

Antecedent

- An *Abatement* Prequel -

by Ben Hanson

With the introduction out of the way I present to you the official, triumphant return of the *Abatement* Universe with installment one! This follows the journey of Wesley and Charles again, going a bit deeper into their lives and the reality of their relationship. It is my sincerest hope that everyone enjoys it, and sees it as an exciting beginning to a story never told. I'm not sure if installment two will follow them or another character(s), but I promise to make it interesting nonetheless. Remember, this prequel is dependent upon your feedback! Email me anytime at – benhanson1980@yahoo.com

Warning – As is required, this story is not for those under eighteen, or those who have issues with boy-boy or man-boy relationships. This installment does include mature themes and content that may be illegal in some jurisdictions.

Chapter One

As the sun began to rise, illuminating the entwined form of Wesley and Charlie, a fluttering of activity outside the door signified the start of a new day. Most of the boys were up early, either preparing for games with one another, taking part in summer school, or just readying for food that never seemed sufficient to satisfy their gluttonous appetites. One scurry of feet, none too different from any other, caused Wesley's eyes to open dimly. He shifted, pressing his eyelids together in hope of more sleep, but the shift was enough.

“Morning,” Charlie said with a cheery expression.

He had always been a morning person, much to the annoyance of Wesley, and whenever he was awake any possibility of further sleep was gone. Wesley smiled back, at least as much as he could, but refused to open his eyes.

“Come oooooon. We gotta get up!” Charlie pleaded, pressing his forehead to Wesley's and starting intently into his eyelids.

“I don't wanna,” Wesley murmured, attempting to turn over but being caught in Charlie's vice-like grip.

“Sometimes you gotta do what you don't wanna!” Charlie giggled to himself, deciding what he said was quite adult. He was, after all, twelve years old; Wesley's senior by four years.

“Fiiiiiiiiine!” Wesley grunted, pushing the covers off of him with his feet in a flurry of movement.

“So what're we gonna do today?” Charlie asked, bouncing to his feet and staring down at the younger boy in genuine curiosity.

Wesley sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, and stared up at Charlie with a blank expression.

“Can I decide later?”

Charlie laughed.

“Sure, but let's go get some breakfast before it's all gone.”

Wesley nodded. If there was something he never refused, regardless of what hour it was, it was food. Whether it was because he was eight, or because Bessie was such a good cook didn't matter. Thankfully the overindulgences seemed to have no affect on his figure, at least for the moment.

The two slipped on a couple outfits from a dresser across the way, a red t-shirt with jean shorts for Wesley, and a yellow tank top with khaki shorts for Charlie. Both had slept completely nude, a fairly common practice for them both. Charlie had introduced Wesley to experimentation a few months ago, nothing more complex than frottage and the occasional oral endeavor, but the nudity was something separate and non-sexual for them both. It was a state they both enjoyed, and feeling each other's skin was fascinating on a number of levels. There never seemed to be any issue with becoming clothed at the start of each day, but while in their room the boys forgot that particular social norm.

Within moments they both greeted the small crowd of boys lining their way into the dining room. The long oak table was fairly new, a donation from a furniture salesman who had adopted a boy a few months ago, but was already showing signs that it was used regularly by an assortment of boys. Little nicks there, several scratches on the edges, nothing more than aesthetic concerns, but thankfully no one really needed it for that. The table was meant to be used as a means to hold food, and in that function it served well.

Almost as soon as the boys sat down, together as always, Bessie and a few other adults that worked for her began carrying out plates full of food; bacon, sausage, eggs, biscuits, gravy, pancakes, waffles. The assortment was endless and promised to always be that way. Wesley looked at one of Bessie's assistants warily, a young man probably in his mid-twenties with brown hair, black framed glasses, and deep set brown eyes. He was extremely tall, probably about 6'5”, and had always shown the boys an unusual amount of attention. He had been there for Wesley in the beginning, a constant companion whenever he called, but upon finding Charlie he severed the bond. Jonathan, the man's name, seemed upset but never said anything about it. These days he never even looked at Wesley.

There was a part of Wesley that felt badly about his abandoning Jonathan, a part of him that felt that perhaps the man needed him as much as he had needed the man in the beginning. Despite that, he knew that his world was separate from the adult world. His only concern was Charlie and why shouldn't it be? Surely Jonathan would find some other boy to be his friend, to talk with, to play games with. Charlie had noticed Wesley's staring at Jonathan and nudged him in the side lightly, breaking his trance.

“Sorry,” Wesley mumbled as he grabbed a few slices of bacon and slid them onto his tray.

“Do you still think about him?” Charlie asked, a jealous tone creeping up despite his best attempts to suppress it.

“Yeah...” Wesley's voice trailed off as his mind wandered for a minute. He could feel Charlie's

eyes burrowing into him, imploring more than a one word response. Wesley's cheeks immediately turned red.

“Not like about *that* stuff,” Wesley said definitively. Charlie accepted the response as sufficient, merely nodding before grabbing some eggs and sausage for his own plate. Wesley nibbled on his bacon before grabbing a pancake and smothering it in syrup.

The boys ate silently, not due to any tension caused by Wesley's contemplation, but because it was their way. Several of the older boys had made it known that they didn't approve of the things rumored to go on between them. Both were fairly certain they didn't know what they were talking about, but both were aware that what they did was gay, and gay was a bad word. The boys knew enough to call them that, and after the first few times they made it a rule to largely ignore most of the boys. There were a few kids around Wesley's age that they played with on occasion, but for the most part they were a unified hermit duo.

As soon as they scarfed down the remainder of their plates, both boys stood and walked hastily towards the entrance. They slid on a pair of sandals in unison, and stepped out into the yard to catch some fresh air.

“I hate eating with everyone,” Wesley mumbled as they walked off the porch and into the yard. He quickly found a few rocks and set about projecting them at a tree in the distance.

“Don't worry about them, we've got each other,” the older boy said in as kind a voice as was possible. The age difference was definitely noticeable at times, especially ones like this, but Charlie did a good job of comforting him without being demeaning, or sounding older. He never wanted to treat Wesley like a younger brother, or just some dumb kid. He wanted Wesley to be his equal, and had often dreamt of them being the same age. While such a reality never could occur, he could at least pretend the age difference didn't matter. At least it didn't matter to Bessie.

“I guess,” Wesley pouted, missing the tree with his last rock as had been the case each time before. Just when he was about to pick up a few more, Charlie grabbed his hand.

“Let's go to the creek!” Charlie chirped, trying to cheer up his young companion. Charlie smiled, nodding in agreement.

“Let's go.”

Their hands entangled. Ignoring any potential cat calls from the older boys, they walked towards the forest and disappeared beneath its canopy. It wasn't particularly long before the sounds of nothing were replaced with more restful sounds; birds chirping, long dead leaves being crushed under foot, the chirping of june bugs, the mysterious rustle of bushes that signified whatever a child's imagination hoped before. For some it was possibly a frightful place, for the brave an exhilarating place. For Wesley and Charlie it was nothing more than their church, a sanctuary away from the eyes of those who misunderstood their affection for one another. Each stump was a pew, the trees - endless lines of icons, the branches and leaves above a heavily ornate ceiling. Even if they had seen the Sistine Chapel they wouldn't have found it as beautiful as this, or as peaceful.

Despite the expanse of it, the ill defined halls that led into a million different directions, the boys seemed to have an ingrained sense of where they were at all times. From the moment they met

they had spent at least every other day there, at least when school wasn't in session. Thankfully it was the summer so they could spend as much time as they wanted. Each visit presented a new adventure, a new discovery to entice their imaginations, but when adventure just wasn't an option the stream was where they'd always go; it was the most tranquil place they'd ever seen. It wasn't very wide, perhaps only a little more wide than Wesley was tall, but the water traveled down it as though it were much more so. An occasional tadpole or fish could be seen scurrying along with the aquatic flow, but it was its unusually clear appearance, the sound it made dashing against the shallow bank, and the lack of civilization that attracted them. Both could spend hours by that bank, talking about anything, and they never became bored.

With each moment, each minute turning into what felt like an eternity, the boys felt as though they could hear the call of the water and the clarity it would provide. Almost as predictable as the illusory sounds that predated it, the sight of a tall rock covered in moss was a sign to both. The boys nodded to one another, broke their grip and began to run wildly, side by side, deeper into the darkness. The rock was a sign they were almost there, and like any arrival at any great destination, a sense of celebration was required. This was more of a ritual, a way to clear their minds to keep the place sanctified and apart from their problems. With each step they discarded another piece of clothing. And by the time there was little left but their underwear, the sound of the water became reality, not just a figment of wild imaginations.

The boys stopped together in front of the clearing that would lead to its bank, slipped off their underwear, and walked purposefully into the clearing. Before either had a chance to stretch, to welcome a day of civility and solitude, a sight caught their eyes.

“Who're you?” Charlie asked the obvious question.

Chapter Two

Both boys seemed to have forgotten about their disrobed state as the man stared at them incredulously for a brief moment. They had visited the spot for so long that it seemed theirs by default, and seeing someone else there, an occurrence that had never taken place, shocked them both. The man laughed openly, both from the unexpected arrival of two nude boys, and from the expressions etched across their faces. The laugh seemed to lighten the mood, but only caused Charlie and Wesley to realize their present state of dress. As their hands flew to cover their parts, the man merely waved his hand, attempting to regain his composure.

“Please, please don't worry about me. You don't have anything I've never seen before. You two must be from the orphanage!”

The man's congenial tone seemed to surprise the boys. They had never expected an intruder in their sanctuary, but surely if one had ever come he would be an evil, insidious sort. Wesley, being more affable than Charlie by nature, allowed his hands to drop first. He waved a little and smiled.

“Yeah, I'm Wesley. What's your name?”

Charlie stared at Wesley, shocked by his bravado and still somewhat surprised by the situation.

“I'm Tom, my folks own a cabin a few miles from here. I was just trekking out to see what I could find in the woods. Cool stream, huh?”

“We found it first,” Charlie mumbled beneath his breath, still standing with his hands protecting his package from view. He looked decidedly younger at that moment, which only caused Wesley to fly into a flurry of giggles.

“That's Charlie, he's grumpy. We come here a lot,” Wesley said in a kind, even tone, defying his prior giggly state. He felt the man was nice, but had a sense of self-preservation nonetheless.

“Guess I'm late then, huh? Well at least I have some friends to share it with,” Tom smiled, opening a backpack that had been lying next to his feet. Wesley attempted to peer over, curious as to what the contents were. Charlie grabbed him by the back of the neck, startling Wesley and causing him to stand upright once more.

“Anyone want a sandwich? I packed a bunch,” Tom asked in a charitable tone. There was no sign of him wanting to leave, nor any discomfort concerning their nude state. Charlie at least perceived the first part to be true, as his hands slowly descended from his crotch.

“We just ate,” Charlie said, a kind tone returning to his words. Wesley smiled up at the older boy, squeezing his hand in support.

“Really? Well that's a shame,” Tom unwrapped one of the sandwiches and stuffed part of it into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

“I guess we better get our clothes,” Charlie said mostly to Wesley, but Tom had overheard.

“No, please, it's not like anyone's out here or anything. I could get naked if you wanted.”

The offer had caused Wesley to blush furiously and Charlie to have his words caught in his throat. Certainly this man was nothing like the homophobic boys that tormented them back at the orphanage. To them, nudity was unacceptable, especially with another boy. While Wesley warred with a deep set curiosity within, Charlie decided to take a responsible stance in the situation.

“That's okay, I mean, we're just gonna go and see some stuff,” Charlie blushed as he said it, unsure of whether it had actually made sense. He knew that he shouldn't trust any adult without good reason to, he had met plenty of adults prior to the orphanage that ingrained that in him, regardless of how nice this one seemed.

“Suit yourself,” Tom said rather matter-of-factly before plopping down onto the soil and staring up at the canopy above. The half eaten remains of the sandwich perched in his hand as it dizzily danced in front of him, encircling each leaf as it danced in the wind.

“I don't wanna go,” Wesley said quietly, so that Tom couldn't hear him. Charlie hesitated, caught between a desire to just pull him away and a more intense desire to treat him as his equal despite their age difference.

“We don't know him, what if he's trying to rub you like I do?” Charlie asked, unsure of what to say or how to be rational.

“I don't think he'd do that,” Wesley said, a contemplative tone covering his face. “Even if he

did, so what?"

"So what!?" Charlie looked at Tom for a moment, moderately embarrassed at his elevated tone. He quieted as he continued. "So, what if he hurts us? What if he's some crazy guy that chops us into little bits and buries us under a tree?"

"This isn't a movie ya know," Wesley giggled despite the serious expression on Charlie's face. One thing was becoming extremely clear, whether Charlie wanted to or not, Wesley wanted to get to know this man better. They didn't have a tremendous amount of friends, and any opportunity couldn't be denied. After all, if worse came to worst, they could just run away, right?

"Fin..." Charlie was cut off mid-word as Wesley's hands shot in the air.

"We're gonna play with you!"

Tom laughed, rolling onto his side and staring at the boys in front of him.

"Sound cool to me."

Wesley was first to run towards the stream. He carefully implanted his bare feet on the stone bed, and walked cautiously to the other bank. Within moments he had ascended, and walked over to where the man was lying on the bare earth. He plopped down on his bottom, sitting indian style, and extended his hand by way of a greeting. Watching in disbelief, Charlie merely shook his head and managed to get half way through the creek when Tom's hand met Wesley's.

"Good to meet you."

Charlie crawled out, sat next to Wesley, and stared dumbfounded at Tom for a brief moment. Finally, stifling a chuckle, Tom extended his hand. Charlie accepted, half heartedly, and was met with an animated shake that put his entire arm into motion. Charlie laughed for the first time since the encounter.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Tom asked only causing Charlie to blush again. With the two boys in such close proximity, Tom sat up, leaning over so that they were all on a similar level.

"What do you guys do here?"

As soon as the question escaped Tom's lips, Wesley giggled, looking down at his lap. Charlie grumbled a little, certain of what was crossing his mind. This was where they had rubbed together for the first time, where they had kissed, where they had tried sucking one another. It didn't happen so often anymore, but something about this being the origin of those experiences and the wild, unexpected difference that such experiments in an uninhibited space provided made it synonymous with sex, or what they perceived as sex anyway.

"Just, hang out and stuff," Charlie said, grabbing a twig from the earth and rolling it around between his thumb and forefinger.

"Well that sounds cool. Never catch any fish? Tadpoles? Get naked?" He laughed at the last part, as the answer was obvious. Charlie seemed incredulous, but Wesley laughed along with him.

“Sometimes we swim but not always. Like we talk and stuff,” Wesley replied in as thoughtful a tone as he could muster. Despite his age he knew when secrets were appropriate to keep, and he wasn't about to relay their most profound memory about the place.

“Now swimming is pretty fun,” Tom chimed in, looking around them for a brief moment and then back at the younger boy.

“You wanna?” Wesley asked, his eyes illuminating with excitement and Charlie's once more filling with concern. The whole experience was exhausting, and he was almost prepared to just rescind his acceptance of their staying when Tom decided to reply in a boisterous tone.

“Sure!” Tom stood to his full height, grabbed his t-shirt and flung it from him. As soon as his hands reached his belt buckle, Charlie's eyes were immediately glued. He reached for Wesley, expecting to find the boy right next to him, but was met with nothing. As soon as the belt was unlatched and Tom set about unzipping his jeans, he turned his head to try to ascertain Wesley's location. He was already stepping into the creek, ready to enjoy himself. Charlie had expected him to be as curious about the older man's form as he was, but that apparently wasn't the case. He suddenly felt dirty, and looked at the earth beneath him so that he wasn't tempted to look any longer.

A wild howl from Tom and a loud splash following it signified that he had been disrobed. Charlie looked up and turned towards the stream. Wesley was splashing as furiously as his small arms could, his face illuminated with laughter and glee. Tom was laughing as well, splashing back but without the same level of intensity.

“Come play with us!” Wesley cried, not relenting in his attack of the older man. Charlie sighed, stood, and looked at them for a brief moment before responding.

“I think I'm just gonna sit out here for a little while. My stomach hurts a little.”

Wesley stopped splashing and Tom follow suit. They both turned towards Charlie as he sunk down in front of a tree, stretching his legs out in front of him.

“You gonna be okay?” Wesley asked with genuine concern, never once assuming it was a lie.

“Yeah, yeah I'm fine, you guys have fun,” Charlie responded, waving at them and staring indignantly at his toes.

“I have some antacids in my backpack if you're interested,” Tom said, only causing Charlie to shake his head.

“I'm fine,” he said simply, and that seemed enough for the duo. Within moments both Wesley and Tom were splashing each other once more, and Charlie had decided to rest his head on the tree behind him. As he closed his eyes, the sounds of the cavorting filling each space of his mind, he began to drift away from the forest.

“Open them up,” Tom's voice echoed into Charlie's mind as his eyes opened, the older man was perched on the earth beneath him and was staring hungrily at his crotch. Charlie's cheeks burned a furious red as he looked around for his younger companion.

“Where's Wesley?” Charlie asked as his legs were spread apart by the man's hungry hands.

“He's safe, don't worry,” the man responded as he began to lower towards Charlie's stiff member. It stood out a proud four inches, still thin and without an inkling of pubic hair. Charlie felt a need to resist, to pull away, but the promise of the older man's mouth kept him still. As soon as his lips encircled it, Charlie closed his eyes tightly in ecstasy.

The young boy gasped as the older man began to move up and down, his lips pursed strongly on his shaft. The force of the suction was unlike any he had ever felt before, and he felt his body melt into the embrace of pleasure.

“Please don't stop, please don't stop sucking it,” Charlie pleaded, his small hands grabbing hastily at Tom's messy blonde locks.

The older man let out a sigh of contentment, merely maintaining his voracious attack on the younger boy. Within moments Charlie found his hands flying uncontrollably, forcing themselves to the earth and attempting to grab something that wasn't there. There had never been anything so pleasurable, never anything so intense. Certainly he had dealt in experiments with Wesley, but he didn't have knowledge of his anatomy in this way. Each fluid motion seemed the ideal of his mind, a perfect dance of physical action with emotional reaction.

Charlie's legs trembled, moving across the coarse ground as his hands once more sprung to the older man's head.

“I'm gonna cum!” he shouted, only causing the older man's pace to quicken. Charlie's mouth became dry, his hands rose to try and stifle a scream, as an intense tingling rushed through his stomach, his pelvis, and finally into his cock. It trembled, moving in dancing rhythm with each suck. Just when it felt like the pleasure would never end, something surprising occurred.

Charlie's eyes flew open as he fell forward, his cock trembling between him and the earth. He had cum, but where Tom was supposed to be was just an empty patch of ground. He looked over by the stream and saw them, both Tom and Wesley stretched out on the bank conversing about something that he couldn't hear. Charlie sat up quickly, attempting to regain his composure as he looked down at his still rigid member.

“Was it... was it just a dream?” He wondered aloud. Thankfully they didn't seem to have noticed, but the cum, that was real. Did he shout? Did he say those things he said in the dream? He couldn't be sure as his cheeks turned a deep shade of crimson. He sat back, crossed his legs, and willed his member to deflate itself so that he could leave.

“You're awake! How are you feeling?” Tom said happily as Wesley joined him in walking towards Charlie. Charlie closed his legs tightly around himself, making sure nothing was exposed, and laughed nervously.

“Yeah, yeah, feel a TON better!”

Wesley smiled, plopped down next to him and wrapped his arm around his companion. His skin was still partially wet, clammy from the combination of partially evaporated water and the cool wind

that mingled with it.

“I'm happy.”

Tom smiled as he plopped down on Charlie's other side.

“Glad to hear it.”

Charlie tried to scoot away as discreetly as possible. He wasn't sure why he had that sort of dream, especially about a man he had just met, but he wasn't about to tempt fate with closeness. Charlie's fingers busily encircled Wesley's, and noticing that the rigidity of his cock had lessened in the moments since their arrival, decided to take the opportunity for escape.

“We really need to go back for lunch,” Charlie said with an authoritative air, one that was very much unlike him. Wesley blinked in confusion, but felt it wouldn't be appropriate to deny the command since it was the first he had ever received from the older boy.

“Okay,” he said, emotionless. He was fairly tired, even if a part of him wanted to stay and be with Tom for a bit longer.

“Well it's a shame to see you guys go. Hey, I'll be here around the same time tomorrow if you wanna hang out. I'll probably be exploring the woods all summer, not a whole lot to do,” Tom said by way of a goodbye. Wesley seemed happy to hear as much, and Charlie merely scrambled to his feet, pulling Wesley right along with him.

“Yeah, sure,” Charlie replied, turning and walking towards the bank with Wesley's hand still firmly in his grasp. Wesley followed, turning slightly and waving a goodbye.

“Bye Tom!” He called out, receiving a returned wave from the man. By the time they crossed the creek and headed towards the clearing, Wesley was fully aware of Charlie's haste.

“Why are you in such a hurry?” Wesley asked, grabbing his underwear from Charlie's grasp.

“Oh, no reason, I just don't want Bessie to get worried. Plus, lunch should be soon and I'm staaaaarving!” Charlie lied quite expertly. He wasn't ready to tell anyone about his dream, and he was fairly certain he never would be.

Wesley seemed unsure, but accepted the lie since it wasn't the norm for their relationship. Thankfully the pace of their walk lessened, and after having retrieved each item of clothing they had spread on their way to the creek, both boys had returned to their normal pace and were conversing lightly, hand in hand as they always were. As soon as they reached the clearing where the orphanage lie, Wesley chirped in excitedly.

“Can we go see Tom again tomorrow?”

Charlie sighed, not wanting to ever see the older man again.

“Sure... I mean, maybe. Who knows, maybe we'll find an adventure here tomorrow?”

Wesley thought momentarily about pouting, his lip protruding for but a moment, but then thought better of it. He collected his expression and nodded as they ascended the porch and walked back inside.

Chapter Three

That night as Wesley lay next to Charlie, sound asleep, Charlie couldn't help but think over the events of the day. He was partially angry, partially surprised by the daydream, but more so by the reaction it produced. Wesley was the only person he was interested in, or at least that was what he had always told himself. He had never had any interest in another boy, but what exactly did the dream mean? Certainly Tom was only a boy in a basic sense, more appropriate though would be the designation of him as a man. Charlie had always thought the age difference between Wesley and himself was difficult to surmount, this was impossible.

Charlie turned over, his fingers lightly dancing across Wesley's scalp as he shook his head. It was just a dream, nothing more. A temporal fantasy did not equate love, and there wasn't going to be anything that could tear him away from Wesley. He watched the cherub sleep, and wondered what life would be like without him for the first time. He was convinced that no alternative relationship would ever end their union, but what about adoption? That was, after all, the reason they were there. For Charlie the possibility seemed more remote, but Wesley was eight, still very adoptable. Maybe it wasn't so bad to think about other, more stable options.

As soon as the thought crossed Charlie's mind, joining the already jumbled collective of thoughts that pre-dated it, he shot bolt upright, slid off the bed, and walked towards the window. The grounds were quiet, naturally, but the trees seemed more ominous than they ever had before. Every time he had ever gone inside it was as a means to escape reality, to be in perfect peace with the world. After today however, the forest took a different connotation; it was now a den of change, of a radical departure from the presumed. It was knowledge, it was chaos.

Charlie looked at Wesley for a brief moment before slipping out of the room, quietly down the stairs, and nearly invisibly out the front door. As soon as he closed it behind him, waiting to see if anyone had noticed, he let out a sigh of relief. He was alone, alone to gather his thoughts and contemplate what had happened. With as much care as he could muster, Charlie stepped across the porch, down the stairs, and began to trek through the prickly grass back towards the former paradise. It occurred to Charlie on his approach that the night did the forest no favors. The moon shining brightly above casted ominous shadows, and the sounds of familiar insects and birds were replaced with new ones, foreign ones.

As Charlie crept a ways in, losing himself beneath the moon's ephemeral glow, he heard a low growling and froze. His eyes darted around him, but he wasn't able to make anything out. Just when he was preparing a daring run for the orphanage, something grabbed his shoulders.

“Lemm...” Before Charlie could yell and beg for help, whatever was behind him had clamped his mouth shut. Charlie struggled for a moment, eventually relenting in the clasp of the much stronger entity that bound him. A million thoughts passed through his mind as to what it could be, logic incapable of discerning facts. For instance, Charlie could have easily dismissed a dragon by merit of the fact it was a human hand that covered his mouth. Thankfully for Charlie he wouldn't have to wait much longer for a more overt revealing of the entity's identity.

“What're you doing out here so late? Don't scream guy, you'll wake everyone up,” the somewhat familiar voice of Tom echoed across the dark towers of trees, filling Charlie with a completely different form of fear. He had to step back, to feel himself and wonder if it was real this time. That dream had been real, the most realistic thing he had ever felt.

“I, um, I can't sleep,” Charlie said simply, lowering his eyes to the floor beneath.

“Same here, figured I'd see exactly how far you two had to trek,” Tom responded, coolly as always, taking a seat beneath a large tree that stood across from Charlie.

Charlie's mind took a decidedly different turn at this revelation. Did Tom like him back? Was he out searching for the orphanage just so they could meet again? When was he planning on revealing himself exactly? Each question led to another, and since no answers seemed apparent, Charlie did the only thing he felt he could.

“Oh,” Charlie said simply, feeling immediately stupid. He had so many questions, so many wild ideas that he wanted debunked, but he couldn't talk about that. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about Tom, but he was sure that he'd take the time to get to know him, on his own terms.

“How's the stomach?” Tom asked in concern. Charlie had to think a moment before he understood, suddenly recalling his fib from earlier in the day at the last minute.

“Oh! That? Psh, I'm fine.” Charlie said as confidently as he could. Tom merely smiled, grabbed a flashlight from his side, and flashed it at Charlie playfully.

“Wanna go exploring?” He asked, appealing to Charlie's more adventurous side. Charlie knew he probably should say no, but the night wasn't the time for moral judgments.

“Sure,” Charlie said as he watched Tom rise back to his full height.

The two began to walk through the woods together, Tom occasionally flashing his light into dark corners that revealed all sorts of unusual critters. It seemed as though any perceived solitude in the forest by day was replaced by a carnival at night. The moon, dim a light though it may shine, was the spotlight for an adventurous tale. Each animal was diverse, sporting various colors, and patterns, and the sounds each made seemed to fall together into some sort of other worldly symphony. Charlie couldn't help but stare into each dark corner, delight at the illuminated scenes created by Tom's flashlight. It was an experience that couldn't be put into words by either, so neither of them ever tried.

The excitement of the unusual nature of the forest at night made what felt like an eternal journey a very quick one, as the familiar sounds of the stream rushing by filled Charlie's ears. The sound broke Charlie's concentration on the nocturnal parade, and instead focused it on Tom once more. He was unsure whether Tom knew the forest better than he had led on earlier, or if they had arrived by chance. Charlie had a great sense of the forest all on his own, but was certain he wasn't led here by his own cognition. Just when Charlie was about to ask, they stepped past the last row of trees and both of their sights fell on the stream, illuminated by the full moon above.

“It's beautiful,” Charlie said simply, unable to say much else.

“Yeah, it is,” Tom said in response, walking closer to the stream and removing his shoes. Within

moments he had sat on the bank, allowing his toes to dip into the illuminated flow.

Charlie followed, his feet already bare, he dipped his toes into the water next to Tom's and stared at their reflection beneath. He caught sight of Tom's leg moving before he realized what he was doing. With a quick brush, the tips of Tom's toes brushed the bottom of Charlie's feet, causing him to giggle for the first time that evening.

"I knew I could do it," Tom said simply.

"What?" Charlie asked, curious as to what he meant.

"Make you smile."

Charlie blushed again, probably for the hundredth time that day. Regardless of whether his dreams meant true feelings or not, Tom did have an affect on him. It wasn't something Charlie was capable of expressing, but a part of him liked it.

"Do you like me?" Tom suddenly asked, only causing Charlie's cheeks to become redder. He wasn't prepared for the question, and fought for a set of words that formed an appropriate response.

"What do you mean?" Charlie asked, unable to think of anything else.

"I mean, it seemed like you really didn't want to hang out with Wes and me earlier, and you ran off so quickly... I thought maybe you didn't like me."

Charlie sighed in relief, perhaps a tad too audibly. He had assumed he was asking whether he *liked* him. This question was not an easy one to answer, but it certainly wasn't as complex as the alternative.

"Yeah, I mean, I guess I didn't know what to think of you before," Charlie answered honestly, swinging his legs a little so that his feet became wetter.

"That's fair," Tom said, nodded, and placed his right hand on Charlie's shoulder.

"Friends?"

"Friends," Charlie responded. It was enough, enough to get to know the man and figure out what the dream had meant. He wasn't one hundred percent sure where it would go, but it couldn't hurt to see what could happen.

"I probably should go..." Charlie began, hugging his legs to his chest as his eyes looked sideways at Tom.

"I guess it's pretty late, huh?" Tom said, allowing his legs to convey him to his full height once more. He reached his hand out, offering Charlie a bit of assistance. Charlie gladly accepted, easily pulled to his full height as he rubbed his wet feet on the hard clay beneath them.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Charlie said in complete truth. He was certain he would avoid him before, but now there was no reason. Tom merely nodded, a smile covering his face from ear to ear.

“Sure.”

Charlie smiled, hesitating for the briefest of moments before turning on his heel and walking towards the forest once more. Before he reached the clearing he turned again, his eyes looking at Tom who was observing him in turn.

“Will you be alright alone?” Tom asked.

“Yeah, I've done this tons of times,” Charlie nodded, attempting to swallow saliva from a dry mouth that just didn't exist. He managed to collect his resolve long enough to turn, walk through the clearing, and lose Tom for the evening. It wasn't as though it was goodbye, it was just a temporary dismissal.

Chapter Four

“Wake up!” Wesley shouted, an unusual situation at best. Charlie couldn't recall a time in his life at the orphanage that he was the one being waken up. Each morning he took great care to get Wesley up, make sure that he kept a decent sleep cycle despite his presence, but this morning was different. Certainly Charlie had an excuse, but he suddenly felt, in his groggy state, that it wasn't one he should share.

“Yeah, I'm up,” Charlie forced a giggle, sitting straight up and stretching his arms towards the ceiling. Wesley looked at him with a profound expression of concern.

“Are you okay? I've never seen you sleep this late before.”

“It's not that late, I mean...” Charlie's eyes fell on the alarm clock before he could finish. It was already a quarter past ten. He had never slept that late to his recollection. Wesley's expression seemed to be only encouraged by Charlie's realization.

“I'm sure it's nothing to worry about, loads of people sleep late all the time!” Charlie reasoned, only causing Wesley to raise his hand to Charlie's forehead. Before he had a chance to protest, Wesley was running out into the hallway, yelling as loudly as he could.

“Charlie has a fever!” The young boy shouted, doubtlessly attracting the attention of everyone in the orphanage. Charlie sat dumbfounded for a moment before allowing his own hand to rise. As he pressed it against his brow he took note, the younger boy was right.

Within a few moments he took account of his condition. He did feel a tad under the weather, and his joints seemed to ache rhythmically against his thoughts. Maybe that was the reason he slept late and not Tom at all. Just as he began to rise and ignore the symptoms, Bessie walked in with a thermometer.

“Back in bed,” she said with her typically genteel, authoritative tone. Charlie wanted to protest, but knew better than to question anything Bessie said. It wasn't for fear that he obeyed her, but because of her endless kindness. Regardless of the boy's opinions of one another, each knew who made sure they had a good life at the orphanage. Bessie was the harbinger of goodwill, a female Santa in full actualization.

As she shoved the thermometer into his mouth and pressed the back of her hand to his forehead, Bessie shook her head.

“I think Wesley was right about you.”

Charlie suddenly felt a deep sinking feeling fill his stomach. He was supposed to meet Tom in a few hours. If Bessie put him on bed rest, he might as well be trying to fly to Mongolia. He closed his eyes tightly, willing his fever to be low at worst, or non-existent preferably. Unfortunately for him, neither desire was going to happen.

“My Lord, you have quite the fever. You crawl back into those blankets and I'll bring you some soup and medicine.”

“Bu...” Charlie began, almost feeling tears come to his eyes at the thought of missing another day with Tom, but the look from Bessie said everything. He wasn't going to see Tom even if the world came to an end. As he lay back, his head sinking into the pillow, he let out a sigh.

“I'll take care of you,” Wesley said, returning to his companion's side and taking his hand into his own. Charlie smiled, opening his eyes a little as he looked into Wesley's.

“Thanks, but I'll be okay. You should go play with Tom.” The last words sounded much smoother than they really were. Charlie found it incredibly difficult to verbalize the suggestion, and envied the younger boy with each ounce of his being.

“He said he'd be there all summer, I wanna stay with you,” Wesley said with a sense of finality that made Charlie feel both comforted and abhorrent. Just a few hours before Charlie was contemplating a life without Wesley, a life entangled in the arms of a more permanent companion. Although he couldn't force the thoughts of Tom away, he could embrace Wesley for the moment, by way of a thanks and to quiet his own mind a little.

“Sure,” Charlie said simply, patting Wesley's head and allowing his eyes to close. As the feverish began to become more apparent to him, causing his state to turn into drowsiness, Bessie returned with the promised items in tow.

“Sit up now,” Bessie said, placing the soup and bottle of medicine on the bedside table. Charlie did as he was told, his eyes immediately falling on Wesley who looked distraught in the corner. Bessie seemed to notice the focus of Charlie's attention as she turned her head and began to speak.

“Heavens, don't worry about Charlie here, we'll have him fixed up in a jiffy!” The words were somehow comforting to Wesley, causing him to smile a bit. For Charlie however they didn't meant much. He knew well that a jiffy wasn't a few hours.

After dutifully taking his medicine and managing to swallow down the majority of the soup, Bessie departed with a promise that he could come downstairs for dinner if he felt better. It wasn't a ton of comfort, but it was better than being stuck in the room all day he had to admit. As soon as the door shut behind her, Wesley came and laid down next to him, wrapping his arm around his chest.

“What if you get sick?” Charlie asked, not undesirable of the attention, but also not wanting his

companion to fall to the same fate.

“I don't care if I get your germs,” Wesley giggled, pecking Charlie's cheek. Charlie smiled, closed his eyes, and fell asleep rather quickly in the grasp of his friend.

Wesley laid there for a moment, staring at Charlie's sleeping form and sighed. He really did want to go see Tom, but knew that he couldn't break his vow. He did, however, know that he needed to eat. Charlie's having fallen asleep seemed as good an opportunity as any. As quietly and carefully as he could manage, he slipped down the bed, and onto the floor. Once he managed to shut the door behind him without as much as a peep, he decided that haste was now his best option. His feet pounded hard, relative to his size of course, as he ran down the hallway, the stairs, and towards the dining room where the adults were already clearing the table of its breakfast scraps.

Wesley stopped, staring in despair, and felt his stomach ache for completion that seemed unable to come. Just as he prepared to turn on his heel and return to his ailing companion, a familiar voice broke his stride.

“Did you miss breakfast?” Jonathan asked, piling another dirty plate on top of an increasingly monumental tower. Wesley turned red as he looked into his eyes for the first time in months. He still felt a lingering guilt for abandoning him, and felt himself unworthy of such kindness.

“I'm okay, really,” Wesley said quietly, trying to combat his overwhelming appetite. Jonathan merely laughed, taking the tower into his grasp.

“Come with me, we'll fix you up something.”

Wesley merely nodded as he followed, struck silent by the awkwardness of the situation. He had felt for the longest time that Jonathan ignored him because of his past actions, angry in some way, but now he knew that the case was quite different. Jonathan had given him his space and had never asked for anything in return.

As soon as he walked into the kitchen with Jonathan, dirty dishes seeming to cover every surface of the limited counter space, he marveled at its size. He had always expected some grandiose monstrosity behind that door, but instead it was a mere reflection of smaller home. The oven was obviously older, the counter space, as said before, quite limited, and only one refrigerator stood able to receive the contents necessary to create feast after feast for ravenous boys. However they managed to pull off each meal seemed a small miracle.

“Pretty small, huh?” Jonathan mused, noticing Wesley's curious glances. Wesley merely blushed, returning his eyesight to the linoleum beneath them.

“Bessie works wonders, really. She sends one of us out for groceries each morning and afternoon so there's enough for everyone. There's almost always left overs, but since she thinks it's not good to feed you guys the same thing over and over she usually gives them away to a homeless shelter in town.” As Jonathan spoke it was clear that he held the older woman in high esteem. Wesley appreciated it, all the boys did after all. It was remarkable to him though that an adult would feel the same way.

“She's great,” Wesley said by way of an agreement.

He wasn't sure what to say, and that was certainly more than he felt he was capable of saying. He watched in mild curiosity as Jonathan uncovered each of the dishes sat on a far counter, apparently prepared to go to the aforementioned homeless shelter. He scooped out a bit of each thing, making sure that no spare spot on the plate remained. When at least he seemed satisfied, he recovered the last dish and handed the plate to the small boy. Before he had a chance to say thanks, Jonathan bent over and gently kissed Wesley's forehead.

“If you ever need anything I'm here, okay?” Jonathan said gently, only causing Wesley to pull the plate closer to his chest. He wanted to scream, to say thank you, to panic, to hug him, but he couldn't decide on anything. Instead, lacking no other option he could perceive, he turned and ran back towards the dining room, across the hallway, and into the yard.

The kiss. Wesley liked it.