

Pepper Espinoza

My
Only
Home

My Only Home
by Pepper Espinoza

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By

PEPPER ESPINOZA

* * * *

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Also By Pepper Espinoza

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CHAPTER 1

Noah knew he hadn't been gone long enough to see any real changes, but he was still surprised when he drove into town and everything was exactly the same. The Welcome to Mountain View sign was slightly more faded, and the light board advertising that night's football game seemed to be half burnt-out, but those were the only things he noticed right away. The streets were mostly empty, the sidewalks covered in a light dusting of snow. The gray afternoon light reflected off the storefronts and into his eyes, forcing him to slow down.

He knew that if he cruised over to the high school, the small lot would be full of battered pick-ups, the football team would be practicing on the muddy, slushy field, and the drive-in next door would be packed with kids buying shakes and chicken baskets. Noah did not find this knowledge comforting. If anything, it unnerved him. Life wasn't meant to be this static. Every time he heard somebody waxing nostalgic about the "good old days," he had to suppress a shudder. What was so great about never moving forward?

That question had been on his mind a lot since his father called. He was holding on to that damned house and that twice-damned store so hard he was bleeding. It was killing him. And why couldn't he just walk away?

Noah shook his head and made a left turn. It took only three minutes to drive from the center of town to the outskirts where the monstrosity he used to call "home" was

located. He passed it without slowing. His father's old Scout wasn't in the driveway, and he didn't have a key anymore. Or any desire to wait in that musty place by himself.

Another left, and then a right brought him to Center Street. The Mountain Diner was just where he remembered it, with the same green-tinted windows, and the same blue Jeep parked in the driveway. Noah couldn't wait to get the fuck out of there. He parked beside it and took a moment to straighten his tie before exiting his car.

A teenage girl was sitting at the counter, a pencil behind her ear, and a notebook in front of her. Noah looked around the empty restaurant, but didn't see anybody else. The apron made him think she was the waitress, but maybe kids were wearing aprons these days. He supposed any weird thing was possible in Mountain View. She didn't even look up as he took a seat.

There was a menu on the table—maybe abandoned there by somebody who wasn't so patient about being ignored. Noah shrugged and began looking it over. He had some time to kill, and he wasn't very hungry. He didn't look up again until the young lady sat a glass of water next to his hand and smacked her gum.

"Can I get you something?"

"What's your special?" Noah asked, without looking up.

"Hey, Luke! What're the specials?"

Noah's head snapped up.

"Chicken fried steak," a familiar voice shouted back.

Noah closed his eyes. He knew he was going to see Lucas Wesson sooner or later, but he had no idea it would be so

soon. He needed a few more days in town, a few more days to readjust to the life he had happily abandoned. And what was Lucas doing there anyway? Had he made a drastic career change and discovered his dream was to be short-order cook?

The girl arched her eyebrow. "Well?"

"That sounds great," Noah said quickly, looking down again.

"What about a drink?"

"Water's fine. Thanks."

He forced himself to take a deep breath as she walked away. So what if Lucas was there? That didn't mean he had to see him. And even if they did run into each other, what did he think was going to happen? Luke would no doubt be happy to see him, and Noah would more than welcome a familiar face. A familiar face he didn't despise. His heart thudded in his ears, but he took a sip of water and pretended everything was fine. Normal. Nothing to panic about.

Noah busied himself with studying the gold pattern on the marble table top, tracing its intricacies and carefully keeping his head down. That was normal. He was in no way panicking about seeing his best friend.

The best friend he hadn't talked to in over five years.

Life's crazy. He probably understands.

But that wasn't why Noah had avoided contacting him, and they probably both knew it.

"Maggie said she thought she recognized you," Lucas said from behind him. "The girl was only eleven the last time she saw you, but I guess she's got a good eye."

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Noah lifted his head slowly, his smile firmly in place by the time he looked up to meet Lucas's gaze. "Maggie? Maggie Frank?"

Lucas nodded.

Noah looked back to the girl and shook his head. "I should have known the second I walked through the door. She looks just like her mother."

Lucas smiled. "Rose was never that pretty."

Noah's smile shifted, became something genuine. "I didn't expect to see you here, Luke."

"I didn't expect to see you at all," Lucas returned lightly. He slid into the booth and regarded Noah thoughtfully. "In all the diners in all the world, huh?"

"To be fair, this is the only place in town," Noah pointed out.

"For now. I plan to expand."

Noah frowned and looked around the old diner, noticing for the first time that the décor had been updated. "You ... bought this place?"

Lucas leaned back in the booth. "It seemed like a good idea at the time. I'm no hotshot Hollywood producer, but it pays the bills."

Noah snorted. "I'm no hotshot Hollywood producer either."

"Do you live in Hollywood? Do you produce things?"

"Yes."

Lucas grinned, satisfied. "Then there you go."

Noah laughed, a sudden explosion of laughter that seemed too loud in the nearly empty dining room. "God, I've missed you."

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A hint of sadness touched Lucas's eyes. "I missed you, too."

"I should have called. Should have let you know I was coming to town at least."

"Oh, I expected you."

"How ... oh, Dad?"

Lucas nodded. "Called me the day before yesterday. Probably called the whole town. I'm surprised there wasn't a welcoming committee waiting for you."

Noah grimaced. "I came to town a bit earlier than expected. I might have just missed them."

"Well, I'm glad you made it by today. I imagine your social calendar will be packed for the next several days or so. Everybody will want a chance to see the local celebrity."

Maggie brought his plate over then and offered Noah a shy smile. Noah smiled back. Now that he knew Rose Frank was her mother, he couldn't stop seeing the resemblance. It was uncanny. She blushed a little at the smile and scurried away.

"See?" Luke said.

Noah waved his fork dismissively. "How long have you owned this place?"

"About three years now. I came into some money and thought it was a good investment."

"Was it?"

Lucas shrugged. "Some days are better than others."

"I thought you planned to leave this place," Noah said, sprinkling salt on his gravy-drenched steak. "Weren't you going to Florida for school?"

"Something came up."

Noah cut into the meat and took a bite. "Hey, this is really good. Did you cook it?"

Lucas laughed and held up his hands. "I just do the buying around here. Gus is in charge of cooking."

"Gus?"

"You don't know him. He came here from Idaho. Wanted to see a big city."

Noah snorted. "Well, tell him he does fine work." He took another bite and chewed it thoughtfully. "It seems like we have a lot to catch up on. I'm supposed to meet Dad in about an hour, but do you want to go out later? The Spur is still open, right? Maybe we can get a drink."

"Sorry. I can't tonight."

"Oh." Noah didn't mean to let his disappointment show, but he didn't do a very good job of hiding it.

"I want to," Lucas said quickly.

"No, I know. It's not like the whole world comes to a stop just because I'm back in town. Regardless of what my welcoming party says."

Lucas stood up. "Don't worry about this. It's on me."

"What about tomorrow night?" Noah blurted.

Lucas paused. "Noah, I..." He nodded. "I think tomorrow night might work. Come by the diner after eight, if you can."

"I'll be here," Noah promised.

* * * *

John Hill had aged forty years when he turned twenty-five. Every single picture Noah had ever seen of his father showed a man who looked like he was about to retire. Or die of old

age. He had asked his mother once if there was any reason—external or internal—for his father to be so damned old, but she hadn't known what he was talking about.

Despite this, Noah wasn't prepared for the bent-over man who hobbled into the house, leaning heavily on a cane. An old gray hat was pulled low over his eyes, and he didn't seem to notice his son at all. He made his way into the kitchen, only tossing his hat aside once he had pulled a beer out of the fridge. Closing his eyes, he took a long swallow and sighed with satisfaction.

"Rough day?" Noah asked.

John didn't jump, or open his eyes. "I had to install an air conditioner today."

Noah's eyes widened. "By yourself?"

"No, no, that Billick kid helped out. He's a good boy. Ron Billick's son. Did you know ol' Ron?"

"Yeah, I think so. Look, do you want me to get you something to eat? I could make a sandwich, or we can go to the diner," Noah offered, alarmed by the prominent collar bone, the gauntness of his cheeks, and the way his shirt hung off his frame.

"No, I'm going to bed."

"Look, Dad, I thought we could talk tonight about..."

"Plenty of time tomorrow, isn't there? You're not leaving again in the morning, are you?"

Noah paused, surprised by John's tone. "No. No, there's plenty of time tomorrow."

"Good, I'm going to bed."

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Noah nodded, feeling like he was ten once again, and trying desperately to stay out from under his father's feet. "I'm going to go for a drive."

John left the empty bottle on the counter and made his way over to the stairs. "I'm going to bed."

Noah hadn't planned to go for a drive that night, but he didn't exactly feel welcome. He followed John over to the stairs, standing there silently as the older man slowly disappeared. When Noah heard the bathroom door close, he turned on his heel and let himself out the front door.

There seemed to be about a million stars overhead, twinkling and dancing against the blue sky. His breath caught in his throat, and all he could do was stare at the stunning view with an open mouth. When he had first moved to Los Angeles, he couldn't help but notice the lack of stars in the sky. He missed them at first, feeling as though a part of him had been lost somehow. Gradually, he stopped noticing. And then he just ... forgot. He stopped looking at the black and silver and orange sky expecting to see a splay of golden light.

Now there they were again. And he had to readjust his vision, his expectations, to their glory.

Noah shook his head and walked to his car, looking up as a light went on overhead. He could see his father's outline in the window, and wondered what he was doing here. John had never asked him to come out and help, but that seemed to be the subtext to all their conversations. Maybe he had misread John? It wouldn't be the first time.

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He briefly thought of Lucas's familiar trim form, his easy smile, the laughter in his eyes. Maybe he had his own reasons for returning to Mountain View.

Maybe.

Noah drove without consciously admitting where he was going. The route was familiar, all the bumps, potholes, and curves exactly the way he remembered. Soon, he left the lights of the town behind him, winding deeper into the canyon, climbing in altitude with each mile.

There was a turnout in the road, a rest stop that overlooked Soldier Lake. In the calm night, the water was a perfect mirror, bringing the sky to Earth with only the occasional ripple. Noah leaned against the hood of his car, a cigarette that he found in his glove box dangling from his lips. He wished he had a drink to go along with it. He needed a beer.

It was easy to recall the memory of the last time he had been there, in that spot, on a similar night. That memory was never far from his mind. It snuck up on him once or twice a month, making his gut twist and his chest ache. Sometimes it made his cock stir to life as well. He thought of it with longing, with shame, with lust, with need, with embarrassment, and ultimately, he pushed it aside, unable to think about it at all.

But the specters of that night were still there. He could almost see the younger versions of themselves, laying out on a blanket and staring up at the stars, passing a bottle of cheap wine between them. It always frustrated Noah that that

part of the memory was so clear, and the rest, the part that mattered, was so grainy and distant.

"You'll miss the stars," Noah mouthed, staring up at the sky.

* * * *

Lucas snorted. "And you won't?"

"I don't spend as much time gawking at them as you do," Noah reminded him, taking the bottle.

"I don't *gawk* at them. I study them. Through a telescope."

"Study them for what?"

"Because they're interesting."

"I'm just saying," Noah said, lifting the bottle to his lips, "you're going to miss them when you move to the city."

"Probably. But it's not like they're going anywhere. I can always drive out to the country and spend a few hours *studying* them." Lucas reached for the bottle. "But I hadn't really given it much thought."

"I have."

"You think a lot about my hobbies, Noah?"

Noah smiled and looked at Lucas sideways. The other man was staring straight ahead, the silver light from the moon bathing his features. "I meant, I think a lot about what it means to leave. What it means to finally get out of here."

"Is it really so bad here?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"When are you going to go? I spoke to Ron today, and he didn't mention that you gave your notice or anything."

"Noah..." Lucas rolled onto his side, propping himself on his elbow. Noah couldn't read his eyes in the dim light, but he didn't like the tone of his voice. "I don't know if..."

"Don't tell me you don't know if you're leaving," Noah warned, turning on his side as well. "Don't. Why did we put up with that hellhole for the past five years? So we could finally save up enough money to leave."

"I don't know if I can leave any time soon," Lucas continued softly, as though Noah hadn't interrupted him. "I don't have as much money as you do. Plus, there's Lilah to consider..."

"Break up with her," Noah said promptly. Lucas only smiled wryly. It wasn't the first time Noah had suggested this obvious solution. He never made it a secret that he didn't like Luke's long-time girlfriend. His disdain never bothered Lilah, because she didn't like him either.

"I love her."

"Lots of people have long-distance relationships, Luke."

Lucas shook his head. "Why does it matter so much to you? I'm not holding you back. No decision I make will change the fact that you're leaving tomorrow for California."

"I know. It's just..." *I wish you were coming with me.* But Luke never even indicated he wanted to live in Los Angeles. Noah had always figured that if he couldn't convince Lucas to go with him, at least he could convince his best friend to start his life somewhere else, somewhere where he had a real chance. "You deserve better than this."

"I like it here. I'll miss you, though."

"I'll still visit on holidays."

Lucas smiled, almost sadly. "No, you won't. Your dad might believe that, but I know you too well."

There was no point in denying it. Noah didn't have any real intention to come back, ever. That was another reason he wanted Lucas to leave as well. A part of him suspected it would be easier to stay in contact with his best friend if they both escaped. Even if they escaped to opposite ends of the country.

Noah took the bottle and drank most of what remained of the bittersweet liquid, waiting for the pleasant burn to begin in his belly. "Maybe you can come and visit me, then."

"And you can introduce me to all of your famous friends?"

"I doubt I'll know anybody famous. I've just got a part-time job at a small station."

"Knowing you, you'll own the entire station in five years."

Noah began peeling the label from the bottle. "Yeah. Right."

"Hey."

He looked up. "What?"

"You're going to do fine, Noah. You can take my word for it. Have I ever been wrong before?"

Noah nodded. That was the great thing about Lucas. He believed in him when Noah couldn't even believe in himself. He always had. It suddenly occurred to him that he didn't know what he was going to do, how he was going to take care of himself, without Luke in his life. They had been together, practically inseparable, since the first grade. Nobody was closer to Noah than Luke, and nobody meant more to him.

Something warmer than the wine bubbled in his chest, and he opened his mouth, unsure of what was going to come out. He made a strangled sound, like the words were lodged in his throat. He closed his mouth again, and Luke tilted his head, regarding him curiously.

"You okay there? You look a little..."

Noah never found out what he was going to say. He leaned forward and cut off Luke's question with a whisper of a kiss. Luke's lips were dry and warm and soft, and when they parted in surprise, Noah took advantage of it, moving to deepen the kiss. He reached for Lucas with his free hand, holding his shoulder, while he explored more and more of Luke's mouth.

Noah broke the caress first. He leaned back, wiping his lips self-consciously, and tried to gauge his friend's reaction.

"Noah..."

* * * *

Noah opened his eyes and growled with frustration. What had happened? What had Lucas said? Had they kissed again? Had they done more? Did Luke push him away? How did he get that home that night?

Everything from the kiss to when he woke up the next morning wasn't just a blur, it was *gone*. Anything could have happened in those hours. And he had no clues when he woke up. No note from Luke, no signs on his body that anything more happened, no residual feelings—nothing except a hangover and a flush of embarrassment. Did it matter if

anything happened after the kiss? Wasn't the kiss bad enough?

The kiss had been bad enough to make him run away and never look back. Ultimately, it didn't matter how Luke had reacted. Noah was leaving and Luke was in love with Lilah, and that's all that really matter. It occurred to him once or twice that it would be as easy as picking up the phone to find out what had occurred, to find out what, exactly, he was hiding from.

But the only thing easier than picking up the phone was *not* picking up the phone. The only thing easier than facing his feelings was pretending that he didn't have any feelings at all. The only thing easier than keeping up his closest friendship was letting it slip away, a casualty to time, and distance, and avoidance. And shame.

Noah rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to clear his head. It didn't seem like Lucas was holding a grudge against him. Noah took that as a good sign. He didn't know if his need to reconnect was just a selfish indulgence, but he did know that the only thing he regretted was the loss of their friendship.

Noah got back in his car, but he didn't start the engine. Instead, he dropped the chair back and watched the sky through the window, covering himself with his jacket to ward off the chill. It wasn't nearly as comfortable as a bed, but he didn't relish the thought of returning home. He was content to lay there, letting his mind drift from one subject to the next, from one memory to another.

Somehow, it always came back to Luke.

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CHAPTER 2

The diner was packed. There was a single seat available at the bar, and he had to fight his way through parties waiting to pay their bills and waiting to be seated to claim it. There seemed to be a wide variety of people, and most surprising of all, he didn't recognize a good number of them. Where were they coming from? Did the diner hold a regional attraction? Were people willing to travel some distance to eat there?

He ordered a cup of coffee once he caught the eye of a waiter—another person he didn't recognize—and began searching the room for any signs of Lucas. The staff was bustling, and he heard the cooks in the kitchen shouting and banging dishes. The most delicious smells were wafting into the dining area. Noah hadn't been hungry before, but as the waiters paraded past him with trays of food, his stomach growled. Everything looked good. He couldn't really judge the quality of food based on the previous day's meal. He had eaten it, but he hadn't tasted a single bite. He had been too distracted.

A woman holding a small girl fought her way to the bar and looked around for a seat. The girl's pale face peeked over the woman's shoulder, and he could tell by her eyes alone that she was ill. Noah stood up and tapped the woman's shoulder. "Excuse me."

She turned around and Noah about fell down. His first reaction was *Lilah*. "Yes?"

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When she spoke, Noah realized it wasn't Lilah at all. It was her sister, Marty. He gestured at his abandoned stool.

"Please, sit down."

She smiled gratefully. "I didn't want to come by tonight because it's always gets so crowded on Fridays, but..."

"I want my Daddy," the little girl said faintly. She sounded so tired and sick that Noah actually felt his heart twist a little.

"I know you do." Marty rubbed her back. "He'll be out in a minute, I promise."

"Look, I don't know if you remember me..."

Marty smiled. "I remember you, Noah. It's good to see you."

Noah returned her smile. "It's good to see you, too." He nodded toward the child. "She doesn't look well."

Marty shook her head. "No. I think she's got another ear infection. And when Lily gets like this, nobody can make her happy except her father."

Noah nodded and tried to think of something else to say. Nobody in his circle of friends had children. "She's a cute kid. She looks just like you."

Marty seemed amused by that. "Well, there is a family resemblance..."

Before Noah could ask her what she meant, Lily turned her head and her eyes brightened. "Daddy!"

"Well, this a surprise," Luke said, approaching them.

Marty shook her head. "I'm sorry. She started getting a fever earlier this afternoon. It was just a light one, but about an hour ago, she started pulling on her ear and crying for you. Classic symptoms..."

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Luke nodded and held his arms out. Lily practically jumped into his embrace, her chubby arms wrapping around his neck tightly. "Don't you feel well, sweetheart?"

She shook her head, burying her face in his shoulder.

He rubbed her back and spoke soothingly. "Then I'll take you home and read you a story." He looked at Marty. "Did you try to call my cell? I forgot to turn it on this afternoon."

She rolled her eyes. "You know, that phone doesn't do you any good if you don't remember to turn it on."

"I know, I know." Lucas turned and acknowledged Noah for the first time. "I'm really sorry about this. Marty was supposed to take Lily for me tonight, but if she's running a fever, I'm going to have to take her home."

Noah hadn't even blinked since Luke's arrival. All he could do was stare at the little girl and his friend, and then back to the girl. "She's your daughter?"

Lucas nodded. "You didn't know? I guess you wouldn't..."

Noah felt a stab of guilt. "I hadn't heard..."

"I'm going to have to take a rain check on tonight." He grimaced. "This whole weekend is bad for me. Especially if I have to take her to the doctor tomorrow."

"I wanna go home, Daddy."

"I know you do, sweetheart. I just need to ... oh, damn. Marty, my car is having alternator trouble again. Do you think you could..."

"I'll give you a ride," Noah said quickly.

"You don't have to do that."

"Really, I don't mind. I'm happy to do it."

Luke smiled. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

Marty kissed Lily's cheek and swept a dark curl from her forehead. "I'll come see you tomorrow, okay?"

Lily nodded. "I love you, Auntie."

"I love you, too, baby." She kissed Luke's cheek. "I'm sure she'll be feeling better in the morning. I'll go get her car seat for you."

Luke nodded. "Thanks."

She turned to Noah. "How long are you going to be around, stranger?"

"Um." Noah's mind seemed to be about a minute behind everybody else's. "I guess about a week."

"Well, I hope I'll see you again. Walk me out, and I'll give you the carseat."

He fished his keys out of his pocket and passed them to Luke. "I've got the green Toyota parked out on the street. I'll meet you there."

"No problem."

Lucas fell in step behind Marty as she walked out of the diner and crossed the parking lot. He was operating on autopilot, his mind entirely focused with the mystery of Luke's daughter. Clearly, Lilah was the mother. But nobody mentioned her at all. Noah didn't relish the thought of seeing Lilah again, but he didn't want to miss any opportunity to spend time with Lucas either.

Marty wrestled the car seat out of her backseat and passed it to him. "Thanks for giving him a ride. I don't mind, but I am beat. That little girl is like an energy vampire."

Noah could only nod. He didn't know what to think of that little girl at all.

Lucas was waiting for him in the passenger seat, cradling Lily's sleeping form.

"I don't know how to secure this."

"See the slots on the back there? Just slide the seat belt through that."

Noah felt like he was all thumbs, and it took much longer than it should have to get the car seat situated. He avoided looking at Lucas, certain his bewilderment at the situation was plain on his face. Once the seat was in, he stepped back and Lucas carefully buckled Lily into place.

Neither of them spoke until Noah pulled out of the parking lot.

"I thought maybe John told you."

"No. No, he never mentioned it."

"Clearly. I don't think I've seen you so surprised since we were twelve."

"What happened when we were twelve?"

"Ted Small pulled your pants down in front of Becky."

"Actually, I think this was a bit more shocking." Noah glanced at them out of the corner of his eye. "How old is she?"

"Nearly four."

"And ... is she Lilah's?"

"Yes. Though she's no longer in the picture."

"Oh." Noah had about a thousand questions, but kept them to himself. This wasn't the time to play catch up. Maybe Lucas didn't want to talk about it in front of Lily. "Where do you live now?"

"On the corner of Second and Alpine."

"In that old yellow house?"

"It's green now."

"I can't believe you have a daughter and I never knew."

"You never asked."

Noah was saved from responding by the sudden sound of Lily's small voice. "My ear hurts."

"Shh, I know. We're going to go home and make it all better."

"Who is this, Daddy?"

Noah's hands tightened on the wheel, and he forced himself to focus on the road instead of stealing another glance at Luke's face. "This is Noah. He's an old friend. I grew up with him."

"Like Caroline is my friend?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Does he know Mommy, too?"

"He knew her."

"Oh." Lily yawned widely. "Can Annie sleep in my room tonight?"

"Yes, that's fine." Luke looked up. "You need to turn right here, Noah."

Noah nodded. Nobody spoke for the rest of the short journey. The few questions Lily asked seemed to exhaust her, and Noah was still trying to make sense of all this new information. He grasped the larger details of the situation. Lilah and Lucas had a daughter nearly four years ago. This daughter's name was Lily. At first glance, Lily looked like her mother, but every time he looked at her, he saw more of Lucas in her face. Lily was sick with an ear infection, and

Lucas needed to take care of her. All of this made sense on a basic level.

But he was still having a hard time processing everything.

Noah followed Luke up the walkway to his front door, marveling at how easy he moved with the girl attached to his neck. He unlocked the front door, flipped on the lights, and moved through the house without breaking stride, one arm wrapped firmly around his daughter. Noah hung back two or three paces, following but trying not to intrude.

"There's a bottle of pink medicine in the fridge and a box of juice. Can you bring those to her bedroom? First door on the right."

Noah nodded, happy to do something other than stand around awkwardly. He made his way into the kitchen, avoiding all the toys, books, and videos strewn across the floor. Despite the clutter in the living room, the house looked well kept, and Noah had to admit he was impressed. He could barely keep his own one bedroom apartment livable. Luke's house was warm, inviting, and clearly the home to a young child—and possibly a cat.

Noah found the medicine and the juice without trouble, then followed the sound of Luke's voice to Lily's bedroom.

"The medicine will help you feel better," he was explaining as he gently sat Lily on the bed. He had already put her in a nightgown and washed her face. Noah felt another wave of respect. Lily looked doubtful. Noah wondered how many times she had heard that before.

"Here you go," Noah said, holding the items out.

Lucas took them with a small nod and smiled at Lily. "Can you thank Noah?"

"Thank you, No."

"No problem."

"Where do you go in the day?" Lily asked.

Noah looked at Lucas quizzically.

"She wants to know where you work."

"Oh." Noah crouched beside the bed so he could be eye level with Lily. "Do you like television?"

Her pale face brightened. "Yes."

"Me, too. So I make shows for the television."

"Oh. Like Sesame Street?"

"Something like that, yeah."

"Do you know Big Bird?"

"No."

"How about Aunt Sherry?"

"She's talking about a show on Saturday mornings. Aunt Sherry reads books."

Noah smiled. "Oh, I know who she is. And, yes, I know her."

Lily gasped, her eyes and mouth forming three perfect O's. Noah didn't think she could be more impressed if he told her he regularly met Santa Claus for tea. "You *know* Aunt Sherry?"

"I do. She's a friend of mine."

"Daddy, No knows Aunt Sherry!"

"That's Noah, honey. And I'm sure he'll be happy to tell you all about her tomorrow."

Noah straightened. "Of course."

"Can I meet her, too?"

"I might be able to work something out. But only if you're good now and go to sleep."

Lily lay flat in bed, then sat up to pull the blanket over her chest, and collapsed against the bed again. She squeezed her eyes shut and folded her hands over her chest. "Turn off the light, Daddy."

"You didn't take your medicine, sweetheart. Come on, sit up for me for a minute."

Lily obeyed, but she stared at Noah nervously while she took the small cup of pink medicine from Luke and downed it on one gulp. She twisted her face with disgust, and Luke silently handed her the box of juice. Still without looking away from Noah, she took several swallows, then laid down again.

"Thank you for the juice, Daddy."

"You're welcome." He sat on the edge of the bed and smoothed her dark hair off her forehead. "Do you want a story tonight?"

Lily shook her head. "I'm sleepy."

"Give me a kiss."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him with a loud smack. "Love you, Daddy."

Noah realized that her excitement over his announcement had taken what little energy she had. Her eyes were shut before Lucas stood, and her breath was beginning to even before he crossed the room. She looked like something out of a fairy tale in her bed, and Noah felt that twist in his heart again.

"Come on," Luke said softly. He turned on her nightlight, then turned off the light overhead, and left the door open a crack behind them.

"She's usually much harder to put to bed when she's sick. But I rarely have such a large bribe to offer her."

"I really do know her," Noah said. "I dated her for a few months."

"Oh? Do you want a drink?"

"Thanks." Noah waited until Luke returned with two beers before blurting, "What happened?"

Lucas sighed and sat down heavily. For the first time, Noah noticed that his friend *had* changed. Lucas used to have the youngest face. It seemed like he had stopped aging at about fifteen. But now he was sporting a dark shadow of stubble, and there were deep lines around his eyes.

"It's a long story. We got married."

"I..." Noah frowned, something teasing the back of his mind. A creamy envelope that wasn't a bill. A creamy envelope that he had never opened, sitting on his kitchen table until it was completely covered with junk mail. And then more garbage. And then he had tossed it all in the Dumpster and started the junk heap over again. "About four years ago?"

"Yeah. About that."

"I'm sorry. I'm ... sorry. What happened?"

"We shouldn't have got married. I thought ... well, I thought if we were married, she'd change. She'd get better. It doesn't work like that." Luke smiled and shook his head. "We

tried for about six months, and then she left. Lily was about two months old at the time."

"Did you marry her because she was pregnant?"

"It was the right thing to do. When she left, she was pretty angry. She wouldn't let me see Lily, but I sent her money every week. Every penny I could afford. And Marty called me every night, and took pictures, and it sucked, but it was the best I could do."

Noah took a long gulp from his beer, because he didn't know what else to do. He couldn't imagine the shit Lucas had gone through, and where was he? Was he helping his best friend? Providing any sort of support? Did he even fucking *know*?

"It may have gone on like that indefinitely. You know how stubborn Lilah could be. Except, she was drinking. Heavily. Marty finally called social services, and they took Lily away from her. Eventually, I got full custody, and a court order that Lilah could have supervised visits as long as she went into rehab." Lucas spoke in a tired monotone, like all his emotional responses to that episode had been deadened.

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know."

"Jesus Christ, Luke. I can't even..."

"Where were you?" Lucas blurted, with the first hint of anger Noah heard from him since he arrived.

Noah was happy to hear it. He deserved it. But he didn't know how to answer the question.

Lucas didn't give him the chance to pull his staggered thoughts together before he launched into his own rant. "I

tried to understand, I did. When the entire goddamned town thought I was trying to kidnap my *own* child, and I didn't have a friend in the world, I tried to understand why you were gone. You couldn't send me a card? You couldn't call just to say hey? And I thought maybe I'd never see you again, and I could come to terms with that because I thought I knew why. So why are you back now?"

"I didn't think you'd want to see me."

"Why? Why wouldn't I want to see you?"

"Because..." Noah swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Because of what I did."

Now Lucas looked more perplexed than angry. "What did you do?"

Noah stared at him. "The night before I left? Up at the lake?"

"Yes. What about it?"

Noah frowned, his confusion deepening. "What the hell happened up there? I kissed you, right? I wasn't just imagining that."

Luke was looking at him like he had grown a third eye. Noah shifted uncomfortably under his stare. "No, you weren't imagining that," Lucas said slowly. "That's really all you remember?"

Noah nodded.

"Noah ... we did more than share a kiss."

"How much more?"

Lucas looked more amused than bemused, but he also looked a little sympathetic, too. "Mutual oral sex."

"Mutual ... I gave you head?"

"Yes. And I returned the favor."

Noah stared at him. Lucas had gone down on him? He didn't remember it, but he could imagine it, and the image went directly to his groin. He looked away, focusing on the floor, unable to look at his friend, certain that Luke would be able to read his mind.

"What happened after that?" Noah asked hoarsely.

"You passed out and I took you home. And then you left."

"I don't remember any of it." But he wished he could. He wanted those memories back more than he wanted anything else. "I remembered kissing you and then waking up. There was no sign ... no clue about what had happened the night before. I thought about calling you, but I didn't know what to say. You were in love with Lilah, and nobody knew ... nobody knows now ... except you, I guess."

"Know what? That you're gay?"

It was the casual way he said it that grabbed Noah's attention. He could have been talking about the fact that Noah drove a convertible. Or that Noah had brown hair. "Well ... yes."

"I knew before that, Noah."

"Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Because you never did," Lucas replied patiently.

"Oh." Noah didn't know what else to say. His mouth was dry, and the back of his eyes stung, and his stomach ached.

The anger that had colored Luke's face before was gone now, and there was only the familiar wry amusement and long-suffering patience. He stood and slapped Noah on the

shoulder. "Look, you've had a long night. We can continue this discussion later."

Noah stood as well. "You don't hate me?" He frowned and shook his head. "Well, you probably do. But you hate me because I'm a selfish jerk, not because I'm gay, right?"

Lucas took his other shoulder and looked him directly in the eye. "I've never hated you, Noah. Is that ... is that why you disappeared? You thought I hated you?"

Noah looked away. "I should probably go." The physical contact was enough to distract him, but the look in his eyes, the words, the tone of his voice, was almost enough to completely undo him.

"You don't have to."

"What?"

"You can crash here on the couch. I know you don't want to stay with your dad."

Noah smiled. "Thanks, man. I slept in my car last night."

"Yeah, you look like you spent the night in a car." Lucas released him and walked over to the closet. "Is the couch okay? I've got some extra pillows and blankets."

Now that Lucas had moved away, Noah felt like he could breathe. The bands began to loosen from his chest, and the ache in his stomach began to fade. Staying the night on his couch didn't seem like a great idea, but Noah couldn't talk himself into leaving. As soon as the shock and fear faded, relief would set in.

"You going to be okay?"

"I can't believe you're asking me that," Noah said, shaking his head.

"Hey, all that shit? It's sewage under the bridge for me."
Luke smiled. "Really. You don't need to feel guilty about it."

"I feel like shit about it."

"Don't." He tossed the pillow and blanket on the couch.
"Lily is usually an early riser. But since she's sick, maybe she won't be out here at six in the morning. Maybe."

Noah helped me spread the blanket across the cushions.
"Thanks for the warning."

"It's the least I could do."

"And, Luke? Thanks for ... everything else."

"If you need anything, I'm right down the hall."

Noah nodded. A part of him wanted to ask Luke not to go, to stay with him a little bit longer, to maybe have another drink. It wasn't even that late. Noah didn't believe for a minute that Lucas actually intended to go to sleep. But he felt emotionally exhausted, and staying up all night with Luke would not be a good idea.

"Right."

"Here's the remote. If you come across a channel that's locked, the password is one-seven-one-one."

"Right."

"Well ... sleep well."

"Yeah. You, too."

As soon as Noah was alone, he knew he'd made a huge mistake. He stretched out on the couch, still fully dressed, and turned on the television. He couldn't find anything he wanted to watch, but it was something to concentrate on instead of his own tumultuous thoughts.

What the fuck am I doing here?

After five years of suppressing any desire to see Lucas, it seemed like it should be easy enough to ignore the impulse to march down the hall and knock on his bedroom door. After five years of alternately obsessing about that night and ignoring it, he should be able to keep himself under control. But he kept thinking about Luke's announcement, about the confession he had offered so casually.

What had it been like to unzip Luke's pants? What had it been like to touch his cock? To taste his skin? To swallow his length? What had it been like to stroke him and suck him until he shot his load down his throat?

Fuck.

He couldn't think about it. His cock was already beginning to ache, and there was nothing he could do about it. He wasn't going to jerk off on Luke's couch, and he didn't know if he could walk to the bathroom.

And what had it been like when Lucas returned the favor?

Noah moaned softly. *Why am I doing this to myself?*

Feeling frustrated and disgusted with the whole situation, he turned off the television and rolled to his side. Maybe he'd feel better after a good night's sleep.

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CHAPTER 3

"No. No, I'm hungry. No."

"What?" Noah mumbled without opening his eyes.

"No, I'm hungry. My belly is hungry."

Noah cracked an eye open to see Lily's face was maybe an inch from his. "Your belly is hungry?"

"I'm very hungry, No."

Noah opened both eyes and sat up. Lily was looking up at him with wide eyes, as though she had pinned all her hopes to him. Her hair was a mess of tangled curls, and she was clutching what seemed to be a stuffed animal in one hand. Her cheeks were a natural rosy color, and she didn't seem to have an earache anymore.

"Well, what do you usually eat for breakfast?" Noah asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Waffles."

"Your dad makes you waffles every morning?"

"Yes."

Noah glanced at the clock on the VCR. It was just after six. "I don't know how to make waffles. What else do you eat?"

Lily stuck her lower lip out. "I want waffles."

Noah realized she was trying to manipulate him, and he also knew that it was absolutely working. "Well, then, let's see if I can figure it out."

Her whole face lit up and she scurried into the kitchen. "I'll help you."

"Of course you will," Noah muttered as he followed her.

She went immediately to the pantry and began pulling everything out and setting it carefully on the floor. Noah watched helplessly for a moment until she managed to grab the blue box of pancake mix. He didn't know if that worked as well for waffles, but weren't pancakes and waffles basically the same thing?

"Thank you, Lily. Here, let me put all this stuff back."

"No, I will!"

"Okay. You do that." Noah read the back of the box with a frown. Eggs. Oil. Water. The directions seemed to be written with an above-average chimp in mind. Which made it perfect for him.

"Do you know where the waffle iron is?"

"What's that?"

"How about pancakes?"

"I want waffles."

"How about I make my special waffle recipe?"

Lily looked up suspiciously. "What's that?"

"They're waffles, except they're flat. That makes them extra delicious," Noah said solemnly.

Lily narrowed her eyes. "Can I eat them with jam?"

"Absolutely."

She smiled broadly and resumed systematically emptying the pantry. Noah carefully stepped around the growing pile of food and opened the fridge.

"Juice!" Lily squealed.

Noah didn't even pause. He reached for a box of juice, stabbed the straw through it, and handed it to her. She snatched it from his hand and smiled around the straw.

"Thank you."

"No prob, lady."

She giggled. "Lady? Daddy calls me sweetheart."

"No prob, sweetheart. Now, let's get these pan ... these waffles going. Three eggs, one *T* of oil, one cup of mix ... What's a *T*? Teaspoon?"

Noah found a bowl, a large wooden spoon, and a measuring cup. He kept one eye on Lily and her food while he mixed the batter into something clumpy and gooey. He had never made pancakes, so he didn't know if this was how the batter was supposed to look, but he had followed the directions to the letter, and he was pleased with the results. He frowned. But were pancakes healthy? Maybe if he added fruit?

He looked around until he found a banana. He sliced it into the batter, wondering briefly if the pieces were too thick, but he thought it would probably be okay.

Ten minutes later, he changed his mind. This was far from okay. The pancakes were nearly black on the outside, raw on the inside, and a clumpy, hot banana, mess. He would never eat it himself, but would it be too hard to trick a toddler into eating it? Didn't they put all kinds of strange things into their mouths?

With a shrug, he scooped the mess out of the frying pan and onto a plate.

"No, I'm hungry."

"I know. It's almost done. Why don't you take your juice over to the table?"

She pushed herself to her feet and scurried over to the table, her little legs moving as fast as they could go. Did she ever slow down? Maybe that was why Lucas looked so old.

"Do you like jam?"

"Strawberry. Please."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What does ma'am mean?"

"It means you're the boss," Noah answered, digging around the fridge for strawberry jam, or anything resembling strawberry jam. He found a bottle in the back of the fridge and grabbed it triumphantly. "Strawberry jam it is."

"Daddy says he's the boss."

"Oh, well, he is," Noah said quickly, spooning jam onto the mountain of pancake-like things. He spread it evenly, successfully concealing the burnt parts. And the raw parts.

"Here you go. Noah's Waffle Surprise."

"I need a fork."

"How about a spoon?" Noah asked, fetching one from the drawer.

"I don't like spoons."

"I can't find a fork."

"I'm the boss."

"You better eat this before your daddy wakes up," Noah muttered, pressing the spoon in her hand.

"Eat what?" Lucas asked from the door.

"Breakfast!" Lily said brightly. "Waffles."

Lucas looked over her shoulder and blanched. "Noah, I don't know what they're feeding you in Los Angeles but..."

Noah made a frantic cutting motion. "It's my special waffles."

"Special, indeed. Lily, wouldn't you rather have some eggs?"

Lily took a big bite and her smile didn't falter. "No, I want this."

I'm sorry, Noah mouthed.

The corner of Luke's mouth lifted. "Would you like some eggs?"

"Please."

"I'm sorry," Luke muttered as he unceremoniously dumped the pan into the sink. "I really didn't think she'd be up so early demanding food. Usually she comes right to my room, anyway."

"It's not a problem. Really. I'm just sorry about the mess I'm feeding her."

Lucas poured a bowl of Cheerios, cut another banana into it, and carried it over to the table. "I think I'll just eat this bowl of Cheerios."

Lily looked up quickly. "Cheerios?"

"Yep. With bananas."

"I want some Cheerios, Daddy," Lily said, very sweetly.

"You have waffles."

She pushed the plate away. "I want Cheerios."

Luke slid the bowl across the table without further protest. "Sorry, Noah, not even special waffles can compete with Cheerios and bananas."

"I understand."

"Noah sleeps funny," Lily announced.

"Oh?" Lucas began replacing the food on the floor. The fact that he didn't even blink when he saw the mess made Noah think that this was a game they played often. "How so?"

"He makes a funny noise. And he talks."

Noah frowned and tried to remember what he had been dreaming about. He couldn't quite remember, but Lucas might have been involved.

"What does he talk about?"

"He says your name a lot, Daddy."

"Okay, yep, I talk a lot," Noah said quickly. "Now eat your cereal."

Lily obediently focused on her bowl once again.

"Do you want some cheese in your eggs?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"So, you never made ... waffles before?"

Noah grimaced. "Was it that obvious?"

"Only to everybody over five."

"It's a good thing I was cooking for somebody who hasn't quite reached four yet, huh?"

"Maybe you should stick to cold sandwiches and cereal," Luke suggested, cracking the eggs into a bowl.

Noah watched silently as he poured a bit of cream into the eggs, then grated a handful of cheese, and whipped it all into a frothy mixture.

"Maybe that's a good idea."

"Daddy, I'm going to get dressed."

"Okay, sweetheart."

"She's a bright girl," Noah commented once she was out of the room.

"She is," Lucas agreed with more than a hint of pride. "Don't worry. She tricks me into making her breakfast all the time."

Noah laughed. "Well, I was happy to at least try, after you let me crash on your couch."

Luke's smile faded, and his eyes turned serious. "Noah, have you talked to your dad at all since you've been back?"

Noah shrugged. "He's been busy."

"It's a little bit difficult to help him if you never speak to him, isn't it?"

He seemed more focused on scrambling the eggs than he did on Noah's answer, and, somehow, that made it easier to speak.

"Look, I knew it wasn't going to be easy. Especially because he doesn't think he needs my help. But..."

"But you thought you'd return to this town for the first time in five years to stick your nose where it's not welcome?" Luke asked, not unkindly.

"Well, when you put it that way..." For all of Luke's sympathy, Noah knew that he just did not understand. He never had a hard time talking to his own father, and Noah didn't think Luke had ever grasped the fact that John Hill really didn't like his own son. "I thought all of the letters he sent me were cries for help, you know? Maybe he couldn't actually say he needed me, but I could read between the lines."

"And now you're not so sure?"

"Well, I don't know. On the one hand, he refuses to speak to me. On the other hand, that's how he's always treated me, so maybe he really is happy that I'm here?"

Luke scooped the eggs onto a plate and set it on the table. "Toast?"

"No, thanks."

"So he refuses to speak to you now, but he wrote you letters?"

"Several. I mean, nobody was more surprised than me when they started showing up in my mailbox, three, maybe four times a month. At first I thought it was some sort of mistake, but they all started the same. Dear Noah."

The eggs were fluffy and smelled better than they looked. Noah didn't hesitate to dig in, happy for the momentary distraction. Luke sat down beside him, his forehead creased with a thoughtful frown.

"How long do you plan to stay?"

"I was going to stay until Friday, but..." *I'm not doing any good here and I've made an ass out of myself with you, so I should probably cut my losses.*

"Don't give up too soon. He might just have a problem admitting he needs help. He's a very proud man."

Noah didn't need to be told that, but he appreciated the effort. "These eggs are really good."

Luke reached across the table and snagged a bit of egg with his fingers. He winked and popped it in his mouth.

"Unlike you, I've learned to cook for myself."

"Hey, I know how to cook for myself."

"Oh?" Luke chewed slowly and leaned back in his chair.
"What do you know how to cook?"

"Spaghetti. I can grill up some hamburgers. Rice." Noah paused before admitting, "Well, minute rice, from a box."

"I stand corrected."

"Daddy! Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!"

"Lily, Lily, Lily," Luke replied, holding out his arms to the running girl. She threw herself at him, climbing up to his lap without a moment's hesitation.

"Daddy, can I wear my white dress?"

"No, that's for fancy parties. You can wear your sundress if you like."

"Oh." She frowned for a moment before brightening. It was like a puff of cloud passing over the sun on a summer day. "Call Aunt Marty. She said she'd take me to the park today."

"The park? Are you feeling better?"

Lily nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, and I brushed my teeth."

"Are you sure you're feeling better? If you get sick again, I have to take you to Dr. Townes."

Lily tilted her head, and seemed to consider Luke's question very carefully. "Yes, I am feeling better. Call Aunt Marty!"

"If you're going to the park, you need to wear pants and a shirt. Go pick something out, and I'll call your aunt."

Lily nodded and slid off his lap, running back down the hall to her bedroom.

"She's got you wrapped around her finger, doesn't she?"

"I like to think of the two of us as a team. She decided where to go and what to do, and I make it happen. See? A team effort." Lucas stood. "If you'll excuse me for a minute, I need to make a phone call."

"Yeah. No problem."

Noah shamelessly listened to Luke's side of the conversation, hoping Marty would offer to take Lily for the rest of the day, and maybe that night, too. *Please. And if she does, what do you think is going to happen?*

"No, I understand, Marty. It's fine ... No ... No, it's fine, I promise. Yeah ... tomorrow. Thanks."

Noah quickly turned back to his eggs so Lucas wouldn't be able to see his disappointment.

"Something came up with Marty," Lucas said as he returned to the kitchen. "She can't take Lily to the park today."

"What?" Lily screeched from the doorway. Lucas blocked her from Noah's view, but Noah didn't have to see the child to know she was furious.

"Lily," Lucas said sharply, spinning around. "We do not scream like that, do we?"

Noah could see her now. All the bluster immediately drained from her face, and she looked at her feet. "No, Daddy."

"Do you need a timeout?"

"No, Daddy." She shuffled into the kitchen and pulled herself into her chair. "Can you take me to the park?"

Before Lucas could answer, the phone rang again. Noah brightened, hoping that it would be Marty. He could tell Lily

had the same hope, and she stared at her father with wide eyes.

"Yes ... is he okay? Did you speak to him?" A troubled frown marred Luke's voice, and his shoulders were bunched tightly. "I'll be there ... alright. Bye." He hung up the phone and shook his head. "Our cook has been in an accident, and now we're short-handed. I've got to go in. I might be there all day."

The disappointed light returned to Lily's eyes. "I don't want to go to the stinky restaurant."

"Honey, it'll just be for a few hours. Then you can go to Grandma's."

"I don't want to. She smells funny."

Noah hesitated to speak at first, frightened that his disappointment would be as evident as Lily's. But as soon as she spoke, he was struck with an idea that could salvage the day. "I'll watch her."

Luke looked up, surprised. "No, I don't think that's a good idea."

"I can handle it," Noah said quickly, though he secretly agreed. It probably wasn't a good idea. What did he know about babysitting little girls? They had already destroyed the kitchen together. Who knew what sort of havoc they could wreak if they had a whole day together.

"Noah, I really do appreciate the offer. But I've taken her to the restaurant before. I'll be able to keep an eye on her."

Lily pulled on her ear, her face twisting. "It's noisy there, Daddy."

"Lucas, please. I want to help. The restaurant is only a few miles away. If anything happens, and nothing will, you're only a phone call away." He didn't know why he was arguing this, but it suddenly seemed very important. He needed Lucas to trust him. He needed this chance to prove himself.

Why? What difference will it make if you're going to leave in a few days?

It was a good question, and he didn't have the answer. It shouldn't have mattered. So what if Lucas didn't want to leave him unsupervised with his daughter? It wasn't a personal insult to point out that Noah had no experience babysitting. And it wasn't a sign of things to come. Because there wasn't anything there...

Lucas looked torn. "Maybe I'll be able to come home after a few hours."

"I can entertain her for a few hours."

"I want to stay with No," Lily announced.

"Lily, why don't you go watch Aunt Sherry while I talk to Noah," Luke suggested gently.

Lily happily slid off the chair and hurried out of the kitchen. Noah pushed his cooling eggs around his plate, hoping Lucas didn't want an explanation Noah couldn't offer.

"Are you sure you want to watch her? Nobody will think less of you if you change your mind now."

"I'm sure," Noah said, though he didn't quite believe it. "She's a great kid, and I'd like to spend a little more time with her."

"Why?"

My Only Home
by Pepper Espinoza

Noah met his eyes without wavering. "Because she's your daughter, Luke."

Luke nodded. "Okay. Let me tell you what you need to know."

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CHAPTER 4

Lucas smiled as Maggie pulled into his driveway. "The house is still standing. I suppose that's a good sign."

"It looks like they've got every single light on. Better get in there before they blow a fuse or something."

"Thanks for the lift. I'm taking the car to Bob's tomorrow."

"No problem, Boss." Maggie paused, fiddling nervously with the zipper on her jacket. "Mom heard Noah is back in town."

"I suppose everybody has by now," Lucas said, opening the door. "Does she want to see him?"

"She mentioned dinner."

"Tell her I'll give her a call tomorrow. Now, I better get in there to see if they've destroyed my house." He sniffed, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "And take a shower." In his experience, nothing clung to skin, hair, and clothes like the stench of a restaurant kitchen. Grease, salad dressing, dish soap, coffee, sweat, perfume from the waitresses, and something vague he could never quite place. He was beginning to suspect that no amount of showering would truly wash the odor away.

Maggie smiled. "I would say it can't be that bad, but after hearing about what happened in the kitchen this morning, you'll probably be cleaning up after them all night."

"So it'll be just like work then? Night, Maggie."

"Night, Boss."

My Only Home
by Pepper Espinoza

Lucas paused outside the door, listening for any sounds of destruction. The house was eerily silent. He unlocked the door and braced himself for thirty pounds of excitement hurling toward him on chubby legs, but the silence persisted. Frowning, Lucas slipped into the hallway, carefully avoiding the toys and shoes—why were all the shoes out of the closet—and hung up his jacket. He heard the blurred voices from the television, but no other sound.

The sea of shoes ended at the edge of the living room, where the crest of clothes began. Dresses, skirts, socks, shirts, hats, jackets, scarves—where did the girl get so many scarves—and even the clothes off her dolls. Lucas rubbed his eyes, more flummoxed than upset. Beyond the clothes were her stuffed animals. Every single stuffed animal she had ever owned.

"They must have gotten into the attic." Lucas sighed. He could just imagine how that went down. Lily batted her big eyes at him, probably told him that her mean ol' Daddy put all her favorite toys in the attic.

Lucas would have kept walking, but one of the stuffed animals moved. He turned his head quickly and spotted Annie's gray and white head between a large green teddy bear and a small black horse.

"Oh, you poor cat," he murmured, stooping to scoop Annie up in his arms. She meowed weakly and rubbed her nose against his cheek. "Did Lily try to put you in a dress again?"

The trail of dolls ended at Lily's door. He pushed it open softly and was greeted with a soft snore. Noah was propped up against the wall, Lily's favorite book in one hand, and Lily

curled around his other arm. She was wearing her fairy-princess dress and her hair was pulled back in a French braid. Lucas smiled, but something felt heavy in his chest.

Lily did not take to strangers well. Marty had warned him more than once that she was too much of a daddy's girl. He had been a little surprised to find her in the kitchen with Noah that morning, and even more surprised by her thrilled response when she learned Noah was going to babysit her. He wasn't jealous, but he still hurt, somehow. Maybe it was because she seemed to adore Noah as much as he always had. Was that sort of thing genetic?

How would she feel when Noah left again? Would she understand? Would she forget about him? Would she somehow blame herself? Was that genetic, too?

Lucas sat on the edge of the bed, absently cradling Annie, who was now purring and watching the pair on the bed with rapt green eyes. He stroked Lily's face softly, marveling at how much she looked like her mother, but at the same time, didn't look like her at all. Did Noah notice the resemblance? Lucas would never stop noticing it.

He shifted his attention to Noah. The first thing he'd noticed when he saw Noah sitting in his restaurant, oblivious, was the markers of age on his face. He seemed so much older now. But it wasn't permanent. He had smiled, and that changed everything. And now, as he slept, he looked like...

Lucas sighed. How was *he* going to deal with it when Noah left again? Hesitantly, he reached out and touched Noah's cheek. It was rough with stubble, and so familiar, like he touched Noah this way every day.

He's going to leave again. You are going to have to let him go.

Lucas pulled his hand away as if burned, and rested his fingers on Lily's warm shoulder.

"Hey," he said softly. Lily stirred but her eyes remained closed. "Lily, darling. Wake up."

"Daddy?" She rolled over and held her arms out without opening her eyes.

"Yeah. Did you brush your teeth?"

"No."

"Let's get you ready for bed."

"What?" Noah said, starting awake. "I'm awake."

Lucas's lips twitched. "Yeah, I see that."

"Oh. Oh man." Noah wiped his hand over his face. "How long have you been home?"

"Just a few minutes." He dumped the cat on the bed and replaced her with Lily. "I'm going to get her changed for bed."

"Sorry 'bout that. She wanted to wear her dress, and I don't know ... I don't even remember falling asleep."

"That's usually how it goes," Lucas assured him.

He stood, lifting Lily off the bed and carried her to the bathroom. Her nightgown was hanging on the back of the door. Lily didn't even open her eyes as he stripped her dress and replaced it with her flannel nightgown. When he carried her back into the bedroom, Noah was gone.

Lily yawned widely as he placed her on the mattress again. "Missed you, Daddy."

"Missed you, too, sweetheart. Did you have fun with Noah?"

"No is silly."

"He is." Lucas pulled the blanket over her and kissed her forehead. "Pleasant dreams, baby."

"You, too, Daddy."

Lucas folded his arms and watched her settle back into sleep. He knew he was stalling, avoiding the conversation that Noah wanted to have. He had chickened out the night before and fled to his room to avoid the confrontation, but he didn't think he could pull that stunt two nights in a row, and he couldn't spend the whole evening hiding in Lily's room.

He had been so happy when he saw Noah. John had mentioned that his only son was returning to town, but Lucas didn't believe it. Not until he walked out of the kitchen and saw Noah sitting at the table, looking large in the booth, and uncomfortable. And then he had looked happy. Momentarily, genuinely, shockingly happy. That was why Lucas had joined him in the booth, why he had agreed to see him the next day, why he had been so eager to get out of his company the night before and so excited to see him that morning.

Lucas found him in the living room, gathering all the clothes into one large pile. Grimacing, Noah straightened and shook his head. "I am so sorry. I swear, we did more today than make a complete and utter mess. I'm not even sure how this happened."

Lucas smiled and waved his hand. "Don't worry about it. Sit down, you look exhausted."

"So do you."

"You want a drink? I might have a few beers."

"Thanks."

Lucas held his breath as he entered the kitchen, expecting more of the same, but except for a few dishes in the sink, the kitchen looked unscathed.

"Did you guys have sandwiches for dinner?" Lucas asked as he carried the beer over to Noah.

Noah accepted the drink with a smile. "And for lunch. I figured that since one was jelly and the other was tuna, it was okay."

Lucas shrugged. "I did tell you to go ahead and make sandwiches. Not great on the nutritional value, but she'll eat anything between two pieces of bread."

Noah nodded and took several deep swallows of his drink. "How was work?"

"Busy. Not that I'm complaining, of course."

"Right."

Lucas perched on the edge of a chair, resting his elbows on his knees. The silence seemed uneasy to him, but he knew that Noah was just tired. How many times had he put Lily to bed and then spent the rest of the night zoned out on the couch, too exhausted to even sleep?

"Did you talk to your dad at all today?"

"No."

"Noah..."

"Not right now."

Lucas sighed. He didn't give a fuck if Noah never spoke to John again. What he really wanted to ask was how long he'd be staying and when he'd be leaving again. What he really wanted to know is why Noah had come back to town at all.

Lucas took a deep breath. If he was going to do this, it needed to be now.

"If you had remembered everything that happened, would you have still disappeared like that?"

Noah looked up, confusion reflected in his dark eyes. "I..."

"Did you think I thought less of you? Would it have mattered if you knew I didn't think less of you at all?" Lucas pressed.

Lucas counted four beats before Noah responded. "Yes, it would have mattered a great deal."

"You should have asked."

"How could I have asked? I thought it was all me, all one-sided, all ... wrong," Noah admitted, his voice fading with each word until Lucas could barely hear him at all.

Lucas abandoned his chair and settled beside Noah on the couch. "You know me better than that, Noah. You've always known me better than that."

"You weren't the only one who suspected," Noah said tightly. "There were people who said things ... threatened certain things ... and you know how people are here. You know that..."

"I know that you were always my best friend. I know that you taught me how to ride a bike, and I you showed me how to use a slingshot, and I always knew there wasn't a single thing you wouldn't do for me. So why couldn't you trust me?"

Noah looked down at his hands. "The first time I knew I wanted you, we were fifteen, and it was the night of the Homecoming dance. I didn't pay any attention to Mary because I was too distracted by you, and you never noticed

because you finally got Lilah to agree to go on a date with you. Should I have told you then?"

"Noah..."

Noah jumped to his feet and began pacing. "I would have loved to say something, Luke. I would have..." He stopped, his hands falling to his side helplessly. "I love you. And I couldn't run far enough to change that."

"You told me," Lucas admitted softly.

"I told you? That night?"

"If you would have come by the next morning, Noah, if you would have just stopped to say good-bye, I would have left with you."

"Don't say that."

"It's true. My bag was packed."

Noah stared at him, unblinking, his face as impassive as stone. Lucas shifted and suppressed the urge to defend himself, insist he wasn't lying, like Noah was accusing him of something nasty with his silence. Noah took a hesitant step forward, but his second step was more forceful. He loomed above Lucas without speaking, then grabbed him by the shoulders.

Lucas allowed himself to be hauled to his feet, and he didn't shy away when Noah leaned forward, tilting his head slightly. He kept his eyes trained on his friend's face, daring him to continue, daring him not to back down and run from something that might be honest, might be a little scary. Lucas wasn't going to do this for him.

The kiss was very much like the first, drunken caress they'd shared. Noah brushed his lips across Luke's, as though

he wasn't quite sure what he was touching. It was soft and exploratory, but not hesitant. Then he deepened the kiss, his fingers tightening on Luke's shoulders, his tongue sweeping into Luke's mouth.

That was the moment Lucas had been waiting for, the sign he needed. He kissed Noah like this would be the last chance they had. He kissed Noah like he wished he had kissed him a hundred times before. He kissed Noah because for the first time, this wasn't a just a fantasy, and maybe, *maybe*, it would be enough for both of them to hold onto.

Noah pushed him back to the couch without breaking the kiss, covering Luke's body. His body was hard and warm, his muscles tense beneath the thin material of his shirt. Luke wrapped his arms around Noah, holding him tightly, not allowing a single inch to separate them. He felt too hot everywhere they touched, and too cold everywhere they weren't touching. The back of his neck tingled, his stomach was rolling, and his groin was tight. Lucas didn't want to stop. He didn't want the kiss to end. He just wanted to hold Noah, turn himself over to the soft pleasure and growing hunger between them.

But he couldn't do that. When Noah finally broke the kiss to breathe, Lucas didn't push him away, but he did turn his head, blocking Noah from another kiss. Noah's cock was hard against his thigh, and there was no mistaking what he wanted. He had been pinned beneath Noah's strength before, and the familiar weight, the blood rushing in his ears, even the vague smell of beer on Noah's breath, brought those

memories—memories that were never far—roaring back, unstoppable waves crashing against the rocky shore.

"Luke?"

"Noah, I don't know if I can do this again."

Noah stiffened and tried to pull away. "Oh. I see."

Lucas tightened his grip, refusing to let Noah escape. "No, I don't think you do." He kissed Noah's jaw and pushed his hips forward, grinding his erection against Noah's thigh. "I want to do *this*, but after what happened before ... I can't do that."

"I ... I'm not sure I understand," Noah said hoarsely, unable to meet Luke's eyes.

Luke thought that Noah understood perfectly well, but he explained anyway. "My life is full here, Noah. Raising Lily and running the diner is a lot of work. People depend on me for their livelihood. It's a huge amount of responsibility, and I ... I can't afford to be distracted."

"This is distracting you?"

"Being half in love with a person who seems to have fallen off the face of the Earth is distracting. And it hurts. I can't afford to be selfish," Lucas explained softly.

Noah finally looked up, and Luke could see a chaotic swirl of emotions in his brown eyes. "I won't ... I won't do that again, Luke. I'm not ever going to do that again. I promise."

Lucas knew Noah wasn't lying, but that didn't mean he was quite telling the truth either. But he wanted to believe him. He had missed Noah terribly. Even if he ignored the stirrings of desire, the deeper feelings of love, he just missed

his friend. Having Noah in his life again, on any level, was necessary.

Luke threaded his fingers through Noah's soft, short hair and rested his palm against the back of his neck. Noah never looked away, all of his insecurities and doubts etched on his face. He was still tense, like he expected Luke to push him away, to dismiss him and his promise. Lucas guided Noah's mouth back to his and kissed him softly. It wasn't as passionate as the first kiss, but it was far from chaste.

Noah gradually relaxed and tried to deepen the kiss, forcing his tongue between Luke's lips. Luke let him control for a few moments, responding instantly and completely to every touch, caress, and change of pressure and tempo. For those few moments, he didn't have to worry about everything he should be doing, and everybody who needed him—he only needed to worry about his own desires, about Noah, about the limited world of Noah's mouth and hands.

But all too soon, Lucas needed to break the kiss again, and this time, he did need to push Noah away. "Noah, I'm sorry. I'm really, really, sorry, but we can't do this now."

Noah blinked. "What? Why not?"

"Lily."

"Lily?"

Lucas smiled patiently. "I'm not going to do anything with Lily asleep in the next room."

"You're not?"

"No."

"Okay. Why?"

"What if she comes out for a drink of water? Would you like to be the one to explain what you're doing to her daddy?"

Noah paused for a moment before answering. "No."

"Right."

"So does that mean we can't do *anything*?"

Lucas would have laughed at Noah's crestfallen expression if he wasn't struggling with his own disappointment. But he knew he was right. "That means we can't do anything tonight. Marty will take Lily tomorrow. She can stay the night, and we'll have the house to ourselves."

Noah nodded and pushed himself off the couch slowly. Luke sat up, his skin still burning from the contact, as though Noah's body had been imprinted on his. They sat in a heavy silence for a several moments, both struggling for self-control. Lucas thought it probably wouldn't be a good idea for Noah to stay, though he wasn't about to ask the other man to leave.

"Can you tell me what happened that night?" Noah asked.

"You want the details?"

"Yeah. I doubt I'll ever be able to remember it myself, but I'd like to know what happened."

Lucas took a deep breath. "Yeah, I can tell you. Let me take a shower first and change. I reek."

"I thought you smelled good."

"You're probably just hungry," Luke said, standing.

"That's not why I thought you smelled good."

Taking a risk, Lucas leaned over and brushed his lips across Noah's temple. "I'll be right back."

"I'll be waiting."

* * * *

"Noah..." Luke's heart was hammering and his mouth was tingling. The kiss had been the last thing he expected, but now that it happened, it made perfect sense. He curled his fist in Noah's shirt and pulled him back, allowing Noah to cover his body as their mouths fused together again.

Noah's cock was hard against his hip, and Lucas slid his hand down his body to palm his length. Noah groaned, grinding against him, and the sound went directly to Luke's groin. Noah's tongue was firm and demanding, thrusting into his mouth, and Luke realized he had never been kissed like that before. Lilah was a good kisser, but she never kissed him like she had been waiting her entire life for that moment. She never kissed him like she wanted nothing more than to devour him.

Noah broke the kiss, gasping, and slid his mouth along Luke's jaw, biting and licking along the line to his ear, and then down his neck. Luke tilted his head back, sighing with satisfaction as Noah pushed his shirt up and continued his journey down Luke's body. His nipples were hard in the cool air, and Noah lightly bit each one, sending splinters of pleasure through him. Noah's mouth was still desperate, still hungry, and if Luke had any reservations, they were gone by the time Noah reached his waistband.

"Lucas?"

"Don't stop, please, Noah. Don't stop."

Noah grinned with satisfaction, but there was surprise on his face, too. Luke didn't blame him for being surprised. It

wasn't as though he had been sending signals. It wasn't as though he hadn't been going on about how much he loved Lilah. But at that moment, all that mattered was his very secret desires finally being realized.

Noah made short work of his belt and pants, grasping his shaft. Luke lifted his head, watching with heavy eyes as Noah studied him. He almost felt self-conscious. It seemed like Noah was trying to commit each detail of his body to memory before he leaned forward. He swiped a drop of pre-come from Luke's skin with the tip of his tongue, and Luke moaned. He wiped his tongue over him again and again, content to just sample him, and Luke shuddered with every warm brush of contact.

Noah seemed to know exactly what he was doing, and as Luke relaxed against the ground, he couldn't help but wonder how many times Noah had thought about this. The idea was enough to make his balls throb. Noah thinking about him. Noah thinking about his cock, about what he wanted to do to his cock. Lucas stared up at the stars, trembling and whimpering as Noah lavished attention on him. He had never felt anything as soft, as warm, or as perfect as Noah's tongue, lips, and even the occasional scrape of his teeth.

Lucas didn't know how long Noah was happy licking and nuzzling him, but it felt like it might have been an eternity. Galaxies and planets rotated overhead, entire civilizations rose and fell, and Lucas was lost in the glare of the distant lights. He didn't start moaning Noah's name until he finally wrapped his lips around his head, and then slowly slid Luke's shaft into his mouth.

He began pumping his head, fisting the base of Luke's cock and moving his wrist in time. Luke's eyes rolled back and he grabbed the back of Noah's head, his fingers reflexively opening and closing in Noah's soft hair.

"Oh, God, Noah ... Noah ... oh, God ... I'm going to..." The last word was lost in his shout as he erupted in the back of Noah's throat. Noah wrapped his lips around Luke's cock tightly, sucking hard and lapping him with his tongue until he swallowed every drop of Luke's come.

* * * *

"Maybe we should stop talking about this now," Noah said tightly.

"You don't want to hear what I..."

"No. I mean, I do. But not until ... later."

Lucas smiled. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"It was worth it. I can't believe I don't remember."

Lucas was glad they were on opposite ends of the living room. If Noah touched him, it would be too easy to forget all of his good intentions.

"I'll show you."

Noah looked up. "What?"

"Tomorrow night. I won't tell you what else happened. I'll show you."

Noah got a funny, pinched look on his face. He ran his hands through his hair and tapped his foot. "I don't think I should crash on your couch tonight."

"You're that ... uncomfortable?"

Noah could only grimace and nod. Lucas laughed, earning a dirty look from the other man.

"I'm sorry, it's not funny. But ... it is. You look like I've spent the last hour torturing you."

"I think that's an apt description."

Lucas sobered. "You asked."

"I'm glad I did." Noah stood. "I've got to go. When ... when can I see you tomorrow?"

"It depends. In a perfect world? We could meet for lunch."

"And in the world we live in?"

"Maybe after lunch. Why don't I come by and pick you up?"

"I'll be waiting."

Luke smiled. "Good. Let me walk you out."

It was difficult to watch Noah drive away, but Luke knew it was the right thing to do. The doubts arrived shortly after Noah left. He claimed he wouldn't leave like that again, but Lucas knew it was a lie. Not a malicious one. Maybe not even intentional. But Noah had no intention of staying in Mountain View.

Luke didn't make it as far as his bedroom. He collapsed on the couch, troubled and confused. When Noah had been there, everything had made so much sense. But now that he was gone, Luke realized Noah's absence was the norm—and it still hurt. How could they make this right again?

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CHAPTER 5

Noah didn't sleep. He didn't eat breakfast. He paced through his father's house, looking for something to occupy his hands, or his mind. The television didn't distract him. Books were no good. John left for the hardware store before dawn, and Noah knew the conversation would be pushed off for another day. They were both masters of avoidance, and Noah didn't really care. Not as much as he cared about Lucas.

With nothing to concentrate on, Noah couldn't stop thinking about Luke's confession. He had been packed? He had been ready to leave Mountain View? Ready to leave Lilah? The thought made Noah ache. He had thought about Luke every single day. One stupid, short-sighted, self-conscious decision had changed both their lives completely.

But he had a chance to make up for it now. Second chances didn't come often. He was lucky Lucas even agreed to talk to him, much less invite him into his home, introduce him to his daughter, trust him to take care of his daughter. Kiss him.

Noah had almost expected Luke to push him away when he kissed him. And he'd never thought Lucas would kiss him back. And he was so good at it. His lips were a perfect fit on Noah's, and they were firm, and he had tasted sweet, like cola.

He ended up sitting on the front porch, eagerly watching the road for any sign of Lucas. He tried to tell himself that Luke was busy, he had a full life, and he had said *after* lunch.

Which could have meant any time. When did Lucas take his lunch? Around noon, maybe one? And after could have meant anything from two until later in the evening. But Noah waited anyway, unable to keep his excitement and impatience at bay. He didn't want to spend a single unnecessary second away from Luke. Or another night.

Noah frowned at the thought. He had told Luke he wouldn't leave him like that again, and he meant it. But he couldn't stay in Mountain View. He couldn't. The town made him claustrophobic. He had a career, a life, in Los Angeles, and after working so hard to carve out a living for himself, he couldn't just abandon it. Not even for Lucas.

Noah rested his head in his hands, staring down at the toes of his shoes. But he couldn't hurt Luke again either. He couldn't make all sorts of promises and walk away. Noah desperately wanted to show Luke how much he wanted him, how much he adored him, how much he loved him, but wouldn't it be selfish to make love to him, only to leave again?

Lucas deserved better. He deserved so much better after all the grief he went through at Noah's hands, at Lilah's. He deserved somebody who would live anywhere to be with him. He deserved somebody who could be a proper parent to his daughter. He deserved somebody who hadn't already broken his heart once.

Noah looked over to his car. His bags were still mostly packed. He could leave town again, slip out while nobody was looking. His father obviously didn't need him. Let the old man work himself to death in a store that was slowly burying him

alive anyway. If that made John happy, who was Noah to get in his way? And Luke didn't need him either. Once upon a time, Luke had needed him desperately. He had emerged from the darkest, lowest point in his life with his daughter, a new house, and his own restaurant. And he had achieved all of those things without Noah's input.

Maybe leaving now would be the best thing for everybody.

Noah gathered the few belongings of his that had made it into the house and slowly packed his car, operating on autopilot. His limbs were heavy with sorrow, with regret, with indecision. He had *promised* he wouldn't leave like that again. But was there a better way to go? Did any escape route make him less of a coward? Less of a jerk?

He briefly considered leaving a note for John, but dismissed it. The old man didn't want anything to do with him while he was there, why would he care if Noah left? The decision not to leave a note for Lucas was a harder one to make. Did Lucas really need an explanation? Didn't a part of him already know? Nobody on this planet knew Noah better, and so nobody would be better prepared to explain his disappearing act.

In the end, there were no notes. No explanations. Nothing but the same stench of cowardice that followed him the last time he left Mountain View. The same heavy sense of self-loathing.

Noah pulled open the car door, but before he could get in, Lucas pulled into the driveway behind him, blocking his escape. Noah straightened, his heart jerking suddenly. Lucas was early. Hours early. It wasn't after lunch yet.

"Going somewhere?" Lucas asked as he exited his car.

"Yes. I am."

"Did you plan to tell me this time?"

Noah fought the impulse to look away. "No."

Luke's lips thinned, and Noah wished he had looked away, so he could avoid the flash of pain in his friend's eyes. "Oh. Well, I won't keep you."

It's better this way. It's better this way. It's better ...

"Luke, wait, please. I didn't mean..."

"You didn't mean what?" He was looking at his car door, his hand on the handle, but at least he wasn't driving away.

"I've been thinking about it all morning. Thinking about what you said. Last night. About how you couldn't afford the distraction. Luke, we both know I'm not going to stay here. As much as I love you, I hate it here. And this is where your life is."

"So you're going to run away?" Luke asked, his voice low.

"What else should I do? Go back to your house with you, and do everything I have always wanted to do to you, and then leave tomorrow morning?" Noah lifted his hands helplessly. "I didn't want to hurt you. Again. I am so sorry for everything I've done ... I thought I should leave before I make it worse."

"Why couldn't you at least talk to me about it? We might have been able to work something out."

Noah swallowed hard. "I don't think we can. Unless one of us is willing to move. Will you come with me, Luke? Will you and Lily come live with me in Los Angeles? I've got a nice

apartment, and if you don't like it, we can find something else."

"I can't," Lucas said flatly.

Noah knew he'd have a great explanation, but he didn't want to hear it. He couldn't hear anything except the finality in his words.

"Then there's really not anything else to say, is there?"

"Are you going to disappear off the face of the Earth again? No calls? No letters? Because I don't think there will be anything to salvage between us if you do that a second time."

"Do you hate me now?"

Lucas slowly shook his head.

"Then I'll call you when I get back."

"What about your father? Does he know your leaving?"

Noah rolled his eyes. "Even if he knew, do you think he'd care?"

"You came out here for a reason," Luke pointed out.

"He had his chance to talk to me. Maybe it'll be easier if I leave and he just starts sending letters again."

"Maybe."

Noah took a step toward him, closing the gap between them, but not quite putting himself in touching distance. "Can I..."

"What?"

"Can I just ... kiss you good-bye?"

Luke studied his face for a long moment before shaking his head. "No, I don't think that would be a good idea."

Noah's throat tightened. "Right. No, you're right. It wouldn't be a good idea. I'm really sorry, Luke. I am. And I

know I could say that for the rest of my life and it won't make a difference but..."

Luke lifted his shoulder in a half-shrug. "You're forgiven. Absolved. I forgave you for everything else a long time ago, and you are right. It is better to leave now. For both of us." He settled in his car again and started the engine. "Good-bye, Noah."

He slammed the door with such a sense of finality that Noah's heart stopped in his chest. For a wild moment, he wondered if he was having a heart attack, but then Lucas put his car into reverse and everything returned to normal. Noah stood in the driveway, watching Luke's car until it disappeared around the corner.

What would happen if he followed Lucas? What would he say if Noah told him it was all a big stupid mistake? What would he do if Noah declared he never wanted to leave Mountain View, and he desperately wanted to be in Luke's life, and he would do anything at all, anything Luke deemed necessary?

Noah sighed. It might have worked. But he wasn't ready to make the sacrifice. Maybe that meant he didn't love Lucas nearly as much as thought he did. Maybe it just meant he didn't love anybody as much as he loved himself. Maybe it meant he should have kept his vow to never return, should have maintained the silence that characterized the last five years.

Am I really going to call him? Or am I going to put this relationship in the ground, where it belongs?

My Only Home
by Pepper Espinoza

The question plagued him as he crossed the Nevada desert. And he still didn't have any answers, hours later, when the bright orange and yellow lights of Los Angeles greeted him.

* * * *

Marty was surprised to see him, just an hour after he dropped off Lily, but Lucas couldn't stand the thought of spending the night alone. He needed his little girl.

"Are you okay?" Marty asked, when he lifted Lily off the floor. Her chubby arms went around his neck automatically, and her lips were sticky with jam when she kissed his cheek. "I haven't seen you look like this since..."

Lucas shook his head. "I'll tell you later," he said softly.

"Where's No, Daddy?"

Luke swallowed hard. "Noah had to go home, sweetheart."

"But he didn't say good-bye," Lily pointed out, her voice laced with confusion.

"No, sometimes he doesn't."

Marty's frown deepened. "I thought..."

"Later," Luke said. "I just want to go home now."

"I wanted to spend the night with Aunty."

"I know, sweetheart. But I thought maybe we could go for a drive. Do you want to go up to the lake?" Lucas hadn't actually planned to go on a drive, and he felt foolish bribing—begging—his own daughter to stay with him, but if it would make her happy to drive around the world, he'd figure out a way to make it happen.

"I like the lake."

"I know you do." He set her back down to the floor. "Why don't you go get your things, okay?"

"Okay!"

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"I just wanted to spend the afternoon with my daughter, since I've got it off from work," Luke said with false cheer.

He trusted Marty. In a lot of ways, she was more like his own sister, rather than just his ex-sister-in-law. But he didn't know if he could trust Marty with this. Nobody knew about his feelings for Noah. Nobody knew about the night they had shared five years ago. And even now, Lucas was wary of even dropping a single hint. He had full custody, but that didn't mean he wasn't paranoid of losing it, of being deemed an unfit parent.

"If you want to bring her by later, I'm free for the rest of the night," Marty said gently.

Luke searched her face for a moment, looking for any clues that she knew, but she just seemed like her normal, thoughtful self. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

"Are you *sure* you're okay?"

No. He wasn't okay. He doubted he would ever be okay again. He had just lost his best friend. He knew Noah had promised to call, had indicated he would keep the friendship alive, but the promise hadn't reached Noah's eyes. Lucas wouldn't be counting on that phone call. Even when Noah was incommunicado, a part of Lucas had always believed they were still connected, somehow. A part of Lucas always thought of Noah as his best friend, even if the friendship had

temporarily disappeared from his life. But now, he didn't think he could do that any more.

And it hurt. More than anything had the right to.

Luke offered a half-hearted smile. It probably did nothing to soothe her concern, but it was the best he could muster. "I'll live."

* * * *

Noah's apartment seemed ridiculously empty when he finally let himself in the door. It was exactly the same as when he left, exactly the way he liked it, but dark. And empty. He checked his messages first, but nobody had called him. It was late. He knew he should go to bed, that everything would look different in the morning, but he wasn't tired. Just very lonely.

Noah hadn't been that lonely since the first night he arrived in Los Angeles. He still remembered that night with painful clarity. He hadn't known a soul, and the apartment he'd leased was the most disgusting little closet he had ever seen. Noah wasn't proud of himself, and the memory was still tinted with shame, but he had cried bitterly that night, curled up in the corner because the apartment didn't come furnished like the ad had claimed. He hadn't felt like he was a grown man of twenty-three. He had felt like a child, confused and alone, and nothing would ever be bright again.

But he had made it through that first night, and the next morning he'd showered, dressed, and gone to his new job. And the rest of his life had fallen into place. But Noah didn't think that would happen again. The last time he'd arrived in

LA from Mountain View, h'de had a whole new life to look forward to. Now what did he have?

Noah knew he didn't have to be alone. He had a whole roster of friends, boyfriends, lovers, and acquaintances who could keep him company. People who would meet him for drinks, people who would meet him to watch a movie, people who would want to hear about Mountain View. People who would spend the night. And he liked them. He liked all of them. But he didn't want any of them. The man he wanted was still in Mountain View.

He had Luke's number. He had promised to call. And maybe Luke didn't want to talk to him, but he could at least make the effort. He wanted Luke to understand that he'd left because he didn't want to hurt him, not because he wanted Luke out of his life. But it took more courage than Noah thought he possessed to dial the number, listen to the phone ring four times, and then speak when Lucas answered.

"Hey, Luke."

The pause before Lucas returned his greeting nearly killed him. "Hey. So I guess you made it back to Los Angeles in one piece?"

Noah desperately tried to pull any clues from Luke's tone, but he sounded neutral, politely interested. *Have I ruined everything?*

"Yeah. I just decided to drive straight through, instead of stopping in Vegas for the night." Noah didn't know why he volunteered that information. Maybe he just needed something to say.

"In a big hurry to get home?"

"Not a big hurry." Noah paused again, and this time he heard Lily laughing—or screaming—in the background. "I thought she was going to be at Marty's house tonight?"

"No. I went and picked her up."

Luke didn't elaborate, but Noah didn't need to ask. He didn't want to be alone either. "Luke, I am ... I'm so sorry."

"I thought I told you to stop apologizing."

"You did. But I still feel ... Luke, I don't ... I didn't leave because..."

"I know why you left."

"You do?"

"I do."

Noah waited for the explanation, but none was forthcoming. "Oh, well, that's good. Look, I've got to unpack and get settled again..."

"I understand. Thanks for calling. Oh, wait a minute. I think somebody wants to talk to you."

"Who?"

"Hi, No!"

Noah smiled. "Hi, Lily."

"Daddy said you go home."

"I did go home. I have to go to work."

"Like Daddy?"

"Yes. Like that."

"Daddy didn't work today. We drove to the lake."

"That sounds like fun," Noah said. It did sound like fun. "What did you do?"

"I swam. And I found rocks. And we saw a deer."

"Wow. I'm sorry I missed all that. What are you going to do with the rocks?"

"Keep them by my bed. Can you come with us next time?"

"I'm sorry," Lucas said, before Noah could answer her.

"She doesn't quite understand distances yet. Six hundred miles away doesn't really have any meaning to her."

"Did you tell her I'm six hundred miles away?"

"I tried to explain that your house is far away. Like I said, she doesn't quite understand yet."

Noah's heart twisted. He did want to go to the lake with Luke and Lily. He wanted to see her rocks. He didn't understand why. He had never thought about having children—it never seemed a possibility. He couldn't even find anybody he wanted to spend time with after he left Luke.

"Maybe you could come out to visit me sometime. Show her just how far LA is," Noah said lightly, but he wasn't joking. "We can go to Disneyland, and the beach, or down to San Diego. I'm sure she'd love the zoo."

"I don't know..."

"Just think about it, okay?" Noah cut in. "I'd love to have the two of you as my guests."

"I'll think about it," Lucas promised, though Noah didn't quite believe him.

"Who knows? Maybe you'll love it here."

Luke laughed. "I doubt it. It might be a bit too crowded for my tastes."

"You get used to the people. Eventually. Or so I've been told. I haven't quite adjusted yet."

"Oh, I don't believe that. I think you probably fit in like you've always lived there. You've always been very adaptable."

Noah sat on the couch and toed off his shoes. This was better. The wary edge was gone from Luke's voice. "Maybe. It took a few years. You can take the boy out of the small town, but..."

"Was it really hard?" Luke asked. "I used to worry about you, you know. Wondering how you were doing."

"What did you worry about? Anything in particular?"

"I worried about people taking advantage of you. It sounds silly, I know. But..."

"I don't think it's silly. I got myself in a few tight spots before I knew better. It would have been helpful to have somebody watching my back." Noah's voice trailed off. He had needed Lucas before. He still needed Lucas.

"It's Lily's bedtime. I'm sorry, I've got to go get her ready."

"No, no, that's fine," Noah said quickly. "I know I called a little late."

"What are you doing tomorrow? You're still on vacation, right?"

"Yeah, I am. But I thought I would go back to work. I haven't really got anything else to do with my time."

"If you go back to work tomorrow, would you be able to use the rest of your vacation time later?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. I've got a lot of time saved up."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Tell Lily pleasant dreams for me."

"I will. Good night, Noah."

"Good night, Luke," he said softly before dropping the receiver to its cradle.

* * * *

"I think you should go," Marty said, while they watched Lily play with Annie. "She's never even been out of Mountain View, and you know she'd have a great time."

"I can't just pick up and leave any time I want to," Lucas pointed out, wishing he hadn't mentioned Noah's invitation at all.

"No, you can't. But you never pick up and go anywhere. Why does everybody deserve a vacation except you? Don't you trust the people you hired?"

"Yes, of course I do."

Marty nodded at her niece. "Don't you think she'd love to meet..."

Luke raised his hand, cutting her off. "Don't say his name. She doesn't know about any of this."

"Still. Don't you think she'd want to?"

"Of course, she would."

"Wouldn't it be worth it to see her smile?"

Lucas sighed. Of course, it would be worth it. There was nothing Lucas loved more than his daughter's thrilled smile, the gleam of excitement in her eye. But for the first time in nearly four years, it wasn't only Lily's smile he was thinking about. He could hear the hope in Noah's voice when he mentioned the idea.

"But you're not really interested in Di ... in the magic kingdom, are you?"

Luke looked up sharply. "What are you talking about?"

"You miss Noah."

"I miss No," Lily volunteered while she petted Annie's head. "Can we call him tonight, Daddy?"

"Maybe, sweetheart," Lucas said absently, his attention focused on Marty. "What makes you think that?"

"You've been moping around here since he left. Just like the last time he left."

"Well, yeah. I've known him my whole life. Things just seem odd without him around."

"If you miss him, you should go see him," Marty encouraged gently.

"Why are you trying to get me out of town? Are you going to stage some sort of coup and steal my diner?"

Marty laughed. "Maybe I just plan to take my own little vacation. My husband wants to spend time with me, and you know I love to help you, and I love Lily but..."

"But you need a break, too."

"Exactly. Why did he leave? I thought he was going to stay until the end of the week?"

Luke shrugged. "It must have had something to do with his dad. You know how those two are."

"Must have. Hey, Lily? Come here, baby."

Lily pushed herself to her chubby legs and toddled over her to the couch. "What, Aunty?"

Marty scooped her up to settle the child on her lap. "Do you want to go to California?"

Lily clapped her hands together and looked at Lucas with wide eyes. "Can we, Daddy?"

"Do you even know what California is?" Luke asked.

"It's where No lives."

Marty arched her eyebrow. "Yes, it is. He must have made quite an impression on her while he was here."

"I talk to him on the phone," Lily announced.

"He's been calling every night. And Lily likes to talk to him."

"But she's not the only one, right?"

"Are we going to Cal..."

"California," Lucas provided.

"Cali," she paused again, like the word was too big for her small mouth.

"Close enough. And maybe we will, sweetheart."

That answer seemed to satisfy Lily, and she turned to Marty and began prattling about Annie and the games she liked to play with the poor, old cat. Luke listened with half an ear, his mind drifting to California, and Noah. He had been shocked when the other man actually called him, and his shock didn't fade with each new call, even two weeks later. They spoke at the same time every night, just before Lily's bedtime. Luke thought Noah timed it that way on purpose. If he waited just a half hour more, Luke would have more time and freedom to allow the conversation to grow. As it was, their discussions stayed short and almost superficial.

But at least they were talking. Which was more than they'd been doing before.

Maybe a short trip to California wouldn't be such a bad idea. Noah was a good salesman. Every night, his pitch was a little sharper, a little harder to resist. But Lucas suspected Noah was trying to sell more than a one week vacation. Noah had left Mountain View because he couldn't stay, not even for the person he loved. Did he think he could solve the problem by convincing Lucas to move to Los Angeles?

Or maybe Noah really just wanted Lily to see Disneyland.

Lucas might have agreed sooner, but he knew it would be painful to see Noah again. How were they going to do this? Noah never mentioned any feelings, never mentioned that night he couldn't remember, never mentioned kissing him or touching him. Were they just going to pretend they were nothing more than good friends? Luke would do that, if that's what Noah wanted, but it would be hard.

He dreamt about Noah every night. Dreamt about what could have been, if Noah had stayed in Mountain View just one more day. Not that they would do anything he dreamed about. If they went to California, it would be to show Lily Disneyland, and the beach, and the zoo, and anything else she wanted to see. He wouldn't allow himself to cross the line with Noah again. They were friends. And unless something drastically changed, that's all they could ever be.

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CHAPTER 6

Noah hovered near the baggage claim at LAX, trying to mask his growing nerves with an indifferent smile. The plane from Salt Lake City had been at the gate for over thirty minutes, and he knew it took some time to disembark, to travel through the terminal, to maybe take a potty-break. And LAX was a huge place. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary for somebody to get turned around, confused, lost. And he knew they were *on* the plane, because Luke had called him just before take-off.

So there was no reason to be sick with nerves. No reason why his palms should be all sweaty, or his pulse should be pounding erratically in his throat. No reason at all. Just because this felt like an audition didn't mean it *was* an audition. Noah didn't actually believe he could convince Luke to move to Los Angeles after a week long vacation. But maybe it could be upgraded to a possibility? Maybe he still had a small chance?

Noah saw the top of Luke's familiar head first, and he straightened, his heart jumping. The large crowd parted, and Lily's smiling, awestruck face came into view. As soon as she saw Noah, she began pushing at her father's shoulders, trying to wiggle out of his grasp. Lucas ignored her efforts until they were only a few feet from Noah, then he set her on the ground. Her feet barely touched the floor before she was running headlong into Noah's legs, her arms going around his knees.

"No!"

Noah bent and scooped her into his arms. "Hey, lady. What's going on?"

"Look what I got," Lily said, holding out a foil packet of peanuts. "I'm saving it."

Lucas shrugged. "I tried to tell her I could buy her more peanuts, but she's not listening to me."

Noah smiled. "How was the flight?"

"Not too bad. I thought she'd have a harder time with it, but she really likes to fly."

"She does?" Noah bounced her in his arm. "Are you going to be a pilot, lady?"

"My name isn't Lady."

"It isn't? What is it? I forgot."

"It's Lily, No."

A buzzer sounded, alerting them to the impending arrival of the luggage. "If you don't mind holding her, I'll grab the bags."

"Yeah, I've got her," Noah said, flashing Luke a reassuring smile.

He could tell the other man was a bit nervous in the thick crowd. How many times had Lucas been around this many people? Probably not many. Maybe once or twice, if at all. Lily, however, was a direct contrast. She seemed intrigued and fascinated by everything going on around her.

"It's a really nice day. I was thinking we could go to the beach after you get settled."

Luke smiled. "What do you say, sweetheart? Do you want to go to the beach?"

"Yes!"

Noah winced and pulled his head back. "I'm guessing by the sudden ringing in my ear, she likes the idea."

"We're still trying to master inside-voices."

The luggage carousel jerked into life, and a conveyer belt in the middle began to spew bags. Lily watched with wide, frightened eyes.

"Where are the bags coming from, Daddy?"

"The plane. You have to keep an eye out for your princess bag, so we don't miss it."

"I won't miss it," she promised solemnly.

"I bet her pink princess bag is easier to spot than your black suitcase."

"How do you know it's black?"

"Isn't everybody's luggage black?"

Lucas laughed. "I almost bought a blue bag, but I didn't want to stick out too much."

Noah watched as Lucas began picking bags off the carousel. A small pink princess bag, as promised. Two large suitcases. A car seat. Another green and white bag that looked suspiciously like a purse. Noah watched the growing pile with trepidation. "Maybe I should have rented one of those handy carts?"

"I think we can handle it..." Lucas offered a lop-sided grin. "I'm sorry, but it was hard to tell what we would need and what we wouldn't."

"Hey, it's no problem. I should be able to get all of this in my car. But we might have to leave Lily behind to make

room. What do you say, kid? Do you want to live in the airport?"

Lily laughed. "No."

"No? Just as well. Your dad would miss you too much."

In the end, Noah did have to rent one of the carts. Lucas had the purse-like bag over one shoulder, Lily in the other hand, and dragged the princess bag behind him. Everything else went on the cart, which Noah dutifully dragged out to the parking lot. He didn't care. He'd carry twice as much. Three times as much, if that was necessary.

"Oh, my God, it's hot," Luke declared, once they stepped out of the relatively cool building.

"Welcome to California."

"Daddy, it's bright."

"We can buy her a little hat before we go to the beach. And some sunglasses. Movie star sunglasses." And whatever else the girl wanted. Noah would shell out a couple hundred bucks, if Lily decided she wanted a pair of designer shades.

It took some creative positioning, but they managed to get all the bags, and Lily's chair in the car, and they didn't have to leave anybody behind. Noah kept the conversation light on the drive to his apartment. He mentioned he already had day passes to Disneyland and Seaworld, and a whole list of favorite restaurants, and there was a free concert in the park, if Lucas thought Lily would enjoy live music.

"Noah?"

"Yeah?"

"You can relax. We're not going to turn around and go home if we're bored for an hour."

Noah smiled. "I know. But this is your first trip to LA, and I wanted to make sure you enjoy yourself."

"What makes you think I wouldn't? Don't we always have a good time?"

"We do," Noah agreed softly. "Well, we used to. Here we are. Home sweet home."

Noah parked his car in spot number three. It wasn't his usual spot, but he traded with his downstairs neighbor for the week. He thought it would be easier to deal with Lily and all their bags if he parked close to the door. Noah took everything he could carry, and led Lucas to his front door.

"I know it's not as luxurious as a hotel," Noah muttered, opening the door. "But it's clean, and I think you'll be comfortable. It's nowhere near as nice as your home. Come on, I'll show you where you're sleeping."

Lucas didn't say anything until they were inside the guestroom. "Are you a big fan of *Beauty and the Beast*?" he asked, nodding toward the bedspread featuring Belle.

"Well, I thought Lily might be more comfortable this way. Plus, we're going to Disneyland, and..."

"You didn't have to buy a whole new bed set."

"I wanted to."

"Put me down, Daddy! I want to see Belle!"

Lucas obediently lowered her to the bed. She immediately threw her arms around the pillow and closed her eyes.

"Are you sleepy, sweetheart?"

"Yes. But no nap."

"No nap," Luke agreed easily. He touched his lips with his fingers, gesturing to Noah to remain quiet. After a few

moments, Lily's breathing evened, and she looked down for the count. "She'll be asleep for a few hours."

"It'll give you a chance to unpack. Come on. Your room is just on the other side of the hall."

"Do you have three rooms?" Luke asked, once they were in the narrow hallway.

"No." He pushed open his bedroom door. "I'll go get your bags."

Lucas took his arm. "Where are you sleeping?"

"I'm taking the couch."

"No, you're not."

Noah tilted his head. "Yes, I am. Look, I sleep on the couch all the time. It's not a big deal."

"You are not giving me your room for a whole week."

"Why are you being so stubborn? This is your vacation. You're my guest. You're going to sleep in the bedroom."

Luke sighed, and pulled Noah into the bedroom, not quite shutting the door behind him. "If I had known you were going to do this, I would have insisted on a hotel."

"I could understand this being a problem if I insisted on sharing the bed with you, but I'm going to be out on the couch." Noah had said it casually, but Luke's eyes widened as soon as he mentioned sharing the bed.

"Noah, I didn't come here to..."

"I know. Look, I didn't mean to make things weird. I just wanted you to be comfortable while you're here. That's all."

"Lily doesn't need that huge bed to herself. I'll just sleep with her. It wouldn't be the first time."

"If you're sure."

"I am."

Against his better judgment, Noah took a step forward. Now they were within touching distance—kissing distance—and he knew he couldn't do either, but his fingers itched to reach out, to skim over his jaw, his cheek, his arm.

"I'm really glad you decided to come out here."

"Me, too. Lily has been bursting with the excitement for the past week."

Me, too. Me, too. "I should have done this sooner. Invited you here."

"Well, now we can make up for lost time."

Noah didn't miss the way Luke didn't move. He was definitely standing too close now, and he expected Luke to push him away, to step out in the hall, to remind him they weren't going to do anything. But neither of them moved. What would Luke do if Noah took his arm, gripped his hip, cupped the back of his neck?

"I've missed you," Noah murmured.

"Noah..."

"I know." And he did know, but he wasn't moving.

"Is this why you invited me here?" Noah could tell he was only half-joking.

"No. No, I just..." He finally stepped away, moving across the room to the window. "I know I've blown it. No, I blew it before. What I did a few months ago was take the shards of our relationship, and any chance I might have had with you, and ground in into tiny little pieces, and then lit the pieces on fire. And then I put the ashes in a safe, and blew up the safe. Then I threw it all out to sea. I know."

Luke's lips twitched. "I wouldn't go that far."

"I would. I'm just saying, you don't need to tell me there won't be a repeat performance of ... anything."

Luke didn't say anything at first, and Noah thought he would probably just leave the room. "I was going to tell you ... I planned to tell you *not* to expect a repeat performance of anything."

Noah nearly winced. "Well, then I guess you can save your breath."

"But I don't think I can," Lucas continued, like Noah hadn't said anything.

Noah's brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"When I saw you at the airport, I forgot all my good intentions. I've missed you, too."

Noah almost laughed. "So what are we going to do? Because I really, really want to..."

"To what?"

"Kiss you."

"I want to let you. But..."

"I know."

Lucas shook his head. "I don't think you do."

"It's the same issue over and over again, isn't it? Talking about it is just slamming our heads into a brick wall. Nothing is going to change. And I've wanted you for so long that..."

Noah shook his head. "My judgment can't be trusted. Because I am this close to chucking all of that out the window and doing what I want anyway."

"I might let you."

Noah frowned. Did Luke know what he was saying? Was this some sort of dare or game? He knew it was a mistake. Kissing and touching Luke would be a mistake. But there wasn't a single part of him that didn't want to test his soft declaration. And they had a week. A lot could change in a week. Lucas might decide California was a good place for Lily. Stranger things had happened. Everything could work out in the end.

Noah was touching Lucas before he even realized he'd crossed the room again. The touch was soft, but enough to warn Lucas of Noah's intentions. He moved his fingers up Luke's arm to grip his shoulder. Noah knew that, like the night in his living room, Luke wasn't going to make the first move. This was his show. Whether he gave in or whether he walked away, it was up to him. But Lucas looked at him with unwavering, clear eyes. He wasn't flinching or pulling away.

As soon as Noah pressed his mouth to Luke's, the last of his good intentions flew out the window. He couldn't stop himself. He couldn't wait. He couldn't think about all the obstacles standing between them. Luke's mouth still tasted the same, with just a hint of sweetness. His lips still felt the same, and his skin was so warm. Noah sighed, closing his eyes to savor each moment of the caress, each subtle shift of Luke's body. He brushed his tongue against Luke's bottom lip, seeking entrance, a shiver racing down his spine as Luke's tongue touched his.

His cock hardened immediately, swelling to an almost painful erection. He pushed against Lucas, grinding against him, and was gratified to feel Luke's own erection pressing

against his leg. His heart went from a resting rate to racing so fast, he was vaguely worried it would explode right from his chest. He backed Lucas against the wall without breaking the kiss, gripping Luke's waistband with his free hand. He knew Lily was just across the hall. He knew Lucas wouldn't want to go beyond kissing. He knew he couldn't do what he really *wanted* to do. He knew he'd have to stop. But that knowledge couldn't stop his wandering fingers, and Luke groaned against his mouth as Noah palmed his cock through his pants.

"Noah..."

"I know," he gasped. "I know we can't. But..." He curled his fingers around Luke's shaft. "But you want to. And I really, really want to."

"Lily..."

"You said Lily would be out for hours," Noah pointed out, pleased with himself for sounding so reasonable. He trailed his mouth to Luke's ear. "And I just want to taste you. I feel like I've been waiting most of my life to finally do that."

"You have..."

"But I don't remember. Please." He tugged at Luke's belt. "If you want me to stop, tell me now. I will. But I really don't want to stop."

"I don't want you to," Luke said hoarsely.

Noah moaned, fumbling with Luke's zipper. "I know we have good reasons not to cross this line. I know it might be a mistake. But I have been thinking and dreaming about this for so long and..."

"Noah?"

"What?"

Lucas gripped the back of his head and brought his mouth down on Noah's in a hard kiss. "Shut up. And I mean that in the nicest way."

Noah grinned. "I can do that."

He lowered himself to his knees slowly, sliding his body down Luke's. He couldn't stand to leave even an inch between them. Luke's body was hard, his muscles solid and surprisingly defined against Noah. But it made sense. Luke worked hard. Something like pride swelled in Noah at the thought of his friend, raising a daughter, running a restaurant, and keeping everything together. It wasn't pride, Noah realized. It was respect. He had always respected Luke, but this was different. Sharper, somehow.

By the time Noah hit the floor, he had Luke's cock out of his pants. He took a moment to simply study it, admire it. He had hoped the sight would wake up the long dormant memory of the last time he was in this position, but there wasn't even a twinge. He had to come to terms with the fact the memory was lost forever, but now that he had an opportunity to make a new one, it didn't seem quite so tragic.

"Oh, Luke," Noah sighed, running his fingers along his shaft. His mouth watered. "God..."

The first touch of Luke's cock against his tongue made Noah close his eyes with delight. He moved his lips down Luke's shaft, relaxing his throat and his jaw. He couldn't believe he was here. He couldn't believe he was finally doing this. He couldn't believe Luke was letting him. He couldn't believe how good Luke felt, and how he tasted, and how right

it seemed. Noah had always known Luke was made for him, perfect for him, but this was all the proof he needed.

Luke didn't remain still. His hands fluttered over Noah's cheeks, and head, and shoulders. He seemed intent to touch everywhere he could reach, like he thought Noah might just disappear. Noah loved every brush of contact. Luke's fingers seared his skin, leaving him both hot and cold. What would it be like to take Luke to bed? To feel his long fingers everywhere? To have no barriers between their bodies? Would he have the chance to find out?

Noah knew he didn't have a lot of time. Luke wouldn't be able to relax as long as he was worried about Lily waking from her nap. He could only hope this wouldn't be the first and last time. He resolved to make it as good for Luke as possible, so Luke wouldn't be able to resist him later.

He gripped the base of Luke's cock, pumping his wrist in time with his mouth. Luke immediately tensed, and Noah knew it wouldn't be long. His fingers brushed against Luke's balls with each stroke, and he ached to explore the rest of Luke's body. He wanted to pull his balls into his mouth. He wanted to lick and nibble along Luke's inner thighs. He wanted to eat out Luke's ass, get him slick and stretched and ready for Noah's cock.

"Noah ... oh, God ... what are you doing to me?"

Making you come, I hope.

Luke's hands finally came to rest on Noah's head, his fingers digging into Noah's scalp. Noah gripped Luke's ass with both hands, pulling him closer and holding him tight.

"Please..."

What? I'll do anything you ask, Luke. I will.

"So close ... So close ... Noah..."

Noah pushed his mouth to the bottom of Luke's cock, his lips tight around the base. He swallowed around Luke's shaft, his throat muscles tightening against the head, his tongue flat against the bottom of his cock. Luke jerked once, and his hand disappeared from Noah's head. He glanced up through his lashes and watched Luke bite the bottom of his thumb, barely keeping back the shout of pleasure as he shot deep into Noah's throat.

Noah closed his eyes, pulling back to catch every hot splash against his tongue. His balls tightened painfully. He wanted to feel Luke's mouth on him. He wanted to feel more than Luke's mouth. But at that moment, he might have settled for a mere hand-job. Everything inside him ached. Giving Luke a blow job eased one desire, but it only heightened a dozen more.

Noah sat back on his heels and wiped his mouth. Lucas didn't move at first, just stared down at him with slightly muddled eyes, his breath coming in rapid gasps. Noah shifted uncomfortably beneath his friend's gaze, waiting for some sort of reaction. But he didn't say anything.

Noah finally stood. "The bathroom is just through that door, if you want to ... clean up."

"Thanks," Luke muttered.

Noah nodded, waiting until Luke was out of the room before he sank to the edge of the bed. He didn't think Luke would come out of the room and announce he planned to fly

back to Utah, but he wouldn't be surprised if Luke wanted to get a hotel room for the duration of his vacation.

A vacation that would no longer include him, Noah was sure. He licked his lips, and he could still taste Luke on his skin. He'd like to say it was worth it, but it wasn't. Not if he'd managed to finally drive a wedge between them.

* * * *

Lucas stared at himself in the mirror, wondering if that's how he always looked after sex. Somehow, he didn't think so. His cock was still hard, like Noah hadn't just given him the best blow job in recent memory, if not his life. He kept waiting for that familiar weight to settle over his shoulders, a pointed combination of regret and relief. But he didn't feel any regret at all. It was hard to regret something they both so clearly wanted. Had it always been this tense between them? Lucas couldn't remember. He didn't think so, but maybe Noah would disagree.

Noah. Luke sighed. He'd never thought he'd be able to withstand the entire week. He'd known they would probably kiss. Maybe even there would be a little touching. He'd imagined it would come later, after days of pretending neither of them wanted to. He'd never thought for a minute he wouldn't even get through the first afternoon.

He hadn't been overcome with lust when he saw Noah. He hadn't actually wanted to do anything until he saw the hunger in Noah's eyes. He had looked so ... helpless. Like he didn't know what he was doing, or what he wanted, or where he was going, or how to get there. And Luke realized Noah

wasn't going to ask for anything, not even a little help. Luke had no doubt Noah fully intended to keep his hands to himself all week.

Lucas didn't know why the struggle he saw on Noah's face affected him so strongly, but he couldn't deny it. Or deny him.

Luke splashed his face with cold water and took a deep breath. He had only needed a moment to collect his thoughts. He mostly didn't want to freak out in front of Noah, but he was surprisingly calm. What had happened wasn't bad. It wasn't even wrong. It was complicated, but hardly the most complicated situation he had ever been asked to face.

He stepped out of the bathroom to find Noah sitting on the bed, waiting for him.

"We should probably talk," Luke said.

"Yeah, I know."

"I've been thinking about the rest of the week and..."

"Look, I know you didn't plan to stay in a hotel, so I'll foot the bill. For the whole week."

Lucas stopped. "You want us to go to a hotel?"

"No."

"Then why did you say that?"

"Because I thought you'd want to go to a hotel."

"Why?"

"That's not what you were going to say?"

Lucas shook his head, joining Noah on the bed. "No, in fact. I was going to say something else. I was going to say I think we could ... Look, we keep talking about how nobody is going to move. Maybe we should actually find out if we want

to live together. Maybe you've turned into an impossible jerk in the past five years. Or maybe life with a toddler is not something you'd want to sign up for."

"So this is an audition, of sorts?" There was no mistaking the note of hope in his voice.

"Of sorts."

Noah nodded. "I think that sounds reasonable. How's my audition going so far?"

"Good. But this isn't just your audition, you know."

Noah looked like he was going to say something, but he closed his mouth and nodded. "Right. So ... what do you want to do now?"

Lucas couldn't answer the question the way he wanted. There was only thing he *wanted* to do, but they had already done too much, gone too far. Maybe there would be time to push Noah back to the bed and return the favor later. In the meantime, he needed to find a way to distract himself.

"What have you got in the kitchen? Maybe we can take a picnic to the beach when Lily wakes up?"

Noah nodded. Lucas expected to see a flash of disappointment in his eyes, but there was nothing like that. At that moment, Luke realized nothing he could do or say would disappoint Noah. Noah was just happy to have him there. He immediately thought of Noah's wide, unconscious smile at the airport, and earlier, when he saw him at the diner the first time. Luke didn't think it was possible to fake that kind of happiness.

"Come on. I tried to buy things Lily would like."

"How did you know what she'd like?"

My Only Home
by Pepper Espinoza

Noah shrugged. "I just tried to remember what sorts of things you had in your fridge. Other than one glaring example, I do have a pretty good memory."

"It's always been better than mine," Luke agreed, following Noah out of the bedroom. He had a feeling Noah's audition was going to go well. Too well. Luke already dreaded leaving again. But he wouldn't think about it. Not yet.

Not until he had to.

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CHAPTER 7

Noah leaned back on the beach towel, resting on his elbows while he watched Lucas lead Lily to her first encounter with the ocean. The child looked terrified and fascinated in equal parts, her small hand wrapped around Luke's finger tightly. When the warm water rushed to meet her toes, she jumped out of the way, shrieking with delight. Luke watched patiently as she did her dance with the sea, finally allowing him to take her ankle deep into the waves.

She reminded him so much of Luke, it made Noah's chest hurt. Luke wore the exact same slightly goofy, slightly mad smile when he encountered something new and surprising, something that scared him a little. When they were kids, Lucas was never the first to try anything new, but he always tried it hardest. If they were swinging from a rope into the lake, Luke would go last, but he would swing the highest before letting go. When they learned to drive, Luke put it off as long as he could, but he drove the fastest, and he passed the test first. And he was always smiling.

Noah supposed it served Luke right to have a daughter with the same tendencies. He didn't doubt Lily would be swimming out into the breakers within fifteen minutes, should Luke let go of her hand. And she was having fun, the way Luke always had fun, no matter what he was doing.

Did Luke still smile like that? Did he ever get that slightly insane light in his eye anymore? Was the boy Noah used to

know still lurking inside this grown man somewhere? Or was that boy lost forever, to both of them?

Not that Noah had a problem with the grown man standing in front of him. He didn't know if it was fair to say Luke was his type. He suspected he didn't have a certain type he tried to find, he was just naturally attracted to men who reminded him of his best friend, as though he could ever find anybody to replace Luke. In five years of cruising the bars and clubs in Los Angeles, he had never even come close to somebody who could touch Luke. Nobody was even in Luke's league.

Lily broke away from him and rushed headlong into the waves, about five minutes earlier than Noah had expected. Luke had clearly anticipated her decision to throw caution to the wind, and he scooped her up with one arm, her arms and legs still swinging wildly. Noah could hear her protest, but her words fell on deaf ears. Luke wasn't going to put her down again.

Noah was smiling by the time they returned to the towel, Lily still struggling against Luke's arm. "You knew she was going to do that."

"She has no nerves, I swear."

"She's just like you."

"I never..." Lucas sighed. "Please don't ever tell her the sort of stunts I used to pull. She doesn't need the ideas or the ammunition."

Noah's lips twisted. "Trust me, if you figured out how to find trouble, she can, too."

"I want to play, Daddy."

"You're not going back to the water. Do you want to make a sand castle?"

Lily tilted her head, carefully considering his offer. "Yes."

"Come here, then." He put her down on the sand and handed her the plastic shovel and pail Noah had bought.

"Look, this is how you build one."

Both Noah and Lily watched with rapt attention while Luke demonstrated how to build the first turret, but for different reasons. Lily was deeply fascinated by the process. Noah was just deeply fascinated by the beads of water flowing down Luke's neck and arms.

"There," Luke said, once Lily was happily shoveling damp sand into her bucket. "That should keep her occupied for a good ten minutes."

Noah laughed. "You look thirsty. Beer?"

"How about a Coke?"

"I've got one of those, too." Noah reached into the cooler and fished a can of soda out of the ice. "Here you go."

"Thanks." He popped it open and drank several swallows before speaking again. "Did you ever think about having kids?"

Noah shrugged. "Not really. I couldn't even find somebody I wanted to see more than once or twice. I never really let myself think about kids."

"I was really scared. I guess I'm still really scared, but the first time I held her..."

Noah could easily imagine Luke, nearly four years earlier, holding his daughter for the first time. He almost felt sorry he'd missed it. Almost. In reality, he knew it would have torn

him apart. He'd never liked Lilah, and he'd never been able to hide his jealousy. Noah would have seen the two of them having a child together as cementing the bond Noah could never share with Luke.

"I can see what she means to you."

"Having her is a full-time job. I don't get vacations or breaks. Even when she's with Marty, I don't really get a break."

"I know, Luke. I'm not stupid."

Lucas smiled. "I know you're not. But the reality of having a child ... it isn't like anything you've ever experienced."

"Is this your way of warning me?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I haven't thought about Lily? My assistant thinks I'm nuts. She's got three kids, and for the first time since she started working for me, I've been asking her to tell me all about them."

"I imagine she's more than happy to oblige."

Noah nodded. "But I think I'm learning a few things. The time and effort she invests into them comes through loud and clear."

"And it hasn't scared you away?"

"I invited you to stay for a week in my apartment. If I was scared, I wouldn't have invited you for a single night."

"After my divorce was finalized, I decided I wouldn't date again. Not for a long time. I didn't want a train of people moving in and out of Lily's life. I'm not sure how much she'll remember of when Lilah left, but I didn't think that memory

would need to be compounded with multiple examples. You know?"

"That makes sense," Noah said slowly, though he wasn't sure what Luke was trying to tell him. If Luke wanted to stay with him, Noah would never leave. Noah never wanted to leave Luke in the first place.

"I just want to be sure that you're prepared to be an involved part of her life."

"You know what I was thinking about while you were introducing her to the ocean? How much she looked just like you. I knew she'd try to run into the water, smiling the whole time, because that's exactly what you would have done. In fact, I'd bet that you want to do it right now, don't you? Just go as far and deep as you can."

Luke smiled. "Maybe."

"If I was a part of her life, I would be the best ... uncle or friend or whatever you'd call me ... that I could be to her. She's *your* daughter, which already makes her one of my favorite people. I'd need a bit of a learning curve, but..."

"We all do. Noah..."

"No! No!"

They both looked up as she ran toward them. Noah instinctively put his hands out to catch her, and she barreled into his arms like she never had a doubt he would. "No!"

"What?"

"Will you make sand castles with me?" she asked with a shy smile.

"I don't know..."

"Please."

"What about your dad?"

"He can watch."

Noah's lips twisted. "What if he wants to play, too?"

"Do you want to play, too, Daddy?"

"Are you kidding?" He winked at Noah. "Daddy is going to take a nap."

"I guess it's just you and me, lady. Come on."

Noah was intensely aware of Luke's eyes on him the entire time they worked on the sand castle. He knew it was another test, another chance to prove himself, prove he wasn't the same guy who left town five years ago.

But he realized something as Lily carefully overturned her pail, creating a column of sand. He really did want to do everything he could for her. He knew he'd never be a father to her—Luke fulfilled that role just fine without him—but he wanted to be something. He wanted to be there for her.

But how much was he willing to sacrifice for that chance?

* * * *

Noah sighed and collapsed on his couch. "Now be honest with me. Bedtime is your favorite time of day, isn't it?"

Luke laughed. "Yeah, usually."

"I usually watch television this time of night, but I think right now, I'll just enjoy the quiet."

Luke lowered himself to the couch beside him and dropped his head back, clearly exhausted. "I can't believe she's already asleep. I figured she'd be too wired for awhile."

"Wired? From what? The twelve cotton candies you let her have? Or the excitement of meeting Winnie the Pooh?"

"I did not let her have twelve cotton candies."

"She had a bag of pink sugar in her hand all day," Noah pointed out.

"She just took her time to savor it."

Noah snorted. "Whatever. I can't believe how much you spoiled her today."

"Hey," Luke said defensively, "she's my daughter, and if I want to spoil her on her first trip to Disneyland, then I can."

"I'm not trying to pick a fight with you. I'm just saying, I don't know how such a little body could hold so much sugar."

"She ran it off. You'd know that if you were chasing her all over the park."

Noah laughed. "You're in better shape than I am. Can tomorrow be a day of rest and reflection?"

"What are you going to reflect on? How happy you'll be when you have your house to yourself again?"

Noah immediately sobered. "No."

Lucas rolled his head to look at him. "You've had three days to get tired of us."

"Not nearly enough time." Noah took Luke's hand, massaging his wrist with his thumb. "Come to bed with me tonight. Lily is not going to wake up. She probably won't be up until lunchtime tomorrow."

"I've been thinking about that today."

"Because you want to come to bed with me, or because you've been trying to think of a nice way to blow me off?"

Luke snorted. "Because I've been trying to think of a nice way to blow you."

Noah's heart slammed in his chest. "I hope you're not just teasing me, because I couldn't stand it if you were."

"I'm not."

"Oh." Noah blinked. "I need to shower first, because I'm gross and sweaty."

"Do whatever you need to do."

Noah was off the couch and scrambling to the bathroom before Lucas could finish speaking. He didn't want to seem overeager, but he was. Very overeager. Nothing had happened between them in the last three days. Noah took them all over Los Angeles during the day, showing them everything worth seeing, feeding them everything worth eating. At night, they curled up in front of the television to watch a movie, then they put Lily to bed, and then they just talked. Nobody brought up the possibility of Luke going to Noah's room, instead of joining Lily or stretching out on the couch. Noah desperately wanted to broach the subject, but he knew it was ultimately up to Luke, and if he wanted to take that step, Noah would be more than happy to follow.

Noah left the bathroom door unlocked on the chance Luke would want to join him in the shower. The days since Lucas arrived hadn't been completely dry. Noah had stolen a few kisses, and Luke always reciprocated. There had been a little bit of groping that morning before breakfast. Every kiss, every single brush of contact, sent a jolt directly to his cock. He didn't quite spend the entire day as a walking hard-on, but he couldn't help but think about all his friends who couldn't get lucky, and how'd they joke about the come bursting from their ears.

In other words, he had a serious case of blue balls, and not even jerking off every morning in the shower and every night after everybody went to bed could alleviate it.

He soaped himself quickly, scrubbing every inch of his skin. Each time he ran his hands over his shaft, he closed his eyes and pretended it was Luke. Noah wasn't usually a praying man, but he sent up a quick word now. *Please, don't let Lily wake up. Don't let anything distract us. Just give me this one night. Just one.*

Less than ten minutes after leaving Luke on the couch, he stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist, mildly disappointed that Luke hadn't joined him after all. He ran a comb through his wet hair, slicking it back to his head, and emerged from the steamy bathroom, hoping to find Luke waiting for him in the bedroom.

Noah wasn't disappointed. Luke was in the bedroom. And Noah was naked. Noah's groin felt tight.

"That was a quick shower."

"I didn't want to give you the chance to change your mind."

Luke looked pointedly at the tent Noah was pitching. "I see you haven't changed your mind either."

"This can't be the first time you've noticed the effect you have on me."

"No, but I thought it'd be more polite if I didn't make a comment." The humor disappeared from his dark eyes, and he touched the mattress beside him. "Come here."

Noah didn't have to be asked twice. As soon as he was within touching distance, Luke reached out and snagged his

towel. A single tug sent it to the floor, and Noah was left standing naked in front of him. Luke paused, his eyes glued to Noah's body, taking in every detail. Noah remained still, allowing the slow perusal to continue until Luke looked up, meeting his eyes.

"Do you approve?" Noah asked, only half-joking.

"I wasn't sure if it'd be the same."

Noah frowned. "If *what* would be the same?"

Luke glanced up, meeting Noah's eyes with a sheepish expression. "I've never been with another man. You probably wouldn't be surprised to know I've only had two partners."

"Besides me?"

"Counting you."

Noah gaped. "Are you serious? You've only ever had sex with Lilah?"

"Yes."

"That means, the blow job the other day, was your first in..."

"A very long time, yes."

Noah sat on the edge of the bed, unmindful of his lack of clothes. "But, Luke, you're still a young man. Don't you have ... I mean, don't you ever want to just pick somebody up and fuck them until you're raw?"

"Maybe not until I'm raw, but I told you already, after our divorce was final and I got full custody of Lily, I didn't want to take any risks with anybody."

"Wow, and I've been feeling sorry for myself because I've had to keep my hands to myself for three days."

Luke laughed. "I bet that's been rough."

"You have no idea." He rested his hand on Luke's knee and squeezed it lightly. "Look, maybe we're going about this all wrong. Maybe I should worry about ... seeing to your needs. Because they're probably a lot more pressing than mine."

Luke turned to face him and put his hand flat on Noah's chest. He pushed gently until Noah laid back. Luke propped himself up on his elbow beside him, caressing Noah's chest thoughtfully.

"Remember a few seconds ago when I said I wasn't sure if it would be the same? I wanted to see if I'd still want you as much as I did that night."

"Well?"

Lucas dipped his head and ran his soft lips over Noah's nipple. Noah sucked his breath in sharply, his skin breaking out in a rash of goose bumps. "I want you. I want to know every inch of you."

"God, Luke..."

"And I think after so many years of celibacy, I should get to do exactly what I want."

"Absolutely," Noah breathed.

Lucas sat up long enough to pull his shirt off, then his mouth immediately returned to Noah's chest. His lips whispered across Noah's skin, the contact light and searing at the same time. Noah's stomach clenched, his groin tightened, his toes curled, and he didn't know what to do with his hands. He lifted his head, his gaze fixed on Luke's as he moved lower and lower down his body.

Luke repositioned himself, swinging one leg over Noah's thighs to straddle him. Noah sighed, his eyes rolling back in

his head as Luke's naked chest slid against his body. His skin was warm from a day in the sun, his muscles were tight, and the weight pressing him to the mattress was solid and comfortable. Noah caressed Luke's back, running his fingers up and down his ribs, smiling each time Luke squirmed when he brushed against a sensitive spot.

Luke's soft breath against his lips was his only warning before Luke claimed his mouth in a thorough kiss. Like every time he had the chance to touch or kiss Luke, Noah was compelled to catalogue everything about the experience, so he could relive it later. Luke's lips were still a little sticky from the cotton candy, a little salty from the popcorn. His tongue moved with more hunger than finesse, and Noah felt like an awkward teenager again, relying on pure instinct rather than skill. Tongues, lips, and teeth clashed, and he lifted his hips off the bed, grinding his hard cock against Luke.

Noah wasn't sure how long each raw kiss lasted. Each time Luke broke away for air, Noah chased his mouth, desperate to reconnect again. Noah didn't care if Luke sensed his desperation, his need. He was trying to make up for what seemed like a lifetime, and each second of each kiss was precious to him. Something that should be savored. They might have been locked in that position for an hour, but Noah was still disappointed when Luke pulled away.

His disappointment didn't last for long. Luke left a trail of wet kisses down his body, his mouth impossibly hot. Noah watched him through half closed eyes, wondering if this was all a vivid dream, a fantasy, wondering if something would happen to make the other man disappear in a wisp of smoke.

But he was real. He wasn't going anywhere. His fingers curled around Noah's hips as he dragged his tongue down the top of his thigh, gathering stray drops of water as he moved closer and closer to Noah's erection.

Noah fisted the bed, his breath frozen in his chest. He couldn't even speak or moan in encouragement, he could only silently will Luke to continue. *Please, please, you're so close. Please.*

Luke paused, looking up through long lashes. Noah didn't know if he was looking for any particular thing, or if he was having second thoughts, or if he was waiting for something. Noah sucked his breath in sharply, transfixed by Luke's eyes. Noah never tried to deny the truth, but now it struck him with singular clarity. He loved this man so much, it seemed to sting his heart. He was going to leave in three days. How could Noah let him walk away? How was Noah going to live with hundreds of miles separating them?

Noah didn't have a chance to answer those questions before Luke blew a warm stream of air over the tip of his cock. He jerked, resisting the sudden impulse to bury his hands in Luke's hair and force his shaft into the other man's mouth. His grip on the bed tightened, and he forced himself to be patient. This was still a mostly new experience for Luke, and he didn't need to be rushed or pressured. Noah would let him take as much time as he needed, but the dull ache he had been living with all week intensified now.

The first touch of Luke's tongue made him shiver with anticipation. His tongue followed thin paths marked by drops of water, from the tip of his cock to the base, in winding,

teasing patterns. Noah didn't know if Luke knew what he was doing, didn't know if he meant to torment him and make him crazy, but the effect was the same in the end. He only wanted Luke to swallow his cock, and at that moment, it felt like the only thing he had ever wanted. Earlier desires and attractions faded from his memory completely. Nothing before this mattered, and the intensity of his lust was almost enough to stop his breath again.

Then Lucas parted his lips and guided Noah's cock into his mouth. Noah expected him to stop once he had his lips wrapped around the crown, but he kept going lower and lower. Luke hollowed his cheeks, creating a hard suction on Noah's shaft, and began to move his head. Each stroke was so slow, each inch wonderful and excruciating. Each second endless and terrifying and perfect. Noah began to chant Luke's name in soft puffs of air, barely allowing any sound at all to escape his throat.

As Luke began to pick up speed, Noah knew he would come soon. It was too much for him to take after waiting for so long. *This is Luke ... Lucas ... my Luke ...* The thought went through him over and over—the only coherent thought he was capable of. At first, Noah could feel the difference between his lips and his teeth, his tongue and the roof of his mouth. He could sense the soft muscles of his throat working around the very tip of his cock. But after a few moments, it all just blurred together in a haze of pleasure.

"Luke ... I'm so close..."

Noah didn't intend for Luke to stop, but he did, tearing his mouth away. Noah gasped like Luke had just dumped a

bucket of ice water on his head, his whole body shaking in protest at the loss of Luke's heat. Luke ignored Noah's pain, stepping away from the bed to unzip his pants and kick them off. It probably only took a few seconds, but it seemed like an eternity to Noah's cloudy brain.

Luke straddled him once again, his thick shaft sliding against Noah's. Luke gripped them both with one large hand, and began pumping his wrist. Nothing could compare to Luke's mouth, but Noah couldn't complain about the firm grip of his hand, and the slick heat of his shaft. Noah jerked his hips, rocking in time with Luke's strokes and fucking his hand. Each thrust against Luke's velvety skin sent a jolt of sharp pleasure through him.

Luke leaned over to kiss him again, and his mouth tasted—felt—completely different. Noah finally released the bed and buried both hands in Luke's hair, holding him tightly as Noah thrust his tongue into his mouth. Luke moaned, a soft sound of satisfaction, and that was Noah's undoing. His cock jerked against Luke's palm, and he shot long streams of come over both their stomachs. Luke reacted almost instantly, shuddering with the force of his own orgasm.

Noah rolled Luke onto his back without breaking the kiss, their stomachs and chests slick. When he finally lifted his head to gasp for breath, he noticed their mingled fluid glistening on Luke's chest, and he was unable to resist. He dragged his tongue down Luke's neck and chest, lapping at their spunk eagerly, cleaning Luke's skin. He glanced up, noting the shock in Luke's eyes, but it wasn't enough to cloud his hunger. He'd be ready to again in moments, Noah was

certain. Then it would be his turn to make sure Luke knew how much he was wanted.

"Daddy?"

They both froze.

"I didn't just imagine that, did I?" Noah asked hopefully.

Luke shook his head, gently pushing Noah away and sitting up. He grabbed the towel Noah had discarded earlier and quickly wiped himself off before pulling his shirt on and buttoning his pants. "I'm sorry."

"No. Go see what she needs." It took the greatest effort to keep the disappointment from his voice, and even then, he wasn't entirely sure he succeeded.

Noah didn't even have the chance to get impatient before Luke returned. "She was asleep by the time I got in there. I guess it was just a momentary disturbance."

"Does that mean you ... plan to stay in here tonight?"

"For awhile. I might leave before Lily wakes up."

Noah didn't care. He slid over on the bed, making room for Luke to join him. Luke stripped quickly, and Noah realized he wouldn't get tired of looking at that body any time soon. Noah reached for him as soon as he settled on the mattress, pulling Luke's body against his for a soft kiss.

"I didn't get a chance to thank you before you rushed out of here," Noah said against his mouth.

"I sensed your gratitude," Luke said with a smile that could almost be shy.

"That was really amazing. It almost sounds cliché when I say it like that, but it was."

"Do you ... is there anything else you want to do?"

Noah frowned, trying to get a sense of what Lucas was thinking. "Are you asking because there's something else you want to do? Or are you asking because you're tired and want to go to sleep?"

"I am a little tired."

Noah stretched out on his side and pulled Lucas against him. They lay face to face, their chest and groins touching, and Noah draped his leg over Luke's pulling him even closer. "How's that?"

"It's good." Luke smiled. "Is this why you all of a sudden stopped staying over at my house when we were kids?"

"Because I wanted to crawl into bed with you and do unmentionable things to your body in your parent's house?" Noah nodded. "Yeah. It was getting harder and harder to deal with."

"You know, I feel like I always knew your sexual preferences, but it never occurred to me that you might want *me*."

"Why not?" Noah asked softly. "You're one of the best people I know. You're funny, and you're good, and you're attractive, and you've always known me better than anybody ... and I was always so scared of fucking up our friendship. I'm actually glad you didn't know. It meant I was doing a good job of keeping it under wraps." Noah frowned. "Until I sucked your cock, I guess."

"You probably could have tried to write that off as a misunderstanding."

Noah snorted. "How would that work? Uh, excuse me, Luke, but I misunderstood how blow jobs worked. See, I didn't realize I was supposed to be on the receiving end."

Luke laughed softly. "I didn't say you could do it successfully." He sobered, his eyes growing soft. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For this week. For tonight. For coming back in my life. It was a bit lonely without my best friend, you know."

"I wish I had done it sooner."

"Maybe now was the right time."

"Maybe." He pressed his lips against Luke's forehead. "You should try to get some sleep. I won't let you stay in here too long."

"Sleep ... would be good."

Noah watched Lucas fall asleep, noting with some amusement that he was out almost as soon as he closed his eyes. He looked sixteen again. He looked like a boy who would take on the world without fear. He looked less like the man he was and more like the man he would become. Noah adored him, regardless of his age.

"I do love you," he breathed, his brow resting against Luke's.

The corner of Luke's mouth lifted in a soft smile.

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CHAPTER 8

Noah had never noticed how tomb-like his apartment was until Luke and Lily were gone. He rarely watched television, despite his job, and if he listened to music at all, it was with his mp3 player. His neighbors were gone all day, and often out all night, plus he had a corner apartment, so he didn't even have that noise filtering through his home. Once they were gone, Noah had nothing to distract him from the fact he was alone.

The phone calls reverted back to brief conversations before Lily's bedtime. Once, Noah had tried to talk about moving. Lucas simply reminded him that Lily's grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins all live in Mountain View. She needed her family. Noah had wanted to counter that all *his* family lived in Mountain View, too, and Noah didn't really miss them. It sounded like a lame excuse to Noah. Maybe that's what it was, and Lucas knew it, too. Maybe he was trying to let Noah down easy.

If that was Luke's intention, he failed. There was nothing easy about enjoying the conveniences and luxuries of living in Los Angeles, then returning to an empty apartment. There was nothing easy about cleaning up the guest bedroom and putting all of Lily's things in storage because it would *always* be a guestroom, and never be her room. There was nothing easy about going to meetings and pitches, preparing for the pilot season, and knowing this was the only thing that gave his life any sort of meaning. There was nothing easy about

looking at the pictures he had snapped of Luke and Lily during their vacation. And he always looked. He couldn't resist, even if he was only digging his finger into an unhealed wound, a little deeper each time.

Luke called exactly one month after he slept in Noah's bed. Noah was returning from work, set for a long night of feeling sorry for himself, when the phone rang. When he saw the familiar number on his caller ID, undeniable hope surged. Luke rarely called him. Maybe he had changed his mind? Maybe he wanted something more than a shallow conversation?

"Hey," Noah greeted warmly. "I was just thinking about you."

"Noah ... wow, this is harder than I thought it would be."

"What is?" Noah asked, his mind going to a million places, all of them bad. All of them about Luke. He didn't think they should talk anymore. He didn't really like men. He found a nice girl who wanted to raise Lily and work mornings in the diner.

"This afternoon, your father collapsed in the hardware store. The doctor thinks it was a heart attack but ... they won't know until the autopsy."

Noah blinked. "John is dead?"

"Yes."

Noah knew the spark of relief was wrong, but he couldn't help it.

"How soon can you get up here?"

"I'm not sure I can."

"What?"

Noah winced at Luke's sharp question. "I'm really busy, and I took all the time off I could."

"You're serious, aren't you? You don't want to deal with this, but nobody else is going to do it for you."

"Somebody will. I might be his next of kin, but it's not like I'm the only person in his family. Somebody there in Mountain View can take care of all the arrangements."

Luke was silent for several beats before he said, "You can't do this for the rest of your life, Noah. You can't just avoid things that might be hard or painful. I know it's easier to take that route. I know you don't do it to be vindictive, but if you keep that up, you're going to have one very long, very lonely life."

"I'm not..."

"You know it's the right thing to do. You should get on a plane up here tonight. I can meet you at the airport, if you'd like."

Noah perked up. Any excuse to spend time with Luke was a good excuse. "No, if I fly, I should rent a car. It'll be easier to take care of everything."

"Does that mean we can expect to see you soon?"

"Yeah. Though I don't know what good I can do. I don't know anything about planning funerals, Luke. I don't even know where to start."

"There's nothing wrong with asking for a little bit of help. You don't need to know how to do everything, you just need to be willing to do it. You never spoke to him when he was alive, Noah. This might be your last chance to get everything settled."

But there was nothing left to settle. Noah believed that. He had thought there was. He had honestly believed John needed him, would be willing to accept his help, but finally, the barrier that always stood between them couldn't be torn down. Now it never would be, and the thought didn't hurt as much as it should.

"I need to make some calls. I'll fly up as soon as I can."

"Good."

The approval in Luke's voice was as warm as his earlier statement had been sharp. Noah couldn't help but smile, but he was careful to sound serious when he spoke again. Luke apparently expected him to take the situation seriously. No smiling. Not now. People didn't smile just minutes after hearing of their father's fatal heart attack.

"I'll call you with the details as soon as I can," Noah promised. "But now I've got to call my boss."

"Okay. I'm really sorry, Noah."

"Yeah, I know." *I only wish I could be.*

* * * *

Noah's childhood home seemed larger and more imposing now than it ever did when he was a kid. It glared at him from the veil of trees surrounding him, like it was challenging him. *What do you think you're doing here? You didn't want to be here before, and I don't want you now. Go back to California. Go back to where you belong.*

But he didn't turn around. Luke expected him to stay. Luke expected him to plan a funeral, go through the house, make all the appropriate gestures. Luke was waiting for him to do

the right thing, and Noah knew he needed to prove himself. He could do the right thing. He didn't have to run away.

Noah hoped he would find something in the house—a letter, a journal, a videotape, a book. Something. Anything, to explain John's bizarre behavior, to explain what he thought of his son. Maybe the barrier would always be between them, but surely there could be some sort of closure. That wasn't too much to ask for. Just a fucking sign, that's all Noah wanted.

Walking into the old man's bedroom was difficult. The air was stale, the blinds pulled. Everything was dark, a secret cave Noah shouldn't have discovered, much less entered. Everything on the surface looked exactly like Noah thought it would. Clothes hanging out of the dresser, an unmade bed, a picture of his mother on the dusty nightstand. But now he needed to go below the surface, to dig into a life where he was never really welcome.

Or he could go back to his hotel.

Noah sighed. He needed to know. He couldn't run from this, no matter how much he wanted to.

But if he expected to make some great discovery that would shed light on the stranger who raised him, he was sorely disappointed. John Hill didn't keep a diary or a journal. And as far as Noah could tell, he didn't save anything except old skin magazines and car manuals. He searched the bedroom thoroughly, going through each drawer, and the closet, and under the bed, and in pockets, and behind the dresser. When he was done there, he moved to the other bedrooms, then the living room, then the attic, then the

kitchen, then his work space in the garage. Then his old truck.

There was no sign of Noah anywhere. He didn't keep pictures of his son. He didn't keep the letters Noah wrote. He emerged from the house, dirty, sweaty, exhausted, and empty-handed. But not quite discouraged. John had spent most of his life at his store in town. It would make sense if he kept important things in his office there.

Noah searched until long after midnight. He found interesting and surprising items, but he never found what he was looking for. He didn't even come across a picture of himself. Everything that ever indicated John Hill had a boy was kept in a series of boxes in the attic, and each box had a rich layer of dust. They hadn't been disturbed since Noah's mother died, over a decade earlier.

Noah returned to the house, feeling curiously hollow. He didn't go inside. He sat out on the dying lawn. There wasn't enough water to keep it alive in the late autumn, and John probably hadn't cared to try. Had John been lonely? Did he used to sit on the porch with a cold beer and wish his boy would return? Did he break down every once in awhile and write letters, and that's why Noah received them? Not because he necessarily needed Noah, he just needed somebody to talk to?

Has he really been such a dire disappointment to his father?

Noah plucked a wilted leaf of grass from the dirt and rolled it between his finger and thumb. He probably had been more than a disappointment. A son who would never marry. A son

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by Pepper Espinoza

who would never have children. A son who never cared for cars, for tools, for building things. A son who didn't want anything to do with the hardware store. A son who wasn't interested in staying in Mountain View. A son who had always been a little too attached to his mother.

The house loomed behind him, watching him. He could feel the weight of its stare on his back. He could feel the weight of the house itself on his shoulders. Nothing but dead weight. It would drag him down if he didn't cut it free. If he didn't cut himself free, like he had tried to do the first time he left Mountain View. Clearly, that hadn't been a clean break. This time, he needed to do something to sever the ties with the house, his father, a past he didn't like to think about. Something so final, there wouldn't be a single strand to hold him back.

John had sisters and cousins and nieces and nephews who could deal with the house and all the contents. Hell, the house might not even belong to him. He had assumed it would, but he hadn't seen the will yet. Noah wouldn't be surprised if John had cut him off entirely. He hoped so. He hoped the old man's vindictiveness went that far, because he didn't want to any of that shit. It could all rot.

* * * *

The service was nice. As was the reception afterward, but only because he had asked his aunt, Joan, to organize it. She had been more than happy to, throwing herself into the preparations and clucking about how awful it must have all

been for Noah. Noah nodded. It was awful, and yes, he did like German potato salad.

Lucas was there, of course. And Lily, looking impossible small in a little black dress. She was passed from group to group, still young enough to attract attention from the old ladies, and the young ladies, who filled the church. Noah kept busy with small errands and tasks, real and imagined, so he could avoid talking to Luke. He wasn't ready to talk to him. The timing needed to be right. You didn't say what Noah wanted to say any old time.

Noah said a few words at the grave. He couldn't remember what. Lily waved while he was speaking, and Luke caught her hand and gently brought it back to her side, looking stern and amused at the same time. Noah wanted to wave back to her. After he tossed the first handful of dirt on top of the casket, she had run over, pulling on his pant leg until he bent to lift her.

"Hi, No."

"Hey, lady."

"I'm sorry about your daddy."

"Me, too."

"Are you sad?"

"A little."

"Are you going to cry?"

"No, probably not."

She surprised him by wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly. Lily was affectionate with him, and didn't mind when he picked her up, but she had never

volunteered a hug. Before Noah could quite get over that, Luke was there.

"She got away from me for a minute."

"That's fine," Noah said, feeling the sting of tears behind his eyes.

"Everything was very nice."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"We should talk. Maybe after the reception."

Noah passed Lily over to Luke, carefully avoiding eye contact. "Yeah. That'll be fine."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Luke asked, shifting Lily's weight on his arm. "You look a little ... drawn."

"I haven't been sleeping too well. That's all. I'm fine."

Luke studied his face for another moment. "You can crash on my couch tonight, if you want."

Noah wasn't sure if Luke was speaking in code for the benefit of everybody surrounding them, or if he really thought Noah would be happy to sleep on his couch. "No, I appreciate it, though."

"If you can't make it tonight, at least come by for breakfast tomorrow."

"I'll come by," Noah promised, his voice neutral.

"Good."

Noah turned away then, afraid he wouldn't be able to keep his promise to himself if he kept looking at Luke. The longer they spoke, the more his defenses crumpled. He wasn't strong. Not as strong as he wanted everybody to think. He wanted nothing more than to be with Luke, to tell him everything he did and didn't find, to give voice to his

confusion, to maybe mourn a little for a man he barely knew. Nobody else could give him the comfort, the privacy, the warmth he needed. But he let Luke walk away without voicing a single need.

Unsurprisingly, neither the house, nor the store, were Noah's. Noah had inherited a bit of money, but he thought that was a token gesture. Not that he cared too much. The only reason he consented to go to the reading of the will at all was because it was the last step, the final observance. Once he confirmed he no longer had any responsibility or obligation to his father, he could move on with his life.

And then there was nothing else to do except make his final stop at Luke's. He didn't feel nervous about this trip. He knew what he wanted to say. Knew what needed to be said. For the first time in his life, he'd make a stand instead of running away. How things went after that would be entirely up to Luke, but Noah was tired of the uncertainty.

He knocked on Luke's door just after midnight, and long after Lily's bedtime. Luke didn't seem surprised to see him.

"We need to talk," Noah said flatly.

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CHAPTER 9

Luke dug out his bottle of whiskey, not because he wanted any, but because it looked like Noah needed a shot. The other man accepted it without protest, downing his swallow in a single gulp. Unfortunately, it didn't do anything about the lack of color in his cheeks, or the dull exhaustion in his eyes. Noah looked like a man sent on a particularly unsavory errand, and the sooner he completed the task, the happier he would be.

"How did the reading go?"

Noah shrugged. "Got a little bit of money."

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

"What about the store? And the house? And his other assets?"

"Joan's son, Joan's daughter, Joan."

"So that's it?"

"Yep. I'm done."

Done? Done with what? Luke downed a shot of the whiskey himself. He had a feeling he would need it for this conversation. "Well ... that's good."

"It is. You know, I tore that house apart the other night. I was looking for something, and it was all I wanted. I swear, no box, no drawer, no corner was safe. I didn't find it, though."

"What?"

"A sign that he thought about me at all. I don't have any family here. Not really. You know, I've never been invited to a holiday dinner?"

Luke shook his head.

"Well, I haven't. I don't know if they were just taking their cues from John, or if there's something so inherently wrong with me that nobody wants me around. I do know that leaving Mountain View and cutting off all ties was the easiest thing I ever did. The only person I ever missed was you, and you know, I could live with that."

Luke didn't know what to say to that. He thought he knew where this was going, but he didn't want to interrupt Noah with questions. Why seek out the pain when it was going to come to him anyway?

Did you think this would go any different? He's going to leave for a third time, and when he does, it's over.

"I've been thinking a lot about the life I left Mountain View for. I love my job. I love Los Angeles. I have friends who I don't see as often as I should, but I love them, too. I love the beach. I don't mind the traffic. It's not great, but a person can get used to it, you know?"

Luke nodded again. Why was Noah bothering to tell him all this? Did he think he needed some sort of explanation or justification? He didn't.

"But I guess I'm greedy, because that's not enough. I love you. I loved you when we were kids, and I love you now, and I'm probably going to love you until I'm a bitter old man. And I love Lily, too. I found out this week that I existed for three decades and barely had any impact on my own father. I don't

want to live like that anymore. And maybe you haven't really wanted to talk to me since California because you regret what we did, and you don't want me around any more than John did. That's fine, but if that's the case, I need to know now."

"Noah..."

"Because I'll stay here. I'll walk away from Los Angeles like it's nothing, and I'll stay here with you if you want. If you want me. But either way, I'm making my decision tonight and I'm not going back on it."

"You're serious?"

Noah nodded. Luke waited for him to say more, but apparently, he'd said everything he was going to say.

"You'll just move back here, even though you can't stand it here? Even though LA is your home?"

"You're here."

"I'm not sure what to say."

"Yes or no. That's all I need to hear from you."

"Noah, I don't think..."

"Fine." He smiled thinly. "I had to try, didn't I? I have some stuff in the trunk. Lily's. The bedspread and the toys I bought her. You can take it, or I can give it to the Goodwill or something."

A fist clenched Luke's heart, and he flew across the kitchen, grabbing Noah's arm before he could leave. "Will you listen to me, please? I was going to say, I don't think you'll be happy here. Give me some time ... I need to figure out what to do with the diner, and Lily's school, and we can move to LA."

Noah blinked. "You'd be willing to move to California? For me."

"Yes. It can't be immediately. But yes."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner? You know, this whole week would have been much easier to deal with if you had mentioned it."

Luke slid his hand down Noah's arm to take his hand. "I tried to talk to you several times this week, and at the funeral. You've been doing a great job of avoiding me. I thought you were coming over tonight to say good-bye."

"I wasn't avoiding you ... okay, I was a little. I needed time to think and plan my speech. It was a good speech, wasn't it?"

"It was very moving," Luke assured him.

Noah grasped Luke's shoulder and turned to push him against the counter. "I had another part of the speech planned, only there was less talking and more kissing involved."

"Lily is still awake."

Noah blinked, like the possibility hadn't occurred to him. Luke didn't miss his disappointment, though he was getting better at covering it.

"Marty can come and pick her up."

Noah immediately brightened. "Really?" He chuckled softly. "I've been saying that word a lot tonight, haven't I?"

"You do sound a bit like a broken record." Luke kissed the corner of his mouth, holding himself back from doing more.

He had been thinking and dreaming about kissing Noah almost continuously since their trip to California. At the funeral, when he saw Noah standing near the grave, looking more confused than sad, Luke had wanted to walk up to him, bury his hand in Noah's hair, and kiss him right there until they were both breathless. "Let me go, and I'll call Marty."

"Are you sure she won't mind?"

"She'll understand. I'll just tell her you need some quiet time after the funeral."

"Are we...?"

"What?"

"Nothing. It's not important," Noah said, taking a step back. "Go ahead and call her."

"Not until you tell me what's bothering you."

"*Nothing* is bothering me. I promise you." Noah smiled broadly. "See? No bothers."

Luke folded his arms and arched his brow. It was a look that said "I can wait all night for an explanation," and one he had cultivated and practiced on Lily many times. Noah was not immune to its power, and after a short staring contest, he backed down.

"Are we going to tell anybody? Or will everybody just think we're roommates? Who happened to move to Los Angeles together?"

"I never really thought about it," Luke admitted. "I haven't had a chance to."

"Yeah, that's what I figured. That's why I said not to worry about it. And what about Lily? What are you going to tell her?"

She's going to know her home life is different than other kids."

"Probably not too different in Los Angeles."

"Well, no. But it still might be a problem. I don't want to put you through anything ... I don't want to make your life harder." The light dimmed in his eyes. "You know, maybe this would just be too disruptive for your life right now."

"You do realize what you're doing, right?"

"What?"

"You're still a little scared, so you're looking for reasons to run again." Luke hooked his fingers in Noah's belt and pulled him closer. "And since I know you're going to feel that impulse from time to time, I want you to understand something." His voice dropped. "I love you ... well, I think I've always loved you a little. Let me rephrase that. I'm in love with you, Noah Hill. And I don't take that lightly."

Luke paused, waiting for Noah to say something, but he only stared.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you."

"And if it makes you feel better, we can talk to Lily about it right now."

That got Noah's attention. He tensed, his eyes wider. "What would you tell her?"

"What I told you just now. Come on."

"We're going to do this together?"

Luke laughed. "What are you so afraid of? She'll understand the basics, Noah. And she already adores you."

Finding out that you'll be in her life more will make her very happy."

"It will?"

"You're not one for intelligent conversation tonight, are you?" Luke pressed a brief kiss against Noah's lips. "That's fine. You've had a long week."

"It's not what I expected to happen tonight. I really thought I'd be..."

"Going home alone? I know. And I'm really sorry you went through that. I should have talked to you sooner, even if you were trying to avoid me. Come on."

Luke understood Noah's trepidation, a little, but he was pretty sure he knew how Lily would react. She'd asked about Noah at least once a day, every day, since they'd returned from Los Angeles. She regularly made discoveries she wanted to share with him—she had an extensive rock collection that she kept in her room, primed to show it off to Noah the first chance she got. Even Marty noticed the girl's affection for Noah.

They found her in her bedroom, quietly undressing every single one of her dolls. She looked up as soon as Noah entered the room, her mouth forming a perfect O of delighted surprise.

"No!"

"Hey, lady."

Luke scooped her up before she could crawl across the floor and wrap her arms around Noah's shins. "We've got to talk to you about something, sweetheart."

"What?"

Luke settled on the bed, positioning Lily on his lap, then patted the mattress beside him. Noah sat down a bit stiffly, like he had never seen Lily before, and he didn't quite know what to make of her. Lily, for her part, seemed content to stare at Noah, which no doubt, only increased his discomfort.

"Remember when Aunt Marty married Uncle Jim?" Luke started, uncertain if she did remember. It had happened almost a year ago.

Lily nodded. "Yes. I wore a princess dress."

"Yes, you did. And what did you do for Aunt Marty?"

"I carried flowers."

"Right. You were the flower girl. Do you remember why she married Uncle Jim?"

"Because she loves him very much."

"Yes, she does. Well, I love Noah the same way. And he loves me."

"Are you going to get married, too?"

Luke shook his head. "No, not right now. But I would like Noah to live with us. Would that be okay with you?"

Lily's brow creased with concentration. Luke watched her curiously, wondering what she was thinking so hard about. She looked like she was trying to tease out a particularly frustrating puzzle, but he couldn't help her. He didn't understand how she came to most of the conclusions or connection she made.

"Will he make waffles?"

"I'll teach him how to make waffles. Just for you," Luke promised.

Lily pushed against his arms, the silent sign that she was tired of being held. He let her drop to the floor and she immediately began pulling on Noah's arm. Noah didn't need to be told to lift her off her feet and sit her on his lap.

"Are you going to live with us, No?"

"If you'll let me."

She threw her arms around his neck. Luke called the move her monkey-hug. Nothing would pry her loose until she had her fill of the embrace. "I love you, No."

"Told you so," Luke said softly.

Noah put his hand against her back tentatively. "I love you, too, lady."

"My name is Lily."

"Oh, right, lady, I forgot."

She laughed, delighted by the game.

"Noah is going to help you pack, so you can go to Aunt Marty's tonight, okay?"

She broke her tight hold on Noah's neck and scampered to the floor, immediately pulling her pink bag from beneath the bed.

"Don't feel bad," Luke murmured. "She likes Aunt Marty more than she likes me most days."

Noah laughed. "That was a lot less painful than I thought it would be. This whole night has been ... great."

"It'll get better," Luke said. He kissed Noah's cheek and added under his breath. "I promise."

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CHAPTER 10

Lily was half-asleep on the couch, snuggled against Noah's side, when Marty knocked on the door. Lucas let her in, and when she saw Noah and Lily on the couch, she smiled softly.

"Hey," she greeted softly. "I wondered if I was going to see you tonight. How are you doing?"

Noah nodded. "I'm good."

"I heard about the will," she said sympathetically.

Noah shrugged. "Word travels fast. But I'm fine." He turned and lifted Lily off the couch. "Hey, lady, your Aunt Marty is here."

Lily's eyes opened slowly. "Where?"

"Right here," Marty said, holding her arms out. Lily allowed herself to be transferred, her eyes falling closed as soon as she rested her head on Marty's shoulder.

"Thanks for coming by on such short notice," Lucas said.

Marty looked from her former brother-in-law to Noah and back again. "I can keep her all day tomorrow. Tomorrow night, too, if you like."

Noah furrowed his brows. Just how much did Marty know? Or how much did Marty think she knew? For a moment, he wondered if that would be a problem, but Lucas only nodded. "Thanks again. I'll walk you out to your car."

"Hang in there, Noah. If you need anything else while you're in town, feel free to give me a ring."

Noah nodded, accepting the offer for what it was. "I'll do that, thanks."

Lucas guided Marty out the front door, gesturing to the bedroom with a nod of his head before following her out of the bright house and into the summer night. That was all Noah needed. As soon as the door closed behind them, Noah hurried to Luke's bedroom, unbuttoning his shirt on the way.

By the time Lucas stood in the doorway of the bedroom, Noah was naked—his clothes left folded on the chair—and waiting for him on the bed. Luke's lips pulled in an amused grin.

"You're not wasting any time, are you?"

"I've already wasted too much time."

Lucas nodded, pushed off the doorjamb and pulled his T-shirt over his head. "I guess I can understand why you're a bit impatient then."

"Impatient? If I were impatient, I wouldn't be waiting on the bed."

"Oh, yeah?" Luke's shoes came off next, then his socks.

"What would you be doing?"

"I'd be pushing you against the wall and making you forget your name."

"You've already done that." He freed his belt, pulling the leather slowly through the loops. Noah couldn't help but think he was just teasing him now.

"I don't like to repeat myself if I can help it."

"So you're going to make me come to you?"

Noah didn't look away from Lucas once, his eyes feasting on every detail, from the hair on Lucas's chest to the strong line of his thighs, to the width of his shoulders. His fingers

curled involuntarily, and he had to stop himself from jumping up and grabbing Lucas.

"Maybe I'm just testing you?"

Lucas stepped out of his pants. "Testing me?"

"To see if you really want me here."

Lucas took a step back and gestured at himself. His cock was hard against his stomach, his balls hanging heavy between his legs. "What do you think?"

"I think you better get over here," Noah said, his mouth suddenly dry.

Lucas smiled before kneeling on the foot of the mattress. He fell forward, catching himself on the flat of his hands, and crawled up the narrow bed, sliding his body over Noah's. As soon as he was within striking distance, Noah sat up and captured his mouth. It wasn't the first time they'd kissed, but it might as well have been. Noah wanted to devour Luke's mouth, his breath, his flesh, every bit of him. And if Luke's response was any indication, he wanted the same thing.

Luke's body was so hard against his, each muscle whipcord tight, his skin taut and smooth. Noah touched him everywhere he could. He ran his hands down Luke's spine, squeezed his ass gently, circled his thighs to brush against the back of his balls. Lucas moaned against his mouth—it was a hungry sound and it vibrated through Noah's body. Noah deepened the caress, attacking Luke's mouth unchecked.

"Hey ... hey..." Lucas said, lifting his head.

"What?"

"You don't have to be in such a hurry. Nobody's going to interrupt us."

"Are you sure? I kind of feel like I need to take what I can get, while I can get it."

"I am positive."

"But Marty could call and..."

Lucas smiled and interrupted. "Marty is not going to call. Now, will you relax?"

Noah didn't think relaxing was possible, but he nodded anyway before gripping the back of Luke's head and guiding his mouth back to Noah's. This kiss was slower, more thorough, but no less hungry. Noah couldn't help but think of the first time he had wanted to kiss his friend, and every single night between then and this moment. He knew he should just turn his mind off, just focus on the way Luke's mouth fit so perfectly against his, but he couldn't quite do that. All of those lonely nights informed this caress, and Noah tried to tell him without words how much he wanted this, how much he had always wanted this.

Lucas shifted against him, and the tip of his erection slid against Noah's groin and lower stomach. Noah's sighed and reached between their bodies, desperate to feel more. He closed his fingers around Luke's hot shaft, and Luke thrust against his hand. There were so many things Noah could do, so many things he wanted to do, that for a moment he felt utterly overwhelmed by his options. But ultimately, there was only thing he really wanted. Noah just wasn't sure if Lucas had the same thing in mind.

"Luke ... do you have condoms?"

Lucas blinked, his blue eyes dark and a little confused.

"Um. I might. Though they could be expired by now. Why?"

"Because..." Noah licked his slightly swollen lips. "I want you to fuck me."

Luke's brow furrowed, then his eyes cleared, and his pupils dilated. "In that case, I might even be able to find two."

Noah couldn't help but grin as Lucas untangled himself and pulled the nightstand drawer open. He also couldn't help tasting, biting, and licking every bit of Lucas he could reach. His teeth scraped across Luke's shoulder, and his tongue darted out to sample the dark skin around his nipple.

"Hey," Luke protest playfully.

"What?" Noah asked, his voice muffled against Luke's chest.

"You're distracting me."

"Mmmm. You're fine. Aren't you used to distractions?"

"Not..." Luke's voice broke as Noah sank his teeth into his nipple. "Not like this. Ah. Found one."

"Expired?"

"No, by some miracle," Luke said, pulling away to sit back on his heels. "We should definitely go to the drug store tomorrow morning."

Noah grinned. "More like tomorrow afternoon. You're crazy if you think I'm going to allow you out of this bed before I absolutely have to."

Lucas ripped the foil open with his teeth and extracted the rubber barrier. Noah's cock jerked as soon as Luke began to slide the condom down his long shaft. He shifted uncomfortably against the bed, heat building in his groin and thighs. His ass was already clenching, and his balls throbbed with each beat of his heart.

"Vaseline?" Luke said, nodding at the open drawer.

Noah shook his head. "Oil if you don't have any lube."

"Really?" Luke groaned. "That's all the way in the kitchen."

"We'll both be happier you took the time to get it."

Lucas nodded and pushed away from the bed. Noah, fortunately, didn't have to wait long for him to return from the kitchen with the plastic bottle.

"I've never done this before, you know," Luke muttered as he smeared the lubricant over his cock.

"Fuck somebody?"

"Fuck a man."

"It's the same basic concept as fucking a woman. But I can walk you through it, if it's been awhile."

Luke snorted. "Thanks, but I think I remember the basics."

Noah slid lower on the bed and hooked his arms around his knees, pulling himself up and open.

"Are you..." Lucas hesitated for a moment. "Ready?"

"I'm very ready," Noah promised him.

"You don't need to be stretched or anything," Lucas asked, positioning himself between Noah's legs. The slick tip of his cock brushed against Noah's ass, and his skin erupted in goose bumps.

"I want to be good and tight for you." He still hesitated, so Noah added a bit of encouragement. "Come on, Luke."

Luke nodded, positioning his cock in line with Noah's ass. He eased the tip into Noah's tight hole, pushing in just an inch before pausing. Noah's eyes nearly bugged out of his head, and the breath was already completely gone from his

lungs. He knew Lucas wasn't trying to torment him, but he was. He really, really was.

"More," Noah choked out.

Luke's face was marked with concentration, like he was engaging in a particularly tricky task. As far as Noah was concerned, there was nothing tricky about this. It was just the two of them finally coming together the way Noah had been dreaming about for years. He was Luke's. Noah knew that completely. Now he just needed Luke to know it.

Luke pushed forward another inch, stretching Noah's body around his shaft, forcing Noah to accommodate him. Noah panted encouragement. *More. Give me more, Luke. I need more.*

After a few moments, Luke paused. "Noah?"

"What?" Noah rasped.

"I don't ... I don't want to hurt you."

Noah could have laughed. "You're not. Christ, Luke, I want all of you. *Now.*"

There was no more hesitation. With a powerful thrust, Lucas buried himself in Noah's ass until he was fully seated.

"Oh, *Christ.*" Noah's body jerked, and he released his legs, reaching for Luke to pull him forward into a frantic kiss. He could feel himself adjusting around Luke's length, every bit of his body on fire. He wrapped his legs around Luke's body, holding him close so he couldn't move as the kiss deepened.

"Oh, my God, Noah. Oh, God."

"I know."

"Gotta move."

"I know."

And move he did. Slowly at first, like he was still trying to figure out just what to do. Noah didn't care how quick he moved, as long as he didn't stop. He might have said as much. He could hear words streaming out of his mouth, but he didn't know what he was saying. He didn't even know if Lucas was listening to him. His head was back, the tendons in his neck standing out in sharp relief, his chest and shoulders flexed and already glistening with sweat.

Love was always the primary emotion when Noah looked at Lucas, but now it was eclipsed by lust. Pure, untainted lust. He had never wanted anybody more than he wanted Luke in that moment.

"Faster," Noah gasped. "Goddamnit ... faster."

Luke reached for Noah's hand, and their fingers entwined. Luke held him so tightly the bones in his hand seemed to grind together. But he didn't need another word of encouragement. Lucas picked up speed, the rhythm shifting again and again until each thrust was frantic and a little wild.

"Yes ... that's it ... Christ, Luke..."

Lucas fell forward again, catching himself with his free hand, and claiming Noah's mouth in a second kiss. Noah closed his eyes, losing himself to the weight of Luke's body against his, the slick burn of his cock, the pressure of his lips. Every moment stretched tighter and tighter around them, pulling them both taut, rigid even. Noah knew he was going to break from the pressure, and he hoped Lucas would break, too.

Noah reached between their bodies and grasped his own cock. It only took two hard strokes before he was howling

with his release, his hot come hitting Luke's stomach in several sudden spurts.

"Noah.... oh, Noah ... I..."

Noah never heard what Lucas was going to say, because his words were broken by a sharp shout. Luke's cock jerked against Noah's walls, and their sighs echoed each other as Noah clenched around him. It took a few seconds for the fog to clear, but when it did, Noah realized Lucas was shaking. Noah wrapped his arms around him tightly and covered his face with soft kisses until he finally began to calm.

"Sorry," Lucas murmured.

"For what?" Noah asked as Luke's cock slipped out of him.

"Just..."

Noah turned over, pushing Luke's back against the mattress. Luke looked up at him with half closed, inquisitive eyes. Noah slid down his body, spreading the sticky come against their stomachs. He ghosted his mouth down Luke's salty chest, his tongue tracing patterns over Luke's flushed skin. He moved lower and lower until he reached his own fluid, which he lapped up with a long, slow stroke of his tongue.

Lucas never looked away from Noah's languid tongue bath, but his cock began to stir again. Noah worked the condom off Luke's shaft without pausing and tossed it into the nearby trashcan.

"What are you doing?" Luke asked.

"Cleaning you up."

"It's not necessary."

Noah reached Luke's cock with his mouth and his salty taste seemed to explode against his tongue. "Trust me, Lucas, it is."

Noah dragged his tongue along Luke's shaft again and again. It stiffened with each swipe of his mouth, until he was hard again, the tip brushing against Noah's mouth.

"Been awhile, Luke?"

Lucas laughed a little. "You could say that."

"You'll never say that again," Noah promised, his tongue curling around his head.

"Noah ... God..." His words were momentarily lost as Noah guided Luke's shaft through his lips. He didn't stop until his nose was brushing against the damp hair at the base of Luke's cock, and the tip was brushing against the back of his throat. "Noah ... Noah ... please..."

Noah looked up through his lashes without moving.

"Come up here..."

Noah increased the suction around his shaft, his cheeks hollowing. Luke's chest rumbled with a low moan. He traced the vein on the bottom of Luke's cock with the tip of his tongue.

"Oh, Christ. Noah ... please..."

Noah acquiesced and crawled up Luke's body again, stretching across him. "Fine, but I get to finish what I started later."

"Fine, fine," Luke gasped, burying his fingers in Noah's hair. "Fine."

Their tongues and teeth clashed in a hard kiss, but Noah almost immediately pulled away from it. He didn't want that.

My Only Home
by Pepper Espinoza

He moved into a much softer, slower kiss. Lucas followed his lead without hesitation, and Noah relaxed against Luke's chest, their skin and limbs melting together. After a few moments of the long kiss, Noah wasn't even sure if they were still two separate beings.

"I love you," Lucas breathed. "Loved you for so long."

Noah could only assure him of his own feelings with his mouth and his hands.

"Don't leave again."

Noah shook his head. He wouldn't. How could he?

He had just found his home again.

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You can learn more about Pepper by visiting her website:
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Don't miss Surrender's Edge, by Pepper Espinoza,

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Geoffrey Kirk has been in love with his best friend, Nash, since almost the moment they met. Convinced that Nash would never return his feelings, he forced himself to move on, and fell for his assistant, Sunny. Despite his strong feelings, he never acted on them, and when he discovered Sunny and Nash together, he thought he lost his chance for happiness forever.

Until Sunny and Nash make it clear that he hasn't lost anything ... and he still has a great deal to gain...

* * * *

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My Only Home
by Pepper Espinoza

Solitary rancher Damon Carhart expects to spend the rest of his life alone. Then an injury to a beloved stock dog sends him to the nearest veterinary clinic for help. His crusty old veterinarian friend is away and, in his place, is a young doctor in whom Damon initially has no faith. Once he entrusts his canine friend to Eric Vann's care, however, everything begins to change...

And once desire gets a bite on him, what can he do but go along for the wild ride?

Eric Vann has loved animals all his life, following in an uncle's footsteps to become a veterinarian. He knows if he ever finds a soul-mate it will be another male. When Damon comes in, fierce in defense of his favorite dog, Eric is immediately captivated.

Can he overcome the other man's instinctive resistance to the powerful attraction that begins almost at once?

* * * *

Don't miss *Soul Obsession* by Amy Wolff-Sorter,

available at AmberQuill.com!

A story blazing with reluctant passion, bitter betrayal, ghostly retribution and the battle for a man's very soul...

A brilliant businessman...

Daniel Grogan is at the top of his game as he prepares to marry a wealthy socialite. But something goes wrong on his wedding day and his path takes a crazy turn toward strange

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visions of mountains and oceans, and a growing obsession about a woman he's never met face to face.

A rebellious rabbi...

Peggy Witwater entered the rabbinate to serve her people. When congregational politics deal her a vicious blow, she fights the tide of change while trying to help Daniel; not realizing her actions could ignite her own deeply buried obsessions.

Passion and vengeance from beyond the grave...

As the two are drawn toward one another, they fall under the shadow of a vengeful spirit who will stop at nothing to claim Daniel. To win the battle for his soul, Daniel must acknowledge past wrongs, or risk falling into an eternal—and fatal—enchantment.

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