



LUKE & BILLY

Finally Get a Clue

CAT SEBASTIAN

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Luke and Billy Finally Get a Clue

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Acknowledgement

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Author's Note

This novella technically takes place in the same universe as the books in the Cabot series, although no Cabots appear in the pages of this book. This book also technically involves baseball, although not much baseball appears in the pages of this book either, and what baseball does appear is probably wrong. The teams and their players as they exist in this book are entirely fictional, despite a few real players' names being mentioned.

Content Notes

This book contains references to homophobia, fear of being outed, a character with a head injury, a pregnant secondary character and mild concern related to that character's well-being, references to the past neglect of a child, and on-page sex.

Chapter One

While the Yankees were busy winning the 1953 World Series in the top of the ninth inning, Billy Reardon was deciding whether to punch Luke Novak right on the front porch of his house. After the disappearing act that fucker had pulled, he had a punch coming, but even Billy's rotten temper wasn't bad enough that he'd go off and hit a guy who'd just had his skull walloped with a fastball, no matter how much of a jackass he was currently being. The problem was that if Billy didn't punch him, he was going to do something even stupider, like kiss him.

In the end, he offered to make Luke a grilled cheese sandwich, which maybe wasn't exactly splitting the difference between kissing and punching, but Luke really looked like he needed a sandwich, so what else could he do.

* * *

Well, Billy tried to make grilled cheese, at least. No sooner had he taken the skillet out than his mother and sister burst into the kitchen, carrying six suitcases, a hatbox, and Leo the cat between them. Billy didn't know what in hell they thought

they were going to do with a hatbox and a tomcat in a maternity ward, but what did he know.

“I *told* you I’d carry all that out to the truck,” Billy said. “You aren’t supposed to be lifting anything, anyway.”

“This baby is due in two days, William. If carrying a suitcase moves things along, then God help me, I’ll carry a suitcase,” Suzanne said, then turned toward the table where Luke had just sat down. “I’ll carry ten suitcases. As I live and breathe, is that Luke Novak? Listen, mister, my brother’s been at the end of his goddamn rope—”

“Shut *up*, Suzanne,” Billy pleaded.

Luke, Perfect Gentleman TM, was already on his feet, hugging Billy’s mother and telling Suzanne she looked beautiful. They were both hugging him back—giving him hugs that he *did not deserve*—and the dogs were either trying to attack all three of them or trying to join in the fun. Billy was the only one here with any sense of self-respect.

Luke grabbed a couple of suitcases, and it just figured that Suzanne let *him* carry her shit out to the truck.

“He’s injured, you know,” Billy pointed out. “He’s probably not supposed to haul things around any more than you are.”

Suzanne shot him a nasty look and so did Luke, so at least the part of his brain that made him a sulky bastard was in perfect working order.

“He looks like the picture of health,” Suzanne said, but she was a liar because you could still see the fading bruise on Luke’s cheekbone and he was down at least ten pounds.

Behind the women’s backs, Luke gave Billy the finger and carried four suitcases outside, the showoff.

* * *

The two weeks Billy had spent imagining Luke dead in a ditch had been the longest fourteen days of his life. All anybody knew was that Luke had been discharged from the hospital after a week, and then apparently vanished off the face of the earth. During the five years they’d played together, Billy would have said that if there was one thing you could count on Luke Novak to do, it was show up. Fucking off while the Phillies were still in the middle of a pennant race, even if he was too injured to play? Was definitely not showing up.

He talked to their teammates on the Phillies and former teammates all over the place, but nobody knew any more than the newspapers. Meanwhile, people who had never watched a baseball game in their life suddenly had opinions about things like batting helmets and wild pitches. Everybody was a goddamn expert on concussions. Billy was ready to start handing out concussions like they were sticks of gum.

Billy pitched four more times in September, the Phillies lost the pennant to the Dodgers, and still there was no word from Luke. Not a phone call, not a letter, not so much as a casual visit to the locker room. Billy called Luke’s apartment

so many times he had the number memorized, but the phone just rang itself off the hook.

He tried to put it out of his mind. It wasn't any of his business. He and Luke had played together for a couple years. That was all. He'd made damn sure that was all.

They'd met in spring training in 1948, the only rookies who made the Phillies' roster. Other than that, they had nothing in common, and Billy suspected that it was somebody's idea of a joke to make them road-trip roommates.

Luke was all freckles and white teeth, big blue eyes and bright blond hair. He had a bit of a twang that you rarely noticed because he rarely talked, an aw-shucks-ma'am manner, and a general air of cornfed wholesomeness. He looked like the kind of kid who hit the sack at a nice, respectable hour and went to church every Sunday, because that's exactly what he was. One look at him and the story wrote itself: American dream, plucked from obscurity, farm boy hits it big, et cetera.

Billy was—not any of that. He swore too much. He drank far too much and stayed out far too late. A series of managers and pitching coaches had made it clear that if it hadn't been for that sneaky fastball of his, nobody would have put up with him. But he had that fastball, and later on a curveball and a respectable changeup, so they did put up with him, and that was that.

In August of their first year, Luke was going through a hitting slump and reporters were starting to ask him stupid

questions. “All I can tell you is that I really am trying to hit the ball, sir,” Luke had told a reporter after one especially ugly game. From any other player it might have sounded like a joke, but Luke’s voice was thick.

“Go away, you jackals,” Billy said, hauling Luke away by the arm. “Jesus,” he said, shutting the door to the empty trainer’s room behind them, “seeing them go after you is like watching the chickens eat one another.”

Luke stopped rubbing the heels of his hands into his eyes long enough to gape at Billy. “The *what?*”

“Chickens. Sometimes they turn on one another.”

“Why?”

“Because they have brains the size of marbles? Because all chickens want to do is find new ways to die? I don’t know, Novak. All I know is that they do it.”

Luke had leveled a glare in Billy’s direction, a glare with harder edges than anything Billy was used to seeing on Luke’s open face, almost like he was pretty sure Billy was pulling his leg. “You’re telling me chickens are cannibals.”

“Most animals are, if you give them half a chance.” Strictly speaking, this wasn’t true. Horses didn’t eat one another, and neither did cows, but Billy was pretty sure that had more to do with not having the right kind of teeth than it did with anything like ethics. Besides, he felt like he was imparting a valuable life lesson to Luke and he wasn’t going to let accuracy get in his way.

“Rabbits,” Luke said.

Billy opened his mouth to say that rabbits were the creepiest animals of them all, but stopped himself. He knew better than to let himself get distracted. All he'd meant to do was get Luke away from the press and then tell him that the sane thing to do was memorize a few boring lines to feed the reporters when they started asking dumb questions. But right now he was imagining Luke growing up on a farm where the animals all got along. Maybe they burst into song and protected nice princesses from evil witches. “What the hell kind of farm do you come from where the animals are all nice to one another?” Billy had asked.

“I don't.” Luke looked around shiftily, apparently making sure nobody was within earshot. “Come from a farm, that is. I don't know where everyone got that idea.”

“Well, you sure haven't set anyone straight.”

Luke shrugged, but he never, not once in five years, corrected anyone who made assumptions about his wholesome, all-American youth. It was the closest Billy ever came to catching him in a lie.

They became friends, but they weren't best friends or anything. Luke quickly got adopted by their older, married, churchy teammates, and Billy would rather have gouged his eyes out than spend more time with those guys than legally mandated by his contract. The feeling was, apparently, mutual.

And so he and Luke spent time together on trains and buses, in hotel rooms and the dugout. There wasn't any actual

reason for the feeling Billy got when he looked at Luke, something like a voice saying *Yes. Him*. There wasn't any reason for the sense that every minute he spent with Luke he was getting away with something. He couldn't even chalk it up to plain old attraction, because Billy was attracted to all kinds of people—he wasn't in any kind of confusion about that and hadn't been since Ramona Maggiano behind the bleachers in tenth grade and Hughie O'Leary in the woods the year after—and it had never yet resulted in that feeling of rightness that he sometimes experienced when he looked across the locker room and caught sight of Luke.

If it had been any other guy, Billy would have kept his distance. The last thing he needed was a crush on a teammate. Jesus. But Billy couldn't keep his distance from Luke any more than he could keep his distance from freshly mown grass and a brand-new ball.

But that's where it stopped. Billy hit the brakes hard. They were friends, but they were friends at the clubhouse. They were friends who went out for dinner with some of the other guys, or for drinks with half the roster. In all the years they'd known one another, they'd never seen the inside of the other's home. They rarely saw one another during the off season.

It was safest that way. Billy might not know exactly what it meant that he looked at Luke and felt a bone-deep and totally unnecessary sense of rightness, but he knew he couldn't let it become anything else. He had to shut it down, lock it out, keep his eye on the goddamn ball—and so that's what he did.

Chapter Two

Finally, Billy's mom and Suzanne got into the truck. Billy winced as he watched the truck lurch to the side, its wheels slipping a little on wet leaves on the way down the hill. He wondered, as he did every year, whether he could finally convince his mother to let him pay to have the driveway properly paved, maybe even regraded. He thought about having it done himself while she was away, and continued to let himself think about it for a full half minute before he realized he was trying to avoid thinking about the man who was standing next to him.

“Come on,” Billy said. “You’ll freeze out here.” Neither of them had on coats and the temperature had been dropping all day. As much as it pained him to admit that Suzanne might be right about anything, she had a point about the weather being strange.

“What was that all about?” Luke asked. “Are they going to the hospital?”

“No, they’re going to stay with Suzanne’s in-laws. She’s got a bee in her bonnet about getting stranded up here and not being able to get to the hospital in time. There was a blizzard a

few years back real early in the season and nobody could get into town for over a week. She's nervous about that happening again."

"Doesn't look like blizzard weather," Luke said.

"Didn't three years ago, either," Billy said, annoyed to find himself defending Suzanne even though privately he thought that worrying about a blizzard in North Carolina in October was just this side of deranged. But Mama said it had been a foggy August, and that a foggy August meant a snowy winter. That sounded like Grade A bullshit to Billy, but all the old folks seemed to be saying the same thing, and he wasn't dumb enough to open his mouth and fight them. "It's her first baby and Phil's stationed in Korea," Billy said, instead of making his entire family—his entire county—seem utterly backwoods by explaining the fog situation.

"I forgot about Phil. Shit, I forgot Suzie was pregnant until I saw her."

"Is that, uh." Billy gestured at his own head. "Is it a symptom?" he asked, as casually as a person could ask whether a fastball to the skull had scrambled someone's brains. In other words, probably not very casually at all.

Luke scowled. "No, asshole. Just because I'm a selfish bastard."

Billy shoved his hands in his pockets and pointedly did not look at Luke. "I'm not gonna disagree."

"I'm sorry, all right?"

“Doesn’t cost much to pick up the phone,” Billy said.

Luke shrugged. “I took it off the hook.”

“For two weeks?” Billy wanted to point out that Luke could have put it back on the hook long enough to call someone—literally anyone—on the team. He also wanted to point out that he didn’t need an apology. What he needed was an explanation. He wanted to know if something was wrong—more wrong than a potentially career-ending injury, wrong enough that Luke would let everyone who cared about him worry themselves sick.

But Billy was afraid that anything he said right now was going to careen straight past rude and into hurtful, and he didn’t want to hurt Luke. Not because Billy was a saint—Major League Baseball was filled with people he’d go out of his way to insult—but because you had to be a monster to want to hurt Luke, even when his head was in one piece. He was the kind of guy people brought casseroles to. The kind of guy teammates set up with their sisters, and if that wasn’t one step away from canonization, Billy didn’t know what was.

So Billy kept his mouth shut, unable to think of a single safe thing to say. Couldn’t ask how Luke was feeling, because the answer to that was pretty obvious—he looked ten years older than he had that summer. Couldn’t ask what the fuck had gone through Luke’s head to make him run off after getting discharged from the hospital, because Billy was afraid that would send Luke right back into hiding. Couldn’t talk about baseball for the same reason.

Billy went inside, not even sure Luke would follow him. That was the strangest thing: for the five years they had played together, Billy always knew what Luke would do. Luke was one of those players who always did the same things in the same order—and there was no reason not to, no reason to mess with perfection. He woke up early, went to the stadium early, made polite conversation in the locker room, put in extra hours with teammates who needed help, called the coaches *sir* without making it sound ironic, was friendly to opposing players, and went to bed at a decent hour. He had no vices, he smiled for the camera, and he signed every ball and baseball card that was handed to him. That had been Luke's life for five years, until suddenly it wasn't.

And now Billy wasn't even sure what to think. Billy hadn't meant to shape his life around Luke's, but apparently that's what he'd gone and done anyway. Without Luke around, that last month of the season had been bizarre. A dozen times a day, Billy had turned in the direction Luke was supposed to be, meaning to say something to him—usually some comment that was too mean for anyone else's ears, or confirmation that they were going to get lunch later on, or any of the other moments that, it turned out, Billy's day revolved around. Luke's absence was like missing a stair, and Billy was in constant danger of stumbling.

But it was October now, a month after Luke's injury, a month after he had effectively disappeared from Billy's life. It was as if the Luke he knew—the Luke, he now realized, he had counted on—had been replaced by a stranger.

Billy hated it. He hated everything about it. He had hated missing Luke and now he hated the mingled annoyance and relief that he felt on seeing him again. It wasn't even like they were best friends or anything. It might have made more sense if they were, because Billy was uncomfortably aware that what he was experiencing was far outside the umbrella of whatever friendly feelings someone might have about an injured teammate.

Fuck.

* * *

Billy got out the ingredients for grilled cheese, slamming around the kitchen as much as possible. Making a bunch of noise never actually made him feel better, but it also never made him feel worse, so as far as he cared, there was no reason to stop.

He slapped the butter and cheese onto the counter and then shut the icebox door with the maximum amount of force. Then he took out a knife that was much larger than necessary and used it to cut off a pat of butter, but when he went to put it in the skillet—the skillet he distinctly remembered taking out fifteen minutes earlier—it wasn't there anymore. Suzanne must have taken it with her. Christ almighty, he felt bad for Phil's parents. He took the second-best skillet from the hook over the stove and put on the gas.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Luke settle in at the kitchen table. He heard the tapping of paws on linoleum and supposed Luke was scratching the dogs' heads. The dogs were

horrible judges of character, always had been. They wanted to murder the milkman but loved the kids who trekked up here scrounging for autographs. Not a glimmer of taste or discernment in either of those animals and never had been.

“What kind of dogs are these?” Luke asked, as if he gave a shit about dog breeds.

“Hounds,” Billy said.

“What kind of hound?”

“Dumb ones.”

Over the sizzle of butter in the pan, Billy heard Luke mutter something that sounded like “For fuck’s sake.” And Billy knew he was being a pain in the ass by not meeting Luke halfway with his small talk attempts, but Billy had about zero skill in small talk under the best circumstances, and these were not even close to the best circumstances.

He dropped four slices of bread into the skillet.

“I knew you were from the hills,” Luke said, as if The Hills was a proper noun, a place that was marked with a black dot on a map. “But I didn’t realize you were from...the country.” He looked around, as if he had just noticed that he was in a falling-down farmhouse in the back end of nowhere.

Billy turned around so Luke wouldn’t see him smile— Luke didn’t deserve smiles yet. Luke Novak probably thought the earth came paved. He was from Cleveland and played in Philadelphia. Apart from spring training in Florida, he rarely had reason to venture out of a large city. Western North

Carolina was probably Luke's idea of the wilderness. Which was fair—it *was* pretty much the wilderness. Billy nearly pointed out that they were barely an hour outside Asheville, but figured that Luke wouldn't know what he was talking about. The only geography Luke was familiar with was the seven cities that had National League teams.

"There someplace I can wash up?" Luke asked.

"Woods are right outside," Billy said, pointing to the back door. He turned to see Luke's reaction.

"I—what?"

"It's not too cold, and there's still daylight. Nobody's seen any wildcats in these woods in years. As for bears, they don't bother anyone."

Luke stared, his eyes big and blue and horrified. "You've gotta be kidding. You're kidding, right?"

Billy slapped his leg and tried to look chagrined. "You caught me. The outhouse is the small building right over there." He pointed to a building that was, in fact, the old outhouse. "It even has a toilet seat now. That's new."

Luke stared some more. He hadn't been raised in the lap of luxury—Cleveland orphanages probably weren't five-star accommodations—but he probably could always count on indoor plumbing. "Okay," Luke said, as if coming to a decision, his face assuming the expression it did when the manager was screwing with the batting order. "Be right back."

Billy reached out and grabbed Luke's arm. "Aw, shit, Luke, I'm fucking with you. Bathroom's the second door on the left."

Luke's face went pink. Two equal and opposite forces were playing out on his face: the urge to be a good houseguest and perfect gentleman versus the desperate need—Luke Novak's one true calling, the one thing he was better at than baseball—to be an impossible little shit. It was nature versus nurture playing out right here in Billy's mom's kitchen.

"Asshole," Luke said, and Billy guessed that nature carried the day. Figured.

Billy started to laugh. "It's just that you were acting like you'd never seen a tree before." His hand was still on Luke's arm. It felt strange, even though they had touched one another a thousand times. Luke was skinnier—that had to be the difference.

"There's something wrong with you." Luke's lips were pursed in that snotty way he got.

"We have running water," Billy said, still laughing. "Shit, Luke, my dad was a dentist. Did you think we lived off the land? Trapping bears or whatever?"

"How the fuck do I know how normal people live?" Luke snapped, wrenching his arm out of Billy's grasp and heading to the washroom.

Billy did not know what the fuck that was about, and he was pretty sure that asking would open up a whole can of

worms, so he set about slicing some cheese.

When Luke came back, the sandwiches were ready, so Billy plonked a plate down in front of him and another for himself.

“Want anything to drink?”

“You gonna just get madder at me if I say yes? Give me a clue about the right answer.”

Billy went and got two bottles of beer. He even opened Luke’s.

“Nearly drove up to Chicago to see you in the hospital,” Billy said after he’d eaten half his grilled cheese in silence.

Luke looked up sharply. “I’d have socked you if you missed a start just to gawk at my sick ass—”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s why I didn’t do it.”

“I wasn’t even awake.”

“I know—”

“The whole team would have killed you.”

This was probably true, but honestly, that had only made fucking off more appealing. Billy really wasn’t much of a people pleaser on a good day, and by the end of the season, he typically had all the grace and charm of a rabid dog.

But the end of the season hadn’t even been two weeks ago, which maybe explained why Billy still felt like spitting nails. He usually stayed at his house in Philadelphia and iced his arm until November, refusing to inflict himself on his family until

he was feeling human again. But when his mom called two days ago and said Suzanne was worried about getting snowed in, Billy got in his truck and was in his childhood home that same night. His mom and Suzanne had been too busy packing baby things and in general turning the house upside down to notice that Billy was basically a snarling wild animal, which was probably for the best.

As for Luke—he was used to Billy being his worst possible self.

For some reason this didn't make Billy feel any better, despite the fact that he wasn't even sure why he felt bad in the first place. *He* wasn't the one who'd disappeared.

Still. Luke had turned up, hadn't he? A month late and with no explanation, but he'd turned up, and not even two days after Billy had gotten here.

Which was odd, now that Billy thought about it. Also odd: how Luke even had this address.

One of the dogs ambled over and put his chin on Luke's leg in a shameless gambit for the sandwich crust.

"Down, Sadie," Billy said.

She ignored him, as usual. Luke grinned, and there it was: that smile that made you want to go straight out and buy whatever brand of soap or gasoline he was advertising.

"I was worried," Billy said, fighting the urge to get up and clean out the pan or organize the cupboards. He looked Luke dead in the eye. "Real worried."

Luke looked genuinely upset. He looked the way he had when Briggs was traded or when they lost the World Series. Just crushed.

Billy made up his mind, all at once and for no good reason, to let Luke off the hook. So what if he'd run away like the worst kind of idiot? So what if he'd nearly given Billy a heart attack? He was here now.

It wasn't until he was setting the plates in the drying rack, pretending not to notice Luke sneaking crusts to the dogs, that Billy realized he'd never found out who won the World Series.

Chapter Three

That night Billy couldn't sleep.

First of all, he was in his old bedroom, trying to cram himself into a bed so short and narrow that he couldn't even arrange himself diagonally across it. The previous two nights, he'd slept in the double bed in the guest room, but he gave that room to Luke. He figured even uninvited guests ought to get the better bed.

Second, he couldn't figure out what Luke was doing there. Billy could think of half a dozen guys who were friendlier with Luke than he was, guys whose kids treated Luke like an uncle and whose wives could be counted on for home-cooked meals. Guys who didn't live an hour from the nearest train station. Guys who were—nice. Billy wasn't nice. Billy was kind of an asshole and everybody knew it. If Billy were recovering from a head injury, he wouldn't want to stay with someone like himself.

The way Billy saw it, there were three possible reasons why Luke had come:

1. He didn't want to be fussed over and figured an old asshole like Billy was his best bet.

2. He wanted to keep away from reporters and figured that a house in the middle of nowhere was the best place to keep a low profile.

3. That fastball had scrambled his brains.

It was probably some combination of 1 and 2. Luke's brains seemed fine.

He kind of wished his mother and Suzanne were around. His mom would know what to do. She'd cook for Luke and make sure he had plenty of blankets for his bed. Suzanne would make him laugh, probably by telling embarrassing stories about Billy's childhood. They'd—well, they'd take care of him, which wasn't something Billy knew how to do.

Now he remembered where Luke had gotten this address. His mom and Suzanne, and his dad back when he was alive, always spent a few weeks in Philadelphia every spring. In between games, Billy made it a point to take them to restaurants and the theater and everything else they couldn't do back home. Billy couldn't have said how it started, but somehow Luke started tagging along. Tagging along wasn't quite accurate—his parents always invited Luke. From the very first time they'd met, Luke had charmed Billy's mother. That was no surprise—Luke charmed everyone's mother. He was put on this planet to hit beautiful line drives and charm mothers and sisters.

Two or three years ago they all went out to an Italian restaurant. While they were waiting for the food to arrive, Billy's mother finished knitting a scarf. She gave it to Luke the minute it came off her needles. "It was supposed to be for Billy, but it matches your eyes perfectly," she'd said, pleased with herself. At some point in the late forties she'd asked Billy for some blue yarn. Billy had misremembered the amount she needed, accidentally moved the decimal point one place to the right, and wound up buying damn near a mile of the stuff. That scarf had been one of about two dozen projects she had knit with it.

Now whenever Billy came across a sweater with a stripe of that color, or the mittens she had made him, or anything else with that yarn, he thought of Luke Novak's goddamn eyes. For fuck's sake.

Luke insisted on writing Billy's mom a thank you note for the scarf, so Billy recited the address of his childhood home while Luke wrote it down in this tiny red address book he always had on him. Over the years, he'd seen Luke write down heaven only knew how many addresses and phone numbers in that thing. Billy didn't know if growing up the way Luke had made him want to hoard the names of everyone who was nice to him, or if Billy was reading too much into what was probably just a normal thing that people did. Billy was—as usual—a no-manners bastard who didn't have an address book so much as a stack of used envelopes he crammed into a drawer.

Luke was careful with people, or at least careful not to lose them. But of all the people whose addresses he had written down in that little book, it was Billy's door that he had shown up at, and Billy still didn't know how he felt about that.

Billy knew that he wanted Luke, but only in safe way. So far, he'd been able to keep his wanting purely theoretical, something that belonged in another lifetime, just like summer vacations and elbows that didn't hurt all the time. Billy was good at living in this world; he didn't waste his time thinking about things that couldn't exist. He was lucky; he was happy. He got to play baseball for a living and was paid kind of amazingly well to do it. He was literally living out his childhood dream. Sometimes he woke up and couldn't get over his good luck.

But with Luke here, with Luke out of the safely contained universe of baseball, Billy was less sure of everything. When he shut his eyes, he didn't hear Philadelphia traffic, but the murmur of wind through the leaves, the calling of owls, and the sound of Luke tossing and turning on the other side of one thin wall. He kept thinking of Luke sitting across from him at the pine table where Billy had eaten nearly all his meals until he turned eighteen. Luke hugging his mother, Luke scowling about the bathroom, Luke spoiling the dogs. *That* Luke—Billy wanted him and couldn't even pretend otherwise, and that was just no good.

* * *

Billy came down the next morning to what he thought was an empty kitchen, only to have the daylight's scared out of him when he saw Luke standing by the window.

“Jesus Christ. Turn a light on, for fuck’s sake,” Billy said.

“Didn’t want to wake you up.”

It was seven o’clock and the sun wasn’t quite up, but Billy could make out Luke’s silhouette. There was something about the way he was standing—leaning against the window, his spine almost sagging—that made Billy think he’d been there for a while. Billy reached up, pulling the chain to turn on the light. They both winced at the sudden brightness. When Billy opened his eyes, he saw that Luke looked awful. His skin had a gray tinge and there were purple circles under his eyes. The bruise on his cheekbone that yesterday Billy had thought looked faded now seemed worryingly dark.

“Trouble sleeping?” Billy asked

Luke grunted in a way that Billy took to mean *yes*. Billy set about making coffee. They both could probably use a few cups as soon as possible, as strong as possible.

“Where are the chickens?” Luke asked.

“Huh?”

“The cannibal chickens you told me about.”

Jesus. The things Luke remembered. “They spend the night in a coop so owls and foxes don’t get them. I’ll go feed them in a bit. You can come with me if you want.” He didn’t know what possessed him to add that last bit, but Luke visibly

brightened, like feeding the chickens was a treat. It was too bad they didn't keep pigs anymore. Luke would have gotten a kick out of them.

It would never stop being funny to Billy that Luke had everyone convinced he was this cornfed farm boy. He certainly looked the part and his manners were what you'd expect from the son of, say, a well-to-do Midwestern farmer or pastor. But that was only because he kept his hard edges hidden away.

Late in their rookie season, they were in the clubhouse, waiting out a rain delay. Most of the guys were playing cards, but gambling was pretty much the only vice Billy didn't have, and Luke didn't have any vices at all, so they found themselves side by side in battered old armchairs, Billy reading a book and Luke paging through a magazine.

"Harrison's cheating," Luke murmured after about fifteen minutes, not looking up from his magazine.

"Huh?"

"Don't be obvious, but watch what he's doing with his left hand."

Out of the corner of his eye, Billy watched the card game. Harrison was one of the guys who had a lot to say about queers and Negroes and a whole lot of other folks. That had been Jackie Robinson's second season and Jesus Christ had Harrison never shut up about it every time they played the Dodgers

“Okay, keep your eye on his left hand,” Luke said, quiet enough so that only Billy heard. “There, did you see that?”

Billy saw it. “That fucker. How could you tell? You don’t even play cards.”

“Anyone who spends time in an orphanage winds up with a bachelor’s degree in cards. And a graduate degree in cheating.”

Billy laughed, which probably was a shitty thing to do when someone was telling you the sad story of their life, but Luke grinned.

“DiParma has a girlfriend,” Billy said, naming another of the guys he couldn’t stand.

“Half the married guys have girlfriends,” Luke said, apparently unimpressed with Billy’s gossip.

“Richards and Sullivan take pills before every game,” Billy said. “And sometimes in the middle of games. And I’m not talking about aspirin.”

“Nice,” Luke said, apparently commenting on the quality of Billy’s gossip and not the drug habits of his teammates.

Billy hadn’t expected Luke to be petty, to be mean and bitchy and sly. But he collected these ugly bits of gossip and shared them with Billy, who repaid this strange candor in the same currency.

“Lewis has a secret baby in St. Louis.”

“You know all those nosebleeds McGraw’s been having? Cocaine.”

“Walter’s six months behind in payments to his ex-wife.”

In the back of his mind, Billy kept track of which players and coaches Luke gossiped about and what kind of gossip he thought was worth sharing. When there were whispers about Pittsburgh’s backup catcher being caught with another man, Luke never said a word about it. Billy tentatively filed Luke away under “people who might not be a total dick about things.”

And then there were Luke’s stories about the orphanage, about stealing cigarettes from convenience stores and selling them to pay for new cleats, about the time some kid stole his new glove and Luke retaliated by locking him in a closet. They were awful stories and they all painted Luke in the worst possible light. Billy suspected that free-wheeling assholery was just the only way to survive in an orphanage, because the fact was that Luke was a decent guy now, and nobody changes their stripes that much.

Still. There was a real difference between the Luke who spoke to Billy in hushed tones on trains and buses and in quiet corners of the clubhouse, and the Luke who everyone else got to see. Everybody else’s Luke was a serious and earnest choirboy; Billy’s Luke was still serious and earnest, but he was a little dangerous.

Billy couldn’t help but be smug that he got to see this other side of Luke, but he was even more pleased that he got to see

anything. Luke was private, and he closely guarded the wholesome reputation that the owners and sportswriters had invented for him.

“You’re kind of horrible,” Billy said one day.

Luke looked at Billy like he was an especially slow student who had finally gotten the point. “Takes one to know one.”

“I like it,” Billy had clarified. “It was a compliment.”

Luke grinned.

Chapter Four

“You’ll want a sweater or at least a coat,” Billy said, pausing at the back door. Luke was only wearing a T-shirt and dungarees, despite there being no way it was a single degree over fifty-five in the house and colder still outside. And those tennis shoes weren’t going to do him any good at all in the mud.

“I didn’t exactly pack winter clothes,” Luke said, frowning. “I didn’t pack at all.”

Maybe Billy was a shitty host and a shitty friend, because he hadn’t really thought about the fact that Luke arrived with only a knapsack that was just large enough to carry a book, a razor, and a change of clothes—the items Luke always insisted on having on hand when the rest of his luggage was wherever luggage went on trains and buses. “Did you get lost on the way to buy the paper and wind up in North Carolina?”

Luke shrugged. “Packing seemed like too much of a decision.”

Billy didn’t know how to pretend that made even the slightest bit of sense. Luke was looking away, as if he knew

exactly how weird he was being. “How’d you get here, anyway?” Billy asked. It had been bothering him since yesterday. “How’d you get from the train station, I mean.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Luke said, still looking away.

“You didn’t drive, did you? You didn’t leave your car at the bottom of the hill?” Billy tried to imagine Luke’s Cadillac—the one luxury he’d ever allowed himself—parked at the bottom of the hill. He wasn’t even sure he’d manage to get it up the driveway without ruining the suspension.

“No, no. I haven’t driven since—anyway. I took the train. Are we going to feed the chickens or what?”

Billy was pretty sure that Luke had been about to say that he hadn’t driven since the concussion. He didn’t know whether that meant that Luke couldn’t drive or if he just didn’t want to. Was something wrong with Luke’s eyes? Jesus Christ, he hoped not.

He got so distracted by this that he almost didn’t notice that Luke still hadn’t told him how he’d gotten here from the train station. Still, he knew what it looked like when Luke was settling in for nine innings of stubbornness and that’s what he was seeing now. There was no use trying to talk reason with him.

“Let me get you some clothes,” Billy said, and went upstairs. He dug through the trunk at the foot of his bed for a heavy sweater. He was bigger than Luke even when Luke was at his usual weight, and now the sweater would all but hang off Luke. Probably one of Billy’s dad’s old sweaters that his

mom had hung on to would fit Luke better, but Billy liked the idea of Luke in his clothes and he wasn't going to think about why.

“Here,” he said, handing the sweater to Luke. “I have more where that came from and a few pairs of corduroy pants that should fit you.”

Luke pulled the sweater over his head and Billy had to look away.

While Luke fed the chickens—a tiny twitch of a smile working at the corner of his mouth as the chickens made fools of themselves—Billy thought. If Luke hadn't driven, then he had no way of leaving on his own.

“I can drive you to the train station,” Billy said.

“What?” Luke went still, his hand in the feed bag.

“There's a station in Bryson City, but it only gets one train a day. I could drive you into Asheville, though. It wouldn't be much trouble,” he added when Luke still didn't say anything.

“Right,” Luke said. “When do you want me to leave?”

“That's not—I don't want you to leave.”

“You want to take me to the train station for fun?”

“No, I just—you're in the middle of nowhere. I don't want you to think you're stuck here.”

“I came here on purpose,” Luke said slowly, as if spelling something out for a child.

Billy gave up trying to explain himself and let Luke feed the chickens in peace. Sadie was amusing herself with a baseball so old and beat up that it had to be a relic of Billy's days playing high school ball. Mabel lay in a pile of dirt, looking like it was a real struggle for her to keep her eyes open. That dog had woken up not even an hour earlier. Billy swore that the hounds he grew up with weren't this lazy, but his mother insisted that this was just how hounds were.

As he watched, Sadie brought the ball to Luke, who took one look at it and politely said "no thank you." Billy bit his lip so he didn't laugh. The coffee must have done Luke some good, because he had some color in his cheeks and didn't look as drawn as he had earlier.

Billy let himself look for the first time since Luke arrived, maybe for the first time in a lot longer. He looked—well, he was *handsome*, that wasn't news to Billy or to anyone else who had seen Luke, either in person or on cereal boxes or anywhere else. Even worn-out and rundown, he was still handsome. But after so many weeks of worrying about Luke, it was such a relief to see him that Billy wasn't sure he could even think straight. Billy just didn't want to look away.

Luke turned and saw Billy watching him. Billy should have looked away, and that's what he would have done if he hadn't also been hit with a gut punch of *wanting*. And that wasn't even the right word. He didn't think there was a word that encompassed his relief at seeing Luke reasonably well, at seeing him in Billy's own sweater, at wanting to make him lunch and also wanting to take him to bed.

Billy couldn't manage to pry his gaze from Luke, but what was stranger still was that Luke kept on looking right back at him.

* * *

Luke had gone to lie down and Billy was scouring the oven. His mother was going to come home and wonder what the fuck had happened to her kitchen, and he was going to have to explain that he was having inappropriate thoughts about his teammate and had taken it out on her kitchen appliances.

There was some oven cleaner under the sink, but what he really wanted to do was keep his hands busy, so he took out a box of steel wool and set to work. He succeeded in keeping one of his hands busy, at least. His pitching arm was giving him shit today, just like it did on all the other days ending in *y*, so he switched to his left arm.

After an hour kneeling on the floor, he groaned when he got to his feet. "Fuck," he said.

"Is it your back?" Luke said, and Billy nearly jumped out of his skin. He didn't know how long Luke had been there. He was leaning in the kitchen doorway, apparently just watching Billy.

"Back, shoulder, elbow, knees," Billy said, before realizing he probably shouldn't complain about pain to a man who had been through what Luke had.

Luke pushed off from the door frame and came to stand behind Billy. Not wanting to ruin his sweater, Billy had taken

it off and thrown it over the back of a kitchen chair, so now he only had on his sleeveless undershirt and a pair of jeans. He didn't know if it was his imagination or if he really did feel Luke's breath on his bare skin.

"Stay still," Luke murmured, and Billy did. He didn't know what was going on, except that Luke was too close and his own heart was going to beat out of his chest. He looked straight ahead, like the pattern of fruit bowls on the wallpaper was the only interesting thing in the room, maybe in the world.

He felt a light hand on his shoulder, callused fingertips moving his undershirt out of the way. "You have a bruise," Luke said. "What happened?"

"Baseball," Billy said, matter-of-fact.

Luke sighed, and now Billy was sure that he could feel the exhale on his skin. "It's black and blue down to your elbow," he said, as if Billy didn't already know that. Those bruises had appeared out of nowhere in September and were taking forever to go away.

"Yeah. It's a mess."

"How did it happen, though? You didn't have this before I got hurt."

Billy stumbled on the fact that Luke had noticed—that, in the locker room, Luke had apparently been paying attention.

"I tore the muscle," Billy said, his mouth dry and his voice scratchy. "A bunch of tiny tears, so it bled, and that's what you're seeing beneath the skin—it's just old blood. Or

something like that.” He actually couldn’t remember if the bruising was from the injured muscle or the injured joint. The truth was that he hadn’t paid that much attention to what the doctors said. It was maybe the twentieth thing someone had said about his arm that hour, the hundredth that day, the ten thousandth that month. He’d been hearing about his arm for his entire career. There were so many parts that went into a functioning arm: tendons, bone, ligament, cartilage, muscle. And Billy’s were all—well, they weren’t quite fucked, but they would be in a few years. A few more years of baseball, though, was worth it.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Billy said. And it was true that the bruise itself didn’t hurt. It was the stuff underneath the bruise that was giving him trouble, but he had long since decided not to think about that.

“Your arm’s hurt since 1948,” Luke said, his hand still resting on Billy’s shoulder. One of them really ought to move, Billy thought, and then there was a brush of skin that it took him a minute to identify as Luke’s fingertips skimming down from his neck to his shoulder to his elbow.

Billy froze. He had never been good at thinking on his feet—always made the wrong damn choice. He had no instinct, as the pitching coach was fond of telling him. He was the kind of ballplayer who had to practice everything a thousand times until it felt automatic. And there was no practicing for the possibility that Luke would—what—*caress* him? Jesus Christ. So Billy choked. He didn’t move, he didn’t say anything, and

when all his muscles went tense, he didn't try to do anything about it. He wasn't sure how much time passed.

“Sorry,” Luke said, moving away. “Don't know what I was thinking.”

It was the sound of the back door opening that finally unfroze Billy. “No, I—”

Luke was gone before Billy could get any words out, which maybe was just as well because he still didn't know what to say.

* * *

When Luke came back inside a few minutes later—the dogs trailing behind him like he was the Pied Piper—he acted like nothing had happened. And, technically, nothing really had happened. Touching someone's shoulder was officially nothing, Billy was sure of it. Reading more into it was just Billy seeing things that he wished were there—or, rather, things that he definitely didn't wish were there, because he was not a crazy person who wanted to get involved with a teammate.

Except—Billy knew the way teammates touched one another, and Luke knew the way teammates touched one another, what had happened in the kitchen wasn't that. There were rules, and Luke wasn't the kind of person who broke rules without having a reason.

And so now Billy felt like he didn't have a choice but to tentatively categorize Luke under “people who are into men,”

whereas before that he had been filed under “people who might be into men and might not be into anyone.” He was trying not to think about what this meant.

For the first year or two they had played together, Billy thought Luke was just a gentleman. He knew Luke was... *innocent* was the wrong word. Inexperienced, maybe. He never took women home. At first, Billy'd figured Luke wanted to wait until he got married, but usually guys who went in for that sort of thing actually got married. Luke didn't even go on dates, except when someone got the bright idea to set him up with their sister, and then poor Luke had to take the girl out and endure endless teasing about it. Luke was the only ballplayer Billy'd ever heard of whose teammates would actually encourage him to date their sisters.

By the end of their second year, Billy was pretty sure everybody's sisters were perfectly safe around Luke. If he was interested in women, then he sure was keeping it a secret. Looking the way he did, and playing the way he did, and getting paid the way he did—there were women in every city they played in who would have been happy to go home with him, but as far as Billy could tell, Luke went home alone.

The fact that Luke didn't seem interested in men didn't mean anything at all. Billy was pretty sure that *he* didn't seem like he was interested in men either, and that was because he went out of his damned way to make sure he didn't. He was absolutely not letting queer rumors trip up his career or make things difficult with his teammates. He was discreet. There

was no reason in the world why Luke couldn't also be discreet.

But until that afternoon, Billy just told himself that Luke wasn't interested in anyone. It was easiest to just shut the door on the entire possibility of anything happening between the two of them. It was best to completely take Luke out of the category of people Billy could potentially be involved with.

Not that Billy really ever really got *involved* with anyone. You could hardly call going home with someone *involved*. He was pretty sure that what he wanted to do with Luke counted as involvement, goddammit.

* * *

Last year, Billy had gotten his mother a chest freezer for Christmas, and now as Billy opened it up, he saw that she had stocked it with enough food to keep him going for weeks. Apart from four brick-shaped items that he guessed were meatloaf and a round object that he thought might be chicken pot pie, the rest were mysterious casseroles that he supposed he'd figure out when he defrosted them.

“What do you want for dinner?” Billy asked. “A brick, a circle, or a mystery?”

Luke came over to peer into the freezer. “That's a lot of food.”

“She doesn't think I can cook.”

“Can you cook?”

It probably was strange that they had known one another for years, in fact spent hours a day together for half the year, but didn't know that kind of basic fact about one another. Billy had been deliberate about keeping Luke out of his private life, but it hadn't really occurred to him that Luke might be doing the same thing, and possibly for the same reasons.

"I can make the basics," Billy said. "Pork chops, spaghetti sauce, roast chicken. Nothing fancy."

"I bought a cookbook," Luke said, sounding uncertain and tentative in a way that Billy wasn't sure what to do with. "I'd never so much as turned on a stove until three years ago."

Billy supposed they didn't teach boys how to cook at the orphanage, and the idea of Luke trying to figure it out on his own made him inexplicably sad. In some other world he could have offered to teach Luke how to cook. In some other lifetime they could have been that kind of friend to one another. He cleared his throat. "Yeah? What do you like to make?"

"I usually just make meat and potatoes, but last week I made something called pineapple upside down cake. It was too big for me to eat myself."

The image of Luke facing down an entire sheet cake by himself was funny and also a little sad—didn't he have anyone to share it with? Billy hated that he didn't have the answer to that question.

"My mom makes that," Billy said. "Could be that one of the mystery dishes in there is a pineapple upside down cake."

“Let’s have a mystery dinner,” Luke said, surprising Billy. He would have thought Luke would take the known over the unknown.

Billy grabbed a foil-wrapped lump out of the freezer at random and set it in a dish on the counter, far enough back that the dogs couldn’t get at it.

“Turns out it’s chicken and dumplings,” Billy said later on, when he had heated up the meal and the kitchen smelled like butter and rosemary. Luke had spent the afternoon asleep on the couch, while Billy all but tiptoed around to avoid disturbing him. Luke slept for three hours, and when he woke up, he looked like he could have gone back to sleep for another three.

“Can I do anything to help?” Luke asked as Billy set the table.

“You can sit down,” Billy said. “And finish that,” he added, slapping a bowl down in front of Luke.

“Or what?”

“Or the dogs’ll get fat and lazy eating your leftovers,” Billy said. “You’re down, what—fifteen pounds? Twenty-five?” Luke only had on a T-shirt now, and Billy could see the sharp jut of his collarbones, the angle of his shoulders. Luke had always been one of those guys who had to work to put on weight and work even harder to keep it on. Billy was the opposite—he was big to begin with, and he was pretty sure that without training, he’d go soft around the middle in no time.

“I haven’t weighed myself,” Luke said, which was pure prevarication because Billy would have bet that Luke knew just from the fit of his clothes—all of which were hanging off him—exactly how much weight he’d lost.

“You’ll have to work at putting some of that back on before spring training.”

“Oh my God, why are you so bossy?”

“Eat your food and stop bellyaching,” Billy said. “Children are starving in Europe. Don’t you read the paper?”

Luke ate all his chicken. Billy, for a minute, considered asking his mother for the recipe, as if he was going to make chicken and dumplings for Luke back in Philadelphia. Jesus, he was losing it.

That night Billy put on the television set he had bought his mother two Christmases ago and they watched a quiz show that neither of them knew any of the answers to. Or, rather, Billy watched it and Luke wandered around the room, picking up the framed photographs on the mantel, fingering the ancient quilt that was folded across the back of the couch, touching the old cotton curtains that hung in the windows.

Finally, Luke was done prowling around and he sat down on the opposite end of the couch from Billy. Before the show was over, he was asleep, his head on the armrest, his knees tucked up tight. Officially, he was five foot eleven, shorter than Billy by a good three inches, but even so there was still no way he ought to be able to cram his whole body onto half the couch like that.

He had one arm tucked behind his head, making his biceps stand out. It would take a lot more than a month of inactivity to get rid of those muscles. His T-shirt had ridden up and his pants, already too loose, had slipped down to his hips, exposing the flat plane of his stomach and a line of dark blond hair.

Billy was careful about who he looked at. It was one of the only non-baseball things he bothered being careful about. But this wasn't looking, really. It was—taking stock. He was looking now so he wouldn't be tempted to look tomorrow, when Luke might notice. That was all.

That was all it should have been, at least.

Instead, when Billy's gaze drifted from Luke's stomach back up to his face, he found Luke's eyes open. He was looking at Billy, a flash of bright blue beneath a pale fan of eyelashes. One corner of his mouth hitched up in something that might have been a smile if it hadn't been so tired. Then he nudged Billy's thigh with his foot, like he'd seen Billy looking and hadn't minded—maybe even had liked it.

Billy swallowed. Not knowing what else to do, he squeezed Luke's calf, then looked away.

Chapter Five

Every year, Billy spent six weeks at his mother's house fighting the forces of gravity and decay. The house was old enough that there was always something that needed to be done: roof shingles replaced, windows sealed, tiles regouted. His father had always said that the woods wanted to take back anything built inside it, which always struck Billy as an uncharacteristically fanciful thing for his plainspoken father to say, but the older he got, the more it seemed like a simple statement of fact.

Billy liked fixing things. His house in Philadelphia was new and modern, and even if it had needed fixing, he wouldn't have had time during the season to do anything about it. He had spent half his lifetime learning how to fix damn near everything, but had no opportunity to do anything with that knowledge until he got home.

This year he was going to paint the trim in a few rooms and then see if he could fix up the tiny alcove that was going to be the baby's room, at least until Phil got back. There was also a pile of firewood to chop and a fence that was so busted it was barely a fence anymore. There was more than enough

work to keep him busy until Christmas. That was the challenge of the off-season: filling the hours. One winter, he'd played in the Cuban league, but that was just too much goddamn baseball, both for his mind and for his elbow.

He was scraping flaking paint off the windowsill when he heard footsteps on the stairs. It was past ten, so maybe Luke had managed something like a full night's sleep.

"There's a fresh pot of coffee," Billy said without turning around.

Luke grunted, but then appeared at Billy's shoulder a minute later with two mugs.

"Thanks," Billy said, taking his.

"What're you doing?"

Billy explained about the trim and the fences and all that. Luke nodded, then took the coarse-grit sandpaper and began working on the windowsill that Billy had already scraped.

"You know you don't need to earn your keep," Billy said. "I'm just keeping myself busy so I don't go nuts."

"Nurses told me I needed a hobby," Luke said.

"You could take up golf."

"You could take up fucking yourself."

Billy snorted. "Salty language from Novak."

Luke gave him the finger. As far as Billy knew, he was the only living person Luke Novak ever gave the finger to, and

there was no good reason this should make him quite so pleased with himself.

“I don’t know what I’m doing here,” Luke said a few minutes later. “I don’t want to mess up your ma’s windows.”

“Stop when it’s mostly smooth and you’re seeing a bit of bare wood,” Billy said, and they worked in silence, the only sounds the sanding and scraping of wood and the dogs’ snoring.

“We’re going to need paint stripper for these bits,” Billy said after a while, indicating the mullions. He went down to the cellar with a flashlight and searched through old cans of paint and rusty saws and the detritus of generations of repairs until he found a can of turpentine. Then he went upstairs, and from under the sink he took the bin of old undershirts that his parents had always used as rags.

“This part’s easy,” he told Luke, unscrewing the can and pouring some of the liquid onto a rag. “You just wipe it on the wooden part—easy now, shit.” Luke had dropped his sandpaper and had one hand on the side of his head, the other braced against the wall. His eyes were squeezed shut, his jaw clenched.

“What’s the matter?” Billy asked, mentally planning the route to the nearest hospital. “What can I do?”

“Shut up,” Luke ground out. “If you start being sweet, I’ll know I’m a lost cause.”

Billy tamped down a swell of panic. “Okay, then get your filthy hand off my mother’s wallpaper and tell me what the fuck is wrong with you.”

“I think it’s that stuff,” Luke said, pointing to the can of turpentine. “The smell. Giving me a headache.”

Billy screwed the cap back on the can and threw open all the windows to air the room out. He heard the sound of Luke retching in the downstairs washroom.

“That happen often?” Billy asked when Luke came out.

Luke gave him an unimpressed look. “More often than it did before I got hit. I’m going to bed.”

And with that, he went upstairs.

“Sorry,” Luke said when he came downstairs a few hours later while Billy was boiling spaghetti for dinner.

“Shut the fuck up,” Billy said. “You’re not apologizing for being sick or injured or whatever.”

“Just trying to have manners,” Luke snapped, but he sat at the kitchen table, so he couldn’t have been too put out.

“Fuck manners. In this house we don’t have manners.” His mother would murder him on the spot if she heard him say that, but his mother wasn’t here and couldn’t hear him dishonor her home. “You didn’t come here for manners.”

Luke gave him a strange look. “What does that mean?”

“It means that if you wanted tender loving care, you’d have gone to literally anyone else.” Billy kept thinking about

what Luke said about how if Billy was sweet, he'd know he was on his last legs, and he thought about Luke turning up without any luggage. "Fuck, you could have stayed at a hotel and had room service if you wanted. You could have stayed in the goddamn hospital, for that matter. You come here, it's because you don't want any of that shit."

"Sometimes I go a whole hour thinking you've got an entire functioning brain inside that thick skull, but thank God you never let me go much longer than that, Reardon."

The ring of the telephone saved Billy from having to come up with any kind of intelligent answer to that. When he turned to answer it, he saw Luke wince at the shrill ringing. And it occurred to him that he might have a clue as to why Luke had kept his phone off the hook. Now Billy really did feel like a fool.

It was his mother on the line. "How's Suzanne?" he asked.

"She's fine. Just calling to check on you and poor Luke. You feeding him?"

"Yes, Mama, I'm feeding him. What do you think, I turned him loose in the woods to gather berries? Jesus."

"Watch your mouth, William Christopher."

"Sorry, Mama. He liked your chicken and dumplings."

"Well, of course he did. He's no fool. There's cocoa powder and a few chocolate bars in the back of the pantry behind the canned beans if you want to make him something sweet."

When Billy hung up, he drained the spaghetti and put it back in the pot, pouring in the sauce he made earlier using some tomatoes his mother put up that summer and an onion that was sprouting. He ladled generous servings into two bowls, and stopped himself right before plonking one down in front of Luke, remembering how Luke had winced at the sound of the telephone. Instead, he placed that dish of spaghetti in front of Luke as gently as he'd ever done anything in his life.

When they were finishing up, Billy got a good look at Luke's eyes. His pupils were tiny even though the kitchen was mostly in shadows.

"Codeine?" Billy asked. It was probably none of his business, but he wasn't sure he cared about that.

"Yeah. Took some this afternoon. I only take it when I get a migraine."

"Good. I mean, good that you have it for when you need it. And good that you aren't swallowing them by the fistful."

"Look, I'm embarrassed," Luke said a minute later.

"About taking codeine?"

"No. I mean, that too, actually, but about—what happened earlier."

"Your headache?"

"My headaches, sleeping so much and still being tired. Just—all of it. I was really a mess when I got out of the hospital and I'm still pretty much a mess."

“Nothing to be embarrassed about,” Billy said. “You didn’t ask to get hit with that ball.”

“That’s not the point,” Luke said without elaborating. Billy didn’t know what to say, so he took both their dishes and put them in the sink.

Billy’s father had been a mean patient whenever he had so much as a sore throat—crotchety, demanding, and impossible to please. Suzanne wasn’t much better. The last time she had the flu, she called him long distance specifically to whine about how she wanted to drag herself out to the woods to die like an old dog but Mama insisted on giving her aspirin. He wouldn’t have said that either of them were *embarrassed* to be sick, but they wanted to be left alone, and the fact that they couldn’t be left alone just made them mean as hell.

Billy was no prince when he was hurting, either. He always felt, idiotically, that giving in to pain was some kind of character flaw. He knew it wasn’t, he knew that he had to ice his damn arm and take whatever medicine the team doctor gave him, but he still felt weirdly ashamed of himself when he wasn’t able to use his body the way he wanted to.

It hadn’t even crossed Billy’s mind that Luke might be the same way. During the five years—nearly six, now—that they’d known one another, neither of them had been sick with more than a cold, and, except for Billy’s elbow, neither of them had been injured with more than a muscle strain. Billy had no idea how Luke acted when he was sick. Maybe vanishing into his apartment and refusing to answer the door,

even when it was Billy on the other side, was his equivalent of trying to haul himself into the woods.

“You’re allowed to feel shitty about being sick,” Billy said, because he thought Luke might need to hear it. “Hell, I felt pretty shitty about you being sick,” he added, trying to make it sound like a joke and wincing when it came out sounding as honest as if he had his hand on a bible.

Chapter Six

In the morning, the sky was a dull gray long after the sun should have risen, and it was a good ten degrees colder than it had been earlier that week. After they finished a pot of coffee, Billy set about making hot chocolate using his mother's hidden stash of cocoa. They took their mugs outside.

Billy wondered if that old wives' tale about the fog was right. There was no way it was cold enough for snow, not yet at least, but it sure looked like something was about to happen. Rain, and a whole lot of it, was Billy's guess.

"You up for a walk? I think we've got some boots that'll fit you," he said when Luke had finished feeding the chickens. "I want to let the dogs get in some exercise before it rains."

Luke looked skeptically at Mabel, who was already asleep at his feet in a pile of leaves. "Exercise?"

"I could do with some fresh air," Billy admitted.

"This is fresh air," Luke said, gesturing around.

Billy rolled his eyes. "Fine, don't come with me. Just don't burn the house down while I'm gone. It'll be an hour or two."

But Luke said he would come, and even put on a pair of Phil's old boots and a coat that must have been Billy's dad's.

The truth was that leaves had just turned, and if the rain was as heavy as Billy thought it might be, then it would strip the branches of all the fall color. It was silly, wanting to take a walk to see a bunch of red and orange leaves, and it was even sillier to want Luke to come with him.

Billy wasn't sure whether Luke's doctors had said he could do anything strenuous, and suspected that Luke wouldn't appreciate his asking, so he picked a path that didn't go too far uphill.

"Where does this go?" Luke asked after a few minutes. "And how did this path even get here in the first place? Did somebody cut down the trees that blocked the path?"

"This path's been here longer than we've been here. Deer probably made it. Or Indians. If we followed it all the way, we'd cross the state line and wind up in Tennessee." There'd probably be a highway and a railroad in the way, but Billy wasn't getting into that.

"Huh. It's pretty."

Billy felt like preening, as if he had made the leaves, the woods, and the ancient deer path with his own damn hands.

"So," Luke said a little while later. "You remember that morning in St. Louis?"

Billy almost tripped over a root. Yeah, he remembered that morning, and he didn't need any other details beyond "that

morning in St. Louis” to know exactly what Luke was talking about.

“The one with Chuck and that girl,” Billy said, just in case he was wrong.

“Yeah. *Chuck*,” Luke repeated, as if he had anything against Chuck Anderson, as if Chuck wasn’t one of the nicest guys on the team, or in the league, for that matter.

Luke and Billy usually shared a hotel room on road trips, but one night Billy and Chuck had taken a woman back to Chuck’s room. That was something they had done more than once, and which Luke never would have found out about it if, the next morning, Billy hadn’t stumbled out of Chuck’s hotel room and found the woman waiting at the elevator, asking Luke for his autograph.

Billy waved at both of them like a damn fool, and then, because he wasn’t the type of dickhead to spend a night with a woman and then pretend he didn’t know her, kissed her on the cheek and wished her luck in nursing school. Mortified, he ducked into the room he shared with Luke.

He had expected Luke to pretend it never happened, which was exactly what Luke did. Billy had no idea why Luke was bringing it up now, over two months later.

“You came out of Chuck’s bedroom,” Luke said now.

“Yeah,” Billy agreed.

“And so did the girl.”

“Yep.”

“And you kissed her cheek. It seemed like—I don’t know. Which of you did she go home with?”

Christ, was he going to have to explain this to Luke? At nine o’clock in the morning in the middle of the woods? “Both of us.”

Luke seemed to think this over. He picked up a stick that still had a couple of yellow leaves attached to it. A few minutes later, just when Billy was starting to think he had dodged a bullet, Luke piped up again.

“So, what, you took turns with her?”

There were a couple of red mushrooms growing out the trunk of a dead tree. Billy decided to think about that instead of thinking about how he was going to have to describe a threesome to Luke Novak. “No, not really. We all just did it together in Chuck’s bed.”

Luke seemed to take a moment to process this. Every muscle in Billy’s body tensed up while he waited for whatever was going to come next.

“What do you mean, you all did it together in Chuck’s bed?” Luke asked. “I don’t get how three people can have sex.”

Billy was startled enough that he turned his head. If he had been in his right mind, he would have kept facing straight ahead, but now he had no choice but to see Luke looking up at him with those eyes and that mouth and his questions about threesomes.

“You’re asking about the mechanics?” Billy asked. “The mechanics of threesomes.”

“Yeah,” Luke said, sounding relieved. “Mechanics.”

“You sure you want to know about this?”

Luke scowled. “Billy.”

He probably ought to say it was private, or embarrassing, or that he just didn’t remember. He did none of those things. “Okay, okay,” Billy said. “So, it’s not like there’s only one way. I’ve done it a couple times and it’s never been the same.” He weighed his words, because he didn’t want to shit on any of Luke’s fantasies, but he also thought that the way most men talked about this kind of thing was plain nasty. “It’s just another set of hands and mouths and, you know, whatever other body parts the people involved have.”

Luke was looking at him like he was speaking in tongues. “But what did you *do*?”

“Right. So.” Billy folded his arms. He wasn’t embarrassed about anything he had done, and he wasn’t embarrassed to talk about it, either. But he didn’t think anyone had ever asked him for this kind of detail, and there was something about the way that Luke was looking at him that made Billy want to get this right. “So, at first we all kissed and got one another undressed. Normal stuff, but with an extra person. Then, uh, well...”

Luke sighed. “Never would have figured you for a prude.”

“Fine! Jesus. I ate her out while Chuck jerked me off. Then she rode Chuck while I knelt behind her and played with her

tits and got her off with my hands. Are you happy now? Christ!”

Luke was bright red, which was pretty typical for him whenever anyone talked about sex. But Billy was pretty sure he was bright red too, which wasn't even remotely typical for him.

“Isn't that—queer?” Luke asked.

Billy took a deep breath and studied Luke's face. He didn't seem outraged or disgusted. He didn't seem anything. Apart from the redness, his face was as blank as it was when he was dealing with reporters. Billy focused on an old squirrels' nest in a tree just past Luke's shoulder. The rain would probably bring it down. “Some folks would say so.”

“What do you think?”

Billy supposed he could lie, but he was already about ninety percent certain that Luke wasn't going to kick up a fuss about this. So, in for a dime. “Well, yeah. For me it is. Is this going to be a problem?”

“Jesus Christ, William. No, no it isn't going to be a problem.”

It was probably a good sign that Luke was calling him William, which he only did when he was especially exasperated with him, but not when he was actually angry. “Okay. Good.” He let out a breath, but his entire body still felt coiled up. “Can you promise never to tell anyone? Especially don't talk about Chuck.”

Luke glared at him. “You’re the only one I ever really talk to.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sorry. I just had to be sure. For some guys, it isn’t queer at all. Sometimes guys are weird about touching one another.”

There was something hard and calculating in Luke’s eyes. “But not you.”

“Not me,” Billy agreed.

“Is it ever just you and Chuck?” Luke asked.

Jesus Christ, Luke wasn’t going to let this go. This was how he always was, whether it was figuring out how to hit a tricky pitch or anything else. When it was something Luke wanted, he was like a dog with a bone. “No,” Billy said. “Not Chuck. But other guys, yeah, a couple times.” He scrubbed a hand over the scruff on his jaw. “Listen, I’ve been with men before, and I like it, if that’s what you’re getting at. That’s pretty queer in my book. I’m queer.”

“But you and Chuck aren’t...together.”

Billy frowned. Of all the things to say after someone admits they’re queer, *that’s* what Luke went with? “No. I’m not with Chuck.” It was the truth; he didn’t even have the sort of loose arrangement with Chuck that he’d had with a teammate in the minors and one guy in the army when he was just out of high school. Although, looking back, Billy thought he could have—sometimes when they were alone, Chuck seemed like he might have been open to more.

“Okay.” Luke sounded satisfied, for some reason. He continued walking, so Billy followed.

The wind was picking up and it was darker now than it had been when they left the house. Billy had always thought it was the purest bullshit when people said that they could feel in their bones when a storm coming, but he was pretty sure that right now he had an extra ache in his elbow that was all the storm’s fault.

“We ought to turn back,” Billy said. “Neither of us have on raincoats and the dogs’ll stink to high heaven if they get wet.”

Luke shrugged, and they began walking in the opposite direction.

“What did you do with the men you were with?” Luke asked.

“What? What the hell kind of question is that?”

“Sorry. Is that personal?” Luke asked, the picture of innocence.

It for goddamn sure was personal and Luke knew it. Everything Luke had asked for the last ten minutes was personal. And Luke was asking anyway. Billy didn’t know if Luke was just curious about what men did together—except that couldn’t be it. Billy didn’t care how sheltered or inexperienced Luke was; he had spent half his life in and out of locker rooms. Luke hardly needed Billy to draw him a diagram, for chrissakes.

Maybe he wanted confirmation that Billy didn't do those things? Did he want to know that Billy had never sucked a cock? Because Billy had bad news for him, in that case.

"I'm sorry," Billy said. "If you want to hear that I haven't done whatever it is you're worried about—"

"Billy, you fucking *idiot*," Luke said, coming to a stop with his hands on his hips.

That was when Billy got an inkling of what was going on. The flush in Luke's cheeks maybe wasn't entirely from embarrassment.

Billy had the sense that he got when he was on the mound, facing down a tricky batter. He had to clear the extra useless shit from his brain. Don't think about the people in the stands. Don't think about that twinge in his elbow. Don't think about his stats or the batter's stats or how many runs are on the board. Right now, all he knew was that Luke just went out of his way to establish that Billy was queer and that Luke was okay with it. And then he kept on going, trying to talk about sex even though Billy'd spent years watching him duck out of conversations as soon as they turned to sex.

Billy's mouth felt dry. He licked his lips. He really wanted to look away from Luke, but he somehow couldn't. "You want me to tell you what I like to do with other men?"

Luke looked back steadily. Nodded.

"Want me to tell you," Billy said, his voice barely audible over the rush of the wind, "or want me to show you?"

Later, maybe, he could figure out why he thought a mountainside with a storm blowing in was a good time to do anything other than make a run for home. But right then he couldn't think about anything, because Luke reached for him, his grip on Billy's jacket collar tight enough that Billy felt it through several layers of clothing.

Billy decided he ought to start pulling his weight around here, so he got a hand on Luke's hip—right over the hem of Luke's borrowed sweater—and tugged. Luke stepped forward, and the next thing Billy knew, his back was against a tree trunk.

Billy was the one who closed the distance, who brushed his lips against Luke's. He probably ought to have held back, just to make sure Luke really wanted this, that Billy hadn't been confused. But he wanted Luke to understand that Billy finally, finally got it. Or at least he thought he did.

Luke tasted like chocolate. Of course he did, what else was he supposed to taste like, since they had just been drinking the stuff. Billy didn't know why it came as a shock to the system that Luke still tasted of chocolate. He didn't know why he thought Luke shouldn't taste like something so silly and indulgent, so sweet.

He tasted like chocolate and he wasn't kissing Billy back. For one stupid moment Billy worried he had gotten the wrong message after all. Or maybe the problem was that Billy was a terrible kisser? Maybe he had somehow gotten to twenty-seven years old and only now found this out about himself? He

wasn't trying anything fancy, just lips brushing across lips. It was hard to fuck that up, but maybe he had done it anyway?

Then Luke tilted his head, parted his lips a little, and Billy felt Luke's tongue teasing at the seam of his own lips. It was kind of clumsy, like he knew tongues were supposed to be involved but couldn't figure out how, precisely, almost like he didn't have much experience with kissing.

He slid his tongue against Luke's, gentle and easy, just sort of showing him a move that he could copy. And Luke did, making Billy groan. He got a hand at the back of Luke's neck, his fingertips brushing the peach fuzz of Luke's hair.

That was when the first fat raindrop landed on Billy's cheek, followed quickly by several more.

"Ah, fuck," Billy said, pulling back, forcing his hands to drop to his sides.

"Yeah," Luke said, sounding a little dazed and looking dazed too.

"We ought to run." They both made a break for it, the dogs leading the way.

* * *

The rain was only a sprinkle, hardly enough to get their hair wet. By the time they got inside and towed off the dogs, it had stopped. Billy didn't trust it, though, not one bit. The sky was still dark and the birds were eerily silent. He picked up the phone and dialed Phil's parents to check on his sister, then made sure they had a good store of firewood and kindling next

to the hearth. Candles, matches, and flashlights were all where they were supposed to be. He put the buckets upstairs for the inevitable leaks in the roof. Just to be on the safe side, he started to reheat the meatloaf, in case the power went out later on.

Then he noticed that Luke wasn't around. He had been spending most afternoons napping or at least lying down, but he wasn't on the couch, and when Billy went upstairs, he saw that the door to the spare room was open and the bed was empty.

For a minute, he felt an echo of the raw, needy panic he'd felt when Luke wasn't answering his phone after leaving the hospital. Billy had gotten Luke's address from their manager and gone to his apartment, pushing his way into the building behind a lady too busy with kids and groceries to care about an intruder. Billy had knocked on Luke's door but there was no answer. The only reason he hadn't sat himself right down in the hallway was that he hadn't thought getting arrested for trespass would do anyone any good. Instead, he'd gone back to the stadium and done his job.

Billy put his hands on his hips and looked around his mother's kitchen, as if he was going to find Luke hiding behind the refrigerator or under the table. If Luke had gotten hurt, Billy was going to kill him. For all Billy knew, Luke had one of his headaches or a seizure and was lying in a ditch somewhere on the property. Or maybe he walked down to the main road and hitched a ride back to Philadelphia. Billy didn't fucking know, and that was the problem.

Then he heard a sound he'd recognize anywhere: the crack of a bat hitting a ball. He followed the sound outside and behind the old, half-rotten barn to find Luke tossing balls in the air and hitting them.

Billy hung back and let himself watch. Obviously, hitting balls you had lobbed gently into the air wasn't anything like hitting a ball thrown at you by a major league pitcher. Still, it was always a pleasure to watch Luke Novak at the plate, even if the plate was just a tree stump. He was always so serious—about everything, not just about baseball—but the minute he picked up a bat and walked to the on-deck circle, he radiated something that Billy almost wanted to call joy.

“You're going to have a hell of time collecting all those balls,” Billy called out.

Luke jumped. “Jesus. Scared the shit out of me.”

“You know, I can throw you a few if you want some real practice.”

Something flickered across Luke's face and Billy was positive he'd say yes. Luke never said no to a chance to try himself against Billy's curveball.

But the expression dropped away. Luke shook his head, and then Billy understood. Luke had come out here to avoid him. They had kissed and now Luke was hiding behind the barn so he wouldn't have to figure out what to say to Billy.

That day Billy had gone to Luke's apartment—wanting to see proof of life, sure that the roiling in his gut would finally

settle if he could just see Luke—he only stopped knocking when a neighbor stuck her head out of her door and glared at him. At that moment, he heard something from behind Luke’s door: the sound of footsteps heading away from him. He had the wild thought that someone had broken into Luke’s apartment, before understanding that, obviously, it was Luke—before understanding that Luke simply hadn’t wanted to see him.

At the time, it had almost made sense. They never visited one another’s homes, so maybe Luke just hadn’t liked the idea of opening the door and letting Billy in. Maybe he just didn’t want Billy in his home, in his private, non-baseball life.

But now Luke was here, and Luke had kissed him, and you weren’t going to get much more private and non-baseball than that. That meant that there had to be some other reason Luke hadn’t opened that door. Billy thought he knew now what it was: Luke was the kind of person who ran away and hid when he was afraid. And that’s what was doing now.

“It’s too cold for this shit,” Billy said. “Come have your queer crisis indoors.”

“Seriously?” Luke said, looking up. “That’s what you’re going to say to me?”

Billy wanted to ask if Luke had any better suggestions, because it sure didn’t seem like it. “Well, first go collect those balls you’ve hit all over the place. Then come inside. Meatloaf’s in the oven.”

Luke folded his arms and sat down on the tree stump. Billy bit back a smile at what a great big baby Luke was being.

“Come back to the house and I’ll even tell you about my own queer crisis,” Billy offered helpfully. “I jerked off to a picture of—”

“No thank you!” Luke said, covering his ears. His face was pink now.

“Budge over,” he said, nudging Luke’s hip with the toe of his boot.

Luke let out a discontented sigh, but he made room for Billy on the stump.

“There’s a sofa and a couple of comfortable chairs back in the house, but if you want to be miserable outside, you’re doing it with company.”

“I’m not miserable.”

“Coulda fooled me.”

They sat there quietly until Billy’s elbow started to bitch about the cold, and then he dragged Luke by the sleeve back to the house. When they got inside, he set the table, grumbling the entire time about idiots who try to catch hypothermia.

Chapter Seven

“It wasn’t a queer crisis,” Luke said after drenching his meatloaf in an ungodly amount of ketchup.

“Okay,” Billy said. He didn’t know if Luke was about to tell him that he wasn’t queer—Billy had heard that one before—or if he was going to claim he hadn’t been sulking all afternoon.

“I know I’m—” Luke sighed and began to cut his meatloaf into perfect little cubes. “It’s not news to me.”

“Congratulations?”

“Asshole. I’m trying to tell you something.”

“You should try, I don’t know, actually telling me.”

“You’re fucking unbelievable. Look. I’ve known since I was sixteen. It’s just that I haven’t done anything about it.”

Billy blinked. He didn’t know what Luke thought you had to do about being queer. There wasn’t an antidote. You didn’t have to fill out a form. It wasn’t like registering for the selective service.

And then— “Oh. You haven’t had sex with anyone.”

Poor Luke looked like he was about six more syllables away from some kind of cardiac episode. He nodded, apparently unable to speak.

“Not into sex?” Billy asked. Then he remembered that Luke probably wasn’t queer in the same exact way that Billy was. He might only be into men, which would have narrowed his options.

Luke looked thoughtful. “I guess I’ve never really felt like it was worth the risk.”

Was the implication that Billy was worth the risk? Or was it just that there wasn’t any risk with Billy—a trusted friend, the middle of the nowhere, no possibility of witnesses.

“Makes sense,” Billy said, taking a bite of meatloaf.

“Really?”

“Yes?” Billy said, not sure where he’d gone wrong. “Don’t you think it does? It’s your...” He made a vague gesture that he hoped was slightly more sophisticated than pointing at Luke’s dick.

“You don’t think it’s a bit strange that I’m twenty-seven and I’ve never been with anyone.”

“Well, I guess it’s statistically unusual, like batting .350 or a pitcher having a twenty-eight-win season.” Billy took a moment to think about how much he’d resent Robin Roberts if he played for any team other than the Phillies. “But not unusual like dousing your meatloaf with a quart of ketchup. That’s fucking strange and you should feel bad about it.”

Luke gave him the finger.

“Some people are born liking more ketchup than others,” Billy went on, warming to his metaphor. Luke looked ready for murder. “Aw hell, I didn’t even get to tell you about my own queer crisis.”

“I swear to God, Billy, I don’t want to hear about you whacking off to Babe Ruth.”

“How the fuck old do you think I am? No, it was—”

“So help me, Billy—”

“I wanted to blow half the 1942 Dodgers roster—”

Luke groaned and buried his face in his hands. “We played with some of those guys.”

Billy tried to look like he was overcome with a sort of horny nostalgia. “You would not believe the number of times I jerked off to—”

Luke was out of his seat now, stalking around the table towards Billy. “Oh, for Pete’s sake, I knew you were going to try to ruin some old ballplayer for me.”

“His curveball was beautiful. Would have turned anyone queer.”

“Not one more word.” Luke’s eyes were bright and it looked like he was holding back a laugh, but he was looming over Billy’s chair like he thought he could pull off being fake menacing.

Billy put on his finest shit-eating grin. “Exactly how’re you planning on stopping me?” And he already knew just how that was going to work out, that the only thing any self-respecting little shit like Luke Novak could possibly do was put a hand over Billy’s mouth. From there, it was the work of a second to grab Luke’s wrist and use it to pull himself up so they were standing chest to chest.

Billy still didn’t know if Luke actually wanted to do anything with him. He didn’t know if that kiss in the woods had put him off the entire notion of men or kissing or just kissing Billy. He figured they could have a conversation about it, which might end with Luke actually dying from the mortification, or he could put himself in kissing range and see whether Luke walked away or if he went for it.

Luke went for it.

This time he tasted like goddamn ketchup, which should have been disgusting, which *was* disgusting, but Billy didn’t care, because Luke’s lips were soft and his hands were on Billy’s waist. And that, he figured, was his question answered in full and then some.

“That feel okay?” Billy asked.

Luke pulled back. “Don’t be like that.”

“Like what?”

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you. I know that you’d make a big deal of it. Look, I know I’m new at this but if I don’t want something I’ll fucking tell you.”

“I’m so sorry that I have manners,” Billy said. “I need to know that things are working. It’s not about you. Jesus Christ, why are you like this?”

Luke glared at him, obviously looking for something to be pissed off about, then rested his forehead against Billy’s shoulder. “Sorry.”

“I just need to know I’m doing a good job.” Billy absently stroked his hand up Luke’s back, feeling the knobs of his spine, too prominent under his shirt. “It’s not about your delicate feelings.”

“You don’t need to be gentle with me, okay?”

“Maybe I want to be,” Billy said, and then immediately realized he should not have said that out loud. He also shouldn’t have thought it or even felt it. “Uh, maybe I don’t, though.”

Luke let out a sharp burst of laughter and pulled back to look at Billy, mocking and amused. “Don’t hurt yourself there,” he said, patting Billy on the back.

* * *

The storm started in earnest right after they finished the dishes. The wind was strong enough that the rain pelted the house almost horizontally, leaking through the keyhole and beating against the windows.

Billy had been through enough storms in this house to know what the next few hours would bring. “Power’s probably going to cut out some time tonight,” he said, showing Luke

where to find the flashlights and other supplies. “I patched the roof over the guest room last year, so you ought to be all right overnight.”

Billy felt strangely embarrassed explaining all this, even though he knew perfectly well that Luke hadn't grown up in a palace and this would hardly be his first blackout or leaky roof. But he felt very conscious of offering something second rate, entirely too aware that he was going to kiss Luke some more, or—*something*—and that everything ought to be nicer than it was.

That night, Billy built a fire. His father had always insisted that you shouldn't run the furnace during a windstorm, and his mother insisted that you shouldn't build a fire during a windstorm, with the result that they all sat around and froze whenever the weather turned. But it was getting colder as the storm picked up speed, and Billy's joints didn't like temperatures that low. He figured Luke's joints probably weren't any happier. He decided that a fire felt safer than the furnace, for reasons that probably didn't amount to much more than the fact that he knew how to put it out.

And besides, fires were...nice, right? People spent time looking at fires with the people they wanted to...do things with, didn't they?

“Honestly, I thought you just dumped logs in the fireplace and set them on fire,” Luke said as he watched Billy pile up the kindling.

“Not if you want actual heat, you don’t,” Billy said, fanning the sparks. His dad and his uncle had spent decades arguing over the correct way to build a fire, but Billy wasn’t that invested in the process. He just wanted a fire. He was cold as fuck and maybe he also wanted an excuse to sit around with Luke in a dimly lit room. Sue him.

Once the fire looked like it would take, Billy sat beside Luke on the couch. Well, not exactly beside. A respectable distance away. But not too respectable. He didn’t have a plan here beyond trying to get Luke comfortable—Luke had made it clear that he wanted to try something, but he had also flat-out said that he had hardly any experience. Billy wasn’t going to jump on him. He just wanted it to be—nice, he guessed.

Going on about storm preparations and leaky roofs was probably not setting the mood. He hadn’t even put on any music. They had meatloaf for dinner. Billy was not doing a great job.

But the next thing he knew, Luke was right next to him, reaching for him, their mouths meeting with a heat that felt almost comfortable, like that kiss earlier had been practice. His hands landed on Billy’s jaw like they belonged there, like he was holding Billy in place, and that thought made Billy want to melt into the floor. With his own hands he cupped Luke’s hips, keeping him close.

Billy had fooled around with a lot of people and didn’t usually have to remind himself it was just fun. Maybe once or twice he met a girl and thought that maybe, under other

circumstances, things could have gotten serious. Now, though, with Luke touching him like this, his thumb skimming across Billy's cheekbone, it was so easy to trick himself into thinking this was something it wasn't. Much more of this and Billy was going to start thinking that he was something special.

"This all right?" Billy asked, more from reflex than for any other reason.

"Jesus, Billy," Luke said, his words impatient but his smile plain as day against Billy's cheek. "Didn't I tell you—"

"I just—"

"Shut up—"

"But—"

Billy only stopped when Luke's palm pressed hard over his mouth. Luke began kissing his neck, and then all he could think about was getting his hands on Luke's skin. He untucked Luke's shirt and smoothed his hands over the hot skin of Luke's back, down to his waistband. He wanted to slip his hands inside Luke's pants, squeeze his ass, pull him close so they could grind together, but instead he let Luke keep kissing him—his neck, his jaw, and then back to his mouth.

They ought to move upstairs to Luke's bed, but that would mean stopping, and Billy didn't want to stop. Instead, Billy shifted a little and lay back so Luke was straddling one of his legs. And God, that was good, Luke's weight a heavy pressure. Even down twenty pounds, he was still big; not as big as Billy, but big enough to make Billy feel pinned in place.

Billy didn't know how much time had passed, but he did know that he hadn't necked like this since he was in high school. He was harder than he ordinarily would have been from kissing alone and he could feel that Luke was hard too. He either needed to stop or he needed more friction than he could get through his pants. Luke was grinding down against him, clearly in search of more sensation.

"Luke," he said against Luke's mouth. He slid a hand between their bodies, cupping Luke's erection. "Let me—"

"Yeah," Luke breathed. "Do it."

Billy got both their pants unbuttoned and shoved down and their shirts pulled up enough that they were skin to skin, sliding against one another.

"What do you want me to do?" Luke asked, not hesitant, not tentative, just a straightforward question.

"Just this." He didn't know if it would be enough. Ordinarily, it wouldn't be—he needed more than rubbing together, that's just how he was. But Luke seemed close, already leaking all over Billy's hip and stomach, all over Billy's cock, and fuck, he wished he could see. And why in hell shouldn't he, come to think? "Lemme see," he murmured, tapping Luke's shoulder.

Luke got the picture, pushing up on one arm to put just enough space between them so Billy could see where they were both hard and wet and needy. Luke groaned.

And then Luke was thrusting against him again, his breath ragged and his hips stuttering against Billy's, and only when he felt the warmth of release over his stomach did he realize Luke had come, totally silent, his face buried in Billy's neck.

Billy wrapped a hand around himself, only whimpering a little in protest when Luke batted it away and replaced it with his own. Billy didn't know if it was his imagination or if he could actually feel the calluses of Luke's palm against his cock. His grip was too loose, leaving Billy shifting beneath him, looking for more friction.

"Harder," Billy said. "Please."

Luke did as he was told and Billy groaned.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Billy said.

Luke propped himself up and glanced down, watching the motion of his hand, the mess on Billy's chest. He let go long enough to shove Billy's shirt further up, and Billy didn't know if that was to spare Billy the laundry or to get a better look at him, and it didn't matter anyway because then Luke was kissing him. Billy reached down to get a handful of Luke's ass, and a few hard strokes later he was coming, his groan muffled by Luke's mouth.

Before he had quite come back to himself, he felt Luke shift on the couch, and when he opened his eyes, he saw Luke take his shirt off and use it to clean Billy's stomach. Billy sat

up, because otherwise there was hardly room enough for both of them on the couch unless they were on top of one another.

“You all—” Billy started, but Luke shut him up with a look that was half exasperated, half amused.

But then Luke surprised him by answering the question that he hadn’t let Billy ask. “I…” Luke started. “That was. Good. I liked it.” He addressed the words to the fireplace rather than to Billy.

“Me too,” Billy said, but he felt like he was withholding information, almost actually lying, by not pointing out that this was just what getting jerked off felt like, that there wasn’t anything unique about what they’d done. He reminded himself that the look on Luke’s face—pleased and a little smug—had nothing to do with Billy and everything to do with the fact that Luke had nothing to compare him to.

Billy’s first few times he’d been the same way—shocked and grateful that his date to the high school dance had let him between her legs, disbelieving that anything could feel that good. The fact was that a lot of things felt that good. Which didn’t make it any *less* good, obviously, but Sex Feels Good wasn’t exactly headline news.

Case in point, Billy felt mighty good at the moment, and that was because of all the usual sex reasons. And also, possibly, because it had been with Luke. He had gotten to make Luke feel good, and it had been Luke’s hands on him, Luke’s mouth on his neck, Luke shuddering to a release against his skin.

Billy was pretty sure, in fact, that the two of them had just done two totally different things: Luke had gotten off, and Billy had had sex with someone he had been trying not to be crazy about for five years running. And tonight he realized just how badly he had failed at that.

Chapter Eight

Billy woke up to a house whose silence immediately registered as wrong, but it was too early to figure out why, and he was too busy thinking about Luke to spend much time thinking about anything else. They had gone to sleep in their own beds. The bed in the spare room was, nominally, a double but it wasn't wide enough to comfortably hold two ballplayers, not by a long shot, so Billy hadn't even suggested it.

After last night, he gave it even odds that he'd go downstairs and find no trace of Luke left in the house; for all he knew, what happened between them might have driven Luke out into the storm—or at least into a sulk that would keep him in his room all day.

But Luke was sitting at the kitchen table, poking glumly at a bowl of corn flakes. Billy could tell from across the room that they'd gone soggy. A goddamn waste of milk if Luke wasn't going to eat them.

Luke looked up from his bowl, his eyes big in his pale face. "I probably shouldn't have opened the refrigerator, but I knew we both needed milk for coffee and I wanted to get out the leftover meatloaf for the dogs, so..." He shifted his eyes to

the counter, where a stick of butter, a bowl of eggs, and a slab of bacon sat next to the stove.

It took a moment for Billy to make sense of this, then realized that the eerie silence in the house was the lack of electricity. At some point overnight, the power must have gone out, and now the refrigerator and freezer weren't emitting the low hum that everyone with kitchen appliances gets used to and stops thinking about until it's gone.

Then he looked again at the pile of ingredients on the counter.

“Were you waiting around for me to make you breakfast?” Billy asked.

Luke blinked at him. “It tastes better when you make it.”

The gas was on and the stove was working, so why not. Luke ate an almost healthy serving, only giving a little bit of bacon to the dogs, so Billy was putting it in the win column, wasted milk and corn flakes notwithstanding.

“When was the Phillies’ last game?” Luke asked as he poured ketchup—Billy suppressed a sigh—onto his eggs.

“September 27th. Sunday.” They lost to the Dodgers.

“And today’s October 9th.”

“Right.” That meant Luke had spent four nights here.

“So that’s twelve days ago. I always wondered how long it took you after the end of the season to stop being such a grump, and I guess now I know it’s twelve days.”

Billy opened his mouth to protest that he was pretty sure he had stopped being grumpy two days ago, and also to point out that his last start had been two days before the Phillies' last game, but then shut up when he realized the math was the same. Also, and more importantly, Luke had wondered about him? Luke thought about him in the off season?

"I always wondered how long it took for those freckles to fade," Billy blurted out. "You never have them when you report to spring training, but there they are by the end of April, every year."

Luke put a hand up to his face, like he thought that would go the slightest distance to covering the freckles that ran from one cheekbone, across the bridge of his nose, and along the other cheekbone. The cheek that Billy could see was tinged with pink.

"Longer than twelve days," Luke said, his voice a little strange.

The rain and wind had slowed enough that Billy could let the chickens out of the coop, and the dogs were willing to go outside, something they had flat-out refused to consider last night. When they came back in, Billy picked up the phone to call his mother, but there was no dial tone. He flicked the hook a few times, but still there was nothing.

When he turned away from the wall, Luke looked worried.

"I'm sure everything's fine," Billy said, as if Luke was the one who needed to be reassured.

“I’ve never really spent much time outside a city,” Luke said. “Never been more than a short walk from a doctor.”

“You worried about your head?”

“It’s stupid. It’s not like anything’s going to happen. I’ve only had the one headache since I got here.”

“Have you been doing anything the doctor told you not to?”

“No. Not a fucking chance. I’ve been the best patient ever. Gold star for Luke Novak. A-plus. It’s like if I get an extra good grade, I’ll have a better chance of—” His voice broke off and he looked away, like he was afraid he had said too much.

“A better chance of what?” A universe of horrible possibilities flashed through Billy’s mind. Luke had been given six weeks to live. Luke was going to go blind. Luke was going to have debilitating headaches forever.

And then he remembered one of his grandmothers hitting her head after a fall. She had seen spots for the rest of her life. What if that had happened to Luke? There were a lot of injuries you could play through, but there wasn’t much a professional baseball player could do without decent vision.

“Jesus Christ, Billy, what’s going through your head right now?”

“Just—” Billy’s mouth didn’t want to make words, and even if it could, he wasn’t sure he’d know what to say anyway. “Just worried about you,” he finally managed.

“I was going to say that I keep feeling like if I do everything right, then it’ll be fine—I’ll be fine, my game won’t change. I know it’s dumb as fuck, but that’s—”

Billy hugged him. He hugged him tight enough that it hurt his elbow. Hell, it probably hurt *Luke*, but he wasn’t stopping and Luke could just deal with it. But Luke hugged him back, so maybe it was fine.

“It’s stupid,” Luke said into the shoulder of Billy’s sweater, “but before then, I never really thought that I could die.”

Well, that made two of them, because it had never occurred to Billy that Luke could die until he saw Luke get hit and then had to get back on the field and pitch another two innings.

A sound that was distinctly similar to a snuffle came from the vicinity of Billy’s shoulder. Billy realized his eyes were kind of damp. Clearly, none of this was acceptable. He kissed the side of Luke’s head, then gave him a backslap, not bothering to think about how he had never before combined or thought to combine those two gestures. Then he quickly turned to face the sink. They definitely did not need to be looking at one another right now.

“There’s probably just enough left in the water heater for a shower, if you hurry,” Billy said without turning around.

“What about you?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to suggest sharing a shower, but the old bathtub in this house was small and sloped enough

that they'd both wind up with broken necks if they even tried. And besides, Billy thought that he probably ought to spend ten minutes alone in case his eyes became mysteriously wet again.

“A cold shower won't kill me. Go, hurry,” Billy said. He felt Luke squeeze his shoulder, followed by the sound of his footsteps heading upstairs.

* * *

While Luke was in the hospital, Billy had only been able to pry information out of the Phillies' manager bit by bit. That first night, the manager had told the team that Luke was alive. A few days later, he told them that Luke was awake. So Billy confined his worries to one step ahead: Luke wasn't dead, Luke wasn't in a coma. Luke was talking and walking, Luke was being discharged from the hospital.

Billy hadn't let himself think beyond that. Luke was alive. He was a shithead for not getting in touch with Billy, but he was alive and he was healthy enough for the hospital to send him home.

Billy hadn't paused to consider that there were gradations of health, that Luke might be well enough to be out of danger but not well enough to return to the team in the spring.

Now, though, it seemed like something he should have worried about. He felt almost remiss, as if this was some worrying he could have finished and moved on from if he had planned better. But now that the possibility of Luke without

baseball—of baseball without Luke—had infiltrated his mind, he couldn't get rid of it.

Obviously, Billy knew that every player had to retire at some point. Sometimes they had to quit because of a normal baseball injury—torn ligaments, arthritic knees—that made it impossible to play well enough to stay in the big leagues. He could name two players who quit after being in car accidents, and another who just got tired of being on the road and figured he'd rather manage his family's car dealership than make what the Phillies wanted to pay a relief pitcher.

But nobody ever expected a player of Luke's caliber to retire in his twenties. Nobody expected anyone to retire due to a wild pitch.

Billy wondered if he'd feel better about it if it hadn't been a wild pitch, if that poor bastard on the Cubs had actually meant to hit Luke, or even if he'd meant to put Luke off his game with a pitch too far inside. Then, at least, there'd be one person to be angry at. But it had been the fifth inning and the pitcher had already been getting sloppy. He'd probably been about two pitches away from getting pulled anyway.

Billy usually tried not to think about the fact that he was basically aiming hundred-mile-an-hour projectiles directly at another person. He'd hit batters before, a couple of times, but only in the shoulder or the thigh, and it probably bruised but didn't do any lasting harm.

When he thought about what it would be like to play baseball without Luke, it left him feeling empty and awful, but

not as awful as when he imagined Luke without baseball. What would Luke even do?

Luke had been scouted while he was still in high school. He'd once told Billy that the scouts were the only reason he kept showing up at school. Once Billy'd remarked on Luke's spidery, uneven handwriting, asking whether Luke was one of those kids who never learned to write right-handed, and Luke had replied that he had barely learned to write, period, and only learned to read from the sports page. With no family and barely any education, Luke had thought baseball was his only ticket out.

Billy thought it had been more than that, though. He was pretty sure that, growing up, baseball had been the one good thing in Luke's life.

By the middle of the afternoon, the power was still out, the rain was still beating steadily down, and Billy still couldn't stop thinking about Luke's future. He'd thought about his own future after baseball, but only in the haziest terms—he'd probably make a decent pitching coach, he supposed. Or he could always come back here. But Luke didn't have a place to go back to.

“Okay, out with it,” Luke said. They were playing gin rummy by the one window that was getting enough light to see by.

“It's nothing.”

“Bullshit, it's nothing.”

“Are you going to be healthy enough to play in the spring?”

Luke sighed and gave Billy a severely unimpressed look, which is exactly what Billy knew he'd do, and exactly why Billy hadn't wanted to say what was on his mind. “Am I a fortune teller now?” Luke asked.

“I hadn't thought about there being any doubt.”

Somehow Luke's expression became even more unimpressed. “Seriously? Because I'm thinking about it every day.”

“What do the doctors say? The coaches, the trainers?”

“We'll find out in spring training,” Luke said.

There was no chance in hell the team doctor or coaches were being that vague. Billy had been through enough with his elbow to know that that much. “What are they really saying?”

“What does it matter to you anyway?”

Billy gaped. “What does it matter to me? After the last few days, after yesterday, you need to ask me that?”

Luke dropped his cards to the table, face up, a sure sign the game was over. “What, you want to keep doing this during the season?”

Shit. Billy should have realized that Luke might not want to, but he couldn't take back his words. “I mean, yes? Obviously? If you don't want to, that's fine, though. I won't be pushy. It would have been nice.”

“It would have been nice,” Luke repeated. “I guess it would be convenient to have that sort of arrangement with a teammate.”

Billy nearly replied that getting involved with a teammate was about the least convenient thing he could imagine, but Luke wasn't talking about actual involvement. He was talking about something simple and transactional. “Yeah,” Billy said. “Convenient.”

Luke picked his cards back up, which was pointless, because Billy had seen all of them. But the fact that Luke hadn't gotten up probably meant that Billy had said the right thing, so he wasn't going to complain.

Except—everything Billy said had been bullshit. He didn't want a convenient arrangement, and even if he did, that wouldn't be why he'd miss having Luke around.

They played a few hands in silence, only speaking as required by the game.

Finally Billy dropped his cards. “I'd miss you, you dumb fuck.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“If you weren't around, I'd miss you. And not because of sex. Have I ever had trouble finding someone to fuck?”

Luke didn't answer.

“Seriously, Luke, have I?”

“No,” Luke grumbled.

“And even if I did, that’s not the point! Who the fuck would I sit next to on the bus? Who would I talk to during rain delays?”

“Bus trips and rain delays,” Luke said, and Billy wasn’t sure why he was rolling his eyes. “You have plenty of pals on the team.”

First of all, Billy did not have plenty of pals on the team, and even if he did, that wouldn’t make Luke less important. “Bus trips and lunches and dinners and team meetings and time in the weight room. I’ve spent every spare minute with you for five seasons and if you don’t think that I’d miss you, then what the fuck is wrong with you? Don’t answer that. And if you don’t come back next year, I’d feel bad for you, too. You love this game.”

Luke swallowed. “You know, when I woke up, the nurses kept telling me I was lucky to be alive. It made me think.” He glanced up at Billy, a question in his eyes, but Billy couldn’t tell what the question was. “Anyway. It’s just the headaches.”

“What?”

“That’s the only problem. I can’t really play with headaches, but they’ll probably go away in a few months.”

“Good. Why didn’t you just say that?”

Luke shrugged.

It occurred to Billy that maybe Luke had been a little shit in order to provoke Billy into saying—well, probably not exactly what Billy had wound up saying, which had been just

this side of raving lunacy. But maybe he wanted to hear that Billy was looking for something more than an arrangement.

The thought made Billy so greedy he could hardly think straight. But he didn't know how to ask for what he wanted—what would “more than an arrangement” even look like? There was a lot of ground to cover between just fooling around and—and Billy didn't even know what. And he wasn't sure he could ask Luke, even if he did have the words, because if what if it sent Luke running? One thing that Billy was sure of after the last month was that he'd take Luke on any terms rather than risk him running away again.

Chapter Nine

There was only so much you could do with no electricity and too much rain, which maybe explained how the cards got forgotten and why they wound up kissing on the couch again.

It was just kissing, Billy told himself. If Luke thought Billy was just in this to get off, then Billy was going to make sure to keep it in his pants. He figured that if he couldn't come right out and say that he wanted something more with Luke, then he could show him. So he braced himself on one arm over Luke, kissed the corner of his mouth, the fading bruise on his cheekbone. He buried his face in Luke's neck and kissed him until Luke started making noises. And when he finally kissed Luke's mouth, he kept it slow, soft, undemanding.

Billy was in trouble, because in proving to Luke that it wasn't just about sex, at the same time he was proving it to himself beyond a shadow of a doubt. And if it wasn't just sex, if it was something warm that and wanting that unfurled in his chest whenever he so much as looked at Luke, then it was probably love, and Billy didn't know what he was going to do about that.

“I need—” Luke gasped. His hand had migrated to Billy’s ass and wasn’t letting go. The knowledge that he was the only one who’d ever heard that note of desperation in Luke’s voice, the only one who’d ever seen Luke like this, was doing something dangerous to Billy.

“Anything. We can stop, or—”

“No, I—”

“Anything. I mean it.” So much for Billy’s big plans of keeping it in his pants. He’d give Luke whatever he wanted, and it would be ridiculous to tell himself otherwise. “You can—anything, okay?” On that third *anything*, his voice caught and his face started to heat.

Luke looked up at him. “Can I suck you?”

And what was Billy supposed to do, say no, when Luke was asking something like that, with his lips all red and wet?

“Okay,” Billy said. “Sure.”

Billy took his pants off. And then, because he always felt silly in just his shirt, he took that off too. Good thing he had lit a fire that morning.

Luke, fully dressed—which was unfair but Billy was willing to suffer—wound up kneeling between Billy’s knees. Kneeling and just sort of...looking at him. Just when Billy was starting to feel awkward about it, Luke licked his lips and glanced up, making eye contact. Jesus.

Luke leaned in, and if Billy hadn’t known that Luke hadn’t done this before, he would have figured it out then. He was

sort of mouthing clumsily along Billy's shaft, occasionally getting his tongue involved in a pretty cursory way. He seemed to have no idea what he was supposed to be doing with his mouth or his hands or any other part of him, but he also seemed to be enjoying it, and far be it from Billy to interfere. He put a hand on Luke's head, just an excuse to touch him, really, and sifted his fingers through his hair, enjoying whatever it was Luke thought he was doing to Billy's dick.

Then Luke must have been struck by inspiration or courage or who knew what, Billy didn't care, and he slid his mouth over the head of Billy's dick. Billy groaned. Luke, his lips still wrapped around Billy's cock, glanced up at him, as if looking for approval.

"Yeah," Billy said. "That's—that's good. That feels really good. But you can, um. Get it wet."

It turned out that *get it wet* was the filthiest sentence in the English language and apparently Luke agreed because he made a sound and adjusted himself in his pants. Billy was going to die.

And then Luke followed Billy's directions, sort of. Billy had meant for Luke to spit in his hand and stroke him a little, but Luke instead bent his head and licked him, lapping at the head of his cock. He followed that up by sliding his tongue along the sensitive underside and then licking Billy's shaft, all of which undeniably achieved wetness, job well done, but which had the more immediate effect of driving Billy out of his mind with frustration.

When Luke tentatively slid his mouth down, Billy groaned again. It was all he could do to stay still, to keep that hand on Luke's head light.

Then Billy caught on—not only had Luke never given a blowjob, but he had never gotten one either, and it was that thought that made him come suddenly, without warning, without so much as a tap on Luke's shoulder. Luke coughed and sputtered and all Billy could do was apologize, mortified.

“Let me do you now,” Billy said when he got his breath back, thinking he could at least show Luke what a proper blowjob looked like. Explain blowjob etiquette, maybe.

“Not necessary,” Luke said, still on his knees, looking at the floor. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“No, really, I like doing it.”

“Uh, yeah, so do I, apparently,” Luke mumbled, gesturing at the wetness on the front of his pants.

“You came?”

“Don't make fun of me.”

“Jesus, I'm not. That's—I like it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Luke said.

“Come here.” Billy tugged Luke's arm.

“What?”

“Here,” Billy said, more insistently, until Luke was straddling Billy's lap and Billy was kissing him.

* * *

When the lights came back on, they'd only been without power for about twelve hours, so Billy decided they probably weren't going to wind up dead from eating anything in the refrigerator. When he opened the chest freezer, nothing in there had even defrosted. There were advantages to keeping the house disturbingly cold, he supposed.

They had dinner—a reheated mystery parcel that turned out to be shepherds' pie—and cleaned up afterwards. The entire evening went as usual, and the fact that they had a *usual* after less than a week made Billy feel pleased but also uncomfortably aware of the fact that it was going to end. Luke wouldn't stay forever. Hell, Billy wouldn't stay forever, either. He usually came in the middle of November and went back to Philadelphia after Christmas, but this house was already going to be plenty crowded with Suzanne and a newborn, and Billy probably ought to make himself scarce pretty soon.

He didn't know what would happen after this. He knew Luke didn't have any family and usually spent his off seasons playing in the Cuban league, but that obviously wasn't happening this year. Would Luke go back to Philadelphia? Would they go back together? Would they keep seeing one another when they got there, or would Billy have to wait until spring training, like he usually did?

When they headed up to bed, Luke hesitated in the hallway between their rooms, like he was waiting for something.

“Goodnight,” Billy said.

“Goodnight,” Luke said, and then neither of them went anywhere.

Billy took a chance and leaned in to give Luke the sort of kiss that was really just a peck on the cheek, an absolute embarrassment of a kiss to give someone who had just blown you in the living room a few hours earlier, but Luke didn't seem to mind.

* * *

In the morning, Luke was already in the kitchen when Billy came down. The air smelled like slightly burned coffee.

“Couldn't get the percolator to work,” Luke grumbled.

“It's about five hundred years old,” Billy said. “We should run it over with the truck and then buy a new one for my mother as soon as the roads are safe enough to drive into town.”

“When do you think that'll be? That the roads'll be clear, I mean.”

Billy looked outside. It had stopped raining overnight. The only question was whether the roads would be covered in slippery, wet leaves or if the rain had washed them all downhill. “Probably this afternoon. You want to go do something?”

“Not really. Just wondering when you're gonna want me out of here.”

“I don’t,” Billy said, deciding right then and there that he was always going to choose embarrassing himself with honesty rather than let Luke think for one single minute that he wasn’t wanted. “I want you to stay. If you want to go, I’ll have you at the train station whenever you like, no hard feelings. Or you can wait and I’ll drive you back to Philadelphia next week, or whenever my mom and Suzie come home.”

“Drive?” Luke asked, as if he had never heard of driving, or possibly Philadelphia.

“It’s twelve hours, maybe thirteen. We could do it over two days if you wanted.”

Luke still looked confused.

“Just a thought,” Billy said.

“Won’t you want to stay and see your niece or nephew?”

“See them, sure. But stick around? Not really.” He’d probably be worse than useless at helping take care of a newborn, and figured the best thing he could do would be to get out from underfoot. “Besides, I’ll be back next month for Thanksgiving.”

“That sounds nice.”

“You can come,” Billy said.

“Yeah?”

“Definitely. As long as you don’t mind the drive. And also, my aunt usually comes and takes the spare room, so we’d both have to fit into my bed. Don’t know how that’ll work.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Mind what? I invited you.”

“Mind sharing a bed with me.”

“No? Why on earth would I? I’m thinking I ought to come up with a good excuse to buy a bigger bed, though.”

Luke shook his head, dismissing the topic, and Billy was left not knowing what to say.

“I need to walk around the property and see what kind of damage the storm did,” Billy said. “Some trees’ll be down. Some fences will need to be fixed.” This was all pretty non-urgent, since the fence was already in bad shape and didn’t do much to begin with. Deer jumped over it, foxes crawled under it, bears did whatever they damn well pleased with it, and half the property was in the woods where nobody had ever bothered trying to put up a fence in the first place. “Want to come?”

Their boots squelched in the mud. Luke was wearing another of Billy’s sweaters along with a hat and scarf that Mama had knit Billy for Christmas a few years ago.

The dogs, apparently sensing that important work was being done, were relentlessly in the way. Luke resorted to picking up sticks and flinging them in the general direction of Not Here, and the dogs, who had never fetched one single object for Billy, not even once, brought sticks back to Luke. They didn’t seem to be the same sticks that Luke had thrown, which made it even weirder.

“They must think I just really like sticks,” Luke said.

“And that you’re too dumb to avoid throwing them.”

Luke bent down to get a stick from Mabel and threw it. “Oh shit, where’d my stick go?” he said as the dog scampered off, laughing at his own dumb joke. “If only I had a dog to save me from my own self-destruction.”

A few seconds later, Mabel came back, stick firmly in mouth, looking mightily pleased with herself.

The dogs loved Luke. A few times, Billy had caught Sadie sleeping outside Luke’s door while he napped. Mabel had taken to dropping her favorite moldy old baseball at Luke’s feet.

“You ever have any dogs?” Billy asked.

“Yeah, lots of pets in the orphanage.”

“After that, asshole.”

“Lots of pets in the army, too.” They had both signed up right after graduating high school, just in time to catch the tail end of the war.

“For all I know, you could have a pet now. For fuck’s sake, Novak. It’s not like I’ve ever been inside your apartment.”

Luke stared at him. “Did you want to see my apartment?”

“I don’t care about your apartment!” Actually, the more Billy thought about it, the more he hated that he had never had Luke to his house or been to Luke’s apartment. “I just asked if

you had a dog because I want to know why these traitors like you so much.”

They kept walking. There were a few fallen trees, but none had blocked the driveway or come close to the house. The chicken coop was intact. The fence was pretty bad, but honestly not much worse than it had been last year.

“If you want,” Billy said, “you can help me fix this fence when you come back in November. I’ll really show you a good time.”

“I’d like that,” Luke said, so earnestly that you’d have thought that he wanted nothing more than to spend his vacation fixing an old fence. Except—maybe he did mean it. This wasn’t Luke’s Perfect Gentleman face. This was just Luke. He actually wanted to come back here and do chores with Billy. He wanted to spend a godawful amount of time in a car with Billy.

And maybe that was just how it was going to work: Billy would keep offering, and Luke would keep saying yes. Maybe that’s what *more* looked like. He’d offer Luke his bed, his time, his car, his anything, and all Luke had to do was take it.

“Okay,” Billy said. “It’s a plan.”

Chapter Ten

Their walk wound up taking most of the morning, and by the middle of the afternoon they were both yawning despite having made it the better part of the way through three pots of coffee. Billy was keeping himself busy by scraping old paint flakes off the stair treads, the sort of mindless work he could probably accomplish half asleep.

“That’s it,” Luke said, slapping down the piece of sandpaper he was using on the banister. “Every damn time you start yawning, it sets me off. Either you go lie down or I lie down or we both lie down.”

Billy wanted to protest, but the fact was that the house wasn’t going to fall apart if he didn’t finish the trim right away. It was too wet outside to even think about painting, anyway, so it wasn’t like hurrying would do him any good.

“Okay,” Billy said. “I’m turning in.” He didn’t know whether he’d actually manage a nap, what with all that coffee, but just being horizontal would be an improvement.

Apparently “I’m turning in” was a magical phrase for the dogs, because they both ran upstairs, pushing past Billy.

“Laziest goddamn dogs,” Billy grumbled, following them up the stairs. To his surprise, Luke was a couple of steps behind him.

“You can’t sleep in there,” Luke said when Billy reached his bedroom door.

“I’ve been sleeping in there every night,” Billy pointed out. “What are you even talking about?”

“Show me how you fit on that bed. Go on now,” Luke said when Billy remained on the threshold, staring at him.

Billy sighed and went to the bed, lying on his side with his knees bent, the only position in which all four limbs fit on the mattress.

“Now roll over,” Luke said.

“What am I, a dog?”

“I’m waiting.”

“Jesus.” Billy rolled over, a maneuver that involved getting his bad arm under him and whacking one of his feet on the footboard.

“That’s what I thought. You’re taking my bedroom, then.”

“You’re not gonna fit in this bed any better than I am,” Billy pointed out.

“I don’t have an arm covered in bruises.”

“I don’t have a banged-up skull.”

“We’ll both sleep in my bed, then,” Luke said, throwing up his hands.

This was the dumbest idea Billy had ever heard. He'd like to know how two grown men crammed into a bed that definitely wasn't twice as big as this bed was supposed to be any kind of improvement, but fine. Billy could give in a little sometimes, just watch him.

He went next door and got into the double bed in the spare room. Swear to God, it was all of two feet wider than his own bed. Luke was deluded if he thought they'd both fit. Sure enough, when Luke climbed in next to him, his weight on the mattress sent Billy rolling toward the middle.

"That's much better, isn't it," Luke said, as if he really believed it. He sat up long enough to take the blanket that was folded at the foot of the bed and cover them both.

Billy opened his mouth to argue, to point out that this was, by any standards, worse. But then it occurred to him that maybe Luke wanted him there, that maybe this whole song and dance was just a sham to get Billy into bed with him.

That would be completely ridiculous from almost anyone else. After what they'd been doing for the past few days, it wasn't like they needed excuses to be in bed together, did they? Except, they hadn't been sharing a bed. There were a lot of things they hadn't been doing. Wanting to screw somebody didn't mean you wanted to get cozy with them, and Billy hadn't wanted to presume.

So it was possible that Luke wanted all those other things—sharing a bed, kissing and touching that didn't lead up to anything—but was waiting for Billy to do something about it.

Well, this was Luke. Of course he couldn't just ask for what he wanted, the ornery little shit. He wanted Billy in his bed and had to make out like he was doing Billy a favor.

Billy already knew he was going to offer Luke everything he had. Maybe he also needed to pay attention to what Luke was asking for.

"Yeah," Billy said, "that's much better."

* * *

When Billy woke up, the room was half dark despite the curtains being open. The day was overcast, so the darkness didn't give him any clue as to what time it was. Could be tomorrow, for all he knew. He lifted his wrist, but he had taken off his watch downstairs, not wanting to ruin it with dust from sanding.

"It's a little after four," Luke said. He was still next to Billy, a bare couple of inches separating them. "Got an hour of sleep, at least."

"That's more than nothing," Billy agreed, wondering if they were going to just lie there, making small talk. He rolled over so he was facing Luke, who was on his back, apparently looking at the ceiling. All Billy could make out was his profile: nose that turned up a little more than it should, chin that was maybe pointier than was strictly handsome, lips that were capable of pressing into the meanest little line but now were soft and slightly parted. Thousands of people could probably recognize that profile from baseball cards alone, and

would know it belonged with too many freckles and a pair of stick-out ears.

Reckoning it was his turn, on the theory that maneuvering Billy into this bed had been Luke's move, Billy reached out and put his hand flat on Luke's chest. He had on one of Billy's sweaters and the wool was scratchy under his fingers.

"You're warm," Billy said, because he had to say something, didn't he?

"You want another blanket?"

"Not really." Billy propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at Luke. There was hardly any light in the room, but he could see a glint of something in Luke's eyes—defiance, or maybe just plain determination. With Luke, maybe they were the same thing. Billy didn't know if Luke was gearing himself up for what they were—probably—about to do, or if something else was going on.

"My bed at home is bigger. Much bigger." Billy swallowed and just went for it. "When we go back, I want more of this. I don't know if you—"

"What's *this*?"

Billy drew in a breath. "I want you to come over to my house. I want to see you in the off season. I want to see you every day. Even if you don't go back to playing, I want this." His hand found Luke's. Luke was still looking at him, but not saying anything. "I want to look at you and know that you're

mine, because I already think it. I'm sorry, but I already think it and I have for a while. Does that sound like something—”

“Yes. God, Billy. Obviously.”

“Okay,” Billy said, too relieved to point out that there was nothing obvious about it. “What do you want?”

Luke snorted. “Everything you just said.”

It seemed a little unfair that Luke had made Billy do all the talking and all Luke had to do was say yes, but Billy was too pleased to gripe about it. “Okay, then.”

Luke rolled so he was braced on one arm, and with his other hand he held one of Billy's wrists—the good one—against the bed. One of his thighs was between Billy's. “Okay.”

When Luke kissed him there was nothing tentative about it, and it wasn't until then that Billy realized that he had been tentative before. Now Luke was *on* him, heavy and demanding and more in charge than Billy was expecting. Billy tried to arch up into it, tried for more contact, more friction, just more. When it became clear that Luke wasn't going to let him, something inside him gave out like an old rubber band, and he gave himself up to Luke's hands and mouth.

“Jesus, Billy,” Luke said, and there was both humor and impatience in his voice, “just let me—just let me *have* you.”

Billy heard the sound he made and was glad the room was dark enough that Luke probably couldn't see whatever his face

was doing. Luke mumbled something into Billy's neck, something that sounded a lot like *finally*.

It was then, maybe, that it clicked for Billy, that this wasn't a new thing for Luke, that this hadn't started two days ago, but he didn't have the presence of mind to really think about that right now.

When Billy couldn't take it anymore, he nudged Luke's shoulder. "Roll over," Billy said, and Luke did.

Billy slid down the bed and did what he'd been wanting to do since yesterday, since last week, possibly since spring training in 1948. He pressed his mouth into the fabric of Luke's pants, feeling Luke's cock harden against his face.

"God," Luke said. "Billy."

Billy unbuckled Luke's belt, the sound of the metal clinking somehow louder than any belt had ever been. As he worked the buttons open, he kept thinking *These are Luke Novak's buttons* as if that would make it feel more real. And then he completely lost track of what he was doing because Luke's fingers were in his hair and all Billy could do was rest his forehead against Luke's hip.

"You okay?" Luke asked.

Billy didn't know how to answer that, so instead he pushed down Luke's pants and underwear, just the crucial couple of inches so he could get his mouth where he wanted it.

"Holy Jesus," Luke said as Billy sucked the head of his cock. "That feels good. You feel so good."

The words shot through Billy's body and took up residence in his already scrambled mind. He wanted to make this good and he wanted Luke to keep telling him it was good. His tongue curling around the head of Luke's dick, he glanced up and saw Luke looking back at him.

"That's good," Luke repeated, softer this time.

Billy heard himself make a noise, something soft and desperate and which he didn't quite understand. It was a blowjob. He shouldn't be coming unglued. He needed to put his mind to the task, that was all, so he slid his mouth lower. It had been a while since he had done this and there was no way he was getting all of Luke in his mouth, but just the thought of it—his lips stretched, his throat open—was enough to have him again making that plaintive little sound.

"Billy," Luke said, and Billy wondered what he'd have to do to get Luke to keep talking the whole time. He wouldn't even have to say anything smart, just occasionally say Billy's name in that rough voice and tell him he was doing good.

Maybe Billy was telepathic now or communicating with radio waves or some shit because Luke brushed some hair off Billy's forehead and murmured, "You look so good like this," and Billy had to pull off in order to catch his breath.

Luke hauled him up and kissed him, rolled him over so Billy was half pinned beneath him.

"All right?" Luke asked.

“Yes,” Billy gasped. “Anything.” He wanted Luke to feel good. He wanted to *make* Luke feel good, to know he had done it.

“I know,” Luke said. “I know.”

And maybe he did know, maybe he understood exactly what Billy needed, because he nudged Billy to sit up and then knelt over him, stroking Billy’s hair as Billy took him in his mouth. He didn’t stop talking, all of it downright nonsense, and Billy loved every syllable of it.

Luke’s grip tightened in Billy’s hair and his body went tense, and Billy swallowed around him as Luke said his name.

* * *

Maybe it was the dark and the quiet that let Billy start thinking about what this all meant, or maybe it was the way that being tucked under the same blanket made you feel like you were the only two people in the universe.

Luke had shown up here, and he’d prodded Billy into that conversation in the woods, and then he’d kept on prodding until he got Billy to spill his guts. And not only had he shown up here, but he’d done it when he was feeling at his worst.

“Did you know this was going to happen?” Billy asked, his lips still touching Luke’s bare shoulder.

Luke went quiet for long enough that Billy thought he might have fallen asleep. “All I was thinking was that I wanted to be around someone who...”

“Someone who?” Billy prompted.

“I was gonna say somebody who thought I mattered, but that isn’t right.”

“You do matter to me,” Billy said, in case Luke wasn’t sure about that. Billy grew up mattering to a whole lot of people, and sometimes he forgot that Luke hadn’t had that, that Luke might want to hear that he did have that now. “More than that, really.”

“I think that what I really wanted was to be around someone who mattered to *me*,” Luke said. “And that’s you, pretty much.”

There really wasn’t anything Billy could do about that other than kiss Luke, and then keep kissing him.

“I don’t think I ever loved anyone until I loved you,” Luke said later on. “And I know that nobody ever loved me until you did.”

“How could anyone not?”

Chapter Eleven

The next morning, Billy woke to the sound of tires crunching in the driveway. He had spent the night in the spare room with Luke and now every joint in his body was furious about it, but he was happy, and Luke was gorgeous when he slept, and—

There really shouldn't be tires on the driveway, though. He got up, threw on some pants, and looked out the window. It was his mother's truck. The phone lines were still down, and Billy figured she'd come to bring news. He glanced at the bed, but Luke was still asleep.

Billy grabbed a sweater and put it on as he ran downstairs.

"Ma," he said when he stepped outside.

"You'll catch your death, William Christopher, running around outside with no shoes on."

That, Billy reckoned, was not what you said if you were bringing bad news. "How's Suzie?"

"Perfectly fine and ready to break out of the hospital at the earliest opportunity. Leslie Marie is seven pounds, four ounces, looks just like her daddy, and has a set of lungs she got straight from her mother."

Billy felt a wave of tension leave his body, tension that he'd been carrying around since the storm started. He let his mother bustle him indoors. "And how's that young man? Heavens to Betsy, you got all that old paint off the steps, bless you."

"Luke's fine. Still asleep. When do you reckon you and Suzie will come home?"

"Another week, I'd say, so you boys'll have the house to yourselves until then."

Billy started a pot of coffee while cataloging the storm damage for his mother.

"Not nearly as bad as I was expecting," she said. "Well, that's a relief."

"Good morning, ma'am." Luke stood in the doorway, looking a little shy.

Billy's mother got up and hugged him. "You look ten times better than you did a week ago."

And the thing was, she was right. Luke did look better. He had color in his face, sure, but he also looked less pissed off than he had when he got here.

"I told you that some mountain air would do you a world of good," she said, holding Luke at arm's length to get a good look.

"Wait, now," Billy said. "You told him what?"

“I wrote him a letter,” his mom said. “I told him I hoped he was doing better and that I was praying for him every night. And then I mentioned that you were going to be here looking after the house all on your own and could use some company.”

“You wrote him a letter? I wrote him three letters and he didn’t write me back. How’d you even have his address?”

“You can get that tone right out of your voice, mister. He wrote me a lovely letter thanking me for that scarf, and I sent him a Christmas card, and then he had an entire crate of oranges sent up here from Florida, and now we’re old friends, isn’t that right, Luke?”

“Yes ma’am,” Luke said, looking like he wanted to disappear.

“Anyway, I know how you get at the end of the season, Billy, and didn’t want you rattling around here on your own. I knew from how you were carrying on every day about Luke not answering the telephone—”

“It wasn’t every day!” Billy protested.

“Every day,” she said firmly. “The amount of money you spent on long distance telephone calls going on about it, I hope I never know. Anyway, I reckoned getting a letter from an old lady who wishes you well is different from getting a letter from a friend who you know is just going to holler at you the minute he sees you. You’re just like your father, Billy. Do you remember that time I fell off the ladder and he carried on about it loud enough to bring down the roof? Shameful rude

behavior, but that's what some of us do when we're frightened."

"Long distance calls," Luke said, of all the things to pick out of that litany of embarrassments.

"You'd have thought he had stock in the telephone company," she said. "He called me every night for a month! Every night! You could've set your watch by it."

"Is that so?" Luke asked, the picture of good manners but with a gleam of pure assholery in his blue eyes.

"I want to hear more about this letter you wrote inviting Luke here," Billy put in. "Because that sounds mighty interesting."

"Nothing interesting about it," his mother said, her hands on her hips. "Just sent him the train schedule and gave him the number of Mr. Jenkins's car service—"

"You *paid* for a car to take you here from the station?" Billy asked, rounding on Luke. "What did that cost? Ten dollars?"

"You boys make thousands of dollars a year," his mother said.

"And it's all right to spend it on taxi cabs in the middle of the mountains but not on a new roof for your mother? How in the world do you figure that out, Mama?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Reardon. A man should be able to buy his own mother a roof," Luke put in with all the solemnity of a preacher and that dangerous sparkle doing overtime.

“I’ve had enough of this foolishness,” Mama said. “I just came here to make sure the dogs were alive and that the pair of you were too. And now I’m going back to my granddaughter, because she doesn’t talk back.” She finished her coffee, put the cup in the sink, and walked out the door, leaving Luke and Billy in what he was pretty sure was the most awkward silence he’d ever participated in.

“I would have picked you up from the station,” Billy said eventually. “You know I would have, right?”

“Figured you might just have put me on the next train out of town. I liked my chances better if you found me at your door.”

“Bullshit. What you should have been worried about was that once I saw you again, I’d never let you out of my sight. Coulda gotten downright weird about it. Anyway, looks like you’re stuck here for another week unless you want me to—”

“I don’t.”

“All right, then.”

“Those letters I wrote her,” Luke said, looking at the toe of his tennis shoe. “They were about you, a little bit. It was kind of her not to mention that.”

“You filled both sides of the page with complaints, I reckon.”

“No, Billy. Not complaints.”

“Oh,” Billy said, because he didn’t know what else he could possibly say to that. He brushed the back of his hand

against Luke's.

“You don't think she could tell that we were—you know.”
Luke's cheeks were pink.

“I know you're new and everything, but you can't actually look at someone and tell whether they're a practicing homosexual.”

“Please go fuck yourself. That's not what I was asking and you know it.”

The easy answer was that nothing they had done that day could have alerted Billy's mom to the fact that they were sleeping together. The more complicated answer was that she sure had gone to an awful lot of shenanigans to arrange for Luke to come for a visit. Billy knew from experience that it took four days for a letter to get to Philadelphia from here, which meant Billy's mom had written to invite Luke even before she'd called Billy and asked him to come. The timing of it was a mite suspicious.

“I figure she knows you're special to me,” was what Billy said in the end, because his mom was right.

* * *

“Look, my house is probably nicer than your apartment,” Billy said one night. They were eating biscuits that Billy had inexpertly made using his mom's recipe. The goal tonight was to eat the evidence so she'd never know what he had done, but honestly, Luke didn't even seem to know that they were inferior biscuits. He had just eaten four of them, each slathered

with butter. That afternoon he had put away half a batch of brownies they made using a recipe they found tacked to the side of the refrigerator. Billy had already copied that recipe down to take home.

Luke looked around. “I mean, yes. But my apartment’s roof doesn’t leak.”

“Not this house. My house in Philadelphia.”

“Okay, good for you?”

“It’s closer to the stadium.”

“This is true.”

“And it has an extra bedroom.” Actually it had two extra bedrooms, but Billy was trying to stick to the basic facts, and it wasn’t like they’d need either of the extra bedrooms for anything other than making sure nobody got too suspicious.

Luke looked like he was starting to catch on, but he didn’t say anything. By this point Billy knew he’d have to spell it out.

“So, you know,” Billy said, “there’s room. If you wanted. Can’t really get a dog because of road trips, but we could get a cat.”

“If I wanted.”

“We could see how we liked it. Fact is, I’m going to miss you when we get back, and that’s fine, I’ll live, but if you wanted—”

“I do.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I mean, the cat was what sold me.”

“I figured.”

After the rain ended, they had three solid days of sunshine, during which Billy painted the baby’s alcove and most of the trim. Luke tried to help the first day, then got a migraine from the paint fumes and spent the rest of the time outdoors with the dogs, while Billy worked with all the windows in the house wide open.

Occasionally, he’d look outside and see Luke holding a bat, hitting balls he tossed in the air, sending them over the clotheslines and right to the beginning of the woods. Somehow, he had trained the dogs to fetch: they’d run after the ball and drop it at Luke’s feet, again and again, until they got bored of the game. Which, to be fair, was usually after about five minutes.

The trees were almost bare of leaves and the grass was more mud than anything else. It wasn’t pretty, not by any standards, especially not with that eyesore of an old barn just sitting there in the middle of it all, but Billy was pretty sure he had never seen anything better.



About the Author

Cat Sebastian writes queer historical romances. Cat's books have received starred reviews from Kirkus, Publishers Weekly, Library Journal, and Booklist.

Before writing, Cat was a lawyer and a teacher and did a variety of other jobs she liked much less than she enjoys writing happy endings for queer people. She was born in New Jersey and lived in New York and Arizona before settling down in a swampy part of south. When she isn't writing, she's probably reading, having one-sided conversations with her dog, or doing the crossword puzzle.

The best way to keep up with Cat's projects is to visit her website or subscribe to her newsletter.

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