



Specter

Author: *Charity Parkerson*

Category: Romance, Western, M-m Romance

Description: All Noah wants for Christmas is a daddy. There's only one man who can help. Silas D.

It's been a year since Noah ran away from Montana after his life changed forever. He's still not ready to move on from losing the love of his life, but he doesn't have a choice. Noah isn't good at taking care of himself and the world doesn't fit him. It's time he accepted it. Plus, he needs someone to cuddle before the grief kills him.

Duke already lost Noah once. It's not happening again. He's been searching for Noah without luck for the past year. When a fancy invitation shows up, enticing him to a Christmas gathering with Noah as the lure, he can't get to New Orleans fast enough. But will he find the same Little he lost, or has Noah forgotten him forever?

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Chapter One

In room four, on the third floor of the most exclusive home in New Orleans, there lived a—somewhat—grown man who still wanted to believe in Santa Claus. Noah hoped—if he was really, really good the entire year—a man with daddy-like tendencies would be dropped down the chimney for him. Obviously, this was a pipe dream, but that was Noah in a nutshell. He was completely beyond all hope. Noah had tried working adult jobs. He got distracted too easily. Four different bosses had fired him in the last seven months. He hadn't known how to fend for himself once desperation had exhausted him. One day, he looked around and found himself over two thousand miles from everything he knew and a lifetime away from the only person who ever loved him. At that point, Noah had sat down and given up. Yet, somehow, he still thought Santa could save him.

“Daddy says we can decorate the Littles’ area any way we want for the Christmas party. There’s so much new stuff, I don’t know where to start.”

In his favorite kitty pajamas, the one with the kitty paws for feet, Noah stared at the art supplies Benji spread across the bedroom floor. Markers, crayons, and glitter glue, as far as the eye could see. Despite his excitement, he was still a little intimidated. “Nothing I do will be as good as yours. You’re a real artist. I just like to color.”

It was true. Benji was a genuine street artist who made the most beautiful pictures Noah had ever seen. Still, Benji huffed at Noah’s claim. “Art is supposed to be fun. Not a competition. Plus, none of the daddies who come to the party will look for anything I’ve created. Silas would poke their eyes out.” Benji made a rapid punching motion with two fingers out, mimicking his words.

Noah covered his mouth to stifle a laugh. He loved Benji. If not for Benji, Noah would still be homeless, moving from shelter to shelter and running from himself. He had scooped Noah from the street like a stray dog, brought him home, and cherished him like a prized pet. Maybe he would be dead without Benji and Silas. Still, he very much wanted someone like Silas to call his own. He was ready to move on with a new life... maybe. At least, that was what he kept telling himself.

The blond beauty sitting quietly at Benji's side leaned Benji's way and spoke against his ear. Noah waited to hear what Tommy said. Tommy's throat had been slashed by a jealous ex a few years ago. Now, he couldn't speak above the quietest of whispers, but Benji understood him. Noah had quickly gotten used to their conversations being held this way. Tommy spoke to Benji. Benji spoke for them both.

"Tommy says we both have him beat. He hasn't colored in years."

That didn't surprise Noah. Tommy wasn't a Little like them. He was beautiful and moved with lithe confidence. Tommy worked Silas' parties as a flower and collar boy. He handed out roses and collars for men to give to whoever they wanted to take home for the night. Men watched him everywhere he went. Tommy didn't need the safety of footed pajamas and teddy bears. Despite the obvious trauma of his past, Tommy was a phoenix. Noah was just ash.

"You're so pretty. We could draw your picture, and everyone would stare at it all night."

Tommy blushed at Noah's compliment. He whispered against Benji's ear again. Benji smiled. He was gorgeous too. Of course, Benji had won the most sought-after man in all of New Orleans. Not only had he won Silas Dreco, but Silas had also married Benji within two weeks of meeting him. With his soft-looking hair and gorgeous eyes, Noah wasn't surprised. Also, he had heard rumors of Benji's kinkiness. Tommy and Benji possessed so much more than Noah ever would. He

didn't know how he would find a man to love him forever the way they had, but he hadn't given up hope yet. Apparently, that was the one thing life hadn't stolen from him. Honestly, it was kind of sad.

"Tommy wants to know what you're looking for in a daddy. What's your ideal man? He knows all the people who get invited to these events. If anyone can find the best fit for you, it's him."

Noah's throat tightened at the question. In theory, he wanted a daddy. He hadn't decided yet if he was brave enough to actually move on, though. An image of a dark-haired cowboy who smelled like leather and musk floated through Noah's mind. The dark blue intense stare. Deep rumbles of praise. Goosebumps rose on his skin. "I had him once." Noah didn't know if he spoke to himself or if he answered Tommy's question. Sometimes he lost himself to a memory. Or maybe he found the pieces of himself that he had lost to the past. Either way, something was forever gone from him. Noah didn't think it could be recovered.

"There you are. I've been looking all over this ridiculously un-humble abode. Do you have any idea of the number of stairs I've traipsed? These old calves have never looked so fine."

A smile snapped to Noah's lips at Max's sudden appearance. Max was a lawyer and British and probably a scoundrel, but he was also funny, and Noah liked him. Plus, he was always good to all the Littles. He was a bit irresistible. In a suit that cost more than a car, he plopped down on the floor and hiked up his pants leg to show off the calves he mentioned.

Noah smothered a laugh.

Tommy shook his head.

“Hey, Max. I didn’t know you were coming by today. You could’ve texted me. I have my phone.” Benji shook the device at him. “I would’ve told you where to find us.”

Max shrugged. “I ran into Kage. He pointed me in the right direction.”

Kage was Tommy’s husband. Noah was a little surprised Kage had sent Max to Noah’s room without tagging along as a guard. Kage tolerated Max, but Max and Tommy had a rocky past. Max’s brother was the man who had sliced Tommy’s throat. As far as Noah could tell, they were working on things.

Max eyed Tommy as if he expected to be told to get lost. “Actually, I was looking for you.”

Tommy’s head whipped Max’s way. He mouthed, “Me?”

Max nodded. He reached inside his pocket and pulled out a brightly wrapped box. “Not to get too mushy, especially since I’ve said it all before, but you’re like family to me. Whether or not you like it,” Max added with a tight smile. “This is just one gift of many I have for you. I’d be honored if you would drag Kage to spend Christmas Day with my husband and me.”

Tommy looked beyond shocked. His gaze dropped to the present. His fingers wrapped around the box.

Noah’s mind slipped away to the past.

“I have a gift for you.”

“For me?” Noah fought hard to hide his excitement. He failed miserably.

Duke nodded. He took Noah’s hand. “Come see. It’s in the barn.”

Noah suspected there was no present and he would be on his knees in the frigid hay soon. That was fine, though. That was a gift too. Being with Duke was everything to Noah. The stolen touches and lingering kisses. All the cuddles. Those were more precious than anything material. Noah felt safe with Duke. He was never safe.

“Wow.”

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Benji's exclamation brought Noah back to the present. His gaze latched on the necklace Tommy held. It had a huge stone that matched Tommy's eyes perfectly. Noah imagined he would look stunning in the piece. Tommy looked blown away by the gift. He spoke against Max's ear. Max looked as if he physically fought the urge to hug Tommy. Noah could see how much he cared.

After a moment, Max seemed to lose part of the battle. He touched Tommy's shoulder and squeezed. "You know money is nothing to me. But I don't want you to ever feel trapped again, and this necklace is worth as much as a house. I know Kage is a good guy, but I want you to have the option to go if he ever changes. Promise me you'll keep it and enjoy it while also knowing you can sell it if you're ever in trouble. I need to know you'll always be safe."

In one statement, it was like the past slapped Noah in the face again. He never stayed away for long.

"I need to know you're safe and that old saddle I had you practice riding on was about to snap in several places. I'd never put you on a real horse with that thing."

Noah wanted to smile at the gorgeous leather saddle Duke had bought him, but a new saddle might be hard to hide. Ted would definitely see him if he ever got on a horse. He knew Duke didn't understand. Noah didn't know how to explain.

"You don't look happy."

A smile snapped to Noah's lips. "I'm happy. We're alone. I'm always happy when we're together." Noah couldn't let Duke think anything else. He was the only good

part of Noah's life.

Duke's expression darkened. Sometimes, Noah thought Duke saw too much. This was one of those times. "Stay with me. I'll fire Ted tomorrow and you'll never have to worry again. You're nineteen. There's no reason you can't choose me."

"He'd kill me."

"The hell you say. No one is ever hurting you again. Do you understand me?"

Noah wished that was true. Falling in love with Duke had never been part of his plan. Duke had just kept pushing his way into Noah's life, finding reasons to spend time with him, and then Noah had been lost. But he feared for Duke all hours of the day and no good would ever come of them. If he were a better person, he would let Duke go.

Duke held his waist while he stared at Noah like he could move mountains. "Tell me. I can help."

Tears welled in Noah's eyes. He had been trapped for too long. He didn't know how to break free. He wanted to say he would stay. Desperation choked him. Duke offered him a lifeline he didn't know how to take. Ted might kill them all. He was crazy like that.

"I knew it."

Noah's head whipped around. He jumped away from Duke. Blood covered Ted from head to toe. The shotgun in his hands shook with the same madness and fury that filled his eyes.

"Your momma tried to say I was crazy, but I knew I wasn't. I told her you two had

been making eyes at each other. I won't have it. I'll see you both dead first."

"You said you had the perfect daddy once. What happened to him?"

Noah blinked as he came back to himself at Benji's question. Three sets of eyes stared at him expectantly. Noah couldn't stand to see their expressions change from curiosity to pity. He moved to his stomach and chose a red crayon. With his gaze locked on his hand, he traced the outline of Santa's suit while he answered.

"Loving me killed him."

And Noah had died with him.

Tiny white puffs filled the air with each breath the horses took. Duke no longer felt the cold. He hated this time of year for a whole other set of reasons. Yet he still couldn't make himself leave the barn today. He didn't know if it was the horses that brought him comfort or if the freezing temps numbed the constant pain. Hell, maybe the smell of hay just reminded him of the best nights of his life... and one of the worst.

The wind whipped outside, making the barn creak beneath the onslaught. Duke automatically looked up. A pain hit Duke in the chest when he realized what he had done. He closed his eyes and let the past carry him away.

Ted's stepson rarely came outside when anyone was around. That was why Duke noticed him. Noah didn't stand out. In fact, the light brown coveralls and jacket he wore looked like every ranch hand's on the property, but Noah was too small to be one of the men. Duke watched him sneak around the outside of the barn with an overstuffed backpack clutched to his chest. He didn't follow until after Noah slipped inside.

Duke kept his pace slow and natural. He didn't want to draw attention to his movements, so no one else followed. There had been something suspicious about Noah's body language. If he was up to no good, Duke needed to be the one who sent him back to the house... unharmed. Noah's stepfather, Ted, had a notoriously bad temper. There was lots of speculation around the boy's small size and rare appearances. Some thought he might have some sort of mental disability. Most, including Duke, figured the boy got the snot beat out of him if he stepped a single toe out of line. Likely, his momma kept him in the house to keep him out of harm's way. But honestly, Duke didn't think the kid's mom was any better. She was an alcoholic who was always out of it. Duke suspected it was more than alcohol, but that wasn't his business. She wasn't his employee. As long as Ted showed up every day sober and put in a full day's work, then Duke kept his nose to himself. Farm hands were hard to come by these days.

Duke stepped inside the barn, moving as stealthily as possible. He didn't want to spook Noah, especially if he was hiding from Ted. Each stall Duke came to was empty. As he reached the final one, he wondered if Noah had slipped out the back and kept going. Maybe that backpack had been filled with his things and Duke had just witnessed a prison break. If so, Duke couldn't blame the kid. As he turned to go, hay fell from the sky and hit his face. Duke swiped at his skin as he looked up. He caught a glimpse of movement above him. His gaze moved toward the ladder that led to the loft. He didn't know if he could make it up without being seen. Duke also didn't know why he didn't walk away. This wasn't his business. Plus, he didn't care to get caught alone with his employee's kid. Yet his feet moved toward the ladder and Duke climbed the first rungs with zero thought to self-preservation.

He moved as slowly as possible. When he peeked over the edge, he froze. In pink bunny pajamas, Noah sat on the floor with a pile of toys in front of him. His coat and overalls were in a pile beside him. Duke couldn't move. The bare bulb above him cast a glow on Noah's face, highlighting his features. His eyes were both black, but it looked like old bruising in various stages of healing. The dark marks only highlighted

Noah's baby blue eyes. He looked younger than his years. Noah had to be at least eighteen by now. He had been ten or twelve when Duke hired Ted as his ranch manager eight years ago. Yet here he was, sitting in footed pajamas and playing with toys. Maybe the kid had some mental issues after all.

Duke moved to leave. The ladder creaked. Noah's chin shot up. Their gazes collided. The look of pure fear that etched Noah's features caused something in Duke's chest to shift. Without a real plan, he climbed into the loft.

"What do you have there? Is that a racetrack? I used to love putting those together."

Noah's expression didn't change. He sat frozen in obvious terror as Duke moved to sit with him.

Duke tried keeping his tone as friendly and unthreatening as possible. He picked up two of the cars that sat waiting for their track to get built. "Oh, wow. You have the 1971 Evil Weevil." He checked out another. They were both worth probably three thousand apiece. "Damn. These are some nice cars."

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“My real dad bought them for me. I don’t know what they’re worth.”

Duke met Noah’s gaze. He didn’t look as frightened any longer. Noah also didn’t look simple. He looked like someone trying to find a sliver of peace in a cruel world.

“Is it okay if I help you put your track together? Like I said, this used to be my favorite thing to do.”

Noah nodded.

Duke picked up a piece of yellow track and they worked together in silence for several minutes. With Noah distracted, Duke stole the chance to get a better look at him. He had definitely been punched in the face, but it didn’t take away from him one bit. It was no wonder Ted kept him away from the men. Noah was stunning and a lot of these guys were pretty shifty. They were roamers, looking for coin while hiding from the world. It wasn’t safe for someone like Noah to get near these guys. Still, it bugged the shit out of him that someone had obviously used him as a punching bag.

“Why are you playing out here instead of in the house where it’s warm?”

Noah kept his gaze locked on his task. “Mom threw up everywhere. It stinks inside. Plus, Ted will be in for lunch soon. He won’t be happy with the mess.”

Duke’s heart dropped. Noah wasn’t challenged in any way. He spoke softly, but there was definite maturity behind his eyes. That meant Duke’s suspicions were right. Ted was a mean one. The tip of Noah’s nose was red and so were his fingers. Some form of papa bear protectiveness rose in Duke’s chest. It was obvious no one took care of

Noah. The boy's fingers could fall off in this weather.

"Your hands are blood red. Don't you have some gloves? You should wear your coat."

"No."

A smile snapped to Duke's lips. Noah hadn't sounded defiant. He merely said no as if it was his right, which really, it was. "Will you at least let me sit next to you so you can share some of my body heat or something? I'd hate for you to lose a finger to frostbite."

"I'll allow it."

A chuckle rose in Duke's throat at Noah's glib tone. He swallowed it down as he moved to sit next to Noah. They went back to building the intricate track. When it was finished, Noah sent the first car sailing down the track.

He looked Duke's way, smiling. "We did it."

Duke's gaze moved over Noah's face. He was sweet. Noah deserved a better life than this. Duke unzipped his thick coat. He moved to take it off so he could drape it over Noah. To his surprise, when he opened the two sides and stretched to take it off, Noah tucked himself inside, as if he thought Duke intended for him to share. For a moment, Duke sat frozen. He didn't know how to react. Noah went back to playing while tucked beneath Duke's arm. Duke's muscles slowly relaxed. He embraced Noah and tucked him tighter against him. They didn't speak. Damned if Noah didn't fit perfectly against him, though. Duke silently vowed then and there to keep Noah safe. It was past time someone did.

"Boss, there's a delivery man here with a letter. He says he's not allowed to hand it to

anyone but you.”

A sigh tore from Duke’s throat as he dropped his gaze from the empty loft. “All right. I’m coming.” Sometimes, he thought he should sell this place and leave behind the ghosts of the past. But then Noah wouldn’t know how to find him, and Duke couldn’t have that. He needed to know Noah could come home any day. Otherwise, he had nothing left.

Duke emerged from the barn to find a huge guy patiently waiting. He smiled when his dark green gaze landed on Duke.

“Duke Wayne?”

Duke dipped his chin. “That’s me.”

He held out an envelope that looked fancy as hell. The paper was thick, and waves rippled through it, creating an intricate design. “You’ve been invited. Please don’t be late.” The moment Duke accepted the card, the man stepped inside a waiting SUV and drove away with no further explanation. Duke opened the letter. Gold foil sparkled inside even under the dreary sky. The card felt like it cost money as he pulled it from the envelope. There was a handwritten note stuck to the front. Duke read that first.

Your presence is expected December 24th at seven p.m. at the Dreco Mansion. I have Noah. Please present the attached invitation at the door for entry.

—Silas D.

Duke frantically checked the address on the invitation. New Orleans, Louisiana. Damn. He finally had a lead. Duke smiled for the first time in what felt like forever. He swore he could already feel Noah in his arms again. This time, nothing would

break them.

Chapter Two

It was six fifty-five at night in New Orleans and still a balmy sixty degrees. Duke felt stuffy as hell in the required tux for the event. He clasped the invitation as tightly as possible, scared as hell it would disappear. His taxi couldn't move fast enough to suit his heart. If Noah wasn't there. If this was a hoax. Duke didn't know what he would do, but he couldn't go on like this. Time ticked by so damn slowly, Duke thought he might go insane. A smile unexpectedly stretched his lips when he realized his entire leg bounced out of control. His whole life, that nervous tic had driven people insane. Noah was the only person who could make him stop without him having to mentally force himself to be still.

Duke's leg nervously bobbed up and down. He chewed the side of his nail. If Noah couldn't sneak out successfully, anything might happen to him. It would be Duke's fault. He should leave Noah alone. Noah's life was hard enough without Duke making things more difficult. Duke couldn't stay away. He was fascinated.

Duke's eyes fell closed as a set of familiar hands landed on his shoulders. Perfect lips brushed his neck. His leg immediately stilled. "Why are you bouncing all over the place?"

Duke had to be honest. "I was worrying about you?"

Noah hugged him.

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Duke drew a steadying breath. Then he snagged Noah and flipped him over his shoulder and the back of the couch. He landed safely in Duke's lap. His eyes shone bright with happiness as peals of laughter escaped him. Duke couldn't look away or stop smiling at the sound. "Why do you waste your time on me? In fact, why do you waste your life on this ranch? You should run away and be young somewhere fun. Surely you don't want to be trapped here forever."

Noah's smile disappeared. "It's okay if you don't want me here. I can sneak back home."

Duke's chest nearly caved at the idea of Noah leaving him. "You're the only person I want here. Let's throw everyone else off my land and become hermits."

A gorgeous smile exploded across Noah's face. "According to you, my toy cars are worth a lot of money. I could sell them and steal you away to however far the money would go. We can be hermits where no one knows our names."

Duke drew Noah closer. He couldn't stop himself. Noah's lips haunted his dreams. "I have money." He whisked his lips across Noah's as lightly as possible. Duke didn't want to scare him. "Tell me where you want to go." His lips moved to the corner of Noah's mouth. "I'd give you anything."

Duke pressed his hand against his stomach at the memory. If only he had known exactly how prepared Noah had been to run. Every night since the one he lost Noah had been a million years long. He hadn't known one year could feel like ten. Noah had to be at this party. If he wasn't, Duke feared what he might do. Insanity had only been a hairsbreadth away for twelve long months. Tonight felt like the edge.

Two pairs of underwear sat on the bed, waiting. Noah stared at each pair and debated. One was covered in cartoon cars and the other was a pair of black boxer briefs. Honestly, the boxer briefs were more comfortable and what he wore most often. But if he met someone, maybe they would expect the cars. Unexpected tears pressed at the backs of Noah's eyes. He didn't know if he could do this. It felt like all the progress he'd made with Duke was gone, but so too was Duke. What did it matter if Noah regressed into being a Little and stayed that way forever? He had only matured for Duke.

"Are you wearing your big boy underwear?"

"Yes." Even to Noah's ears, he sounded unsure.

Duke shook his head. "That didn't sound truthful. Let me see."

Noah blushed but dutifully unbuttoned and unzipped his pants, showing Duke his red boxer briefs. "I don't know if they're strictly big boy underwear since they're not white briefs, but these are more comfortable."

Duke kissed the tip of his nose and helped Noah fix his clothes. "Those are perfect. You did good. I'm proud of you."

Noah beamed under the praise. No one said nice things to him except Duke. Noah wondered if the love and desperation he felt showed in his eyes as he looked at Duke. He wanted Duke to see him as a man... as desirable. Without thinking and before he missed his chance, Noah shot forward and pressed his lips to Duke's. Duke didn't move. In fact, he leaned into their kiss. Noah's lips instinctively parted. Then his body was on fire. As quickly as it happened, it was over. Duke walked away from him, leaving him cold.

Noah grabbed the underwear covered in cars and angrily pulled them on. He didn't

deserve to be comfortable. For a moment, Noah stood, chest heaving, and with his broken heart screaming. Then he peeled off the underwear and pulled on the comfortable pair. No matter what, Duke's praise still lived in his brain. With his heart in his throat, Noah stepped into his dinosaur pajamas and zipped them to his throat before pulling up his hood. He moved to look at himself in the mirror. Noah massaged his arm as his gaze moved over his reflection. His blue eyes seemed lighter than usual with his face pale and tears barely resisting the fall. Noah swallowed. He just needed to get through tonight. Then maybe he could find his way back to sanity.

With a breath for courage, Noah pulled on his backpack full of toys and he headed for the door. As he reached for the handle, his throat tried swelling closed. Noah pressed his forehead to the cool wood and the nightmare that always waited to consume him overtook him again.

"I knew it."

Noah's head whipped around. He jumped away from Duke. Blood covered Ted from head to toe. The shotgun in his hands shook with the same madness and fury that filled his eyes.

"Your momma tried to say I was crazy, but I knew I wasn't. I told her you two had been making eyes at each other. I won't have it. I'll see you both dead first."

Duke shoved Noah behind his back. "Whose blood is that, Ted? Put the gun away."

"I knew things weren't right. Noah's been hiding from me. He's been disappearing at night. At first, I thought he was just hiding in the woods to get away from me. But then I saw the way you looked at him and I knew. Kate said I had to leave him alone. She said he was too old for me now anyhow."

Noah whimpered. He couldn't stop the sound from escaping. Ted was telling Duke

his secret. It was like having his heart ripped from his chest.

“Put the gun away, Ted. We can figure this out.”

“Come out from behind there, baby boy. Your momma is dead now. She can’t stand between us.”

Tears streamed down Noah’s cheeks. Whimpers he couldn’t swallow kept rising in his throat, choking the life from him. He never, ever wanted Duke to hear this. Noah would rather die.

“What are you saying, Ted? Is that Kate’s blood?”

“Baby boy, it’s time to be with Daddy now.”

A sob tore from Noah. Ted would kill Duke and then he would be trapped forever. He had to make his move. Duke had given him nearly a year of happiness. It was over now. All he had to do was let Ted kill him instead of Duke and this lifetime of nightmares would end.

“I love you.” He whispered the words before he tried stepping around Duke. Duke’s grip refused to loosen so he could pass.

Ted’s voice turned whiney, almost sickeningly desperate. “That’s it, baby boy. Come to me. You know I can make you feel good. We can play a game.”

“You sick bastard.” Duke lunged. A loud blast cut through the air, deafening Noah. He covered his ears. Blood splashed his clothes. Duke hit his knees. “Run, Noah! Don’t look back. Run!”

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Noah darted out the barn's back door and ran for the trees. Another blast tore through the night air. Noah didn't slow. Tears and snot streaked his face. He made no move to wipe it away. There was a bag hidden in the brush near the edge of the property. Noah had stashed it there three months ago after a night he didn't care to recall. He had known he couldn't stay much longer. Now he had to go. Duke and his mom were dead. There was nothing left. It was time to run.

Noah fought his way through the grief that always struck from nowhere. Tonight, he was doubly raw. Duke had told him not to look back. He pulled open the door. Noah had to keep his eyes locked on the future now. It was last order Duke had given him. Noah had to obey.

No one waited for him in the hall. Relief poured through him. Noah didn't want anyone to see him at his weakest. He couldn't let them see how torn he was over this entire situation. Noah had to find someone to care for him. He couldn't stay at Silas's forever. Noah had done what he needed to do to survive his entire life. Tonight was no different. He descended the steps. Since his room was on the third floor, he had time to harden himself. At the bottom of the final staircase, Kage waited. The gentle giant—as Noah like to think of him—gave Noah a reassuring smile before escorting him to a waiting cage. It was like a birdcage. Noah smiled at the thought. This was like a game. He could pretend to have wings. Noah could choose to see the night as him waiting to be set free so he could stretch his wings and soar.

“Are you ready?”

Noah nodded.

Kage eyed him. His ice-blue eyes looked oddly kind as they moved over Noah's face. "Do you have the key and your cell phone?"

Noah showed Kage the backpack. "The key is around my neck and my phone is in the bag."

Kage nodded. "Okay. Don't forget, you choose. You have the key to open the cage. No one can get to you without your permission, and you don't have to choose anyone. You can text me anytime if you don't want to stay. I'll walk you upstairs. You don't have to be scared."

Noah nodded and stepped inside the cage. Kage shut the door. Noah used his key to lock it from the inside before hiding it again. Their gazes met.

"I'm opening the door to let the guests inside now. Are you sure you want to do this?"

A lump rose in Noah's throat, but there was no going back. "Do it." A tear rolled down his cheek and Noah turned away. He sat on the floor of the cage with his bag. Noah would color until his nerves calmed. Then, he would pick a new daddy. He had no other choice.

Chapter Three

A tall stone fence surrounded the property. After Duke handed his invitation to security and had it scanned by a black light, he was allowed inside the gate. His heart skipped a beat as he set sight on the house. It was a huge place that made his home look like a shack. For a moment, Duke wondered if he should turn around and let Noah keep this life... if he was here.

Duke eyed every face he passed. Men milled around the lawn, socializing and flirting.

Champagne glasses passed from servers in various stages of undress to tux-clad partygoers. He didn't see Noah anywhere. Duke wondered if Noah had changed or if he even still lived. He felt sick. It was a feeling that worsened by the second. The huge double front doors to the mansion opened. Light spilled out and everyone turned toward the house—like moths drawn to the warmth. With his heart in his throat, Duke fell into step with the crowd, moving along with the throng.

An arm slipped through his and held on.

Duke's gaze shot toward the blond beauty. "I'm sorry, but I'm not interested." He was beautiful. Flawless, really. But Duke was here for the only man who mattered, and he couldn't be distracted.

The blond held up a yellow card.

Duke read it. My name is Tommy. I'm mute. Duke blinked a few times and cleared his throat. "Hey, Tommy. No offense, but I'm still not interested."

Tommy rolled his eyes and crooked his finger, motioning for Duke to lean down. When Duke tilted his head Tommy's way, Tommy pressed his mouth against Duke's ear. "I'm escorting you to Noah."

While his voice was barely a whisper, Duke hadn't misheard. He covered Tommy's hand, which rested in the crook of his arm. "Sorry. Please lead the way."

A sweet smile met his apology. Tommy moved away from the crowd as they stepped through the door. Most people headed right. Tommy hauled him straight ahead. As they passed through an archway, grand chandeliers cast a glow on the room. Gorgeous art covered the walls and sculptures lined the shelves. Duke's gaze was locked on the giant old-fashioned bird cages scattered throughout the room. In a cage near the back of the room, a smaller man sat coloring. A dark green dinosaur costume

hid his features, but Duke knew. He felt it in his heart. It was Noah. There was no mistaking the defeated way he sat, with his shoulders hunched and one foot extended. The foot moved restlessly from side to side, as if keeping beat with the music in his head. Duke had seen Noah sit the same way a hundred times. Each breath Duke took came harder than the last. He wondered if he would faint.

Then the man's chin lifted, as if he felt Duke's presence. His head turned. Their gazes met. Duke's knees weakened. Noah's perfect lips parted in surprise. He moved to his knees and clutched the bars. Duke moved faster. He left Tommy behind.

"Noah."

Noah swayed. "Duke?"

Duke ran the last few feet and dropped to his haunches. Their fingers linked through the bars. "Holy shit, baby. Why are you in a cage? Is this why I haven't been able to find you? I'll get you out. Don't worry. Hang on." Duke shot to his feet. He tugged at the locked door. When it didn't budge, his gaze shot around the room. A stone sculpture sat nearby. He didn't hesitate to grab it.

"Duke."

Some form of madness had taken hold. He could barely hear a thing. His entire focus was locked on setting his baby free. "Hold on, angel. I can get you out." He smashed the sculpture against the door handle. It didn't budge, but a small chunk of the stone from the piece hit the floor.

"Duke."

"I've got this, Noah. Just stay back."

Noah moved closer because it was him and Duke should have known he wouldn't listen. With a shake of his head, Noah unwound a necklace from his neck. Before Duke could smash the handle again, Noah used the key on the necklace to unlock the door. It swung wide. Noah didn't move to leave. He stood perfectly still, as if scared to touch Duke.

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Duke had no such fear. His long stride made the space between them vanish. He scooped Noah into his arms.

“Oh, my god. It is you.” Noah kissed his face and neck. Anywhere he could reach. “How are you alive? I saw Ted shoot you. How are you here?”

Duke lifted Noah from the floor and held him as tightly as possible. Noah’s arms and legs wrapped around him. His gaze shot desperately around the room. They needed a quiet place to go. Noah had thought he was dead, and Duke’s mind was a mess. He just wanted to hold his baby and never let go. So much bad had happened to Noah, and Duke had spent too much time thinking about every warning sign he had missed. He needed to fix everything. Duke had to give Noah the life he should have before Ted stole everything.

His blond escort still stood nearby, wiping his eyes on the sly. He met Duke’s gaze and waved for him to follow. Duke headed that way. Tommy moved to a darkened alcove and made sure no one watched before sliding away a hidden panel, revealing an elevator. He pushed the button, and the door slid open. After Duke stepped inside, Tommy leaned in and pushed a button for the third floor. Then he met Duke’s stare and held up four fingers. The door closed before Duke could ask what that meant. The elevator moved upward while Noah silently cried against his neck. He felt the tears soaking his skin. When the door opened again, he found himself staring at a wall. He noticed a metal lever and pulled. The wall slid away, revealing a hallway of doors. He immediately spotted one with a four on it. Duke headed that way. Unfortunately, it was locked.

“Is this your room, baby?”

Noah leaned away long enough to look. His face was a wet, splotchy mess. He was still the most beautiful man Duke had ever seen. Noah glanced at the door.

“Yeah.” His voice shook. “Hold on. I have the key.” While Duke held him, Noah unzipped his pajamas. A key was pinned to the inside. Duke fought a smile at the sight. It seemed someone had been trying to teach him to stay safe and not lose things. A wave of sadness hit Duke like a tsunami. Noah deserved to be safe. Everyone had failed him. Duke never would again.

Noah unlocked the door and Duke carried him inside. He barely spared a glance for the upscale bedroom. It was obvious no expense had been spared for the entire place. Duke didn’t give a shit about anything except Noah. He moved to the closest chair and sat with Noah straddling his lap. They stared at each other. Noah’s gaze moved over Duke’s features as if he still tried to convince himself Duke was real. Duke couldn’t look away from the baby blue eyes that had stolen his heart.

“I kept waiting for you to come home.”

“You were dead,” Noah whispered, as if he still feared Duke would disappear. “I saw Ted shoot you, and then I heard the second shot. I was too scared to look back. If Ted had caught me...”

Noah didn’t need to finish. Duke had gone over the night a million times in his head. He had imagined every nightmare scenario that could have come to pass.

“Are you a ghost?”

Duke shook his head. “Unless you’ve moved on, that is. If you’re happy here and you’ve found a new life, then I can go back to being the grumpy specter that haunts our ranch.”

Noah stroked Duke's face, wiping away tears Duke hadn't known were falling.

Duke's throat tightened. He couldn't force his voice above a whisper. "I've been looking for you everywhere. From the moment I was released from the hospital, I never stopped searching. How did you get so far away?"

"My car collection. I sold it and kept taking buses until I made it here. Then I hung on until the money ran out. I spent some time trying to hold down a job until Benji found me."

"Who's Benji?"

"Benji Dreco. He owns this house. Well, his husband Silas does. I guess they both do." He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I've died every day without you."

Another tear slid down Duke's cheek. "You should've known I wouldn't let anything take me away from you. I'm sorry it took me so long to track you down. It took me a while to heal enough to even get started."

Noah fell forward and cuddled against Duke's chest. "I don't care about any of that. You're here. I didn't think I'd get to hold you like this again. What if I wake up? I've dreamed I've had you back before. The next morning always kills me when that happens. I'm tired of dying."

"I'm real. I swear." Duke stroked Noah's back. He couldn't stop. Time passed without them. Duke didn't care if it was hours or days. In fact, he didn't care if he ever moved again. As his hand slid down the stuffed tail of the dinosaur costume, Duke shook his head. "You're in footed pajamas again. Did you get tired of being a big boy?"

He felt Noah smile against his neck. "I've always hated being a big boy. It's too hard.

But I'm wearing my big boy underwear." Noah excitedly sat back on his heels and unzipped his outfit, revealing a pair of black underwear.

"Black. Very masculine. I'm proud of you."

A bright smile lit Noah's face. It disappeared as quickly as it appeared. "You shouldn't be proud of me. It's my fault. Ted hurt you because of me. I've had to know that every day."

Duke thought his chest might cave. His anger over the things Ted had done never lessened. He wanted to shoot him in the face again. Killing him once hadn't been enough. "It's not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong. Ted is the only one to blame." And Noah's mother, but that was a conversation for when Noah started therapy. "Neither of us deserved what happened, but you, most especially. I should've saved you. I shouldn't have let you tell me no every time I asked you to run away with me. It was obvious Ted hurt you. I just didn't know the extent of it. If I had known... if I hadn't been so goddamn blind..."

Noah covered Duke's mouth with his hands. "Stop. How could you have known? Ted was sick. Normal people don't think like him. I should've told you. I should've told anyone at all, but my own mom didn't keep me safe. It was too much to hope anyone else would rescue me. I just wasn't strong enough to fight." Noah's shoulders fell. He looked more defeated than any man should. His gaze locked on his hands, which were pressed against Duke's chest. "Tell me what happened after I ran."

That was the last thing Duke wanted to do. Right now, Noah was just happy to know he was alive. Duke didn't want to have to tell him he wasn't whole. "It's somewhat of a blur."

Noah's gaze lifted and met Duke's stare. "Please?"

Duke couldn't deny him. "All I could think about was saving you." That was the best place to start. "I knew I couldn't let him leave that barn. I couldn't die before he did, or he might..." Duke shook his head. "There was so much blood and pain. I was angry and scared. If I fell, I knew you'd be next. Rage, or hell, maybe it was just adrenaline kept me moving. Either way, once you were clear, I pounced. I heard another shot, and my entire body was on fire, but I just couldn't let go. I couldn't stop fighting. Then I was holding the gun, and he seemed to just give up. He was crying and begging for you. I had my cellphone. I could've called for help right then. He was helpless without that gun." Duke swallowed. He hadn't lied. Most of that night was a blur, but some parts he recalled with a clarity that frightened him. "I couldn't stop hearing the sick way he spoke to you. I couldn't stop seeing the way he practically salivated at the idea of having you." Duke held Noah's stare. "There was no way I could let him leave that barn. I couldn't risk him ever having another shot at you. So I pulled the trigger."

For a long and nerve-wracking moment, Noah stared at him without saying a word. Finally, he blinked, as if coming back to himself. "It's like learning the devil is dead." He sounded as if the words were meant more for himself than Duke. "I've been so sick and scared for the last year, expecting him to appear around every corner."

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Without warning, Noah started tugging at Duke's clothes, trying to tear open his shirt. "He shot you. Your blood soaked my clothes. Show me what he did. I need to know."

Duke covered Noah's hands, stopping him. "Please stop."

Noah went still. His eyes filled with tears. "He hurt you. I have to see. I have to fix it." He visibly swallowed, looking lost. "I need to kiss it and make it better the way no one ever did for me."

Duke's eyes fell closed. He couldn't deny Noah a single thing, even this. While holding Noah's waist, Duke stood. He carried Noah to the bed and set him on the mattress. Noah shifted to his knees as Duke's hands moved to his tie. With every article of clothing that disappeared, Noah leaned closer, and Duke's heart beat a little faster. He was already fifteen years older than Noah. It used to not matter. Ranch work had kept him fit. Noah had loved to stare at Duke's nude body, making him feel like a king. Things were different now.

"I'm not the same."

Noah held his stare. "You could've rolled into this house as a head on a unicycle and I wouldn't see or want anyone else. I fell in love with you. Not your body."

Noah had moments where he was almost otherworldly. It was like trauma left him decades wiser than Duke would ever be. Duke had forgotten the way Noah left him humbled by the purity of his love. He peeled off his shirt.

Noah leaped from the bed.

Duke held out a hand, stopping him. He had to completely strip before he lost his nerve. Duke moved back to the chair and took off his shoes and socks. Then he stood and peeled away the bottom half of his clothes.

Noah covered his mouth. Tears slipped down his cheeks.

Duke couldn't stand the silence. "That's why you were covered in my blood. The first shot took off my leg." The scars on his chest and side were merely spray from the buckshot. But the first blast had hit its mark and taken Duke's leg below the knee. He had gotten fairly used to his prosthetic, but not completely. Duke still suffered from phantom pains and muscle spasms. As much as he had prayed to have Noah back, it hurt to expose himself like this. He didn't know if he could for anyone else. No one else mattered to him this much. If Noah didn't accept him, Duke wouldn't move on. Noah was it for him.

Many times, over the years, Noah had wondered if a person could die from heartache. More times and hours than he could count, he had wished the pain would kill him so the suffering would stop. He had wanted to join Duke on the other side. Seeing the carnage his love had wrought nearly broke him. It was the ultimate heartache. His feet moved even as his gaze refused to budge from the scars. Without a plan, Noah crossed the room. His fingers skimmed the small white scars littering Duke's torso. Then his gaze lifted, and he stared into the most beautiful dark blue eyes. Eyes that screamed fear of rejection. Never. He would never turn away from Duke.

"You're so beautiful. I've missed being beneath you more than words can say." He touched Duke's chest. "I've dreamed of this chest." Noah kissed his collarbone. "Prayed to have it back as my pillow."

When Noah had been small, and his father had been alive, Noah had always felt safe and happy. Then his father had died, and his mom became an addict and married the first scumbag who would let her stay high all the time. Noah hadn't known safety any

longer. Those days of footed pajamas and playing with his toy cars had disappeared into memories that helped keep him alive. Then this man had come along. He had loved Noah and brought him back to the land of the living. Duke had given him new memories. Noah had felt safe and happy again in Duke's arms. He had lost that when he thought Duke died and now Noah would never let Duke get away. Noah wouldn't let any amount of scarring or past trauma come between them. Duke was perfect. He loved Noah flawlessly.

Noah's lips moved to one of the small scars on Duke's chest. His tongue shot out, and he traced the indentation. Duke's cock stirred between them. The air thickened. Noah's fingertips found Duke's nipple. He stroked. Noah heard Duke's breath catch. Power surged inside him. That was something else Duke gave to him. He filled Noah with strength. Whereas everyone else had always made Noah feel weak, Duke lifted him, making him stand taller and embrace his might. He could bring this powerful man to his knees. It was intoxicating.

"My dreams aren't always sad," Noah confessed as he continued exploring Duke's chest. "Some of them leave me panting and sweating."

"I have those too." Duke's voice sounded gravelly. Noah lost the battle against his smile. Duke cupped Noah's jaw and forced him to meet Duke's gaze. Duke's eyes burned with lust. "Your life will be perfect."

"I know." Noah had never said two words with more confidence. There was no one he believed in more.

"You're marrying me."

Noah smiled. "I know."

Duke gave him a sharp nod. "Good. It's time for bed."

While holding Duke's stare, Noah peeled off his pajamas. "You should get in first."

Something flickered in Duke's eyes. An insecurity that didn't use to exist. "I'll have to remove my prosthetic. I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

Noah didn't break eye contact. "Please believe in me the way I've always believed in you."

With a nod, Duke moved to the bed and sat. Noah watched as he removed the prosthetic. Without meeting Noah's gaze, he settled on his back and stared at the ceiling. Noah couldn't let this discomfort stand. He knew it would take time for Duke to relax over this change. Noah wasn't going anywhere. The love of his life was alive. After a year of believing he was dead, Duke was here. Nothing else mattered. Plus, Noah hadn't lost an ounce of desire. He still burned every bit as hot for Duke as he had since the first time Duke held him.

Noah stripped off his underwear. Duke still didn't look his way. Noah fought a growl. He opened the bedside table where he kept his toys and found the lube. Even as Noah lubed his asshole, Duke stared at the ceiling. That hurt a little. Terrible thoughts crept in. Maybe it wasn't Duke's newfound insecurity keeping him from looking at Noah's body. Maybe Duke was disgusted by what he had learned about Noah from Ted.

Noah tossed the lube back in the drawer and slammed it closed. "Never mind. I should take a shower."

Duke finally looked his way. There was a deep line between his eyebrows. Noah massaged his arm and tried not to shift from foot to foot. He hated this. The dark thoughts consumed him without his permission. A tear slid down his cheek.

"What's wrong?"

Noah lost the battle. He shifted nervously, practically dancing in place. “You don’t want me. You won’t even look at me. I knew—if you ever found out about Ted—you wouldn’t want me anymore. I knew you would think I was dirty.”

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Duke sat up and snagged Noah's waist. In a flash, Noah found himself pinned beneath Duke's large body. "That's not true. I love you." His gaze moved down Noah's body and turned heated again. "I love this body. You're perfect."

Noah wanted to believe, but the lump in his throat wouldn't go away. "Then why aren't you looking at me?"

Duke touched his forehead to Noah's and stared into his eyes. "It's not you. I swear. You've always been light years out of my league. Now I'm not whole any longer. I'm scared to see the interest leave your eyes. You could do so much better than me. There are hundreds of obviously rich and young men downstairs. One day, you'll realize you could have any of them. I don't want you to resent me."

Noah pushed at Duke's chest until he rolled over, and Noah straddled his body. Outrage had him ready to punch something. "You're who I want. I died when I thought you had. Silas has had these parties before since I came to live here, and yes, men have tried to convince me to choose them at every one I've attended. I couldn't because I gave my heart to you. It's yours whether or not you want it. Whether you're alive or dead." Noah's gaze moved down Duke's body. His cock ached. He had dreamed and burned for this man. Duke had made him writhe and fly. Above everything, he had respected Noah's boundaries and rights. Noah was a whole person with Duke. No one else saw him the way Duke did. There was no one who could replace him.

Noah ran his hands down Duke's torso. A ragged-sounding breath escaped him. His body recalled every time he had Duke between his thighs. A pant burst from Duke. Their gazes met. Duke was every bit as aroused as Noah. Noah saw the desire in

Duke, and his sanity returned. The dark thoughts vanished. Duke still wanted him. Nothing had changed.

While holding Duke's stare, Noah scooted lower. He savored the sensation of skin scraping skin in the most delicious of ways. The memory of their first night together nearly caused Noah to double over in desire. Duke had let Noah use him. He had held completely still while Noah had rocked his cock against Duke's stomach, using the friction to get off while Duke's dick barely kissed his asshole. It had been empowering. He had felt so fucking safe and cherished. For the first time in his life, the control had been his. Noah started the same way now. He braced his palms on either side of Duke and pivoted his hips. With his erection trapped between their bodies, a delicious friction had his back arching. Duke's breathing turned ragged, as if the pleasure was his. Noah kept fucking the space between them, driving himself insane.

Duke's dick barely touched the tight ring of muscles surrounding Noah's asshole. Noah whimpered. He was turned on to the point of insanity. Then Duke's hands landed on his hips. Noah felt the way he fought to ask for more.

"I'd give you anything."

Duke sucked in a ragged breath at Noah's confession. "You're so beautiful."

Noah moved lower. He pressed back harder against Duke's erection. "I need you to put it in me, Daddy. I feel empty."

"You can have anything you want, baby." He held his cock in place so Noah could lower himself onto it. Noah moved slow. His eyes fell closed as the first inch penetrated him.

"That feels good. I have toys I put in my butt while chanting your name, but it's not

the same. Nothing feels the way you do.”

A low and sexy chuckle rumbled from Duke’s chest. “You make it damn hard to be patient when you talk to me like that, minx.”

The air stuttered from Noah’s lungs as he took all of Duke. He wiggled, finding the perfect angle. A moan tore from him when he found it.

“Fuck, Noah. You’re really killing me here.”

Noah’s eyes opened. He stared down at the man he loved more than air. “No more dying. I need you to live.” He lifted and sat. “I need you to make me come.”

In a flash, Noah was on his back with Duke’s dick pounding inside him. He hit at the perfect angle. All Noah could do was cling to him and moan. Sounds burst from him without his permission. He sucked air while Duke took him to heaven. Noah stayed completely focused on every sensation. He moved closer to the edge by the second. Then Duke grabbed his cock and tugged. Noah saw stars. A cry tore from his throat. His dick twitched and spit in Duke’s grip while his body tried sucking Duke deeper. Noah bit Duke’s chest and sucked hard, trying to smother his screams.

“Goddamn. Yes. That’s it, Noah. Come for me. Let me hear your pleasure. I missed you so fucking much. I could watch you come all day.” A ragged-sounding moan broke through Duke’s rambling. “Damn. You’ll break my dick if you don’t relax. Shit. I’m going to make you drip with cum. You’re marrying me. Don’t fucking forget it. Jesus, Noah.” Duke slammed hard inside Noah, making him see stars, and then he cried out. Duke buried his face against Noah’s chest and chanted Noah’s name as he rode out his orgasm. Noah couldn’t as much as blink. He didn’t want to miss a second. So much had changed in a few short hours. As Duke collapsed, Noah held on for dear life. He would never let go again.

“Maybe Santa is real, after all.”

Duke chuckled. The sound came out breathless and tired. “What?”

Noah smiled at the ceiling as he hugged Duke tighter. He really had his love back, and it was a Christmas miracle. Santa was real, and his name was Silas Dreco.

Chapter Four

It felt like it had been years since Duke slept. With Noah tucked against his side, Duke swore he had died until he jerked from his sleep with the oddest sensation. A man in teddy bear pajamas was on his knees next to the bed, staring at him.

“Hi.”

Duke blinked at the whispered greeting. “Um, hello.”

The adorable bear smiled. “I’m Benji.”

Duke rubbed his eyes. “Nice to meet you, Benji.” He glanced Noah’s way. Noah was sound asleep. A smile tugged at Duke’s lips. Noah looked adorable and peaceful.

“Silas wants to see you. Tommy is waiting in the hall to show you the way. I’ll stay with Noah so he doesn’t wake up scared.”

While Duke didn’t want to leave Noah, and his heart still feared Noah might disappear, these people had not only taken Noah in, but had also sent for him. He couldn’t repay their kindness by saying no.

“Okay. Just let me get dressed.”

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Benji stood and turned his back.

Duke quickly grabbed his leg and slipped on the bare minimum of clothing. Once he was dressed, Benji quietly slipped into bed with Noah while Duke sneaked from the room. Tommy smiled when he caught sight of Duke. He waved for Duke to follow him to the hidden elevator. Duke assumed Tommy kept avoiding the stairs because of his leg. He wondered if everyone under this roof knew everything about everything.

As they rode the elevator down, Duke felt moved to fill the silence. “So you can’t speak. That must be maddening.”

Tommy made a dismissive motion. Then he tilted his head back and showed Duke the deep scars on his throat. Duke felt strangely better.

“Is everyone here like us?” He winced at his question. Duke tried to explain. “I mean, is this like some sort of place for...” Duke couldn’t figure out how to finish his question. He didn’t want to say they were victims or downtrodden. Duke didn’t want to offend anyone, even though he counted himself among them.

Tommy touched his arm and smiled. “It is,” he said in a harsh whisper that sounded like it hurt. Tommy touched his throat and winced.

Duke felt guilty for making him try to talk. He decided to be quiet. The door opened and Tommy stepped out. Duke followed on his heels. He tried not to gawk. The small part of the house he had seen last night had been lost to seeing Noah. Now, without Noah as a distraction, Duke couldn’t stop trying to look in every direction. The place was amazing. He wondered how many other secret passageways it had.

Finally, Tommy came to a closed door. He knocked and then stepped inside without waiting for anyone to give him permission. A man probably fifteen or so years older than Duke sat behind a large desk. The walls were covered in various art pieces. He glanced up as they came through the door. His gaze was intelligent and soul-piercing. Duke didn't know how else to explain how it felt to be under the man's open inspection.

"Thanks, Tommy. If you want to turn in, you can. We're good."

Tommy smiled and waved before leaving them alone.

Duke went back to staring at the quintessential sugar daddy behind the desk. "You must be Silas."

Silas dipped his chin. "And you're Duke Wayne. It's good to finally meet you." He motioned toward a chair across from him. "Please, have a seat."

Duke wanted to get back to Noah, but he sat. He owed too much to Silas to say no.

Silas didn't pounce the moment Duke was seated. Instead, his gaze moved over Duke's half-dressed state before landing on the hickey on Duke's chest. "I'm assuming your reunion with Noah went well."

Duke wasn't embarrassed. "Thankfully. I've had investigators looking for him since he went missing. You have no idea how grateful I am he was here, safe and sound with you. Thank you for that, and for contacting me."

Silas didn't as much as smile. "He's only been here for two months."

Duke's eyebrows snapped together. It was out of his control. "Where was he before that?"

“Living on the streets,” Silas said without a hint of care for Duke’s feelings.

A lump jumped into Duke’s throat. He tried speaking around it, but his voice came out gravelly. “I didn’t know.”

“Nor is it your fault.” Silas’ matter-of-fact tone soothed Duke a hair, but he still felt sick at the idea of Noah sleeping on the street.

“Anything could’ve happened to him,” Duke said, more for himself than Silas.

Silas’ eyebrows rose. “Anything had already happened to him before he left your ranch.”

Even though there hadn’t been an ounce of accusation in Silas’ tone, Duke still felt attacked. “If I had known, I never would’ve let him get hurt.”

A hint of sympathy touched Silas’ features. “It started long before you noticed him. There was nothing you could’ve done to negate the damage. Now, however, is a different story. What’s your plan?”

Confusion had Duke shaking his head. “What do you mean?”

Silas didn’t lose his patience. “Do you intend to take Noah back to the same ranch where he lived a nightmare?”

When Silas put it like that, Duke felt like a monster. “For now, I don’t see that I have a choice. I have a ranch to run, and Noah belongs with me. Unless I sell the place, I can’t walk away. Everything I have is tied up in that ranch.”

Silas leaned back in his chair and eyed Duke. “You could stay here until the place sells.” Silas paused for a beat before adding, “then you’re welcome to continue living

here... if you'd like."

Duke released a slow breath while he eyed Silas. He couldn't get a read on the guy.

"Why would you invite a complete stranger to live under your roof? You don't know anything about me. I could be a serial killer."

"I know everything about you."

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Duke snorted at Silas' quick and confident claim.

Silas' expression didn't even twitch. "You are William Duke Wayne Jr., a thirty-five-year-old ranch owner. Your father, the original Duke, was a professional race car driver who died in a crash on the track when you were twenty, leaving you everything. You were the byproduct of a one-night stand, and your biological mother, Alicia Stevens, was happy to give up her parental rights for the right price. Everything you have is not—in fact—tied up in your ranch, but rather mostly in bonds. You have the means to care for Noah, and you will. Of that, I have no doubt."

Duke shook his head. "That's all likely public record and any half-assed detective could dig that up, but that's not me. That's just facts. You don't know me."

Silas sighed. He settled deeper into his chair and ran his fingertips across his lips for a moment, as if thinking things over before speaking. "Fine. Two years ago, you found Noah playing with toys in your hayloft and immediately took him under your wing. You started teaching him how to move away from being a Little to becoming a Middle, because something inside you recognized that's where he would be happiest. Probably because you found him playing with race cars rather than sucking his thumb and coloring. Nonetheless, you knew exactly how to care for him, and Noah responded. He fell in love with you first, I imagine. Probably because something in your gut said things weren't right in his home. You likely feared him seeing you in the same light as he did Ted. But in the end, he's a grown man, and you couldn't resist him. Now, I'm guessing you've spent the last year in absolute agony, unable to find him. How am I doing so far?"

Duke wouldn't lie. "It's uncanny, really. However, I am surprised you didn't bring up

the fact that I recognized Noah as a Little immediately because of my membership at a fetish club.”

Silas shook his head. “That part is immaterial, so I didn’t bother bringing it up. But now that you have, that’s how I know you’d be a great addition here. The party I held last night is a regular event here. I’m always grateful for more hands. Plus, Noah is doing well in therapy here. I’m not sure he can get the same treatment in Nowhere, Montana.”

Duke’s stomach muscles clenched. “He’s in therapy?”

Silas nodded. “It’s a requirement for anyone I take in. Finding love doesn’t heal people. Healed people find love.”

“Good.” Duke was more grateful than he could articulate.

“Have you started therapy?”

Duke blinked. “Why?”

Silas’ eyebrows rose. “You were shot. You lost a leg and murdered a man. That sounds traumatic to me.”

“I killed a man who needed killing.”

Silas’ gaze moved over Duke’s face for a moment. “Still.”

Duke blew out a sigh. “I’ll consider everything you’ve said. As to staying here, I’d like to leave that up to Noah. He should be the one to choose.”

“Fair enough.” Silas stood. “We should head upstairs. You need to get back to Noah

and I have a cuddly teddy bear to collect.”

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Noah tells me Benji is your husband. How long have you two been married?”

Silas led Duke into the hall before answering, “Just over eight years.”

Duke nodded as they headed for the elevator. With no one staring at him, Duke spoke without thinking. “You have no idea how much I resent this past year. I lost an entire year with the other half of my heart. Whatever Noah decides, that’s what we’ll do. Being without him isn’t an option for me.”

Silas flashed him a surprisingly understanding smile. “Actually, I know exactly what it’s like to think I’ve lost the other half of my heart. It’s one of the many reasons I do what I do. Someone has to keep an eye out for this community. Someone has to push people to pick up the pieces of their life.” He called for the elevator and then met Duke’s stare. “I could use some help. Someone solid and steady.”

Duke got it. He really did. Dealing with wild horses was the same. It took a steady yet firm hand. That was something Duke possessed. Still... “As I said, it’s up to Noah.”

The elevator door opened, and Silas stepped inside. “I’d be a little more accepting of that answer if you hadn’t smashed a two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar sculpture against one of my custom-built cages.”

Duke’s eyes tried popping from his head. “You’re joking. That stone thing cost that much?”

The elevator headed up and Silas snorted. “Yeah, I’m joking. It’s worth half a mil, but I know the artist. He’ll fix it.”

Duke felt sick. He couldn't believe he had smashed something that expensive. To be fair, loving Noah had made him half crazy. Their life had been one hell of a ride. But he wouldn't choose anyone else for an ounce of peace. This was love.

The bed shifted and Noah's eyes shot open. Light trickled through the window. He had obviously forgotten to pull the blackout shades before falling asleep. A weight across his stomach had him rolling to his side in a flash. It hadn't been a dream. Duke slept cuddled against his side. Tears filled his eyes. There had been times when he thought he might have gone a little crazy. The possibility of it all being in his head was a real thing. But Duke was really there, and Noah's heart could barely hold in his swelling emotions.

He buried his face against the crook of Duke's neck and inhaled. That smell. Leather, man, and soap. He had missed it more than anyone could understand. Noah didn't know how he had survived a year without it.

"Mhmm." Duke grabbed his ass and hauled him closer. "My teddy bear."

Noah smiled so hard, it hurt his face. Duke had played this same game with him a hundred times, pretending to be asleep while obnoxiously cuddling him.

Duke squashed him to the bed while pretending to burrow deeper into Noah's body, as if he was a squishy stuffed animal. "Mine. So cuddly."

A giggle escaped Noah.

Duke nibbled his neck. “Nom. Nom. He tastes good too. Like a gummy bear.”

Noah’s laughter doubled. His fingers found Duke’s hair. He held on and held him in place. Duke’s nibbles turned to sucking. Noah’s body immediately responded. He gasped and writhed beneath Duke’s attention. Duke’s mouth found Noah’s. Life felt like an amazing dream. It hit Noah. Duke was alive and Noah was safe. Everything he had prayed for had come true. They had their entire lives free and clear. There was nothing stopping them from being just like this for the rest of their lives. He felt amazing.

Duke’s mouth moved to Noah’s ear. He lightly kissed the shell. “I have to ask you something.”

An uneasy feeling washed over Noah. “I don’t like how ominous you sound.”

He felt Duke smile against his skin. “Don’t worry. It’s about our future, and that’ll be happy no matter how you answer. Do you want to go back to the ranch? Or would you rather stay here?”

Noah pushed at Duke’s chest until Duke met his gaze. “What do you mean? You can’t leave me again.”

Duke stroked his hair and face, while making soothing sounds. “No, baby. That’s not what I’m saying. You’re never getting rid of me. What I’m asking is if you’d rather we stay here... together.”

Noah blinked. He was still confused. “But this isn’t our home.”

“It is if we choose it. Silas has offered to let us stay.”

“When did you talk to Silas?”

“Early this morning, before the sun came up. He brought up some valid points. If you don’t want to face the ranch again, I get it. I won’t make you. Wherever you are, that’s where I’ll be, but I need you to decide. I can’t stay in limbo.”

Honestly, Noah hadn’t thought about it. Last night, he had been in shock when Duke came through the door. Then he had been on a rollercoaster of emotions before falling into the sleep of the dead. He hadn’t considered how he might feel about setting foot on the ranch again. The worst days of his life had happened there.

A loud knock landed on the door. “It’s Christmas. It’s Christmas. Santa came.”

Benji’s bright voice and chuckles floated through the door, making Noah smile. Another knock came before they could even exchange a glance. “It’s Kage. I grabbed Duke’s luggage from the hotel. It’s outside the door. Don’t dawdle. Benji is already climbing the walls, wanting to open gifts.”

Their gazes met. A hint of disappointment wormed its way into Noah’s happiness, despite his excitement over opening gifts. He wasn’t ready to share Duke yet. “I guess we have to get dressed.”

Duke smiled. Noah couldn’t look away. The deep lines around his mouth and the way his eyes crinkled in the corners, Noah hadn’t thought to see it again. The dark hair covering his jaw and head, Noah hadn’t thought he would feel those against his skin again.

“I love you. More than life. More than the sun. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to

handle you leaving my sight again. I might ride your back like a monkey everywhere you go. Get ready for some awkward trips to the bathroom.”

A sexy laugh rumbled from Duke at Noah’s claim, making Noah smile. He knew then what he wanted. “I want to go home.”

Duke’s smile faltered. “Are you sure?”

Noah nodded. “I miss our bed. Before everything fell apart and too many times to count, I dreamed of it being mine full-time. In my heart, I always knew you would save me one day and we would grow old together on our ranch with our horses. You would finally teach me how to ride and I would sit on your lap after dinner each night. I love these people. I hope I get to see them again, but this isn’t my home.”

Duke nodded. “That’s what we’ll do then. First, you should spend Christmas with your friends. Now, show me your big boy pajamas.”

With the excitement of getting to go home racing through him, Noah scrambled from the bed, laughing. He made a show of pulling out a pair of skintight two-piece red racing pajamas. Duke watched him with pride in his eyes while Noah dressed. Noah knew then everything would be okay. He had no reason to fear going home to Montana. Maybe some nightmares still lived there, and it was possible he might get home and discover he couldn’t stay. But no matter what happened, Duke would be at his side. Noah’s personal Christmas miracle had come to life... literally. It was the first best day of his life. There were countless more to come.