an extra load of stuff coming in can you stay after and help unload it. We'll pay you by the hour."

"Of course." Ashton said, sliding his phone in his pocket. After work, Ashton's arms felt swollen and sore. He drove home in the dark and snow with music blasting to help keep him awake. He hasn't slept in the past few nights because every evening he's been awake doing chores in the house. There was always something to do. And then, for his own entertainment, Ashton watched late night TV until the morning came. There was no time for fun and sleep. He had to sacrifice one. He chose
sleep. It seemed like a good idea at first, that is until he was nearly falling asleep on the middle of the highway.

He made it home alive and walked inside fully expecting to sleep in his cozy bed. Of course that's not what happened. Life never goes the way Ashton plans. Inside his house, right in the livingroom was a huge red stain on the carpet. Ashton's heart dropped to his stomach as he realized the stain was blood. There was a trail of blood leading up the stairs that made Ashton's skin get goosebumps. His eyes scanned the room for his brothers. No one was in sight, but he could hear crying coming from upstairs. Oh shit. All it took was Ashton to hear his brother's cries and he took off running. Darting up the stairs, Ashton rounded the corner of the hall and walked into the bathroom where he heard the cries coming. He opened the door and what he saw made his eyes roll to the back of his head. Everything went black.
Michael, Calum, and Luke were sitting on Michael's bed drinking chocolate milkshakes and leisurely scrolling on their phones.

"Calum, when should we go back to school."

"When our lunch break is over."

"Yeah but we have to walk all the way back there so we better leave at least fifteen minutes in advance."


"Well I did leave school again, I'm not getting caught. Can you imagine how mad Ashton would be?"

"Yeah, he'd ground you for life." Calum laughed, he then showed Michael a picture of cat standing in its head. "So cute."

"Do you follow, puppies?" Michael asked.

"Duh. I have like twenty puppy followers. My time line is basically dogs and music."

Michael chuckled, "I was going to tel you to follow this one kid, she always post pictures of her dogs."

"What's her Twitter name?"

Luke crawled over the two of them so he could look at the phone.

"Aw. Cute dogs."


"I just wanted to let you know we should be going back to class now." Luke informed his giggling brothers.

"Yeah, you go. We're going to skip."

"If you do that, Ashton will know you ditched school. He'll ground you two for life."

Michael clicked the off button on his phone and glared in Luke's direction. "Fine. But if one more teacher picks on me today, I'm never going to school again."

Calum wrapped his arm around Michael's neck. "We love you, Mikey. Don't let those teachers bring you down."

"Yeah, we know you're smart." Luke said. "You're our big brother, you have to be smart."

Michael tried to smile, but tears rose to his eyes despite himself.

"Don't cry, Mikey." Pleading Calum. "It's gonna be okay."

"I know. It's just -" michael sniffled, "sometimes I feel so worthless."
"You're not worthless, you mean everything to us." Calum reassured.

"But I'm not smart and I keep failing classes and I keep letting Ashton down. He told me if I don't start trying I'm never going to get into college." Michael sniffled.

"But Ashton also said its okay if we don't get into college as long as we try our best in school. He said some people just aren't cut out for that and they can be plumbers or handymen." Calum said, "I'm not good at school either. But I am good at sports. Ashton says I should keep it up and I might get a sports scholarship."

"He also said we're way too young to be worrying about this." Luke said sliding off of the bed. He slung his backpack over his shoulder and gestured for his brothers to follow. "Come on Mikey, we ditched Lunch so we could come home and cuddle you, now let's go back to class."

Michael groaned. "I don't want to. I just want to sleep all day."

"Nope. You're going." Luke struggled to pulled Michael up by the arm. Eventually the boys managed to get back to school in time for afternoon classes. Michael was late however which resulted in some verbal abuse.

"Where were you, Michael, class started ten minutes ago."

"I'm sorry, sir." Michael muttered under his breath. He sat down in his chair and felt Cruz staring at him.

"I guess now would be an excellent time to talk about your paper on the importance of music. There were no facts to support your argument."

"I'm sorry I didn't know where to look for facts."

"Try a library, or the Internet."

"I wasn't sure if the internet was a credible source."

"So you decide to use no sources at all? Do you know how awful your paper was? It was one of the worst papers I have ever read in my entire career. It looked like a third grader wrote it."

Michael felt his vision go blurry with tears. Why was his teacher so mean to him. He already knew he was a failure.

"Honestly, Michael, if you are going to write all of your papers like this you might as well give up. You will never amount to anything."

Michael cried silently for the rest of class. No one cared.

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When school was over, Luke went to Toby's locker to ask him if he wanted to come home with him to actually write up the paper on their science experiment.

"Can't you write it, blondie."

"Would you stop calling me that, it's girly." Luke whined.

"That's the point, blondie."

"Look, Luke, I helped you with the two experiments now all I ask is you write the paper on your own."

"We need to do this together".

"Fine. But today's not a good day."

"Sure it is, Ashton's at work so we'll have the whole house to ourselves."

"My dad doesn't want me going to your house anymore. He wants me to come straight home after school."

"But Toby, how are we going to finish our project."
Toby shrugged, "I don't know. That's why I said you should just do it."

"But you have the notes." Luke whined.

"I'll send them to you. Give me your number."

"I don't have my phone." Luke said sighing.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Toby asked slapping Luke's arm.

"Can we just go to your house and type the paper?" Luke asked.

Toby slammed his locker shut. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because,"

"Because why?"

"Because, you saw how angry my dad gets."

"You said that only happens when he's drunk."

"It is. But he drinks all the time."

"So he's like that all the time?"

"Yeah. That's why he wants me home early. So I can cook him dinner and do the chores."

"Isn't that abusive?"

"Doing chores?"

"No, drinking all the time."

"It's alcohol abuse." Toby said, shrugging, "but he's only hurting himself. I'm fine."

"Ashton gets mad when he drinks too." Luke admits, "but he, like, never drinks."
"Well lucky you." Toby rolled his eyes.

"I'm not saying that to brag, I'm just saying, I think most people don't drink all the time."

Toby grit his teeth, "of course most people don't drink all the time. My dad's not normal. It doesn't mean he's bad. Now shut up before I beat you."

"I'll walk you home." Luke suggested, "then we can do the project if your dad is sober."

"He won't be, but okay."

Luke and Toby walked home while Michael and Calum took the bus. Ashton usually picks them up, but he couldn't make it today. He texted them and told them to take the bus because he was doing an extra shift at Target.

Once the toby reached his house he walked up the porch steps to get the key out of the flower pot. Inside, Toby's father was sleeping on the couch cushions, snoring loudly while Smoky the Bandit played in the background.

"I have the notes in my room." Toby led Luke through the small trailer over to a tiny room big enough to fit a small one size bed, but a person would have to crawl over the bed when to walk in the room.

"The computer is over in the kitchen." Toby whispered and he pointed to a room past his sleeping father. "It won't be easy to get to it." Toby took a few tiny steps forward past the sleeping man. Carefully, he lifted the laptop and tried to crawl out of the tiny space without making a sound. He successfully completed the difficult task. Breathing out a sigh of relief, Toby handed Luke the computer.

"Alright, let's type up the notes." Luke whispered. Toby nodded and pointed to a spot outside of the trailer.

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"He wants to die doesn't he!" Michael yelled, pacing back and forth on the livingroom floor. Calum was surprised his brother hadn't burned a hole through the floor.

"Calm down, Mike, it's not that big a deal, I'm sure he will be back before Ashton gets home."

"Not that big a deal? This is huge! Luke's missing. He didn't get on the bus. Do you think he could still be at the school?"

Calum shrugged, "I guess he might now have gotten the text Ashton sent us."

"Shit Cal, you're going to have to go back and get him cause I'm not going back there."

"Did Mr. DeJour mess with you again?"

Tears welled up in Michael's eyes at just the name of his teacher. "I'm never going back." Michael choked on a sob.

"Michael -"

"No, Calum!" He shouted causing Calum to flinch at his harsh tone. Sighing, Calum strides over to the kitchen to pick up the telephone.
"What are you doing?" Michael asked, wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

"Calling Ashton."

"You can't do that. Ashton's busy."

"He needs to know Luke's missing." Right before Calum could dial a number the phone rang in his hand. He answered it immediately hoping it would be Luke.

"Hello."

"Calum," a familiar girl's voice said through the phone, "is Ashton there?"

"No, but I can take a message." Calum said grabbing an envelope from the ginormous stack of mail sitting on the kitchen counter.

"Oh no, I don't think I can tell you dear. Just tell him that Miss Rogers called and wants to talk about Michael."

Calum's face lit up, maybe Miss Rogers could help soothe his brother's fear of school. Finally, someone that can help. "Michael's right here if you want to talk to him."

"Oh. I guess I could."

Calum had already shoved the phone into Michael's trembling hand. He snarled at Calum raising his arm to punch him, but Calum ducked. "Talk to her."

"I'm not talking to her."

"Do it."

"Calum, I'm not -" the lady on the phone interrupted him. "Michael, is that you?"

"Yeah. Hi Miss Rogers. Um, I was going to start doing my homework so if you want to hang up now that would be totally understandable."

She chuckled through the phone, "I'm glad you sound better. Is everything okay? I saw you crying in the hallway. You were sitting on the ground. I didn't want to approach you and embarrass you, like I probably am now." They both laughed to ease the mood.

"I'm fine." Michael saw Calum shake his head out of the corner of his eye. "One hundred percent fine, yep, so I'll be going now."

"I saw you crying, Michael. What was bothering you?"

"I don't know. I was sad." He said awkwardly. He then shook his head at Calum who silently mouthed out the words, "tell her."

"Sad about what? Is everything okay at home? Was Ashton scolding you again?"

"I'm fine." Michael said a little too quickly.

"Alright. Well, can you tell Ashton to give me a call when he gets home?"

"Sure. Thanks for calling."
"Anytime. Goodbye Michael."

He put the telephone down shakily. It was all too much. His teacher bullying him, Luke being missing, Ashton never being around. He didn't want to feel like this, but he couldn't help it. He had a good life, he should be thankful, but things are falling apart and his soul feels helpless.

"Mikey, why didn't you tell her? You could have vented to her."

Michael was about to respond but the door creaked open and a pair of puffy blue eyes peered through the crack. Michael and Calum looked at one another before looking to the door and examining Luke's timid appearance. Red nose, sniffling Luke whispered a question, "can you throw me some band aids."

"Lukey? What are you doing behind the door?" Calum said. Luke's knuckles tightened on the door handle as Calum approached him.

"Why do you want band aids?" Michael asked, "are you hurt?"

Luke whimpered, "don't come any closer."

"Why?" Calum asked halting in his tracks.

"I need a towel!" Luke shrieked, then he slammed the door on Calum's approaching face.

"Luke, open the door." Calum ordered, he pushed the door open knocking Luke over in the process.

He was sitting on the patio sobbing and bleeding.

"Oh my God!" Calum cried in horror. Luke's hand clutched his shoulder over his right side holding it tightly while blood poured through the cracks of his hand and his grey shirt was now dark red and wet.

"Michael!" Calum screamed. As soon as Michael saw Luke, he had a gag reflex.

"Oh my -" Michael picked Luke up, "what happened."

The younger boy was sobbing. He had been ever since the door flung him on the ground.

Michael wasn't sure what to do. How badly was his brother hurt. I mean Luke looked pained but how badly?"

He tried to carry Luke up the stairs, wincing as blood dripped on the floor. He'll have to clean that later. His brothers cries were increasing in volume and it was deafening. "Luke, what happened?"

Michael asked as he placed Luke in the bathtub. He took his brother's shirt off so he could examine his cut shoulder. The cut looked deep and agonizing.

"It was - a-a-an accident." Luke sobbed. "We didn't mean to drop the laptop." He choked on his breathing. It felt like he was suffocating. Michael pulled Luke in for a hug because it was the only thing he could think to do. Luke loves cuddles.

"Who is we?"

"Me and -" he paused to cough, "Toby."

Michael turned to Calum and said ordered, "call an ambulance. Luke's barely able to breathe."
Calum rushed out of the room and into his bedroom to grab his cellphone.

Michael stroked Luke's face and asked, "Lukey who did this to you?"

"He woke up. We woke him, but we didn't mean to. And he threw the glass bottle at us. It hit me in the shoulder."

"Who?"


That's what Ashton saw the second he opened the door was a bathtub full of blood and vomit and his sobbing younger brother bleeding. Apparently the sight was too much because Ashton's eyes rolled to the back of his head and he fell against the floor with a bang.

"Ashton!" Michael shouted in alarm. What the hell was happening to his family.

"I called the hospital they are sending an ambulance -"

He gasped, looking at the ground, "Ashton!" Crouching down, Calum placed a hand on Ashton's sweaty head. "Is Ashton okay?"

"I don't know." Michael said tugging at his hair. "I can't do this, I can't..."

Feeling frustrated, Calum let out a scream. "Mikey please don't freak out on me. I need you to help. I'm scared. Please don't freak out now."

"I'm scared too, Calum." Michael started crying, his green eyes shedding small droplets of water. Stinging, Michael rubbed at his sore eyes. He's been crying too much today.


"Mikey, it's gonna be 'k" Luke whispered as his eyes drooped closed. He himself was slowly losing consciousness from all the pain and loss of blood.

Calum sat nervously by Ashton's side, dabbing his forehead with a wet rag. Slowly, Ashton's eyes blinked open.

"Calum?" He asked hoarsely. "What's happening?" He sat up slowly and got another glimpse of the horrible scene.

Groaning, Ashton shielded his eyes from the sight. "Oh God, what happened"

His question went unanswered because the door to the house opened and paramedics were surrounding them in seconds.
What happened?" Ashton asked as he opened his eyes. Above him were men and women with bright green neon vests.

"You passed out, sir. Everything's going to be alright. Just lay back and relax."

Ashton remembered the past events as they placed an oxygen mask around his nose. "Luke." He shouted in concern. "He was bleeding."

"We have him in the ambulance already. Now just take a deep breath." They attached a blood pressure stethoscope to Ashton's arm and pumped it.

"Your blood pressure is low, but it is rising. Someone give him a Pepsi." The man said and suddenly a woman was handing him a Pepsi with a long yellow straw.

"No, really I'm fine."

"Drink." The man commanded.

Ashton sighed then decided to comply. "I want to see my kid brother." Ashton whined. His head was pounding and he felt dizzy but he needed to see Luke to make sure he's okay. Then it occurred to him, where was Michael and Calum.

It's as though the paramedics read his mind because they said "If we take you to the hospital we need to take your other brother's there too."

Ashton nodded vigorously. He couldn't wait to be with Calum and Michael.

"Alright I'm taking you to the ambulance. Can you walk?" Ashton nodded weakly. He stood up wobbling on his feet and allowed the paramedics to carefully lead him to the ambulance.

"We're going to give you a check up when we get to the hospital." Ashton paled at the suggestion. "I really don't think that's necessary, Luke is the one who needs help."

"We are already working on Luke. He's going to need operated on. His shoulder's tendon was cut. We need to run a few labs on him, take a few x-rays and tetanus booster shot. After that we'll give him surgery and put his arm in a sling. He can go home the next day. As for you, I'm not sure how long we have to keep you in the hospital."

"I'm fine." Ashton said laughing it off, "I just fainted at the sight of blood."

The paramedic shook his head, "I think it might have something to do with your blood pressure. Have you eaten today?"
Ashton winced, he didn't want to answer that. "No." He whispered.

"It's seven in the evening."

Ashton nodded, he knew what time it was. In the distance, Ashton spotted Calum running away from the ambulance, that he assumed Luke was on, and towards him.

"Ashton!" He shouted. Ashton smiled as Calum climbed up on him like a little monkey.

"Hey bud. Are you okay? Did you get hurt?"

"No. I'm alright. But they got Luke all wrapped up in bandages. They said they are calling social services."

"Shit." Ashton muttered under his breath, "Calum, this is very important. Do you know how Luke got those cuts?"

Unfortunately, Calum shook his head no. Sighing, Ashton ran a shaky, weak, hand through his hair.

"Alright. Go back with your brothers."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the hospital too."

The trip to the hospital took a few minutes in Ashton's opinion. He was taken to a doctor like room and laid down on the chair. They hooked an IV to him which he freaked out over and once again passed out. When Ashton awoke, he broke down into tears at this embarrassing situation.

"Hey it's alright. Everything is alright." The doctor soothed. She was a lady with blond curly hair, "I'm just going to ask you a few questions. Your blood pressure is really low so we hooked you up to an oxygen tank. Just breath softly through your nose." She instructed.

Ashton nodded curtly, fluttering his eyelashes at the bright hospital lights.

"So where do you live?"

"423 Gulf Street, Greensboro, VT. 05841" He answered with no hesitation.

"And where do you work, Ashton?"

This one caused him to pause and think. "I have a lot. Um, last night I was working at Target."

"What position do you work?"

"I'm a crew member. I unload the trucks and stock the selves."

"You are raising your two brothers."

"Yes."

"I said two, don't you have three."

Ashton narrowed his eyes, "yeah, whatever. I'm raising all three of them. What does this have to do with anything?"

"How do you punish them?"
Now Ashton was on the defense. He knew where this was going, "I didn't do that to him."

"Then who did?"

"I don't know. I was at work."

"Where was the babysitter."

"I took an extra shift. I didn't know I was going to be staying late."

"So there was no babysitter and you have no idea what happened to Luke."

More tears formed in Ashton's eyes, "yes." He said frustratedly.

The lady doctor seemed to finally take pity on him because she asked, "how much sleep do you get a night, Ashton?"

"I don't know. For the past few days I've been watching TV at night instead of sleeping. Can I see my brothers now?"

"In a minute. Social services are talking to them."

"I'm trying my best to care for them." Ashton sniffled.

"I'm sure you are dear, but your lack of eating, of sleeping, and obsessive manor towards your work is harming you. And you can't take care of your baby brothers until you take care of yourself."

"But I can't clean the house, pay the bills, work, and sleep at the same time."

She frowned sadly, "then perhaps it would be best if they lived with someone who can."

Ashton stared at her with wide eyes, he felt his throat close up and tears pooled in his eyes. That's one way to cut him deep.

"We are giving you some nutrients in your IV and then you can go see your brothers." She said pushing Ashton's sweaty hair back in an attempt to be kind after breaking Ashton into pieces.

When Ashton was finally reunited with his brother's Luke was no present. He was undergoing surgery.

"Ashton, he's scared." Calum said, sniffling.

"Who, Luke?"

"Yeah. He doesn't want to be operated on."

"Baby, he needs it."

"How much money will this cost?" Michael asked, raising an eyebrow.

The social worker Mr. Boward glared at Ashton. "Do you mind telling me how Luke got his
injuries? Because according to your little brother, he doesn't know. Now I understand you are not a social worker, but that is a bad answer in our books because obliviously Luke knows how he got hurt. Which means he is lying to me, which I am forced to assume you told him to lie."

"Honestly, Mr. Boward, sir, I did not do this to him. I would never ever hurt them like that. Just the sight of my brother's blood made me pass out."

"Maybe you passed out from guilt." He said. Ashton glared. This was all wrong. What the hell did happen to Luke anyway?

He turned to his two brothers. Maybe they knew? The social worker cleared his throat.

"I did not cut my brother." Ashton said, stomping his foot like a two year old. Great, he was regressing to childish stages in a time of distress.

"I was at work all day. I took on an extra shift for more money so I didn't have a babysitter lined up." He explained in defeat. So he messed up. Big deal, that doesn't mean he's a vicious child abuser.

"Very well." Mr. Boward scribbled some things down in his notebook. He ripped out a sheet of paper and handed it to Ashton. "This was strike three Ashton. Until we know what actually happened to Luke, we have no other choice, we must remove your brothers from your custody at once."
"Ashton do something!" Michael begged.

The man gave Michael and Calum a pity smile. "I know this is going to be hard on all of you. Which is why I tried to work with you to keep your family together, but there have been too many safety hazards. You will of course have a court hearing to make sure I did the right thing in removing your brothers. While your brothers are gone i will use that time to investigate the matter further. If the court thinks that you are suitable to continue to care for your brothers you will get them back. I'm terribly sorry about this."

Ashton stared at the clock behind the social workers head. How did everything spin so out of control in a matter of minutes and then just suddenly stop? It's like a roller coaster that starts off with a sudden drop then climbs a never ending hill of terror and anxious anticipation. Ashton use to like that feeling in his stomach. He doesn't anymore. He doesn't like the feeling in his stomach right now. It's a mix of nausea and lightheadedness. He sat down on a bench and put his head between his knees.

"You are welcome to ask any questions Mr. Irwin. I won't take your brothers until you are fully informed with everything you want to know."

Calum and Michael were standing shell shocked in the middle of the room staring at Ashton's depressed demeanor in fear. The words "take your brothers" stirred something up in Michael because his face grew red with some type of emotion.

Evidently it was anger because he reeled back on his feet and screamed, "YOU CANT TAKE US. WE'RE NOT OBJECTS. I WON'T GO." He began sobbing in the earnest. "You can't make me." He broke down violently, feeling like the world fell apart at his feet and he was fall from the face of the earth.

Watching his brother break down into tears wasn't doing Calum any good. He ran to Ashton's arms and threw is face into Ashton's neck. "Don't let them take us. Please Ashton." He pleaded. "We love you."

Nothing tore Ashton up more than this. He needed to keep it together. He can't break down. He needs to be strong. Even if being strong means getting a massive headache and feeling like your insides will explode.

Ashton wrapped his arms around Calum and whispered in his ear, "I love you more than anything. We're going to be together again someday soon. Don't give up hope." He kissed Calum's tear stained chubby cheeks. Then crouched down on the floor next to Michael who was sobbing so hard he could barely breathe.
"Everything's going to be alright." Ashton said holding Michael. "We will be together soon. But until then you need to look out for Calum and Luke. Keep them close."

"I don't want to go, Ashton. I'm scared. Where will they take me? I don't even care cause it won't be home. I won't be with you. I already lost mom and dad, I can't lose you too."

"You won't lose me, Michael. I'm right here and you'll be back in no time."

"How do you know? How do you know they won't take us away forever!"

"I don't." Ashton admitted honestly to the teary green eyes, "but I have faith and I am fucking determined to get you back."

Michael sniffled, wiping his eyes with his hand, though it was useless, the tears weren't stopping anytime soon.

Ashton thought about his youngest brother. Poor Luke was going to wake up from surgery and be taken to a new home. He'll never even get to say goodbye. Maybe it was better that way, Ashton thought, because he would surely break down if he had to say goodbye one more time.

"Will you keep them together?" Ashton asked the social worker from his spot on the floor.

Mr. Boward, who was staring out the window to give the family a little privacy, returned his gaze to Ashton. "We keep brothers and sisters together whenever possible. If we have a group home with enough room for all of your brothers we will keep all or some of them together. It depends on the rules of the home."

Ashton gulped, "why can't they stay with Marian Rogers? They stayed their last time."

"This is a temporary arrangement until the court, however, we must assume that the home they are taken to will be permeant should you lose the court hearing"

Ashton sucked in a deep breath. He can't even think about possibly losing the court case.

"Will they be safe?" Ashton whispered, clinging to Michael.

"Of course. I will check on your brothers regularly while they are away from you."

"How should I prepare for this court hearing?"

"You should hire a solicitor specializing in child law. And before you ask about money, if you cannot pay, the family court will appoint you one at no cost to you." Then the social worker added, "I will send you a letter of all the changes you need to make in order to keep your family together. However, I'm telling you now, unless you can prove it wasn't you that hit your brother it will be nearly impossible to keep them in your care."

Ashton swallowed hard and stood up.

"When can I see them?"

"You can visit them when group home has visiting hours."

Ashton started shaking as the social worker approached. "it's about time." He said reaching for Michael's arm.

"NO!" Michael screamed at the top of his lungs, "no please." He clutched his brother's neck,
"Ashton!" He screamed as Mr. Boward literally pulled him away.

"I'm sorry, Michael, but you will make new friends at your new home." Mr. Boward tried to soothe. "you will get use to it."

Michael shook his head drastically, "stop. Just stop." He begged as the social worker walked him out. He beaconed for Calum to follow. The younger boy shook his head and hid his face in Ashton's arms.

"Calum. Be good for me okay?" Ashton whispered, softly shoving him into the social workers arms. Ashton watched his family walk out the door and out of his life.

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Michael and Calum sat on top of eachother as they waited in the hospital room for Luke to come out of surgery.

"He will be a little groggy, and his shoulder will be extremely tender but he should be just fine." The nurse said handing Mr. Boward a bottle of pills and what looked to be a check for the hospital.

"You will pay for the boy?"

"Yeah. He's not Mr. Irwin's responsibility anymore".

Soon a little blonde head popped out from behind the door with a blue sling around his arm and a big bandage over his shoulder.

"Michael! Calum!" He said happily running over to them and wrapping them in a big one sided hug. "I love you." He whispered. "I had a weird dream when I was asleep. I actually thought you guys weren't gonna be my brothers anymore." He looked around the room ready to hug Ashton but the look of disappointment on his face made Calum cry.

"What's wrong?" Luke asked worriedly, "where's Ashton."

"Luke..." Michael gulped, "they're removing us from Ashton's care."

Luke blinked. "That's not true. You're lying." He said accusingly. Then with a pout, he turned to his other brother, "Calum tell him to stop lying."

When Calum didn't respond Luke sucked in a gulp of air. For once Luke actually tried to avoid crying in front of everyone. He pulled his jaw string beanie down over his whole face to hide his silent tears.

Calum wanted to reassure his brother that everything would be fine, but he didn't believe that. He couldn't lie to Luke so he settled for saying nothing. That seemed like the best option for a moment like this.

Mr. Boward finished signing the release papers then he took the boys into his van.

"This is actually happening." Luke muttered from his spot by the window.

"I don't like this!" He screamed kicking the drivers seat. Mr. Boward chose to ignore the mild tantrum and drove off.

"My advisor sent me an email saying there is an opening at a group home not to far from here. Isn't that nice?" He said smiling back at them through the rear-view mirror.
"As nice as a bullet through the brain would be -ow!" Michael rubbed the part of his arm Calum hit.

Luke tugged Calum's shirt, "will we ever see Ashton again?"

"Yes, at the court case." He answered.

"He's going to win and get us back." Michael said confidently.

The driver pulled up to a dull green pained house. To the kids surprise, it looked like a normal house. It even had a basketball court in front of it.

Mr. Boward opened the door and helped the boys out of the car. They walked up the porch steps then knocked on the door. A woman with long thin brown hair answered the door. "Hi." She said in a cheery voice.

Mr. Boward pushed and pulled the reluctant boys inside. Once inside they began to take in their surroundings. The pale yellow walls matched nicely with the wooden floor and cabinets. There was one TV and one kid sitting on the floor watching it. She had bleach blond hair, a pointy nose, and a crooked smile. She appeared to be about Michael's age. He eyed her suspiciously, holding Calum and Luke's hands. The dining room could be seen straight ahead and in it were two boys: one black, one white. They were coloring or painting, Michael couldn't tell which.

"Thank you, Mr. Boward. I will show the boys to their rooms and introduce them to the whole house."

"Remember Kelly, they might only be here for two days."

"I'll keep that in mind." She said. They exchanged in small talk and then Mr. Boward walked out the door. This was it, Michael thought, squeezing Luke and Calum's hands tightly. They were about to find out what this lady was really like.

"Hello boys. I'm Mrs. Kelly. I will be your house parent along with my husband Drew. He's at work right now, but you will meet him soon." She said. Michael watched her walk over to the kitchen and gesture for them to follow. Calum and Luke looked to Michael for guidance. Sighing, Michael slowly walked to where Mrs. Kelly was.

"Take a seat." She ordered. They did. Suddenly she blew a whistle so loudly Michael swore he went deaf for a second. Two seconds later the girl from the living room appeared along with two other girls. They were holding each other tightly by the hips. Calum's jaw dropped when he saw who it was. He knew this girl! "Nia?" He asked, raising his eyebrows.

She smiled a beautiful smile, "Calum! Oh it's so good to see you. I forgot to give you your notebook back." She said blushing. "I can give it to you now if that's okay with miss Kelly."

"No Nia, I need you to sit down. We are going to have a house meeting."

Nia nodded and sat down with this other girl on her lap. This whole situation confused the heck out of Calum. "What are you doing here?" He asked her blatantly.

"Oh, I live here. I guess I never told you. But in my defense I don't have to tell you where I come from."

Calum sat is shock. "Oh."

"Kids." Mrs. Kelly said clapping her hands, "we have new guests. Boys would you like to introduce
Michael gulped. This was so weird like a strange nightmare that he thought he would wake up from at any time now.

"Hi, I'm Calum."

"I'm Luke."

"Michael."

Mrs. Kelly clapped her hands, "good job. Boys this is your new roommates. Why don't you start Nia, since Calum already knows you."

"Sure. I'm Nia, I go to your school but I live here. This is Rena, my little sister. She doesn't talk and if you touch her I'll be forced to hurt you."

"NIA!" The house lady shouted. "What have I told you about threats."

"You told me not to use them." She said looking at her hands.

"Apologize."

"M'sorry."

Mrs. Kelly sighed, "alright. Let's continue. This is Casey." She said pointing to the boy with long hair. "And this is Trey." She said pointing to the boy with curly black hair. "And that is Miranda." The blond girl smiled and waved.

After seeing what this place held in store for him, Michael was ready to jump out the window as soon as he was alone.

"I'm going to read you the rules now. Everyone else remain quiet."

She pulled out a list of rules and began reading them off one by one. The main rules were no hurting others, no running away, no going into the girls hallway and girls weren't allowed in the boys hallway. Apparently they are allowed to go to the bathroom in their designated hallway at night but if they pass a certain point motion detectors will alert the parents in order to prevent runaways or meeting with the opposite sex. Michael glared at that stupid list, so much for his plan. There were rules about the types of music, movies and games the kids played. That's when Luke lost it. He started crying in the middle of the lecture but Mrs. Kelly just kept reading the rules. When she finished she went straight on to punishments. That was a fantastic conversation. Basically they thrived off a strict rewards/punishment system. If they are good they get more freedoms. If they are bad they get punished. She listed a few common punishments. The first was isolation in a locked room. Then the second most common was physical strenuous work such as running a few laps or carrying bricks across the yard multiple times and lastly they mentioned corporal punishment as a last resort if they child refuses to comply with the other punishments.

By the time that conversation ended Calum and Luke were in tears. It was quiet crying, they weren't sobbing or causing a scene but they say there with tears dribbling down their chin's and no one said anything. Michael clenched his jaw tightly, and slipped his hands into his brothers hands. The physical connection seemed to be the only thing keeping them together now.
Ashton threw another crinkled sheet of paper into the trash. Screaming at the sky, Ashton kicked the trash can repeatedly until his foot ached. He was trying to write a statement for the court but he was struggling to word everything perfectly. But as of now, everything needed to be perfect. As promised, his social worker emailed him the list of things he needs to do in order to get his brothers back. But some of the things were fucking impossible! For instance, one item on the list says that Ashton needs to earn a higher income above minimum wage. Oh, that sounds fabulous! Why didn't Ashton think of that sooner? oh, that's right! He can't earn more than minimum wage! He never went to college, he doesn't have much work experience at all. No one on the earth will hire him for more than minimum wage! Another item on the list was 'create a safer environment' which just pissed Ashton off because his home was fucking safe, thank you very much, Mr. Boward sir. To top it all off, Ashton needs to be 'more responsible' and 'spend more time with the kids.' Right, right, spend more time, but at the same time provide an income higher than minimum wage. Who did they think Ashton was, superman?

As much as it pained Ashton to admit it, he knew deep down that if things don't change his brothers are probably better off in someone else's care. However, those thoughts are always countered by the memories of his parents and how they would want Ashton to keep his family together. Then Ashton starts thinking his parents are dead why should he please them. Finally, he snaps himself out of those terrible thoughts and tells himself that Michael, Calum, and Luke want to live in their 'home' and home is where family is and Ashton is part of their family dammit.

He takes another shot at writing his statement to no avail.

"I give up!" He screeched, tossing his head down on the table just as his cell phone blared.

Muttering a few curse words under his breath, Ashton dug his phone out of his pocket and held it to his ear. "What do you want?" He spat. Thanks to modern technology, Ashton knew by caller ID that it was Bryana calling.

"Hey. I heard what happened." She said a little more slowly than usual, obviously she was thrown off by Ashton's curt greeting.

"Hey. I heard what happened. I didn't tell anyone anything." He stressed.

"How could you possibly heard what's happened? I didn't tell anyone anything." He stressed.

"My brother told me." She explained, a little annoyed that she has to defend herself.

"Oh, right. Tim." Ashton shook his head, nearly laughing at himself for not realizing such a simple thing.

The phone line was dead silent for a few seconds before Bryana cleared her throat.

"Yeah. So... I was calling to see if you needed anything."

Ashton resisted the urge to chew her out for cheating on him. Instead, he settled for a long sigh. "No,
I don't need anything. I'm fine."

It amazes Ashton how well he can lie sometimes.

"Cool. I know they mean a lot to you. I'm sorry this happened."

"Me too. I'm sorry we had to happen."

"What do you mean?" Sh asked, with fear in her voice. He knew now, and she knew he knew. No more words needed to be said. But for clarity's sake Ashton mentioned bumping into Matt on his way to work.

She said a few polite lies along the lines of you will get your brother's back in no time, and then she said goodbye. It was the forever type of goodbye. Ashton tossed his phone on the floor, grumbling to himself about writing the perfect statement.

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They survived one night in a group home, that was an accomplishment. Michael thought as he stood at the bathroom sink with Luke sitting on the counter kicking the cabinets beneath his feet. Michael waited patiently for his cup to fill up with water, humming a small tune in his head. It was a song from that disney movie they watched last night. Calum walked in the open door and handed Michael a list.

"Mr. Drew said these are our chores."

Michael raised an eyebrow, "did he really create this last night and print it out already?"

"It appears that way."

"Dude this guy got home at like, midnight." Michael crinkled the sheet of paper and tossed it in the garbage bag. He clapped his hand excitedly when the paper ball went directly in the target. Calum copied Michael's actions, but his shot missed. He tried again with the sheet of paper addressed to Luke.

"Mrs. Carol said its breakfast time." Casey informed them, on his way past the door.

Turning the water off, Michael picked up his plastic cup and splashed it over Luke's head.

"What the heck!" Luke screamed. He leaped off the counter and started punching Michael's stomach. If only Luke wasn't eight, then maybe Michael would actually stop laughing and take him seriously.

"He took Luke's wrists in his hand and tugged him out of the room. Let's go, it's breakfast time."

"NO!" Luke shrieked. "I don't want to eat breakfast I want to go back to sleep!" He stomped his foot defiantly.

"What's up with you, Mr. Grumpy Pants?" Calum asked the pouting eight year old. Michael answered instead, "He's tired and pissy because Kelly woke us up with a whistle."

Calum nodded, totally understanding the annoyance of that. Honestly, he thought he was going to have a heart attack when he woke up to the high pitched sound.

"That's how things work around here, I guess." Calum answered, rolling his eyes. "We need to try
and get use to it." He said directly to Luke.

"No. This isn't home and we don't need to be use to anything." Luke said, kicking the wall with his foot.

"For once, I agree with cranky over here," Michael said, "I don't want to get use to this place."

"Yeah but, Michael, what happens if we don't go home?"

"We'll go home." He said flatly, irritation lining his voice.

"I'm just thinking rationally." Calum said softly.

"So am I." Michael said, then in a flash, his eyes grew dark. "We're you implying that I can't think rationally? Is that what you were doing?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Oh so now I'm stupid and ridiculous."

"What are you talking about? I wasn't saying you were stupid or ridiculous."

"You just said I was ridiculous."

Throwing his hands up in the air, Calum shouted, "I'm not having this conversation." He began to walk down the hall, but was stopped by a hand on his shoulder.

"Move out of my way." Calum grunted.

"I am not stupid!" Michael shouted angrily. Calum gasped when he saw Michael's eyes water up with unshed tears.

"Mikey. I wasn't saying you were stupid. I would never hurt you like that."

Michael released Calum while muttering a few apologies. "I've just been under so much stress lately." He said wiping his eyes. "I'm sorry for snapping on you, Cal."

"It's okay. I'm sorry for making you sad."

"Can we just eat. I'm starving." Luke blurted out from behind the two hugging brothers. They shifted their eyes onto the boy with a pink towel over his head. Michael was the first to crack up at Luke's appearance. He looked like a fortune teller. Luke, however, was not amused. "Ha ha, very funny." He scowled.


"I don't want to eat with those people. They are weird!"

"Luke, knock it off." Michael said sternly, "we need to just chill."

"Last night I heard them talking. They were calling us weird and making fun of my beanie. It's not my fault it has a stupid Pom-Pom on it. I like it!" Luke huffed.

"That's my beanie!" Calum shouted, "where did you put it?"

"It's in my suitcase dummy. I wasn't about to get made fun of."
"Guys. Let's just eat the damn meal and stay silent. After breakfast we'll go to our rooms and figure out an escape plan." Michael whispered.

"Actually, Michael, I think we have to go to school after this."

Michael shook his head, "I'm never going to school again."

Luke and Calum looked at one another with that 'he's being stubborn' look.

"Come on." Michael tugged them down the hall and into the kitchen/dining room area. All the kids were chattering until they walked in. Suddenly everything was quiet and everyone's eyes were on the new kids. Michael pulled out his cell phone to distract him from the awkwardness only to remember that there was no cell service in this prison.

"Boys this is crystal. She's another member of this home." Mrs. Kelly said as she walked in with a little girl by her side. The girl was a small blond with her hair pulled back. She walked up to the table and took a seat.

"That's a nice name." Michael said to her, trying to make small talk.

"No it's not." She said heatedly. Her little hand grabbed a bagel off the table before she continued, "Crystal stands for the drug my momma was addicted to. She named me after the drug."

"Speaking of which, Trey you need to take your pill." Mrs. Kelley said handing the dark skinned boy a bottle of pills. A teen boy with dark hair and tattoos came stomping into the room with Mr. Drew following behind.

"I'm not going! I went yesterday." The boy screamed.

"Ethan. Sit down." Mrs. Kelley scolded. She wiped her mouth delicately, put her napkin down and stood up to meet his eyes.

"Your devil of a husband is trying to force me to go to my probation officer again!"

"Because I found him selling drugs outside the house."

"For the last time, I was selling test answers not drugs! I'm a cheat, not a druggie."

"This is hardly the place for this conversation."

"Where would a better one be, ma?"

"Get outside." She said flatly. He rolled his eyes before shoving past drew.

"That was Ethan." Nia whispered in between Calum and Michael's ear. "He's not usually around, but when he is, he is violent. I'm just warning you."

"Nice to know." Michael shot Nia a half ass smile, before standing up from his spot at the table and taking his brothers back to their room.

Nia walked by the door and knocked. Her sister was at her side, holding her shirt. "Hey, you're not suppose to leave the table until everyone is finished."

"Yeah," Michael paused, "and you're not suppose to be in the boys hall, am I right?"

"The house parents are outside so they don't know im here. Besides I was just trying to tell you the
rules, you don't need to be a bitch about it.

"Sorry, but the house parents are outside so we decided to leave." Michael explained, "besides, they aren't eating so why should we?"

She spun around, her pigtails twirling as she stormed away with her sister lingering behind.

"She's the Nia you have a crush on? Seriously?" Michael asked his brother.

"She's hot." Calum's cheeks burned red. Luke chuckled, giving Calum a small push. "You like her." He teased, giggling his head off because according to Luke, girls have cooties.

A few minutes later everyone was sitting in silence, bored out of their minds. There was no TV or cell service. Michael stared at the ceiling frowning. How was he going to survive without his favorite music. No, he wasn't living here forever. He would have his music back. He'll have his family back. Ashton's loud, talkative voice would be so soothing right now, Michael thought, while he listened to his brothers whine.

"What now." Michael muttered, opening his eyes a crack.

"We're bored." Calum said honestly.

Michael sat himself up, then dug out a few plastic dinosaurs from his suitcase. "Here, play with these."

"Oh, can I have pengy and scruffy." Luke asked, eyes full of hope.

Calum's eyes lit up as well, "and Mr. kangaroo. Get him out too. Oh, and Ketchup."

Michael pulled the stuffed animals out of their suitcase.

"You want me to play with you?" Michael asked, leaning in to the bed where Calum and Luke sat.

"Yeah. You can be Ketchup." Calum said handing the animal to Michael. It was weird for the fourteen year old boy to play with stuffed animals but somehow, playing with Luke and Calum felt natural. Maybe it's because he remembers all those late night parties they use to have when mom and dad were asleep. It was just the four brothers parting with their stuffed animals: saving the world, or doing dance offs. Michael snorted at himself. He was such a lame kid.

"Hey, Mr. Bear are you going to help me fight the evil dinosaurs?" Michael asked, always starting the creative stories. Luke and Calum admired Michael for his ability to make something out of nothing. His active imagination was also appreciated by Ashton. He use to let Michael create the situation. However, as Michael grew older, he realized his imagination might be the cause of trouble. "What do you say, Mr. Bear?"

"His name is scruffy." Luke said, covering the Bear's ears - as if that would actually offend him.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Scruffy, would you like to beat some dinosaurs butts?"

"No, but pengy would. He's the ninja of the family." Luke insisted.

"Awesome. Let's go penguin."

"His name is Pengy." Luke huffed.

"Right. Pengy." Michael lifted ketchup up and thw him at the dinosaurs. The giant penguin
followed behind.

"Get away from Mr. Kangaroo." He shouted. The dinosaur, that Calum held, soared into Ketchup, knocking the strong dog down.

"Get off!" Ketchup yelled, trying to fight the dinosaurs, but there were too many. Then out of nowhere, a giant penguin comes and saves the day.

"Yay! It's pengy to the rescue." Michael giggled as Luke tossed himself onto the dinosaurs.

"Aw, Luke, that's not fair. You're bigger than they are." Calum whined.

"You're just upset cause you lost."

Unfortunately their game was interrupted, by a knock at the door.

"Boys. You are not allowed to leave the table until everyone is finished eating." Mrs. Kelley informed them. "And Mr. Boward, your social worker is at the door. He wants to talk to you."

"Can you tell him, we're busy." Calum asked. Her response was vivid in her glowering eyes. Gulping, Calum nearly ran out of the room along with his other brothers.

"Hello boys. Let's talk in a private room." Michael sighed and followed Mr. Boward into another room. Calum and Michael sat down on the chairs across from the desk table in the office type room. Luke hopped on Calum's lap laughing when Calum groaned.

"Boys." Mr. Boward said in a stern tone, "I have some serious questions to ask you. First of all, how do you like it here so far?"

"It sucks." Michael responded instantly.

"When can we go home?" Luke asked.

"Well that brings me to my next question, Luke. Can you tell me what happened to your arm?"

Luke bit his lip, "I don't know."

"You don't know? How can that be? It happened to you. You must have seen who hurt you?"

"I don't remember anything."

"Really? Did you get hit in the head?"

"No."

"Then how can you not remember?"

"He has amnesia." Calum said, trying to defend his brother, even though, he didn't know why Luke was lying.

"Boys," Mr. Boward began, "I'm going to level with you. If you answer my questions honestly I might be able to get you back to Ashton. Even if Ashton hit you, I can still find a way -"

"Ashton didn't hit me." Luke said quickly.

"Then who did? Because someone did, Luke. Those gashes in your shoulder were from a whisky
bottle. Either Ashton or someone threw the bottle at you. I just want to know who did it." Mr. Boward's eyes were nearly pleading. He knew Luke was withholding information. Michael shot his younger brother a look.

"I don't know." Luke said staring at the floor. Calum bounced him slightly, easing the mood.

"Can you boys prove it wasn't Ashton."

"He wasn't home all day. He got home after Luke was hurt." Calum said.

"That can't be proven." Mr. Boward sighed, "Luke I really need you to tell me the truth. Did Ashton throw a whiskey bottle at you? Maybe you were making him angry and it was an accident? He let his anger get the best of him? Perhaps he was drinking and you caught him. Did he throw it at you to keep you quiet."

"No, no, no!" Luke yelled, "Ashton wasn't the person who did it, it was-" Luke cupped his mouth with his hand. Everything was silent. Calum pulled Luke off his lap and turned him around.

"Luke, you need to tell us right now." Calum said sternly, boring his eyes into Luke's.

"I can't." He whispered.

"Whoever told you not to tell is lying." Mr. Boward reassured, "trust me, Luke. If you tell me who it was I promise you I can get you back to Ashton very quickly."

That was enough motive for Michael. He took one last look at Luke and then blurted out the answer. "Luke was at Toby's house. He's a kid from our school. Luke told me that Toby's dad did it."

"Michael!" Luke screeched, "I told you not to tell."

"we had no choice."

"yes we did. Now Toby will be stuck in this fucking group home."

Calum softly smacked Luke's butt. "Stop it, Luke. He had to tell the truth and deep down you know it."

Mr. Boward was already on the phone with his agent. "I need the address a Toby's house. He goes to school with the Irwin boys."

Luke pulled away from Calum and glared at both of his brothers. "He trusted me not to tell anyone. He doesn't want to be taken away from his home either. If anyone should understand that it should be us!"

Michael and Calum shared a knowing look. "Listen, Lu, If Toby's dad really did this to you, then he needs to be taken away. Toby isn't safe."

Luke shook his head, feeling betrayed by his two brothers.

Mr. Boward hung up the phone, slinging his arm around Michael and Luke's shoulders, "you boys will be back with Ashton before you know it."
The boys are still surviving the group home and Ashton wants them back.

"Come on, Luke, I said I'm sorry like 40 billion times. When are you going to start taking to me?"

Luke didn't bother to give Michael his attention. Instead, he focused on putting the dishes away like Mrs. Kelly asked him to. All of the kids were to clear the breakfast table while Kelly and Drew spoke with Ethan about his probation issues, whatever that is. Luke never understood half of the things grown-ups talk about.

A loud shattering sound caught him by surprise. He turned to see Rena silently crying and a shattered ceramic bowl scattered around her feet.

"It's okay," he heard Nia whisper, "it was an accident. Mrs. Kelly will understand." The older sister started picking up the broken pieces with her hands.

"Use a broom, stupid." Trey said angrily.

Nia got up, and went to the supply closet, no doubt to find a broom.

"Why are you so mean." The blonde haired girl with the crooked teeth stood with her arms folded.

"Because your stupid friend is always clumsy."

"So, what's it to you." Miranda bit back.

"So her clumsiness gets us all in to trouble thats what." Trey said splashing the wet, soapy towel on Rena's face.

Out of nowhere, Nia comes up and strikes Trey in the back with the broom stick. It reminded Luke of something Batgirl from batman would do.

"Leave her alone," she growled, "if anyone will get in trouble it will be me. So calm down and finish the dishes."

Nia seemed quite intimidating to Luke, he wondered what Calum saw in her. Glancing at his older brother, Luke's mouth dropped open as he saw Calum blushing. It grossed Luke out so he turned his attention back to the sisters. Nia was cleaning the soapy water off of Rena's face.

"You need to stop doing this stuff or I'm gonna tell Mrs. Kelly." Miranda scolded.

"Shut up, you little bitch." Trey yelled, throwing a dish at her face.

Miranda ducked and Crystal ran out of the room probably to get help.

Luke jumped as someone gripped his shirt. He let out a breath of relief when he saw it was only Michael.
Michael put a hand over Luke's mouth and tugged him and Calum over to the corner of the room. Luke felt trapped between the two walls, if it wasn't for his brothers standing by his side he would probably start bawling. Miranda certainly was crying. The other boy, Casey, pulled Trey back and continued to shout things like, "remember the safe room."

Mrs. Kelly walked in, and pulled Trey back, holding him to her chest she said, "I know you're mad, but we're here for you. For now, I think you should go sit in the safety room and calm down." She was slowly walking towards a room with him as she spoke reassuring words. When they were out of ear-shot, Michael relaxed his grip asked angrily, "what the hell is his problem?"

"A lot of things." Nia admitted, "he's a sad case, just like the rest of us."

A solemn expression crossed Michael's face. He looked at his shoes, apologetically. But Calum needed clarification.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's had it rough. So try to forgive him, okay?" Nia said pulling her younger sister over to the table. Nia put a box of crayons in front of her along with a Giant notebook. Rena took the pink crayon and flipped through the notebook. Luke couldn't help but notice the younger girl was smiling for the first time.

"My life is difficult too, but I don't throw things at people." Calum said, putting his hands on his hips, puffing his chest out proudly.

Nia smiled sadly, "no offense Calum, but you have a better life than the rest of us."

"Oh how can I take offense to that." He chided.

Meanwhile, Luke had taken a seat next to Rena and was watching her color a picture of two pink elephants.

"Can I color with you?"

She looked at him through the corner of her eye. Luke gave her a big cheeky grin.

She smiled softly and handed him a blue crayon.

"I love blue." He proclaimed.

Nia was getting closer to Calum as she explained herself, "I don't know what you've been through -"

"No you don't." He snapped.

"But I know what Trey went through. And unless this is your fourth group home in one month then I don't think you have a right to judge him."

"All I'm saying is he is violent. I'm worried about my safety, not to mention my brothers safety."

"I'll be fine." Michael said flexing his arms in multiple directions trying to look like a sumo wrestler. When neither of the kids laughed with him, Michael wiped the grin off his face. "Tough crowd."
"Can't you try and have some sympathy? He was abused. All he knows is violence." Nia spluttered, crossing her arms over her chest.

Calum ripped his eyes off of her's. How was he suppose to know? A blush creeped over his cheeks as he thought about what a jerk he was. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." She replied. Her hands slipped into Calum's hand, "thanks for understanding."

Michael popped his lips, "okay, I'm gonna go see what Luke's drawing."

He shoved his way past the awkward, but cute kids. His heart swelling with pride for his younger brother. At least Calum was improving in the love department even if Michael's life sucked.

"Whatcha drawing, Lukey?" He asked ruffling the smaller boy's bushy blonde hair.

"I'm drawing a dog." He said scribbling more blue on his paper.

"That's a terrible dog."


"I think it's pretty." Nia exclaimed crouching down and staring at the paper as if it was the Mona Lisa.

"It's a shitty dog." Michael laughed.

"You're not very good with children are you?" Nia accused.

"How should I know."

"Do you always treat your brother like this?"

"He drew a shitty dog, I thought he should know."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe drawing a dog is the way your brother is dealing with all of his emotions?"

"I take it that's what your sister is doing?"

"Yes. She draws because her therapist tells her it's good for her."

Michael bit his lip. "Okay." He mouthed out, moving away from the annoyingly sensitive girl.

"Come on Luke, let's go to our room."

"No. I wanna finish drawing."


"You go. Me and Rena are drawing our feelings." Luke giggled.

"Oh for the love of..." He trailed off, shaking his head all the way to his room. Calum sat next to Nia, taking her hand in his while they watched their siblings color.

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Ashton slammed his pen down on his desk. It was finally finished. The statement for the court was
written up along with a never ending list of things he will do better. Ashton read over his list, cringing at how much work it will be to provide all of this. He needs to spend quality time with his brothers, serve as a role model, and build a support network of friends and babysitters. At least the state provided the babysitter. That was one benefit of his situation. On the other hand, Ashton also promised to earn twice as much money to pay off all of the bills.

He groaned at the impossibility, holding his growling stomach which felt like puking.

The phone rang again. Ashton picked it up on the second ring, "hello."

"Ashton? Hi, this is Miss Rogers. I'm sorry for calling you so early on a Friday, but I wanted to let you know that I saw Michael crying in the hallway yesterday and I'm really concerned. He seemed extremely upset about something. I would ask him myself but I didn't want to embarrass him."

Ashton blinked a few times unaware of how to tell her this. Finally, her words started to sink in and Ashton wracked his brains for a reason why Michael might be upset. He grunted when he couldn't think of a single reason. God, how horrible was he?

"Thanks for tell me." His wavering voice cracked through the phone, "I'm not sure what's wrong."

At first, Miss Rogers began to reassure him that Michael is probably fine, but then she paused. "Are you alright? You sound upset yourself."

Gulping down his stress, Ashton tried not to choke out a pathetic 'I'm fine'.

He settled for the truth, "actually, I am upset."

Shit, he was crying now. "They took my brothers away." His voice rose ten octaves as he said it: the heartbreaking truth that was eating Ashton alive. He broke down embarrassingly, crying on the phone to a woman who has done nothing but helped him. He was such a basket case.

"Oh my God, I am so sorry." She apologized quickly. It made Ashton feel even worse knowing that she was pitying him.

"I......it is what it is, I guess" he said calming down from his emotional wreck.

"If there's anything I can do, Anything that you need, I'm right here."

Ashton smiled, sniffling a laugh, "thank you, Marian, that means a lot to me. Oh, and if I do get my brothers back. I'll be sure to talk to Michael about whatever it is that made him sad."

"I'm sure you will. You're a good big brother, Ashton. I know you will get them back." They exchanged a friendly goodbye before both of them hung up.

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Mr. Drew called the kids into the kitchen where Luke and Rena were coloring.

"It's time for school." He repeated, then he crouched down to Rena and Luke.

"Are you two ready for school?"

Rena nodded, beaming up at the house parent. She ripped her coloring page out of her notebook and handed it to him.

His face lit up, "WHOA." He exclaimed, "is this another pink elephant?"
Rena nodded.

"It's beautiful. I think this one needs to go on the fridge." Drew put her picture under a rectangular magnet and stuck it on the refrigerator. Luke felt the urge to hand him his drawing also, but he felt subconscious about it. Michael was right, it was ugly. He couldn't even draw the feet right. He crinkled his paper up. Rena, took the ball of paper and unrolled it. She handed it to Drew, to Luke's dismay.


Luke tilted his head, "really?"

Rena clapped her hands and nodded her head.

"Looks like Rena agrees with me. Let's hang it in the fridge."

Luke watched his picture go up and he felt good about himself. Even if it was just a blob of blue with eyes and a mouth, people said they liked it.

A few kids started to enter the room. They grabbed their brown paper bags and took them outside.

"The bus is coming." Nia called, she grabbed Rena's hand and held her other hand out for Calum.

"I have to wait for my brothers." Calum said, "but you go ahead."

Nia nodded, then handed Rena her paper bag before scurrying outside. Mr. Drew handed Luke and Calum a bag.

"Are either of you allergic to peanut butter?" Both boys shook their heads no.

"Alright, then her are two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a yummy Apple."

"Thank you." Calum responded.

"Where's Michael?" Mr. Drew asked, lifting his head up to look around.

Calum and Luke bit their lips and stared at their hands.

"Boys. Do you know where he is?"

"He doesn't want to go to school." Calum reluctantly answered.


Just then, Mrs. Kelly walked in with Trey.

"Did he miss the bus?" She asked. Looking out the window, Mr. Drew saw the bus drive away.

"Yep."

"Alright. I'll drive him." She noticed the other boys sitting at the table, "are they not going?"

"I can't find their brother." Drew, sat down heavily and tugged Trey to his side. Luke closed his eyes, not wanting to see another kid get hit. To Luke's surprise, he didn't hit, but he hugged Trey closely.
"Do you feel better champ?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry. I just needed to get out my anger."

"Did you vent in your room and sit quietly for a while?"

"Yes sir."

"Good." Drew rubbed his head, "Alright, let's get you to class. But there is to be no fighting in school today or else you will lose your privileges."

"I know. I won't fight, I promise."

Mrs. Kelly called out "I found Michael. He's hiding in a closet."

Drew sighed, "Alright. I'll get him out."
It was the day of the court case, Ashton could barely breathe. Everything had to go over perfectly. He discussed his case with his lawyer, but he still felt terrified. He couldn't wait to see his brother's again. It's only been two days, but that feels like forever when he's not with the people he love.

Ashton listened to his attorney testify for him. Behind him, in the crowd of people, Ashton could hear his brothers babbling on about something stupid. He smiled widely, turning his head and waving towards the boys.

"Look it's Ashton!" Calum squealed, waving his hand wildly. Mr. Boward gripped Calum's moving hand and pulled him onto the bench.

"Mr. Irwin will now give his speech."

Ashton gulped. Standing on wobbly legs, Ashton walked over and sat on the stand in front of a microphone. Smiling, Ashton saw that not only his brother's were in the audience but Miss Rogers was too.

"Hello. I'm Ashton Irwin,"

His attorney coughed loudly, warning Ashton he already made a mistake. Ashton shook his hands in front of him, "sorry, I mean, My name is Ashton Irwin; my case number is 765F. I am writing to request that I regain custody of my three younger brothers: Michael Irwin age 14, Calum Irwin, age 11, and Luke Irwin age 8."

Letting out a sigh, Ashton nervously looked up at the judge hoping the man was easily persuadable.

"My brothers were taken due to an incident where they were injured. The injuries were not caused by me, as my attorney already explained, but I realize that I am partially to blame for not keeping a better eye on them. Therefore, I promise to spend more time with my brothers and to keep the babysitter the state provided me. Thank you for your time."

Ashton quickly stepped down from the stand, nearly hiding in his seat at how awful his speech was.

"You did fine." His attorney promised, but Ashton wasn't sure. The court finally went on a break to decide the verdict. During this time, Ashton was allowed to see his brothers.

"Ashton," they shouted, running up and hugging his legs. Ashton scooped Luke up and placed him on his hip. Stroking Calum's back, Ashton led the boys out into the hall where they could sit down on a bench.

"Ash, we missed you." Calum said, squeezing his older brother in a bone crushing hug.

"Oh you guys have no idea how much I missed you." Ashton ruffled their hair affectionately, "I'm so sorry this had to happen. Is the group home alright?"

All three boys nodded slowly.

"It's durable, but it's not home." Michael said finally.
"It would feel more like home if you were there." Calum explained, his brown eyes shining. Ashton could tell his brother was on the verge of tears. Poor Calum is such a sensitive soul. If fact, they all are. Perhaps that's what his parents instilled in them: empathy.

"Listen guys, I'm trying so hard to get you back. But if you don't -"

"Shhh." Michael put his hands over his ears, "don't talk about that. We're going to be together, I know it."

"Oh?" Ashton asked his left eyebrow raising, "do you have intuition?"

Michael nodded, "oh yeah. I can tell this is going to work out in our favor."

"I wish I had your confidence." Ashton muttered, gripped his suit tie and tightening it. Luke rested his head on Ashton's shoulder. Calum sat on the other side squeezing Ashton's side. Michael, however, was pacing back and forth, frantically. Ashton shook his head, "Michael, you are making me nervous. Sit down."

"I can't sit. I'm nervous." He stopped, an idea popping into his head, "Can't we just leave now, and hide out on a ranch? Or better yet go to Mexico."


Michael finally sat down leaning his head on Ashton's chest. They were all strangely affectionate. Mainly because they knew that this might be the last time they ever see each other again, though no one wanted to admit that possibility. But if the judge thinks Ashton is unfit to be a guardian then that's it. End of story. He will be forced to see his brothers during visiting hours at a group home, and that's if the boys are staying in the same place. What if they get split up and move to another state?

Ashton rubbed the back of Michael's head. His head hair was greasy, he must not have washed in the past couple of days. The kid lucked out, even without his hair, he would still look good.

Ashton watched the rain beat against the windows. Rain always made him want to sleep, especially thunderstorms. He was never one of those kids who were afraid of storms. Michael used to be, and if you asked Ashton, he's say he still was. Michael just wouldn't admit it. He always wanted to stay home when they were going on. He'd roam the hallways at night, searching for a person to cuddle. When Calum rolled around, he was the perfect person to go to during a storm because Michael could pretend to comfort him, when in reality it was the other way around. Then Luke, that kid, use to be so fascinated with lightening, the colors and the sound thunder made, he'd stand outside and watch storms. Their parents used to be afraid he would be struck by lightening.

A loud clap of thunder made them all jump. Luke groaned, and he shifted uncomfortably.

"I wish we could just be home." Michael said. "With pizza and the TV. I hate storms."

It was scary, what were they going to do if they didn't go home with Ashton. He pulled them closer.

No one was ready for the judge to make his decision, but before they knew it they were all standing up. The judge looked anything but merciful. "Ashton Irwin, taking care of three kids at the age of 22 is not an easy task. It will require incredible sacrifice on your part. You could give your brothers up and pursue a life of your choice. However, you choose to stay with your brothers? Can you tell me why?"

Ashton closed his eyes, when he opened them he had a smile on his face. "It's simple, really. My
father and mother showed me how important family is. So now I live for my family and for us to be together and stay together, even if their are obstacles. I will fight for my brother's happiness."

For the first time, the judge seemed less harsh. He almost appeared to be a father speaking to his son.

"Then I will grant you custody - if,"

Ashton had to catch himself from jumping up and screaming hysterically. All he wanted to do was hug his brother's tightly.

"If you promise to go to parenting classes then I will give you custody."

"Yes sir, I promise."

"And, you will need a schedule that you and your social worker will work out in order for you to be more consistent. You need to create rules/consequences. You need to create days to spend with your brothers and days you will be at work. When you are at work you will have a babysitter from the state with your brother's at all times until Michael is at least 16. Is that clear."

Ashton nodded vigorously, "yes, absolutely. Thank you, thank you so much. Thank you."

The judge slammed his mallet down, "case closed." He said and Ashton raced over to his brothers, engulfing them in a giant hug.

"I'm so happy." Luke cried as he was squished in between his brothers.

"Oh thank God." Ashton, pulled away, then and thanked his attorney and social worker.

By the time the family got home, it was pouring down rain and late. Mr. Boward dropped the boys suitcases off and left a pile load of papers to fill out. He promised he would come back early tomorrow morning to set up a schedule for Ashton.

As soon as Mr. Boward left, all four boys got ready for bed.

"I missed my room so much." Calum shouted jumping on the furniture. "I love this room." He bounced up and down repeatedly.

"Can I have my penguin?" Luke questioned for the fifth time.

"I'm still looking for it." Ashton groaned, "it's not in the first box."

"But that's my box." Luke whined. "Ash, what if they left him at the group home!"

Ashton's warm hazel eyes met Luke's panicked ones. "Don't worry. I'm sure it's in one of the other boxes." Then, Ashton pointed to Calum, "and stop jumping on the bed before you break something!"

A soft apology came from the room as Ashton continued to look for Luke's toy.

"Ashton!" His blue eyes where brimming with tears.

"I'm looking, calm down. Why don't you go put your pj's on."

"No, I need penguin." The small boy said stubbornly.

"Here baby, take scruffy." Ashton handed him the stuffed bear.
"He's not the same."

"I know honey, but until I find Penguin, Scruffy can keep you company."

"I want my penguin!" Luke screamed, kicking the wall. Ashton closed his eyes. It didn't take very long for his brothers to drive him crazy.


"Alright. Hop in bed. There you go." Ashton pulled the covers over Luke's legs. "If you want to get into your pjs, then go ahead, but stay in your bedroom."

Luke squinted, "am I in trouble?" He asked, from his spot on the bed.

"No. I just think you should get some sleep. It's been a long day."

"Ok." Luke laid back on his bed, slowly, shaking a little. He sat up, before Ashton even left the room. "Are you sure you're not mad at me?"

Ashton snorted, "no, Luke. I'm not mad. Just get some rest."

"It's gonna be impossible without pengy."

Ignoring him, Ashton whispered a soft "I love you." Then he left.

Once Ashton searched through all the boxes and found nothing, he focused on tucking Calum in and then headed to his own bed. Michael was asleep ages ago, so there was no point in going to check on him.

Michael awoke with a start as a loud boom sent tremors through the small house, rattling his nerves as well as the lumpy double mattress. He sat straight up in the bed, the sheets sticking to his body, which was drenched in cold sweat. He couldn't figure out what woke him up until he heard a loud clap of thunder. Michael yelped and quickly hid his head under the covers. Dammit, not only was he the dumbest kid at school but now he was probably the weakest person in Vermont. Seriously, he was fourteen and hiding under his blankets because of a thunderstorm. Gathering up the courage, Michael peeked his head out from the covers and caught a glimpse of lightning through his window. Quickly, he grabbed the blanket and wrapped it around his body then walked out of the bedroom. Michael felt like such a screw up recently.

He crawled into the bathroom and splashed some water on his face. The running water blocked some of the thunder but not enough, and Michael couldn't keep it running because he didn't want to wake anyone up. Maybe he could sleep in Ashton's room? Michael quickly pushed that idea out of his head. He didn't want to wake him up and it's already embarrassing enough to be afraid to sleep in your own bed during a thunderstorm without your other brother. He decided to plop down on the couch; figuring, if he wasn't going to sleep he might as well be comfortable.

The thunder kept rolling and the lighting kept striking and all Michael could think of was how much of a failure he was. Mr. Dejour's laughing face rolled in his head. He heard the mocking teacher insult him repeatedly in his brain. Michael whimpered.

"Mike?" He jumped. Ashton was standing in the living room, holding a cup of water.

"What's wrong? Why are you crying?" Crying? Michael hadn't even realized he had tears streaming down his face.
"It's nothin'," he said solemnly.

"Come on, Mikey, let's go to my room," Ashton said. Shrugging, Michael stood up, wrapped the blanket tightly around himself and followed Ashton to his room. Ashton climbed into bed and patted the space next to him. Hesitantly, Michael laid down, making sure to give him plenty of space.

"Michael come here," he said, pulling Michael closer to him. Michael laid his head on Ashton's chest, closing his eyes. The lightning struck again. Failure. His laughing face boring into his mind.

"Shhh…baby, it's okay. Oh Mikey, what's wrong?" Ashton asked, his voice gentle. It was then Michael realized he was sobbing.

"School….failing…worthless…" He gasped between breaths. Ashton tightened his grip around his little brother, holding him as he cried.

"Michael, it's okay. I've got you. Whatever it is that's bothering you, we will deal with it together." Michael nodded as the tears slowly began to stop. He was safe with Ashton. Everything would be alright. The lightning faded and the thunder ceased in Michael's mind.

"Goodnight, Michael. I love you," Ashton said, kissing his forehead.

"Love you, too, Ash. So much."

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone. Thanks for continuing to comment/like this story. Also, thank you even if you just read it without responding. I use to do that so I understand and don't want anyone to feel left out :)
But seriously, I love comments <3
It wasn't my fault!

Chapter Notes

So I know Ashton just got his brother's back and he already has to punish them, but this is for the person who wanted to see the boys be a little mischievous. They will deal with Michael's issue soon. Not yet though.

I hope this isn't a complete fail.

 Alright boys, Mr. Boward and I will be in the dinner room making our schedule, don't bother us until we are finished, okay?"

A chorus of "yes Ashton" roared out.

"Thank you."

Twenty minutes later, Ashton and Mr. Boward jumped at the loudest noise they ever heard. Both adults ran into the living room where they saw a lamp smashed on the ground. But it wasn't an ordinary lamp, it was, a lamp from the second floor.

"My God, they really do make a mess don't they?" The social worker said, shaking his head at the boys.

Ashton glared up at his three guilty looking brothers who were standing on the stairs.

"How did you manage to knock a lamp down the stairs?" Ashton asked, placing his hands on his hips.

"What lamp?" Michael asked innocently, a cheeky smile on his face.

That comment made Ashton's blood boil. "This lamp!" He screeched, pointing to the fallen object.

"It-it fell." Luke whimpered peaking his head out from behind Michael. He quickly retreated back to his hiding spot when Ashton's face remained red.

"And it has syrup all over it! You boys better have a good explanation for this."

"Ashton -"

"Save it Michael. I want to speak with Luke first."

The boys gasped. Michael bent down and whispered hastily into Luke's ear while Ashton climbed the stairs.

"Hi there, Ashton." Michael said when he reached the top of the stairs. Ashton reached over, pulling Luke away from the group.

He led the younger boy into the kitchen. "Alright. Let's hear it."

Luke starting shaking in his chair, "it wasn't my fault!" He yelled, "it was Michael's fault. I was just
getting myself a lego waffle --actually, it was for you, Ashton."
"Of course it was." Ashton sassed.
"Yeah, well anyway, I was in the kitchen. Right next to the dining room when Michael walked in acting all reckless. He started making fun of me, like he always does and he told me he could eat more waffles than me."
"Luke what does this have to do with the lamp being broken?"
"I'm getting to that." The boy snapped.
Ashton pointed a finger in his face, "one more snappy remark like that and I'll beat your butt so hard you won't be sitting for a week."
"Luke. You broke a lamp from the second floor? It can't possibly be an accident. You had to have throw it down the stairs somehow."
"Not me! It was Michael, I'm telling you. Look, he stole my waffles to prove that he can eat more than me and then he ran upstairs. I chased him up there to get my food back. Once I was upstairs he held it over my head so I jumped to get the waffle. When that didn't work, I pushed Michael backwards and he hit the lamp. That's when he picked it up and threw it at me. If I didn't dodge away I would be seriously hurt right now."
Rubbing his temples, Ashton asked, "was Calum involved at all?"
"No" Luke promised.
Ashton sat back in his chair, "alright fine. You can go, but if I find out you lied to me, you will be in big trouble."
"It's the truth." Luke stated, putting a hand over his heart.
Ashton pointed to a corner in the room.
"What do you want me to do over there?"
"Go stand over there."
"You're kidding right? I'm not a baby. I'm not standing in the corner."
"Luke. I want to make sure you can't share stories with your brothers, so go stand where I can see you."
"Fine" Luke huffed, "but I'm not looking at the wall."
Ashton decided not to fight it. He went back into the livingroom to grab one of the other boys who were helping Mr. Boward clean up.
"Oh, sir, you don't have to do that." Ashton told the social worker.
"It's no problem. I figured you would have your hands full. Once were done doing this we can discuss a list of discipline and rules for your brothers to follow."
"Yes sir. That sounds good. I'm sorry this had to happen the day after the court case."

"It's fine. This is the perfect demonstration of life, right?"

Ashton nodded, "yeah. I'm going to steal Calum from you."

The tan boy walked into the kitchen with Ashton, sniffling slightly. "I'm sorry, Ashton. I didn't do anything wrong. It was Michael and Luke."

"Why don't you tell me what happened." Ashton said as he took a seat across from his younger brother.

"Okay, so I was in my room when Luke forced me to play ball."

"Hold up, he forced you to play?"

"Yeah, with him. See he was bored so he wanted me to play footie with him. Obviously I told him playing ball in the house is unacceptable, but you know Luke."

"What is that suppose to mean!" Luke shouted from his spot in the corner.

"Quiet. Turn around and look at the wall."

"But Ashton."

"Luke, turn around."

The youngest turned and Calum continued, "so Luke told me I had to play ball or else he wouldn't make me a waffle. And I love lego waffles, with blueberries and syrup."

"Get on with it, Cal."

Calum rolled his brown eyes dramatically, "you are so pushy but fine. So basically, speed up time and Michael was walking upstairs with my waffles along with Luke. They got into a fight as usual. Luke pushed Michael. My ball accidentally hit Michael which knocked him into the lamp. Then Michael, picked up a lamp and tossed it at me"


"Whatever he told you isn't true."

"He told me you didn't do anything."

Calum's mouth formed a big 'o'. He laughed nervously, "Luke's actually telling the truth." Calum scooted off his chair.

"Stand in a corner." Calum cringed.

Finally, Ashton dragged Michael into the kitchen and sat him in the chair.

"Ashton, whatever they told you isn't true. I'm innocent."

"I find that hard to believe, but let's hear it."

"So I was doing my homework -"

"Oh bull shit." Calum spat.
"Yeah that's such a lie." Luke added.

"Boys turn around and be quiet." Ashton warned.

"Sorry Ashton." They responded.

"Anyways, I was just finishing my homework when Calum and Luke kicked a soccer ball into my room and started bothering me. So I told them to stop playing ball in the house and go make something to eat. Luke decided to make waffles for him and Calum. I went down stairs to help because I'm nice like that. But Luke was being a little brat and decided to pour way too much syrup on the waffles and threaten to toss the waffles in my face if I didn't let him play ball. Of course, I refused to give in to his threats. He chased me upstairs and Calum ambushed me with the soccer ball. The ball nearly knocked me downstairs, if hadn't held on to the lamp I would have died!"

"Oh stop. That's not what happened -"

"Quiet." Ashton yelled, "anything else, Michael?"

"Well just the obvious. I held on to the lamp to save me so the lamp fell backwards and tumbled down the stairs. Then Luke tossed the waffles on top of the mess."

"He's lying, Ashton!" Luke cried, walking out of his spot and shoving Michael. "Stop trying to get me in trouble."

"You're doing a fine job of that all by yourself." Michael laughed, but Calum silenced him when he took Luke's side.

"You need to tell the truth." Calum said to him.

"No, you tell the truth." Michael said, rolling his green eyes dramatically. Calum walked behind Michael, bent down and tugged Michael's blue underwear up.

"Ow." Michael hissed. His cheeks heated up as Calum laughed at him so he grabbed a fist full of Calum's hair and tugged...hard.

"Stop!" Calum screamed, tears rushing to his eyes.

"Leave him alone". Luke shouted, pushing Michael again. This time the older boy stumbled into the glass vase on the counter top.

Sneezing his eyes shut, Michael clenched his teeth together and backed away slowly once the case hit the ground with a crash."Oops."

No one dared to look at Ashton. Just the thought of what he might look like was horrendous.

The beautiful glass vase laid splattered across the kitchen floor. a pile of flowers laid clumped together in the middle of the mess.

No one said anything until Mr. Boward walked into the room. "What was that noise?" He paused, looking startled.

"What should I do?" Ashton asked the social worker, his voice a very scary calm.

Mr. Boward sighed. "Was it an accident?"

"No they all shoved eachother and lied to me about what happened earlier. Can I spank them or are
you going to report me for that?" Ashton raised his eyebrow, a deadly frown plastered to his usually smiling face.

Michael raised his hand, "You should probably report him if he does that."

Ashton slammed a dish towel on the counter, effectively scaring them all.

"I won't report you, Mr. Irwin. You have every right under the circumstances, however, I will advise you to calm down first. Take a few minutes to cool off. Walk to your room, sit down for five minutes and come back. I'll keep the boys here. We will start cleaning up."

"Ashton, we're sorry." Luke said as Ashton walked away. Luke was about to follow but Mr. Boward said, "Now is not the time to bother your brother, young man."

Five minutes later a calmer Ashton appeared. "Thank you for all you have done today, Mr. Boward."

"You're welcome."

There was an awkward moment of silence, because Ashton wasn't sure how to ask for some privacy.

"I'm going to punish them now."

Mr. Boward nodded, but remained in the room.

"Ashton please don't." Luke begged, "it really wasn't my fault. It was an accident."

"Guys this is not about who's fault it is. This is about you lying to me and fighting with each other. Come on. We just got back together yesterday and now here you are screaming at one another, and pushing each other."

Luke looked at his feet, feeling ashamed.

"Luke, Calum, go put your nose in a corner." Ashton commanded. After a few moments without the boys complying with his order, Ashton spoke firmly again. "Now!"

Ashton watched as his littlest brothers sulked off to the corner quietly. Ashton looked at Michael and the boy slumped his shoulders.

"Just get it over with. " Ashton grabbed Michael's hand and led him over to the chair.

"I'm sorry Michael, but all stories led back to you. Plus you pulled Calum's hair. Plus you lied."

He sat down and reached out with his free hand to tug Michael over his knee.

Ashton was rather shocked that Michael was willingly submitting. Usually the kid would try to fight Ashton tooth and bone. "You're awful quiet."

"I shouldn't have pulled Calum's hair." He whispered, "I made him cry."

Since Michael knew exactly what he did was wrong, all that was left was for Ashton to punish him.

By the tenth swat, Michael let out a tiny whimper, signaling to Ashton that he needed to end the spanking soon.

"You won't be fighting with your brothers again, will you?" Ashton asked as he tipped Michael
forward.

"No, I won't." Michael promised.

As soon as the dreadful task was complete, Ashton, enveloped him into a tight hug.

"Are you alright?"

The boy calmed his breathing and nodded. He would be fine.

Ashton couldn't ignore the slight sounds of crying coming Luke in the corner. He knew how much worst is was for Luke to wait for a punishment -but, it felt especially terrible for him to have to listen to his older brother get spanked.

"Michael, don't lie to me about stuff. If you would just come to me and tell me what happened we could talk it out. I promise I won't smack you if you tell me the truth."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Cool. Maybe I'll try the truth sometime."

"Well, then I think it's Luke's turn now, switch places with him. Michael walked over to where Luke was and placed a hand on his back.

"Don't cry." He whispered, "you're fine." Michael gave him a hug and allowed Luke to cling to him for a bit like a little koala until Ashton called him over.

"Come on Luke, you know I'm not going to hurt you." Ashton said, kissing his youngest brother's head before placing him over his lap.

"Alright, I'm punishing you for pushing Michael and lying. Pushing can hurt. What if you knocked him against a hot stove. Or what if you push him into something and it breaks -like the vase just did. Now we have a mess and a damaged vase.

"I'm sorry." Luke mumbled, "I didn't mean for him to break the vase."

"I know you didn't. But that's my point. You wouldn't mean for your brother to get hurt either, but that could happen too."

"I get it, I said I'm sorry. Let's move on please."

Luke yelped at the harsh smack applied to the center of his butt. Ashton finished it up fast, and before Luke knew it he was scooped up and cuddled to Ashton's chest.


Ashton snorted, "it must be my cologne." The social worker chuckled along with him. "That's interesting."

Finally, Ashton pulled Calum over to the chair and did the exact same to him.

The middle kid seemed to take it the hardest, apologizing to Ashton relentlessly.

"Hey now. It's alright. You didn't let me down."
"Yes I did."

"No Calum, it's alright."

"I should have just told you the truth. And what was I thinking giving Michael a wedgie."

"Yeah, that hurt man!" Michael joked from the corner of the room.

"Come on guys. Let's go pick out a movie for you to watch. I'll clean the kitchen floor."

"I can do it." Mr. Boward offered, but Ashton politely refused.

Once the kids were tucked under the blankets on the sofa, Ashton went back into the kitchen to finish discussing schedules.

"Hey Ashton, you did good." Mr. Boward said, "I can see that you are really trying to keep a balance between fun and discipline in this house and I think you are doing a great job."

"You don't think I was too hard on them."

Mr. Boward laughed, "trust me, I've seen my fair share of harsh families and yours doesn't even come close."

"Is that good?"

"Yeah. Like I said, you're doing good."
A shopping Day

Chapter Notes

I apologize again for the filler chapter. I want to go into detail with some of the problems on this story, but I've been too busy to write anything. Plus I have had some writers block. I will get in to it more when my Work gives me a break.

As for now, here is a silly chapter.

Ashton looked over his list one last time before placing it back into his pocket. Lifting up the stack of boxes he started walking down the mall hallway.

"This is actually kinda fun." He said, trying to see around the boxes to make sure he didn't bump into people. A elderly woman with a walker nearly cussed him out earlier when he whammed her into the wall on accident. "I have to admit, when Mr. Boward suggested we go for a shopping trip to spend quality time together I thought he was ridiculous. But he was right, we did need to buy some new clothes. After all Luke's legs are growing daily." Ashton giggled to himself. "I wonder how tall you'll be Luke? Do you think he will out grow you Calum?"

Ashton halted his walking when no one answered him. "Boys are you even listening to me?" He asked, turning around to face them, only to realized they weren't behind him. "Mother of -" Ashton muttered some horrible things under his breath as he walked back towards the toy shop where his brothers had spent extra time looking around at. As soon as Ashton arrived he noticed his three brothers scattered around the store playing with the stuffed animals, or looking at gaming equipment. Calum was busy stuffing a cart full of basketballs, footballs, and soccer balls.

Ashton walked over and snatched the cart away, "Absolutely not."

"Aw but Ashton!" Calum whined, "they're having a sale."

"No, Calum. You know how we are with money right now. We're lucky we can even afford to buy new clothes."

"I though you were getting more money thanks to the schedule Mr. Boward set you up on."

"I am."

"Then let's buy the soccer balls!" Calum smiled, dragging the cart away from Ashton.

"No." His older brother stated firmly making Calum pout. "Oh come on. Why does Luke get to buy all the stuffed animals he wants and I don't even get a few soccer balls?"

"Luke doesn't get to buy all the stuffed animals he wants."

Calum raised his eyebrows, "really, cause he already has four carts filled so..."

Ashton looked over at his youngest brother. It was true, Luke was filling carts up with every animal in the store. When Ashton got over there, Luke was introducing the toy lions to the Tigers.
"Oh Hi Ashton." Luke greeted, placing a stuffed gorilla in his hand. "You can buy him first. And then you can buy this cart, and then ."

Ashton placed the gorilla back on the shelf while his younger brother babbled on. "Luke, I'm not buying you any toys today. This is a clothes only shopping trip remember?"

"That's not what Michael said."

Ashton groaned, slapping his hand over his face. "I should have know." He laughed at himself for a few seconds, a beautiful high pitched sound before he went over to the gaming section to find the real culprit. Michael was at the front counter, flirting with some high school girl with red hair pulled back in a bun.

"Yeah, I graduated last year. Look, I know I don't have enough money on me right now, but if you let me get it, I promise to take you on a ride on my Harley Davison."

Michael winked at the girl before noticing his older brother standing in the corner with his arms crossed. Michael's face lit up with a cheeky smile.

"Hi Ash. What brings you here?" He then whispered to the girl, "this is my best friend. He's in my geometry class. He can be a little pushy and hard headed sometimes, you gotta watch out."

"Michael, let's go."

"Go where?" He tuned to the girl, "see he can also be a little delusional. People think it has something to do with the milk he sniffed up his nose in the second grade."

"NOW." Ashton barked, dragging Michael by the collar of his shirt.

"It was nice meeting you." He shouted towards the snickering girl. When they were safely tucked in the back of the store, Ashton shook Michael's shoulders.

"What do you think your doing? not paying for something is illegal. I can't believe I have to remind you of that."

Michael shuttered, remembering the first time his parents caught him stealing something.

"I wasn't stealing it. I was trying to convince that girl to pay for it."

Ashton dropped his head, "never mind, go get your brothers we are stopping at one last shop and then we are leaving."

Michael's eyes traveled to his favorite video game, sitting perfectly on the shelf. His eyes lit up and he hurried to find his younger brothers.

"Alright everyone lets follow Ashton to the next store."

Ashton nodded, laughing a little, "maybe we can stop at target on the way home and buy some Icys and hot dogs for dinner?"

"That sounds great! We should totally do that." Michael said following Ashton a few feet and then snatching his two younger brothers hands and pulling them back.

"What are you doing, Michael?" Luke said, freeing his hand from Michael's gross sweaty hold.

"How would you guys like it if we bought a soccer ball and stuffed animal?"
The two kids gasped, looking at each other then giggling mischievously, because, hey, they were about to get what they wanted.

"All we need to do is find a way to earn some money. And luckily for you, I already found the perfect way. See that ad, over by the gaming section?"

Calum read off the sign, "wrestle Thorn the Great and win 50 dollars."

"Look at the picture of the guy. He's a kid, about the size of an ant."

"Yeah, even I could beat him." Luke agreed.

"Glad to hear you say that, Lukey boy. I'll sign you up."

"Wait? Seriously? I don't know if I could actually take him on. I mean, you two are way bigger."

"Oh, you'll be fine." Michael said, waving his hand around. "Sign ups are in the wrestling arena."

The kids went into the wrestling area where they spotted a giant man, tossing a body bag on the ground repeatedly.

"I feel sorry for whoever has to go against him." Luke shuttered.

Calum paused, his mouth dropped open and he tried to speak but nothing was coming out.

Michael walked over to him and smiled, "it's all set. I signed Luke up."

"But Michael look!" Calum shrieked, he pointed to a giant sign that had Thorn's picture on it. He was the giant wrestler who was currently lifting three hundred pound weights.

"Holy shit." Michael bit his lip, "talk about false advertising."

Luke started shivering, "Michael! This is all your fault. Get me out of this!" he hissed.

"Okay, relax. I know how you can win this."

"Win! Are you kidding? Luke can't face a grown adult man with muscles the size of mountains!"

"No. But look, he can run away from the guy. Anything counts in wrestling right? And all it takes is one match to get the 50 dollars. He doesn't have to win."

"I don't want to die either!" Luke said.

"That's why you're going to run." Michael said, smiling triumphantly. He reached into his pocket and pulled out three ketchup packs.

"Just squirt this at him if he gets to close to you."

Luke stared blankly at the ketchup packets. "I'm going to die."

"That's not the spirit I'm looking for." Michael said, rubbing Luke's shoulders like he saw in Rocky. "Get in that ring and stall him for like twenty minutes and we'll be good."

Luke whined, walking hesitantly to the ring. He was so small it was easy for him to roll under the elastic rope. The giant beast of a man looked Luke up and down.
"You are my opponent? Kid, you're a kid."


"Did you make a wrong turn?"

"no unfortunately I'm in the right place." Luke gulped.

The wrestler looked over at his boss, "I'm not wrestling him, he's a kid."

"The mall folk pay good money to see a match go down. So you better wrestle." The man behind the booth shouted, unnecessarily banging his stand for emphasis.

Thorn, the wrestler, apologized before aiming his fist straight for Luke. The younger boy jumped out of the way, diving on to the mat.

"Michael! help!" He squealed.

"Run Luke, just run around him."

The younger boy picked himself up off the floor and started running.

"Wow, he is fast." Calum admired from his safe spot on the ground.

"Yeah look at him go." Michael smiled, eyes wandering to the clock. Hopefully the match will be over soon.

Calum tugged Michael's sleeve, "we got bigger problems. Ashton's coming over here."

"Aw No!" Michael said stomping his foot. "I had this all planned out. Why does he have to ruin it!"

Michael rolled his eyes as Ashton ran over to them and grabbed their arms, "what we're you thinking? Running away in the middle of the store? You are not four years old guys. I expect you to know better."

A scream from Luke caught Ashton's attention. "Oh my God!" Ashton cried as he witnessed Luke shrunken back in the corner of the ring with this heavy man about to clobber him. Going in protective mode, Ashton started racing for the ring only to be stopped my Michael pulling him back.

"Wait, Ashton. Let Thorn the Great finish Luke off so we can at least have the 50 bucks."

If Ashton's flaring nostrils could spit fire they would have. Michael shrunk back, "or not." He whispered.

A few seconds later Ashton managed to get on the square stage and pick Luke up over the elastic rope.

"Ashton." He squealed, hugging his older brother, "boy am I glad to see you."

Ashton huffed. He set Luke down on the ground and said to the crowd, "I'm sorry but the match is over."

Everyone in the crowd started booing. Thorn the Great asked the crowd who wanted to go next thus shutting the people up.

In his car, Ashton had just finished unloading his packages in the trunk when Calum had the nerve to
ask, "are we still going to target?"

Ashton slammed the trunk door.

"Good job nimrod." Michael said, giving Calum a good shove.

"What, I was just asking." The younger boy whined, rubbing his sore side.

Ashton opened the driver's door saying, "that depends, can you three promise to stay in the food court and out of trouble?"

They all nodded. "Yeah. Uh huh."

"Do you promise not to fight any wrestlers?"

"Yes Ashton."

"Alright. Then let's go to target." The curly blonde said. He really wanted to end their bonding night on a good note. Even if that meant he had to sacrifice the parenting role for one night. In a way, Ashton liked it like that. Just him and his brothers hanging out and making stupid decisions. Besides, he will talk with them about it tomorrow.
I'm sorry it's been so long. As I said in the last chapter this summer job has been keeping me busy. Hopefully my schedule will shrink.

Anyway, to make up for the absence, here is a long chapter with a lot happening! :)

Ashton giggled wildly as he slide down a giant slide, with his brothers by his side.

"Oh my Gosh! Ashton it's like a Giant castle! Do you see this place? It's amazing!" Calum screamed running up the indoor playground steps.

"I know Cal. I see." Ashton laughed, tossing a bean bag in the hole. Cheering at his own success.

"I think you're having more fun than Luke and Calum." Michael said from his spot at the table outside of the netted playground.

"Yeah." Ashton admitted, "because it's actually really fun. I mean, come on, Michael, look at this place. It's like a McDonalds playground times four hundred."

Michael snorted, "it's cool...for an eight year old."

Ashton tilted his head, challengingly. "Maybe you should get in here and see just how much fun it is to be eight."

"I think I'll pass." He sipped his Pepsi and stared out the window.

With a heavy sigh, Ashton was about to go over and talk to Michael, when Luke came tumbling down the slide.

"Ashton!" The younger boy squealed, bouncing around Ashton's legs, "follow me up the tunnels."

Ashton couldn't deny his brother fun, so he agreed to run up the blue tubes laughing as they got higher and higher.

"Look what's down here!" They crawled through a few more tunnels and found a walkway with a balance beam and secure netting all around. Across even more yellow tunnels and hey were suddenly on a pirate ship. Luke stuck his face against the plastic window feeling like he was going to fall, but realizing he couldn't due to the plastic bowl shaped window holding him securely fastened to the top of the playground.

"This was the best idea ever." Ashton heard Luke say as they wandered towards the wavy slide with bumps in it.

"I'll race you!" Ashton called out, his heart swelling.

"You're on." Luke pushed himself down the slide first. Gasping, Ashton followed, coming in last place at the bottom.

Ashton shook his head, "you cheater."

"Am not. You could've went whenever you wanted. Obviously I have faster reflexes."

"Oh okay then." Ashton said. He was about to follow Luke back up the steps, but he caught a glimpse of Michael checking his phone and he knew he needed to talk to his other brother. This was suppose to be a part of their family bonding. It wasn't right for Ashton to bond with both Luke and Calum and not Michael.

"Are you coming?" Luke questioned, his little sock feet hanging from the matted steps.

"In a little while. I'm going to talk to Michael first. Why don't you play with Calum."


"What's wrong with that?"

It clicked in Ashton's brain the time that Luke fell off a trampoline when he was five and needed stitches in his leg. The boy swore off of trampolines that day.

"Oh right. Okay then, go tell Calum he should ride the slides with you."

"I can do it myself. I'm not a baby, jeesh."

"Sorry." Ashton laughed.

The oldest walked over to the table, exiting the playground room in his black socks. He smiled at Michael, then tossed himself down on a seat.

"So, I can't help but notice you have seemed a bit more...anxious since that day I came home late and all the crazy stuff happened."

To Michael, this statement appeared out of the blue. He wasn't expecting Ashton to dive right into his personal life, nor did he want his older brother in his business. Naturally, an irritated glance would get the message across, or so Michael thought.

"What's going on, Michael?"

So much for body language. If he wanted Ashton off his back, Michael was going to have to play dumb.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you." Ashton stumbled over his words. "Why were you crying in my bedroom a few nights ago?"

"I don't know. It was raining. I hate when it rains, you know that!" Michael started taking the defensive approach. Crossing his arms to protect himself from further intrusion by Ashton.

"True, but you said something about school? And failing? Are you failing school?"

Boy, Ashton just wasn't getting the hint. Michael nearly groaned. "Maybe I am." He muttered. It was time to test the waters. How would Ashton respond if he found out Michael was failing?
"Do you need help studying? A tutor maybe?"

"No. I'm just stupid." Michael stated with confidence.

Ashton blinked a few times. That's probably not a good sign.

"Excuse me? What did you just say about yourself?"

Retreat Michael, retreat.

"Um. I said. I was Cupid! Yep, I was playing Cupid at school which is why I'm failing. Girls, am I right?"

"Michael, You are NOT stupid. I don't want to ever hear you say that about yourself again."

Michael scoffed, "you don't know that Ashton. Maybe I am."

"You're not."

"What if I am? So what?"

"What do you mean 'so what'?" Ashton asked.

And Michael couldn't do this anymore. He was done with this conversation.

"Oh, so now you're going to shut me out?" Ashton raised his voice. "You have got to be kidding me. Come on, Michael. I know you aren't stupid because you come up with the most genius plots for trouble."

"Then how come you always tell me I'm stupid for doing that crap?" Michael's hurt green-eyes stung Ashton.

"Michael, I'm sorry. I never meant for you to think bad about yourself. I just say things like that because I want you to understand how dangerous some things can be. Like stealing, and drinking and smoking. It's all dangerous and in my opinion stupid to do to yourself. But it doesn't mean, you're stupid."

Michael sighed, trying to find the power to speak, but a lump in his throat was tightening. "It's not your're fault, Ashton. It's a lot of other things."

"Like what?"

"Like..." Michael sighed, and wiped his tears in his sleeve. "My teacher, he keeps telling me I can't do it. That I'm a failure. I think he's right, Ash. I keep failing all my classes. I'm not smart. I should just give up now and accept my fate."

Ashton grabbed Michael's tear streaked face in his hands.

"You are not a failure Michael. You wanna know what dad told me on my first day of school? He said, just try your best. That's all you can do. It's worked pretty well for me. I tried my best to get you guys back didn't I?"

Michael nodded.

"Then that's what I want you to do. I don't care if you fail as long as I know you tried. And as for that asshole teacher of yours." Ashton laughed dangerously, "oh I'm going to have a talk with him.
Actually, scratch that, I'm going straight to the principal."

Michael laughed through his sniffles, "can you get him fired?"

"I'll try my best."

The two brothers shared a laugh. Michael leaning on Ashton's arm.

"I'm so glad I have you, Ashton. I'm sorry if I drive you crazy sometimes."

"It's alright, Michael. You can make it up to me by racing me down the slides."

"You're on!"

"Order pizza!" Luke said from his spot on the couch. They had just arrived home from the indoor playground and it was already six in the evening.

"Ok, ok. Turn on the TV." Ashton said from the kitchen, he had the phone tangled around his waist.

"Hello. Hi, this is Ashton Irwin. I'm Michael's older brother. Can I speak with the principal?"

"The proper term is 'may I'?"

Ashton had to cover his mouth with his hand to keep himself from groaning into the secretary of the school's ear.

"May I speak with the Principal."

"Of course. I'll patch you through." She snipped.

"Thank you." Ashton growled. A few moments later, Principal Richardson was on the phone.

"Hello, Ashton. What can I do for you?" He said, sounding like a man who wanted to be doing anything else but this.

"I'll cut right to the chase. My brother is being bullied by his Teacher. I would like you to set up a meeting for him and I."

The principal signed, "alright. Give me his name and come in on Tuesday Afternoon."

Ashton bit his lip, "sorry, that won't fit on my schedule."

He inwardly cringed at how awful that sounded. The principal seemed to think so too, "really, Ashton? Are you so important now that you can't find time to come in on a Tuesday afternoon -"

"I work on Tuesday. Honestly, my social worker just set up a schedule for me to follow closely. I can come in on Sunday?"

"I'm sorry, but we won't be here Sunday."

"Alright. How about Monday morning at six thirty?"

"Fine." The principal snipped before the phone line went dead. Oh this was going to be fun, Ashton could already tell. He picked up the phone and dialed for a big box of warm cheesy pizza and wings.
"Luke, Michael, get you butts down here, the pizza is here!"

Luke and Michael came running down the stairs. Michael leaped up on the couch, over Calum's sprawled out legs.

"I want the one with extra cheese!" Luke called out.

"The whole pizza has extra cheese." Ashton shushed his brother by putting a paper plate in front of him.

"What's on TV?"

"I'm watching a mystery movie." Calum said, laughing as he chewed on the straw to his soda.

The four brothers sat around the TV and shared a few theories on who they think killed the maid. Once the movie was over they shut off the TV and started talking about everything in life. Finally, when the brothers disbursed, it was late and they were heading to bed.

"Ashton, I just wanted to thank you again for finding my Penguin." Luke whispered later that night when Michael and Calum were out of ear shot.

Cracking a smile, Ashton ruffled Luke's hair up. "No problem kiddo, it was just mixed in the box with your paperwork."

He had no idea how it got in there, but it did. Luke, was very grateful though, especially since the penguin was a gift from his parents.

"I was wondering if I could have an extra blanket for him."

"You want an extra blanket for your penguin?"


"No. He wants another blanket."

"Alright. I'll dig one out of the attic."

"Thanks Ashton." Luke gave him a kiss on the cheek before scurrying off to bed.

Ashton sighed at the tedious task of trying to get into the abandoned attic that no one has been in for years. He lifted the latch and climbed up the stairs. He was expecting so old cobwebs and maybe some disturbing bugs, but he didn't expect to find so many pictures. Though he did see his fair share of cobwebs, the pictures hiding out in the attic were so much more mesmerizing.

There were old black and white pictures of a couple of kids that looked like his parents. Wedding photos, with his dad in a black tux and mom in a stunning white dress. Dancing photos of his mom when she seven and enrolled in gymnastics and dance class. Her hair was so blonde, Ashton had to look at his father to understand why his hair was much darker than her's.

Ashton picked a few photo albums up and then he found the baby albums of himself and his brother's. Oh God they were such dorky kids. Ashton had on a superhero cape for goodness sake! He never took that thing off. A part of Ashton wonders why he ever did take it off. It was so much easier with the cape on.

Calum and Luke only had baby pictures in the albums. It seems like the time they rolled around mom
was getting tired of taking pictures of everything they did. Ashton put the photos down, and tried to remember why he came up in the attic in the first place. But then, a promisingly warm blue blanket caught his attention and he went to find Luke.

His youngest brother was curled up under a big soft white comforter. He had his penguin pressed to his chest and his eyes were closed but he wasn't sleeping peacefully.

The phrase "Here you go, kiddo" left Ashton's mouth before he could get a fully glimpse at Luke's furrowed eyebrows and pained expression.

Luke withered and whimpered in his sleep, kicking the sheets every now and then. Ashton sat down on the bed, "baby, are you alright." He patted Luke's butt, and softly shook his arm.


"Luke wake up." Ashton said a little more firmly. "I have the blanket for your penguin."


"Yeah, your penguin's right here."

"Mummy." He said softly, rubbing his face against the soft material of the stuffed animal.

"You miss her, don't you?"


Ashton continued to rub the penguin across Luke's warm forehead. Soon the boy began to wake up. His eyes opened and he looked up at Ashton with wide fear stricken eyes.

"Ashton -" his voice broke, "I had a nightmare again."

Ashton gave him a sympathetic look. "I know, I saw you. It looked like you were in pain?"

Luke nodded, "my nightmares are always painful."

"You want to tell me what they are about?"

"No." Luke whispered, ripping his eyes away from Ashton's.

"Why not?"

"Cause once you know, you can't unknow." Luke said honestly.

Ashton just stared for a little while, his heart aching for Luke. He knew he needed to express himself and talk about these nightmares. He needs to get them off his chest.

"maybe I should take you to a therapist." Ashton muttered, rocking the distraught child.

"What?" Luke pulled back, to look Ashton in the eye, "I don't need a therapist! Don't take me there!"

"Luke, it's not a bad thing. Therapy can really help you with these nightmares."

"I'm not crazy."
"I know you're not. You don't have to be crazy to go to a therapist. Lots of people do it."

"But not anyone in the third grade. I'll get laughed at, Ashton." he whined.

"No you won't." Ashton promised, "because they don't have to know. It can be your little secret."

"Mikey will laugh at me."

"Then I'll beat his butt."


"I love you too." Ashton laid Luke back down and planted a kiss on his head before heading to his own bedroom.

He wrote 'call Mr. Boward.' On his schedule for tomorrow to ask about calling a therapist. That will of course cost money, but with Mr. Boward's saving advice hopefully Ashton can have insurance to cover it.

Ashton woke up at 5:30am to the sound of his loud annoying alarm clock. He turned it to snooze and slept for another 5 minutes before dragging himself out of his warm sanctuary of a bed.

He brewed a cup of coffee with his favorite hazelnut creamer while looking over his schedule for the day. He had to attend parenting classes today, a request from the court that Ashton couldn't deny, and he had to call Mr. Boward about the therapist thing. Plus he had Michael's teacher conference to attend. Then he had a retail job to work in the afternoon so the babysitter will be here when the boys come home from school.

His brothers were starting to wake up at the top of the stairs, Ashton could hear the hammering footsteps. He decided to jump in the shower real quick before his brothers needed him to drive them to school. Once Ashton was out of the shower, he combed his hair, dried it, then tossed on a soft grey shirt. His first job of the day was working at a retail store, so he could wear whatever he wanted to.

When he walked back in the kitchen he was proud to see all three of his brothers actually awake and eating something, even if it was sugary cereal and toast. By sugar, Ashton means mountains of sugar. His younger brothers have been know to scoop spoonfuls of sugar into their cereal.

"Hey Ashton." Calum giggled from his spot at the table, "what are we doing today?"

Ashton smiled, while pouring himself a cup of coffee. "Well, today is Monday, so we're back to the daily grind of school and homework."

The boys faces dropped. "That's not fun." Calum said spinning back around him his chair and shoving Lucky Charms in his mouth. "If I would have known that, I wouldn't have got up."

"Hey." Ashton placed the coffee cup down, "don't say that. I'm proud of you three for getting up today. That's a good habit to get into. Trust me, I wish I would have gotten into that habit when I was your age."

Ashton crossed his arms as Michael yawned saying, "I think I'm going to go back to sleep."

"Oh no you don't. We have a meeting with your teacher today."

"Aw Ashton. Do I have to go to that?" Michael whined.
"Yes you do. Now get your backpack and your shoes."

"Can't we finish watching this episode of Power Rangers?" Luke asked eyes glued to the livingroom TV. It was a miracle Luke could see the screen all the way from the kitchen.

"No." Came his brother's response.

Luke rolled his eyes, but clicked the TV off nonetheless.

"Fine. I won't see how they save the day. It's cool, the city will just burn in turmoil."

No one responded to Luke, they were too busy shoveling papers into their folders and running to the car.

"Come on guys get into the car." Ashton called from outside. Luke was about to go, but the remote was right in his hand and when he turned the TV on his show was back on. Luke stared at the doorway and then back at the TV. Ashton would come and get him if he really wanted to, right? Well, the young lad was about to find out. He sat on the floor so he wouldn't be noticed and continued watching his favorite show.

Michael was last to the car, taking his good old time considering he was not looking forward to confronting his teacher.

"Come on Mike, I'll be right beside you the whole time." Ashton assured him with a cheesy smile. The teen growled in response, "my name is Michael. Not Mike or Mikey. I'm not five years old anymore." Spat the upset teen.

"Seriously Michael get your ass over here. We can't be late today," Ashton said more sternly than before. Michael hopped in the front seat with an attitude and Calum rolled his eyes because this was going to be another one of those rides.

Calum seemed to be the only one who noticed the empty seat in the back of the car, but he didn't say anything. Ashton and Michael were already bickering so it was too late to get a word in anyway.

Once Ashton arrived at the school, he parked the car and instructed the kids in the back seat to go to class and have a good day. Without sparing a second glance, he took Michael's hand and led him to the school building. In two seconds Michael had yanked his hand away from Ashton, sending him the coldest stare. "Come on, Ashton. This is the place of torture. I don't want people to have a reason to torture me."

Ashton apologized. He babied his brothers too much, he had to admit it. In his defense, though, his brothers were still young. But Ashton knew he would be babying them even when they are thirty. He really was turning into his father.

They picked their way through the sea of vans and Hondas to where the front entrance was. The double doors were swarming with kids and some parents. I remember when I was like that, Ashton thought bitterly. He was a normal teenager who excelled at music class. Now he was a young adult just floating above water and everyday it felt like he was sinking further and further down.

For a moment Ashton felt a blooming, bittersweet feeling of pity for his brothers. Before Mom and Dad had died they had been a normal family. Things could have been perfect. His brothers could have a better chance at achieving their dreams.

Ashton shook his head and awkwardly pushed his way through the crowd. The principals office was located on the first floor along with the elementry students. Ashton saw Calum scurry to his locker
but he didn't see Luke anywhere.

"Ashton! So good to see you again." Principal Richardson greeted, extending his hand to the distracted boy. Ashton grasped it and shook. "You too sir." He said politely.

"I hope this doesn't take long. I am a busy man as you know." The principal said, taking a seat behind his big wooden desk.

Michael followed Ashton's lead and sat when he sat.

"Alright Mr. Irwin. Let's cut right to the chase. What has Mr. Williams done?"

Ashton cleared his throat, "well for starters, this man has been calling Michael names in front of the class. Personally, I don't believe in public humiliation as a form of discipline so-

Ashton was cut off by the principals laughter. "I'm sorry, Ashton. But what could you possibly know about discipline. After all, it was only a few years ago that you were a student here getting into a lot of trouble."

Ashton took a gulp of air. His throat was closing up from nerves. He wet his lips, trying to think of a response. "That's true. And now I am his legal guardian. I think that means you have to listen to what I have to say."

"Very well, Ashton. I'm listening." The principal said, clapping his hands together, providing Ashton his undivided attention.

"I just told you. Mr. Williams is abusing my brother."

"did Mr. Williams hit you Michael?" The principal asked.

"no sir."

"Did Mr. Williams touch you in anyway?"

"No but -"

"Did he threaten you?"

"Not exactly. But -"

"I don't think there is any buts. I think it is very clear that you are not being abused by your teacher. Perhaps you wanted attention? Is this a stunt to try and help with your grades?"

"No!" Michael looked helplessly at Ashton.

The older boy shook his head, "that is not what is happening here. What's happening is that sick bastard teacher made my brother sit in the middle of the floor and called him names. I consider that abuse."

"I say it's more of constructive discipline. Unfortunately, Michael is not one of the best students here at this school."

"I don't care what kind of student he is, there is no need to put him down."

"I agree." Mr. Richardson said.
"Good. Then what are you going to do about it?"

"Well you have to understand. It's your word against his and we have this union."

"So your not going to do anything?" Ashton said, mouth gaping.

"I can't do much, Ashton. But I can recommend your brother sees a doctor for his inattentive behavior."

"Excuse me. Did you basically just tell me my brother needs medication?"

"You said it, not me." The man smiled widely, but Ashton wasn't reciprocating. He shot up in his chair and tugged Michael by the sleeve.

"Come on Michael. We're going home."

"Seriously?" Michael's eyes lit up, "I get to skip school."

"For today. Tonight we will work on finding you a new school."

"Good luck finding one in this location." Mr. Richardson hissed.

"You better hope I do find a new school, because if I don't I'm taking this to court."

"Please. I doubt You have the money to take this to court."

"Don't test me. I've already been there once, I have no problem with doing it again. And I highly doubt you want this bad reputation, or better yet, have the money yourself. So do me a favor and fire that teacher or the next time you see me will be in front of a judge."

Ashton slammed the door behind him, feeling the adrenaline rush through his veins. He could feel Michael staring at him, which was making him squirm.

"Alright Michael. Let's get you to class."

"I thought I was going home?"

Ashton sighed, "I can't take you home, it's not part of the schedule and I don't have a babysitter."

Michael groaned, "I'm fourteen I don't need a babysitter."

"I know, but the state thinks you do. If I left you alone and they found out we would be in the same position as we were before."

"Oh, you mean back before we had a babysitter?"

"No, I mean they would take you back to the group home."

"Seriously?" Michael raised his eyebrows, "that's not cool bro."

"I know. Anyway, you need to get your grades up."

"But Ashton, I don't want to go to class with that Jack ass teacher."

"Fine. I'll give you a note to go the nurses during his class." Ashton stated off the cuff. looking for a pen, Ashton searched through his brother's backpack and wrote the note.
He left Michael to his own devices in order to be on time for his retail job.

The day was going by smoothly, not many complaints until a thirty-something woman comes into the camera shop, pushes past some other customers, and slams a camera bag onto the counter, brandishing a receipt. Ashton held his breath thinking only one thought: get me out of here.

The customer shouted, “I bought this camera yesterday! AND IT’S BROKEN!!”

She thrusts the receipt in front of his face, and jabs her finger at the date. It’s worth noting that when Ashton sells a camera, he always open the box and checks that it’s working before the customer leaves the store.

"I want a replacement, and an upgrade to a better camera!” She demanded.

“How to hear that, ma’am! May I please have a look at the camera?” Ashton said, trying his best to be polite.

The customer issues a massive sigh, opens the camera bag and shoves a little point and click camera at him. Ashton turns it over to discover that the battery door is ajar. He opens the battery door.

"The battery is in upside down.” He said with a smile.

"What?!” She asked

"The battery is in upside down, and so the battery door won’t close. One second.”

Using a bit of tape to remove the lithium-ion rechargeable battery, Ashton turned the camera on, check that it’s working, and then handed it back to her. It has about 50% charge.

“Sorry, ma'am but I can’t do that. If it were broken, I would happily give you a replacement, or a refund, but I couldn’t give you an upgrade. As it is, the camera isn’t broken. When you removed the battery, you put it back in upside down.” He explained and luckily, the lady seemed pleased with the camera and left him alone.

Ashton was about to leave for the day, his shift being almost over when that same woman came back in the store and made a bee line for him.

Dammit.

“IT’S BROKEN AGAIN!” She screeched causing other shoppers to look in Ashton's direction. He laughed nervously. “How can I help?”

"When I turn it on, It gives an error message, and then turns off again! I want you to UPGRADE me to a better camera!” She stated.

"Again, sorry, I can’t give you an upgrade, but I can replace or give you a refund. May I please see the camera?” Ashton asked, taking the camera into his hand.

Ashton turned it on and it said, "battery exhausted."

“Oh! This message just means that the battery is flat. Once you recharge the battery using the charger, or plugging the camera in, she’ll be right!” Ashton smiled, handing the woman the camera back.
"What do you mean, I have to charge the battery? Doesn’t it just take photos?"

Ashton stare at her for a long moment.

“No, ma'am. Like your mobile phone, you need to recharge the batteries when they go flat.” He explained.

“You mean I have to plug it into the wall?!”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“But it just takes pictures.” The costumer said.

“…and that uses electricity. When the battery goes flat you need to charge it.”

“I wasn’t told that when I bought it. I want a camera that doesn’t need batteries or charging. Now are you going to give me an upgrade, or do I need to speak to your manager?!”

Just then the phone rang, and Ashton picked it up.

"Can I help you?" Ashton asked again. This time, he knew the voice all too well. "Miss Rogers. What can I do for you?"

"Hi Ashton," her sweet voice soothed his nerves, "I'm afraid I have some bad news. At first, I called your home phone to ask if the note Michael gave me was real."

"Wait. He gave you the note? He was suppose to give it to the nurse."

"Oh. He told me he wanted to sit in my class and do homework because he was afraid to go to Mr. Williams class and then he gave me this sloppy note that he could have easily written himself and I was just calling to see if it was true."

Ashton put his cell phone to his chest and gestured for the lady to speak with the manager who was coming over to the front of the store. He waved her away then put the phone back to his ear. "Yes. That's true." He said, "I wrote the note this morning. I'm sorry, I was in a hurry but it's legitimate."

"Okay. That's good. But I still have bad news." Marian Rogers said.

"Give it to me."

"Okay, so I called your home and Luke answered the phone. I asked him why he wasn't in school and he didn't answer me. Instead he started telling me about this episode of power rangers."


Ashton could almost picture Marian Rogers smile from the other side of the phone.

"Thank you for telling me." He said, "I'll go get him."

"I won’t say a word, but if anyone finds out I'm afraid you might lose your brothers again."

"Say no more. I'm on it."

As soon as Ashton hung up the phone he made his way over to his already angry manager.

"Sir."
"Can you believe that customer." He said to Ashton, elbowing him in the ribs. "You did the right thing, though."

"Thank you sir. I know I asked this last week but I need to go home early. Something came up." Ashton said hesitantly.

His manager asked a simple question, "What came up?"

There was a pause. The problem with the truth was Ashton looked like a total loser for leaving his brother all alone so he went with the best excuse in the history of excuses.

"I don't feel well. I think I may have a fever. I don't want to get anyone else sick. I'm really sorry."

His manager gave him one hard look before giving him the okay. Ashton rushed out of there and drove home.

Sitting on the living room floor with a pile of juice boxes and crayon was Luke. Ashton let the door slam behind him as he galloped into the room.

"Hey Ashton." Luke said, peeking up from his drawing.

"What are you doing, Lucas!"

"The Power Rangers are having a contest!" Luke squealed, obviously missing the anger in Ashton's tone. "I have to draw a picture of a monster and submit it online for a chance to win us money!"

Ashton's heart turned to putty. He was starting to see how his parents let Luke get away with everything. He's as innocent as a baby turtle and yet devious like a snake.

"That's very nice. But Luke, you know you can't skip school. Remember we talked about this. In fact, I think we did a little more than talk." Ashton cleared his throat, tossing his neck towards the wooden spoons in the kitchen. Luke didn't sweat. He had Ashton wrapped around his finger.

"I'm sorry." Puppy dog eyes, pouty lip, and even slouched shoulders to make him look smaller than he was.

"It's fine, just don't do it again."

It worked like a charm, it always did.


Someone knocked on the door, startling the two boys.

"Shit Luke, I think that's social services."
I'm sorry it's been so long. I'm planning/writing another 5sos story in my spare time and work has been a killer.

Thanks for those of you that still enjoy this story. I have some ideas on where I want it to go, but if you want to see anything happen let me know in the comment section :)

"What are social services doing here?" Luke asked worriedly.

"Maybe they found out you ditched school." Ashton said with a dangerous voice, holding Luke's wrist tightly.

Luke gulped. Why did he have to finish watching that episode of the Power Rangers. Now Ashton was mad at him. Ashton opened the door and allowed the people to walk in.

"Can I help you?" Ashton asked, quirking an eyebrow. Trying to keep it cool during an internal crisis was difficult, but Ashton found it possible as long as he kept a smile on his face.

"No Mr. Irwin. This is a routine checkup, nothing to worry about."

He let out a sigh of relief, but began to panic again when he thought the social worker heard him sigh. Sure enough, the man was giving Ashton one of the most skeptical looks since Brian Dunning hosted a podcast on Skepticism.

"Is everything okay, you seem a little jumpy."

"Oh yeah, everything's fine." Ashton rushed his words together, blushing deeply as the guy gave him more judgmental stares.

"Is this your youngest?" The man said, pointing his attention to the kid by the television. Luke looked like a deer caught in the headlights, unmoving and shocked.

"Yes." Finally an answer Ashton could be confident on. The man flipped through a few papers on a clipboard and said, "his name is Luke, is that right?"

"Yes." Another confident answer.

"So what is Luke doing home from school on a Monday?"

So much for confident answers. "He...um...I took his other brothers to school and, well..." He looked at his younger brother then back to the social worker and blurted out, "Luke feels sick."

It was such a great, classic excuse. It was the same excuse Ashton used to get out of work early and come home to be with Luke.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." The man said turning his pity eyes onto the young boy in the corner. Thankfully the child played along, but not with a fake cough. No, Luke used his best weapon. He
used his pouty lip. "I'll be alright." He whispered. Ashton stood in awe at the wonderful performance. Luke should be an actor.

"So," the man moved on, "today is your first day of parenting classes. Are you going to go?"

"Yeah, of course I am." Ashton responded, "why wouldn't i?"

"Because he's sick."

"Oh, I figured I'd call the babysitter and have her come over later so I can go to the meeting."

"Aright then, that sounds like a plan. It was nice meeting you Ashton. Your house looks good. Your brother looks good, despite his sickness, and it all seems good."

"Thank you. I think it's going good too." Ashton said awkwardly which was wired because Ashton was never usually awkward or nervous around strangers until now.

The man scribbled a few things down on his clipboard then escorted himself out.

"That went well." Luke said sassily, putting his hands on his hips.

"Shut it Luke. I have Parenting Classes to get to, what am I supposed to do with you?"

"Call the babysitter like you said you would."

Ashton scowled, because Luke had a point, and that's all Ashton could do right now.

Back in school, Michael made his way to English class. It was one of those classes he actually enjoyed because he actually understood it! Unlike Math that required Michael to follow the rules, English was a place where he could create his own story, his own rules, besides, reading stories fascinated him. It was like a TV show only on paper. When he entered the class, he sat next to one of his favorite girl, Jenny. She was gorgeous, her hair a thick brunette color, nose a little on the large side, skin soft, it made Michael want to reach over and touch her shoulders.

"Get off of me you creep!" The girl shouted, and the rest of the class snickered.

Michael looked down at his hands to see they were plastered to Jenny's shoulders. He removed them quickly, muttering an apology. Damn his hormonal impulses. Thankfully, the teacher saved him by walking in the room. He had never been more happy to start class. Michael's luck ran out when a teacher knocked at the door and asked Michael to step outside the class. What did he do now? Hopefully he didn't attack someone in the cafeteria and not realize it, because apparently if he's able to touch Jenny's shoulder without realizing it, anything is possible.

"Michael, I was reviewing your test scores, and I think you would benefit from being in an honors English class. It would look great on your transcript and it would certainly help make up for the subjects you are struggling in."

The colored haired boy stared at his teacher for a long while, not knowing what to say to such a ridiculous request. He could barely handle half his classes let alone an honors class. She handed him a few papers and told him she would call his guardian later in the day to discuss it with him.

Parenting classes. That's what the sign said on the door of an apartment room. Ashton glanced at the
paper Mr. Boward gave him to make sure he was in the right place before he entered. Though the classroom walls were bare the windows were large. Everyone wanted a window seat, to sit in the sunlight of the afternoon. Outside the sky was blue except for a few strands of white clouds. Whoever painted the walls in here must have had an imagination bypass. Ashton could imagine all of the things they were going to tell him here. For example, the lady might discuss how he's a horrible caretaker, how he's a failure at being a guardian. She will probably discuss all of the ways he went wrong in his life. He was positive she wouldn't accept his way of disciplining his brothers. Ashton was alright with that, though. If she could teach him a better way to punish them he would try it. He would try anything to keep his brothers out of trouble.

The parenting teacher was a tall blonde haired lady with the name Mrs. Kelly. She said she was a parent at a group home for abused and unwanted children.

"Hi everyone. Why don't we take a moment to get to know our new guest. Come on up here, Ashton, say hi."

The color drained from his face when he realized she wanted him to speak in front of everyone. It's been forever since Ashton was in a classroom setting to being with. Now, to make matters worse, he was in front of a bunch of judgmental parents.

"Hi. I'm Ashton." His said, getting into his typically cheerful voice, "I have three younger brothers that I'm now the legal guardian of."

The parents in the room gave him blank stares. A few couples smiled at him, which he returned. Guiding him back to his seat, Mrs. Kelly continued the class. She wrote the word, destress on the white board.

"We're going to learn about ways to help your child destress and ways to avoid stressful situations in the first place." She explained as she passed out sheets of paper. Going around the room, she asked each parent to explain one stressful time of day when the kids seem to be acting up.

Ashton wracked his brains trying to think of a scenario when his brothers get into the most trouble. He barely had time to practice his speech in his head when the teacher called on him.

"Um. Uh. I guess mornings are stressful in my house." Ashton recalled the recent events of today, explaining how he is always rushed and his brothers rarely get up on time and they never want to get in the car to go to school. Mrs. Kelly listened thoughtfully to him, nodding to show her understanding.

"One idea I always tell parents that struggle with mornings is try and get most of your children's things ready the night before. Have them pick out their clothes every night and keep their backpacks in a specific place so they don't lose them."

To Ashton's surprise, mrs. Kelly actually have some good advice. He decided to make a note of it so he could get his brothers in the habit of preparing things over night. There was a lady in the back of the class that upset Ashton with what she said. Apparently her idea of raising kids was to be very strict and provide children with little affection because she feared that the affection would spoil her kids. Now, it wasn't Ashton's place to say anything for a number of reasons, one being that he wasn't even a parent yet, and two, it wasn't his place to judge so he remained silent. However, Mrs. Kelly did a great job at explained the need for humans to feel loved and a sense of belonging.

Back at home, Luke was coloring a picture for Rena with his babysitter, also know as his best friend,
"She likes elephants a lot. When I was at the group home she had a notebook and it was full of elephants." Luke explained.

"Really? What kinds of elephants?"

"All different kinds. She likes pink the most, but there were blue ones and purple, and yellow, and big ones and small ones."

Luke explained while concentrating on making the curve of the elephants trunk go up in just the right way. He frowned at his work, then picked up an eraser.

"I think she think's she's an elephant."

Gretchen snorted out laughter. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, all of her pictures had one big pink elephant and then it had a little pink elephant. I think the big one is her big sister and the little one is her." Luke said as he drew a connecting line. "I would know. I use to draw pictures of me and my family all the time."

Gretchen smiled down at him, giving his cheeks a pinch. "Oh did you? Why did you stop?" She asked sweetly.

Luke shrugged, continuing his drawing. "I wasn't very good."

"Sure you are. Look how cute this elephant is." She praised but Luke only frowned.

"I don't like coloring pictures of my family anymore, ok? Stop bothering me." He instantly felt tears prick at his eyes for lashing out at his babysitter. "I'm sorry." He whispered.

Gretchen put down her crayon and rubbed Luke's back gently. "It's alright dear. You don't need to explain why you don't want to do something. I shouldn't have asked." Then, to change the subject she looked at the clock and said, "it's lunch time. What would you like to eat?"

Luke wiped his eyes with the back of his hand saying, "peanut butter and jelly."

Gretchen signed, that's all Luke's been eating recently. Nevertheless, she went to the kitchen to make it for him.

It was the last class of the day for Michael. He was in Math class, a place no one wanted to be and he couldn't help but think about how soft Jenny Appleby's shoulders felt. He was about to fall asleep when the teacher put a paper on his desk. It was a test Michael took last week. The letter grade resembled the letter failure. Crinkling the sheet, Michael threw it at the teacher without even thinking about what he was doing.

"Who threw this?" The teach snapped, turning around and glaring at the entire class as if they were all criminals. He was about to unfold the crinkled piece of paper when another paper ball was thrown at him.

"Who threw this?" The teach snapped, turning around and glaring at the entire class as if they were all criminals. He was about to unfold the crinkled piece of paper when another paper ball was thrown at him.

Michael gasped and turned to see the Jenny Appleby's arm extended. She retracted it, then glanced over in Michael's direction giving him a smile. He couldn't believe it. A few minutes ago she thought he was some creep! Pretty soon the whole class was throwing things at the poor math teacher. That is until the math teacher called the principal and he went up to the classroom and screamed at the kids. Michael and basically everyone else in that classroom rant to the bus crying because they were so
hurt by the screaming principal. A few kids were even more pissed off then before and decided to vandalize the walls of the classroom.

Michael saw Calum waiting for him at the typical outdoor pickup spot. He wiped his eyes quickly, refusing to look like a baby in front of his younger brothers...wait, where was Luke?

"If that kid brother of ours left school again, I'm going to personally whip him." Michael said, kicking a pebble because it made him feel tough.

"Relax, he wasn't in the car with us this morning."

"So he just skipped school? Is that suppose to make me feel better? Lucky little brat! I wish I could skip school." Michael ranted, shoving his hands in his pockets, trying to forget the words that were vibrating around his head.

"Worthless little delinquent skipping school. I hope he knows he's never going to amount to anything in his life." Michael seethed.

"He skipped school, he didn't burn one down." Calum joked, grabbing Michael's hand.

"What are you doing?" Michael asked, irritably.

"Holding your hand."

"Why?"

"Because it's suppose to be comforting."

Michael yanked it out of Calum's hand, "Well it's not."

The middle child, looked down at his feet embarrassed. Why can't he do anything right? He can't even make Michael smile like Ashton can. What a pathetic brother he was.

Gretchen pulled up to the curb and gave the boys a happy grin. Calum felt a little better, and he felt even better when Luke jumped out of the car to pull him in for a hug.

"I saw what you tweeted." The younger boy squeaked, "I'm so glad you got the part!" Luke jumped up and down with Calum.

"Thanks Lukey." He giggled, "it was easy. I'm the best Prince Charming ever!" Calum said proudly.

"I knew you would get the part. You have the best face in the world." Michael rolled his eyes at their conversation. It's not that he wasn't happy for his brother, because he was, but at the same time he wasn't. He was just angry and miserable because all of his teachers were picking on him, scolding him which is something Luke and Calum never had happen to them. Life didn't seem fair but like his dad always said, life isn't fair.

"Do you have to sing?" Luke asked?

"No." Calum's smile dropped, "that's the only bummer. I really wanted to sing."

"I'm sure you can sing next year." Gretchen chimed in.

"You really think so?" Calum asked, hope gleaming in his eyes.
"Sure, why not?" She said, putting the car in drive mode and cruising back to their house. Along the way, Michael stopped feeling so sad when he reminded himself about Jenny Appleby. She defended him. She must really like him. Sunlight danced off of the rear view mirror as if signaling that everything was going to be okay.
Chapter Summary

Toby and Luke are back at it.
Ashton is continuing parenting lessons
Michael is struggling with people
And Calum is preparing for his play!

Chapter Notes

Wow. It's been a while, has it not?
I'm sorry. I still have two or three other stories in the works. It's hard because I have all these ideas but not enough time to actually write. And then when I do write them, I lose track of my ideas. :(
Oh well, I'll get them posted eventually. As for now, here is more of this fun story which I'm really proud of. I feel like the story has grown like an actual family would. :)

Luke rolled over in his nice warm bed, shielding his eyes from the sun with his arm. He knew that his three brothers would be trying to get him out of bed at any minute, but he still decided to try to go back to sleep anyway. Sure, he probably shouldn't stay up late on school nights watching TV, but once he finds a good show, Luke has to binge watch it. Michael and Calum know that Luke watches TV into the late hours of the night. Fortunately, Ashton does not know. If he did, he'd ground Luke for sure. Well, maybe not ground him, but he would definitely get a lecture about how watching TV in the dark is bad for his eyes. Not to mention, how it affects his school work, which personally, Luke think's is a load of bull.

"Luke, get up. You have school today." Michael shouted from the kitchen. He does this every time Ashton tells him to wake his brothers up. And every time Michael screams up the stairs, Luke pretends not to hear him.

"Come on Lukey, it's time to get up now." That was Calum, who was now sitting on the bed and bouncing on it. He was also getting Luke wet since he had just got out of the shower and his bouncing made the water drip from his hair.

Luke groaned and pulled the covers over his head.

"If you don't get up, I'll tickle you out of this bed." Calum said. Of course, he didn't wait for a response. He never does. He just starts to tickle Luke.

"Are you going to get up now?" Calum asked.

"Calum, Luke, come on, breakfast is ready. Get out here before Michael eats it all himself." Ashton called from down the hall. He was stripping the sheets in his bedroom, throwing them in a basket and taking them to the laundry room.
"Okay, I'm up." Luke gasped out of laughter, sitting up.

Calum messed up his hair. "You stayed up late again, didn't you?"

Luke nodded. "You're not going to tell Ash are you?"

Calum grinned. "don't get caught."

"I won't." Luke replied. "And please tell me you left some hot water for my shower."

Calum has this habit of using all the hot water when he takes a shower. Luke however, had the habit of getting the bathroom floor soaking wet.

Calum winked, "I left as much hot water in the shower as you leave on the floor."

So, in essence, Luke won't have any hot water at all.

"Well, it's about time." Ashton commented when the two boys finally stepped into the kitchen for breakfast. "Do I have to make your bed time earlier?"

"No." Luke replied as he helped himself to a slice of Nutella toast.

"Maybe he had one of those dreams again." Michael mumbled. He knew Luke didn't but, he was trying to bring up the negative topic of therapy. And it worked. Ashton just frowned and mumbled something that the boys weren't able to hear.

Luke gave Michael a scornful glare when Ashton wasn't looking and Michael grinned back as he put more jelly on his toast.

Taking a seat, Ashton set his newly filled glass of chocolate milk on the table. "Luke, I think you should really consider seeing a therapist."

Why did Michael have to bring up that sore subject. Luke took a bite of his food and ignored Ashton in hopes that his older brother would drop the subject. It didn't exactly work.

"Luke, are you listening to me?" Ashton asked angrily.


"So, what do you say? Mr. Boward said he thought it was a great idea. He found a place in my schedule for it and he even recommended a wonderful therapist." Ashton smiled with his beautiful white teeth that Luke was jealous of.

"I don't want to go." He said stubbornly.

Ashton dropped his smile but he didn't press on the subject. "I just think it will help with your nightmares. It's a good idea to talk with someone."

"I'll talk to Calum about my nightmares." Luke tried to compromise.


After breakfast, Calum and Ashton did the dishes. They finished in time to get to school without being late.
"Have a good day, guys. I love you."

Calum and Luke gave him a big hug but Michael was already halfway in the building, ditching his siblings as usual.

Toby was at his locker, violently ripping down his posters of cars. He was repeatedly grumbling swear words as he stomped on his calculator.

"Toby! Toby, what are you doing?" Luke shouted running over to his friend.

"Get away from me!" The boy seethed, shoving Luke's chest so hard it knocked him directly to the floor.

A few third graders in his class gasped and ran inside the classroom. Two seconds later a teacher was outside with her hands on her hips.

"Toby! What is the meaning of this?"

Watching as the boy's face turned Scarlett, Luke felt instantly bad for him.

"m'sorry." He muttered, placing his head inside his locker.

"You cannot push people. I thought you knew better -"

"Mrs. Daris, it's fine. I'm okay. We were just playing." Luke lied smoothly.

"Rough housing is not appropriate for school, Luke."

"I know, I know. We're sorry. We won't do it anymore."

Believing her youngest student, she walked back inside the classroom after ordering them to hurry up.

"What was that for?" Luke whispered in Toby's ear.

The dark haired kid turned his menacing face towards Luke and growled, "you ruined my life."


"Don't give the stupid kicked puppy look. You know what you did and now, because of you, I have to live in some freaking group home."

Gasping, Luke realized what Toby was going on about. Apparently because he ratted Toby out the social workers must have investigated his house.

"It's not that bad." Luke said quickly, "you can go back home with your daddy as long as he agrees to take parenting classes and-"

"You don't get it!" Toby hollered, "my dad isn't like your brother. He doesn't want me! He was happy when they took me away. He just doesn't want to go to jail! I'm gonna be at that group home until someone fosters me. Do you get it now? My life is over and it's all your fault!"

He slammed his locker and walked down the hallway. Obviously, Luke had to follow him. He had to explain that he didn't want to tell on Toby. It was his brothers faults.

"Wait. Please. I didn't mean to tell on you. They made me."
He followed Toby until he saw the boy walk straight out of the school doors. Stopping by the door, Luke refused to leave the building again. He was not about to get his butt beat by Ashton for the third time by doing the same crime.

"Where are you going?" Luke asked.

"I'm running away and don't try to stop me. I'd rather live on the street than in some prison home."

"No! The streets are too dangerous, you could get robbed or kidnaped or something bad could happen." His words fell on deaf ears, because Toby was already crossing the street. What was he going to do. He had to do something.

"Mrs. Daris!"

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It became a pattern for Calum to eat his Lunch in the music room with Miss Rogers. That way they could talk about the play Calum was going to be in a rehearse his lines.

"Miss Rogers does Cinderella really exist?" Calum asked while chewing on his sticky peanut butter and banana sandwich.

"It's hard to say." She answered fondly, "I know their are several different versions of the story, so perhaps it was true at one point. But like most stories, things get exaggerated." She smiled at her curious student, watching as his mind started spinning another idea around.

"But do people in sad lives really get happy endings like Cinderella did?"

"I love how your mind works, Calum." She said laughing, "in all honesty, I think it is very possible, but I think it has to do with how you live your life. You create your own happy ending by choosing to take opportunities, and by always being kind."

"You think good things come back around huh?" Calum said with a skeptical look on his face.

"I do." She said strongly.

"Well I think bad things happen to good people." Calum responded, "cause they're so sweet people take advantage of them."

"True. But I believe more good things happen than bad if they don't let the bad things change them."

"Wow this is getting confusing." Calum laughed.

Miss Rogers nodded, "it is, isn't it?"

"Can we go over page two again. I want to make sure I remember where I'm suppose to exit on stage from."

"Sure thing, I like this modern version." She commented, reading through the script.

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The principals office was stuffy at this time of year. Luke sat nervously on the bench, glancing sadly at Toby who was currently being lectured.

"I already called your group home parents, they will be here any minute to pick you up." The
principal said, jotting down a small note to himself. "Because you left the school grounds you will have to serve detention for the next three days."

"Fantastic." Toby snarled, "why don't you just line me up against the wall over their and shoot me."


"Oh shut up. I don't want to hear a word from you."

"Well that's too bad Toby, because I want to talk to you. I want to help you."

"You've helped enough."

"Thank you. I know I have." Luke said, ignoring the insult, "because I know what your father was like. He was mean! He beat you, Toby."

"Your brother beats you."

"No. He really doesn't." Luke said softly, "listen, I think this might be a good thing. At least you will be safe and I can visit all the time."

Clenching his jaw, the older boy turned his cheek the other direction. Sighing, Luke put his hand on Toby's knee. To his surprise, Toby didn't push him away.

Mrs. Kelly and Mr. Drew arrived a little while later. They looked equally as exhausted as Ashton had looked last night.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your busy schedule." Principal Richardson apologized, "but we need you to take Toby home."

"Sure." Mrs. Kelly signed a few papers before shaking the principals hand and sitting down to have a conversation with him.

The conversation ended with Mr. Drew promising that Toby will not be acting out and that he will, in fact, enjoy the group home. Luke rolled his eyes at the typical adult conversation. They always make empty promises about kids.

"Also, we have another problem. Luke, here, wants to come to the group home to show Toby around. Can you please explain to the child how that is not possible."

"He can visit." Mrs. Kelly said softly, "but I'm afraid you can't visit right now. We need a signed permission slip from your guardian, and besides, you should be in class Luke."

"Yes. He should be. But he refuses to go." The principal complained.

"I want to go with Toby. He deserves to have someone there to show him around."

"We will show him around." Mrs. Kelly promised.

"If you don't go back to class I will have no choice but to call your guardian."

"Whatever. I'm not going back to class. Look, he thinks it's my fault so I have to prove to him that it won't be that bad."

Toby crossed his arms and scoffed, "You already tattled on me for the second time. Their is no way I'm ever trusting you again. And we are NOT friends so go to class Benedict Arnold."
Luke's eyes watered with unshed tears. He had to stop Toby from running away but he didn't mean for this to happen. "I'm sorry -"

"Save it." Toby rolled his eyes.

Luke watched sadly as his friend walked away with his new family.

Suddenly the door opened and a security guard walked in with four people in his grasp.

"What now."

"Sorry sir, but these four got in a fight at the cafeteria."

"He was pounded on my little brother!" Michael screamed, fist making contact with Cruz's face for what seemed like the millionth time considering how bruised Cruz was.

"I'll get your for this Michael! I can't believe you were ever my friend."

"You were pulling little nine year old girls dresses up and then, when Calum tried to stop you, you hit him! Did you think I was going to be okay with that?"

"For your health's sake, I think you should have been."

"Enough!" Mr. Richardson boomed.

"Sit the kids down and call their parents."

"Look what you did!" Cruz growled, shoving Michael.

"This was entirely your fault!"

Calum sat down next to Luke and wrapped an arm around his neck, "so what are you in for?"

"I'm a tattle tale."

Calum nodded, as if any of this chaos made sense to him. "Well at least Ashton won't be mad at us."

But why?!! A whiny Luke shrieked in the middle of the night. Calum glared at his alarm clock: 11:52pm. It was way too late for Luke and Ashton to continue having this fight. They have been fighting for over five hours.

"Because you skipped school."

"But why the hell are you doing a punishment chart. That's so stupid." Luke argued. Calum sat up in his bed and turned on his lamplight with a thought of going downstairs to break up the argument that has been going on since dinner. He leaned against his pillows, though, and listened to Ashton explain it one last time.

"First of all, you are way too young to be swearing. Second of all, it's a rewards and punishment
chart, not just a punishment chart!"

"I'm not five."

"No, you're eight and Calum's eleven and Michael's fourteen. You are all young enough to have a rewards and punishment chart."

Calum could hear the tears in Luke's voice, "it's not fair! You said I could skip school."

"I never, not even once, said that. You are just trying to get out of your punishment and it's not going to work."

"I don't want to lose my toys!"

"Well too bad."

"Not my penguin. You are not taking my penguin!" Luke stomped his foot on the floor down stairs.

Calum hear a slap and a cry from Luke that was all he needed to hear to race downstairs.

"What's going on!" Calum asked nervously.

Luke was rubbing the back of his pants, face burning red and Ashton looked completely exhausted.

"Nothing, go back to your room." His oldest brother barked.

"Ashton's taking all of my toys away for two whole days!" Luke cried.

"He skipped school and that's his punishment. Then today, he refuses to got to class so he deserves this!" Ashton explained, rubbing a hand over his face.

"I don't need a stupid punishment chart." Luke cried, frustrated tears dribbling down his face.

"Oh for the love of... It's a rewards and punishment chart! I learned about it in parenting classes. Mr. Boward, the social worker, says its a great idea so we're doing it." Ashton yelled, his vein popping out of his neck.

"Mr. Boward obviously doesn't understand what it's like to be ruled by a schedule." Luke muttered.

"Oh trust me Luke, I think the man understand perfectly well what it's like. His entire career is run by a schedule. In fact, most lives are run by schedules. This list is good for you. It will give you structure."

"You're turning into one of those types of people!"

"Ok, what does that even mean?"

"You're boring and no fun!"

"See what happens when you're actually a good kid. Maybe you will have more fun!"

Luke started to run up the stairs but Ashton stopped him from going up. "And yes, Luke, you can visit the group home. I will happily sign a permission slip. All I ask is you go to school tomorrow and stay in class."

"Good night." Ashton yelled as Luke ran up the stairs and slammed the door.

"What am I going to do with you guys." Ashton said to Calum, laughing to himself at how insane his life has been.

"Don't know, but I wouldn't want to be in your shoes." Calum admitted looking at the bags under Ashton's eyes. He still had a smile on his face though, which Calum always admired about his older brother.

"How's your cheek, by the way?" Ashton asked out of the blue. Touching his own cheek, Calum shrugged, "it's fine. I can't even feel it anymore."

"Good then the ice worked."

"Yep. Can I watch TV with you?"

"Sure." Ashton led him over to the couch and sat Calum on his lap.

"Are you excited for the football match tomorrow?" He asked, whisking Calum's hair out of his face. The younger boy leaned into Ashton's touch. "Yeah."

"Do you think Michael's mad at me?" Ashton asked a few minutes later, "you know, for grounding him?"

Calum shrugged, "he'll get over it."

"I do appreciate how he protected you." Ashton sighed, "I would have done the same thing. I think that's half the problem. Michael's too much like me sometimes."

Calum agreed with the statement and couldn't help but laugh. "Anything interesting happen today?"

"Not really. But Nia and I are competing on our grades and I beat her!"

"Really? Wait to go, Cal."

"Thank you. I had a 94 and I was really worried that she did better cause she usually always does, but today she had a plain old 90%."

Making Ashton laugh was Calum's greatest accomplishment. He was proud of himself for being one of the only people to ever coax a laugh out of the stressed out boy.

"Well that is fantastic. Plus, I learned this morning from Luke that you made the part of Prince Charming in the play. Congratulations."

"Thanks Ash. I worked really hard to get it."

"Good. That's even more rewarding."

"And Miss Rogers is helping me with the part."

Ashton's checks blushed at the mention of miss Rogers. "Really? That's nice. How is Miss Rogers?"

"She's good."
"Is she, um, does she talk about me?"

"Sometimes. She usually wants to know if you need a babysitter."

Ashton's smile fell, "oh. Right".

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Ashton said quickly, "I hope you know how proud I am of you Calum."

"I know Ashton. You remind me all the time."

He hugged his big brother tightly. Everything felt so right.

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End Notes

Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!