

Abatement

by Benjamin Hanson

Chapters Thirty Six through Epilogue

Statement and Disclaimer

When I began writing Abatement over a year ago, I never dreamed that it would turn into what it has. I had read a few stories about age regression, and while the genre intrigued me, this story was more or less a project to flitter away my time with. Over time however, I began to fall in love with the characters I was creating; Ben, David, Bessie, Peter, and even Frederick to one degree or another. While I am sad to see an end to their world, I feel that I did the best that I could for them. I will forever miss Abatement, but I hope that as you read these final words that you find the same love for the characters that I have. It's been an emotional journey, but the end has arrived. Thank you to each person that stuck with me from the beginning, and thanks to each person who is just reading this for the first time. Without your words of encouragement, and your commitment to finish right alongside me, this wouldn't have been possible. I present for your approval, the end of Abatement. Please send me your emails and comments at benhanson1980@yahoo.com

If this story is illegal in your particular jurisdiction then please don't continue reading. If you are under eighteen, are offended by cross generational themed stories or the age regression genre doesn't interest you then don't read this either.

Chapter Thirty Six

I turned immediately to look at Peter and embraced him tightly. I was certain that I would never see him again, and here he was, as soon as I stopped looking for him. All I could do was whisper my love, my adoration for him over, and over, and thankfully, he replied much the same. As angry as I had been at him for the night before, it didn't matter anymore. Peter was safe, he was in my arms, and come what may, we wouldn't be separated again. I suddenly gasped, remembering the horrible visage I had seen not so long ago.

"Listen, we need to leave..." I began, to which Peter smiled, wiping a few errant tears from his eyes.

“We will, we just need to figure out some way to make money. I’m sure we’ll think of so...” before he could continue I cut him off.

“Listen, Horace is here. I saw him. We need to go NOW!” I exclaimed, placing as much emphasis on the word ‘now’ as I could. Peter’s eyes grew large as we both turned on our heels and began to run; as tired as I was, as much as my legs ached, having Peter by my side gave me a new resolve to not only run, but also to live. I couldn’t believe that mere moments before, I was considering turning myself into Purity. Now with Peter back in my life I knew I had to escape, no matter the price.

As we returned to the main road, my body struggling to keep an even pace with Peter, we turned the corner and began to head back the way Wesley had taken me earlier. I was certain that I would never see him again, but I knew we were headed into the wilderness, away from town, away from Horace. I wasn’t sure what we would do next, but anything was better than being here. Peter glanced over at me, his breath quickened and his eyes dark from lack of sleep.

“Your knee...” He began, a look of remorse covering his exhausted eyes.

“Wesley was trying to take me out of town, I couldn’t leave without you,” I stammered, trying to get the words out between my ragged breaths.

“Why... Why didn’t you save yourself?” He asked, a look of surprise and disappointment appearing.

“Cause... I love you,” I said simply. I had said it before, but at that moment it felt most profound. Peter smiled, his hand encircling mine, as we continued to run together. He looked the happiest he had in days.

“Thanks,” he whispered, to which I said nothing. There wasn’t anything to say. We both understand how much we meant to one another, but I was despondent that he felt I would actually leave without him. Thankfully I had proven myself faithful, even in the face of his less than even temperament.

I began to feel as though we may have a chance; that we may be able to escape unscathed, when the sound of tires screeching to a halt sounded behind us. I felt the blood run from my face; my lips began to quiver in fear.

“Run!” I exclaimed, as Peter and I began to dash into the woods. Before we managed to get inside however, a familiar voice boomed across the road.

“Get in this car, NOW!”

We immediately stopped at the sound, turning on our heels. My face quickly regained its color, my lips formed into a grin.

“Wesley!” I exclaimed in my joy. Wesley, for the first time since I had known him, looked none too pleased.

“Listen, as much as I’d love to have this emotional reunion with you guys, we need to go... NOW!” As the last word escaped his lips he flew back into the driver’s seat, and Peter and I ran to the car in haste. I once more slid into the passenger’s seat, and Peter into the seat behind me. Before we could shut our doors entirely, Wesley had put the car in drive, pulled off the shoulder, and back onto the road. I sighed, sitting back for a brief moment before I was roused from my momentary serenity.

“What the hell were you thinking? You could have died! If you ever do that again I’m going to kick your ass personally!” Wesley yelled, his voice shaking in anger. I blushed, looking down at my feet. I fought for the words to defend myself, to explain how my love for Peter was worth more than my own life. Before I could speak however, an unfamiliar sound filled my ears.

“I’m sorry,” Peter replied, his voice genuinely remorseful. For a moment I was confused, as I glanced over at Wesley who was staring at Peter angrily through the rearview mirror. I had assumed that he was scolding me, but he wasn’t, it was Peter. I felt bad at once for him, but knew well why Wesley was mad.

“I told him, everything,” I said suddenly, once more returning my gaze to the floor board. I heard Peter stammer before he replied.

“What? Are you serious?”

“Yes, and I believe him,” Wesley said in immediate response. Peter went silent, as my eyes rose to survey him through the rearview mirror. He seemed conflicted, mulling over his thoughts as they formed in his mind.

“Thanks,” Peter finally said, placing his hand gently on Wesley’s shoulder. Wesley’s face began to melt from its previous anger into a calmer tone. I felt relief, and genuine surprise.

“Truce?” Wesley asked in earnest.

“Truce,” Peter replied, a smile appearing on his lips. The look on my face was likely the most confused it had ever been. Had someone told me yesterday that Peter and Wesley would be friends, well, I would have never believed them.

“It was THAT easy?” I asked in confusion, causing both Peter and Wesley to laugh.

“Well, yeah, he saved our lives,” Peter said, rather matter-of-factly. I just shook my head in disbelief. I sat back as the car fell silent once more, and I surveyed the road as it seemed to extend out forever. I began to feel hope, hope that perhaps we would be alright. With Wesley on our side, it felt like nothing could go wrong.

When at last we managed to reach 95 and Wesley felt comfortable enough to return to the speed limit, I let out an audible sigh. I was certain we were headed for New York, away from Purity, and more importantly away from Horace. While I was frightened of the organization, Horace had this aura about him that sent shivers up my spine whenever I thought about him. He was the one, after all, that

had taken me down the night I was doomed to regression. A small smile covered my lips as I thought about it, strangely grateful that he had. Even though my life had turned into something chaotic, it had given me Peter, it had given me Wesley. Peter noticed my smile, and leaned forward.

“Whatcha thinking about?” He asked.

I simply sighed before replying. His hand lay on my shoulder as my fingers danced across it momentarily, admiring the soft skin that was its glove.

“I’m just happy to have you in my life, and you too Wesley.” I grinned as I spoke, brightly. I knew that I looked incredibly childish, but it was alright. I was genuinely happy, and nothing could take that away from me.

“Me too,” the two said in unison, causing them to look at each other momentarily before laughing. Life was good.

Chapter Thirty Seven

As soon as we passed into Massachusetts, the sun had begun to set, and despite how tired I was I found it impossible to sleep. The car ride had been mostly silent, all three of us contemplating our next move. I glanced over at Wesley who stifled a yawn, inclining his head towards me momentarily with a small smile appearing on his lips. His hand extended, patting my leg gently.

“We’re going to visit my friend in Worcester for the night. We need to get some rest.”

I nodded as he finished speaking, and looked behind me at Peter who was curled up in the back seat, fast asleep. I knew that he had been traveling all night, and was likely more exhausted than we were. The car veered from the highway finally, taking an off ramp, and we began to travel deeper into the unfamiliar city. I placed my index fingers and thumbs together, retracting them, and then bringing them back together over and over. I was nervous about stopping, especially in such a big city, but we were far away from Jackman, from the orphanage, from Purity. I sighed, gazing out the window as we pulled up to a large, white, craftsman style house and parked. Peter finally stirred, sat up, and began to rub the sleep from his eyes.

“Where are we?” He asked, looking impossibly adorable.

“Worcester, we’re going to stay with a friend for the night. I told him you guys were in trouble, and his parents are the ones that own the cabin we’ll be staying in for a bit. Don’t worry, he doesn’t know anything more than what he has to,” Wesley finished as Peter’s face roused a bit in concern. He seemed contented with the clause as everyone opened their doors and stepped out into the brisk autumn air.

We followed Wesley closely, as we walked onto the porch, and he knocked on the door firmly.

“Wes!” A tall black man with short hair, and a pair of silver, wire-rimmed glasses perched on his nose exclaimed, sliding the door open to greet his friend. The two embraced momentarily as Peter and I turned to stare at one another.

“That sweater,” Peter mouthed silently, causing me to giggle. I knew exactly what he meant as soon as he mouthed the words. The man’s sweater was a variety of colors, ranging from blue, to green, to orange, to yellow. To say that it was tacky was an understatement; to say that it looked like someone massacred a box of crayons on a sweater seemed more appropriate.

“Come on in boys!” The man exclaimed, stepping aside and ushering Wesley, Peter, and myself inside.

As soon as we stepped into the living room, I felt a sense of relief fall over me. The air was warm, with the smell of cinnamon dancing lightly across my nose. He had a large cream colored sectional that filled the majority of one wall, and an extremely large television on another. There were several photos on the walls, including one of a young Asian and African American boy that I assumed to be Wesley and the man. I stopped to stare at it, admiring a younger Wesley than I currently knew.

“Like that?” Wesley asked as he came up behind me and placed his hands on my shoulders.

“I was probably about your age then.”

I laughed a little, in spite of my current state. Thinking of Wesley at that age was a strange concept.

“Yeah those were some good times. Sure am glad you managed to turn out alright,” the man said with a booming voice, patting Wesley’s shoulder heavily. Peter and I finally took a seat on the sectional, managing to get as close to the other as was humanly possible. Wesley sat a couple cushions over and the man sat next to him, gazing at us with a concerned expression for a few moments before speaking.

“So this must be Ben and Peter. My name is Charles. It’s good to meet you.”

I smiled a little, nodding my head as Peter did much the same.

“Good to meet you...” I whispered, finding myself incredibly nervous in his presence. I could tell that he was a nice man, but his size was daunting. Wesley chuckled to himself, causing Peter and I to stare.

“No reason to be scared, Charles and I have been friends since the orphanage.” As the words escaped his mouth it suddenly made sense to me. Peter, however, looked genuinely confused.

“You were in an orphanage?” he asked, looking at Wesley with one eyebrow arched.

“Sure was.” Wesley said, causing Charles to chip in.

"Yeah, although I was there long before him and managed to stay long after he left. We managed to keep in touch though."

I smiled, thinking momentarily of David. I knew our situation was far from similar, but it did seem possible for childhood friends to remain close into their adulthood. Although I didn't know the ins and outs of their relationship, Wesley and Charles seemed as close as two men could be.

"Well I don't know about you boys, but I sure am hungry!" Charles finally said, eliciting smiles from Peter and myself. I hadn't really paid attention to my stomach the whole ride there, my mind writhe with thoughts that meandered from the mundane to the complex. I often thought of my overactive mind as being a problem, but at least it let me ignore my hunger. I was grateful for that at least.

"Me too!" Peter and I said in unison, causing both Wesley and Charles to laugh. Within moments Charles had picked up his phone, ordered a pizza, and given them the address to where we were. Wesley and Charles caught up happily, as Peter's eyes fell on my knee once more.

"Does it hurt?" He asked. I merely shrugged, not really feeling it, but noticing how nasty looking it had become.

"It's okay I guess." I responded as quietly as I could. I didn't want to interrupt Wesley and Charles' conversation, but apparently it couldn't be avoided.

"Hey Chuck, do you mind if I take Ben to the bathroom real quick? I need to take care of this knee."

"Sure, sure," Charles responded quickly, his own eyes darting towards my knees. I blushed, looking at Wesley as he extended his hand towards me. I reached up and grabbed it, following him towards a set of stairs that led to the second story of the white craftsman. Once we reached the top of the stairs, Wesley slid open a door that revealed a small, but cozy bathroom that was painted a pale yellow.

"Have a seat." Wesley inclined his head towards the toilet as he began to search through the medicine cabinet for something to doctor my knee with. I relented, sitting silently and staring at Wesley as he rummaged. He extracted a bottle of alcohol and some cotton balls, kneeling beside me and smiling.

"Do you like Charles?" He asked, unscrewing the cap and placing the cotton ball atop the opening of the alcohol's container.

"He's nice," I winced nearly as soon as I said it. Wesley was dabbing my knee and the chemical caused a stinging sensation to dance across the wound.

"Yes, he is." Wesley remarked, finishing the ritual and blowing my knee a little to help with the stinging. I smiled, thinking what a wonderful father he would be.

After replacing the lid on the alcohol, putting the cotton balls in the trash, and extracting some band aides from the medicine cabinet, he looked at me calmly. He spoke as he affixed a couple band aides to keep the wound from being exposed to more germs.

“You know I’d do anything to protect you right?” He asked, looking at his job with a sense of accomplishment when it was finished. I nodded, I knew he would.

“Yeah,” I replied. I wanted to thank him for everything he had done, for his generosity, but the words escaped me.

“Good,” he said, smiling and rising to his full height. I followed him out of the bathroom and back down the stairs as he turned the light off. Once we reached the bottom I glanced at Peter who was giggling uncontrollably.

“Stop it!” He exclaimed, to which Charles merely laughed. I smiled, plopping down on the sofa next to my love once more.

“I knew Peter wouldn’t be able to last too long.” Wesley laughed, taking his place again next to his friend. I looked at the two in confusion, but it was Peter who spoke first.

“Charles is really funny. He kept telling me these awesome jokes!” He exclaimed. The look on his face more childish than it ever had been. I grinned, happy to see Peter happy, and being genuinely happy myself. Peter did his best to retell some of the jokes, but typically either got the punch line wrong, or forgot a crucial element. I giggled just the same, not just to make Peter feel better about his failed attempts, but because seeing him acting like a kid was delightful. We were safe, at least for the moment, and life could afford to be normal for a bit.

When at last the pizza arrived, everyone dug in and we found it all too easy to finish off a sizable portion. I kept making faces at Peter, only causing him to laugh again, and even managed to make him expel cheese from his nose. Wesley and Charles teased him naturally, but thankfully Peter took it all in good humor. When at last dinner was done, and the full feeling in the pit of our stomachs, combined with the warmth of the home around us caused us to become aware of our exhaustion, Wesley excused us and took us upstairs.

“Do you need anything before you go to sleep?” He asked the two of us, tucking us beneath a large quilt that warmed me to my very core.

“I’m good,” I said, turning to look at Peter who smiled.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Alright then, you two get some sleep. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow.”

We both grinned and nodded.

“Night!” We both said in unison, causing Wesley to smile as he closed the door behind us. The darkness in the room blanketed what parts of us weren’t already covered by the quilt, and Peter spooned me from behind.

“I love you,” he whispered sleepily into my ear, nuzzling his face into my hair.

“I love you too,” I replied, placing my hand on his arm as it surrounded me. As soon as I closed my eyes I knew that sleep wouldn’t be far away. As I drifted off, my mind clear for the first time in weeks, I began to dream of a life with Peter that was free of running, of fear. I dreamt of a life where endless possibilities existed, and no harm could befall us. Sadly, it was just a dream.

Chapter Thirty Eight

When I first heard the banging, my first thought was that I was merely dreaming. That evening had been so pleasant that any thoughts on my previous fears had escaped my mind. When I heard it again however, I immediately knew that I wasn’t dreaming. My eyes flew open at the same time as Peter’s, and as we stared at each other in fear, I had little time to react. Peter flew over me, blocking my view of the door as light began to flood the room. The sound of light footsteps invaded my senses as I grabbed onto Peter tightly, pulling him to my chest.

“What exactly do you think you’re doing?” The familiar voice called out. It wasn’t angry, more inquisitive, but since it belonged to whom it did, I knew it didn’t bode well for us.

“Are you going to speak or not?” The voice spoke once more. I felt Peter tremble in my embrace.

“Fine,” Frederick finally said, switching the light on, and bathing each corner of the room in light. I slid next to Peter so I could look at him, his body previously obscured by Peter’s slender frame. His hair was a mousey brown, tousled lazily atop his head. His eyes bore deeply into mine as he gazed at me, his fingers lightly playing with his bald chin.

“You made me break a promise Benjamin, I’m none too pleased.” He said, a slight smirk covering his lips. I swallowed deeply, fear welling up inside of me.

“Well this is a delightful little home isn’t it?” Frederick commented as he removed a vase from atop the chest of drawers in the far corner. He turned it around in his hands, examining the pattern that covered it, before allowing it to drop and shatter on the hard wood floor below.

“Whoops! Butter fingers,” he said, with a menacing expression covering his lips.

“Leave us alone!” Peter finally managed to exclaim, grabbing my arm tightly and clinging me to his side. I sat silent, unable to move, unable to breathe. Frederick merely laughed in response, removing a pair of leather gloves from his hands and pushing them into the pocket of his tan colored pea coat.

“I just, well, I have to know. Why exactly are you of all people protecting him? I thought all you cared about was yourself.” Frederick spoke lazily, his eyes dancing on the ceiling above. Peter trembled before he spoke.

“I love him,” he said simply, causing my heart to warm in spite of our situation.

“Remarkable... I didn’t think you had the capacity.” Frederick said simply. My once fearful expression began to turn to one of anger.

“Leave him alone!” I yelled, feeling my blood boiling inside of me.

“Feisty! I’ve not seen this side of you, since, well since that first night.” Frederick mused as he moved to the right a bit, the doorway becoming exposed. My confidence began to wane as Horace walked in, depositing Wesley’s body on the floor beneath him.

“Wesley!” I yelled out, attempting to leave the bed but being kept still by Peter’s grasp. Wesley contorted his head, looking up at us with a slight smile. His eye was black, lower lip busted. He had been beaten, and beaten hard.

“It’s going to be okay.” Wesley said weakly, his breath shallow and raspy.

“You fucking asshole!” Peter yelled at Horace, causing the muscular man to smirk. He made his advance towards Peter, spitting in his face.

When it happened, I was at a loss for words to explain it. My body moved without command, without my brain having the time to understand it. I flew off the bed, straight at Horace, and my arms flailed as I attempted to cause the older man some form of pain. The tears flew from my eyes, not because I was sad, but because I was frustrated, I was angry. What they had done to Wesley was inexcusable, what they had done to us was nigh unforgivable, but Horace spitting in Peter’s face, well, that was simply unacceptable.

I knew that each time my fists made contact with his rock solid legs and stomach that it was a futile attempt. The larger man laughed above me, his icy eyes watching me in the same way someone looks at an insect they’re about to kill. I felt his large, warm hand extend down, and grab the neck of my shirt, raising me up to eye level. I swung in the air, too far away to reach, choking to catch my breath as the shirt suffocated me.

“Intriguing...” Frederick mused, watching us with intense interest. I managed to gaze at him through my bloodshot eyes, the tears still flowing, and my cheeks flushed violently red.

“Let him go,” Frederick finally said as Horace began to raise his fist.

“But...” Horace began, looking very much like a child who just had his favorite toy taken away.

"Now," Frederick said simply, causing Horace to sigh and finally release me. I fell on the floor, gasping for breath as I grabbed the collar of my shirt, pulling it away from my neck. Peter fell immediately to my side, taking me in his arms.

"Are you okay?" He asked between tears as I clung tightly to his chest. My moment of insanity had passed, and clarity was beginning to return to me.

"So what do you feel your punishment should be?" Frederick finally asked, gazing at us mingled on the floor. Peter smirked, looked up at him, and wiped the errant tears from his face.

"Maybe you should just let us go." His tone was sarcastic, but definitive. I felt bad at once for him having said it, knowing that it was an impossible request. Our lives were as good as through.

"Cute, really cute, but we do have some matters to discuss." As Frederick finished speaking he inclined his head towards the bruised and battered Wesley. Horace walked over, grabbed him by the back of his shirt, and lifted him into the air as though he were a small dog.

"We'll be back," Frederick grinned and waved his fingers at us, following Horace into the hallway and closing the door behind them. I sighed, breathing deeply at the relief of his departure. I couldn't bear to think of what they were going to do to Wesley, but at least I had a moment alone with Peter.

"How did they find us?" I voiced my thoughts, still struggling to accept what was happening as real. Peter sighed, taking my hands into his own, and holding them firmly.

"I don't know," he replied, barely audible. We were both at a loss, unable to know what to do. My mind fluttered with the idea of escaping, but I knew it was of no use. If they found us here, then they could find us anywhere. Even if we wanted to try, it would mean leaving Wesley behind, and that simply wasn't acceptable. He had done so much for us, was as much a part of this family as we were.

"I'm going to miss you," I said finally, surprisingly finding no tears to follow the words. I had cried so much that I simply had no tears left. Peter looked at me, his face completely blank as his mind mulled over the words.

"Not yet, not yet Ben," he said, willing me to take them back. I sighed, looking at the floor and counting the hours we had spent free. It had been a good attempt, fraught with difficulty, but it was over now.

"Promise me you'll wait for me?" Peter asked, looking at me with a resolved expression. I felt confused, and queried as to his meaning.

"In heaven I mean, promise you'll wait for me? Even if I have to fight all the demons in hell, I'll come for you." His words were deep, penetrating. He saw himself as a flawed creature, his sins unforgivable. The fact he saw me as deserving of heaven was sweet, but I felt incorrect.

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that.” I laughed a little, certain that I wouldn’t be going to heaven. Certainly I hadn’t lived a horrible life, but the acts I had committed since my regression, well, I felt them pretty unforgivable.

“Eternity in hell would be like heaven as long as you’re there,” Peter breathed, looking into my eyes, the reflection of my own melting into his. I smiled, squeezing his hands.

“Yeah,” I said simply, finally accepting our end. I leaned over and grabbed him as our frames laid together on the cold, hardwood floor. Peter wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close.

“I love you,” he finally said as we lay there, shivering against the cold of the floor.

“I love you too,” I replied, certain it would be the last time I spoke those words.

Chapter Thirty Nine

When the door finally opened, revealing the form of Frederick once more, Peter and I finally broke our embrace. As we scooted back against the bed, eyes full of fear, Frederick began to laugh. His face was covered in an expression that was unreadable, but it wasn’t evil, it wasn’t angry. I grabbed Peter’s hand tightly, unsure of what to think or feel.

“Any other time you’d have just cause to be afraid, but sadly, this isn’t that time.” Frederick spoke simply, closing the door, and leaning against it. As he propped his foot up on the wooden frame behind him, Peter and I looked at each other in confusion.

“There has been a change of plans,” Frederick finally said, breaking the endless silence. Peter was first to speak, his lips trembling as he did.

“I don’t understand,” he said. It was the only statement that could be made, and certainly what I felt.

“It would seem as though Mr. Terrance wasn’t as careful as he felt he was. He was picked up by the Feds a few nights ago, and I was on my way to the orphanage to tell Ben as much the night you two decided to run away.”

I felt a sense of impossibility and relief wash over me. I wouldn’t have to be with that evil man, that possibility was removed forever from my life. I couldn’t believe how fortunate I was, and the timing, well, it almost seemed more impossible.

“However, Purity has very strict rules when it comes to what you did. Both of you are worth a lot of money, and when you misbehave, there are consequences.” Frederick spoke with a firm tone, causing our bodies to tense once more. What relief we had felt before was now completely missing.

“In this particular instance, the punishment would be death,” Frederick continued, my face draining of its color. I knew that it was coming, I had felt it. As Peter sat next to me, solid, frozen in

place, I knew that it was only a matter of time. This would be it. Our attempt to escape was for nothing, we would have been fine, but we didn't know any better at the time. Hindsight is twenty-twenty as they say, but I still felt no regrets. Certainly life at the orphanage was fine, it was a great way to live, but at what point did I sacrifice my desire to be with Peter, and Peter alone, for temporal security? I didn't want anyone else to sleep with me, or to sleep with Peter for that matter. What I shared with Peter was deeper than that, and even if death was the only way of avoiding it, that was fine.

"Despite all of that..." Frederick began, walking across the room and staring out the window at the street lights below.

"I'm a sucker for romance. I can't deny what you two have, and while I felt it was impossible, apparently Peter does have a heart."

As the words escaped his mouth, Peter and I glanced at each other once more, our former confusion returning. We had no idea what to think or feel at that moment.

"I'm not going to kill you," Frederick said finally, turning on his heels and clasping his hands together in delight. We stood, backed against the wall, and stared at him. It was too good to be true, surely he was lying.

"I don't understand," I said, speaking the words for us this time.

"I don't expect you would, and neither do I really. You are free, free to live your meaningless, finite lives as you so please, with a couple *minor* changes of course." He stressed on the word *minor*, causing me to swallow deeply.

"What do you mean?" Peter asked, once more asking the question that kept my mind.

"Wesley has agreed to be your caretaker, which is all well and good, but we can't simply allow you to remember your time with us and go on as you are, that would be an extreme liability." As he spoke I began to feel nervous once more. Could he take away our memories? Would he? I couldn't accept it. If I had no recollection of Peter, then what would my life mean? I couldn't imagine living without my love, without memories of who he was.

"You will have your memories removed, and you will become toddlers. You will age just as typical children are ought to do, and you will live a normal life," he spoke the words calmly, as though it were a simple and gracious task. As much as I knew it was gracious, it just wasn't enough for me. I blurted out the words before I could stop myself.

"You can't take away my memories! If we don't remember our time together, then how will we still love each other?" I asked in a rather childish tone, unable to contain myself. I wasn't willing to forget Peter. Frederick took a few paces back and forth, his feet echoing through the room before he finally spoke.

“If your love is as strong as I believe it to be, then it won’t matter,” he said with a sense of finality. I sighed, thinking about the love that I had for Peter. It certainly was strong, strong enough for me to be willing to die instead of parting from him. While I would miss the memories of the time we had shared, the sacrifices he had made, the journeys we had traveled, I felt at once that it was possible to still love him beyond those memories. Perhaps it was enough to just feel, and not know. Peter squeezed my hand gently, smiling at me.

“It’ll be okay,” he said with a calm tone to his voice. I smiled back, squeezing his hand in return, and nodded.

“Okay,” I said in response. Frederick walked over and began to extract two syringes from his coat.

“When you wake up, this will all have been a bad dream,” as he spoke he began to flick the tube of the first syringe, causing the air bubbles to recede. I immediately turned, embracing Peter tightly.

“I love you,” I said, smelling the sweet scent of his hair.

“I love you too,” he replied, squeezing me as tightly as he could. When at last we released and we turned to face Frederick, he grabbed my arm and turned it over, pushing my sleeve up past my shoulder.

“This time I will keep my promise, this will be the last time you ever see me,” he said as the needle penetrated my skin, causing me to wince.

“Thank you,” I said, as I felt a burning sensation travel up my arm, and my eyelids begin to droop. I looked at Peter whose arm was beginning to be turned over by Frederick when the world around me became dark. I tried to speak, to say something to Peter before I passed out, but it was too late. It was over.

Epilogue – Five years later

I finally cut the last piece of cake and handed it out, sat in a chair at the kitchen table, and sighed. It was Ben and Peter’s seventh birthday, a day I chose to celebrate on the anniversary of their being given to me, and the house was bustling with energy. The pair was quite popular in school, and had given out several invitations to friends for the day. While not everyone showed, a good number did. There was even a pair of redhead twins there, both of them twelve, who couldn’t help but admire the duo. I wondered how many second graders had twelve year old friends as I laughed to myself.

I watched as Ben ran up to one of the red headed boys, embracing him tightly.

“Thanks for coming David!” He exclaimed, a toothy grin crossing his angelic face. He had lost a tooth a week ago so he definitely looked his age.

“Anytime,” David said, hugging back. He always seemed to have this strange look on his face whenever Ben hugged him, like they had known each other for some time.

“I think it’s about time to open presents,” I said finally, looking over at Charles who was taking snapshots of the kids running around. He finally had a child with his longtime girlfriend. Her name was Amelia, and she was running around teasing the boys.

“Alright!” Ben and Peter exclaimed together, running over to a table in the far corner that was covered in brightly colored gifts, stacked well beyond their reach. Even though they had no memory of their former lives, they were inseparable. Most boys their age were fighting, and since I had raised them as brothers one would expect as much, but somehow it never happened. Even when they were only two or three they were very considerate of one another, always sharing their toys and their experiences.

“Can I open them now Dad?” Peter asked, turned, and grinned at me happily. My heart warmed whenever I heard their voices, especially when they called me Dad.

“Absolutely,” I said, watching intently as they began to tear in. With each open present they were happy, and properly thanked each person that gave it to them. They were incredibly well mannered, and grateful. They didn’t have a rough life, but I didn’t dote on them as much as I wanted to. I wanted to make sure they weren’t spoiled, and so far I appeared to be succeeding.

When at last all the presents were open, the people thanked, and the moment of excitement allowed to flow into another, the kids gathered outside to play. I had assembled a large collection of games, but it was the pile of leaves in the corner that received the most attention. I laughed, grateful that they were still young enough to enjoy simple pleasures, and smiled when Charles handed me a cup of coffee.

“It’s pretty great huh? Being a Dad,” he said, watching Amelia as she ran around Ben and Peter, pointing and laughing happily. I nodded, taking a sip of the coffee and smiling genuinely.

“The best,” I said, as truthfully as I could. The pair had changed my life forever and certainly for the better.

“I’m glad I got to make it up here, Amelia sure did miss hanging out with those boys,” Charles stated, the pair of us still glued to the festivities.

“They really like her, I think they consider her a little sister,” I replied. Taking another sip of my coffee and placing it down on the empty table that once contained the great pile of gifts.

“Well no sense in waiting inside all day, let’s go have some fun!” Charles exclaimed, clapping his hands together and doing a little jig as he escaped into the backyard. I laughed, grabbed my coat, and shrugged it on over my shoulders.

“On my way,” I said, following him outside. Ben and Peter at the sight of me immediately ran over, wrapping their tiny arms around my legs and hugging me tightly.

“We love you Dad!” They said in unison, their faces equally as pleased to see me.

“I love you too my boys,” I said simply, happy to see them enjoying themselves.

“Now get out there and have some fun!” I shooed them away playfully, watching them giggle and run off as I did. I walked over to David who was watching them from against the fence, and laughed a little as he looked up at me nervously.

“You alright?” I asked, noticing that he wasn’t taking part in the leaf attack.

“Yeah, just watching them,” he said simply, his cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

“Aren’t you going to play?” I asked, wanting to get him involved somehow.

“Playing in leaves is for babies.” He said with a disgruntled tone, echoing the voice that would travel from him through his teenage years. As he shoved his hands in his pockets, I laughed.

“I’ll tell you what, you can run and have fun today, and I promise I won’t tell anyone. Deal?” I extended my hand, causing David to turn and examine my face for a brief moment. He finally extended his, wrapping his fingers around mine, and shook firmly. His once curious gaze turned into one of excitement as he ran towards the leaves with wild abandon.

“Hey Ben, watch this!” He cried as he jumped into the leaves, causing the younger kids to laugh and pile on top of him.

Charles walked over with a football in hand, slamming it into the other a few times.

“Care to throw the old pig skin around a bit?” He asked, a happy expression still lighting his face. I nodded. It had been several years since we had done this. I backed away a bit, and he threw the ball at me. I easily caught it, sending it barreling back with a perfect spiral.

“Good one!” He shouted before spiraling it back towards me. We played for quite some time before parents started to arrive and the party broke up. When at last all that was left was Charles, Amelia, Ben, Peter, and me, I set forth on the task of cleaning up.

“Let me help.” Charles said, joining me in the kitchen, and rinsing the dishes as I handed them to him. I nodded in gratitude, happy for the help. We talked about how successful the party had been, what an exciting day it was, how we really had to get together more often. When at last we ran out of things to talk about, the dishes were done, and we walked back into the living room to find the kids.

Amelia was out like a light, sleeping silently on the loveseat with her pig tails covering her face. Ben and Peter were on the floor, tangled together, fast asleep beneath her. Charles and I laughed, knowing full well what a busy day they had.

“I’ll take Amelia to the guest room,” Charles said, picking up his daughter and throwing her over his shoulder. As he disappeared out of sight, I bent over, removing a couple toy cars from Ben and

Peter's hands, and managed to shoulder both of them. I knew from their weight that it wouldn't be much longer before I couldn't do this anymore.

When at last I managed to slip them into their beds, pull the covers up to their necks, and kiss each of their foreheads, I stood there for a moment in thought. It was hard to believe that it had only been five years; I found it impossible to remember my life before the boys. I sighed, happily, and walked towards the door, flicking off the light.

"I love you," I said quietly so as not to wake them. Ben rolled over, his arm falling onto Peter as the two breathed deeply in their slumber. I walked out into the hallway, cracked the door, and made sure the hall light remained on so that they weren't in complete darkness. They would sleep for now, and in the morning we would begin another adventure. An adventure that I hoped would last forever.