

HALL BROTHERS ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS  
INDEPENDENCE DAY 2011

Three for One

By A.C. Hall

“Nelson, get your butt outta’ bed!” Jared bellowed.

When his son didn’t respond, Jared slammed his coffee cup down and stomped down the narrow hallway.

“I said get up boy!” he yelled.

Jared grew angrier by the step. His blood was boiling by the time he reached Nelson’s bedroom door. He turned the knob and shoved the door open.

“I’m gonna smack you upside your head you little...”

He stopped when he saw that the room was empty. He turned around slowly, angry thoughts swirling around in his mind.

“If that little brat took off on me,” he muttered.

Jared checked the bathroom, then the living room. He was just about ready to smash something when he heard a noise outside. Opening the front door, he saw Nelson pulling boxes of fireworks out of the garage and loading them into the back of the pick-up truck.

“What the hell are you doing?” Jared asked.

Nelson stopped and wiped the sweat from his forehead. The sixteen year old had always been the shortest kid in his class, but over the past few months had finally grown by a few inches. His messy clump of brown hair was hidden beneath a rundown Kansas City Chiefs ball cap. The hat was a hand me down from his big brother, as was the plain black t-shirt and the tattered jeans.

“Getting everything ready for our day,” he answered.

Jared could only stare. He’d been forcing Nelson to help him run their fireworks stand for five years now, and every single summer morning it was a battle to wake him up and get him to help. But now here he was, up at the crack of dawn and hard at work.

“Well, be careful with the merchandise,” Jared said.

He watched for another moment, wondering why Nelson was being so helpful, then went back inside and finished getting ready. By the time he was fully dressed Nelson had the truck fully packed. The two of them rode in silence to the edge of town where their small fireworks stand was located.

There wasn't much to see or do in St John, Kansas, and the drive to the stand was uneventful. Jared had dragged his family there from Arizona for a new job. The job had lasted only two weeks before Jared got fired. His wife died suddenly a month later. In the five years since, Nelson was the only one around to deal with the broken man who had once been his dad. His big brother Timothy had disappeared after their mom's funeral, and Nelson hated his brother for not including him in the escape.

Nelson grinned as they approached the fireworks stand. It was positioned beside the only popular place in town, Freddy's Fry Shack, a drive in burger joint. The fireworks stand was in a field right next to it. Normally the sight of it brought up nothing but bad memories of bad summers spent working long days for his dad, but this year was going to be different.

They stopped the truck in front of the stand and Nelson hopped out. He started taking the fireworks from the truck and stocking them inside as they prepared the store for the first day of business. They used to sell fireworks all summer long, but new city ordinances said they could only open for the week leading up to the fourth of July and the week leading up to New Year's Day. This meant Jared was even more of a demanding boss than usual as he tried to scoop up as much money as possible during their short window of time.

Once all of the fireworks were situated on the shelves, Nelson busied himself by cleaning the inside of the dusty stand. He strained his ears, had been straining them all morning, and he stopped suddenly when he finally heard the noise. An obnoxiously loud truck, driving across the field.

Jared heard it too, and soon he and his son were standing out in front of their stand, staring across the field. They watched as the immaculately kept white truck pulled up to a fireworks stand that looked strikingly similar to their own. Jared cursed under his breath as the drivers door opened and a man stepped out. His name was Andy Hartnett and even though they were a few hundred yards away, it

was still clear to Jared that the man was wearing expensive shoes, a name brand polo shirt, and department store bought slacks.

“Still a prick,” Jared said, spitting on the ground as he stared at his only competitor, the man he hated most in the world.

Nelson had picked up on none of these details, watching for the passenger in the white truck to get out. Finally the door opened and a slender figure stepped out. She walked around the front of the truck and stretched. Her name was Allison Hartnett and even though they were a few hundred yards away, it was still clear to Nelson that her wavy reddish brown hair was pulled back into a perfectly even ponytail, she had on dark purple sunglasses that brought out the endearing freckles on her cheeks, a light sleeveless blouse allowed her cream colored arms to soak up the sun and a pair of sensible yet fashionable jean shorts made up the rest of her outfit.

“Good, keep a close eye on him,” Jared said, mistaking the target of his son’s intense gaze. “I’m going to go inside and get the sign ready.”

Nelson didn’t answer. He kept watching her, hoping for a moment when their eyes would connect. She made her way to the back of the truck, grabbed a box, then disappeared inside her father’s fireworks stand. Nelson’s heart sank a little and he went back inside to do some more work.

“So? Did he put up the sign?” Jared asked.

Nelson looked up at him.

“What?”

Jared grabbed his arm hard.

“I told ya to watch close to see what sign he uses today!” he yelled.

After jerking his arm away Nelson shrugged.

“He hasn’t done it yet, dad, chill out.”

Jared waved a threatening finger at his son.

“Don’t start spouting your cool guy hip hop phrases to me,” he threatened. “I’ll knock you on your ass, ya hear?”

Nelson smartly avoided his dad for the next few hours, busying himself around the stand. Most of his time was spent staring across the field, enjoying the far too brief and infrequent sightings of Allison. Trash was piling up behind their stand but he left it there, waiting for an opening he prayed was going to come.

It happened a little after one in the afternoon. Allison set out from her father's stand with a handful of empty boxes. Nelson dropped what he was doing and raced around the stand. He gathered up trash bags and boxes and then jogged towards the dumpster behind Freddy's Fry Shack. Once he was sure he was going to arrive at the same time as Allison he slowed down and tried his best to act natural.

Allison was tossing the boxes over the side of the dumpster as Nelson approached.

"Hey Allison," he said.

She turned around and smiled.

"Nelson, hey!"

Allison held out her arms and stepped towards him. Nelson dropped all of the trash bags and boxes without a thought and moved into the hug. The two of them had always known each other, but it wasn't until the last school year that they had started talking. They shared the last two classes of the day in the final months of the semester, and spent most of their time talking about anything and everything.

But the hugging was new, and Nelson liked it very much.

Allison released the hug but followed it up by punching Nelson in the arm playfully.

"Ow," he laughed. "What was that for?"

"For not having a cell phone," she answered. "School's been out for weeks and I wanted to call you."

"You did?" he asked dumbly.

His question embarrassed her and she looked away. Nelson wasn't sure what to do, so he started tossing the trash into the dumpster.

"I thought you said you were going to be at Becky Clemster's birthday party last week," Nelson said.

"I didn't end up going," Allison answered. "Why, did you go?"

Nelson quickly shook his head, even though he in fact had gone. He'd never once spoken to Becky Clemster and didn't know any of her friends, and showing up at her party unannounced just so he could run into Allison had turned out to be a top five embarrassing moment for him.

"I thought I heard something about you being there," Allison said.

He thought he detected the slightest beginnings of a smile on her face as she said it.

“Nope,” he said. “I didn’t.”

“Then how did you know I didn’t go?”

She was really enjoying this.

“Uh,” he stammered, searching for a quick answer. “Didn’t you just tell me?”

“Did I?”

Nelson laughed. It was something he did when he got hopelessly nervous.

Allison laughed too, and he seized that moment as a chance to change the subject.

“Do you want to grab some lunch?” he asked, gesturing towards Freddy’s Fry Shack. “I’m buying.”

He’d said it before thinking it through, and quickly started trying to recall if there were seven dollars in his wallet or only six.

“I can’t, we’re only working a half day today,” she answered.

“Oh, that’s too bad.”

He tried to smile but couldn’t force much of an effort onto his face.

“How about tomorrow?” he offered.

“I won’t be around. I’m going swimming at Nancy’s aunt’s house.”

“Oh.”

This time his voice gave away his full disappointment. Allison offered him a sad smile.

“I better get back,” she said. “My dad’s being awful this year.”

Nelson nodded.

“I can definitely relate to that.”

Allison took a few steps, then looked back.

“We’ll talk soon, okay?”

He smiled weakly and nodded. Nelson stood there and watched her for a minute before finishing up with the trash and heading back to the fireworks stand. His dad was just finishing hanging the large banner on front of the stand. TWO FOR ONE, it read in large bold letters, advertising their famed buy one get one free deal on all fireworks. Jared stepped back and admired the banner. He turned around when he heard Nelson approaching, but his attention shifted when he saw Andy Hartnett closing up shop for the day in the distance.

Jared waited until Andy was facing him, then motioned towards his banner and yelled as loud as he could.

“Your move, Hartnett!”

Andy shook his head as he opened the door to his truck.

“Enjoy your one day of success Murdock, it’s the only profit you’ll see all week,” Hartnett yelled back at him.

Jared glared at the truck until it was down the road and out of sight.

The rest of the day went by in a tired haze for Nelson, as they had a rush of customers after lunch that didn’t slow down until well after dark. It was approaching midnight by the time they were back home and Nelson fell into bed and was asleep within seconds.

Nelson knew he was going to have a bad day twenty minutes after he woke up. As they parked beside their fireworks stand they could see that Andy Hartnett was already open for business, a massive banner reading THREE FOR ONE hanging from his stand. Nelson cringed as his dad went into a raging rant upon reading the banner, his fist slamming again and again into the dashboard of the truck. And from there, Jared’s mood just worsened.

They were doing dismal business through the morning. Nelson was practically running the place while his dad paced like a caged animal, staring across the field at the THREE FOR ONE banner and cussing under his breath. Several times he went to the back of the stand and reached for his own THREE FOR ONE banner, but then would cuss some more and leave it alone. They were operating with a razor thin profit margin already, and it’d be next to impossible to make any money selling at three for one. Running a summertime fireworks stand was just something the Hartnett’s did so they could have money for more extravagant vacations later in the year, and it seemed that Andy was willing to forego a profit if it meant getting the best of his rival.

“Hey, Ben Affleck.”

Nelson turned towards the voice. He had picked up the nickname a few years ago when a classmate had seen the movie Daredevil on HBO, in which Ben Affleck portrayed a character with the last name Murdock. Since Nelson’s last

name was also Murdock it somehow made sense to this classmate to start calling him Ben Affleck, and inexplicably the nickname had caught in.

“Nancy, hey,” Nelson said.

He walked over to her and leaned on the counter.

“Allison said you and her would be swimming at your aunt’s house today.”

Nancy frowned.

“Yeah well, apparently instead of doing that we’re eating lunch at Freddy’s Fry Shack,” she said with a pout. “And I’m supposed to come over here and see if you want to join us.”

Nelson looked up and squinted as he studied the nearby restaurant. He saw Allison standing outside of it. She waved at him and he smiled.

“Yeah, of course, that sounds great,” Nelson said.

Nancy sighed heavily and crossed her arms.

“Awesome,” she spat.

Nelson didn’t want to risk the wrath of his dad so instead of telling him he was going to have lunch he lied and said he was going to get some change from Freddy’s. Nancy and Allison were sitting in a booth when he got there and he tried to keep himself composed as he approached, even though his heart was pounding.

“Hey Allison,” he said as he stepped up to the table.

He looked down at them both. Nancy glared at him, so he slid in beside Allison.

“I wasn’t sure how long you could get away for, so I went ahead and ordered you a burger and tater tots,” Allison said.

“Sounds good,” Nelson said. “How much do I owe you?”

He reached for his wallet but she grabbed his arm gently.

“My treat,” she said.

Their eyes met and they both smiled. Nelson nodded and she released his arm. A worker approached and set down their drinks. A water for Nancy, who was always watching her figure, a soda for Allison, and a large rootbeer float for Nelson. He smiled.

“These are my favorite,” he said.

“She knows,” Nancy said, rolling her eyes, “that’s why she ordered it for you.”

Allison shot her friend a dirty look, then returned her attention to Nelson.

“I thought you guys were going to be swimming all day,” Nelson said, trying to ignore the fact that she was sitting so close to him.

“Yeah, so did I,” Nancy said.

“We can swim all summer,” Allison answered.

Their food was brought to the table and Nelson started devouring his burger. He hadn't eaten all day and had missed dinner the night before, so he was starving.

“Boys are so gross,” Nancy said as she watched.

Nelson was too hungry to worry about her, but he could feel her staring at him.

“Did you really show up at Becky Clemster's birthday party?” Nancy asked.

It was clear she was trying to embarrass him. He stopped chewing and looked at her, then over at Allison.

“No,” he lied.

“People saw you there,” Nancy said. “There were like fifty people there who saw you.”

Nelson didn't know what was worse now, keeping up with the obvious lie or admitting the embarrassing truth.

“It could've been somebody else,” he said.

“You're such a freak,” Nancy said.

Something bumped the table from underneath and Nancy jumped.

“OW! Geez, Allison,” she complained, rubbing her leg where her friend had just kicked her.

Allison again turned towards Nelson.

“How's the firework business today?” she asked.

Her tone said she already knew the answer to the question. Nelson looked at her and their eyes met. Family was a touchy subject for both of them, and even though they had bonded over their shared troubles it was still something neither of them liked to discuss.

“You saw the banner?” Nelson asked.

Allison scoffed.

“Yeah, three for one.”

He just nodded.

“Yeah.”

They didn't say much after that. Nelson ate fast. As much as he liked being there with Allison he knew his dad was going to go ballistic on him for taking so long. When they were all done they left the restaurant. Nancy marched to her car but Allison hung back with Nelson.

"How about we do this again tomorrow?" Nelson asked. "I'll treat this time." Allison frowned, then looked down.

"I can't," she said. "I'll be with my mom."

"But won't she be up here helping your dad at the stand?" Nelson asked.

She stayed silent for a long moment, and when she finally looked up there were tears in her eyes. It broke Nelson's heart.

"She left him," she said.

Nelson didn't know what to say or do. He stepped closer and put his hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Allison had feared it was going to happen. She'd confided as much to Nelson just a month before.

"She moved out a few days after school let out," Allison said. "That's why I wasn't at Becky Clemster's party. I was staying with my mom that week."

"I looked for you there," Nelson finally admitted, "at Becky Clemster's party."

Allison smiled and punched him in the arm.

"I knew it," she said with a laugh.

Nelson pulled her into a hug.

"I'm sorry about your parents," he said. "Maybe this will help them figure it out."

She squeezed him and then pulled away and wiped her eyes.

"Thank you, Nelson."

He was about to say something else but stopped when he heard a terrifying noise in the distance.

"Nelson!"

It was his dad, yelling.

"Where the hell are you at?" Jared bellowed.

Nelson's cheeks flashed red.

"I guess I need to get back," he said. "When will I see you again?"

Allison frowned.

“I’m staying with my mom until July second.”

His heart sank.

“Oh,” was all he could say.

Nancy honked the horn of her brand new VW Beetle, the sound barely drowning out another yell from Nelson’s dad. Nelson and Allison looked at one another sadly. She gave him a weak wave and he returned it, then watched as she got in Nancy’s car and drove away.

The first thing Jared did the next morning was put up a new banner. It read FOUR FOR ONE, representing a colossal increase in the amount of business they did. Customers got four items for the price of one, but even with the huge influx of customers, Jared was still losing a lot of money.

This kicked off three days of hell for Nelson. He held onto the idea of seeing Allison again, but getting to that ultimate reward wasn’t going to be easy. Andy Hartnett was infuriated that Jared had put up the banner. He had been certain Jared wouldn’t be willing to blow his chance at making money just to one up him, but it had happened. And Jared was going chewing through the days in a frenzy, waking up pissed off and going to bed the same way.

On June 30th, a customer informed Jared that Andy Hartnett was bad mouthing him, which prompted a near fist fight between the two men. Jared stormed across the field, yelling insults at the top of his lungs, and Andy met him in the middle. It took Nelson and three other men to break the two of them up.

On July 1<sup>st</sup>, someone slashed the tires on Andy’s prized pick-up truck. He insisted it had been Jared, and the cops came over and gave him a pretty rough time over it. When they finally left Jared and Andy again met in the middle of the field, where they promptly got into a scuffle. They rolled around in the dirt like animals, both raging at the other while doing minimal damage. It was all broken up by the time the cops made their way back out, and with neither man admitting to any wrongdoing the officers finally just went home out of frustration.

Nelson hadn’t paid much attention to that particular incident. His mind was already on the next day, the glorious day of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, the day Allison would be back. He woke up with a smile and bounded out to the truck. Even the waves of

anger emanating off of his dad couldn't bring him down as they drove to the stand, and when they arrived Nelson leapt out and stared across the field. Andy Hartnett was already there, but there was no sign of Allison.

Nelson figured she just wasn't back yet, but as the hours passed by he still never saw her. Finally, as the sun started to set he could take no more. He left the fireworks stand and set off across the field. This close to Independence Day there were plenty of customers around, and Nelson found it easy to move through the crowd unnoticed. If Andy Hartnett saw him coming, or worse yet if his own father saw him going towards their competitor's stand, there would be hell to pay.

There were fewer people as he neared Hartnett's stand. Most customers were making their way across the field to take advantage of the FOUR FOR ONE sale. Nelson could see Andy Hartnett now, talking with a customer. The man kept glancing across the field at the throng of people waiting to buy from his competitor, a scowl on his face.

Nelson watched for a few minutes, but saw no sign of Allison. Sometimes when she got tired of helping out she'd sit behind the stand for a while and take a break. He knew it was risky, but Nelson decided to see if she was back there. He waited until Andy turned around, then he sprinted forward. A few random people gave him strange looks as he ran around the side of the stand.

Even though he knew it was foolish, he got his hopes up as he stepped behind the stand. But there was no one there. He stood and stared at nothing in particular, feeling overwhelmingly sad. The only reason he'd been able to endure the past few days was because he knew Allison would be back soon.

“YOU!”

Nelson jerked his head around to see Andy Hartnett approaching him from behind. He immediately took off running. After two steps Andy caught up. He gripped the back of Nelson's shirt and ripped him down, sending both of them tumbling to the dirt. Nelson tried to pull away, but Andy pressed down on him, pinning him to the ground.

“You trying to spy on me for your daddy?” Andy yelled.

“No!” Nelson yelled, straining to break free. “Get off of me!”

“Did he send you over here to steal some of my products? Is that it?”

“No! Please, just let me go!”

Andy flipped him over, then planted his knee on Nelson's chest. His face was contorted with rage, all of his frustration from the past few days bleeding through.

“Tell me why he sent you over here!” Andy yelled.

“He didn't send me!”

Andy slapped Nelson hard across the face.

“Don't lie to me!” Andy shouted.

Andy raised his hand again.

“Allison!” Nelson yelled. “I was looking for Allison!”

The anger and rage disappeared from Andy's face. His expression was totally blank, yet somehow even more frightening than it had been just a moment before.

“My daughter?” he asked quietly.

“We're friends from school,” Nelson said quickly. “She told me she was going to be back today.”

Andy stared down at the teenager, still showing no emotion.

“My daughter,” he said again.

The anger slowly started returning.

“MY DAUGHTER?” Andy roared.

He stood, pulling Nelson off the ground by his shirt. He dragged him back around the stand and set off across the field. Nelson twisted and turned, trying to break free, but Andy had a death grip on his shirt and wasn't about to release it. People moved aside, watching the scene with a mix of concern and curiosity. Andy dragged the teenager all the way across the field. Finally, Jared looked out and saw what was happening.

“Unhand my son!” Jared yelled.

Jared came charging out of his fireworks stand. Andy stopped just a few feet away. He threw Nelson down to the ground hard. Jared was ready to fight but Andy held up his hands.

“I caught him snooping around,” Andy said.

“That doesn't give you the right to put hands on him!” Jared shouted as he continued to charge.

“He was looking for my daughter!” Andy shouted.

Jared froze. He looked down at his son.

“Is this true, boy?” he asked.

Nelson wasn't sure what to say. He got up and brushed himself off, careful to keep one eye on each of the angry men, unsure which he should be more afraid of.

“Tell me you aren't sneaking around with that no good daughter of his!” Jared bellowed.

“Hey,” Andy said, “don't talk about my daughter that way.”

“Shut up Hartnett, this is between us.”

“He's right dad,” Nelson said. “You have no right to talk bad about Allison.”

Jared whipped his head around and fixed an angry stare on his son.

“I can say whatever I want about her, because you're never going to see her again.”

“That's not your decision!” Nelson yelled.

“You're just a kid! It is my decision! Now get back in the stand and do some work!”

Nelson balled his fists and stood his ground for a moment. His dad continued to stare at him, almost daring him to make a move. Finally, Nelson stomped away, feeling angrier than ever before.

The two of them didn't speak another word to each other for the rest of the night.

For the briefest of moments, Nelson felt complete and total happiness the next morning. The first thing he saw when they pulled up to open the fireworks stand was Allison. She was getting out of her dad's truck. Their eyes met from across the field. Nelson smiled and waved. She waved back, but stopped when Andy came around the truck. He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her towards the fireworks stand.

Since it was July 3<sup>rd</sup> they were busier than ever, but Nelson kept watching across the field. Andy was keeping Allison out of sight for most of the day, but every now and again Nelson would get a glimpse of her. One time his dad caught him looking and slapped him hard in the side of the head. Nelson glared at him but didn't say anything. He knew it would just cause trouble and that his dad wouldn't understand.

A few hours after lunch time Nelson was helping a grandmother who was buying fireworks for her many rambunctious grandchildren.

“Hey Affleck,” a voice called out.

He looked over and saw Nancy. Nelson held up a finger, letting her know he'd be right over. He quickly wrapped up the sale to the grandmother, then went to talk to Nancy.

“Is Allison okay?” he asked.

Nancy gave him a weak smile and nodded. She pulled a folded piece of paper out of her pocket and handed it to Nelson.

“She's okay. She wanted me to give this to you.”

Nelson shoved the note in his pocket before his dad saw it.

“Thanks,” he said. “What happened yesterday? She wasn't back.”

Nancy sighed.

“Her parents are being horrible,” she answered. “Her mom kept her an extra day and threatened her dad, saying that she was going to go for full custody or something.”

“That's awful,” Nelson said.

“Anyways, see ya,” Nancy said, abruptly ending their conversation.

Nelson wasn't sure why she had done it until he saw his dad approaching. He quickly got back to working, but his mind was always on the note in his pocket. He waited for an hour and then took the garbage to the dumpster. Once there he pulled the note out and read it.

Nelson,

I heard what happened to you yesterday. I'm so sorry. Maybe it would be best if you just stay away for the rest of the summer, I don't want you to get into any more trouble because of me. Hopefully things will settle down by the time school starts again.

Allison

He slowly folded the note up and put it back into his pocket. He stood there for a long time, feeling completely drained. Every big idea he'd been having about this summer and what it could mean for him and Allison was slipping away. And

if that was gone, all he had left was two long summer months with his dad. Nelson wasn't sure if he could handle that.

They were so busy for the rest of the day that Nelson had little time to think about the situation. From time to time he'd see Allison across the field, but now it just made him sad. There was a steady stream of customers all night and it was after 2 a.m. before Nelson and his father headed home.

Things were always bad at the stand on the Fourth of July, but when they pulled up and saw the massive FIVE FOR ONE banner hanging from Andy Hartnett's stand, Nelson felt like crying. His father was already in a bad mood, and the sign enraged him further. Since he couldn't take his anger out on the customers, all of it was focused on Nelson. Jared seized every opportunity he could to belittle his son. An insult here, a push there, his appetite for it was insatiable.

It was already lunchtime when Nelson got his first look at Allison. With the five for one sale going, her father's stand was being mobbed by last minute shoppers. She saw him and started to wave, but her dad noticed. He put his finger in her face and looked to be yelling at her.

The more business Andy's stand did over the course of the day, the angrier Jared became. He flew off the handle at the smallest of infractions. Nelson dropped a penny when giving a person their change, winning him a ten minute long chewing out by his father. Around dinner time it became too much and Nelson slipped out of the stand to take a break.

He went around behind the stand and sat against it. He pulled Allison's note from his pocket and read it. He smiled, thankful for the note. At least it was some sort of communication from her, even if the message it delivered was sad.

“What is that?”

Nelson looked up to see his dad standing there, arms crossed. He quickly started folding the note up.

“Nothing dad, I was just taking a quick break back here,” he said.

Jared came at him. Nelson held up his arms to defend himself, but his dad stopped and snatched the note away instead of hitting him.

“No, dad! That's private!”

Jared read it, then crumpled it up into a ball and threw it on the ground.

“There's a school full of girls where you go, and next year you will pick one of them to go after. Any of them but Hartnett's daughter!”

“No I won't,” Nelson said.

Jared grabbed him and slammed him up against the back of the stand.

“That family has caused hell for us!” Jared raged. “The fireworks stand is all we got, and every year now the Hartnett's roll up in their perfect vehicle, with their perfect family, and they steal away all of our business and rub it in our faces!”

It was the most his dad had said to him in years. As Nelson looked into his father's eyes he didn't just see anger there, he saw sadness.

“They're not perfect dad,” Nelson said.

“Did you not see the truck he's driving this year? It's brand new!” Jared said.

“They've got money, but that doesn't mean they're perfect,” Nelson argued.

“His wife just left him, and now she's using Allison to make the divorce messy.”

Jared's expression softened for a moment.

“Where'd you hear that?” he asked.

“Allison told me.”

An angry sneer spread across Jared's face.

“That girl's just playing you, son, don't you get it? That's what teenage girls do! They get together with their friends and they laugh about all the ways they can manipulate stupid pathetic boys like you.”

“Allison's not like that, dad! She's my friend, I care about her.”

“We're done talking about it,” Jared said. “Get back inside and get to work.”

Nelson stared at his dad for a long moment before responding. He'd grown so used to hating his father, but now that emotion was different. Now he just felt sorry for him.

“No dad, I'm done working for the day.”

Jared chuckled darkly.

“Are you, big man?” he asked.

“I've got somewhere to go,” Nelson answered.

He turned away and started walking towards his father's truck.

“You think I'm going to let you take my truck?” Jared asked.

“I'm not asking permission!”

Jared stalked after his son, his rage close to boiling over.

“It takes keys to operate it, dumbass!” Jared yelled.

Nelson whirled around and held up his father's keys.

“I took them from under the counter three hours ago.”

He knew that would be the final straw, so he picked up his pace as he neared the truck. Jared was jogging after him and there was no telling what he'd do if he caught up.

“You don't have a license, Nelson, and we sure as hell don't have money to pay that ticket if you get pulled over.”

Nelson stopped. Tears welled up in his eyes as he turned towards his dad.

“I've had my driver's license for three months dad. My math teacher, Mr. Rabach, took me to the DMV and let me borrow his car to take the test.”

Jared paused, a confused look on his face.

“Do you know how embarrassing it is when your teacher knows that your dad's such a deadbeat he won't even take you to get your license?” Nelson asked. “I begged you for weeks dad, and you just ignored me. Do you even remember me asking?”

After realizing that his father wasn't going to respond, Nelson turned back around and got into the truck. He started it and then took off across the field. He drove straight for Andy Hartnett's stand, honking anytime someone got in his way. Even though there were tons of people gathered around the stand, Nelson kept driving right for it. The sun was just beginning to set and he flashed his lights and honked his horn to keep people cleared out of the way. He slammed on the brakes and skidded to a stop right in front of the stand.

“Allison!” he yelled as he rolled down the window.

She was standing there by her dad, staring at him in shock.

“Allison, do you want to go somewhere with me?” he asked.

Her mouth was wide, not believing what she was seeing. Slowly she nodded. Nelson smiled.

“Good,” he said.

“Like hell, good, my daughter won't be going anywhere with you, young man!” Andy yelled.

“Sir, you have my word that I'll drive safe and I'll have her back here in just a few hours,” Nelson said.

Andy laughed, not believing the nerve of this teenager. Before he could say anything, Allison stepped up onto the counter, then over to Nelson's truck. He grabbed her hand and helped her climb through the window.

“Allison!” Andy screamed. “Get back in here this minute!”

She climbed over Nelson, accidentally kneeing him hard in the stomach and honking the horn as she made her way over into the passenger's seat.

“Hi,” Nelson said.

She smiled at him and shook her head.

“Hi to you too.”

“You sure you want to do this?” Nelson asked.

She looked past him at her dad, who was still yelling. Allison nodded.

“Absolutely.”

“And you mark my words, young lady,” Andy continued, “if you don't...”

Nelson slammed on the gas, the roar of the engine drowning out the rest of Andy's sentence. The truck bounced and bobbed as they sped across the field, and it wasn't until they were out onto the street that Nelson finally let out his breath.

“I can't believe you did that,” Allison said.

Nelson smiled.

“Me either,” he paused and looked over at her. “But I'm glad I did.”

Their eyes met and after a moment Allison reached over and took his hand.

“Me too,” she said.

They rode that way in silence for a few minutes. Nelson had never held hands with a girl before, and now that he was he struggled to believe that there was a better feeling in the world.

“Where are we?” Allison asked.

He stopped the truck.

“My house. I just need to grab something real quick.”

She followed him up to the door. Nelson paused before unlocking it.

“Our house isn't very nice,” he said.

“That's okay.”

“And it's not very clean, either,” he said.

Allison put her hand on his back.

“That's okay, too.”

He nodded and unlocked the door. She followed him to his bedroom. While she looked around at the different things he had on the walls and on his dresser, enjoying the look at his personal space, he set about uncovering a secret he'd never shown to anyone. He pulled the drawer out of the nightstand by his bed, then used a screwdriver to remove the board on the bottom of it.

“What is that?” Allison asked.

He pulled out the last screw and lifted the bottom of the drawer. In the small space there, money was hidden. Nelson collected it all and then looked up at Allison.

“Remember how I told you about my big brother?” he asked.

“Yeah, he left to go to college, right?”

Nelson shook his head.

“He left, but not for college. He just couldn't take things here with my dad and he disappeared, just took off.”

“Oh,” Allison said quietly.

“I've been stashing money ever since, hoping one day I'll have enough to do what he did, just get away from all of this.”

“Is that what you're doing right now?” she asked. “Running away?”

He pushed the money into his pocket, then smiled at her.

“I think I have a better idea than that,” he said.

They left the house, but Nelson wouldn't tell her where they were going. Allison opened up about the experience with her mom, telling him about her plans for divorce. He listened quietly, letting her share as much as she needed. Soon the subject was behind them. They both had plenty of experience with the failings of their respective families, and tired of the topic fast. By the time they pulled up to their destination they were laughing and again holding hands.

“This place is amazing!” Allison said as they got out of the truck.

They were standing in the parking lot of THE FIREWORKS MEGASTORE. It was fifty times the size of a regular fireworks stand.

“No wonder our dad's aren't making much money these days,” she said.

“This place opened up a few years ago,” Nelson said. “Just a ten minute drive and you have access to every type of firework known to man.”

“Why are we here?” Allison asked.

Nelson took her hand and walked towards the entrance.

“Because I want this fourth of July to be special,” he said.

Two hours later they returned to the field beside Freddy's Fry Shack. Just like it was every Independence Day, the area was filled with people. Music blared from Freddy's, while those people unaware of the megastore down the interstate lined up to buy fireworks from the two small stands.

Nelson pulled the truck into the middle of the field, careful to avoid all of the people. He and Allison got out and climbed into the back. Taking up almost the entire truck bed was a massive firework, the top of the line sort that professionals fired off. Nelson had spent almost all of his money buying it.

They both grew up around fireworks, and setting them up to launch was second nature. Neither had ever seen such a complicated set up as this one, but after just five minutes they had it ready to go.

“You do the honors,” Allison said, offering the lighter to Nelson.

He smiled and took it, then positioned it at the end of the fuse.

“Ready?” he asked.

Allison smiled wide and nodded.

Nelson lit the fuse and the two of them jumped out of the back of the truck. Once they were a few feet away they turned and waited. She hooked her arm through his and pulled him close. After what felt like minutes, a deafening boom sounded out. The truck shook and every eye turned and watched as the firework sailed high into the air. The anticipation was almost too much to bear, but finally it exploded.

A massive green ball of light expanded, looking like a small moon. Then bright yellow rockets took off in every direction from its center, streaking across the sky. Finally, each of them burst into a shower of brilliant blue sparks that floated slowly down towards the earth. They illuminated the entire field, bathing it in a surreal glow.

Everyone stared up at it, shocked and amazed. Allison pulled on Nelson's arm and he turned to look at her. He had never seen anything more beautiful. She leaned forward and he kissed her.

A moment later she pulled back and smiled.

“Was it worth it?” she asked.

He nodded and smiled back at her.

“Absolutely.”

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