

I want a key to your house, I wanna pick up your clothes, I wanna clean up your mess.

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/25064308) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/25064308>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	The Politician (TV 2019)
Relationship:	River Barkley/Payton Hobart
Characters:	River Barkley , Payton Hobart , River's Parents , more to be added , Astrid Sloan
Additional Tags:	maid au , mlm , mental health , Angst , Fluff , small angst nothing too bad , Maid! Payton , Orphan! Payton , do i headcanon payton and evan hansen being brothers? yes. , More tags to be added , Slow Burn , Slow Burn Ish
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-07-04 Completed: 2020-08-30 Words: 10,355 Chapters: 6/6

I want a key to your house, I wanna pick up your clothes, I wanna clean up your mess.

by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

The Barkleys hires a maid. River is fascinated by him.

Notes

Welcome to the fic! Just for some context, in this AU Payton was not adopted by the Hobarts, but remained as an orphan for the majority of his life. He was unable to go to high school, hence why he is working.

If anyone expected Payton to be wearing a maid dress, I apologize for the disappointment.

I'm open to suggestions as where this fic will lead and other AU ideas to write about in the future!

HUGE thanks to reading-ladyy on Tumblr for beta-ing this fic!

One

River's mother hired maids to clean their house every Monday and Thursday. She usually hired the same three each time, unless one didn't meet her expectations, then a new one is hired the next day.

Cleanliness was the only thing that his mother was really strict about. He was required to shower at least every other day. She set up this rule when he was 13 because, at the time, River often forgot or couldn't find the energy to shower. Once he was diagnosed with depression and able to get therapy and meds, he got his shower schedule back on track. His mother made him get dressed every morning so he wasn't wearing pajamas all day. Once he adjusted to his meds, he was able to get enough energy to get ready without his mom nagging him to do so. No shoes were allowed on carpet, and other rules similar to that. Other than those rules, his mom was pretty cool. Always supportive and kind.

He tried to be friendly with the maids that came, but he tried not to get into conversations, as that may lead to a friendship with the maid. Which wouldn't be that bad, it's just that his mom has eventually fired every maid they've had.

There was one when he was little named Joan. She lived with the family, and River quickly became attached to her, as his mother was busy running the family business. She would bring him to the park, make him snacks, play with him, and taught him how to read. It was amazing, having a friend like that. After a few months, he began seeing Joan as another mother figure. He strived to be just as kind and patient as she was. He loved her like family.

But then the inevitable happened, and she was fired.

River wouldn't come out of his room for days, refusing to eat and drink. He did nothing but sleep and cry. His mother and father didn't know why. When he looked back on the event, he's positive that if his mom knew how important Joan was to him, she wouldn't have let her go. He never got close to a maid again, in fear of the same thing happening. River developed since then, and if that were to happen now, it would probably feel worse. He feels everything.

He really wished he didn't.

~•~

Tonight was one of the only nights that River's parents didn't order out. Usually by the time dinner rolls around, his mother is too tired to cook, and his father is not to be trusted in the kitchen. But by some miracle, his dad was able to cook something that didn't catch on fire. Which meant he wanted something from his mom.

The beginning of dinner went fine. The usual "how was your day" talk and general discussions. But River couldn't help but notice the tense vibe in the room. He knew his father was just waiting for the opportunity to pitch whatever idea he had. A few minutes passed, filled with mostly silence before he decided to break the tension.

“So... I’ve been thinking about this for a while, and I wanted to know your opinions on it.”

His mom immediately sighed in amusement and leaned back in her chair. “So that’s what this is about. Go on.”

River’s dad breathed out in relief. “ Okay, so I was considering the idea of hiring a live-in maid. Who could cook and clean up the little messes we make and stuff like that...” He was nervous, River could tell by his tics he picked up over the years. His father was a fairly anxious man.

His mother took a moment to think.

“I think there's more to your proposition than just having a maid, Steven.” She smirked.

He laughed nervously. “Well, there was this orphan boy looking for work and a home...”

“A boy? You better not be trying to get a 10-year-old to work for us.”

“No no! He’s River’s age. He dropped out of high school so he doesn’t have a home or work, and the orphanage he’s at seems really eager to let him go...”

“Dad,” River speaks up. “Did you happen to talk to this boy before?”

Steven smiled sheepishly and nodded. “I was out for a walk, and I came across him in the park. He looked so skinny, so I offered to get him lunch. He refused at first but eventually caved. We had a conversation, and he told me about his... situation. So off the top of my head, I suggested he could be a maid for us, and... I swear his eyes lit up. When I mentioned he could live here as well, I didn’t think a kid could be as happy as River was for his first Christmas, but.”

A moment of silence passed, River’s mother considering the proposal.

“You know I can’t say no, right?” She smiled playfully, then shook her head. “Okay, we’ll hire him. River and I will get his room ready and you will tell him the news.”

“What’s his name?” River asked.

“Oh right! His name is Payton. He may seem aloof or cold, but he’s okay. Don’t judge a book by its cover.”

~•~

Two days later, Payton was moving in. River hasn’t met him in person yet, but based on what his parents had told him, Payton seemed a little... weird, if River’s going to be honest. He seemed very reserved and unpleasant. But he could make it work. He’s known for befriending stubborn people.

The boy had moved in when he was at school. He could tell by the organized shoe closet and the cleaned-up vase his father had bumped and broken while in a rush this morning. He could

smell food cooking, which was normal as he gets home from lacrosse practice at 5. River followed his usual routine of setting down his bags in his room, then taking a quick shower.

He was nervous to meet Payton. Probably because he's going to have a boy his age cleaning up after him, which is very weird if you think about it. Why wasn't he in school? Why does he need work anyway? Shouldn't the orphanage he's at provide for him?

His thoughts are interrupted by his mother calling him down for dinner. He headed for the dining room, where his parents were.

"Hello, River. How was school?" His father asked.

The family carried out small talk until Payton emerged from the kitchen with their food. He had made some sort of stew that looked really good. River smiled as he placed the bowl in front of him.

"Thank you-" River looked up at him.

Payton is fucking adorable.

The first thing River noticed is the boy's clothes. His uniform is a simple black vest over a button up shirt with dress pants and shoes. It worked well for him. Then he saw his face. He had a serious yet blank expression, his round glasses highlighting the professional aura he has. But as he looked at Payton a little bit more, he found some concerning qualities the boy had. He seemed pretty small for being 17, and he looked underweight. What orphanage was this boy being treated this way in?

"Payton, would you like to join us for dinner?" His mother offered.

Payton shook his head. "No thank you. I wouldn't want to intrude, and I'm not good at conversation. Enjoy your meal." And with that, he left.. River wished he stayed for dinner.

"He's very polite but I see what you mean about him being cold. He seems nice, Steven." His mom said.

"Ah, good. I was afraid that you wouldn't like him too much. What about you, River? What do you think of him?"

River smiled. "I think he's cute. It'll be nice having him around."

"I don't know if cute is the word I would use. I guess I can kind of see it." His mom commented.

The rest of the dinner went by normally. The stew Payton made was amazing. The boy had returned a few times to refill drinks or bring seconds if asked. Once the family finished eating, his parents went up to their room while River decided to help Payton clean up a bit. The two cleaned in silence for a while.

"How was the food?" Payton asked, breaking the quiet.

“Really good. Have you made it before?”

Payton shook his head. “No. This was my first time cooking something like this.”

River laughed. “Really? I wouldn't have guessed. I'm looking forward to your other meals.”

The silenced resumed for a few minutes.

“Did you eat?” River asked.

“I'm going to have the leftovers of what you three didn't eat.” Payton replied. River looked over to the stove where the stew was being kept warm. There was about half a bowl left in there.

“Are you sure that's enough for you? It's a really small portion.”

“Yes. Your mother provided lunch for me, so this will be more than enough.” Payton said. The statement stuck with River. He didn't know why.

“I'll handle the rest. You can go to bed, River.” Payton told him. River nodded and headed to his room. He wanted to work on homework but his new maid kept him thinking. Something about him was... entralling. Interesting. River wanted to get to know him more.

Two

Chapter Summary

Whoop! Next chapter!

Once again, bigggggg thanks to reading-ladyy on Tumblr for beta-ing this fic!

Payton had been working for the Barkley's for a few months at this point. He was somehow able to always meet River's mother's expectations. In fact, with Payton doing his given chores and the extra ones he did out of boredom, other maids only came once a week. Whenever River encountered Payton, the boy was either cleaning something or cooking. He seemed to like cooking. He started doing grocery runs for the family as well, just as soon as he got his driver's license. He often got the family little treats as well. A package of his mother's favorite chocolate, a pack of soda that his dad really liked, and he gave River little candies that could be either chocolate, hard candy, or gummy based on whatever River was craving that day. Payton was always able to tell, even without a word spoken to him.

This small gesture Payton did subconsciously only made River's feelings for him bloom. Not to mention everything else he did too. River had taken to doing homework on his kitchen counter, because Payton would be cooking dinner. He could watch him work, which was very intriguing to watch. He liked seeing how smoothly Payton worked, keeping everything clean and tidy even when preparing the messiest dishes. He also does a little thing where he furrows his brow in concentration and his bottom lip sticks out in a small pout that makes River's stomach fill with butterflies.

Astrid had seemed to catch onto River's crush. She kept on pestering him about it at school. He didn't want to tell her about Payton. Not yet, at least. Nearly everything about the situation was weird. Payton's age, his occupation, where he lived, etcetera. There's probably something illegal about it, but River didn't want to find out.

Payton always did yardwork on the weekends, but always left the complicated work to professionals that River's mother hired. He mowed the lawn, watered plants, weeded the flower beds, raked up leaves, ect, ect. He even got a little outdoor work outfit that River adored. It was a simple red or blue t-shirt with denim overalls and some work boots. It was a Saturday, and River had just gotten home from a lacrosse game. He was finally able to relax. He liked his teammates, but they could be very emotionally exhausting to be around. He liked standing on his balcony with a nice drink and watching whatever was happening outside. It usually was just Payton doing work, but at least he had an excuse for watching him.

The boy was pulling weeds from the flowerbeds as the harsh sunlight beamed down on him, making his hair look more blonde than brown. River's mom started making him put on

sunscreen before going outside. Everyone in the house has taken a liking to Payton, often encouraging him to join in on their normal activities. His father liked to take the boy to his yoga sessions every Monday and Wednesday. Payton liked to read some of River's school textbooks and sometimes River tutors him about whatever he's learned. At this point, River really couldn't imagine the house without him.

River peered down at Payton. It was one of the hottest days of the year, and Payton has been working for a few hours now. He was sweating and lightly panting, and River had to scold his teenage hormones to stop thinking about him that way. He was also getting pretty red, and River couldn't tell if he was getting sunburnt or if he was just flushed from hard work. Either way, River was going to do something about it. He headed downstairs to get a cold water bottle and some sunscreen. He also checked his phone to see the outside temperature, and found it to be 99°F, the highest this year so far. River went outside to where Payton was working.

He seemed to be wrapping up with the flower beds. River hoped that it would be the last thing he would be doing that day, as he looked exhausted.

"You've finished up here?" River said, making his presence known by the boy. Payton peers up at him, then gets to his feet.

"Not quite. I still have to water these flowers and mow the lawn. It won't take too long."

River hands him the water bottle and sunscreen. "Then at least take this. The last thing you need is to get a heat stroke or sunburn."

Payton furrows his eyebrows. "I've already put on sunblock."

"Yeah, hours ago. You need to apply it regularly or else it stops working. It seems like you're already burning a bit." He cupped Payton's jaw, gently running his thumb over his cheek. He let out a little 'ow' and pulled back a little bit.

"See? You got burnt."

Payton sighed and took the sunscreen and water. After a quick break to put on sunblock, he quickly resumed his work. River decided to stay outside and watch him for a while. He was still a little afraid that Payton would get a heat stroke. It wouldn't be the first time, as he often put his work before his own health. Payton would often skip meals unintentionally to prioritize cleaning. Seeing him like that made River want to take him into his arms and just hold him, have a moment together so Payton could just slow down and relax for once. River wished he had the courage to openly display affection towards him. He doesn't know why he can't. Almost everything Payton did made River want to hold or kiss him. It's funny how such a cold person could make River feel so warm.

~•~

"Just spill it already."

Astrid poked his cheek. River laughed and swatted her hand away.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you do! C’mon just tell me,” She whined.

River sighed. He wanted to tell her the truth, but the scenario was so odd, that he wasn’t sure if he should have told her. But, he didn’t like lying.

“I’ll tell you soon. I’m not ready yet.”

“Boo. You’re no fun. I know you’re fluid, you don’t need to tell me.”

“It’s not that. It’s a situational thing.”

“So it is a boy. Tell me if he’s cute, at least.”

River smiled. “He is.”

“Riveeeerrrr... just tell me! Is he on the lacrosse team? Or does he sit near you in class? What?”

“He doesn’t go here. He dropped out, actually.”

Astrid was taken aback. “So... a bad boy? With piercings and stuff?” River could tell that her interest was fading.

River could go with that to get Astrid to stop nagging him, but he would feel guilty for the rest of the week for lying to her. He decided to go with the truth.

“No. I don’t think he had a choice in it. He’s kind of the entitled rich kid type but without the entitled or rich part.”

“Huh. He seems interesting. I’d like to meet him soon.”

“You will. I promise.”

~•~

When River returned home, he couldn’t find Payton in any of his usual spots. He wasn’t in the kitchen or in the study. He wasn’t outside or cleaning anything, so River was a little worried. If he had gone out, he would have left a note, and it wasn’t one of the days where he went with his father to yoga. He tried to put it to the side, trying to convince himself that Payton was just in his room or cleaning somewhere unexpected.

He headed to his room to change out of his school clothes. He set down his bag, then noticed a figure in the corner of his eye. When he looked over, he saw Payton, asleep in a chair, one of River’s old textbooks in his hands. It was the most relaxed Payton looked since he started living there. River had to suppress an “aww” in case he would wake up.

And no matter how cute Payton looked curled up in that chair, there’s no way that position was comfortable. River quietly took the textbook from Payton’s lap, putting a piece of paper

at the page Payton was at, then placed it on his desk. Then, he gently picked up Payton. While he was getting his footing down, he felt Payton nuzzle into his shoulder. He looked over to the boy and saw him bury his nose in his sweater. River felt a soft blush fall onto his cheeks.

He brought Payton back to his room, a former spare room that came with its own bathroom. Payton didn't have much to bring with him, so the overall room had looked the same. River laid him down on the bed. He took off his shoes and vest before pulling a blanket over him. It was then when he noticed the bags under Payton's eyes. When he thought about it, Payton was always wide awake when River woke up and when he went asleep. He could've been awake for hours before River was up, doing housework. He really hoped Payton wasn't sacrificing sleep for work.

River couldn't help but give the boy a kiss on the forehead before he left him to sleep. When he went out of the room, he saw his father in the hallway. He gave him a knowing smile, before going downstairs.

Three

Chapter Summary

Someone sick

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December came around fast. It was weird how fast the year had gone by, especially since school days always seemed to take so long. Maybe it was because every time he was away from Payton, he longed to be back with him.

River's relationship with Payton had developed by an insane amount. They would talk for hours together, usually when Payton was working. Sometimes when Payton finished his chores early, they would find a place to sit and continued their conversation. With every day that passed, River found himself falling harder for him. And Payton didn't mind affection too much, so sometimes River would be able to hold his hand or sling his arm around the boy's waist. Some of his parent's friends thought that Payton was his boyfriend. He never denied it.

Anyway, it was Christmas break, and River was bored. He had already finished the homework his teachers gave him to do over the time off, and he didn't feel like reading or playing the video game he had gotten a few years back. He was never really into electronics and digital devices. He noticed that his room could use a little bit of organizing. There were some dirty clothes scattered in random places, his dresser and desk were filled with miscellaneous objects and items. Pushing himself off his bed, he went around his room picking up trash and dirty laundry. There was something oddly calming about cleaning up. He rarely did it because of Payton and the other maids, but he always got a little pang of guilt when he saw them cleaning up his mess.

River had lost track of time. It may have been five minutes or maybe an hour, but he had started dusting bookshelves and wiping down surfaces. He didn't even hear his door open.

"If you wanted your room clean, you could have just told me."

River smiles. "Hey, Payton. I was just bored, so I started tidying up a few things."

Payton gives him an odd look. Something in between stern and confused. "Oh. Well, I still could've helped."

"You were probably in the middle of something. I wouldn't want to interrupt you."

"I can always make time for you, River. Half of the chores I do are just to keep me busy."

He can't help to laugh at Payton's little confession. It was like him to go the extra three or four miles without being asked. He left the cloth he was holding on the table he was dusting and hugged Payton. He always took a second to return any affection given to him, but River didn't mind. He knew that Payton would always let him know if he's uncomfortable with any affection. Consent was a major factor in their relationship. 'Relationship'. That would explain their connection. They weren't dating, they weren't friends. They just had a relationship together. And River was okay with that, even if they never started a proper romantic relationship.

Payton had wrapped his arms around River's waist and pressed his lips against where River's collarbone would be. A few moments of intimacy like this happened often. Sometimes Payton would come to sit by River and lean into his side, and other times River hugs Payton from behind while he's cleaning or cooking. It wasn't an uncommon sight, as his parents and other people who frequent his home had gotten used to the boy's affection towards each other. A few minutes later, Payton pulled away urgently. He took a step back, reaching around for a chair before finding River's bed and sat down.

"Payton?"

"I'm... I just had a dizzy spell. Sorry," Payton rested a hand against his temple. River quickly joined him, replacing Payton's hand with his own.

"You feel a little warm. Are you okay?" Payton nodded. "Yes, I've just been getting a few dizzy spells lately. I'm having some trouble sleeping."

River's hand slid down to cup the boy's cheek and turned Payton's head toward him. His eyes looked a little unfocused and he seemed a little flushed.

"Well, at least take the rest of the day off, and go to bed early tonight. Besides, the other maids are coming in tomorrow."

Payton shook his head. "I still need to make dinner. I was going to try a new recipe."

"You can make it tomorrow. We can just get takeout and give you a break."

He looked unsure. "Are you positive? I can do it."

River just shook his head and pressed a kiss on Payton's head.

~ ~

Ignoring River's request, Payton attended to his usual chores the next day. River followed him around like a lost puppy all day, as Payton's dizzy spells seemed to be happening often. He often paused and closed his eyes or sat down to rest. River brought him little snacks and water often in hope that it would help Payton's condition.

To his dismay, Payton only seemed to be getting worse. His breaks became more frequent and he looked a little green. River should've known something was up when he woke up and Payton was still in bed. The boy seemed to be sweating even though the work he was doing

was lax in nature. River knew he had to do something soon, so he risked leaving Payton alone for a few minutes to get some ibuprofen and a thermometer. During the short time he was away from Payton, he couldn't help but think of a worst case scenario. What if Payton collapsed? Even worse, he hits his head and bleeds out before River could get back? Every thought compelled him to move faster.

When he returned, Payton was lying on a couch, arms covering his face. Which was both a relief and concerning. River sat next to him.

“Payton?”

He replies with a groan.

“Can you move your arms, please?”

Payton sighs as if the request was difficult. His arms flopped to his sides, one attempting to reach River's hand. River stroked his cheek, noting that Payton was indeed sweating and a lot warmer than he should be. He takes out the thermometer and takes his temperature.

102°F.

A fever. Big surprise.

“You should go lay down.” River said, taking out some ibuprofen and some water, handing it to Payton as he sat up.

“Why? I'm fine.” He takes the medicine.

“You're sick. You need to rest.” He pulls Payton close to his chest, the boy subconsciously relaxing in his embrace.

“Yeah, no. I still got a ton of work to do. In fact, I feel better now that I've laid down and taken that pill.”

Payton attempted to sit up, but quickly lied back down after getting dizzy.

River strokes his hair. “Maybe stay for a few minutes?” Payton nods, closing his eyes and nuzzling into River.

Less than five minutes later, Payton sluggishly got up and continued on with his chores. River reluctantly left him, as he had an outing with his mother. He asked his dad to keep an eye on Payton.

When he and his mother returned, he found Payton cooking dinner. Well, he was attempting to. He had food out, ready to be prepared, but Payton was leaning against the countertop. He didn't seem to be completely conscious, and was swaying a bit. River quickly rushed to his side and held him. Payton barely acknowledged that he was there. Payton looked up at him, eyes unfocused and foggy.

“Riv... River?”

“Yes, I’m here. Are you okay?”

Payton has to take a minute to comprehend what River said. “Yeah... I’m just... tired.” His eyes start to droop.

“Okay, just stay awake please, okay? Don’t go to sleep yet.”

River’s mother walked into the kitchen. “River? What’s wrong with Payton?”

“He’s sick,” He pressed his hand against his forehead, noting that Payton felt a lot warmer than before. “He wasn’t this bad earlier. I’m going to bring him to bed.”

She nodded. “I’ll clean up here. Should I order some soup for him later?”

“That would be a good idea. Thanks mom.”

River leaned down to pick up Payton and quickly brought him to his room. He laid Payton on his bed, then changed him into more loose and comfortable clothes. He sat next to Payton, gently stroking his cheek as the boy fought off sleep. It took nearly an hour, but Payton eventually fell asleep.

A little bit later, his mom came into the room with a tray of multiple things on it, including a thermometer, water, various types of cold and flu medicine, a washcloth, and some hard candies. She placed the tray on the bedside table, then taking the thermometer and sitting on the other side of Payton. Placing the thermometer in his mouth, she also grabbed the washcloth. She gently patted his face, removing sweat that had accumulated. While she did that, River looked at the thermometer.

“103.2°F,” River tried to stay calm as he read the numbers. “Should we bring him to a hospital?”

His mother paused. “Not yet. He was overworking himself while sick, so his elevated temperature may be a result of that. We’ll wait for him to wake up, then we’ll observe his symptoms, then go from there. I don’t think it’s that serious, it’s just that he practically works himself to death.”

“I know. I worry about him a lot,” River replied.

“I know you do sweetie. We all do. He’s family to us now. I wish I could be around enough to keep him from bending over backwards all the time.”

“He probably wouldn’t listen, anyway. I’ve tried often and he never listens.”

River watched Payton’s breathing. Even when sick, Payton was able to take his breath away.

“You do like him, right?”

River looked at his mom, who was waiting for an answer. “Huh?”

“You like him, right? Romantically?”

River nodded dumbly. “Oh, yeah. I do.” He peered back down at the boy.

“Ah, okay. Just wanted to confirm. Anyway, I’m going to order dinner. I’ll get your usual,” She says, before exiting the room.

River watched her leave, then looked back at Payton. He stayed for a few more minutes before being able to pry himself away. He stood and started to leave the room, before a soft groan stopped him. He turned to find Payton, half asleep, and weakly reaching for him.

“...come back,” Payton said with unintentional puppy dog eyes. When River didn’t respond, he pouted.

“...cuddle.”

River’s heart nearly exploded. He quickly returned to Payton’s side, letting him snuggle into him. Payton quickly fell asleep again, and River soon felt himself drifting off as well.

Chapter End Notes

hey if u got this far let me know where u want this to go or any ideas for other fics owo

Four

Chapter Summary

Hey look some angst don't worry it's not bad.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Payton had never felt this way before. When he was younger, he pretended to have crushes on girls he met at school. He never really felt anything for them, they just seemed to pop out to him. There was a girl named Alice that he had dated in middle school. She was nice and sweet, but Payton never had real feelings for her. In his eyes, they were basically just friends who held hands and cuddled every once in a while.

They had to break up after middle school, as Alice was going to another school and they didn't have any way to contact each other. Payton had never received any sort of cellphone or electronic device to connect with people. He had always lied to his friends, telling them that his parents were strict. That was his excuse for everything back then. It was humiliating to have to admit that your parents didn't want you.

Feeling this way about River was wrong. He knew that. For one, he was his maid. Payton is supposed to work for him, but instead, he's become his lover? boyfriend? partner? He didn't know.

Two, River is in highschool. There are so many more people there who River could be with, people who are most likely better looking than Payton, smarter than Payton, and most definitely richer than Payton. For God sake, Mr. Barkley had literally found him on the streets.

And three, men are supposed to be with women. That's how he was taught. His old orphanage was run by a woman who was very vocal about how homosexuality was a sin and all homos were going to Hell. Payton never fully agreed, as he had some old friends who were gay. But he was straight, and he's supposed to be with a woman.

Somehow, River made all of these doubts and beliefs disappear. Whenever he was with River, he never felt like he was less than him. They were equals, despite him working for the other's family. And all of the thoughts telling him that loving another man like this was wrong were drowned out by the warm feeling of belongingness. He could care less if he was thrown back onto the streets to starve as long as he could be with River.

Payton felt the arms around his waist tighten, then loosen again as the boy behind him began to wake up. The two had started to sleep in the same bed occasionally, usually River's. He was the one to suggest it, and both of them had seemed to sleep better with the other there.

He felt River move closer to him, pressing his lips against Payton's shoulder. In return, Payton reached down to take River's hand in his own. He felt River smile.

It was moments like these that made Payton forget that homophobia existed. How could something 'wrong' feel so right?

At one point, Payton had drifted back to sleep, which was a rare occasion. When he woke up, he found River sitting beside him, thermometer in hand. Payton was still recovering from his sickness. They had never found out what exactly he had, but it had lasted a few days. River would rarely leave his side, asking if he's hungry or needs water every thirty minutes. It was weird but nice to have someone care for him.

"99.2°F. Still no work today, but you're getting better."

Payton groans. As nice as it was to laze around for a few days, he really got antsy without something to do.

"Can I do something, at least? Low effort?" He reasoned. He was feeling fine, just a little sluggish.

River smiled and brushed back some of Payton's hair. "Not until you're 100% better. Maybe tomorrow."

Payton would argue more, but River's patience counters his stubbornness. Instead, he sat up and leaned into River's chest. He had discovered that River had changed out of his pajamas and brought some fruit and toast for their breakfast. After they ate, River tutored Payton a bit, giving him a summary of what he was learning in school. River had never seen anyone who actually wanted to go to school, but knowing that Payton was denied an education for whatever reason, it made sense. Besides, seeing Payton's face light up whenever he learned something new was enthralling.

A little bit later, River had to go out shopping with his dad. Payton assumed it had something to do with Christmas which was two weeks away. Payton never got to celebrate any type of holiday, except when his school did little celebrations for whatever holiday had come up. He remembers one year, one of his classes had a secret santa exchange. He had to opt out because he had no money to buy any gifts, and there was no way the director of his orphanage would give him any money for it.

The only holiday he somewhat celebrated was Hanukkah. Even then, the best he could do was draw a menorah and add flames on the candles as the days passed. According to his former social worker, his biological parents were Jewish, so he tried to at least somewhat follow the religion. It was all he knew about his parents, so he figured doing this would keep some sort of bond between them. He hated thinking about it. His family. They had abandoned him. He really shouldn't care, but...

Payton got up and went downstairs. He could do some housework to ease his mind. River wasn't there to stop him.

The Barkleys weren't exactly religious, but they still enjoyed Christmas anyway. Mrs. Barkley loved having the house decorated in red and green tinsel, but didn't seem to have the time or motivation to really decorate. So Payton had taken on a new job. He had looked up good Christmas decor on the laptop River let him borrow occasionally. He heavily referenced and got inspiration from the pictures he saw.

He was perfecting a last bit of fake holly onto a windowsill when the front door opened. He paid it no mind, as it was most likely River and his father returning home. And oddly, if River saw him, he didn't say anything. Payton would've expected that he'd be mad, well, as mad as River could be, and tell him to rest. Instead, he just heard whispers that were obviously coming from River and his dad. He couldn't make out any words, but kept to himself. He was about to turn and leave the room when Mr. Barkley stopped him and told him to just stay in the kitchen for a bit.

In the end, his curiosity got to him and peeked out to see what the two were doing. They had quite a few bags that were rather large, filled with who knows what. He could make out small bits of their conversation, and based on that, it wasn't good.

"We can't let him know..."

"... but you know how Payton is..."

"I know how you really feel about him..."

He didn't know what to think. Did they not like him? Just humoring him for the past five, six months? Oh god, what if they were going to fire him?

Payton felt nausea build up in his stomach. Anxiety always manifested as a stomachache, nausea, or a migraine for him. The worst part was that he couldn't shut down these thoughts. He was usually able to stop thinking about things if he wanted to, but with anxiety, he couldn't stop it. He spiraled. He thought up outrageous scenarios that wouldn't logically happen. But he couldn't help it.

He had to rush to a bathroom before he vomited on the floor. He didn't want to be fired. He couldn't be fired! He had nowhere to go. He would be back on the streets, starving and poor, and even worse, without River. What did he do? Did he not clean something to the family's liking? What if he took too many sick days this past week? Was that it? He couldn't stop heaving. This was one of the worst parts of having these episodes. Gagging for what seems like forever before realizing that he wasn't going to vomit, or he does vomit. In this case, it's the latter. River's breakfast he made for them, down the drain.

He felt like shit. He knew he was over exaggerating, but he couldn't stop. He kept gagging with nothing coming out. He felt like crying.

"-ayton? Payton?" He heard River calling. Payton couldn't speak. River eventually found him, quickly sitting next to him, rubbing his back lovingly as Payton dry heaved.

A few minutes later, Payton's stomach stops cramping and the urge to vomit retreats. River then pulled him into an embrace.

“C’mon, let’s get back to my room,” River said. Payton nodded along, feeling completely drained. River had a concerned look on his face as he walked Payton to his room. Once he was sat down, River immediately took his temperature. He frowned when he saw the result.

“I still have a fever?” Payton guessed.

River shakes his head. “No, you don’t. But that means you were vomiting with no cause.”

Payton really didn’t want to tell River about his episodes. They make him look and sound insane.

“I don’t know. Just got nauseous all of a sudden.”

River looked through him. “I can tell when you’re lying, you know. You can’t look me in the eyes. I have a theory.”

Payton looked at him, waiting for him to continue.

“Were you purging?”

River said that with such pain in his voice that Payton couldn’t help but feel guilty at his actions.

“What? No! It’s just... sometimes when I get anxious I get nausea. No big deal,” Hey, it wasn’t a complete lie. And River seemed to take it.

“Thank god,” He breathed. “Eating disorders are not something I want to see you have to go through.”

River handed him a glass of water, and then refused to let Payton leave until he drank the whole glass. Payton then returned to his room for the rest of the day, leaving River confused.

Chapter End Notes

Just curious, does anyone want smut for these two? If you do send me them prompts in the comments or on tumblr: <https://www.tumblr.com/blog/view/autym73>

Five

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Payton always looked peaceful while he slept. The stress and tension from the day faded away, so he could finally have a moment of relaxation.

He was lying in bed, River's arm around his shoulders, resting his head on the other's chest. It was a rare night where Payton was able to sleep soundly, while River could not. His mind was kept him awake, dwelling on what had happened days before. He was somehow able to ignore the odd feeling in his chest until now. The feeling that there was more to the events that had occurred.

Payton had said he was just anxious. River wanted to believe him, but it never sat right with him. He kept trying to convince himself that he was just overthinking it, that Payton was not intentionally harming himself. Both his mother and father had told him that it was most likely a result of Payton's sickness.

God, just thinking that Payton was insecure about his body made him sad. He was already too skinny to begin with, why would he be bulimic now?

After Payton had gotten settled into their household a few months ago, his mom set up a doctor's appointment for the maid. He was underweight at the time, which was not a surprise but still, he didn't want to hear it. His body in general wasn't in good shape, as there were many bruises on his body, a few vitamin deficiencies, and even a minor wrist fracture.

Since then, Payton had gotten much better. He was gaining weight, his body was healing, and despite working nearly all day, his spirit and energy increased. His dad made sure that Payton was given multivitamins and other similar supplements every day, and just a few weeks ago he had introduced melatonin to the boy after learning about his sleeping habits. He was doing well.

But then again, mental health and physical health aren't the same thing. Payton had given off many symptoms of trauma, depression, and anxiety, but River was nowhere near a psychologist. It was obvious that something wasn't exactly right going on in Payton's head. But if River could unlock his past, he may be able to find out.

But Payton had hidden the key very well.

Every time he attempted to bring up the boy's past, he found a way to deflect and have River speak instead. He desperately wanted to know what hid inside Payton. He had heard somewhere that the foster care system around where he lived wasn't good. Many abusive or negligent homes were being caught every few weeks. River hated thinking about the possibility that Payton had to endure those places.

River had never felt so protective of someone before. He had sympathized with others before, but never wanted to defend them from things. He found himself often wishing that he could go back in time and change an event Payton had gone through so he wouldn't be hurt. All he wanted to do was make him smile and laugh, see him happy.

And he tried. He's tried a lot. But Payton had set up walls to protect himself, and even though River was able to make it through a good bit of them, there were still a few that were made of titanium which River was working his way through. He couldn't wait to finally make his way to a Payton that he knows through and through. Who will tell him everything he wanted to know.

His mind kept wandering, thoughts becoming fantasies about him, and Payton's future together. When Payton could finally drop his 'job' at their house. Payton could stop being their maid tomorrow and he would still be welcome in their house forever.

He made different scenarios on how he would finally ask Payton to be his. They would be walking through a park on a warm autumn's day when River would take him aside and ask, or they would be playing around in the ocean in summer when River would kiss and ask him. Maybe a cold (or as cold as you could get in California) winter's night, cuddling and watching a movie, he would ask.

Eventually, River was able to drift off to sleep with the thought of possibly getting married to the other boy. The last thing he remembered thinking before falling asleep was, "I'm in love with him."

~•~

"You've seriously never celebrated Christmas before?"

Payton shook his head. "Not that I can remember. It's not that big of a deal as you're making it out to be."

It was Christmas Eve, and as the family's tradition for years, the Barkley and Sloan families come together for the holiday. River had found a secluded space where he, Payton, and Astrid could sit and talk. He was able to get Payton to stop working for a night, even though he put up much resistance at first.

Astrid had taken to an armchair as River and Payton sat at the loveseat opposite of her. River had his arm around Payton, leaning into him. A common and casual situation for them.

Astrid sat back in her seat and chuckled. "What kind of shit cards does God have to give you to never celebrate Christmas? How poor are you?"

"Astrid!" River muttered. She shrugged her shoulders in response. "What? I just asked a question."

"It's fine. I just happened to be in orphanages whenever Christmas rolled around, and they don't have enough funding to buy presents for all the kids." Payton replied.

River had already known this, but whenever he heard or thought about it, his heart sank. But now, knowing what will happen tomorrow morning, he also felt a bit giddy. It would be Payton's first Christmas, and River was eager to see his reaction to the presents they got him. The day Payton was recovering from his illness, with much hesitance, he and his father went to buy Payton and his mother presents. When they had come back, they had to sneak it by Payton without him noticing. His father was a little paranoid that Payton wouldn't accept the gifts, and River was too, but he thought that Payton was polite enough not to refuse something from his parents.

Astrid made a face. "Ugh, I hope I'm never that poor. How the hell did you survive?" She said, taking a sip of her champagne.

"Luck and lack of being spoiled in my childhood," Payton says with a straight face. Astrid leaned back, putting her free hand on her chest, offended. But then quickly smiled and returned to her relaxed state.

"You have attitude. I like that," she leaned forward, looking at Payton with an expression that River knew too well. He gave a stern look to Astrid, who laughed in response. "Don't worry River, I'm not stealing your boyfriend."

Payton seemed a little taken back by her statement. They had never really defined their relationship, so his reaction wasn't too surprising. He seemed to space out a bit as the conversation continued, soon becoming just River and Astrid talking about whatever. And despite what she had said earlier, she tried to weasel her way into a threesome with the two. River kept on telling her that they haven't even kissed yet, let alone have sex, but she always responded by either calling them lame or asking them to let her know when they're ready.

As much as she could be annoying or just an asshole, River still loved her. They have stuck together for so long that not sticking together would be weird. Even after their breakup, they never had any awkwardness hover around them. At this point, he considered Astrid as a combination of a sister and a close cousin.

"Ugh, I'm getting bored. I'm going to see if I can get some vodka without getting caught. Nice to finally meet you, Payton," she said, putting emphasis on 'finally', giving a quick glare at River before walking off. River waved her goodbye as Payton found his way out of his thoughts.

"River?"

His attention was redirected to the boy in his arms. "What's up?"

Payton seemed a bit hesitant as if he was afraid of what River's response would be. "I- um. I don't know what we are, exactly. I mean, I've heard people refer to us as 'boyfriends,' but we've never really... made it official," He refused to make eye contact with River.

He had to take a moment to think. Sure, they hadn't made anything official, but River found something special about that fact. They could be whatever they wanted to be, no labels restricting them. But on the other hand, having a label on the relationship is also a really nice thing. River really liked the idea of calling Payton his boyfriend.

“I guess that’s up to you. Any way you choose will make me happy, as long as you’re still with me,” he said, noticing how close his face was to the other. Payton was looking up at him, his doe eyes making him look more innocent than he is.

Payton seemed to be having an internal conflict with himself. “I... I don’t know, River. As much as this feels right, there’s just something inside that’s screaming at me that it’s wrong. I want to be with you, I... I think I love you, but at the same time... I can’t shake the feeling that this is just, bad.”

“Does our relationship feel wrong because we are both men, or is it something else?”

By Payton’s expression, River had hit the nail right on the head.

“Um... yeah. I know it’s not ‘wrong’, but it still feels wrong! Am I just messed up or broken?”

River felt a pang in his chest at the boy’s words. “No, no, no. You aren’t messed up or broken, okay? It’s called internalized homophobia. It’s not an uncommon thing for people who have just figured out their sexualities to have.”

Payton’s gaze went to the floor. “So... It’s just my own mental hang up sort of thing?”

River nodded and wrapped his arms around Payton. “Now, would you like to be my boyfriend?”

To River’s surprise, Payton quickly looked at him, cheeks quickly turning pink to red. He seemed that he was incapable of words, mouth agape yet nothing coming out. River smiled as he brought his hand to cup his cheek, then lead their faces closer together. Payton seemed to get the gist and closed the gap between them.

The kiss was soft and warm, Payton turned out to be a natural kisser. He became more adventurous, placing one of his hands on River’s neck, the other on his thigh. River found himself smiling as he brought Payton closer to him, sitting on River’s knee. After a few long, precious moments, Payton had pulled away, tears pooling around his eyes.

“I’m crying... Why am I crying?” Payton looked at River, and he had never seen someone as beautiful as him. He wiped away one of his tears and smiled at him.

“There doesn’t really need to be a reason. Sometimes we get overwhelmed by our emotions and crying is a way to let out our emotions.” River cupped his cheek, looking into Payton’s eyes. The boy sniffed, then wrapped his arms around River’s neck and kissed him again, and again, and again.

heyo wassup. i'm planning on one more chapter, but if anyone would like to see more, I'll see if I can add more.

Six

Chapter Summary

Chritmaths

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

River snuck out of bed at midnight. Ideally, he wouldn't have to, but Payton was feeling a tad clingy and asked to sleep with him that night. And, River being River, he couldn't say no.

Now he had to get out of bed without Payton noticing. He had presents for him and in tradition to the holiday, he was going to put them under the tree on Christmas Eve. He wanted to make this year as magical as he could for his boyfriend (boyfriend!)

He was able to weasel his way out of Payton's embrace with some difficulty, as he gets very cuddly when he's asleep. After getting out of bed, sneaking away undetected became easy. No floorboards creaked, it was bright enough to see objects, so any loud noise to wake Payton would be a result of a mistake from River or a random act he couldn't control.

He quickly descended from the stairs and headed out the back door. He had hidden Payton's presents in one of their storage sheds outside, a place Payton had most likely never been in. He unlocked it, went inside, and reviewed what Payton would be receiving. He would be getting some modern essentials, such as a cellphone, a laptop, quite a few articles of clothing that Payton had liked (He couldn't wear his uniform 24/7 anymore, anyway.)

Anything else he had shown interest in during his time with the family was bought, which consisted of anything from a pencil that he thought looked cool, to a car that fit Payton's preferences. River was going to utterly spoil Payton this Christmas. He had even bought them matching promise rings made of silver with a flower carving topped with a diamond.

He began taking trips from the shed to the house, his father coming to help after a bit. It was around 1 in the morning once they were finished, his father returning to bed. River took a moment for himself in the kitchen, getting a drink and thinking for a minute.

He had his doubts about what tomorrow would turn out to be. Payton becoming enraged because the family spent so much money on him, or him disliking every gift or demanding them to return the gifts. But River had faith that Payton would accept their presents with a smile.

River soon returned to his room a little after one. When he entered, he was surprised to find Payton sitting up. The boy had clearly just woken up, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes before noticing River was out of bed.

He decided to make his presence known, coughing so the other knew he was there. Payton turns to him, a sleepy smile spreading on his face. River made his way to the boy, joining him under the duvet.

Payton was quick to nuzzle into River's side, pressing his face into the other's firm chest. "Where did you go? I missed you," Payton murmured, half-lidded eyes peering at River. Sleepy Payton was the most adorable Payton.

"I'm sorry, sunshine. I was just getting some water," River wrapped his arms around the other, bringing them closer. He gave Payton a kiss on his temple, making him smile. Payton then leans up to kiss River's lips. There's nowhere else he'd rather be.

~•~

Payton had only experienced the stereotypical Christmas morning by watching Christmas programs on the television or by standing and watching as his foster family exchanged gifts, never including him. He liked to think that it never really affected him. So when he woke up the next day, he started his usual routine.

After wiggling his way out of River's arms, he went to his room to change into his uniform. He predicted that the family would be sleeping in this morning, so he decided he could start making breakfast a bit later. Maybe some sort of brunch. He has a few recipes he hasn't tried out yet.

Payton went downstairs and began some of his daily chores, such as dishes, laundry, and tidying up miscellaneous objects. When he entered the living room, he found a lot more presents and gifts under the tree, all of similar wrapping. The Barkley's probably put them there last night. He decided to leave them be, in case the family wanted them placed a certain way.

They were probably having a Christmas day party or something like that, why else would there be more gifts? He wished they would've told him earlier so he could've made snacks and treats.

He began making breakfast around eight. He decided to make an assortment of sweet breakfast foods, such as pancakes and waffles. The Barkley's tend to stick to healthier foods, so he decided to treat them today. At one point, River's parents joined Payton in the kitchen.

"You don't have to work today, you know. I said you can have holidays off."

Payton shrugged. "What else am I supposed to do? Besides, don't you have a party today?" Mr. Barkley laughed. "We weren't planning on having a party today."

"Then why are there so many gifts under the tree?"

It was then when River decided to make an entrance, pulling Payton away from the countertop and into his arms. "Those are for you," he said. Payton pulled out of River's embrace, looking at him, then to his parents and back. "What?"

River's mother smiled at him. "Did you really think that we would leave you out? You're one of the family now," Her husband nodded in agreement. Payton looked to River. "...All of them? The new ones?"

River smiled brightly, nodding. "Yep. I know there's a lot, but we hope you'll accept them." Payton felt himself start tearing up. It's cheesy, he knew, but fuck... no one's done anything like this for him before. He told himself not to cry.

"I- River..."

"How about we have breakfast first, hm? Then we'll get to presents." River kissed Payton's forehead, leading him to the dining table.



River handed him a small present, wrapped in the same dark blue wrapping paper with gold stars peppered across it, the same wrapping paper used for all of Payton's presents. So far, he had received a variety of things, such as books and materials he found interesting in the past. He had even gotten his own laptop and cellphone! He wouldn't have to hog River's anymore!

He unwrapped the present River just gave him, noticing that his mother had taken out her phone and assumingly started recording his reaction. The wrapping paper revealed a small box with a removable top. He pulled it off, finding a pair of keys inside. They didn't belong to any of the cars the Barkley's owned, so that meant...

"You didn't." Payton looked at the family, dumbfounded. River, who was sitting beside him, hugged him with a blinding smile. "We did." He said, his parents wearing the same big smiles.

"But... a car is thousands of dollars, why waste it on me?" Payton, who has been holding off tears for the last who-knows-how-long, couldn't keep them back anymore. River was quick to wipe away the tears with his thumb.

"You aren't a waste of money, Payton. We bought these things for you because you deserve them." River told him.

"We care about you, Payton. You've really made yourself a place in our home, not just as a maid, but as a member of the family," River's mother explained. "Which is why you're being relieved of all of your cleaning duties."

Payton seemed to be offended by this. "What? No! I'm- I can't-"

River's father interrupted him. "Instead, we could let you go back to school. If you study and work hard, there are tests you can take to get you into the grade you're supposed to be in, or you could work on a GED instead." Payton was speechless.

"But... I,"

"We also have been able to gain legal custody of you. We are now your legal guardians." He continued. "We would adopt you, but then your relationship with River would be illegal."

Payton sat silent, mouth agape as he processed the words spoken to him. River called out his name a few times before the boy turned to him and began sobbing into his chest. He choked out words of thanks between his sobs, confirming that his tears were happy. River recalled the rings in his pocket, but decided to give them to Payton later, as he was already overwhelmed.

When Payton was able to regain his composure, he went up to River's parents hugged them tightly, once again thanking them over and over. Once the waterworks were over, River helped bring Payton's new possessions to his room, immediately making the room become Payton's room, not just a guest room. They were often interrupted by River taking Payton's lips into his own.

As the morning turned into late afternoon, River had taken Payton to his room and watched a few Christmas movies. When an extremely cheesy scene came on, Payton leaned over to River, kissing him deeply. They stayed together for a few moments before Payton leaned back. After a quick breather, River kissed Payton again, much more passionately than before. He positioned himself on top of Payton, his hands gently running over the other's body. He heard Payton make some soft moans in between the passion, and River cursed his teenage hormones.

Payton pulled back from River, and Goddammit his teenage libido was betraying him again. His face was flushed and pink, lightly panting. It was now when River noticed how well Payton's shirt clung to his frame, tight pants not concealing what his little friend thought of this situation. River smirked, and dove in for another kiss and a little more.

~◇~

"I'm sore," Payton complained, rolling over in River's bed. "I can imagine. I thought I would've had more self-control."

Payton cupped River's cheek and gently kissed him.

"I love you, River."

And he swears that his brain just short circuited. After processing what Payton just said, River leaned over the side of his bed, finding his pants that he had thrown off. He located the little velvet box in his pocket.

"River?"

River took Payton's hands in his own, hiding the box in the blankets.

"I... Payton, you've made me feel things no one else has. I've never fallen so hard or fast for someone before you. Whenever I'm around you, I feel warm inside, like all of my problems have left. So, I wanted to get you something that can remind you of us whenever we're apart," He got out the box, opening it and showing Payton the matching rings inside. Payton gasped, hands covering his mouth.

"I love you, Payton. Will you accept this promise ring?" River asked.

Payton said nothing for a moment, before tearing up. “Dammit, River, I’m going to cry again,” He sniffled. “Yes, I accept. Of course I accept, dumbass!”

River found himself feeling tears gather in his eyes. He smiled brightly, letting out a laugh before taking out the rings, putting on Payton’s while Payton put on his. He then pulled the other into another sweet kiss. With a final exchange of ‘I love you’s,’ the two laid in bed, basking in each other’s presence.

Chapter End Notes

That's it my bros. Hope ya'll enjoyed.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!