

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

FOREVER. I PROMISE.

Lily Grace

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

FOREVER. I PROMISE.

By Lily Grace

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two teenage boys cuddle outside. One is leaning back against the other's chest and they're smiling at each other like nothing else exists in the world.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

People always tell me that the chance of finding your true love in high school is pretty slim. Well thank god then that I didn't meet Patrick in high school; that's just the time I fell in love with him. We actually met the day we were born, our mothers going in labour the exact same day and us being born just minutes apart from each other. We grew up together, always being at each other's side, no matter what. So why are people so shocked about us falling in love? Why are they telling us that for us to be close is great but for us to love each other is wrong?

But all this doesn't matter, because no matter what our families may think, I am never letting him go. I simply cannot live without him and I certainly don't want to. So even if everybody will turn on us, we'll be good, because we have each other.

Sincerely,

Little.dhampir

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, young adult

Tags: high school, first time, friends to lovers, young adult characters, bullying, coming out, homophobia

Content warnings: sex between two minors (both seventeen years old)

Word count: 30,224

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PROLOGUE

May 1997, 10 years old

“Come on, Zack!”

“Wait up!”

Zack ran after Patrick through the woods behind their houses. Zack had been trailing behind him since they had decided to race back to their secret spot from the park. Gripping his baseball glove tighter in his sweaty hand, Zack skidded down the hill between the trees and finally came to a stop in the small meadow that opened up in front of the pond.

“Beat ya!” Patrick jumped up and down, waving his hands in the air.

Zack grinned good-naturedly, not minding that Patrick had won. Patrick was faster and stronger and better at sports than Zack was, but that was okay. Zack was just happy to tag along, and Patrick always wanted him to.

The grassy knoll in front of a small, algae-covered pond was their place. They had been coming here since their parents had started allowing them to them go off exploring on their own. It wasn't all that special, really. There was too much algae for the pond to be good for swimming. But it was secluded and to them, it was their own private kingdom. When they were seven, Zack and Patrick pinky swore never to tell another living soul about it.

Still breathing hard, Zack sat down cross-legged on the grass, tossing his glove off to the side. Patrick flopped down next to him, close enough so their knees pressed together.

“You're getting better, y'know.” Patrick nudged against Zack's shoulder and unzipped his backpack, shoving his glove inside.

Zack smiled and ducked his head. They had spent the last two hours at the neighborhood park working on Zack's fielding. Little League tryouts were only a few weeks away.

"Not sure I'm good enough to make the team."

"Sure you are. The coach would be stupid not to want you."

"Still, it might not happen." Zack wished he could take some of Patrick's confidence and transfer it to himself.

Patrick frowned. "Don't think like that. And, if you don't play, then I'm not either."

Zack's eyes widened. "Don't say that! You're gonna be the best player on the team! You have to play!"

Patrick shrugged. "I don't have to do anything." He turned and gave Zack a brilliant smile. "Besides, it wouldn't be any fun to play if you weren't on the team with me."

Zack's heart soared a little. Patrick Martin had been his friend forever. They lived next door to each other at the end of a cul-de-sac and had spent almost every living moment with each other since birth. They were both only children and they even shared a birthday. June eighth. Their mothers had been pregnant together, had gone into labor within hours of each other, and they had been born only minutes apart. Patrick was older by exactly twenty-three minutes. Zack didn't know much about fate or kindred spirits or soul mates, but he figured Patrick was his. He was his best friend, his hero, and his favorite person all wrapped up into one. He couldn't even begin to picture his life without Patrick in it.

"Patrick?"

"Hmm?"

"You think we'll be friends for a long time?"

Patrick regarded him for a few moments, chewing on his bottom lip, as Zack's heart climbed into his throat.

“Of course we will, Zack.” Patrick’s expression was as serious as he had ever seen it.

“Yeah?” Zack hadn’t even realized he had been holding his breath. He could feel his smile taking over his entire face.

Patrick matched his grin and slung an arm around his shoulders, pulling Zack to him. “Forever. I promise.”

CHAPTER ONE

September 2003, 17 years old

“That was so frickin’ cool.” Brad walked ahead of them as they exited the movie theater in Uptown. “*Underworld*. Best movie of 2003.”

“Totally agree.” Joel grinned. “Kate Beckinsale as a vampire in all that tight, black leather? So hot.”

Brad and Joel played varsity baseball with Patrick. Zack had played Little League with all of them, but once they reached high school, there was no way Zack had been good enough to make the school team. He still went to all the games to cheer them on, though. It was how he had convinced Patrick to continue to play when Zack hadn’t made the cut. Patrick played first base and was by far the best player on the team. Now that they were starting their senior year, there was even talk of an athletic scholarship to the University of Minnesota.

“Whatever. She didn’t even get naked. I feel totally cheated.” Scott gave a smile that was somewhere between a sneer and a leer. Zack had never been a particular fan of Scott’s, and he knew Scott wasn’t a fan of his. But he was on the baseball team as well and seemed to have a habit of inviting himself along when they went into the city since he didn’t have a car of his own.

Joel rolled his eyes. “What’re we doing? Burgers?”

“Sounds good.” Patrick elbowed Zack. “Burgers good with you?”

“Like he cares. He barely talks as it is.” Scott wrinkled his nose.

Zack felt his face flush. He knew he was shy. He didn’t have any trouble talking when it was just him and Patrick, but in groups he had a tendency to stay quiet unless someone spoke to him directly.

“Watch it, asshole.” Patrick shot Scott a warning glare, and Zack was both touched and embarrassed that his best friend had to stick up for him. Patrick nudged his arm and smiled. “So, burgers?”

“Yeah.” Zack forced a smile.

“I thought the werewolves were pretty cool. Heard they’re planning a sequel.” Patrick pulled open the door of Bob’s Burgers and let the guys file in ahead of him.

“Rock on.” Brad slid into a booth near the door and the rest of them followed suit. “What’d you think, Zack?” Brad pulled out the plastic-covered menus from where they were wedged behind the napkin dispenser and handed them around the table. “Think Kate was hot?”

“Yeah. Totally.” Zack lied through his teeth and buried his face in his menu. At seventeen, he knew he should be noticing when girls were hot, but somehow it was still escaping him. He didn’t really need to look at the menu, he basically had it memorized at this point, but he knew he was blushing and it gave him an excuse to hide his face. The ’burbs of Minneapolis didn’t exactly offer much excitement, so once drivers’ licenses had been obtained, they had begun to make their way more frequently into the city. The Uptown Theater and some of the many restaurants in the hip, trendy area had become a hangout. More often than not, though, they always seemed to settle on Bob’s. Zack had to admit the milkshakes were out of this world.

Conversation turned from the movie to the start of senior year and classes just as the waitress arrived with their shakes. “That reminds me.” Patrick edged a little nearer to Zack in the booth. “I’m totally going to need your help this weekend with my math. My Algebra II teacher somehow thinks I actually remember Algebra I.”

The rest of the guys snickered and Patrick shot them a wide grin. Zack couldn’t help but laugh and also found himself very aware of the thigh now pressing up against his. “That can probably be arranged.”

“You’re the best.” Patrick looped his arm around Zack’s shoulders and pulled him into his side for a quick one-armed hug.

A burst of warmth spread through his body. “No prob.” Patrick was the jock while he was pretty much the nerd, but Zack didn’t mind if that meant he could help his friend. He figured it was the least he could do. Patrick had always made sure he was included all his life. Sometimes he wondered if he would have any friends at all, if it wasn’t for Patrick.

“Seriously dude, don’t you get tired of all those accelerated, AP classes and shit? I mean, don’t tell me you actually like it?” Scott looked at him dubiously from across the table.

Actually, Zack did like it. School was something he excelled at and it made him feel good that he was able to help Patrick. He took a sip of milkshake and gave a noncommittal shrug.

“He’s like the smartest person at our school. He’s going to be Valedictorian.” Zack could hear the pride in Patrick’s voice and his heart gave an extra beat. “He’ll have his pick of any college he wants to go to. You’ll be lucky if you get into Hennepin Community College.”

“Screw you.” Scott sucked loudly on his milkshake straw.

Zack didn’t want his pick of any school. The thought of going anywhere without Patrick was beyond terrifying. Besides, he would miss him too much. The U of M was a good school and then he and Patrick could be together.

After their burgers arrived there was a lull in conversation while everyone chowed down. They were all about halfway through their burgers when the front door to Bob’s jingled and two guys, probably in their mid-twenties, walked in. They were holding hands.

Zack watched, transfixed, as the taller blond smiled at something the shorter, dark-haired man said. Then he leaned down and kissed him. It was just a light peck. Short and sweet. But in the brief moment, Zack felt his world tip on its axis and all the air sucked out of his lungs. Something flip-flopped in the region of his abdomen and a sudden vision of he and Patrick kissing flashed through his brain.

The two men walked past their table, seemingly oblivious to their rapt audience, and took a seat at a small table near the back of the restaurant.

“Fucking gross! Did you see that?” Scott threw down the last bit of burger he had been holding onto his plate. “I’ve totally lost my appetite. Those fags were completely disgusting.”

“Chill. You don’t want them to hear you.” Brad looked uncomfortable. Joel looked like he had just seen an alien and Zack couldn’t read Patrick’s expression at all.

Zack’s stomach churned at Scott’s words. They made him feel hurt and panicky, but he didn’t know why. The two men looked so happy together. What was wrong with that?

Zack’s limbs moved on autopilot as he followed the other guys out of the restaurant and back to Joel’s SUV. Scott had claimed shotgun and Patrick was wedged into the middle of the backseat with Zack and Brad on either side of him. No one besides Patrick seemed to notice the silence from his side of the backseat. Patrick kept glancing in his direction as the rest of the guys began a rousing conversation about the hottest girls in the senior class, but Zack did his best to avoid Patrick’s gaze and spent the ride home staring out the window.

His mind whirred as he went from wondering why watching those two men kiss had affected him so much, why it physically pained him that his friends might not approve and why the first thing he had thought of was him and Patrick kissing. One other thought dominated his brain the entire ride home. He needed to know what Patrick had thought about the kiss. The thought that Patrick might feel the same way as Scott was devastating.

Joel dropped Zack and Patrick off between their two houses. Patrick checked his watch and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “So, am I sleeping over?”

Zack had to laugh, even though he was still feeling nauseous. “Well, it is Saturday, isn’t it?” Zack fished his keys out of his pocket as they walked up the driveway to his house.

Almost every Saturday night for as long as he could remember Patrick had slept over in his basement. His mother didn’t really use the downstairs of their house at all. The family room had been more of his father’s domain apparently, and he had left shortly after Zack was born.

“Your mom working the night shift again?” Patrick stepped in the front door and toed off his shoes.

“Yup.”

His mother, Linda, was an ER nurse and often worked long and odd hours. He knew she always picked up extra shifts when she could. Raising a child on a single salary wasn't easy and Zack was thankful, but he and his mom had never been close. Because she worked so much she wasn't ever really around, and she had always been a bit distant even when she was. Zack guessed she loved him in her own way, but she definitely wasn't the type of mother to bake cookies and give out hugs. Sometimes it hurt. Sometimes he wished he had two parents like Patrick—a dad that would play catch with him and a mom who would make his favorite dinner to cheer him up—but Zack knew it was pointless to dwell on things that couldn't be changed.

After raiding the pantry for junk food and the fridge for Cokes, they made their way downstairs. Patrick dropped the snacks he was carrying on the old coffee table in front of the beat-up plaid couch and knelt down in front of the cabinet under the TV that held all the movies. “What're you in the mood for? Wanna stay up all night and watch all three *Indiana Jones* movies?”

Zack bit on the corner of his bottom lip, shaking his head. “Sounds like a plan. Dork.”

Patrick threw a grin over his shoulder and popped in the first DVD.

They started out sprawling on either side of the couch, but as the movies and the night wore on, they grabbed the sleeping bags they kept in the corner of the room and stripped the couch of cushions, essentially creating mattresses for themselves, and stretched out in front of the TV. It didn't matter that Zack's bedroom was right off the family room. He always slept on the ground with Patrick.

They watched *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* from inside their sleeping bags. He knew the movies almost by heart and Zack found his mind wandering back to Bob's Burgers and what he had witnessed. Instead of focusing on Indiana and his father racing across the desert to find the Holy Grail, he kept picturing the kiss. He had... liked it. A lot. And he couldn't stop picturing himself and Patrick doing the exact same thing.

He stole a glance at Patrick. He was tall and muscular and always seemed to have a tan. It was a stark contrast to Zack's wiry, thin frame and pale skin. Where Patrick's hair was a rich brown and always seemed artfully tousled and just a bit wavy, Zack's was short, straight, and sandy blond. Patrick also had amazing eyes. They were like liquid dark chocolate and were framed by thick black lashes. Zack's were a nondescript light blue.

Zack's gaze traveled down to Patrick's mouth. Even in profile and in the semi-dark, his lips looked full and plush and Zack was already too aware that when Patrick smiled, he could light up a whole room. Patrick was gorgeous.

Zack's brain skittered to a halt as he processed his thoughts. He wasn't an idiot and he was actually amazed he hadn't realized it sooner. But guys being attracted to other guys wasn't something that was talked about in the suburbs. Even though Zack had never understood what it was about girls the other guys found so fascinating, it had never really occurred to Zack to look at other guys. Watching two men act on their attraction to each other and kiss had caused some sort of mental block in Zack's brain to crumble.

He liked guys. Which meant he was gay. And, he was attracted to his best friend. His revelation hit him like a ton of bricks.

He tried not to hyperventilate during the rest of the movie. How had he been alive for seventeen years and smart enough to get straight As and not known? How had it taken a two-second moment between two strangers to bring everything into focus? It was the proverbial light bulb switching on moment. If it wasn't so terrifying, he would laugh.

It was three in the morning when the credits began to roll and Patrick switched off the TV with the remote. They had been falling asleep next to each other almost every Saturday night since they were little kids, but this time Zack was restless and scared and not doing a very good job hiding it.

"Zack, you okay? You were acting weird after we left Bob's and it's like you've been quietly freaking out all night." Patrick knew him so well.

They had always told each other everything, but his brain was still trying to process. He certainly couldn't tell Patrick how he felt about him, but the dark

gave him some bravery. Zack at least needed to know how Patrick felt about gay people, because if Patrick wasn't okay with that, then Zack might just die.

"Yeah." Zack nodded and swallowed. "I'm okay."

"But?"

Zack steeled his nerves. "You remember those two guys kissing at Bob's?"

The silence stretched on for what seemed like an eternity.

"Yeah." Patrick finally said. "I remember."

He couldn't determine anything from the tone of Patrick's voice and his face gave nothing away. He could only forge ahead.

"Um, it was pretty clear Scott was totally disgusted, but I was wondering what you thought." Zack bit down on his lip, pretty sure he might be drawing blood. The importance of Patrick's answer hit him full force. What would he do if Patrick felt the same way Scott did?

"What I thought about it?" Patrick enunciated every word like he had to ponder each one before it left his mouth.

"Yeah." Zack's heart was in his throat.

Zack could see Patrick shrugging his shoulders beneath his sleeping bag. "I get that we don't live in, like, San Francisco or New York, but sometimes it kind of freaks me out how closed-minded people can be. Scott was pretty much a douche."

"So," Zack licked his lips, "you were okay with it?"

Patrick turned on his side so he faced Zack. "Yeah. I mean, weren't you?" There was almost a hint of fear in Patrick's voice, but he could be imagining things. Relief washed over Zack and he felt giddy.

"Yeah. I was okay with it." He cared about Patrick's opinion more than anyone else's in the entire world.

There was a beat of silence before Patrick spoke again. "It looked like they were really in love."

Zack froze, as his eyes locked with Patrick's. "Yeah. It did," he whispered.

Patrick gave a small smile. "I'm glad it didn't bother you. 'Night, Zack."
"'Night."

Patrick shut his eyes and several minutes later his breathing evened out. Zack continued to watch him, though, as he slept. He mentally traced his features, taking in his dark lashes and full lips and strong jaw. Patrick was beautiful. And good. And completely amazing. The longer Zack stared the more certain he became of yet one more giant earth-shattering revelation. When he really thought about it, it probably shouldn't have been all that surprising because Patrick meant absolutely everything to him. Not only was Zack gay and attracted to his best friend, he was also in love with him.

CHAPTER TWO

Zack wrapped his arms tighter around his knees and stared out over the algae-covered pond. It had been a little over a week and Zack still hadn't found the courage to tell Patrick he was gay. It was killing him. Where they lived, homosexuality wasn't really talked about. Homogeneity was favored and sticking out or being different was pretty much frowned upon. Zack was already so shy and introverted, the thought of coming out just boggled his mind. It was already senior year. He figured a big coming out party was probably not in his best interest. He could just wait until he got to college and deal with it then. No need to rock the boat. He could get more comfortable with it, and then there would be no need for anyone to decide to hate him based on something he couldn't control.

He did want to tell Patrick, though. He would leave out the part about being in love with him. Zack would have to find a way to get over that or learn to live with it. But he and Patrick never kept secrets from each other. Ever. And somehow telling Patrick would make it real. Like he would really be gay once he uttered the words to his friend. Patrick had seemed okay with the two guys kissing at Bob's, but they had been strangers. It made it different. Would Patrick still be so okay with it if it was his best friend?

"Hey, Zack! Sorry I'm late." Zack startled as Patrick crashed through the undergrowth, leapt over a log and skidded to a stop beside Zack. He had needed help with his math homework and asked to meet at the pond after school. All too soon, the weather would turn freezing. They wanted to enjoy the Indian summer while it lasted. "Thanks for agreeing to help your dumb best friend." Patrick gave him a puppy-dog face.

"No worries. Let's see what sort of evils Mrs. Hanson assigned you this week. And, you are *not* dumb! Don't say that about yourself." He squeezed Patrick's shoulder as he settled on the grass beside him. "Lemme see your assignment."

An hour later, they were still slogging through algebra problems.

“I can’t believe I’m having this much trouble with problems I should have mastered last year. What the hell am I going to do once we actual transfer out of ‘review mode’ and start learning new stuff?” Patrick looked up, his eyes baleful. Zack bit his lip so he wouldn’t laugh. “I’m beginning to think our teachers are members of an evil intergalactic conspiracy put on Earth to torment me.” At that, Zack did laugh.

“You can do this, Pat. I know you can.” Patrick hated it when anyone else called him Pat, but Zack was allowed.

Patrick squared his shoulders and let out a deep breath. “Okay. If I solve this equation for X, then I can plug in that number in this equation here, and then all I need to do is solve for Y...”

As Patrick worked through the problem, Zack couldn’t help but focus on things his brain wouldn’t have allowed him to only weeks ago. He noticed how Patrick’s navy henley stretched nicely over his shoulders and upper back, how his right forearm muscles flexed as he wrote in his notebook and how when his tousled brown hair caught the light just so, it took on an auburn hue.

“Nine! Y is nine!” Patrick threw his pencil down in the grass and raised his arms above his head. “Am I right?” He turned to look at Zack and Zack caught himself staring at Patrick’s lips and mouth.

Crap.

“Yes! Awesome!”

Patrick held up his hand, and Zack gave him a high-five. “Thank you, seriously. Sometimes I’m not sure I would make it through school without you. You’re so smart.”

Zack shrugged, uncomfortable with the praise. “I figure this just makes us even. You help me not to be a social pariah and I give a little help with school stuff.” One side of his mouth turned up.

Patrick’s brow creased. “What’re you talking about? You’re just a little shy. That’s all.”

Zack dipped his head and became more serious. “You have to know I only have the friends that I do because I’m friends with you. It’s like I’m made

cooler by association or something. If I didn't have you, I'd just be some introverted, nerdy guy without any friends."

"Hey," Patrick placed his hand on the back of Zack's neck and squeezed. "I don't know where all this is coming from, but I promise you, you're the coolest guy I know. If someone has a problem with you, then I have a problem with them."

"You mean that? You would stick up for me no matter what?" Zack was horrified when the grass in front of him began to blur as he pictured Scott calling him a fag.

"Of course! How can you even question that?" Zack glanced to the side. Patrick wore a worried frown. "What's going on, Zack?"

This was his window of opportunity. It was now or never. Zack gathered his courage and prepared to rip the Band-Aid off.

"Pat... I need to tell you something."

"Okay."

"But I'm not sure how you're going to react. But it's so important to me that you're okay with this." Try as he might, he couldn't keep the tremble out of his voice.

When Patrick scooted closer and wrapped his arms around him, Zack couldn't hold back his tears any longer. He cried into Patrick's shoulder and Patrick just held him tighter.

"Zack, I promise you, if you've killed somebody, I'll help you hide the body." Zack gave off a snort-laugh through his tears. "Seriously. You can tell me anything. You're my best friend. Nothing will ever change that."

It was exactly what he needed to hear. After taking a deep breath, he extracted himself from Patrick's warmth so he could look him in the eye.

"Pat, I'm gay."

Patrick's eyes went wide. "How long have you known?"

"Um," Zack used the heels of his hands to wipe his eyes. "I just kind of figured it out, actually."

Patrick continued to stare at him, and the terror began to roil in Zack's gut. "P-please tell me that it's okay."

"Shit, sorry." Patrick shook himself out of whatever stupor he had been in. "Of course it's okay." He pulled Zack in for another hug. "I'm glad you told me."

"I can't believe it took me this long to figure it out, y'know?" Zack breathed out a sigh of relief and breathed in Patrick's intoxicating scent of Irish Spring soap, Tide detergent, a little sweat and something else that was purely Patrick. "I mean, how could I have been this dense?"

"Well," Patrick shifted back, but kept an arm around Zack's shoulders. "I don't think there are any hard and fast rules about these things. Maybe some people figure it out earlier, but then there are guys who grow up, get married, have kids, and wake up one morning when they're forty and realize they're gay."

Patrick could always make him feel better about things. "I'm just really worried what everyone will think. I know I wanted to tell you, but I don't think I want to tell anyone else. I have a feeling most people would react like Scott did. I just want to get through high school. Preferably unscathed."

Patrick nodded slowly, but wore an odd expression. "But what if you, y'know, wanna have a boyfriend or something?"

Zack gaped at his friend. "I... I wouldn't even... know... the chances of that..." Zack couldn't tease out a coherent sentence from his tangled mess of thoughts. "I'm like the only gay guy in our whole town. And I'm completely shy. Why would anyone want to date me? And it doesn't even matter, because the chances of it happening are, like, a million to one." Not to mention the only person Zack wanted was sitting beside him, but he didn't tell Patrick that.

"Law of averages would tell you you're wrong. You can't be the only gay guy. In fact, I can guarantee you're not. Maybe they're just scared to come out, like you." Patrick's eyes bored into him, and Zack was almost certain he could detect a hint of blush creeping into Patrick's cheeks. "Isn't there anyone in school you would think about dating?"

Zack's mouth open and closed and he started to feel very much like a cornered rabbit. He had never lied to Patrick, but he couldn't tell him the truth. "I dunno."

"Oh." Patrick withdrew his arm from around Zack's shoulders and stared down at the grass.

"Pat?" He didn't understand the sudden change in his friend's demeanor. "What's wrong?"

When Patrick lifted his head, Zack was shocked to see that his friend's eyes were red. "Maybe I've been keeping a secret, too."

"What? Tell me."

"I'm gay too, Zack." Zack briefly had tunnel vision as he let Patrick's words sink in. "But unlike you, I know who I want to be my boyfriend."

His heart, which he had allowed to soar for one brief nanosecond, came crashing back down and splintered into a million pieces. "Who is it?" Zack tried not to cry. Against all odds, Patrick was gay too, but he already had a boyfriend picked out.

Patrick gave a choked laugh. "You're really not going to make this easy on me, are you?"

Zack's brow knit, but before he could open his mouth Patrick had leaned forward into his personal space and cupped his face with his hands. "Hopefully this will answer your question." And then Patrick's lips pressed against his own. It was warm and soft and when Zack's bottom lip slipped between Patrick's, and Patrick sucked on it ever so gently, Zack thought he might just die of pure bliss right then and there.

Zack's eyes slowly fluttered open when Patrick pulled back and he could see the worry in Patrick's eyes. "Please tell me I haven't totally screwed things up between us."

"No!" Zack grasped Patrick's hands that were still framing his face. "I just didn't think... I had no idea... it never occurred to me that you would feel the same way about me. Or, that you would be gay. Wait a minute! You've had

girlfriends.” It was all a bit much to take in and Zack was worried he would need a paper bag to breathe into momentarily.

Patrick just laughed, wrapped his arms around Zack’s middle, and pressed his nose against Zack’s cheek. “I went out with Kelly for, like, three weeks freshman year. Then last year, I dated Sara for two months, but I knew it didn’t feel right. All I could think about was that I would much rather be spending time with you.”

“Really?” Zack wasn’t entirely sure when he had started to tremble. Patrick’s arms tightened around him.

“Really. Why would you think I wouldn’t want you? You’re the most important person in my life. You always have been. I just didn’t know how to tell you I was gay. You were braver than me.”

“I’m the farthest thing from brave. I definitely wouldn’t have had to guts to tell you I wanted you. You were the one who kissed me, remember?”

“Okay. We’ll call it a group effort.”

Zack let out a breathless laugh and Patrick nuzzled at his temple. “Zack? Are you done talking now?”

“Yeah.” He turned to Patrick. “Why?”

“Because I’d really like to kiss you again.”

When Patrick’s lips connected with his, Zack couldn’t help but let out a soft moan and he wrapped his arms tightly around Patrick’s neck. After a few moments, Patrick pushed him back until he was lying on the grass and Patrick was on top of him. Zack gasped as Patrick swiped his tongue over Zack’s bottom lip and then Patrick’s tongue was in his mouth, sliding over his own. Zack couldn’t help it. His hips bucked up against Patrick’s thigh and he could feel his erection pressing against the fly of his jeans. He loved the warm weight of Patrick’s body on his and their tongues twining together was absolute heaven. He couldn’t believe this was happening and how amazing it felt to be kissing his best friend.

Patrick kissed a trail from his jaw down his neck. When he began flicking his tongue over Zack’s pulse-point, Zack thought he might pass out. His arms

tightened around Patrick and when Patrick shifted, Zack felt Patrick's erection pressing against his hip. Knowing that he was the cause of his best friend's arousal just added fuel to the fire traveling through his entire body. His hips sought more friction, and Zack turned his head in search of Patrick's lips. He had only had his first kiss moments ago, and he was already addicted.

Their mouths connected again and again and Zack could feel the desperate thrust of Patrick's hips against his. They had just gone from zero to sixty in the blink of an eye, but it was okay, because he trusted Patrick completely. He wanted this more than he had ever wanted anything in his life.

"Zack..." Patrick's breathing was harsh and ragged. "I'm gonna... if we keep going..."

Zack tightened his grip. "Me too. Please... don't stop."

Their kisses became sloppy as they stole breaths of air in between lips and tongues heatedly meeting, but it didn't matter. To Zack, it was perfect.

"Zack!" Patrick buried his face in Zack's neck and his whole body tensed.

Patrick trembled in his arms, and Zack's hips erratically thrust upwards a few more times before he came undone in Patrick's arms.

"Oh my god. I can't believe we just did that." Patrick pushed up on his elbows and kissed Zack's jaw and then placed a lingering kiss on his lips. "You okay?"

Still regaining his breath, Zack could only nod and smile. He didn't think there were adequate words to accurately describe how very okay he was.

Patrick beamed down at him. "So, does this mean you'll be my boyfriend as well as my best friend?"

Soon he would feel wet and sticky, but for now, lying beneath Patrick, listening to his words, Zack could only feel pure joy.

"Yes." He felt like the luckiest person on the planet as Patrick leaned in to kiss him again.

CHAPTER THREE

“Hey.”

Zack gripped the side of his locker as he felt Patrick come up behind him and his breath on the back of his neck. All too soon, the closeness was gone and Patrick moved to stand in front of him.

“Hey, Pat.” It had been a couple days since their afternoon at the pond, but they hadn’t had a chance to be alone since then. By unspoken mutual agreement, they had been extremely careful how they acted around each other at school, though Patrick somehow was able to look at him with eyes that conveyed heat and longing when no one else was looking. It was how Patrick was looking at him now, and Zack could feel the flush travel over his whole body and his pulse speed up. Thank god, he only had one more class to get through and then it was the weekend.

“Please tell me your mom works tonight.” Patrick’s mother was a stay-at-home mom so they could really only be alone at Zack’s house when his mom was at the hospital.

“Come over at seven. She’ll be gone by then.”

“Good.” Patrick glanced up and down the hallway. The last bell would ring soon and most students had already cleared out. He leaned in so his lips were right by Zack’s ear. “Because I can’t wait to kiss you again.”

Zack’s knees went a bit weak and he forced himself to think about cold showers and his sixty-year-old history teacher naked so he wouldn’t embarrass himself with an erection in school.

He somehow made it through history, but he had no idea what his teacher had said about the Medici family and Renaissance Florence. As soon as class was over, he headed for his car. Even though they lived next door to each other, he and Patrick never actually carpoled to school. Patrick had weight training with the rest of the baseball team after school and Zack had a first period while Patrick didn’t. Zack hopped in the beat-up Ford Taurus he had

bought toward the end of summer with some of his savings and drove home, willing time to go faster and wishing that it was seven already.

When he got home, Zack thought about trying to pass the time by getting a head start on his homework, but quickly nixed the idea. He knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate. It still all seemed so surreal. One conversation was all he and Patrick had needed to completely change their relationship. Except, they weren't really all that different now. He and Patrick were still best friends. Now they were just... *more*.

It did bring up a lot of questions, though. Could Zack tell Patrick he loved him? Was it too soon? And were they just going to hide their relationship for the rest of the year? Or were they going to come out... as a couple? And, what—and this was the one that made Zack's heart stop and his blood run cold—what would happen if they broke up? He wasn't sure he would survive.

Zack jumped when he heard a knock and the front door subsequently opening.

“Hey. It's me,” Patrick called.

They had been letting themselves into each other's houses for years. Zack almost tripped over his feet as he half walked, half jogged from the kitchen to the front entryway.

“Hey.”

Patrick took a few steps forward and started to reach for Zack, but stopped himself. He peered down the hall and then in toward the kitchen. “Your mom gone?”

Zack smiled. “Yeah. We're alone.”

“Good.”

Patrick's grin was breathtaking. He wound his arms around Zack's waist and pulled him against his chest. Lacing his arms around Patrick's neck, he raised his chin in anticipation. His breath caught in his throat as Patrick's lips met his. It was like a jolt of electricity and he couldn't imagine it would ever be anything less than pulse-quickenning when they kissed.

“Let’s go downstairs.” Patrick kissed his cheek, then his temple, before turning and steering Zack in the direction of the stairs.

When they got down to the family room, Zack looked around at the familiar surroundings and thought about all the nights he and Patrick had spent in this very room, but this time everything was different.

“Are you spending the night?” His voice came out sounding a little breathless as his brain processed the possible implications.

“Is that okay?” Patrick looked almost a little shy.

“Yes.” Zack swallowed. “I want you to.”

Patrick moved forward and pulled Zack close, resting their foreheads together. “Can we go to your room?”

Zack nodded, not trusting his voice. He led the way across the family room. Once they were both inside his bedroom, he shut the door for good measure. As soon as the door clicked shut, Patrick whipped him around and moved in so their lips met. Zack groaned as he opened up to Patrick’s questing tongue.

It was a small room, so it only took a few stumbling steps for them to reach the side of the bed. Zack felt Patrick’s hands slide up under his shirt and trail up and down his bare back.

“Is this okay?” Patrick tore his lips away from Zack’s. “I mean, are we going too fast? I just... god, now that I know you feel the same way and that it’s okay to touch you, it’s all I can think about.” Patrick pulled him closer and he could feel Patrick’s erection pressing against his own through their jeans. “Jesus, Zack, you feel so good. I want you so much.”

Zack had always considered himself so lucky that Patrick was his friend and that he wanted to spend all his time with him. But now, Patrick also *desired* him. He wondered if it was possible to burst from happiness.

“I want you too. Keep going.” He raised his hands above his head so Patrick could pull his shirt off. If it had been anyone else, he would have wanted to go slower. But not with Patrick. They didn’t need to spend time getting to know each other to be comfortable. He had finally figured out

seventeen years' worth of feelings, and now it was like a volcano of need and lust and want had erupted and all he wanted to do was act on them.

“You're so gorgeous.” Patrick stripped off his own shirt and then Zack found himself wrapped up in another all-consuming kiss. They ground against each other and the feel of their bare chests pressed against each other was almost too much for Zack. “Zack... take off your jeans? I wanna see you.” Zack moaned and tightened his grip on Patrick's shoulder as his words reached his ear. He nodded against Patrick's neck, and then forced himself to take a step back. With trembling fingers, he reached for the waistband of his jeans, undid the top button, and pulled down the zipper. Patrick matched his movements. Their eyes locked as they both pushed their jeans over their hips, down their legs and then stepped out of them.

“Will you lay down?”

His erection straining against his boxers, Zack did as he was asked and stretched out on the bed. He watched, heart pounding in his chest, as Patrick hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his own boxers and pushed them down and off his legs. Zack couldn't help but stare at Patrick's groin. The only other aroused dick he had ever seen was his own. Patrick's cock was about the same length as his, but maybe a little thicker. It curved up toward his stomach and there was already a drop of pre-cum glistening at the tip. Zack licked his lips, unable to look away.

Zack vaguely heard Patrick chuckle as he knelt beside Zack on the bed. “I've shown you mine. Now it's time for you to show me yours.”

Zack gave off a breathless laugh as Patrick reached forward to grasp the waistband of Zack's boxers. Their eyes met and Zack nodded in answer to the unvoiced question in Patrick's heated yet questioning stare. Closing his eyes, Zack took a shuddering breath as he felt his boxers being peeled down his legs. When he opened them again, Patrick was leaning over him and Zack could see the desire written all over his handsome face.

This was happening. He was naked with his best friend.

Patrick bent down and placed a kiss on his chest, then his neck, and finally on Zack's lips. Patrick grinned down at him and then trailed his hand over

Zack's smooth stomach and over his hip. Patrick's gaze followed his hand as it traveled toward Zack's cock. "Can I?"

"Y-yeah."

When Patrick's fingers closed around him and began gently stroking, Zack's hips actually came off the bed. Patrick maneuvered so he could stretch out beside him, his hand still languidly running up and down Zack's length.

"You're really beautiful." He murmured against Zack's lips and then claimed them with his own.

"Pat..." Zack wound his arms around Patrick's shoulders and pulled Patrick so he was on top of him. Patrick released his erection and Zack instinctively spread his legs, making room for Patrick between them and so their hips and groins would line up perfectly.

They both gasped. When they had been together by the pond, it had been magical, but this was intensified a hundredfold by the skin-to-skin contact. Their mouths came together as their hands wandered over each other's bodies, exploring and discovering. Zack's hips bucked up to meet Patrick's thrusts and Zack was sure he had never felt anything so good in his life.

Just as Zack was wondering how much longer he was going to be able to hold out, Patrick propped up on an elbow and reached a hand down between them. He grasped both their erections and began stroking them off together.

Zack was beyond being able to kiss. He buried his face in Patrick's neck, which served to muffle some of his incessant moans that he seemed completely unable to stop. Patrick's breath was ragged against his ear, and his hips began to jerk harder against his own. Zack gripped tighter at Patrick's back, holding on for dear life as the pleasure became too much.

"Pat!" It was all the warning he had time to give before he came apart at the seams.

Patrick thrust forward once more, groaning into Zack's shoulder, and Zack felt the slickness of Patrick's release mixing with his own.

After several shuddering breaths, Patrick lifted his head. He wore a dazed, almost goofy expression that only made Zack love him more.

“Holy shit.” Patrick leaned down placed a shaky kiss on Zack’s lips.

Zack made a noise that sort of resembled a hysterical giggle. “You can say that again.”

Patrick reached for a few tissues from the box on the nightstand and did what he could to wipe up. When he had finished, he slid back down beside Zack, who still hadn’t quite found the energy to move yet, and pulled him close. Zack rolled on his side so they were facing each other. He traced a finger down Patrick’s cheek, and gently pressed his lips to his.

Patrick sighed and just pulled him closer so Zack’s head was tucked up under his chin. “Wow. I still can’t believe... that this is happening... that we...”

Zack pressed his lips against the base of Patrick’s throat. “I know. Me too.” He hummed contentedly and closed his eyes. They had a lot of things they needed to talk about and figure out, but for right now, all Zack wanted to do was bask in the afterglow.

After a few minutes, Patrick’s voice punctuated the silence.

“Zack?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you, you know.” Zack froze then slowly pushed himself back so he could look into Patrick’s eyes, not quite believing what he was hearing. “It’s true. I mean, maybe it’s too soon to say that because we just got together, but I figure we’ve been best friends for seventeen years, so in some ways it’s long overdue, and...” Patrick licked his lips, seeming to realize he was rambling. “I just... I love you. And I wanted you to know.”

Zack could feel his eye prickling as he sucked in a breath. He was pretty sure his heart was about to beat right out of his chest. He pressed his lips hard against Patrick’s and then buried his face in his neck, trying to regain some composure.

“How long? I mean, how long have you known? And, actually,” Zack rolled onto his back, a thought coming to him, “how long have you known you were gay?”

Patrick propped himself up on his elbow so he could look down at Zack. He chewed on his bottom lip, thinking. “I think I realized both things at about the same time, really. Remember when I was going out with Sara last year?” Zack nodded. “Well, I told you it didn’t feel right, and I realized when I spent time with her, I really just wanted to be spending that time with you. I think the real tell for me though was when she wanted to, um,” Patrick looked everywhere but at Zack, “y’know, do stuff... I um, I couldn’t really get *excited* about it, if you get what I mean, unless...”

“Unless what?” Zack couldn’t hold back a smile. Patrick was so cute when he was flustered.

“Unless I thought of you.”

Zack’s eyes flashed wide. The longer he stared at Patrick, the more Patrick blushed.

“I kind of had to ask myself some serious questions after that. So,” Patrick shrugged one shoulder, “I kind of figured out I was gay and that I was attracted to you at the same time. But I didn’t realize I loved you until a bit later.”

“When was that?” Zack shifted to his side and Patrick immediately put this arm around him, his fingers tracing up and down Zack’s spine.

“You remember last spring? When we took that practice SAT?”

“Yeah.”

“You got, like, an almost perfect score. And everyone was telling you that you could get into any college you wanted to. Teachers were thrusting Harvard brochures at you.”

“I told you, I never wanted to go to any of those places. I couldn’t afford to, anyways.”

“I know, but that’s not the point. I remember thinking that after senior year you were going to go off to some fancy school far away and I would be lucky to get into the U of M, and we’d never see each other. I was so happy for you. But when I got home after school I started to really freak out because the thought of being away from you was so physically painful. That’s when I had

to admit to myself that I didn't just have a crush on you. I was in love with you."

"I'm not leaving you." Zack swallowed hard, trying to get himself under control. "I never wanted to leave the state to go to school, even if I *could* afford out of state tuition. I always wanted to go to the U of M with you. I wish I would have known sooner. Maybe I could have stopped you from hurting."

Patrick pulled him close and rested their foreheads together. "You can't think like that. I think we both needed to just get here in our own time." Patrick kissed the tip of his nose. "It's funny. I may have only realized what all these feelings meant last spring, but I'm pretty sure I've loved you my whole life. Does that make sense?"

Zack pressed his lips against Patrick's and nodded. "Yeah. It does."

Zack snuggled into Patrick's arms, mind reeling from all that he'd heard, and feeling like he was so content and happy there was probably a law against it, when he realized he had forgotten one very important thing.

"Pat?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you too."

They made love twice more that evening. They took turns stroking each other to climax and then they just rocked together, erections trapped together between their bodies, kissing and touching and letting the pleasure slowly build until neither could stand it any longer.

When the need for food and water finally became too pressing to ignore, they pulled on clothes, ordered a pizza, rehydrated, and curled up on the plaid sofa together while they waited for it to arrive.

Part of Zack just wanted to continue floating along in the happy bubble they were currently in—basking in their new feelings and reveling in the new pieces they had added to their relationship. He didn't want to face the real

world, but he had always been practical, and Zack knew the real world would catch up to them, whether they wanted it to or not.

“Are we going to tell people about us? Or, are we gonna keep it a secret?” He lifted his head from where it rested on Patrick’s chest so he could look him in the eye.

“Honestly? I’m not sure what we should do.”

“You’re worried about what people will say.” It wasn’t a question.

Patrick blew out a breath of air. “Yeah. I mean, it was already something I worried about when I figured out I was gay, but Scott just really confirmed it for me. People around here are very closed-minded.”

“What do you think your parents would say?”

“Oh, Jesus.” Patrick ran his hands over his face. “I can only imagine. I’m an only child and my mom’s already talking about how much she wants grandkids one day. I’m pretty sure she cried when I broke up with Sara last year.” Zack liked Mrs. Martin well enough, but she was a staunch traditionalist and saying she smothered Patrick would be an understatement. “And, my dad...”

Zack frowned when Patrick looked away, his jaw muscle flexing.

“What about your dad?” he asked gently.

“Right after I had basically put the pieces together and figured out I was gay, my dad and I were watching a Twins game. It was one of the first games of the season, and the Twins weren’t doing so hot.” Zack watched, his heart aching, as tears filled Patrick’s eyes. “He said ‘I can’t believe the entire team is swinging their bats like a bunch of fags. Why can’t they just man up and hit the ball?’”

“Oh, Pat.” Zack offered the only comfort he knew how to and pulled Patrick into a hug. He kissed the corner of his eye, his cheek and down his jaw. “I’m so sorry. I wish I had known. I wish you hadn’t had to go through that by yourself.”

“It’s not your fault.” Patrick held him tight. “But I just knew right then and there, I couldn’t tell them. My mom would basically go catatonic and my dad would never be okay with it. He would never look at me the same way again.”

“Okay. So, we keep it a secret. We just get through this year and then we can figure things out when we get to college. Okay?” Zack stroked Patrick’s face and wiped away the remaining tears.

Patrick took Zack’s hands and held them in his. “You know I don’t want to hide forever. You know it’s not because I’m ashamed you’re my boyfriend. You know that right? I’m so proud of you.”

Zack leaned in and placed a kiss on Patrick’s lips. He knew Patrick would never do that, but it was nice to hear just the same.

“I know. And look, I have no idea how my mom would take it anyway.” Zack shrugged. “She’s not exactly forthcoming about her thoughts and feelings.” That was the understatement of the century. “Most of the time I don’t know what she thinks about anything. Things’ll be easier at college. People in Minneapolis are more open-minded than they are here and the city is at least a little more diverse.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Patrick pulled him in for a kiss. When Zack opened his eyes, Patrick’s smile had turned into a mischievous grin. “But there’s still one more problem.”

“What’s that?”

“How am I supposed to keep my hands off you at school?” Patrick slid his hands down Zack’s back and squeezed his ass.

Zack let out an undignified squeal, and they both erupted in giggles. “I guess you’ll just have to store up now when you can.” Zack smirked and then proceeded to attack his best-friend-who-happened-to-be-his-boyfriend’s lips with his own.

CHAPTER FOUR

Early November

It was so much harder than they thought it would be. Now that they were honest with each other about their feelings, now that they had admitted they loved each other, hiding it from the world took constant effort. Zack found himself second-guessing everything he said and did around Patrick at school and he knew Patrick felt the same. It was exhausting expending the energy necessary to *not* act like a couple. Zack was on edge all the time when they were around other people, and every day at school began to feel like torture. He wanted to be able to show Patrick affection. Even something as simple as holding hands. But they couldn't.

Sometimes he wondered if it would almost be easier to just tell the truth and let the chips fall where they may. But then he remembered Scott's reaction at Bob's Burgers and Patrick's story about his dad. Hiding certainly wasn't ideal, but at least they would be able to get through to graduation without everyone hating them.

So, every day they went to school and acted their asses off and pretended they were nothing but friends. And whenever his mom's work schedule permitted, they were in Zack's basement loving each other where no one could see. Some days they barely made it down the stairs and into Zack's room before they were ripping each other's clothing off, desperate to be skin-to-skin, and kissing like each other's lips were more important than oxygen. They'd curl up on the sofa together to do their homework or sometimes they'd just lie down together on Zack's bed, holding each other, talking and making plans for the future.

The problem was the longer they were together as a couple the more difficult it became to separate the time they spent alone and the time they spent in public. They began to slip up. Zack would catch himself staring at Patrick too long when he talked. Patrick would let their knees rest against each other under the lunch table. When they stood at their lockers, they stood much too close together. They should have known it was a recipe for disaster.

“You know Rachel?” Brad waggled his eyebrows and took another bite of his slice of pizza. “Heard she was talking to the other cheerleaders and apparently she has a thing for you, Patrick.”

Zack and Patrick sat next to each other at the crowded lunch table, taking the opportunity to scoot their chairs as close as possible. They sat with their backs to the wall, and Brad, Joel and Scott sat across from them. Several other members of the baseball team were at the table as well, but engaged in their own conversations. The thought of Rachel making a play for Patrick sent a wave of unfounded jealousy coursing through Zack. He knew it was silly, but he hated everyone thinking that Patrick was available. He wasn't. He was in a relationship. With him. But no one could know that. Zack just bent his head down and forced himself to eat his sandwich.

“Dude, she's hot,” Joel chimed in. “You gonna go for it?”

Patrick studied the potato chip in his hand before popping it into his mouth. He chewed slowly, and gave a half-hearted shrug. “I dunno.”

“What's wrong with you? Why the hell not?” Scott piped up. “You'd have to be a fag or something not to want to tap that.”

Zack had been taking a sip of his Snapple, but Scott's comment almost caused him to regurgitate his iced tea.

“Don't say that.” The words were out of Zack's mouth before he could think.

“You've had nothing to say for the past twenty minutes, but *now* you have an opinion?” Scott looked at him like he was a bug. A bug he'd like to squash.

What Zack really wanted to do was sink beneath the table, but his mouth had different ideas. “I just think it's a pretty ugly word. And Patrick deserves way more respect than that.”

“Dude, you're like some nerdy, Mr. No-personality. The only reason we hang out with you is because of Patrick.” Zack could almost feel himself being incinerated under Scott's glare. Now that his brain had caught up with the proceedings he remembered why he hated confrontation. Why couldn't he just

have kept his mouth shut? This was not how he and Patrick were going to fly under the radar for the next seven months.

“Okay, let’s all just chill.” Brad gave Scott a wary look.

“I agree. Back off, Scott,” Joel said.

“Whatever.” Scott stood up to leave. “Maybe Patrick doesn’t want to date Rachel because he already has a *boyfriend*.” He looked between Patrick and Zack and sneered.

Zack felt his face heat and the cafeteria began to spin. He tried to take a calming breath and glanced over at Patrick, who had been silent through the entire altercation. Patrick’s head was bent down, but Zack could see his jaw muscles flex. He was pissed.

When Patrick stood up, it was with enough force to topple over the plastic chair. In two steps he had invaded Scott’s personal space, and Scott was actually forced to step back just so he wasn’t staring into Patrick’s nose hairs.

“I suggest you listen to me, Scott, because I’m only going to say this once. Zack is my best friend, and if you ever throw an insult in his direction again, you’ll have me to answer to.” Patrick didn’t raise his voice, but the mask of rage on his face left no room for doubt that he was not messing around. “That *nerdy* guy is so smart he’ll be ruling the world one day while you’re pumping gas.” Brad and Joel both snickered at that. “Not only does he have the balls to stick up for his friends, he’s also about a hundred times the man you will ever be. Fuck off, Scott.”

Scott looked like he might have wanted to say something, but thought better of it and instead turned and walked away. Zack thought that was probably the smartest decision Scott had made in a long time.

When Patrick sat back down, he still looked enraged, and Zack saw the red that had crept up his neck.

“Zack, you know we don’t think that about you, right?” Joel looked to Brad who nodded his head in confirmation. “Scott’s pretty much an asshole most of the time. Don’t listen to him.”

Zack managed to find his voice. “Thanks, guys.”

Several of the other nearby lunch tables had gone silent to observe the mini-fight between Patrick and Scott, but now that it was over, they had gone back to their own conversations and Zack was thrilled not to have so many pairs of eyes directed at them. Just as he was beginning to breathe easy again, he felt Patrick's fingers find his under the table and grip tightly. He squeezed back. They both needed the comfort, and no one was between them and the wall to see. But Zack hated that his first instinct had been to pull away.

“What the fuck?”

Scott's voice froze the blood in Zack's veins. Scott must have doubled back behind them. He dropped Patrick's hand like he had been scalded.

“Were you two just holding hands? Hey, everyone!” Scott's voice carried over the entire cafeteria. “I just caught Patrick and Zack holding hands! They're fags together!” The lunchroom went deadly quiet, and then everyone started talking at once. All eyes were on them. Zack couldn't pull enough oxygen into his lungs and he thought he might pass out.

“So, I was actually right. You two disgusting freaks are fucking homo boyfriends together.” Scott looked so satisfied and smug. Bile rose up in Zack's throat.

“A-Are you...? Is he serious?” Brad stared wide-eyed first at Zack, then Patrick and then Scott. Joel just looked stunned.

The bell rang and people started to stand up and throw away their trash, but instead of heading off to their next class, many stayed to stare and point.

“I'm gonna be sick.” Zack heard himself mumble more to himself than anyone else. Patrick was still sitting next to him, looking like he was still processing what had just happened. He started to say something, but Zack couldn't wait. He had to get out of there. Now.

He sprinted from the cafeteria. After losing his lunch in the first bathroom he came to, he went straight to his locker. Ignoring the titters, sickened expressions and whispers behind his back, he grabbed his coat and left the building as quickly as he could. It was the first time in his life he had ever cut class.

He drove home in a daze. When he got home, he went straight to the kitchen and leaned over the sink, thinking he might be sick again. He tried to take deep, calming breaths, but it just increased his nausea. So much for best-laid plans. He and Patrick had been outed by the absolute worst person imaginable. It had been as horrific as some of the worst-case scenarios Zack had outlined in his head. It had been so public. It had been so hurtful. There had been looks of disgust and contempt. Being gay at their school was most definitely not okay. Zack gripped the edge of the sink tighter as the room began to spin.

“Zack!” Patrick burst through the front door looking disheveled, distraught, and panicked. “Are you okay? You ran off and I didn’t know where you had gone.”

“I couldn’t...” Zack choked back his tears. “I had to get out of there. It was my worst nightmare come to life. Everyone staring at me and everyone hating me.”

Patrick’s arms were around him in an instant and Zack clung to Patrick for all he was worth.

“I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault. I didn’t think anyone could see. I shouldn’t have grabbed your hand.”

Zack laughed bitterly. “It’s not your fault. We *should* be able to hold hands.”

“I know. It’s all kinds of messed up. But it’s what we were afraid of and what we were trying to avoid.”

Zack buried his face further into Patrick’s shoulder. How were they going to get through the year now? The thought was daunting. Paralyzing. How was he supposed to go back to school and continue to live his life?

“W-what are we going to do now?”

Patrick stepped back and cradled Zack’s face in his hands. Patrick’s eyes were red too. “First, I’m going to kiss you. And then I’m going to hold you some more. And then we’re going to talk about it. It can’t get any worse, right?”

Zack almost managed a smile. When Patrick's lips met his, it was like a soothing balm. He was still overwhelmed and terrified, but kissing Patrick made him feel like he could maybe, possibly, go on, as long as his best friend was at his side.

"I love you, Zack. So much. It's going to be okay."

"I love you too." Zack let the words wash over his soul as he leaned in for more kisses.

"*What* is going on here?"

Zack and Patrick froze in each other's arms. When Zack took a step back and turned around to face his mother and saw the expression on her face, he knew this day had entered a new hell dimension. He couldn't breathe.

Laura Larson was still in her scrubs from the hospital and her straight brown hair was pulled back severely into a ponytail at the nape of her neck. Her expression was an equal mixture of anger and pure disgust.

"M-Mrs. Larson, we can explain—"

She held up her hand to stop Patrick. "I can see just fine. I saw exactly what was going on." She shifted her gaze to Zack. "*What* were you thinking? How could you allow him to...?" She made a revolted face.

"Mom, please calm down and listen—"

"Calm down? *Calm* down?" She threw her purse down onto the kitchen counter. "I come home after a twelve hour shift and find my son skipping school so he can be touched and kissed by another boy and you want me to *calm down*?" She spit out the words as if they left the foulest taste imaginable in her mouth.

Zack slowly felt his insides begin to crumple and die. He wasn't exactly sure when he had started to cry. "Mom, please. Patrick isn't just any boy. He's my best friend. And, well actually, he's my boyfri—"

"Don't you dare even say it!" She scrubbed at her face with her hands. "I don't know how long this has been going on for. But it is going to stop. Right now. Patrick, get out of my house. Now. You are no longer welcome here."

“Mom!” The panic and bile were rising faster than Zack could swallow it down.

“Enough, Zack! You are confused and have somehow been enticed by him.” She waved her hand haphazardly in Patrick’s direction. “You are absolutely not...” She scrunched up her face.

Gay. His mother couldn’t even say the word.

“Please. Please can we just talk about this? This isn’t Patrick’s fault.” He was begging and he didn’t care. Patrick looked shell-shocked and unsure whether it would help or make matter’s worse if he spoke up.

“Stop!” Her hand slammed down on the counter, and Zack knew he wasn’t going to get anywhere. “Patrick, leave. Zack, go to your room. I’m going to call the Martins and we are all going to talk about this tonight.”

Patrick’s face was pained and questioning, but Zack nodded at him to go. He wanted to just grab his hand, make a break for it, and run away from this nightmare. But there was nowhere to go. They were still kids. They were powerless.

With one last look back, Patrick left the house. Zack’s mom was leaning against the counter with her head down, her hands gripping the edge so tightly her knuckles were white.

“Mom?” His voice was small and pathetic.

“Just... go to your room. I can’t even look at you right now.”

Zack felt himself go numb. His body moved on autopilot and he walked downstairs, through the family room and finally shut the door to his bedroom. He crawled onto his bed and curled up on his side facing the wall, his arms hugging his body tightly. He couldn’t figure out why he was shivering. He wasn’t cold. He stared at the white wall, black spots dancing in front of his eyes. At some point, the wall began to swim in front of him and he felt wetness running down the side of his face.

He didn’t know what was going to happen when he went over to the Martins’ with his mom. He didn’t know how he was going to survive at school. One day was all it had taken for his life to go from heaven to hell. The

only thing he did know was that he would give anything, anything in the world, to feel Patrick's arms around him.

When his mom called down the stairs telling him it was time to go over to the Martins', Zack realized it had been about five hours since he had moved. His muscles were stiff as he stretched and stood. After taking a deep breath, he walked upstairs to learn his fate.

His mother still wouldn't look at him as they left the house and walked next door, and Zack wondered vaguely if he had had some sort of emotional breakdown, because he felt absolutely nothing. He was putting one foot in front of the other. He was aware that his mother was planning on telling Mr. and Mrs. Martin what she witnessed and that it would not mean good things for him and Patrick, but his brain felt blank. It was like he was floating alongside his body watching it all happen.

"Hello, Laura. Hi, Zack. Come on in." Beverley Martin stepped back from the door and allowed them to enter. She was wearing khaki slacks and a pale pink sweater set. Zack often thought that if he looked inside Mrs. Martin's closet all he would find would be rows and rows of khaki slacks and sweater sets in various colors. "Is everything all right? Laura, you were pretty cryptic on the phone and Patrick has been up in his room all afternoon. He said he came home early from school because he wasn't feeling well."

"No. Everything is not all right. Is Peter here? And you'll probably want to call Patrick down."

"Oh, dear." Mrs. Martin frowned and tilted her head to the side. "Zack, did the two of you have a disagreement of some sort?"

For some reason that made Zack want to laugh. Or cry. But he was pretty sure he couldn't get his voice working to do either, so he just managed something resembling a shrug.

Mrs. Martin's frown increased further. "Peter, honey? Laura and Zack are here," she called up the stairs. "Can you please bring Patrick down with you when you come?"

Mrs. Martin ushered them into the living room to sit. Zack sat next to his mother on one sofa and Mrs. Martin took a spot on the other. Silence permeated the room, and Mrs. Martin fidgeted with the buttons on her sweater as she waited for her husband and son to join them.

Zack's heart skipped a beat when Patrick walked in the room followed by his father. When they locked eyes, Zack could tell Patrick had been crying. He looked a wreck and it was all Zack could do not to rush forward and comfort him.

"Laura. Zack." Mr. Martin nodded at each of them as he sat down. "What's all this about?"

Zack's mom leaned forward, rubbing her hands together. "I'm not quite sure how to say this. So, I'm just going to say it, and please pardon the blunt delivery. I came home today from my shift at the hospital to find your son and mine..." she closed her eyes and looked like she had bitten into a lemon, "...kissing in my kitchen."

There was a long, digestive pause.

"That... that absolutely can't be true. There has to be some mistake!" Mrs. Martin turned to Patrick who was sitting between his parents on the couch. "There's been some sort of misunderstanding, hasn't there sweetie?"

Patrick had dropped his head to his hands, so it was impossible to read his expression.

"Answer your mother, Patrick. You explain yourself right now!" Mr. Martin's face had gone hard.

Patrick slowly lifted his head and turned first to his mother, then his father, and then looked directly at Zack. He looked absolutely defeated and Zack ached for him. "There's nothing to explain. We were kissing."

Mrs. Martin let out something resembling a wail and began to cry. "But, why? How could you do this?"

"No son of mine is going to be a fag!" Mr. Martin roared. "This nonsense is going to stop right now!"

“Laura, how could you have let this happen? I knew I shouldn’t have let my Patrick spend so much time over at your house. You’re never home!” Mrs. Martin’s voice was shrill.

“Oh, don’t you dare try to blame this on me, Beverley!” Zack’s mom rose to her feet. “Some of us have to work! I don’t have the luxury of staying home like you do! And how do you know it wasn’t Patrick that was pressuring Zack to do disgusting things together?”

“How dare you!” Mr. Martin’s voice thundered as he stood up. “My boy plays varsity baseball. He’s had girlfriends. It’s obvious Zack’s the queer one. No father figure to speak of. A mother who’s gone all the time. No wonder he turned out the way he did. And he’s sucked our boy into his disgusting ways!”

“He’s not disgusting, Dad.” Patrick slowly got to his feet and faced his father. “There’s nothing wrong with Zack. And, there’s nothing wrong with me. He’s my boyfriend.”

Mr. Martin’s face, which was already red, turned several shades darker. “Don’t you *ever* say anything like that again!”

Mrs. Martin just cried harder.

“It’s not like we’re super religious or anything, so why is it so terrible if I’m gay?” Zack heard the waver in Patrick’s voice and he could see his hands shaking from where he was sitting. After the story Patrick had told him, and listening to the things that had come out of Mr. Martin’s mouth, he couldn’t imagine the amount of strength it took for Patrick to stand up to his father the way that he was. It made Zack love him even more.

“Because, I don’t need someone named Leviticus to tell me two boys kissing and touching each other is unnatural, abnormal, and absolutely wrong! A man is supposed to be with a woman. That’s it.”

Patrick slumped back down onto the couch like his legs had just collapsed out from under him. Their parents went back to screaming at each other, throwing barbs, and placing blame. Zack tuned them out. He and Patrick just looked at each other from across the room. Zack felt lost and completely

helpless. Why was everyone okay with them being best friends their entire life, but not okay with them being in love?

“Okay, enough!” Mr. Martin held up his hands. “This is what is going to happen. The two of you”—he pointed first to Patrick and then to Zack—“are not going to spend any more time together.” Zack was sure his heart stopped beating. “Zack is not allowed over here any more, and you, Patrick, are absolutely forbidden from spending any time over at the Larsons’. I’m going to call the school to make sure you boys are kept away from each other. You two are not to associate with each other ever again.”

“Dad, no—”

“No! You listen to me! You boys are not to be friends any longer. I mean it. You are *not* gay Patrick, and somehow the two of you have gotten it through your heads that it’s okay to...” He held up his hands and shook his head. “I absolutely forbid it. If you want us to pay for college, you will do as you’re told.”

Patrick looked mutinous, but Zack understood what was at stake. Zack’s grandmother had left him money for college and he would qualify for some financial aid. Patrick wouldn’t. If his parents didn’t foot the bill, he wouldn’t be going to college. He might get a partial athletic scholarship, but it wasn’t guaranteed.

“Dad, he’s my best friend, you can’t—”

“It’s fine.” Zack’s voice was quiet, but since it was the first time he had spoken since arriving, they all stopped to listen. “We won’t be friends any more.”

“Zack?” Patrick looked stricken.

“It’s done. We’re done.” He willed Patrick to understand. They couldn’t win this battle. They just couldn’t. And he couldn’t live with himself if it cost Patrick going to college.

When they got back home, it was clear his mother was going to be giving him the silent treatment for the foreseeable future. He went down to his room and let the full force of what had transpired that day hit him. He would be

ostracized at school, his mother couldn't even look at him, and he no longer had the one person in his life who could make him feel better because he and Patrick could no longer be friends. It felt like a ton of rocks were weighing down his chest. It was hard to breathe and this time when he cried it wasn't the silent tears he had shed earlier that day. These sobs racked his entire body and made his very bones ache. Without Patrick, he wasn't quite sure how to go on living.

CHAPTER FIVE

Zack didn't know what horrors awaited him when he parked his car in the school lot the next morning. He had tried to prepare himself the best he could and tell himself all he had to do was just survive the day. He'd worry about tomorrow later.

He kept his head down as they walked briskly through the hallway toward his locker. There may have been whispered conversations where he thought he heard his name. One guy Zack vaguely recognized from the hockey team asked, "Hey, is it true you're a queer?" as he walked passed. But that seemed to be the worst of it. He hadn't been beaten up and the words "fag" or "queer" hadn't been spray-painted on his locker. He breathed a very small sigh of relief as he shoved his backpack in his locker and grabbed his books for first period. Sure, Scott had announced to the entire cafeteria that he and Patrick were gay, but there wasn't any proof. It wasn't like the entire school had caught them making out or something. It was Scott's word against Patrick and Zack's. Scott was the only one who had seen them holding hands. He started to feel a little bit better and wished that he and Patrick could talk about how they wanted to handle things. Then he quickly remembered that they couldn't be seen talking to each other and he felt miserable all over again. He had no doubt that Mr. Martin would make good on his promise and talk to the school about keeping them apart.

His morning classes dragged by, but Zack got through them with only having to endure a few more comments thrown his way. He did his best just to ignore them, but each one sliced into him.

The worst part of the day was lunch. The cafeteria suddenly became a landmine. He stared at all the tables filled with groups of friends and cliques. He had no idea where to sit and it was terrifying. Before he hadn't even thought about it. He always sat with Patrick. But now he didn't belong anywhere. Escaping to the bathroom or finding some place he could hide during lunch was very appealing, but then Zack remembered this was just the first lunch of the rest of the school year. At some point, he would need to eat.

He skirted along the wall, keeping his head down, until he reached a table that was only sparsely populated with members of the theater clique. Sitting down at the very end of the table, he felt his face flame as he focused on unpacking his lunch. He dared one glance sideways and caught the cocked eyebrows and dubious stares from the junior thespians before they went back to discussing the winter play.

Trying to calm his jangled nerves and the twisting in his gut that just wouldn't go away, Zack twisted off the top of his Snapple and dared one more glance up. His eyes locked on his former lunch table. The seating arrangement was a bit different than normal. Scott and a few of his cronies sat at one end, there were a few empty seats in the middle, and then Brad, Joel and most of the rest of the baseball team sat at the other end. They were laughing and joking like today was just like any other day. His absence seemed to go unnoticed, but then his eyes landed on Patrick. It made him feel a little better that Patrick still had most of his friends by his side. Clearly most of the team had chosen him over Scott. But he wasn't smiling or joking around with the others. He was pushing food around on his lunch tray looking totally depressed. For the thousandth time, Zack wished there was some way they could be alone so they could talk. At that very moment, Patrick lifted his head and their eyes met across the room. Even from a distance, Zack could see the pain, but also the guilt, written across Patrick's face. Zack felt his eyes begin to prickle and he quickly looked down again. He couldn't lose it at school. Looking at Patrick and knowing the person he loved was so close, yet so far away, was the worst form of torture.

Zack attended the rest of his classes, but he wasn't really present for them. When the final bell of the day rang, all he wanted to do was get home as fast as he could so he could scream and cry into his pillow about the great injustices of the world. He flung open his locker, grabbed his backpack, but froze as he reached for his books. On the top shelf sat a cell phone. Zack didn't own a cell phone and there was only one other person who knew the combination to his locker. He dropped his backpack to the ground, and with trembling fingers, reached for the phone. The small screen told Zack he had one text message

waiting for him. His hand shook as he flipped open the phone and called up the message. It was from Patrick and it said exactly one word: POND.

When he pulled to a stop in his driveway, Zack flung himself out of the car, leaving his backpack in the backseat, and ran around the back of his house to the edge of the woods and the trail he and Patrick had worn over the years through the underbrush. He almost fell more than once in his haste to make it down the slope to the pond.

Patrick was already there and turned to face him when he broke into the clearing. His face was a mask of hurt and it broke Zack's heart.

“Pat—”

“Did you mean it?”

Zack was taken aback. “Did I mean what?”

“That we weren't friends anymore. After everything... how could you?” Patrick choked out the words. “My dad makes one threat, and what? You're just done? I thought you loved me.”

“No!” Zack rushed forward and pulled him close, resting their foreheads together. “I do love you. And of course you're still my best friend. You always will be. But he was threatening not to pay for college. I couldn't let you lose that. I only said it to protect you.”

Patrick slumped against him and for several moments they just clung to each other. “You didn't sit with us today at lunch,” Patrick mumbled into his neck.

“How could I? For all I know your dad has spies at the school making sure we don't interact. And I had no idea how everyone was going to react after Scott's announcement yesterday.”

“I'm so sorry, Zack. I told people that Scott was just a fucking asshole, and I think most people believed me, though some of Scott's closest friends are siding with him. I don't think I squashed all the rumors, though.”

“Yeah.” Zack gave a bitter laugh. “I got asked quite a few times today if I was a big queer.”

“Shit. I’m so sorry. This isn’t fair. Why do I get to keep most of my friends and you have to sit off by yourself? I didn’t know what to tell people when they asked where you were. I just said we had a fight.” Patrick dropped to the ground and ran his hands through his hair. “This just sucks so much. I don’t know what to do.”

Zack knelt beside him and rubbed soothing circles on his back. “It’s not your fault. The guys on the team are more your friends than mine anyway. Most of the guys like you more than Scott, so I’m not surprised they believed you over him. Telling people we got into a fight seems like as good an explanation as any.” Zack shrugged. He didn’t know what else to do. It was painful knowing that at school he wouldn’t have friends any longer, but he was almost feeling more resigned now than anything. In his head he already had a countdown to graduation going. “Thanks for the phone, by the way.” He tried to smile. “I was trying to figure out how the hell I was going to get a chance to talk to you.”

“I knew I had to do something. I was so scared after you and your mom left my house yesterday. I left for school early this morning so I had time to stop at the store first. It’s a pay-as-you-go phone, so there aren’t many minutes on it, but I figured it’s cheaper to text and it’ll at least be a way for us to communicate.”

Zack gently pulled Patrick’s face toward his. “Thank you.” When their lips met, Zack could almost block out the last twenty-four hours.

Patrick scooted back so he could lean against a large rock that sat in the middle of the small meadow and held out his hand. Zack moved forward and let out a surprised sound that was almost a squeak as he was pulled into Patrick’s lap. Patrick’s arms wound tightly around his waist as Zack straddled his hips.

“How were things with your mom after you got home?”

Zack shrugged and gnawed on his bottom lip. “She’s still not really talking to me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not like we were really close anyway. I was more worried about you. Your parents were so upset. Your dad...” He trailed off. He didn’t even begin to know how to express how sorry he was that Patrick’s dad had found out. Zack petted at Patrick’s face, trying to make some of the pain disappear.

“I knew he would react that way... I knew my mom wouldn’t do anything but cry. I wasn’t... I wasn’t expecting it to hurt so much. I didn’t want them to find out that way.”

“I know. I’m so sorry, Pat.” Zack held him close and he felt his shirt become damp as Patrick cried into his shoulder. Everything just sucked so much. And he had absolutely no idea how to make it better.

“Can we just stop saying we’re sorry? Because it’s not either of our faults.” Patrick wiped his eyes on the back of his coat sleeve. “People suck. And our parents... they suck too. I thought parents were supposed to love their kids no matter what, but it turns out they’re bigoted intolerant assholes just like the rest of the people we live around. We just, we need to figure out what we’re going to do. You’re the smart one. What’re we going to do, Zack?”

Zack wished he knew the answer. More than anything. “For now, I don’t think we can do anything but survive. Survive until graduation. That is...” He swallowed hard, his stomach twisting. “If you still want to do this. I mean, if you still want to try and be together.” He looked down and off to the left. Not daring to take a breath.

Patrick’s chilled fingers gripped his face and forced them to make eye contact. “Zack, I’ll always want you. Never forget that. I’ll love you forever. I promise.”

Zack sucked air into his lungs, the relief making him dizzy. Patrick’s words soothed his soul. “Me too.” He leaned forward to kiss him and then straightened his spine. “Okay, then. So, we just get through the days. Send in our applications to the U of M. And know that it will get better. For now, that’s all we can do.”

“And, we’ll text and meet here whenever we can, right?”

“Right. We’ll make it work. It’s gonna suck for a while. But eventually, everything will be okay.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” He didn’t know how, but it would be okay. It would have to be. Because he had promised Patrick.

Patrick beamed at him. “Can you stay for a little while?”

“Yeah. My mom’s working until five.”

“Kiss me until you have to go?”

The conditions were less than ideal. It was freezing. The ground was hard. There was the ever-present fear of being caught. But as their lips and tongues met again and again, and they breathed each other in like it was the sweetest oxygen in all the world, Zack knew that everything they had endured and the hard months he knew lay ahead were worth it because Patrick was worth everything.

CHAPTER SIX

Mid-December

Saying things sucked was an understatement. Every day at school dragged by and every weekend Zack was lonely. He knew Patrick wasn't faring much better. Sure, he still had friends to hang out with, but Zack knew how guilty Patrick felt about that. Both Brad and Joel had tried to talk to Zack several times since the day everything went to hell, but Zack had basically all but blown them off. He appreciated the gesture, but he didn't know what to say to them, and he certainly didn't want to be put in a situation where he accidentally gave something away. It was just easier not to have to answer questions about why he and Patrick didn't hang out anymore.

He and Patrick usually managed to exchange at least a few texts each day, usually at night right before bed. Zack didn't want to risk his mom finding him with a cell phone and asking where it came from. And a day or two each week, they managed to meet at the pond for at least a little while. But there was two feet of snow on the ground now and it was bitter cold. Trying to kiss and be close through layers of winter clothes wasn't much fun. They hadn't been able to be *together* together in so long. Zack ached for Patrick.

Scott had gone from being an impulsive guy who acted like an asshole on occasion to being a full-on bigoted bully from hell. Apparently, he had decided that Patrick was too big a fish to take on. It wasn't surprising that people didn't believe that Patrick was gay. He had denied it, and he was more popular than Scott. His words had more clout, not to mention that he was a varsity athlete who had been known to have a few girlfriends. Zack, on the other hand, was quiet, shy and bookish, who now didn't really have any friends. Without the protection of Patrick and some of the other members of the baseball team, Zack was ripe for the picking, and Scott took advantage.

"Hey, fag." Scott nudged Zack's shoulder hard enough that he sidestepped and bumped into the lockers as he went to gather his things at the end of the day. "Sucked anyone's cock today?"

Zack felt his face heat in embarrassment and shame. He hadn't even done that yet with Patrick. He looked around to see who else in the hallway had heard. Several people smirked as they walked past his locker. Others were too wrapped up in their own conversations and mini-dramas to notice the boy getting bullied. He took a deep, calming breath and did what he always did, ignored Scott. He knew Scott was nothing but an ignorant dick, but Zack still hadn't quite mastered how to not let the words bother him. Every time was like a punch to the gut. Sometimes he wished he could tell Patrick. Zack could use the comfort. But he didn't want Patrick to worry, or get involved, which is exactly what Patrick would do.

Scott's hand slammed against the lockers, inches from Zack's head. "Look, you little fucking queer, even if both you and Patrick deny it, I know what I saw that day." Scott had lowered his voice so only Zack could hear. "I know you were both fucking homos together. Hell, maybe you still are in secret and this whole big fight you two got in is just some big sham. Whatever. You two are fucking disgusting and are gonna rot in hell." With that, Scott pushed away from the lockers, shoved his hands in his pockets, and sauntered down the hall.

Even though he had just about stopped shaking by the time he approached his car in the parking lot, he jumped when he heard his name called.

"Zack! Wait up!" He turned to find both Brad and Joel jogging in his direction. "We caught the tail end of what we assumed was Scott being an asshole." Brad came to a stop followed closely by Joel. "You okay?"

"Y-yeah. Thanks."

"Would you please tell us what is up with you and Patrick?" Joel stepped forward and shoved his bare hands inside his jacket pockets. "It's been over a month, and every time we try to bring it up with him, he basically jumps down our throats."

Zack open and shut his mouth. "I... can't."

"Dude, you and Patrick were, like, inseparable. And now, you don't even talk. And you totally stopped talking to us too. I mean, I'm really sorry if something happened between you and Patrick, but I thought we were your friends too." Zack was astonished when Brad actually looked hurt.

“I’m sorry. I never meant...” Words stuck in his throat. He didn’t know what to say.

“Look, you and Patrick have been best friends for... well, *ever*. We just wanna help.” Joel glanced at Brad. “And don’t get mad, but Brad and I have been doing some thinking. Patrick said you two just got in a fight. But it doesn’t really seem like one of you pulled a douche move or anything, ’cause you both just seem more sad and depressed than pissed-off. And you basically stopped hanging out right after Scott decided to yell across the whole cafeteria that you were boyfriends or whatever, so we just wondered... is that why you guys don’t talk anymore?”

Zack was frozen, like a deer in the headlights.

“Don’t worry, I don’t think most people really believed Scott. I think it was more just sensational for a few days more than anything else. Patrick shut down those rumors pretty fast. But I know some people are still giving you shit about it though, probably because you and Patrick kind of split after that. I know Scott’s still totally acting like a jerk toward you and doing what he can to perpetuate the rumor. Most of us don’t even really speak to him anymore.” Brad looked at Joel a little unsure, but Joel nodded so he took a breath and continued. “But, y’know, if there *was* anything you and Patrick wanted to tell us, it would be okay. We’d still be your friends. And you wouldn’t have to hide it from us or anything.”

Zack just stared back, not entirely sure what Brad was trying to get at.

“For fuck’s sake.” Joel rolled his eyes. “What Brad’s trying to say is that *if* you were gay, and *if* you and Patrick were, or are, or whatever, like, boyfriends or something, it’s okay. I mean, I don’t really get it, but I also don’t think it’s really something that you choose or anything, and we just wanted you to know that. Y’know... just in case.”

Zack still couldn’t find his voice and was horrified when his eyes started to fill with tears.

“Shit.” Brad wiped a hand over his mouth. “It’s true isn’t it? You and Patrick?”

Zack managed to jerk his head up and down.

“So, did you guys break up, or what happened?” Joel looked like he was still trying to process the information.

Zack wondered if he should tell. Would it be betraying Patrick? But Brad and Joel had basically guessed on their own, and they said they were okay with it. What harm could it do at this point?

“N-no, we didn’t break up. But after the cafeteria incident, our parents found out that same night.”

“Shit!”

Brad nodded in agreement. “Talk about a suckage of a day.”

“To say they didn’t take it well would be an understatement. Um, they basically said we couldn’t be friends anymore. Patrick’s dad even called the school and told them to keep us apart, so there are basically teachers making sure we don’t even talk in the halls and stuff.”

“Holy fuck.” Joel squeezed Zack’s arm. “That really sucks, man.”

“Yeah. You have no idea.”

“But you two are still... together?” Brad asked.

Zack took a deep breath and looked them both in the eye. “Yes. He’s my boyfriend.” For a millisecond it felt so wonderful to be honest about it and share it with other people. But then he remembered the reality of the situation and looked down at the pavement. “It just has to be a secret. At least until we go away to college. Please don’t say anything.”

“Wow. It must be practically impossible for you two to actually find ways to be together, huh?” Joel asked thoughtfully.

Zack nodded. “We manage to meet like once or twice a week, but it’s never for very long and we can never meet at each other’s houses.”

Joel pulled Brad toward him and whispered something in his ear. Brad pulled back and smiled, turned to look at Zack, and then leaned in to whisper something back to Joel. When they separated, they both had smug expressions on their faces.

“Okay, so, here’s the deal,” Joel said. “My parents are going to be out of town next weekend. They’re driving to Madison to pick up my sister from college and move her out of her dorm room because she’s studying abroad next semester. So, that means I have the house to myself. Saturday night you’re going to tell your mom that you’re spending the night at my place.”

“And I’m going to tell Patrick that he’s going to be spending the night at my house.” Brad chimed in.

“But really, Brad is going to bring Patrick to my house too. And I’m actually going to go to Brad’s that night. So really, you and Patrick will be at my house Saturday night by yourselves.”

Brad and Joel crossed their arms over their chests and looked very pleased with themselves. Zack was dumbstruck.

“Y-you would do that?”

Joel shrugged. “Sure. It sounds like things suck pretty badly for you both right now. And you’re both our friends. It’s not much, but at least we can give you a little time to be together. We’ll tell Patrick the plan tomorrow.”

Zack shook his head, still utterly amazed. “Thank you. You have no idea...” He swallowed hard. “Thank you.”

The next night, Zack’s phone buzzed just as he was getting into bed. He smiled in anticipation and propped himself on his side to read the text.

PAT: J & B told me the plan 2day. Still can’t believe it.

ZACK: I know. It’s amazing. We’ll get an entire nite 2gether.

PAT: Best X-mas gift I could think of.

Zack smiled and clutched his phone a little tighter.

ZACK: Miss you so much.

PAT: Me 2. Can’t wait 2 touch you again.

Zack felt his entire body flush. He had definitely been missing that aspect of their relationship as well and his right hand just wasn’t quite cutting it. He needed to feel Patrick’s skin against his again.

ZACK: *I can't either. I luv u.*

PAT: *I luv u 2.*

ZACK: *Nite, Pat. <3*

PAT: *Nite. Sweet dreams.*

Zach rolled onto his back and hugged his phone to his chest. Only a few more days and then he and Patrick would get an entire uninterrupted night together. He had to think of something amazing to get him for Christmas. As he stared up into the darkness, an idea came to him. It would need to be modified slightly, but after that, it would be absolutely perfect.

CHAPTER SEVEN

His mother had eyed him suspiciously when Zack had told her he was going to spend the night at Joel's, but when Joel came to pick him up, and Patrick wasn't anywhere in sight, she seemed to be convinced that he really was just going to hang out with his friend.

As they pulled away from his house, Zack breathed a sigh of relief, but he couldn't get his knee to stop bouncing.

Joel looked over at him and chuckled. "Hang in there, man. We'll be there in, like, ten minutes and Brad and Patrick are on their way."

True to Joel's word, they had barely stepped through the front door of his house and had the time to take off their coats when Brad's car pulled up into the driveway. When Patrick entered the house he pulled off his parka, dropped it on the floor and strode straight toward Zack. Zack held out his arms and started to reach for Patrick, but stopped and actually took a step back when Patrick entered his personal space. He glanced to the left where Brad and Joel were standing.

"Um, it's cool." Joel looked mildly embarrassed. "Say hello like you normally would. Pretend we aren't even here."

Apparently, Patrick didn't need any further invitation. Zack found himself almost lifted off the ground as Patrick's strong arms went around his middle. Zack let out a happy hum as their lips met and he framed his boyfriend's still-cold face with his hands. They kept it relatively chaste, remaining aware that they had an audience, but their somewhat tame kiss felt very, very special. It was their first kiss in front of other people. When their lips separated, and they turned to face their friends, it made Zack feel warm that Patrick kept an arm around his waist.

Brad and Joel stared at them with wide eyes and their mouths hanging open for several seconds before they seemed to shake themselves out of it.

"Well, alrighty then." Brad's face was beet-red.

“Yeah.” Joel still sort of resembled a guppy. “I mean, I understood in theory that you two must... because you’re... but it’s a little different actually seeing it.”

Zack felt Patrick’s arm tighten around him. “Everyone still cool?”

“Yeah, man. No worries. It’s just... it’s just going to take a little while to get used to. That’s all.”

“Joel, thank you so much again. You too, Brad. This is just...” Zack looked up at Patrick and couldn’t help beaming. “The best thing ever.”

“Hey, don’t mention it. Brad, you ready to go?”

“Ready when you are.”

“Okay, so, um, the guest bedroom is, um, all made up.” Joel’s face turned several shades of pink. “So, y’know, help yourself. And I’ll call tomorrow when Brad’s gonna drop me off, so you, um, have a bit of warning. Okay?”

“Sounds good.” Patrick walked toward Joel and after a moment of hesitation, pulled him into a hug. “Really, thank you.”

As soon as Brad and Joel had made their exit and the front door clicked shut, Patrick whirled around, lunged toward Zack, and Zack could only let out an undignified squeal as Patrick picked him up and threw him over his shoulder.

“Pat! Put me down!” Zack knew he didn’t sound very convincing since he could barely get the words out he was laughing so hard. Patrick had never picked him up before, but he guessed he shouldn’t be that surprised by his strength.

Patrick carried him down the hallway until they reached the guest bedroom and Zack was unceremoniously dumped onto the middle of the bed. He clutched his sides, still gasping for breath. “Seriously? Was that necessary?”

Patrick laughed and climbed up on to the bed and over him and bent down until their noses were touching. “Yes.” Then he kissed him.

This kiss wasn’t chaste. Zack moaned as Patrick’s tongue invaded his mouth, and he spread his legs to make room for Patrick between them.

Patrick's body felt so warm weighing him down. He fisted his hands in Patrick's unruly hair as he kissed his way along Zack's jaw.

"God, I love being able to really feel you again." Patrick's hands trailed down Zack's sides and up underneath his shirt and Zack shivered in pleasure as Patrick's fingers danced along his ribs. "It's been so long since we weren't outside freezing our asses off."

Zack laughed into the kiss as Patrick's lips met his again. Now that they were together with an entire night before them, they could make light of their troubles. He just wished tomorrow never had to come.

Instead of continuing on with their make out activities, Patrick rolled onto his side and brought Zack with him, their legs tangled together.

"You have no idea how much I just want to get you naked and love you over and over." Zack blushed at Patrick's words but was also entirely delighted that his muscled jock of a boyfriend somehow found his thin frame such a turn on. "But you know what I want to do even more than that right now?"

"What?" Zack bumped their noses together.

"I just want to hold you and look at you for a little while. Is that okay?"

Zack found himself suddenly choked up. Patrick was always able to say exactly what was on his mind... and in his heart. He was completely forthright and utterly honest and Zack loved him so much.

"Yeah. Of course that's okay."

Patrick's hands went up under his shirt and kneaded his back. "And, I need to talk to you about something. Something Brad told me."

"What's that?"

"He said Scott's been giving you a hard time. Why didn't you tell me?" Patrick's forehead creased with worry.

"I can handle it. I didn't tell you because I knew you'd want to get involved. You can't be seen sticking up for me at school. We can't be seen together, remember?"

“I most certainly can! I would stop anyone from being bullied if I saw it. The teachers can’t run tattling to my parents just because I stopped Scott from being an ass. I won’t let this happen to you!” Patrick was getting more and more worked up. “It’s not okay for him to think he can single you out just because the stupid fucking high school social hierarchy means he can’t take me down because I’m more popular or whatever. I can’t believe I didn’t realize this was happening. Brad thought I should know. Scott’s probably too much of a chickenshit to harass you when me or Brad or Joel is around. Bastard.”

“Hey,” Zack soothed and placed a kiss on Patrick’s cheek. “This isn’t your fault. And it’s not something I want you to worry about. This is…” He shrugged his shoulders, at a loss. “It is what it is. It’s high school. And it isn’t fair. But you’re gonna stay out of it because despite your good intentions, I know your dad would blow a gasket if he found out you were defending me at school.”

“This isn’t right.” Patrick shook his head. “How can you ask me to just stand by and not do anything? God, how the hell am I supposed to play baseball with that douche this spring? Maybe I shouldn’t even play.”

“That’s crazy! Of course you’re gonna play. You love baseball and you want to play in college so you can’t not play your senior year. You play first base and Scott plays left field. It’s not like you have to interact on the field. And just ignore him in the dugout. It’s not ideal, but you’ll make it work. And you’re gonna stand by and not do anything because I want to make sure your parents pay for college so we can be at the U of M together. I’m way more concerned about making sure we have a future to look forward to than being called names now.”

Patrick stared at him long and hard before giving a small nod. “You’re gonna need to promise me something in return, though.”

“What?”

“If you won’t let me be there for you, you’re gonna promise to let Joel and Brad.”

Zack rolled his eyes. “You make me sound like a damsel in distress.”

“You know that’s not what I meant. I just mean you’re gonna start to hang out with them again at school. I know they want to. It’s not a crime for you to hang out with them. My dad can’t prevent us from having some of the same friends. And you’ll be less of a target for Scott if you aren’t alone all the time.”

Zack smiled. It was a pretty easy decision to make. “Deal.” He could see the visible relief wash over Patrick’s face. “Do you want to open your Christmas present now?” He trailed his fingers over Patrick’s cheek and down his neck. “I promise you can hold me while you open it.”

Patrick grinned. “Okay. I have something for you, too.”

They separated just long enough to retrieve their backpacks that were serving as their overnight bags from where they had dumped them in the front hall. Zack pulled out the small gold box tied with red ribbon from the side pocket before returning to the bed to sit cross-legged in front of Patrick.

“Merry Christmas, Pat.” Zack pressed the box into his hand.

Patrick gave him one of those soft, tender smiles that made his insides go a little weak before untying the ribbon and lifting the lid.

“It’s a Celtic eternity knot pendant,” Zack explained as Patrick stared at the contents of the box.

“It’s beautiful. I’ve... I’ve seen this before, haven’t I?”

Zack slowly nodded. He wondered if Patrick would remember. “Yeah. It was my Grandma Emily’s. Grandpa George gave it to her on their first wedding anniversary. He was Scottish and said if she wore it, they would be together forever. And they were. They loved each other their whole lives.” Zack rubbed his hands over his knees. His heart was pounding. “She left it to me when she died. She said I should give it to my one true love.” He paused and took a shaky breath. “She probably assumed that would be a girl, so, instead of the really thin chain it was on, I had the jeweler put the pendant on a black leather cord.”

Zack’s grandpa had died when he was six, so he didn’t have many strong memories of him, though he could still hear his window-rattling, belly-shaking, joyous laugh if he closed his eyes. His grandma had died when he

was twelve. They had been very close and Zack still missed her very much. He often wondered how someone so loving and caring could have a daughter whose demeanor was cool at best and lately had been downright icy. He liked to think his grandma wouldn't have minded that he was gay and that her necklace had been given to a boy. His eyes became prickly as he fantasized about having someone from his family accept him for who he was.

"I always really liked your grandma," Patrick said as he carefully picked up the necklace. "She was such a nice lady. This is absolutely amazing, Zack. Thank you." Patrick reached for him and Zack took the opportunity to press his face into the crook of Patrick's neck and breathe him in. "I know how much she meant to you. I can't believe..." Zack caught the hitch in Patrick's voice. "I can't believe that you're giving it to me. Help me put it on?"

Zack's fingers shook slightly as he undid the clasp and then refastened it around Patrick's neck. The pendant hung in the hollow on his throat. It looked perfect. Patrick reached up with one hand to finger the pendent and reached for Zack's hand with the other. "Did you mean it? What you said?"

Zack felt his entire body heat and his pulse rate increase. "You've been my favorite person in the entire world my whole life. No one could ever know me as well as you do. No one could ever understand me the way that you do." Somewhere along the way, he had started crying. "Maybe people would say we're too young to know, but I *do* know. I've loved you forever, even if I did just kinda realize what that meant recently. I could never love anyone like I love you."

At some point during his speech, Zack had gone from looking at Patrick to looking at the geometric pattern on the bedspread, but now that he had finished he dared to look back up. Patrick's eyes were red and he reached forward to pull Zack into his lap. Zack straddled Patrick's crossed legs and for the next several minutes, no words were needed, but their lips kept busy.

"Jesus, Zack. You may not have a lot to say to other people, but you say all the right things to me." Patrick reached to his left to pull his bag closer. "I don't have a beautiful speech to go with this, but Merry Christmas, Zack. I love you." Patrick placed a small black velvet box in his hands.

The stiff box hinge creaked as he opened it and he gasped when he saw the contents. It was an elegantly simple and completely beautiful hammered-silver band. Zack was still gaping at it when he felt Patrick's lips brush over his cheek and heard him whisper in his ear. "I had it inscribed."

Zack's fingers trembled as he pulled the ring out of the case. Three words were written on the inside of the band. *Forever. I promise.*

He hadn't anticipated that exchanging Christmas gifts would get so emotional, but Zack felt himself tearing up once again. He remembered, with vivid clarity, the first time Patrick had ever uttered those words to him. It had made him feel warm and loved and so very, very happy. The ring was absolutely stunning, but the message lit up his heart. Zack slid the band onto the ring finger of his right hand. It was a perfect fit.

"I mean it." Patrick whispered.

Zack looked up and into the soulful eyes of the person he knew he could never do without. "I know. I love you."

Their kisses started out slow and languid, but with enough simmering heat that Zack was soon rhythmically rocking forward in Patrick's lap to gain what friction he could. Their lips parted long enough for Patrick to tug off Zack's shirt and then his own.

"Lie back." Patrick nuzzled into his neck and then gently pushed him back on the bed.

The rest of their clothing came off between kisses and soon they were lying skin-to-skin.

"God, I've missed this so much."

Zack hummed in agreement, and for several moments they just rocked together, kissed, and let their arousal build.

Patrick kissed along his neck, over his sternum and continued down his body, stopping to pay special attention to Zack's nipples with his tongue. Zack moaned and writhed under the ministrations and only managed to catch his breath as Patrick moved farther south, his tongue trailing a path down Zack's abdomen. Patrick stopped several inches from his erection and looked up.

“Can, um, can I try something?”

Zack was breathing hard and he had just enough brain cells to process what the close proximity of Patrick’s mouth to his groin meant. He swallowed hard and nodded.

He gasped as Patrick’s tongue experimentally flicked over the head of his cock and cried out as he was slowly sucked into the heat of Patrick’s mouth. He tried to watch as Patrick’s lips wrapped tightly around his length and started to move up and down, but it was too much. His head flopped back onto the pillow. Zack saw stars as Patrick gained confidence and began to move faster and suck harder. He couldn’t help his hips from bucking up off the bed. Patrick looked up and smiled, Zack’s cock still in his mouth, before placing his hands on Zack’s hips to hold him down and returning to his task.

Zack was going to lose it in record time. The heat and the wet and the suction and Patrick—it was all just too much.

“P-Pat... close, I’m gonna...” He gasped for air, hoping he was getting his warning out in enough time.

Instead of pulling off, Patrick just sucked harder. Zack lost control, lost his mind, and came harder than he ever had before.

When he finally began to calm, Patrick scooted up Zack’s body, and lay next to him.

“Was that okay?” Patrick actually looked a little shy. Zack noted Patrick’s tongue darting out to lick at the corners of his mouth.

Zack didn’t even have close to the words necessary to describe how amazing it had been. “That was... holy shit.”

Patrick laughed and planted a wet kiss on his cheek. “Good. I was hoping my enthusiasm would make up for any lack of technique. But you know what they say, practice makes perfect.”

“Please tell me you’re interested in a lot more practicing.”

“Any time you want.” Patrick pulled him close and kissed him. When Zack parted his lips and their tongues met, it was strange tasting himself and Patrick, but he found it was also kind of hot. He pressed himself closer,

starting to get aroused all over again, and felt Patrick's erection against his stomach.

Zack licked his lips and pushed Patrick onto his back. He didn't exactly know how, but he wanted to do the same for Patrick. He placed several kisses on Patrick's chest before going lower. Patrick's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"You don't have to if you don't want to. I'd be more than happy if you just wanted to stroke me."

Zack moved up so he was eye level with Patrick. "I don't know how good I'll be at it, but I want to. I promise."

Zack started with a few tentative licks along Patrick's shaft before closing his lips around the head. He slowly began moving up and down, applying suction and swirling his tongue. He tried to imitate what had felt good when Patrick had done it to him, and if the noises coming from Patrick were any indication, he was doing okay. It would take some practice before he would be able to take any more than half of Patrick in his mouth before his gag reflex kicked in, but he found wrapping his hand around the base of Patrick's length kind of made up for it. When he glanced up, he saw Patrick's head thrown back on the pillow, his mouth open, and bliss written on his face. Zack hummed and returned to his task. Zack decided that he loved the weight of Patrick on his tongue and the burst of salty, musky flavor on his taste buds. It was a total turn on to have Patrick in his mouth and at his mercy. It didn't take long before Patrick's breathing became harsher and his hands came up to grip Zack's head.

"Zack, I'm close."

Patrick's hips came off the bed and Zack managed to pull back just enough so he didn't choke as Patrick came. He swallowed as quickly as he could, but he could feel some of Patrick's come dribbling out the side of his mouth. Breathing hard, he let Patrick slide from his mouth. He licked his lips and wiped off his jaw as he sat up. Perhaps it had lacked a bit of finesse, but he loved that he had been able to make Patrick come apart beneath him.

"Wow," Patrick panted. "That was amazing."

“Yeah?”

Patrick sat up, grabbed Zack from where he was still kneeling between Patrick’s legs, and yanked him forward. He fell on top of Patrick and was pulled into a heated kiss.

“Yeah,” Patrick said as their lips parted.

They lay sated and sweaty in each other’s arms for several minutes and Zack was content to spend the rest of the time they had cuddling naked with Patrick, their bodies tangled together.

He knew Patrick had gotten a few blowjobs before when he was with Sara, but this had marked yet another first for Zack. Patrick was his first everything, so when they had first gotten together, it seemed more than enough just to touch and kiss and get each other off using their hands. But now that they had moved on to oral sex, it made Zack think of other things they could do as well.

“Pat?” Zack nuzzled at his cheek. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Do you ever think about... would you ever want to... y’know, do other stuff?” He pressed his face into the crook of Patrick’s neck. If his face wasn’t already flushed from exertion, he was sure he would be turning ten shades of red.

“Like what?” Zack could hear the smile in Patrick’s voice.

“Like *sex-sex*.” He prayed Patrick would understand what he was getting at.

Patrick was silent for a few beats before shark rolling Zack so he was on this back and Patrick was on top of him. He bumped their noses together. “Do you want me inside of you?” he murmured against Zack’s lips.

A shiver ran through Zack’s body and he felt an ache somewhere deep inside him as he imagined what that would be like. All he could do was nod his head.

“And do you want to be inside me?” Patrick kissed the corner of his eye.

Zack gripped at Patrick's arms as he imagined sinking into Patrick's tight heat. Oh, god. Yes. He wanted that too. He let out a whimper and nodded his head again.

Patrick framed Zack's face with his hands and brushed his lips over Zack's. "I want both of those things too. So much. But I don't want us to have to rush. I want us to have all the time in the world so we don't hurt each other. Would... would it be okay if we waited until we've moved out to go to college? I just want it to be absolutely perfect. Not like this where we're sneaking off and in someone else's house and... does that make sense?"

"Yeah. It does." Zack was touched by Patrick's words. "I think waiting is a good idea." It meant that they would be waiting quite a while, but it would be worth it if when they did decide to be together like that they would be away from their parents and free from worry.

"Okay." Patrick smiled and kissed him one more time before rolling off Zack, curling into his side, and giving off a contented sigh.

For several minutes Zack lay on his back with his eyes closed, combing his fingers through Patrick's hair and listening to him breathe. But then he remembered that there were other things they really needed to discuss while they had this time together.

"Pat?"

"Hmmm?" Patrick sounded so happy and worn-out in a good way, Zack hated to bring up unpleasant topics, but there were things they should really talk about while they had the chance.

"How are things with your parents? You haven't really mentioned them." Patrick frowned and flopped onto his back. Zack rolled with him and placed a kiss on his shoulder. "It's just a long time until we leave for college and our problems aren't going to go away. And I certainly don't think they're going to get any easier and... they're your parents, Pat." Zack ran a hand through Patrick's hair and down his neck. "I just want you to know you can talk about it."

Patrick grasped Zack's hand and rested it on his chest as he stared up at the ceiling.

"I knew they were going to react badly," he began slowly. "I mean it's one of the reasons we agreed not to say anything until we got to college in the first place. I shouldn't have been shocked. I should have been prepared. But... I wasn't. Even though I knew my mom would freak out and think it's unnatural and mourn the loss of grandchildren, and even though I knew my dad would be completely disgusted and just reject that he has a gay son at all and think that if he's a hard-ass about it I'll change my mind or something... I guess I just kept hoping that they would love me anyway. Unconditionally."

Zack watched, his heart breaking, as a single tear ran down from the corner of Patrick's eye and was absorbed into the pillow.

"I wish there was something I could do," he said quietly, knowing it wasn't nearly enough.

"You already do it." Patrick turned his head and pulled Zack's hand across his body, effectively pulling him in for a kiss. "I know you love me. I know you're there. That's enough. But what about you? How are things with your mom?"

Zack scrunched his nose. "She's still basically not talking to me. She only acknowledges me when it's absolutely necessary." Patrick squeezed his hand. "The thing is, I feel like I'm still far better off than you. I mean, my mom and I weren't that close to begin with. You know that. When I was younger, I was always way closer to my grandma. But you were always close with your parents."

"All the kindness and compassion must have skipped your mom's generation." Patrick furrowed his brow, thinking. "I guess I was close to my parents, but it was like I was always trying to be exactly what they wanted me to be. The great athlete who would play baseball in college, then get a job and get married and give my mom grandchildren and have a life exactly like theirs. But they never asked me what I wanted. And if they can't accept me and the life I want for myself, well, then that's their problem."

Zack sat up leaned back on his palms. “You know, after my grandma died, and it was just me and Mom, I kind of just told myself that you were my real family. So maybe,” he could feel the blush creeping into his cheeks, “maybe we can just be each other’s family.”

Patrick sat up, grasped the back of Zack’s neck, and pulled their heads together. “Sounds like a good plan to me.”

Zack leaned a fraction of an inch closer in order to bring their lips together.

“So, what do you want to do now that we’ve cried over Christmas gifts, had sex and gotten really depressed over our parents?” Patrick bumped their noses together. “How about more sex?”

Zack laughed out loud. “Nympho.” He swatted Patrick on his shoulder.

“Only when it’s you.” Patrick waggled his eyebrows.

Shaking his head, Zack glanced at the clock on the bedside table. “Well, it’s only seven thirty. How about we work on your math? Your final’s next week. You brought your book didn’t you?”

Zack hadn’t been able to help Patrick much with his homework lately, so he had texted Patrick the night before to pack his textbook and notes.

“Yes,” Patrick grumbled. “I still can’t believe you made me bring it. Is that really how you want to spent our one night together?”

Zack leaned forward and kissed the end of Patrick’s nose. “Yes. It’ll make me feel better knowing you aren’t worried about your exam and we’ll still be spending time together. And after that, we could work on our college application essays.”

“Didn’t you finish your essay, like, a month ago?”

Zack bit the corner of his lip. “Yes. But I know you haven’t finished yours and our applications are due in a couple of weeks.”

Patrick groaned and started to reach for his boxers. “Slave driver. If you’re going to make me do all this work, could you at least institute some sort of positive reinforcement program?”

“What’d you have in mind?” Zack pulled on his shirt and boxers.

“Like for every math problem I get right, you’ll owe me a sexual favor later.”

Zack rolled his eyes, but couldn’t help a wide grin from forming. He picked up Patrick’s backpack from the floor and shoved Patrick in the direction of the living room. “I’m sure we can work out an amicable agreement.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Early March 2004

PAT: *U get your letter?*

ZACK: *Yeah. Came in the mail 2day. U?*

PAT: *Yup. U open it yet?*

ZACK: *No. Waiting for u.*

PAT: *Pond? When can u meet?*

ZACK: *6? Mom doesn't leave 4 work 'til then.*

PAT: *k*

Zack pattered in his room, counting the minutes until he and Patrick could open their letters from the U of M. Their future plans to be together all hinged on the contents of their respective envelopes.

Of course, everything was relative, but the last few months could have been worse. Brad and Joel had played a huge part in making things more bearable. They took turns sitting with Zack at lunch, so he no longer felt so alone at school, and they continued to help orchestrate secret meetings between him and Patrick. They had been able to meet up several times when Brad or Joel's parents were both going to be out of the house for an extended length of time. Mr. Martin had been very thorough and had called Joel and Brad's parents to tell them he didn't want Patrick and Zack to be at their houses at the same time. He hadn't told them the real reason, of course.

They hadn't been able to have a whole night alone since before Christmas, but it was way better than their former freezing cold clandestine meetings down at the pond. The few times they had been able to meet at Brad or Joel's house, Zack had almost been able to forget about everything that had happened. It had felt so normal, all four of them hanging out together, like nothing had changed. Brad and Joel always made themselves scarce for part of the time though, and he and Patrick were grateful for a little time to themselves

in a temperature-controlled environment, even if their clothes did have to remain on.

Even Scott seemed to have lost interest in tormenting Zack in the hallways since he had started hanging out with Brad and Joel again. It was hard not to be hopeful that maybe everything would work out just the way he and Patrick had planned. Maybe in just a few short months everything really would be okay.

Patrick was already pacing along the frozen bank of the pond by the time Zack came down the hill and into the clearing. Patrick turned and beamed, but Zack could tell just by the way Patrick held himself—the tightness through his neck and shoulders and the clenching and unclenching of his fists—that he was nervous.

“Hey.” Zack wrapped his arms around him and held on tightly. “It’s gonna be okay.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You don’t have anything to worry about.” Even through their jackets, Zack could feel Patrick trembling.

“Pat, your grades are *not* that bad. They’re plenty good enough to get you in. And with your baseball skills, they would be crazy to turn you down. C’mon.” Zack tugged him over to the large rock a few paces away and they both perched on it. “You got your letter?”

Patrick nodded and dug into his coat pocket and produced a folded envelope that looked exactly like the one Zack was clutching in his hand.

“Open ’em together?” Zack asked.

Patrick took a deep breath and blew out a gust of air that fogged in the cold evening air. “Kay.”

Zack tore open his envelope and with shaking fingers unfolded the several pieces of paper enclosed. The rustlings to his left indicated Patrick was doing exactly the same thing. His heart beat faster and faster as his eyes scanned the words on the page, not quite believing what he was reading.

“I got in... and they’re giving me a full academic scholarship.” His voice was breathless. “I won’t have to pay a thing. I’ll even get money for room and

board, whether I choose to live on campus or not.” He couldn’t believe it. Of course he had been hoping for some financial assistance just based on his mother’s income, but he hadn’t even let himself dream about a complete full ride. “Pat?”

Patrick looked up and gave him a half-hearted smile. “I’m so happy for you. No one deserves it more than you.” Zack could tell his words were sincere, but something was seriously wrong. Zack’s heart began to climb into his throat as Patrick went back to staring at his letter, his brow furrowed. “I got in too,” he finally said.

“That’s amazing!” Zack let out the breath he had been holding and threw his arms around him. “Congratulations!” His elation dampened, however, when he realized Patrick was still stiff in his arms. He pulled back, frowning. “Pat? Aren’t you happy?”

“I got in, but no athletic scholarship and no financial aid. I mean, I knew the baseball scholarship was a long shot. Unless you play football or basketball, athletic scholarships are pretty hard to come by. And my dad makes too much money for financial aid.”

“Well, your parents were always planning on paying for college, so that’s okay isn’t it?”

“You don’t get it. Them paying for it *is* the problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, after we get to college, you’ll be fine. Everything will be paid for and you won’t have to worry about what your mom thinks anymore. You’ll essentially be independent. I won’t be.”

Understanding began to wash over Zack. He had been so focused on just getting to college and thinking that once they were out of their parents’ houses and starting over in the big city that their troubles would go away. He had failed to examine the finer points.

“Even though I’ll be living away from home, I’ll still be dependent on them. They’ll still have control over me. That means I can’t be out. That means they still can’t know that we’re together. Things will be better, sure, but

I still won't be free. We aren't going to be able to be together the way we want to be." Patrick's eyes were red-rimmed and he looked utterly defeated.

As Patrick rested his head in his hands, his elbows propped on his knees, Zack caught sight of the Celtic knot pendant dangling at the base of Patrick's neck. Just like that, Zack had the solution. It was so simple and it would fix all their problems. He just hoped Patrick would accept it.

"Pat, look at me." Zack slid to the ground and scooted around so he was kneeling at Patrick's feet, not caring that his jeans from the knee down were now covered in snow. "I have a plan." Patrick removed his hands from his face and looked up. Zack smiled and leaned forward to gently touch his lips to Patrick's. "I have a way for us to be together. Without worrying about your parents. You won't have to take a dime from them."

"How?"

Patrick's hands were resting on his knees, and Zack reached out to clasp them in his. "My grandma's money."

Patrick pulled his hands out of Zack's. "Absolutely not! That was the money she gave you for college! She left you that in her will!"

"I know." Zack put his hands right above Patrick's knees and squeezed. "Calm down and listen for a second. She gave me that money for school, but I'm not going to need it."

"Yeah, but you could still save it. Hell, you could use it to help pay for graduate school if you wanted to go. You could even use it for a down payment on a condo or a house or something!"

"Grandma gave me that money because she wanted to make sure I had everything I needed. She wanted to take care of me. More than anything, she just wanted to make sure I was happy and that I didn't have to worry. And what would make me the happiest person in the world is to be able to be with my boyfriend without worrying about whether our parents approve, or what we would do if they found out, or how we were going to pay for college if they did."

Patrick was looking down and off to the left, his jaw flexing. "I can't."

Zack racked his brain for what else he could say. Patrick was trying to be all noble and selfless. But Zack didn't want him to be. Zack wasn't just doing this for Patrick. This was for both of them.

“Do you love me?”

Patrick's head shot up at the clearly unexpected question. “Of course I do. More than anything. You know that.”

“Then let me do this. Let me do this for us,” Zack pleaded. “I have enough to pay for your tuition and help out with living expenses. We can get an apartment. We can live together. We can even move to the city right after we turn eighteen if we want to and get jobs on campus for the summer. Please, Pat. I want to go to college with you and have everyone know that we're together and not have to worry about anyone's approval. Grandma wanted me to be happy. And you make me happy. More than anything else in the world. I love you. Please say yes.”

Patrick was fighting back tears as he reached forward and cupped Zack's face in his hands. “I need to know that you're absolutely sure about this. I want you to be completely positive.”

Zack thumbed the silver band around his right ring finger through his glove, feeling like he would burst with joy. “I promise.”

CHAPTER NINE

Early May

The announcement came during last period on a Friday. Zack was sitting in AP Calculus, copying down the problem Mr. Robertson was walking through on the whiteboard, when the loudspeaker crackled to life and the principal's voice filled the classroom.

“Good afternoon. Please pardon the interruption. This is Principal Norris speaking. As I’m sure all the seniors know, graduation is only a month away. So, it is my great privilege to announce the class of 2004’s Valedictorian and class speaker during commencement. Please join me in congratulating Zack Larson.”

Zack froze in place as his brain slowly registered what he had just heard. He knew he had a high GPA. It was actually a little over a 4.0 because he had received a few A-pluses. He had never really seriously considered that he might have the highest grades of his entire class. He tended to keep his head down, do his own work to the best of his ability, and not spend time comparing himself to other people. As pride and accomplishment slowly began to come over him, he realized two things that quickly supplanted those feelings. One, he was going to have to get up in front of his entire class and all their relatives to give a speech. And second, his whole calculus class was staring at him. Some were even clapping. In that moment, Zack fully understood the flight response. He desperately wanted to flee the scene. That, or dive under his desk and squeeze his eyes shut. He felt his face heat and could only imagine the red shade of his cheeks. He hated being the center of attention. He slumped down in his chair and forced himself to take several deep breaths, hoping to slow his heart rate. It kind of felt like he was having a heart attack. Fortunately, he was literally saved by the bell. The final bell of the day sounded and Zack bolted from the classroom before it had even stopped ringing.

The hallway wasn't much better. People stopped to look as he walked by. He heard several “Congratulations!” as he made his way quickly to his locker,

but he also heard a lot of other mutterings that he couldn't quite make out. He thought he heard "queer" and "speech" uttered in the same sentence by someone, but he could have been imagining things. As he continued to be the center of attention, Zack thought about just climbing into his locker and shutting the door until the school had cleared out. Then he heard a familiar voice call his name.

Patrick was running toward him grinning from ear to ear. "I knew it'd be you! I just knew it!" Patrick's arms went around him and Zack was soon wrapped up in a bear hug in the middle of the school hallway. "I'm so proud of you!"

"Pat, we're at school," Zack whispered. "We're not supposed to be seen together." It meant so much to him that Patrick was proud of him and there was indeed a light at the end of the tunnel for the both of them, but they weren't home free yet. It was probably still in their best interests to be careful.

Just then, Ms. Benson came around the corner. She taught European history, was nearing retirement, and was known for being rather cranky and a stickler for the rules.

"Mr. Martin and Mr. Larson. A moment, if you please." They broke away from each other and turned to face her. Ms. Benson pursed her lips. "I will ask you two to separate immediately. I've received instructions that the two of you are not to be associating with one another."

"Ms. Benson, you don't understand. My dad—"

Ms. Benson held up a hand, cutting Patrick off. "I'm not interested in an explanation, I just know what I have been told. Mr. Martin, please be on your way and allow Mr. Larson to collect his books from his locker in peace."

As she turned and strode away down the hallway, Zack half expected her to jump onto her broomstick.

"Shit." Patrick ran a hand through his hair. "Bet that witch is going to tattle. I was just so proud of you. I couldn't *not* congratulate you."

"I just hope it doesn't get you in trouble." They had been doing so well. They had kept away from each other at school since the fall. They only had a

month left to go, but their one slipup was caught by probably the worst person imaginable.

“Whatever.” Patrick shoved his hands into his pockets. “We’ll be out of here soon. We definitely need to get the hell out as soon as we graduate and we’re legally able to do so.”

Zack nodded in agreement. Thankfully they would both turn eighteen three days after graduation. He had already researched campus jobs and found that they would have no trouble securing full-time employment over the summer and most likely just be able to cut back to part-time once the fall semester started. He had even researched apartments within easy walking distance of the campus. They just had to make it another month.

“Hey, Mom.” Zack had waited upstairs, doing his homework at the kitchen table, for his mom to get home from work. She stopped, gave a half nod in his direction, and then continued to walk into the kitchen. Zack guessed that was about as much acknowledgement as he was going to get, so he plowed ahead. “Um, I just wanted to let you know that they announced who the class Valedictorian was today. It’s me.” She stopped with her hand on the door to the fridge and turned to look at him. Zack licked his lips and pressed on. “I’ll be making a speech and everything during commencement. I know you sometimes have to work Saturdays, so, I wanted to tell you now, y’know, so you could take that day off, if you can. So you can be at graduation.”

She yanked open the fridge, pulled out a can of Diet Coke and slammed the door. “You know, Zack, I’m really not that interested in you making speeches.”

“I thought you might be proud of me... for getting such good grades,” he mumbled. Even though they had never been close, even though she didn’t approve of him, she was still his mother and her words hurt more than he had anticipated.

“Well, that’s just great, but what I’m more concerned about is the fact that I got a call from Patrick’s dad today during my shift. Apparently he received a

call from the school saying that the two of you were talking... and *hugging* in the hallway today.”

“H-he just wanted to congratulate me for being Valedictorian, I—”

“No! I don’t want to hear any more excuses! We told you two to stay away from each other! And, and now you’re what? *Flaunting* yourself in front of the whole school?”

“No, Mom—”

“I’ve just about had it, Zack! I thought you had finally come to your senses and you were done with that disgusting behavior.”

“That was the first time we had spoken at school since last fall,” he said softly. It was actually a true statement.

“Well, thank goodness for small mercies. But let me make myself perfectly clear. I don’t want to receive any more phone calls from Mr. Martin. Do you understand me? Stay away from Patrick.”

“Yes, Mother.” There wasn’t anything else to say. Heart aching, he quietly gathered up his books and headed downstairs to finish his homework.

Just as he was completing his history assignment, Zack’s phone buzzed.

PAT: *Fuck*

ZACK: ???

PAT: *School called my parents.*

ZACK: *I know. Your dad called my mom. U ok? What happened?*

PAT: *Dad freaked out. Talking about sending me 2 therapy. Says there’s something wrong with me. Grounded until graduation.*

Zack’s heart dropped into his shoes. He wanted so much to be there for Patrick right now. How the hell was he supposed to offer comfort via text message? There wasn’t anything wrong with Patrick. He was perfect. But his father was never going to understand that it was perfectly okay to be gay, that it wasn’t a choice, and that Patrick certainly wasn’t confused.

ZACK: *I don't know what 2 say. I'm so sorry. We're gonna make it. I promise.*

PAT: I know. U okay? What did your mom say?

ZACK: *She was pissed. Whatever. I'm ok.*

PAT: *I love u.*

ZACK: *I love u 2.*

Their last month of senior year sucked. While their classmates were making plans for graduation parties and prom, and spending their days with friends celebrating, Zack and Patrick were counting down the days until they could get the hell out and never look back.

Ever since Patrick had been grounded for speaking to Zack at school, his parents had been watching him like a hawk. Unless it was for school or baseball, he was barely able to leave the house. And unfortunately this year, Patrick couldn't get much joy from playing baseball. The rift with Scott had effectively divided the team and needless to say, the team was going to finish out the season without many wins.

It wasn't until three weeks later, the week before graduation, that he and Zack were finally able to meet at the pond.

“Geez. When my mom said she had to go to the store, and my dad still wasn't back from his golf game, I thought she was seriously gonna contemplate tying me up to make sure I couldn't leave.”

Patrick walked right into Zack's arms and for a good long while they just held each other.

“How long do you have?” Zack placed a kiss on Patrick's jaw, then his cheek, and then his mouth.

“To be safe, probably no more than half an hour.”

Zack nodded, and the next several minutes were taken up with mouths and tongues colliding, trying desperately to make up for lost time.

Even once their lips detached so they could have a conversation, they still stayed close. Patrick sat with his back against the big rock and Zack sat in his lap.

“How are things with your mom?” Patrick asked.

“She...” Zack took a shuddering breath. “She’s not coming to graduation.”

“What? You’re Valedictorian and she can’t even get over herself to come see her own son give a speech and graduate?”

“I guess I really shouldn’t have been surprised. I really doubt she’s going to be sorry to see me go when I tell her I’m leaving three days after graduation. She’ll probably be relieved.”

“She has to be crazy to not be so fucking proud of you.”

Zack ran his hands through Patrick’s hair and placed a lingering kiss on his forehead. “Thank you. I’m okay. Really. But tell me how you’re doing.”

“Honestly?” His face twisted. “Not good. My parents—” Patrick’s voice hitched and Zack pulled him closer. “They say something’s wrong with me, Zack. They literally think I’m sick in the head and that with therapy or some bullshit they can ‘cure’ me. In their world, when it comes to their son, homosexuality doesn’t exist.”

Zack held him tight as Patrick cried into his shoulder. He kissed his head and felt helpless that he couldn’t do more. “You don’t need to be fixed. You’re perfect and beautiful and I, for one, am so glad you’re gay because I don’t know what I would do if you didn’t love me the same way I love you.”

“I wish things could be different. I’m not gonna lie. But I would never want to change who I am. Loving you could never be wrong.”

Patrick’s arms tightened around his waist and Zack felt his heart surge. As long as they were together, they were going to be fine. They just had to be strong for another week and a half.

“I’ve done some research.” Zack pulled out a piece of paper from his back pocket and handed it to Patrick. “This is a list of a few apartment buildings that seem affordable and are right near campus. I checked ’em out online. The first one I think might be our best bet. It looks like they have several furnished

studios that are available. But we should call to make sure. We probably won't be able to go see anything in person before we're ready to move in, but there's an application online that we can send in."

"Awesome. Thanks for doing this." Patrick took the piece of paper and read it over. "I can call them. I know how much you hate phoning people you don't know."

Zack placed a kiss at his temple. Patrick knew him so well. "Thank you." He pulled another piece of paper out of his pocket, unfolded it, and handed it to Patrick. "I, um, I also wanted you to read this. It's my valedictorian speech. I wanted to know what you think."

He moved off Patrick's lap and sat beside him as he read, nervously chewing on his thumbnail. He had put in all the obligatory stuff—that they were all going off into the world to do great things and that they had accomplished so much by graduating—but he had also added in a few other things at the end.

After a few minutes, Patrick looked up. "Zack, this is amazing. Please tell me you're going to say these things."

Zack gave a short laugh. "Honestly, I don't know how I'm going to get up on that stage to say anything at all, let alone what I've written down. I'm so scared, Pat. They expect me to give a speech in front of hundreds of people. How am I supposed to do that? I'm gonna pass out, or throw up, or both."

Patrick looped an arm over Zack's shoulders and pressed his nose against Zack's cheek. "You aren't going to do either of those things. You're going to get up on that stage and give this amazing speech because you're the bravest person I know."

"Pat, I'm the opposite of brave. I can barely even talk to people who aren't you. I've been so lucky all these years, because I didn't need to have any courage. I had you."

Patrick turned Zack's head so their eyes met. "Zack, you're stronger than you know. Look at how you've handled things since last fall. You've been the strong one. I've mostly just been falling apart. But you're the one who figured

out a plan for after graduation. You're the one who gives me strength to just get through the days. And you're the one who's going to get up in front of the whole school and tell them what you really think."

"But I literally don't know if I can do it. I'm petrified. I can't even explain it. When there are people around I clam up and my brain stops functioning and I can't even speak. Not to mention, if I say these things, it will probably make our lives a living hell for the last few days we're at home."

Patrick leaned in and pressed their lips together. "We're leaving seventy-two hours after graduation. After making it this far, what're a few more days? Hell, I'll sleep in a tent down by the pond if I have to. Don't you dare let what our parents might say or do keep you from giving this part of your speech. So, when you get up on that stage, don't say it to all of them. Find me in the audience and just say it to me. You're going to be amazing. I promise."

CHAPTER TEN

June 5

On the day of their graduation, Zack almost choked on his Cheerios when his mother entered the kitchen wearing a floral dress, her hair drawn back into a bun.

“I didn’t know you had gotten the day off of work. You’re coming to graduation?” Zack could feel the hope bubbling up inside of him.

His mom glanced briefly in his direction, lips pressed in a hard line as she pulled on a cream-colored cardigan. “I figured it would look pretty bad if the valedictorian didn’t have any family in the audience.”

His heart sunk into his shoes. She wasn’t going because she cared about seeing her son graduate. She was going because of what people would think if she didn’t go. He was foolish to be so optimistic.

“Mom, there’s something I want to tell you.” He figured this was as good a time as any. “I’m going to move into the city for the summer and work on campus. I’m leaving in three days.”

She stared at him, and if his mother felt any emotion, she didn’t show it. “I think that’s a good idea. I know you need to get to the auditorium early, so we’ll take separate cars.” With that, she walked to the fridge, poured herself a glass of juice, and left the room.

He had told her he was leaving and she didn’t even care. In fact, she seemed in favor of it. Zack took a shaky breath and then choked down the rest of his cereal. He tried to refocus on graduation. He had a speech to mentally prepare for. His mother being in the audience didn’t change what he wanted to say. In fact, he was glad she would be there to hear it.

It was strange experiencing his own graduation ceremony from backstage. Principal Norris gave some opening remarks. The choir sang and the band played. Ms. Paul, the teacher voted on by the senior class to give the commencement address, spoke. Zack tried to form some connection, to feel some bond with the school and his graduating class, but he couldn’t. He had

always been on the outside looking in, but this past year had just solidified that this was not where he fit in.

The stage manager walked up to him and gently touched his shoulder. “Your speech is next.”

Zack jerked his head up and down and he smoothed the crumpled piece of paper he held in his sweaty hands. With those four spoken words, his stomach began to rebel and the big red curtain seemed to swim in front of him. He closed his eyes and inhaled and exhaled deeply, but the room just began to spin even more and his nausea increased.

“And now for this year’s Valedictorian, Zack Larson.”

He wasn’t going to be able to do this. Zack was quite sure that if he opened his mouth he would vomit. He heard a smattering of polite applause, and the stage manager pulled back the curtain and gave him an encouraging smile. As he peeked through the curtain and saw the podium where he was expected to stand and the hundreds of people sitting in the auditorium, he was quite sure this was his own personal version of hell.

He had no idea how his feet began to move, but he somehow found himself standing in front of the podium. With trembling hands, he placed the mangled piece of paper that held his speech on the podium and placed his hands on either side, partly to get them to stop shaking and partly to help keep himself upright.

Zack’s heart pounded in his chest as he blinked rapidly, his eyes adjusting to the harsh stage lights. Scanning the audience, he saw a sea of students and parents staring at him, waiting for him to begin. He was never going to be able to find Patrick in the mass of bodies. Panic began to set in, and his grip on the podium became white-knuckled as his legs began to wobble. The silence stretched on, he began to feel woozy, and Zack was terrified his worst fear would be realized and he would actually faint right there on stage.

Then a person about half way back in the section where the graduating class was sitting stood up halfway in their seat and began to wave. Zack sucked in his breath. It was Patrick. Eyes focused on his best friend, he took a breath. Then another one. And finally he loosened his death grip on the

podium. He could do this. He let all the other people fade away until it was just him and Patrick in the auditorium.

“Good afternoon. It’s a privilege to be speaking to you today as Valedictorian. And I’m so proud of all of us, the class of 2004...”

He spoke about what a great accomplishment it was to be graduating. He talked of the wonderful experiences that lay ahead and the great things they would all achieve. The words were empty, but he knew that’s what everyone wanted to hear. It wasn’t until the last part of his speech that he really spoke from the heart and said what he really wanted to say.

“As we go out into the world to make our mark on it, I urge you all to practice tolerance and acceptance. Just because we grew up in a small town doesn’t mean we have to have small town mentalities. Just because something is less common, doesn’t mean it’s abnormal. And just because something is different, doesn’t make it wrong. Throughout our lives we will meet people with divergent backgrounds and beliefs, varying ethnic origins, and even people with different sexual orientations.”

A rippling murmur went through the audience and Zack paused to lick his lips. He could see Patrick smiling at him, eyes fixed on his. He took a breath and continued.

“I challenge each and every one of you to respect and learn from those who are different from you, instead of falling back on scorn and hate. Because at the end of the day, we are all human and far, far more alike than we are different. Remember that, Class of 2004.”

Zack wasn’t perturbed by the unsure applause as he exited the stage. He was simply giddy with relief that he had gotten through his speech and that he was out of the spotlight. He hadn’t exactly come out to the school, but he had said what he wanted to say.

The next hour was a blur of parading across the stage to collect a scroll of paper, raucous applause, and blue mortarboards being tossed into the air.

After the ceremony ended, it was mayhem as parents, relatives and graduates attempted to find each other in the mass of people.

Zack felt compelled to just slip off to his car and drive home. It was crowded and loud and he wasn't sure how he would be received by his fellow classmates after his speech and all too aware of what his mother would think. He guessed it wouldn't do, though, to simply take off. If he had the guts to get up on stage in front of everyone and give a speech, he had the guts to stick around for the aftermath.

He felt a little less claustrophobic once he left the auditorium and stepped out onto the lawn. Scanning the people milling around and the pockets of graduates grouped together, laughing, hugging, and taking pictures, he tried to find his mother.

“What. The. Fuck.”

As it turned out, Scott found him first. Zack tensed as he turned in the direction of the voice. “What do you want, Scott?”

“So, you thought you'd just ruin graduation for the rest of us with your speech? Fag. Trying to make excuses for being a completely disgusting gay freak?”

“Believe it or not, Scott, my speech wasn't just about being gay. And if that's all you got out of it, you really missed the point and I really feel sorry for you, your ignorance, and your teeny tiny little brain.” Freedom was only three days away and Zack just couldn't bring himself to be scared of Scott anymore.

“You little fucking faggot! How dare—”

A blur of blue whooshed past Zack on his left and then there was the sickening sound of a fist colliding with a face. Before Zack even quite registered what had happened, Scott was on the ground whimpering, clutching his nose, which was gushing blood, and Patrick was standing at Zack's side.

“Listen to me you sack of shit, never talk to Zack ever again. And if you knew what was good for you, you'd never use that word again.” Patrick put an arm over Zack's shoulders and turned to him. “C'mon.”

A small crowd of shocked bystanders was gathering around Scott and Zack was still a bit dazed as Patrick led him away. “I, for one, loved your speech.” Patrick squeezed his shoulder.

Zack smiled. “Thanks.”

“What the hell? Did you just punch a boy?”

The small feeling of victory dissipated quickly as Patrick’s parents rushed toward them. Patrick’s dad looked like he was about to commit murder and his mother looked as if she might faint.

“Answer me, Patrick! And what are you doing with Zack?” Zack took a step back as Mr. Martin turned his attentions to him. “You get away from my son! You hear me? You’ve done enough damage! This is all your fault!”

“Hold it right there!”

Zack cringed as he saw his mother, looking positively livid, walking toward them.

“You need to stop blaming my son for everything, Peter. You and Beverley need to take responsibility for your own son.” In a completely twisted way, it was almost funny hearing his mother defend him. “Though, I have no idea what you were thinking with that speech.” She turned to Zack. “Did you really have to bring... sexual orientation in to it? What were you thinking? I don’t know what has happened to you, but—”

“Enough. Everyone just shut up!” Patrick held up his hands.

Zack eyed a few other groups of graduates and families that were close by. A few had glanced in the direction of their outburst, but there was so much commotion no one really seemed to be paying them much attention.

“How dare you speak to us like—”

“Dad, seriously? Stop. Here’s the deal, and I’m only gonna say this once. You all have put Zack and I through hell this year. Not because we’ve done anything wrong, but because you are ignorant bigots who are completely afraid of anything that you don’t perceive as normal. But let me tell you something. I love him.” Patrick pointed to Zack. “He’s my best friend and I’m in love with him.”

“How can you say that? Patrick, honey, you need help.” Mrs. Martin was sobbing.

“No, Mom. I don’t. There’s nothing wrong with me and there’s nothing wrong with Zack. And nothing is going to keep us apart. I’m just sorry you couldn’t accept us for who we are. And Mom, Dad, I guess this is as good a time to tell you as any, but I’m moving out as soon as I turn eighteen. So in three days.” Patrick turned to Zack. “You ready to get out of here?”

Zack fought back tears as he stared at his brave and beautiful best friend. “Absolutely.”

Patrick slung an arm around Zack’s shoulders as they walked away from their stunned parents.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

June 8

It was still very early when his phone buzzed, but Zack had already been up for hours. He finished taping up his last box and then reached for his phone.

PAT: Happy B-day

Zack smiled and sat down on the edge of his bed.

ZACK: Same 2 u. U packed?

PAT: Yup. Should be able to go by noon.

ZACK: k

It was still surreal to think that after months and months of painful waiting, the day had finally come and they were moving out. Their application for a furnished studio apartment in a building not a five-minute walk from campus had been approved. They would sign the lease when they showed up that afternoon and then they could move right in. Almost all the other tenants were U of M students as well and there was even a small park across the street from the building. It was going to be great.

They had already told Brad and Joel of their plans. They would see both of them over the summer before Brad and Joel went off to the University of Iowa together and they also promised to visit Zack and Patrick when they were back for holidays.

They had gotten lucky with their parents' schedules. Zack's mom would be leaving for work in a few hours. Patrick's dad would be at work all day and Patrick's mom had a hair and nail appointment so she would be out of the house for a few hours as well. After graduation, all they wanted was to leave without another scene. There really wasn't anything left to say anyway.

When it was time to pick up the small U-Haul trailer he had reserved online, Zack climbed the stairs unsure what to expect when he stepped out onto the main floor of the house. He had been studiously avoiding his mother since graduation, staying downstairs whenever she was home, but he knew she

hadn't left for work yet. He had thought about just waiting until she had left, but he felt compelled to try to talk to her one last time.

When he heard her coming down the hall, he backed up against the door leading downstairs, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

“Bye, Mom.”

She halted on her way to the front door. Her back was to him, but Zack could see she was rigid and tense.

“I... I just wanted to let you know I won't be here when you get back. I'm moving out today.”

There was a long pause before she said, “I think that's for the best.”

“Y-you really can't be okay with me being gay, can you?”

She shuddered. “Of course I can't. I don't understand why anyone would choose such an unnatural lifestyle.” She still didn't turn to look at him, and Zack's heart twisted in his chest. “But it's clear you aren't coming to your senses, so I would prefer it if you were no longer in my house.” With that, she continued walking toward the front entryway and out of view. Zack heard the front door slam shut with finality behind her.

Zack was glad for the support of the wall behind him as he took several gasping breaths. He felt like he'd had the wind knocked out of him as he realized that he would probably never see her again. She thought it was a choice. But it wasn't. It was who he was and she would never understand that what he and Patrick had was beautiful.

Once he had returned with the trailer attached to the back of his Taurus, Zack spent the remainder of the morning carrying out boxes full of his clothes, books, and other keepsakes. Just as he was loading his last box, he heard the Martins' garage door open and watched as Mrs. Martin backed her car down the driveway and drove down the street. Not a minute later, the front door of the house opened and Patrick was jogging toward him.

“Hey.”

Zack didn't even have time to reply before Patrick's arms were around him. "Hey, yourself." His words were muffled as he pressed his face into Patrick's neck, breathing him in.

"Happy Birthday, Zack." Patrick tipped his head to the side and nudged Zack's head with his shoulder so their lips could meet. It was strange kissing out in the open, but it was exhilarating at the same time.

"Happy Birthday, Pat." Zack pulled Patrick's face forward for one more kiss. "You ready to load up your stuff?"

"Absolutely."

It was strange being back inside the Martins' house. As he carried down a box from Patrick's bedroom, he realized it was also the last time he would be in this house.

Between the two of them, it didn't take long to load Patrick's things. As Patrick shut the trailer door with all of their belongings inside, the finality of the situation hit Zack. They wouldn't be coming back and they would effectively be cutting off all ties to their families. He looked from his house to Patrick's and didn't even realize he had begun shaking until Patrick's steady hands came to rest on his shoulders. Zack leaned back into Patrick's sturdy chest and took a deep breath.

"You okay?" Patrick's hands massaged his shoulders for a moment before he wrapped his arms around Zack.

"Yeah. It's just, this is it. I wish..." He wished that so many things had been different. He wished the last year had been easier. He wished their parents understood. He wished they didn't come from such an intolerant place. He wished it didn't hurt so much.

"I know." Patrick's arms tightened around him. "Me too."

Zack turned in Patrick's arms, and they both held each other, Zack silently crying into Patrick's shoulder, as they both acknowledged their loss.

"Any second thoughts?" Patrick asked.

Zack lifted his head so he could look into Patrick's eyes. Of all the things he wished he could change, being gay wasn't one of them. He wouldn't change loving Patrick for the world. "Not one."

Patrick kissed him hard. "Let's go." They turned to walk to the front of the car, but Patrick stopped and looked back, his eyes focusing on the woods between their two houses and the parting in the underbrush that you could just make out from where they stood. "You wanna go to the pond one last time?"

Zack thought about it. So many of his favorite memories could be tied to the pond. It was where they had pledged to be best friends forever and where Patrick had kissed him for the first time. But it was also the place where they had had to hide to be together and where they had shared so much pain.

"No." He slowly shook his head. "I just want the future. I don't want to go back."

"Okay." Patrick traced a hand down his spine and kissed his temple. "Want me to drive?"

"Yeah."

Zack handed over his keys and got in the passenger seat of his old Taurus. As Patrick started the engine, he placed his hand palm up on the middle console. Zack threaded his fingers with Patrick's and gripped tightly. As they pulled out of the cul-de-sac and began driving down the street, Zack didn't look back.

EPILOGUE

Late May 2005

It was hard to believe their freshman year of college was almost over. Finals were just a week away. It was a beautiful sunny day and Zack and Patrick had opted to study outside in the small park across the street from their apartment building. They had both tossed their books to the side to take a little break and Zack scooted back so he could lean against Patrick. Smiling, Patrick looped an arm around Zack's shoulders so his hand rested on Zack's chest. Zack brought his own hand up to thread their fingers together and shut his eyes for a moment, basking in the warmth of the sun and of Patrick.

He was so happy. They were both out and proud and never hid their relationship from anyone at college. They had even joined the GLBTQ group on campus as well as the Gay-Straight Alliance, knowing all too well the importance of education and tolerance. Of course, it still hurt that their own families hadn't accepted them, but they had made so many wonderful friends and formed a new family of people that loved and accepted them for who they were. And, they had each other.

Zack opened his eyes and turned his head to the side, focusing on the Celtic knot that always hung at the hollow of Patrick's throat.

"Pat?"

"Hmm?"

"Tell me you'll always love me."

Patrick just leaned down and kissed him, his fingers caressing the silver band that Zack never removed from the ring finger on his right hand. Patrick didn't have to say anything. Zack already knew the answer.

THE END

Author Bio

Lily Grace hails from the Midwest but currently resides in the DC metro area. Her background is in public health and the life sciences and she spends her days working as a health care consultant. When she's not busy being a nerdy scientist she curls up with her laptop and dreams up romantic stories about beautiful men.

She's a fan of loud rock concerts, cooking, shoe shopping, and strawberry ice cream. She loves love, hates cleaning, and is still amazed that when she decided on a whim to try writing a story a few years back that it would lead to having her works published.

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