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LGBTQ+, Young Romance about two boys coming of age, dealing with grief, and finding first love.

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CANDY CRUSH

Simon Harris grabbed his books from his locker and shut it with a bang. All around him kids were scrambling to get to class but he was in no hurry. Next period was English Lit, and although it was his favorite class, he was dreading facing a certain person who also had that particular class that period.

Like most eight graders at Mason Middle School he was eagerly anticipating the end of this school year and the promise of the summer, then next year the beginning of High School. Everyone knew High School was so much better than Middle School, the classes were harder sure, but the kids were cooler, and there was a lot more freedom when you were 16 and maybe even driving.

"Hey Si," Fred Willis said as he breezed by Simon, "see ya' at Trent's later?"

"Not sure I can make it," Simon said. Trent Marshall had invited a few of the guys over for a swim after school, but Simon wasn't really up for it. Trent's folks had just had a heated pool installed and he was dying to show it off to his friends.

"Too bad, Cathy and Alicia will be there," he said wiggling his eyebrows suggestively, "hopefully in a skimpy little bikini."

Simon laughed, "You're a perv. Anyway, those two aren't gonna do more than show off."

"Hey, looking is fun too. You should try to make it."

"We'll see..." Simon said, but he had no intention of going. He had too much going on right now, not to mention that Cathy and Alicia, or any girl for that matter, held no interest for him.

Eventually he knew he couldn't stall any longer and he headed off to class, dreading what was ahead.

Toby Grayson sat chewing on a pencil as he sat at his desk, bored as usual, and eager to get this period over with. It wasn't that he had anything against English Lit or the instructor Mr. Graham, but it just wasn't his thing. He liked music, and sports, and even math better than language, and he was barely squeaking by in the class.

At 13 he was a handsome boy, broad shouldered and athletic looking with blond hair and hazel eyes framed by bushy eyebrows and long luscious eye lashes that were the envy of many girls, and boys. The dimples at each side of his mouth only added to his cuteness, but he wasn't stuck on himself, far from it.

Actually Toby was a bit shy and not at all as self-assured as one might think a boy like him would be. His mom had died several years ago, and now it was just him, his dad, and his younger brother Jeff. His mom's death had been hard on him, but his father had been a pillar of strength, and somehow they'd managed to get through the ordeal. He still had

nightmares sometimes, as did his younger brother, who often wound up in his bed when the nightmares got too much to deal with, but lately the nightmares had been fewer and farther between.

He played Football and tennis and was an all-around good athlete, but he didn't hang out with the usual jock crowd, although he did have a few good friends on the football team.

As Simon wandered in, sucking on a lollipop, Toby looked up for a second then went back to whatever he was doing completely unaware of the nervous look the other boy gave him.

Simon was also 13, an inch shorter than Toby and not as well developed, but boarding and biking kept his lean teenage body fit and strong. He had broad hips for a boy and walked with a tilt almost. Some of the boys thought he was a sissy, while others said it was just his style. His green eyes accentuated his face nicely, and his long brown hair curled long over his shoulders and surrounded his cute face. Like Toby, his looks were the envy of a few girls and boys, but he wasn't aware of any of that.

He wasn't at all shy when it came to his friends, but he was a mess when it came to meeting new people, especially lately. He was lucky in that most of his friends here at Mason were kids he knew from grade school and there were plenty of them.

Toby Grayson however was not one of those friends, and in fact had just transferred to their school at the beginning of the year. He'd been on Simon's radar since the first day he'd seen him strolling down the

hallway, but he knew a super cute boy like that would never be interested in being friends, especially if he knew the real truth about him.

The truth that he'd only admitted to himself recently, the awful truth that he was gay. The truth that he liked boys, that girls did nothing for him, and that suddenly he couldn't quit thinking about one particular boy, Toby Grayson.

It had gotten so bad lately that Simon could barely stand even being near the boy for fear he'd be caught staring at him, or worse drooling, and that was what made English Lit, his favorite class, a hard place to be right now.

"Class, for this week's assignment, since this Thursday is Valentine's Day, I want each of you to write a brief essay about what this particular day means to you."

There was a groan from the class and Simon almost joined in, but he didn't want to draw attention to himself so he kept quiet. He was glad of that for another reason when he noticed that Toby wasn't groaning but seemed to be thinking about what Mr. Graham was saying.

"Calm down class," he chuckled, "This should be an easy assignment, and I'm not even imposing any mandatory length. Of course it will be subject to the usual rules of grammar and spelling and it should be double spaced and perhaps with a nice cover picture. Have fun with it class, I'm looking forward to what you come up with."

The instructor moved on then and they picked up where they'd left off the previous day, but Simon's head really wasn't in it. He managed to keep up for the most part, but he couldn't help but notice that Toby seemed preoccupied with something else.

The bell finally rang, releasing them for the day, and Simon was one of the first out the door. With his head down he trudged on to his locker and quickly stowed his books and grabbed the books he'd need for his homework assignments that night.

"Coming over?" Trent asked as he breezed by Simon, "there's gonna be pop and eats."

"I...I can't make it dude, sorry."

"Aww come on, the whole gang will be there."

"I don't know, I'll try."

"Cool, see ya there," Trent said, assuming that Simon would eventually give in.

Simon shook his head, but he was smiling as he headed out to the parking lot. The buses were already lined up, but Simon only lived a few blocks away and he walked to and from school unless the weather was really bad, in which case his mom would drive him.

"Hey, wait up," it was his younger brother Luke who was in seventh grade that year.

"Hey," Simon said, "thought you rode your bike."

"Nope, had a flat. Can you help me fix it later?"

"Sure, except...I might be going over to Trent's. He's got a new pool and he's showing off," he laughed.

"Lucky, wish I could go."

"Maybe next time. How was school?" Simon asked, then laughed, "Sorry, I sounded like mom."

"Yeah, school was okay. Thursday we're having a Valentine's Party," he said cheerfully.

"Valentine's Day," Simon moaned, "what a crock."

"Why, just cause you don't have a girlfriend?" Luke laughed.

"Shut it, neither do you."

"How do you know?" Luke teased, "anyway I might have one after I give this one girl a Valentine's card."

"Oh, what girl is that?" Simon said with amusement.

"I can't tell ya," Luke laughed, then took off running and didn't stop till he was at their driveway.

Simon didn't bother to chase him. He was in no mood to run, and anyway he needed time to think. Luke had already gone inside and Simon found him pouring a glass of juice.

"Pour me one," Simon said as he laid his backpack down by the door.

"Thought you were going out?"

"Haven't decided yet, anyway I'm thirsty."

Their mother wandered in then, took one look at Luke and shook her head. "Here, let me do that, you'll make a mess."

"Mom, he's 12," Simon grouched, "he's not a little kid anymore."

His mother gave him a questioning look but didn't interfere with Luke's pouring. "Are you boys hungry, there's fruit or granola bars."

"Just thirsty," Simon said, "Umm...mom, can I go over to Trent's? He's having some friends over to try out the new pool." Simon wasn't sure exactly when he'd decided to go, but now that he had, he decided it wouldn't be all that bad, maybe even fun.

"Oh, I heard the Marshall's had put in a pool. The car business must be picking up."

Mr. Marshall owned a Ford Dealership in town and they were always driving new cars, and Trent had bragged that next year his folks were buying him a new Mustang convertible for his birthday.

"So, can I go?"

"Will you be home in time for dinner?"

"Dunno, I can call you later. Is that okay? He said there would be food."

"I was just going to fix some mac and cheese anyway."

"Yum," Luke said, he loved mac and cheese.

"Dad working late?"

"Yes, again," she said sounding annoyed.

"I'm gonna go change," Simon said draining his glass of juice and setting the glass in the sink.

"Lucky," Luke whined from behind him and Simon smiled. Maybe getting out of the house and being with his friends would be good for a change.

He slipped on a pair of board shorts and then covered them up with sweats and a tee shirt. Lacing on his Nikes he grabbed his ball cap and headed downstairs.

"Going mom," he yelled, "see ya later."

He grabbed his mountain bike and rode the mile to Trent's house and walked his bike around the side of the house and through the gate. There were several of his friends already there and they greeted him as he parked his bike.

"I knew you'd come," Trent laughed, "who could resist a pool party?"

"Pretty sure of yourself," Simon chuckled, "So where's Fred, I thought he was all gung-ho to see girls in bikinis."

"He's on the way, and so is Cathy and Alicia," he said grinning.

"Hey Simon," someone called from the pool and he turned to see Lane Hollis climbing up the ladder.

"Hey, Lane."

"Come on in, the water is just right," Lane urged.

"Just a minute," then turning to Trent he said, "Where can I change?"

"My room, where's your swim trunks?" he asked eyeing Simon who didn't appear to be packing anything.

"Under my sweats."

"Well, just take off your sweats then goof, you don't need a changing room for that."

"Oh, yeah," Simon said grinning. Then finding a chair he sat down and unlaced his shoes and slipped off his sweats. He rose and threw the sweats on the chair and his tee soon followed.

"Cannon ball," Simon yelled as he ran toward the pool, and seconds later he hit the water, sending up a spray of water that splashed down on the tiled edges of the pool.

"Good one," Lane said, "wanna race me to the other end?"

Simon was a good swimmer, but Lane was on the school swim team and he was no match for him. Also he got a little distracted when upon closer examination he discovered Lane was wearing a skimpy pair of white Speedos, the same kind of swim wear the swim team wore. White with a red stripe and waistband, the school colors.

"No fair," Simon groused, "You're a pro." Simon wiped the water from his eyes and was about to say more when suddenly he heard the gate open and seconds later Fred came hurrying in with Cathy and Alicia. Fred was wearing board shorts and had a towel thrown over his shoulder, but both girls were still fully dressed, though they were carrying bags which Simon assumed held their swimsuits.

"Hi guys," Fred said grinning, "Look who I ran into out front."

"Hey, you girls gonna swim?" Trent asked hopefully.

"Yeah, where can we change?" The blond, Cathy Hill, said as Alicia studied the pool and the two boys hanging onto the side.

"Oh hi Simon, hi Lane," she said drawing Cathy's attention that way.

"Hi guys," Cathy said waving, "be there in a minute, just gotta change."

As Trent led the girls inside to show them where to change Fred jumped into the pool and joined them at the edge.

"Told ya, there was gonna be girls," Fred said excitedly, "I can't wait to see what they'll be wearing, or not wearing...he he."

"Calm down, don't scare them off," Lane laughed, "and if you pop a boner, for god sake stay in the pool."

"Why? So you can see it?" Fred joked, "Oh Lane, I didn't know you liked me that way."

"Shut up fuck head," Lane said, but he was laughing. Simon was used to this kind of kidding among his friends, but lately it had become almost uncomfortable to hear, considering the fact that he was gay.

"Who else is coming?" Simon asked, trying to take the boys' minds off their sex jokes.

"Oh, just a few of the guys from the football team, Mark Swanson is bringing his girl Suzy."

"Oh," Simon said not really sure what else to say at the moment.

A noise from the house signaled the return of Trent, and a few minutes later the girls reappeared, this time both sporting skimpy two piece bathing suits that caused Fred to let out a low moan.

"Fred..." Lane warned.

"Sorry, sorry..." he said biting his lip, causing the other two teens to laugh.

The girls didn't seem anxious to get wet, and at first they sat on lounge chairs and talked to Trent who offered them a soda which they sipped delicately. A noise from the side of the house brought more of their friends, including Mark and his girlfriend and an unexpected visitor. At least unexpected by Simon. But it made perfect sense when he thought about it. Trent was the captain of the football team and he was friends with most of the other guys, including Toby Grayson.

"Toby," Trent yelled as Simon moaned to himself. Suddenly he wished he could just sink to the bottom of the pool and stay there till Toby was gone, but instead he sighed and gritted his teeth, as he thought of some excuse to make his exit.

"You guys want a pop?" Trent offered, and most of the guys took him up on it, but Toby declined and instead headed toward the pool.

Oh my God, Simon moaned internally, Please don't let him be wearing a Speedo.

"How's the water?" Toby asked as he got closer.

It took Simon a minute to realize that Toby was talking to him, but when he realized no one else was about to answer he finally spit out, "Fine, uh fine, really warm...nice." He moaned again in his head; I sound like an idiot.

"Cool, be there in a minute, just gotta slip off these jeans..." he said heading over to find a chair and sit down to remove his shoes.

Simon wanted to look away, to look anywhere but where Toby Grayson was slowly undressing, down to God only knew what kind of provocative swimsuit, but he was frozen like a deer in the headlights and unable to tear his eyes away.

If Toby, or anyone else seemed to notice Simon's predicament, no one said anything, but Simon knew he had to do something before he made a fool of himself.

Still unable to pull his eyes from Toby's body, he watched with interest and dread as Toby skinned off his shirt, revealing a sleek muscled upper body that was smooth and solid looking. That left Toby in just a pair of black jeans that hugged his body nicely and he noticed Toby was having some difficulty skinning off the tight jeans. Perhaps because the swim wear he was wearing beneath was a bit thicker than, say a pair of boxers, they snagged on the jeans and were pulled down a bit by the downward force of Toby's effort, and for one brief second Simon caught glimpse of a few soft looking hairs just below the waistband of the board shorts that Toby was wearing beneath his jeans. Quickly pulling the board shorts back into place, Toby continued to slowly slip out of his jeans until at last he was free of them. Then taking the garments he folded them carefully and stood, dropping the jeans to the seat he'd just vacated. Looking up, his eyes met Simon's and both boys blushed.

Simon felt quite ready to die, sure that Toby would start screaming at any moment, denouncing him as a pervert and faggot, but when the other boy smiled and headed his way, he decided he was overreacting.

Sliding into the water Toby stretched out and swam a few laps before swimming up to where Simon floated. Simon's heart was beating so fast he was afraid he'd cause tidal waves in the pool, but Toby seemed cool and collected and not at all menacing.

"Simon, right?"

"Uh, yeah...uh, Toby, right?"

Toby laughed, "Yeah, we have English Lit together, right?"

"Uh, yeah. Ummm...I didn't know you knew any of my friends."

"I don't, well just Trent really. He insisted I come, but I usually don't hang out that much."

"Yeah, I almost didn't come," Simon confessed.

"Oh, why not? Not your thing?"

"Just busy and stuff..." Simon said, not wanting to explain further.

"Yeah, me too. So...what do you think about the assignment, the one on Valentine's Day?"

"Pretty lame, but it shouldn't be that hard. I'll just write some crap and put a nice picture on it and bam, an A," Simon said grinning.

"So, I guess VD doesn't have any special meaning for you either..."

"Uh, no, not really. I mean when I was a little kid, you know? We used to exchange Valentine's card and have a party, but now...it's just another day."

"No girlfriend huh?"

"Naw, you?" Simon said, then blushed. He was surprised at how easy it was to talk to Toby, especially after hiding from him for so long.

"Naw, not really my thing," he said leaving more questions unanswered.

What did that mean? Were girls not his thing, or just love? Did he like boys, but didn't have anyone special?

"Me either. Valentine's Day is for lovers, I guess," Simon said fishing around for more answers.

"Yeah, my mom and dad got married on VD. My dad said it made remembering their anniversary easy. Of course that was before, before...you know, my mom died."

Simon had heard something about that when Toby had first come to their school, but he'd never heard the details.

"Sorry, that sucks. Is it just you and your dad?"

"And my little brother. He's 11, but pretty cool for a kid."

"My bro is 12, he's in 7th this year."

"Oh, he goes to Mason too?"

"Yeah, sometimes we walk together. We only live a few blocks from here."

"Cool, me too...over on Dixon."

"No way, that's close to my house, by the park right?"

"Yeah, I can see the park out my bedroom window."

"Cool," Simon said, then ran out of steam. So what if Toby lived nearby, they could never really be friends, could they?

"Those two gonna swim or just sunbathe all afternoon?" Toby chuckled nodding toward the two girls in bikinis.

"Dunno, they're both sort of a tease. Fred is crazy for that one girl, Cathy, the one in the pink bikini."

"Not my type," Toby said, but he didn't elaborate. What was his type? Simon wondered.

"Mine either, too flashy."

Toby laughed, wanna swim some laps?"

"Sure," Simon said, realizing that this wasn't so bad after all. Toby wasn't at all like he'd thought he would be. He wasn't stuck up or pushy and he seemed like a genuinely nice guy. It sucked about his mom and maybe that caused him to be the way he was, but so far he really liked what he saw.

The girls eventually braved the water as did the new arrivals and the other girl Suzy, and soon the pool was teaming with teenage bodies.

"Wanna get out and get something to drink?" Toby said softly, pulling Simon to one side.

Simon nodded and they climbed out and grabbed towels from the huge stack nearby and dried off a little before wrapping it around their bodies. Simon was glad Toby had covered that part of him, because the last thing he wanted to happen was to throw wood and wind up getting outed.

They grabbed a soda and sat down on the lawn swing near the sliding glass patio door and Toby began swinging his feet to get them moving. Simon added his efforts and soon they were gently swinging back and forth as they watched the other teens frolicking in the water.

"So, what do you do for fun? I mean do you play any sports?"

"Nope, but I like to bike and board. I have a sweet mountain bike and I ride the trails down by the park as much as I can."

"Cool, I play football, but tennis is my real love, ever play?"

"Nothing serious, I mean I know which end of the racket to hold," Simon laughed.

"We should play some time."

"Sure, yeah...totally," Simon said smiling and taking a sip of his soda. This was way easier than he'd ever dreamed. Soon they'd be friends and then...and then what? Toby Grayson is not gay, he reminded himself. I can never get that close to him, he'd figure me out in a heartbeat and spread the word all over the school and ruin me, "I mean if I can find time. I'm pretty busy."

Toby's face fell, what had he done wrong? He'd been so worried about making a good impression on Simon and things were going just fine and now, and now it seemed like things were going South.

"We could swap numbers..." Toby suggested.

"Oh yeah...uh, sorry didn't bring my phone."

"I did," he said hopping up and retrieving his jeans. Pulling out a shiny smart phone he unlocked the screen and pulled up his contacts, number?"

Simon rattled it off, realizing it would seem weird to refuse, but he had no intention of following up. But what if Toby called him? What would he do then? Well, he'd figure that out when and if the time came, but he was pretty sure that that would never happen.

Eventually Trent came along and pulled Toby away and Simon went back to the pool and goofed with Fred and the others while keeping an eye on Toby without being too obvious.

God, he is so beautiful, he thought, those eyes are amazing. He was just about perfect in every way, Simon had to admit, from his long blond hair right

down to his sturdy teenage feet. He felt a lump in his stomach and a tingling a little lower and had to look away to save himself from further distress.

"Simon," it was Cathy Hill and she was only inches from him now.

"Oh, hi Cathy. What's up?"

"Oh, just wanted to say hi again," she said acting totally weird.

Was she flirting? He wondered. No one had ever really flirted with him before, boy or girl, and he wasn't sure exactly how to handle it.

"Hi," Simon said grinning, "So...umm...how do you like the pool?"

"It's really nice," she said seeming to lose some of her weirdness, "I'm so glad he invited me," she said, giving Simon a little smile, "so...do you play football?"

Simon knew the girl wasn't that dense, she was part of the in crowd and knew all the right kids, including those who played sports.

"Uh, no...I bike a lot...and board," Simon stuttered.

"Oh, was that your bike by the gate? It's really nice."

Nice? Simon almost laughed, fortunately he was saved any further embarrassment, as Fred swam up behind Cathy and soon she was chatting him up.

Good, Simon thought, at least Fred knows what to say to a girl, even if most of it is dumb.

Simon took the opportunity to climb out and get a drink from the cooler on the broad patio. He popped the top and took a big swig then looked around just to see Toby emerge from the house.

"Hey, Trent was showing me his dad's pool table," Toby said, and a few seconds later Trent emerged.

"Hey Simon, do you play pool?" Trent asked.

"Yeah, some...I'm not a pro or anything."

"Me either, it's my dad's and he plays a lot. He's pretty good. I just like to goof around."

"Hey Trent," Mark called from the pool, you gonna swim?"

"Yeah, coming," Trent said waving, then to Simon and Toby, "catch ya guys later, help yourself to the eats if you want."

When Trent was gone Toby wandered over to the table where bowls of chips, dip, and some finger food were laid out. "Come on, let's chow down," Toby said to Simon, "I'm starving."

Simon was a little hungry too, having missed his after school snack, and he grabbed a paper plate and piled on some chips and dip, chicken nuggets, and a sandwich, and walked over to the swing and sat down. Toby soon joined him, and as they rocked they ate in silence.

Simon was feeling a little awkward. Why was Toby hanging around him? Didn't he have better things to do, more interesting people to talk to?

"Mmmm...I love French onion dip," Toby said.

"Yeah, me too," Simon offered. He assumed he was expected to add to the conversation, but he really didn't know what to say, and instead stuffed a chicken nugget in his mouth and chewed slowly.

Toby sighed, and Simon felt awful, the guy was trying, why couldn't he meet him halfway? I can do this, he thought, just be myself, talk about crap like I do with my friends.

"Where do you play tennis?" Simon blurted out.

Toby smiled, "Ummm...at the rec center on Holbrook, my dad bought me a membership."

"Cool, so you're like a pro or something?"

"Not really a pro, but I'm pretty good."

"Cool, so...how old is your brother...?"

As they continued to talk Simon found it easier and easier to find things of interest to say. In fact he was surprised at just how easy it was to talk to Toby Grayson, the boy he'd been fawning over all this time. But he was reluctant to let himself get too close or expect too much. As nice as Toby was, there was no way he would stand for having a gay friend, that he was sure of.

Eventually they went back in the pool and joined in the fun with their friends. But even as much as they interacted with their other friends it seemed like Toby stayed close by, and Simon just couldn't understand why he was paying him so much attention.

Was it because he was as shy and lonely as he was, or was it something else? He'd opened up to Simon and told him things that he was sure he hadn't told his other friends. Like losing his mom to cancer and how it had taken them by complete surprise and been over so quickly they hardly had time to wrap their heads around it. How there dad had been strong for them, but then how he had fallen apart at the funeral, and the nightmares he and his brother Jeff still had.

It made Simon want to give Toby a big hug and kiss his pain away, but he knew he could never do anything like that. They were both 13 and you didn't just go around hugging 13-year-old boys no matter how much they needed it.

He'd found himself opening up too, he'd told him about his dad who worked too much and how his mom resented it, and the arguments his folks sometimes got into when they thought he and his brother couldn't hear them.

"My folks never fought," Toby had told him, staring at the pool and looking thoughtful. They were like...like really in love. I think they were like, made for each other and dad says he can never find anyone like that again. That's what I'm gonna write my Valentine's theme about, my mom and dad's love," he said then blushed, "Lame huh?"

Simon had assured him it was not only not lame, but that he thought it was a great idea, and would probably guarantee him an A.

In the pool, coming up behind Simon, Toby laid a hand on his shoulder, then as if he suddenly thought better of it, he removed his hand and just floated there.

"I gotta go, I just wanted to say goodbye," Toby said looking pensive.

"Oh, yeah...I should be getting home too, uh...did you walk or ride your bike?"

"My dad dropped me off, but I'm just gonna walk back."

"I rode my bike, but I could walk with ya...if that's okay."

"Yeah, sounds good."

Trent showed them to the downstairs bathroom and they took turns showering off the pool water and redressing. As Simon waited outside the door he couldn't help but think about what was on the other side, namely a naked Toby.

Then bitterly he realized this was probably the closest he'd ever be to the gorgeous teenage teen in that state, and he felt a wave of despair wash over him. This was so hopeless, why was he trying so hard to make friends with this boy when it would only lead to frustration and maybe worse, getting outed?

"Your turn," Toby said reappearing, thankfully dressed in his tight black jeans once more, "Ouch, I hate going commando," he chuckled, "I forgot to bring undies."

"Oh, yeah, me too, but at least I'm just wearing sweats," Simon chuckled, trying not to think about what was loose in Toby's jeans.

Then he had another thought, just wearing sweats without any kind of support for his junk, he'd have to be careful not to throw wood, or he'd be busted right away.

"I'll be out by the pool," Toby said to Simon's relief, "I wanna grab another soda."

Simon showered quickly, trying not to think about the fact that minutes earlier Toby had been standing under the spray, the water cascading off his perfect teenage body. He even imagined he could smell Toby's musky scent still in the air and he did throw a little wood, but luckily it went down quickly as he was drying off. He slipped on his sweats and tee and combed his hair with his fingers then went out to find his shoes and socks.

Toby had already laced on his shoes and was talking to Trent who was hanging on the side of the pool. As Simon approached he included him in the conversation.

"Thanks for coming guys. I plan on doing this again pretty soon, I'll let ya know when."

"Cool, thanks for inviting me," Simon said politely, then to the others, "Bye you guys, and girls," he said blushing, and Cathy gave him a radiant smile.

As he and Toby headed toward the gate Toby turned to him grinning, "I think that girl Cathy likes you."

"Aww...I barely know her," Simon said blushing, "besides she's not my type." Because boys are my type, he didn't add.

"Nice bike," Toby said changing the subject. He'd been testing Simon to see what he thought about Cathy, and he was satisfied with the answer he'd given.

"Thanks, do you have a bike?"

"Yeah, an old ten speed, but it's still in good shape. I don't ride it much these days, but I could probably keep up with you if you ever wanted me to come along for a ride."

"Uh sure, the trails at the park are pretty level and some of them are paved," Simon said as he pushed his bike along, Toby falling in beside him.

They talked about school, their younger brothers, what music they liked, sports, movies, TV shows, things they'd seen on FB or YouTube, and with every step they took they became a little closer.

Simon was still worried about getting too close to Toby, but he found it hard to back away as they shared their lives with one another. Neither had a perfect home life, but of the two Simon felt like

Toby's house had more love in it. It wasn't that he didn't think his folks loved him, but the constant battle between his parents over his dad's work, had left both of them emotionally exhausted, and that spilled over to the relationship with their two sons.

That was one reason he was sure he could never come out to his folks. Not only was he not sure how they'd take the news of having a gay son, but he also feared that would just be more fuel for the fire that constantly burned between his parents. He'd considered telling Luke, after all they were very close as far as brothers went, but the time had never seemed right, and he still considered his little brother to be naive and innocent and didn't want to complicate his life.

"What were you thinking just now?" Toby asked bringing him back to the present.

"Uh, sorry...just some stuff. Nothing really."

"Ummm," Toby said, wishing he could think of a way to get Simon to open up to him, "So...your brother is 12? I wonder if he knows Jeff."

"Dunno, maybe...he has a couple friends who are still in 6th maybe he knows him through them."

"Yeah, maybe...is this your house?" Toby said as Simon stopped at the end of his driveway.

"Yeah, hey...thanks for walking me home, and for the talk. It was...um, fun," he said then blushed. I must sound like an idiot, he thought.

"Yeah, it was," Toby said easily, "Ummm...well, guess I should be going," he said wishing beyond hope that Simon would invite him in, "I'll see ya tomorrow...in English Lit...right? Well, bye..." he said starting off.

"Yeah, see ya," Simon said, "uh, tomorrow for sure," he said wishing he could think of some way to keep him a minute longer, or the right words to say to make sure he wanted to see him again.

Toby waved as he walked off toward his street and Simon watched till he was out of sight. By the time he turned to go inside Luke had emerged from the open garage door and was staring at his brother, wondering what he was looking at.

"What's up?"

"Damn, Luke, you scared the crap out of me," Simon said turning to stare at his brother.

Luke laughed, "What are you staring at, some girl?" he teased as he joined Simon on the sidewalk just as Toby reached the end of the block, then as he stood watching the distant figure turned and waved.

At first Simon was reluctant to wave back with Luke there, but he didn't want Toby to think he didn't care, and he returned the wave, perhaps not as energetically, but at least Toby knew he had seen him.

"Who's that?" Luke said frowning.

"No one," Simon said pushing his bike toward the garage.

"Oh, so no one," Luke laughed, "I guess I must've seen a ghost then."

"Just a friend, that's all," Simon said realizing he had to say something.

"Anyone I know?"

"No, he's new this year. He was at Trent's pool party, that's all, and he walked home with me."

"What's his name?"

"Why are you being so nosy?" Simon said, becoming annoyed with his little brother's questions.

"Chillax, dude. Just askin'," Luke said sounding hurt, "Forget it," he said stomping off toward the house.

"Luke..." the word hung in the air and Luke froze, a sly smile crossing his lips. He knew exactly how to play his brother; it was easy really. He was a nice guy and nice guys were easy to manipulate.

"What?" he asked feigning annoyance.

"His name is Toby Grayson, he's in my English Lit class, that's all I know."

"He got a brother named Jeff?"

"What? Yeah, how did you know?"

"Cause he's best friends with Calvin."

Calvin Harris was their next door neighbor and like Jeff was also 11. He and Luke had been friends since the Harris family had moved in and the two had gone to the same grade school, in different years of course, until this year when Luke moved up to middle school.

"Oh," Simon said dumbly.

"His mom died of cancer you know," Luke said, and it's just the three of them now."

"Uh yeah, I know. So...you know his brother huh? Weird," Simon said.

"Why, you like this boy?"

"What?" Simon said almost losing it, "What do you mean?"

"I mean are you two friends now?" Luke said giving his brother a curious look. Why was he getting so uptight about a simple question like that?

"Dunno, we just met. He's pretty cool I guess. We might go play tennis some time."

"Tennis, I didn't know you liked tennis."

"I like lots of things you don't know about," Simon said smugly.

"Like what?" Luke laughed, "I know everything about you that's important."

Not everything little brother, he thought. You don't know I like boys.

"Whatever, any mac and cheese left?"

After nuking a bowl of mac and cheese and pouring himself a glass of milk, he sat at the breakfast bar and ate as he thought about the afternoon. Toby had been nothing like what he'd expected, and he was even more confused than ever. Could he be friends with a boy like Toby and control his feelings? It would be hard, no pun intended, but it might be worth it just to be around him.

But what would he do if Toby found a girlfriend and they started dating? Could he stand to be around him knowing he was kissing, and maybe more with some ditzy girl?

He was interrupted from his thoughts by Luke who came in carrying his phone.

"Your phone was ringing," he explained, "I brought it to ya, I didn't look to see who it was."

Simon grabbed the phone, but the ringing had stopped and instead there was a missed call message. He didn't recognize the number, but he was pretty sure he knew who it belonged to. Should he call him back or wait for him to call again? He was saved making a decision as his phone notified him of an incoming text.

You there? Sorry, tried to call. I forgot you didn't have your phone.

Oh, no prob. I saw the call, was gonna call back

Oh cool. Sorry about calling, I just found out that my bro knows your bro...lol

Yeah, my bro told me that too

Cool, huh, small world

Yeah, Jeff has even been to your house

Simon tried to remember when that might have been, but he supposed it could have been while he was elsewhere or busy in his room. He and Luke didn't hang out all that much lately, however Luke was a social butterfly and had lots of friends.

I never met him

Oh

I would like to though

Oh, okay maybe you could come over some time

There was a pause as Simon considered that.

Sure, sounds good

Well, gotta go now that you got my number you can add me to your contacts...ok

Yeah, I will. See ya..thanks for...texting

LOL thanks for thanking me

Simon smiled and blushed, but there was nothing more to say at the moment. He quickly added Toby to his contacts and went back to his mac and cheese which had grown cold by now. Sighing, he rose and dumped the sticky mess in the trash and put the bowl in the sink.

He was just starting on his math homework when Luke knocked on his open door.

"What?" Simon said turning to see his brother standing there grinning.

"Was that your new friend?"

"Yeah, so what?" Simon said defensively.

"Why are you acting so weird about this new boy?" Luke said, causing Simon to nearly lose his cool."

"I'm not, why are you being so nosy all of a sudden. Do I grill you about your friends?"

"I'm not grilling you, I'm just curious," Simon said levelly. He'd been wondering about his brother for some time now, but he really didn't know if what he suspected was true or not.

"Well, mind your own business. I don't go getting up in your business."

"Hmmm..." Luke said closing the door and inviting himself in. Sitting on the bed he studied Simon who was watching him warily. He expected that Simon would start yelling at him at any minute, but so far he seemed too surprised to move.

"Simon, I'm not trying to get into your business, I just...I just worry about you sometimes."

"You worry about me?" Simon said looking amused, "What are you, my mom now?"

"No, mom doesn't have time to worry about us," he said sadly.

"Yeah," Simon said, at least they agreed on one thing.

"Look, Simon...I know I'm only 12, but I'm not dumb. Lately I've noticed that you've changed."

"Changed?" Simon said, but he didn't deny it.

"Yeah, you used to be fun. You used to have friends over and do stuff. WE used to do stuff, you and me, but lately you just keep to yourself. What's going on?"

"Nothing, nothing is going on. I...I just, I've been busy with school and all..."

"Really, do you expect me to believe that?"

"I guess not," Simon said sounding defeated. Maybe the time to tell Luke what was going on with him had come at last.

"So, what is it? Is there something going on at school. Are you being bullied or something?"

Simon laughed, "No, nothing like that." If only it were that simple. But if the truth ever did come out, bullying would be the least of it.

"Then what?" Luke said sounding desperate now.

"You wouldn't understand," Simon said sighing, wishing he could just come right out and tell him what the problem was.

"I might. Look, Simon, it's none of my business, but I know something is going on. I don't know what, but I think I might."

"What...um, do you mean?"

"Well...you're 15 years old, a Sophomore and almost in high school, and you still haven't got a girlfriend," he said pausing to see how Simon reacted, then seeing the fear in his eyes he went on, "Is that what's wrong, do you feel like you're missing out on things?"

If only he knew, Simon thought. Then a horrible thought overcame him. What if he told Luke and he couldn't accept him. What if he didn't like the idea of having a gay brother, and they weren't as close as they used to be, or worse, what if he outed him to their folks?

"Just because I don't have a girlfriend, doesn't mean I don't have girls who are friends. That girl, Cathy Hill, she was all over me at the pool party," he said with more enthusiasm than he felt.

"Cathy Hill, she's a bit much, isn't she? Sort of flirty. Do you like that kind of girl?" Luke said, completely confused now.

Simon shrugged, "I dunno, I'm not really looking for a girlfriend right now."

"Hmmm...me either, but I guess there must be a lot of pressure for you since you're older and stuff."

"Naw, not really. Only a few of my friends have girlfriends."

"Oh, well...so...what is it then?"

"What? I told you..."

But Luke cut him off, "I know what you said, but I know you and something is wrong."

Simon stared at him blankly for a moment then sighed, "I'm not sure you want to know," he said sounding defeated at last.

"Yeah, I do," Luke said rising and walking over to where Simon sat at his desk, then pulling up a chair he sat down beside him so close that Simon could feel the heat coming off his body and smell his familiar and comforting scent.

They'd always been close. Even being three years apart they'd still found common ground and had been more like friends than brothers most of their life. At least until recently when Simon had begun to pull away from him.

It had hurt at first, Luke supposed it was just because Simon was growing up and moving on. He knew what peer pressure was like, and he figured it wasn't considered cool to hang around with your little brother when you were almost in high school.

Simon could see that Luke was serious and that he was waiting for some kind of answer, but where did he begin? How did you tell your little brother that you didn't like girls that way and that you had a thing for this new kid, Toby Grayson, and you were terrified that someone would find out and your life would be over?

"You remember that one kid, Matt Sinclair?"

Matt had lived in the neighborhood a few years ago, but he and his family had moved abruptly that summer before Simon entered the class. He remembered how his friends had picked on Matt and all the things they'd said about him and even now it hurt to think just how cruel kids could be.

"Yeah, sort of...what does that have to do about anything?"

"Do you know why he really moved?"

"His dad got transferred or something, right?"

"That was the official story, but there was more."

"Like what?" Luke asked innocently. He'd been in 5th grade that year, and as insulated from all that as any kid could be.

"The truth is that the other kids made his life a living hell and he begged his folks to move."

"Why?"

"Because he dressed differently, and he liked the wrong things, like dance, and choral club, and...and other boys."

"What? You mean...?"

"Yeah, Matt was gay, and that didn't go over very well with the other kids."

"I still don't understand what that has to do with..." Luke began, "Oh My God, Simon, are you? I mean...do you...um, is that what's wrong? Are you...gay?"

Simon sat, unspeaking, tears stinging his eyes. Everything hung in the balance. He could dismiss Luke's question and say that he was just using that for an example, or he could tell the awful truth and let the cards fall where they might.

"Simon..."

"Would it matter?" Simon said, still not sure he wanted to go this route.

"No, not really, as long as you didn't hit on me," he said making it into a joke.

Simon gave him a withering look, "Is that what you think gay guys do, perv on their little brothers?"

"I was kidding," Luke said gently touching his brother's shoulder, then seeing the look of fear in his brother's eyes he frowned, "It's okay. I'm not gonna freak out. Just tell me, is that what's wrong. Are you gay?"

"Duh," Even now Simon couldn't bring himself to say the words, to admit that he was gay, but there was no mistaking the implications of what he'd said so far, and now Luke knew and there was no turning back.

"Wow, I knew it," Luke said simply.

"What? What do you mean you knew it?"

"Oh, nothing. I knew something was wrong and that was one of the things I thought about. I mean it fits. You don't talk about girls and you've become moody and quiet and don't hang with your friends like you used to."

"Oh man, do you think other people have figured it out...?"

"Naw, probably not. I mean I only know cause we're so close, or...used to be," he said sounding sad.

"I'm sorry. I guess I've been pushing you away lately. It's just that I've been so stressed, and now this thing with Toby," he sighed.

"So, you really like this boy, this Toby kid?" Luke said grinning, "Does he like you too?"

"No, I mean, I don't know. I mean he's a nice guy and we seem to hit it off, but there's no way he's...you know? Like me."

"Maybe, maybe not. I mean, it's not like guys go around acting gay and stuff, right?"

"Well, no one I know of except Matt," Simon admitted.

"So...you're gay. Wow, what's that like?"

"No different than being straight I guess, except I like boys instead of girls," Simon said, suddenly feeling better about things.

"Yeah, so have you ever...you know? Done anything with a boy?"

"Luke," Simon warned, "I'm not discussing this with you," Simon said blushing.

"Okay, okay," Luke said looking disappointed, "Are you gonna tell mom and dad?"

"Are you crazy? How do you think that would go over? You think dad works a lot now, we'd never see him if he knew he had a fag living in his house, and mom would blame herself for me being gay. And then they'd probably send me to a shrink or something."

"Yeah, I guess, but at least you can talk to me now."

"Yeah, thanks," Simon said smiling. "Luke, you know this doesn't change anything between us, right? We're still tight, right?"

"Does this mean you're gonna stop being a dweeb?"
Luke chuckled.

"No, I'm still a dweeb, but I'm your bro, and it feels good to get this off my chest. Thanks, you're a good brother."

"You too...dweeb," Luke chuckled.

"Are we done?" Simon said grinning, "I got some homework to do."

"Sure, me too. Well, good talk," he said laughing.

When Luke was gone Simon stared at his math book and tried to get his head back into his homework. All those months of worrying, all the fears and misgivings gone, and now he almost felt let down, as if it had been no big deal at all. How could he have doubted Luke? They'd always had each other's backs and had shared so much over the years. They'd been the kind of brothers who didn't rat each other out and who had stood together, the two of them against their parents, and over the years they'd pulled off some crazy shit.

He smiled when he thought about some of the things they'd gotten away with. If only his parents knew. And now, and now he and Luke had one more secret to keep from them, and this was the biggest secret of all.

He smiled and went back to his homework and this time it went quickly. He put his books away and got ready for bed. As he stripped off his sweats he remembered he had nothing beneath them and considered grabbing a pair of boxers, but instead he piled down in bed naked and tried to sleep.

He stared at the ceiling for a while and thought about his conversation with Luke and then his thoughts drifted to Toby. Was Toby laying in his bed right now? What was he thinking about? Was he thinking about him, or some girl? No, of course he wasn't thinking about him, that was silly. Toby was straight, that was that. They could be friends and that was all they could ever be, but that was fine too. Nothing wrong with having friends. He smiled, at least he'd have Toby in his life, and that was worth putting up with all the frustration of loving someone he could never have.

Tuesday crawled along until English Lit, then the hour seemed to fly by as he and Toby exchanged bored looks while the instructor droned on. Afterwards Simon didn't know what to expect, but it was Toby who made the first move.

As he emerged from the classroom Toby was waiting for him with a cheery smile on his face.

"Hey, I was wondering if you wanted to walk home together...unless you have a ride or something."

"Nope, I walked, but my brother Luke might be walking with me."

"That's cool. I'd like to meet him."

"Okay, then let's go," Simon said, feeling almost giddy at the prospect of being in Toby's company once again.

They had just made it to the parking lot when Luke came rushing up, out of breath. Ordinarily he would have ridden his bike, but because of last night's talk he'd forgotten to get Simon to help him fix the flat tire.

"Luke, this is Toby, Toby this is my little brother, Luke."

"Hey, Toby said offering his fist to bump.

"Hey," Luke said, looking the older boy over, trying not to be too obvious.

He wasn't gay, but he could appreciate that Toby was cute and well built, and he guessed he could see what Simon might see in this boy, but what was he really like? Was he a nice guy, would he treat his brother good?

"I heard you know my brother Jeff," Toby said smiling pleasantly.

"Yeah, he's friends with this boy who lives next door to us, Calvin."

"I know Calvin. I'll be sure to tell Jeff we met today."

"Yeah, he's pretty cool," Luke said, then trying to feel Toby out he asked, "So, I heard you play football..."

Toby was easy to talk to, Luke discovered, and before long they were chatting amiably while Simon jumped in occasionally, just happy the two were getting along so well.

By the time they reached Luke and Simon's house Luke decided Toby was a pretty cool guy and he relaxed some. He didn't know if Toby was gay or not, but it was obvious that he and Simon had something going on, and he felt good about things.

"I gotta go," Luke announced once they were there, "gotta hit the bathroom," he said, giving the two sometime together.

Simon saw right through him and smiled, "See you inside Luke," he called after him.

"Nice meeting you," Toby said and Luke waved before going inside.

"I like your brother, he seems cool. He's a lot like Jeff, and not shy at all," he chuckled.

"Yeah, he's pretty cool," Simon said, then changing the subject he added, "So, have you started working on your Valentine's project yet?"

"I did a little work on it last night, but it has a ways to go."

"I guess I'll work on mine tonight. I don't have much else going on."

"Yeah, me too."

"Well...ummm...I was wondering, you wanna come in for a little while?"

"Well, yeah..sure, I don't have to be home for a while."

"Cool, come on," Simon said smiling, "I can fix us a snack if you want."

They found Luke sipping juice and eating a PBJ and he looked up when they entered and smiled.

"Hey, you guys."

"I'll nuke some pizza rolls, that okay?" Simon said poking his head in the freezer.

"Yeah, sounds good."

While the pizza rolls were heating up Simon grabbed two sports drinks from the fridge and handed one to Toby. When the microwave was finished Simon pulled them out and suggested they take them to his room.

Luke smiled at them as they left and nodded. "See ya guys later."

"I like your room," Toby said taking the offered place beside Simon on his bed.

"Thanks, I used to share a room with Luke, but we moved here when I was 11 and we got our own rooms. Doesn't keep the little squirt from bugging me all the time though," he laughed.

"Yeah, Jeff is like that, and sometimes...sometimes when he has bad dreams he comes and climbs in bed with me," he said looking away.

"That's cool, that he trusts you like that," Simon said, not mentioning that he and Luke had shared a bed a few times for the same reason.

"Yeah, he's had a hard time since mom died. I'm glad he has good friends though, that helps a lot."

"Yeah, Luke has tons of friends. My mom says he attracts friends like flowers attract bees," he laughed.

"You and him pretty close?"

"Yeah, always have been, but not as much lately."

"Oh, why not?"

"You know, we're older..."

"Ummm..." Toby said looking distracted for a moment, "I guess it's not cool being seen with your little brother, huh?" Then before Simon could answer he went on, "I guess I must seem pretty lame hanging out with my little bro so much."

"No, it's not that," Simon said, not elaborating.

"Oh, is it him that doesn't want to hang around with you?"

"No, it's complicated. Hey, want me to put some music on?"

Simon hopped up and turned on his bookcase stereo and the music seemed to derail Toby's questions about him and Luke. They talked about biking and tennis once again and made tentative plans to go biking at the park on Saturday.

After about an hour Toby said he should get home and Simon walked him to the door. When he was gone Luke came looking for his brother, expecting a full report.

"So...he seems nice," Luke said grinning.

"Yeah, thanks for not making him feel weird," Simon teased.

"Hey, just wanted to see what he was like. I mean if you like this boy so much he must be special."

"What boy?" it was their mother who had arrived without them knowing it and she was looking at the two expectantly.

"Oh, just this new kid at school," Simon said quickly, "he's in my English Lit class."

"OH, has your father called?" she asked forgetting Simon's new friend quickly.

"Nope, why...is he gonna be home soon?"

"Who knows," she fumed as she hurried off to her bedroom, "I'll fix us some dinner later. I'm going to take a shower."

"Sorry," Luke said softly, "come on, let's go out back and talk."

Simon followed his brother out to the back yard and they settled into the lawn swing under the tall shade tree in the corner. His mom and dad used to sit out there and rock for hours, that was until his dad took the new job and. Now days he was hardly ever home, and when he was, the two of them fought most of the time.

"I hate it that mom and dad fight so much," Luke said frowning.

"Yeah, it sucks, that's for sure."

"Do you think they'll get a divorce?" he added, voicing the same fear Simon had been packing around for the last few months.

"Naw, they'll work it out. Dad works so much so we can have a nice place to live and stuff."

"I'd rather have less stuff and more dad," Luke said.

"Yeah, me too."

"So, what did you and Toby do in your room?" Luke said grinning, seemingly forgetting the problems with his mom and dad.

"Well, we got naked and then..." Simon teased as Luke's eyes grew wide.

"Huh uh, you did not," Luke said realizing he was the brunt of a joke, "but you wanted to, right?"

"Naw, we're just friends, that's all we'll ever be. He's just a nice guy, he's real...sensitive," he said trying to figure out how to explain how he felt, "he's really protective of his little brother. He said he's had a hard time dealing with his mom's death and he still has nightmares."

"Oh, well...that's good, right. That means he's really a nice guy, and maybe he's...well, you know?"

"You think only gay guys are nice and have sensitive feelings?" Simon laughed.

"No, but at least he's not some brain dead jock who only thinks about himself and getting laid."

Simon laughed, "No, he's nothing like that. He's smart, and funny, and I like being with him....even if...you know, that we can never be...that close."

"Hmmm...it must be hard to like someone that way and them not like you back. Sort of like..."

"Like what?" Simon asked looking at his brother with interest. "Is there someone you like, someone that doesn't like you back? Some girl?"

"Naw, well...there is this one girl. Sandy Nelson, but she doesn't even know I'm alive."

"Sandy Nelson, is that Bret Nelson's sister?"

"Uh huh."

"I remember she came to your birthday party. She's really cute. Why do you think she doesn't know you're alive?"

"Well, maybe she knows I'm alive, but I'm not part of "the crowd"," he said making air quotes with his fingers, "that she hangs with."

"Well, maybe you should try to get her alone sometime and just talk to her."

"Good plan. How?"

"Sorry, I guess I'm not the best person to ask about that stuff."

"It's okay. I have a plan."

"OH, what's that?"

"Remember I said I was giving a Valentine's card to a certain girl, well that's the girl."

"OH, good idea," Simon said grinning, "What are you gonna say in the card?"

"That's personal," Luke said grinning.

"Okay, okay...maybe I should give Toby one," Simon teased.

"Hey, that's not a bad idea," Luke said looking excited.

"Are you serious? Yeah, that's all I need, to have Toby tell everyone some gay kid gave him a Valentine's Card."

"What if he didn't know who sent him the card?"

"Huh, but what good would that do?"

"I dunno, but you could at least get it off your chest, or your heart," he said grinning.

Simon was quiet for a few minutes, thinking about what Luke had said, and the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. So what if Toby didn't know it was him who wrote the card? At least he'd know, and he could tell him exactly how he felt, and that had to worth something.

"You just worry about what's her name and I'll worry about Toby, okay?" Simon finally said, "come on, let's see what mom has brewed up for supper," he added laughing.

Their mom was just taking a tray of fish sticks out of the oven and there were tater tots in a skillet on the stove. It wasn't a gourmet meal, but both boys liked simple things and enjoyed the meal, even if their mother was moody and somber the whole time.

The boys cleared and excused themselves to their rooms and their mother washed the dishes and piled down on the couch to watch TV, waiting for her husband to come home so she could give him the cold shoulder.

That night Simon began writing his Valentine's theme and thought about the idea Luke had for sending Toby a card.

The cover page was a heart with these words inside it:

Because Love Isn't Complicated Enough as it is.

Valentine's Day

by Simon Harris

Valentine's day is for lovers. But not everyone has someone to love. Love is great, but it's hard to find. Valentine's Day can be great if you have that special someone, but if you don't, if you're alone, it can be a reminder of what you're missing out on.

When we were kids we exchanged Valentine's Cards with all our friends, boys and girls, and no one thought much about it. We made boxes with colored crepe paper and decorated it with cut out hearts or glitter. We cut a slot in the top and carefully made out cards for all the kids in our class, cause no one should feel left out, and this wasn't a popularity contest. This was just about exchanging cute little cards, sometimes with candy or a sucker inside, and everyone was equal for that one day.

Sure there might have been someone special, a friend, or maybe some girl or boy that you liked and you picked a special card for them, but no one could know but you and that person, because no one wanted to get laughed at by the other kids.

When we got older that all changed. Now instead of giving a card to everyone, we were expected to pick out someone, someone special, and that was to be our Valentine. Well, maybe we're too young, or not popular enough, or whatever, but not everyone is lucky enough to have that one special person, that one person that makes us feel good inside. That person that means more to us than anyone else, our Valentine. Or maybe we know someone like that only they don't feel the same way or you just can't tell them. Then Valentine's Day is more of a reminder of that failure than a celebration of friendship and love.

Maybe that person doesn't even know how you feel or could never feel that way about you that you feel about them. The bitter truth is, we don't know till we ask, or put ourselves out there, but who can take those risks? Everyone is so afraid of being different, of being made fun of, of daring to take a risk and looking stupid, or being shamed for having feelings that don't fit into the normal scheme of things.

We're told to love, then shamed if we do. We don't know what to do sometimes, and Valentine's Day only confuses some of us that much more. I try not to be bitter, but Valentine's Day to me is just another day to feel different and alone.

The End

Simon stared at the screen of his laptop. Did he really want to put himself out there like that? Even if Mr. Graham would be the only one to read it, did he want to take the chance that he might read between the lines and figure him out?

Sighing, he was just about to delete it and rewrite it when he suddenly had this wicked thought. What if he let Toby read it first? Would Toby be able to read between the lines? And if he did and didn't freak, maybe it would be a way of letting him know how he really felt. He could always play it off as a joke if Toby reacted badly, but he really didn't think Toby was the kind of boy to make a big deal of something like that.

I need a cool pic to go with it, he thought, and then using Google Images he found the perfect one. Hitting the print button he made two copies and as the printer did its thing he thought about the Valentine's Card he would send to Toby.

Luke knocked on his door a few minutes later and he grabbed the sheets off the printer and covered them with his textbooks.

"Come in. Oh, it's you," he said pulling the theme back out again."

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Just finished a theme for English Lit."

"A theme, about what?"

"Valentine's Day. Yeah, I know, weird subject for English Lit, but we've been studying some love stories and poems. I guess Mr. Graham wanted to get our take on the whole thing."

"So, what did you write?" Luke teased, "About you and Toby?"

"Yeah, I wrote how I'd like to rip his clothes off and lick him all over, and then put candy hearts all over him and eat them off of him."

"Get real, if you don't want me to know just say so."

"Actually," Simon said pulling out the printed pages, "Maybe you should read it first. I was thinking about letting Toby read it. What do you think?"

Luke was a smart kid and a fast reader and it didn't take him long to read through the short essay, then he reread it and when he looked up he smiled.

"Dude, you nailed it," Luke said, "if he doesn't figure things out after reading this, then he is an idiot."

"You think so?" Simon said, not sure now if he was willing to take the chance.

"Yeah, but I mean if he's freaked out you can still bail and just say it was just a bunch of junk you wrote for a grade."

"Yeah, maybe..."

"Dude, do it, show it to Toby first. If there's any chance he's into you, this will seal the deal."

A few blocks away Toby Grayson was working on his own theme as tears clouded his eyes. He hadn't planned on going this route, he'd planned on just writing the usual drivel about love and stuff, but it

was if his fingers had a mind of their own as they moved across the keyboard.

Toby's cover page was a huge heart with a jagged broken line down the middle.

Valentine's Day

by: Toby Grayson

My parents were married on Valentine's day. They were both fresh out of college and they'd been in love for a long time. My dad said he chose Valentine's day for their wedding because that way he would never forget their anniversary. That was so like my dad to make a joke of it, but there was never really any danger of him forgetting what he said was the greatest day of his life.

My parents had that kind of love that poets write about and that lovers all over the world seek. They were devoted to each other and they were the happiest two people I have ever known.

I was born a year after they were married and now my mom and dad had someone else to love, and that only made their love stronger. Then my brother came along and added even more love to our family.

We were a happy family and every year on Valentine's Day our folks would celebrate, and when my brother and I were old enough to understand, they included us in that celebration of love. We were a happy family and our parents showed us what

being in love was all about, and we looked forward to someday finding that kind of love for ourselves.

Then, as often happens in real life stories, tragedy struck. Not every story has a happy ending and ours sure didn't. When my mom was first diagnosed with cancer we just assumed the doctors would figure out a way to make her well and things would be okay again.

A lot of people with cancer live a long time, but six months after mom was diagnosed with cancer, she was dead. In the movies the person dying always has time to say goodbye to their loved ones, but in real life that doesn't always happen. Mom died in her sleep while we were in our beds at home and we never got a chance to say goodbye.

So, I guess Valentine's Day has a double meaning for me. It's a day to celebrate the love that my parents had, but it's also a day to mourn the loss of my mom, because Valentine's Day was not only the day she married my dad, but it was also the day she left us forever.

Toby was openly weeping now and he was glad his room was far enough away from his dad's that he couldn't hear him. He knew how hard Valentine's Day was for his dad, and he sure didn't want to stir up any unpleasant memories.

Jeff was probably asleep by now; the kid always went to bed early and slept as much as he could. Sometimes Toby thought sleeping was his brother's way of escaping the pain caused by the loss of their

mother, but for once he was glad that his little brother was asleep.

He stared at his laptop, reread what he'd wrote, and inserted a comma here and there and changed a few words, then hit the print button. He thought the picture above it was perfect, a broken heart, cause that's what he had, and what his dad had, and Jeff, but he hoped that someday those hearts would mend, and they'd all find that love that had been ripped away from them.

He wondered if what he wrote was too sad, and what Mr. Graham would think of it. Then he had an idea, what if he let someone else read it, someone he trusted, someone who would understand. Someone like...Simon.

Naw, he thought, we're not that good of friends yet. He didn't want to drag him down with his sadness, especially since they'd just met, but Simon had seemed like a nice boy and they had a lot in common. Maybe he'd let Simon read it first, maybe...he'd have to think about it.

He placed the theme in his backpack and stripped off his clothes and piled into bed naked. He usually slept in boxers, but he was too wiped out to dig a pair out. Fortunately sleep came quickly and he didn't have to think any further about his mom or Valentine's Day or the growing crush he had on a certain boy.

Simon was surprised to find Toby waiting for him when he emerged from his house the next morning, but he gave him a sunny smile.

"Hey," Toby said smiling back, "Thought I'd walk you to school, don't want the bullies to get ya'," he teased.

"What bullies?" Simon laughed.

"Never know when there might be someone lurking."

"Well, I'm glad you came to keep me safe," Simon said feeling really happy.

"No probs. Got your theme done yet?"

"Yeah, I did it last night, you?"

"Yeah, same."

"I was wondering..." they both blurted out at once, then they laughed.

"You go first," Toby said.

"I was gonna say, I was wondering if you'd read my theme first and see if you think it's any good, and not too weird."

"Oh, sure."

"What were you gonna say?"

"Ummm...just that I was wondering if you'd read mine and tell me if it's too sad or something."

"Okay, but not here, okay? How bout if you walk home with me and we swap them at my house and read them?"

"Yeah, that sounds good," Toby said as they walked along side by side.

Simon could feel the tension in the air and changed the subject to their plans for the weekend and Toby perked up and joined in right away. They chatted amiably all the way to school then split up to go to their lockers after agreeing to meet for lunch in the common area.

Simon floated through the morning, eager to see Toby again, but as the time approached to meet him for lunch he began to get nervous. Things were moving so fast. They'd only just formally met and now they were having lunch together and making plans for the weekend and sharing their themes with one another. Was it possible Toby felt some of the same things he was feeling, or was he just a nice guy making a new friend? Maybe making friends came easy for Toby, maybe that was why everyone he knew seemed to like the boy. Maybe it had nothing to do with him, maybe it was just how Toby was.

At lunchtime he grabbed his sack lunch and headed toward the commons and found a two man table near the hallway where he knew Toby would emerge.

He didn't have to wait long and a Toby was smiling as he zoomed in and sat down across from Simon.

"What'd you bring?"

"Looks like turkey and cheese, want some?" Simon offered.

"I'll swap you some of my chicken nuggets for half."

"Deal," Simon said sliding half of his sandwich across on a napkin.

As they ate they talked about nothing in particular, and both boys felt very comfortable with each other. All around them other kids were laughing and talking and having a good time as they ate their lunches, and for once Simon felt like he really belonged.

Oh not that he didn't have his share of friends, and he never ate alone, but lately he'd felt uncomfortable around his friends, and seldom joined in their conversations.

After lunch they split up again and went off to class and didn't see one another till last period, English Lit. Toby was already seated when Simon walked in and gave him a little smile. Toby nodded and smiled back, but there was no time to talk as Mr. Graham started speaking.

"Class, tomorrow is Valentine's Day and your themes are due tomorrow. I hope all of you have had time to complete them by now and haven't waited till the last minute," he chuckled. I had one student ask me if the themes would be read aloud in class. The answer is no, no one but me will read the themes. I certainly wouldn't want to embarrass any of you," he chuckled. Now then, let's get back to where we left off yesterday."

After class Toby waited for Simon and for the first time they walked out together. If anyone noticed or cared, it wasn't obvious, however Mr. Graham did give them a smile as they passed by. He'd noticed the two seemed to have become friends over the last few days and he envied them their easy comradery.

Luke had aired up his tire the night before and was back to riding his bike and he was already gone by the time Toby and Simon made it to the sidewalk. As they walked to Simon's house they talked about the poems they'd been studying in English Lit and Toby frowned.

"It's not that I don't understand what the writer is trying to say, it's just that the words they use don't make a lot of sense sometimes. I guess it's cause they were written so long ago."

"Yeah, modern poetry is different, but I'm not really a fan of poetry. I prefer short stories and novels, especially fiction."

"Yeah, me too," Toby replied, "I like stuff like Stephen King, stuff like that."

"Yeah, he's good."

By the time they arrived at Simon's house Luke was already there. As they entered the kitchen Luke looked up and smiled.

"Hey, you guys, mom left some cookies for us."

"Cool, we'll take ours to my room," Simon said grabbing a couple sodas and a handful of cookies for them.

"Okay, see ya later."

In Simon's room they ate their cookies and sipped their sodas, but neither had much to say. They were both thinking about the same thing, the themes they were about to swap. There were no secrets revealed in his theme, but Toby was afraid that Simon might think he had too much baggage to make a good friend.

Simon was concerned that Toby might read between the lines and figure out that he wasn't exactly like other boys, but again he thought he could always play it off as just some random words, written to get a decent grade.

"Well, still want to read my theme?" Toby said, deciding to make the first move.

"Yeah, of course. You still want to read mine? I gotta warn ya', it's not all happy and stuff."

"Neither is mine, so I guess we both see Valentine's Day the same way."

"Okay, well...only way to find out is to do this," Simon said going to his desk and pulling out a copy of his theme. Meanwhile Toby had dug his theme out of his backpack, and with one last look at each other they swapped papers.

Toby laughed when he saw the picture at the top, "Perfect picture."

"Thanks, yours too," Simon said grinning, and then he began to read.

At first he thought the words were sweet, an expression of the love his folks had had for one another, then when he got to the part where Toby and his brother joined the family he smiled. But as he read further he began to understand what Toby was really trying to say. He was expressing his sorrow, his bitterness at the loss of his mom, and when he saw that she had died on Valentine's Day, he couldn't stop the tears from forming in his eyes. Sniffing and wiping at his eyes he finished reading, then let his eyes wander over to where Toby seemed to be engrossed in his theme.

Toby smiled as he read the part about exchanging Valentine's cards as a kid. He'd always enjoyed that, and a couple of years he'd had a favorite friend, sometimes a girl, sometimes a boy, that he'd given a special card too. Simon was right, everyone got a card and no one felt left out, but that was only because the teacher insisted. Truth was there were kids who were unpopular for whatever reason, and only on Valentine's Day were they treated as equals.

Was Simon trying to say he didn't conform to the expectations of society? He wondered as he read on. Was Simon trying to say that he liked a boy? Naw, that was silly, but then...after all he certainly could relate to that because he really liked Simon and maybe...just maybe Simon liked him back.

"This is really good," Toby said at last, "I think Graham will give you an A for this one."

"Yours is sad, but it gives me hope too," Simon said, struggling to express how he truly felt. "I mean at the beginning you talk about how much your folks loved each other and how they loved you, and that's good, really good. It's sad that she had to die, but you guys still have some of that love, for each other, right?"

"Yeah, I never really thought about that. My dad has been amazing. Even though I know he is really hurting, he takes such good care of me and Jeff, he's always there for us," Toby said wiping at his eyes.

"I feel like I know you so much better now," Simon said sincerely, "and I think what you wrote is amazing."

"I feel the same way about you. I like that you seem to know what kids our age are feeling, about fitting in and stuff."

"You saw that in there?" Simon said blushing.

"Yeah, I sort of read between the lines, but maybe its cause I feel that way too that I picked up on it."

"You do, you feel that way? I thought I was the only one who was confused," Simon offered, "I mean all around me my friends seem to be so confident and so...comfortable with everything."

"They're not, trust me. Take Trent for instance. He worries that he's not good enough at football to please his dad, and he just keeps trying harder and

harder, and sometimes he's so stressed out we have to calm him down before he can play."

"Wow, who knew?"

"No one, except us guys on the team, so please don't tell anyone."

"I won't, you can trust me," Simon said, meaning he could trust him with his own secrets as well.

"I know," Toby smiled, "Well, looks like we're both gonna get an A. I just hope Mr. Graham doesn't recommend us for counseling after he reads these."

Simon laughed, "Yeah, he might. So...I was wondering. Do you have any plans for tomorrow night?"

"Nope, why?"

"Well, I was thinking maybe we could go grab a burger or something, have a few laughs, forget this Valentine's Day crap."

"Okay, yeah...you're on. Uh, where can we go though?"

"We can walk over to the Wendy's by the High School, how does that sound?"

"Perfect."

They worked out the time, and pretty soon Toby headed home, and Simon went down to find his brother who was watching TV in the family room.

"Toby gone?"

"Yep, but we sort of have a date tomorrow," Simon teased.

"Huh uh, what? Really?"

"Relax, we're just gonna walk down to Wendy's and have a burger."

"You gonna give him a Valentine's card tomorrow night?"

"I can't just hand him a card and say Happy Valentine's Day. He'd know for sure I liked him."

"Is that so bad? Maybe that's exactly what you need to do. Just get it out there and get it over with."

"Yeah, right, easy for you to say." But Simon was wondering if Luke wasn't right. So what if he gave him a card? He could always play it off as a joke if Toby reacted badly. Yeah, maybe that was what he'd do, but first he had to get a card.

"Mom, can you take me to the mall?" Simon said approaching his mom who was watching TV and sipping iced tea.

"The mall, what do you need at the mall?"

"Umm...just need to buy something for school. I won't be long, please."

"All right, see if your brother wants to go, maybe we can get ice cream or something. Lord knows I could

use a change of scenery. Just let me change and we'll go."

Luke was eager to go, though he'd already bought the Valentine's Cards he was giving out, there was no way he would pass up a trip to the mall and ice cream.

Their mom took longer than they'd have liked to get ready, but they spent the time sitting in the car talking.

"Are you gonna get a card at the mall?"

"Yeah, I want something special. I thought I'd go to the Hallmark Store. I have ten bucks to spend."

"Wow, you should be able to get a good one with ten bucks."

Their discussion was interrupted by the arrival of their mom who had put on makeup and a pretty dress.

"Wow, mom you look pretty," Simon said grinning.

"Well, thank you. I'm glad one of the men in this house thinks so."

Why couldn't she just accept a compliment without bringing up her problems with dad? Simon moaned to himself.

The mall was busy with last minute shoppers looking for that perfect gift for their Valentine and some stores already had some of their stuff marked down.

While their mom window shopped the ladies' stores the boys headed to The Hallmark Store. Simon went straight to the card section while Luke checked out the stuffed animals and other neat gifts. Then seeing a mylar balloon that said, "My first Valentine, I love you mom." Simon had a great idea.

"Hey Simon, wanna go halves on this balloon for mom?" Luke said hoping he didn't sound too sappy.

"That's a great idea, I found the card I want and it's only 5 bucks. Come on let's get out of here."

"Can I see the card?"

"Maybe later," Simon said blushing.

They added a small box of chocolates to their purchase and a nice card, and Simon put his leftover money in and Simon paid the rest. They found their mom just coming out of a dress shop with a package and headed her way.

"Hey mom," Simon said grinning, "did you buy yourself something?"

"Yes, I decided I deserved a new dress and they were having a sale. So what have you boys been up to? Buying Valentine's gift for your girlfriends?" she laughed.

"Well, for one of them," Luke said handing the balloon, signed card, and candy over to their mom. Happy Valentine's Day."

"Oh my, what have you boys been up to?" she said smiling.

"Thank you boys," she said giving each of them a hug and kiss on the cheek. She almost said, well at least someone cares, but decided that to do so would only spoil the moment, "That was very sweet. Come on, I'll buy you boys some ice cream."

Their mother was in a decidedly better mood when they got home and their dad was home for a change and seemed to be in a good mood himself.

"Hi dear, hi boys," he said giving his wife a kiss on the cheek, "Guess what we're doing tomorrow night?" he said grinning.

"Watching TV and waiting for you to get home," his wife smirked.

"Nope, you and I are going out to dinner and dancing."

"Dancing? We haven't been dancing in years. What's gotten into you?"

"Aww honey, I know I've been working a lot lately and neglecting you guys, but I finally got caught up and things are gonna be different. Besides, tomorrow is Valentine's Day and we always go out on Valentine's Day."

"I wasn't sure you'd remember this year. Do you really mean it?"

"Of course I mean it. Boys will you be okay alone tomorrow night?"

"Sure dad, I'll babysit Luke," Simon teased.

"I don't need a babysitter," Luke grouched, and they all laughed.

The boys went off to their bedrooms, leaving their parents to work things out and they were both smiling for a change. Maybe things with their parents would get better, only time would tell.

Luke knocked on Simon's door a few minutes later and Simon got up and let him in.

"You said I could see the card."

"Oh, that. You're just in time, I was just about to write something in it, and that will be personal."

"Hand it over," Luke giggled.

The card was simple, but Simon thought it was perfect. On the cover was a cartoon drawing of a boy playing tennis and inside it said: Having a friend like you is worth the racket.

"Funny," Luke said, what's with the tennis thing?"

"Toby likes tennis, he wants to go play sometime."

"Perfect then, but...isn't he gonna know it was you since you talked about the tennis thing?"

"Oh, he's gonna know all right, cause tomorrow night at Wendy's I'm just gonna hand it to him."

"Good for you. So...what are you gonna say inside?" Luke said hoping Simon would let it slip if he was sly enough.

"Good try, but that's personal, besides, I haven't decided yet. I'm gonna work it out on my laptop first then write it on the card."

"I could help?" Luke said grinning.

"No thanks, now go...do your homework or something and leave me to figure out what to write."

"Okay, okay," Luke chuckled, then sobering some he said, "Do you think mom and dad will work things out?"

"Yeah, I'm sure of it. I think dad is really trying."

"Yeah, I hope so, well...goodnight."

When Luke was gone Simon fired up his laptop and stared at the screen. What should he write? He wondered, something not too mushy, but something that says I want to be good friends, really good friends.

He was still staring at the screen ten minutes later when he heard his folks bedroom door close. He looked up and smiled, maybe tonight they'd make up and things would get better.

The next morning Simon met Toby again out front and they walked to school together.

"Dad says he's glad I'm making new friends and getting out. When I told him we were going to Wendy's he insisted on paying. I have twenty bucks, so I'm buying."

"That was cool of him. Ummm...did you tell him it was me you were meeting, or does he think you're meeting some girl?" Simon wondered out loud.

"Oh, he knows," Toby said quietly. In fact he had told his dad all about Simon and his dad had guessed that Toby was crushing on him. He'd come out to his dad when he was 13, and his dad had taken it well. Not that Toby was surprised, his dad was one of the most open-minded and loving men he knew, and he'd accepted Toby's news with a hug and a promise that nothing had changed between them. In fact he'd told Toby that his mother had suspected Toby was gay long ago, and they'd discussed it, but they were waiting for him to feel comfortable enough about himself to tell them.

That had been two years ago, and as promised nothing had changed. His dad still loved him, only now when he teased him it was about boys and not girls. Jeff knew too, and had been even more understanding, though he admitted that he really didn't understand it that much, since he didn't think about girls or boys that way yet.

"Okay, I just thought maybe he might think it was weird or something..."

"Why?" Toby said sounding worried, "Does it...um, sound weird to you?"

"I asked you, remember?" Simon said, then blushed.

"Yeah, well...nothing wrong with two friends having a burger, right?"

"Yeah, so...today's the day, huh?"

Toby suddenly looked sad and Simon wondered if he was thinking about his mom's death on Valentine's Day. He felt awful for him and quickly added, "The day to hand in our themes. Guaranteed A's," he said trying to lighten things up.

"Yeah, I just hope Mr. Graham agrees."

"Yeah, well...too late to change it now."

They arrived at school then and split up to go to their classes, each thinking their own private thoughts and looking forward to meeting again.

At lunch Simon told Toby about Luke's idea to buy their mom a gift and their dad's plans to take their mom dancing.

"They used to do stuff like that all the time, before dad started working so much."

"What does your dad do?"

"He's an accountant at a big bank. He's like head of his department."

"My dad remodels houses," Toby said then, "He has his own company, but he almost lost it when...when mom died. A bunch of the guys he had working for him stepped in and ran things till he was able to deal with things again."

"That's awesome, but he's okay now, right?"

"Yeah, he's fine. He still gets sad sometimes, but me and Jeff do all we can to help."

"Sounds like you have a good family."

"Yeah, we have a lot of fun. Dad always has time for us. Sometimes we have to tell him to back off a little," Toby laughed, "or he'd plan all our free time."

"Nothing like that at my house. Mom hardly knows we're there and dad is always gone. It wasn't always like that though, we used to do stuff together as a family. I really miss that."

"Maybe things will get better."

"Yeah, I hope so. You done? I need to use the bathroom before next period."

"Yeah, me too."

They threw their trash away and headed to the nearest restroom and each took up a urinal, leaving one between them as was proper etiquette for teenage boys.

Simon was curious about what Toby was packing, and like most boys his age he wondered how he

compared. He had never really done anything with another boy, except some fooling around when he was younger, but he was sure that was what he wanted, eventually. He wondered if Toby had ever done anything with another boy, or a girl, but he didn't know how to ask those kind of questions without sounding weird.

After using the bathroom they returned to their lockers and split up for their afternoon classes. They were both anxious for the day to be over, but they still had English Lit class to look forward to.

Mr. Graham collected the themes as the students filed in that day, then left them to read or do other work while he read them and graded them, planning to return them that day.

Most of the themes were short and along the same lines, but when he came to Toby's he felt tears welling in his eyes. Toby and Simon had been watching him, trying to guess when he got to their themes, and when Mr. Graham opened the theme, Toby saw the cover picture and his gut clenched up.

Mr. Graham was a young teacher and had only been at Mason Middle School two years. He loved teaching, and loved his students, and had gotten quite close to a few, and a few others he'd observed from afar, trying to figure them out. Toby Grayson was one of those kids he wasn't sure about. He'd heard about his mom dying, but he didn't seem to be consumed with it. He did reasonably well in his class, and he knew he was on the football team.

Recently he'd noticed that a friendship had sprung up rather suddenly with another student, Simon Harris, and he'd seen a change come over both of the boys. They seemed to be more relaxed and he attributed that to their friendship. He knew how important it was for kids that age to have friends and to fit in, and both boys seemed to be benefiting from the relationship.

Wiping a tear from his eye the young teacher looked up to see Toby staring at him nervously and he gave him a smile and a nod, then taking his red grading pencil he marked A on the theme and put it aside.

Several themes later he ran across Simon's and smiled when he read the words inside the outline of a heart. "Because Love Isn't Quite Complicated Enough As It Is". He was looking forward to something equally humorous as he began to read, but soon he realized this was no ordinary theme. What was Simon trying to say? He wondered, then in a sudden moment of insight he thought he might have an idea. Rereading the theme he smiled, was Simon perhaps struggling with his sexuality? He knew that some boys his age were often confused and unsure how to deal with that confusion. With no one to talk to they often kept to themselves and feared being figured out by their peers. Then thinking back he remembered a few times catching Simon staring at Toby in class. This was before they'd become friends, and now that they were, Simon seemed to be walking on air. Was it possible Simon had a crush on Toby, and was it possible that Toby might feel the same way?

He reread Simon's theme, then marked it with an A, and went on to the next one, but none were as interesting as the two Simon and Toby had written.

"Class, I've read and graded all your themes, and for the most part I must say they were very good. Several were very original and enlightening. This was meant to be a fun assignment, but I see it actually got some of you to think a bit, and as a teacher that's my number one priority. I'll pass them out now and when you have your theme you may leave, have a good evening class. I'll see you tomorrow, when we will discuss the poetry of Robert Frost."

Simon got his theme back first and he stopped by Toby's desk and told him he'd meet him out front. Mr. Graham smiled, the boys seemed to be bonding nicely and he envied them in some ways. He remembered when he was a boy and how important his friends had been. His home life had been strained and uncomfortable at times, but his friends never let him down.

"I got an A," Toby said beaming, "but he did write a little note that said, if you need to talk to someone, the student counselor is there for you."

"What? No way, you're kidding," Simon said with alarm, then seeing the smile on Toby's face he relaxed, "You butt, you scared me."

"So what did you get?"

Simon decided it was only fair he do some kidding of his own, "A B, he said it wasn't as funny as the picture on the front."

"Liar, you got an A too," Toby said not believing him for an instant, "I know a good theme when I read it."

"Okay, okay...I got an A too, but I think everyone did. I saw a bunch of em' as I was walking out."

"Danny got a B, but there's no telling what that kid wrote. It might have been dirty for all I know," he laughed.

"Yeah, X rated Valentine's Day," Toby added doubling over with laughter.

"Yeah, did you get any Valentine's Day cards yet?" Simon said feeling him out.

"Naw," Toby chuckled, "I don't exactly go in for that stuff anymore."

"Oh," Simon said, sounding disappointed, "So if someone gave you a card, you'd like, be offended?"

"No, not offended. It would depend on who it was. If it was someone I really liked, it would be cool."

"Like a friend maybe?"

"Yeah, especially from a friend," Toby said, finally figuring out what Simon was really asking. He'd considered giving Simon a card too, but had chickened out, but it wasn't too late. He could print one off on his computer using the program his dad

had installed for printing cards and stationary for his business.

"Cool, me too," Simon said, determined to give Toby the card no matter what happened. He'd spent an hour figuring out what to write and had finally settled on what he thought would be the perfect words to express how he felt without being too mushy.

"Well, here we are," Toby said, "Meet you in front of my house about 6:30 and we can walk over together since my house is on the way."

"Great, I'll go knock out my homework so I won't have to worry about it when I get home."

"Yeah, me too, see ya later," Toby said bumping fists with Simon before walking off.

Simon watched him for a few minutes then went inside to have a snack and do his homework. Luke arrived a few minutes later with one of his friends, Tommy Gilbert in tow, and Simon looked up and said hello.

"I'm going over to Tommy's tonight so you won't have to worry about me. I guess you forgot you were going to meet Toby for dinner."

"Damn," Simon said slapping his forehead, "I'm glad one of us is thinking. Thanks bro, I owe you."

"No prob," Luke said grinning, "Just come get me when you get home."

Tommy lived two houses down and was in Luke's grade, and Luke spent a lot of time at his house.

"Does mom know?"

"Yeah, I already told her."

"Told me what?" their mother said breezing in, looking happy for a change.

"That Luke is going to Tommy's. Sorry I forgot about meeting Toby for dinner."

"Its fine," she said dismissing it. She wasn't one to dwell on things, and as far as she was concerned she was happy to let the boys work things out on their own.

"So, mom...you gonna wear your new dress tonight?"

"Yes," she said smiling, "I never dreamed when I bought it that I'd be showing it off so soon. Oh, I have a million things to do before your father gets home. You're eating at Tommy's right?" she said looking at Luke.

"Yeah, they're having basketti," he laughed.

"And meat balls," Tommy giggled..

"Basketti and meatballs," they both said giggling like little kids.

"Oh you boys," their mother said, but she was laughing as she went back to her room.

"Mom sure is happy, I just hope dad comes through."

"He will, I just know it," Luke said. Well, I'm gonna go change and then we're going to Tommy's."

"Luke fixed himself a sandwich and poured some milk and took it upstairs. He ate it as he did the little bit of homework he had, then he pulled out the card and looked at what he'd written for the hundredth time.

Frowning, he tucked the card back in the envelope and wrote: Happy Valentine's Day Toby Grayson on it and tucked it into his backpack for safe keeping.

Later he showered and brushed his teeth and then stressed over what to wear for a half hour before deciding on his newest pair of black jeans, and a collared pullover that he thought looked good on him. He pulled on black Nike socks and laced on his shoes and checked his phone once again.

Around six he heard his dad come in and he went down to greet him.

"So big night with mom huh?" Simon teased.

"Yes, what are you boys planning?"

"Luke's going to Tommy's and I'm meeting a friend at Wendy's for a burger."

"Oh, well have fun. Do you need any money?" He said digging out his wallet.

He didn't, but what teenage boy would turn down money from a parent? Accepting the offered ten dollar bill he smiled and thanked his dad.

"Well, I better go check on your mother and make sure she's ready on time. Our reservation is for 7."

"Have fun dad," Simon called just as his phone rang. His dad gave him a little wave then headed off to his room while Simon answered his phone.

"What's up, you're not canceling are you?" Simon teased when he saw who the call was from.

"No way, I was wondering if you wanted to come a little early, if you're ready."

"Yeah, I'm ready," Simon said grabbing his jacket, then covering the phone he yelled to his folks, "Leaving now, have fun tonight." He heard a muffled thanks from upstairs and walked outside to resume their conversation.

"I'm headed your way," Simon said, "Hey, what's your address anyway?" he chuckled.

"I'll be out front, just come up the street toward the park and you'll see me."

"Okay, if you don't want me to know your address that's cool," Simon teased.'

"417 dude," he laughed.

"Okay, just in case I wanna send you a letter," Simon teased.

"Or a card..."

"Yeah, or a card."

"I see you," Toby said stepping out to watch Simon approach, "You're wearing a red tuxedo," he joked.

"No man, that's not me," Simon said, feigning fear. "That's the Valentine's Day boogie man, run."

"Oh wait, it's just a kid in a red hoodie," he laughed.

"Okay, that might be me."

Seconds later they put their phones away as Simon scooted up beside Toby.

"Hi, long time no see," Toby laughed.

"You hungry?"

"Starved," but a little nervous, he didn't add. He'd finally decided to give Simon a card after all, and he was a little worried about what he'd wrote inside. He'd talked to his dad about Simon and he'd been supportive and his advice had been to take it slow, but not to be afraid to show that he had feelings for the boy.

Concealed in Simon's jacket, the envelope holding the card for Toby reminded him of what this evening was really all about and his stomach churned with fear.

"What are you gonna have?"

"A double, and fries, and a Frosty for sure. You?"

"Baconator," Toby said, fries and a Frosty of course, oh, and the biggest Pepsi they have."

"My dad gave me ten bucks, he was in a really good mood," Simon said grinning.

"I'm paying, remember?"

"Okay, okay...but if we want to get something extra, I got it covered."

"Okay, deal."

The walk to *Wendy's* didn't take long and when they arrived they were pleased to see the line at the counter was short. Toby ordered first and then when he was done he told the girl that they were together and Simon rattled off his order. She smiled as she looked them over. They were both cute and she wondered what they were doing here together on Valentine's Day and not with their girlfriends, but after studying them a little closer she wondered if maybe they weren't a couple. She knew gay kids at school and she was cool with it, but it seemed such a waste when the boys were as cute as these two.

They gathered napkins and condiments and got their drinks and staked out a table at the far end of the dining room and stared out the window at the traffic passing by as they waited.

"I...have something for you," Simon stuttered after a while. He'd debated waiting till after they'd eaten to give him the card, but decided now might be better.

That way if he was offended he'd have to hang around at least long enough to eat his food.

"You do? Well, I have something for you too."

"Oh, what is it?"

"You first."

"Okay, well here goes. I hope you like it. I picked it out just for you," of course it was just for him stupid, he chided himself, stop being such a dweeb.

Toby took the envelope and read the writing on the front and smiled, "Thanks dude," he would have said more but their number was called about then and the card would have to wait.

They grabbed their food and tore into it, both forgetting the card and their nervousness for the moment. They ate slowly, laughing and cutting up the whole time, and growing closer with each passing moment.

When they were down to their Frostys they ate them slowly, making faces at each other and cracking up. The girl at the register had come out to clean off some tables and she smiled at their antics. Yep, good friends at least, she decided, even if they weren't boyfriends.

"The card," I almost forgot," Toby said suddenly, and..."for you," he said producing a small white envelope he'd made himself.

"For me, what is it?" Simon said nervously.

"A lottery ticket. What do you think it is?" Toby laughed.

"Oh, yeah...a card," he said taking the envelope and studying it carefully. In Toby's messy teenage scrawl was written, To Simon from Toby, and Simon planned on hanging onto this particular envelope for a long time to come.

"Well, let's open em'," Toby said retrieving his card from the table beside him.

"Okay, but I hope you won't think I'm weird or anything when you read what's inside," Simon said growing nervous again.

"Don't worry I already think you're weird," Toby joked, but Simon frowned, more worried than ever.

"Dude, I was kidding. I won't think you're weird," Toby added quickly as he carefully opened the envelope and slipped out the card inside, "Oh, tennis. Is that me?" he laughed, then opening the card and reading the humorous saying he laughed, "Funny, very funny. Then noticing there was something handwritten on the opposite side he studied the handwriting closely. Unlike his own, Simon's handwriting was clean and precise and each line seemed perfectly straight.

"Well..."

"Oh, I'm reading it now," Toby said finally diving into it.

Toby,

When I first saw you I thought you'd be too busy or too popular to be friends with a guy like me. Then we met at Trent's and I found out what a nice guy you were, I felt like a dope for thinking that way. As we got to know each other better I realized something else, all this time I was watching you and hoping to be your friend, and all I had to do was put myself out there and say hi. The rest was easy. But there's more and this is kind of the hard part. I really like you and I know we just met for real and got to know each other, but I want to get to know you even better and be really close. I know that might sound weird, but I've never had a friend like you before and I'm sort of confused right now. I think it's just coincidence that we met so close to Valentine's Day and knowing that it has sort of a sad meaning for you, I wasn't sure if I should give you a card or not, but thanks to my little brother I got the nerve to step out and do something I wouldn't usually do. I don't know if you feel the same way, and if you don't then that's cool, cause I still want to be your friend no matter what. If I'm not making sense I'm sorry, but if you have any questions I'll try to answer them truthfully.

Your Friend,

Simon

When he finished he looked at Simon and smiled, "Dude is this really how you feel?"

"Uh, yeah, is that okay?" Simon said, ready to bolt if Toby seemed upset.

"Read mine first, then I think you'll know the answer to that."

Simon pulled the card from the envelope and looked it over. On the front was a boy on a skateboard surrounded by a red heart and below it it said: It takes heart to fly. Simon looked up and smiled.

"I made it myself on the computer, open it up. My handwriting is crap so I printed it on the printer."

Simon nodded and opened the card. In red ink on a white background the words filled the right side of the card and Simon began to read.

Simon:

I noticed you almost the first day I started at Mason and when I found out we shared a class, English Lit, I hoped I'd find some way to get to know you. Only thing was it seemed like you didn't like me, or at least was avoiding me. Then when I saw you at Trent's house I decided to try again. I know I was kind of pushy that day, but you never said no, so I just kept pushing and before we left that day, things had changed. I don't want to freak you out or push you, but I want us to be friends, maybe even best friends. I think we've made a good start and I hope we can be closer. If this sounds too weird then I understand, but I hope you will still hang out with me, cause I think you're the coolest dude I know.

Toby

"Wow, I never knew you felt like that. I just figured a cool dude like you wouldn't have time for someone like me," Simon said, revealing his true feelings.

"Dude, I'm not that cool. I'm sort of a loner really, but I don't want to be, it's just that until I met you there was no one I really wanted to hang around with. I mean there are a few guys on the team that I like, like Trent, but we don't really hang out that much."

"Toby?"

"Uh huh?"

"Wanna go for a walk? It's kind of busy in here."

"Oh, sure let me get a refill on my Pepsi."

"Yeah, me too."

They threw away their trash and refilled their sodas and walked out onto the sidewalk running along the busy street. As the traffic whizzed by Simon thought about what to say next. He was pretty sure Toby was on the same page as him and all that was left was to go out on a limb and admit that he was attracted to him as more than a friend.

"Umm...when I said I wanted us to be good friends, that wasn't exactly true...at least not all of it," Simon said, then taking a sip of his soda he sighed, "What I mean is...well...don't get mad, but I think I like you as more than a friend." Toby looked ready to say something, but Simon quickly went on, "I...mean...look, I don't know if I'm reading you right or if I'm just hoping that you feel the same way I do."

"Simon, stop," Toby said, causing Simon to screech to a halt and stare at him in fear.

"Simon, I'm gay."

"What?" Simon said, not sure he'd heard him right.

"I said, I'm gay. I've known for a long time, my dad knows, my brother knows, but until now I've never told anyone else."

"You, you're gay," Simon said, finally wrapping his head around what Toby was saying, "That's great, really great," he said excitedly, "That sure makes it a lot easier to finish what I was saying."

"So tell me, what were you gonna say before I bombed you with my news," Toby laughed.

"I was just gonna tell you that I wanted to be more than friends, like boyfriends maybe. I guess I'm trying to say that I'm gay too."

"There, was that so hard?" Toby laughed.

"No, but you made it easy. Wow, I can't believe this. We're both gay, but..."

"But what?"

"Uh, I know what I want, but what do you want?"

"That's easy, I want you."

"You do?" Simon said bumping into Toby playfully like a puppy.

"Hey, my dad is gone and my brother is at a friend's house. Want to walk over to my house and talk some more?"

"Just talk?" Simon giggled.

"Well...talking can lead to other stuff..."

"Yeah, like maybe stuff and...?"