

ADAPTATION: RE-CREATING THE NOVEL AS A STAGE PLAY

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Doctor of Philosophy

by

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ADAPTATION: RE-CREATING THE NOVEL AS A STAGE PLAY

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ABSTRACT

The critical introduction examines Linda Hutcheon's notion that the process of adaptation is worthy of observation, and that in analyzing a novelist adapting her own work for the stage, we begin to see how the interiority of characters can be externalized for the stage. First, I look at Norman Mailer's adaptation of his novel, *The Deer Park*, for the stage. Using Robert Breen's method of chamber theatre as a lens, I examine Mailer's stage directions and changes to dialogue. Next, I look at my own adaptation of my novel, *Three Cubic Feet*, into a stage play, *The Lad Sketches*. By adding a magical character and incorporating an object into the action of the play, among other changes and additions, I was able to externalize for the stage the inner lives of my novel's characters. I conclude that observing a novelist adapting her own work for the stage is particularly revealing of the process of adaptation and helpful to all adapters of fiction into stage plays.

The second section is the text of my novel, *Three Cubic Feet*. The novel is about Theo, his family, and his boyfriend, Jonathan. In a small college town in Missouri, life for a gay teenager can feel stifling and bleak. When a chance encounter with a young professor ends in seduction, Theo Williamson must decide how much to tell his boyfriend and his family, and in the end, he must overcome his own guilt and fear to see that his allegiance lies not with everyone else, but with himself. This is a story about the body,

how it can be broken, violated, and sometimes used to violate others, and yet we go on, we heal, and life continues.

The third section is the text of my stage play, *The Lad Sketches*. The play is based on four of the main characters from *Three Cubic Feet*, Theo, his parents, and his boyfriend. Set in a pizzeria in a small town in Missouri, Theo is confronted by his parents when they discover through his sketchbook that he is leading a secret life. The play traces Theo's struggle as he realizes he must break off his relationship with his boyfriend and break away from his parents. Issues of sexuality and secrecy are explored in the play through Theo's relationship with his parents and his boyfriend, as well as his parents' own histories of childhood abuse.

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The Novelist/Playwright: On Externalizing Interiority for the Stage

Many novelists have tried their hand at playwriting, and some have adapted—successfully or not—their own works for the stage, including Alexandre Dumas, *films*, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, Salman Rushdie, and Leslie Epstein. One of the biggest challenges a novelist faces in adapting fiction for the stage is to *show* to the audience what was previously *told* to the reader. This is especially true when a writer tries to externalize for the stage the inner life of a novel’s characters. In her book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon challenges the cliché that interiority is the terrain of narrative and that exteriority is best handled by drama (56). She examines adaptations of several novels into film, opera, and musicals, but she says little about novels that have been adapted into stage plays. Generally, there is little scholarship on adaptations of novels into stage plays, and even less about the writer’s process. There is a need for scholarship about adaptation that includes writers’ reflections on the experience of adapting their own works for the stage—these insights will provide a deeper understanding of the process and the possibilities for all adapters of fiction for the stage. In this essay, I will take up Hutcheon’s call for testing out “theoretical truisms or clichés against actual adaptation practice” (52) and show how the particular situation of a novelist adapting her own work for the stage—both the move toward collaboration and the shift in medium—enables the writer to externalize the interiority of a novel’s characters.

Fiction is literature, but drama is embodied literature. The transition from novel to stage play is a move from telling a story with words on a page to showing a story with spoken words, live action, and constructed sets. When a novel is adapted into a play, as Hutcheon explains, “description, narration, and represented thoughts must be encoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images” (40). Some adaptations of novels, such as those done in the style of chamber theatre, are designed to serve the original text, to increase the audiences’ “critical acumen” (211) in understanding literature. Robert Breen, a professor at Northwestern, developed chamber theatre as a tool for teaching literature to students, a kind of readers theatre where the text is strategically divided among multiple readers, which was designed to help students understand literary texts better than if they were just reading the texts on their own. Much scholarship has been devoted to adaptations intended to serve literature, such as chamber theatre, as well as to evaluating the fidelity of an adapted text to its original source material. A more recent turn in adaptation theory is to look, instead, at how we can analyze an adapted work as *an adaptation*. Linda Hutcheon suggests that the presence of the original text and the fidelity of the adaptation to the original need not be the “criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis” (6), but rather, that we can look at adaptation as an active *process* of creation and interpretation (7-8). This process, when the adapter is transitioning back and forth between the novel and the script, is a locus for understanding how the inner lives of fiction characters can be externalized for the stage.

One of the basic differences in the process of writing a novel and the process of writing a play is that playwriting is collaborative. Unlike the months and years of solitude required for writing a novel, playwriting demands a shorter timeframe; troupes of actors don't have years to dedicate to the development of a play. The playwright depends upon the actors as they interpret and embody the characters, and the writing is propelled by the collaborative effort of the entire group dedicated to developing the play, which includes limited schedules. Leslie Epstein, professor and Director of the Creative Writing Program at Boston University, describes writing a novel as, "on average, six years of solitary confinement. But it takes only six months to write a play, and if you're lucky, the balance of the year is spent in collaborative effort" (para. 9). He adapted his novel, *King of the Jews*, a year after its publication in 1979. The play was given a public reading at the old Phoenix Theater in New York, but the theater went bankrupt before mounting a full production. Later, in 2007, Epstein had the chance to further develop the play through readings at the Boston Playwrights' Theatre. The script went from twenty-five parts to twelve. Before rehearsals began, the producer and the director's questions pushed Epstein to drop lines and further develop what he'd thought was an ensemble piece into an ensemble, as he put it, that finally had a conductor (para 7). Once rehearsals began, actors came to him with questions, and more changes were made. Developing the play became a collaboration "with people who have the heightened ability to sense the inner lives of others" (para. 9). As the actors found a "lapse in motivation [or] some note that was false to a character," (para. 8) they were able to show Epstein where he hadn't yet been able to externalize the inner life of a character. This collaborative process, where the novelist-playwright develops the script while watching the actors embody the characters, enables

the writer to understand what must be present in the dialogue and stage directions in order for the actors to effectively *show* the story on stage.

What is it about the specific situation of a novelist collaborating with a director and actors in adapting her own work for the stage that provides the opportunity for other adapters to understand more about how to externalize interiority? The novelist has an intimate understanding of her own characters, themes, and narrative structure. Through wrestling with a text for months or years, a writer develops a deep knowledge of the many threads that come together in a novel and is uniquely positioned—if she has the desire and the “ear” for stagecraft—to bring those forth in a stage adaptation. Another element to consider is that in working with actors and a director, the writer is literally externalizing what, previously, had been an internal process. In essence, the work of turning from a medium that is solitary to one that is more collaborative mimics the task the writer is trying to undertake with her characters; she must get them out of her head, off of the page, and into the mouths and bodies of the actors up on stage. As creator of the source text, the playwright has no obligation, if she so chooses, for fidelity to her earlier novel. As mentioned above, much criticism has been dedicated to whether or not an adaptation is “true” to the original. When writers adapt their own novels for the stage, I would argue that they have more freedom than other adapters, and thus may attempt changes, additions, and deletions that an outside adapter might not.

I am not suggesting, however, that when a novelist adapts her own work, she is more likely to produce great plays. Many novelists-playwrights have not been successful, hence comments like the following from Toronto theatre critic Frank Moher: “Famous novelists may make many mistakes in the course of a long career. They may hire the

wrong agent. They may fire the wrong agent. They may insult Oprah. Or, they may try to write a play” (13). However, I would re-state Hutcheon’s theory that one of the interesting aspects to examine in adaptation is process. In observing a novelist adapting her own writing, whether or not the stage play is ultimately a critical or commercial success, we get to see a part of the collaborative process of someone with a great deal of freedom and a deep understanding of the story as she interprets, transforms, and ultimately critiques her own work, externalizing the story for herself, for the actors and director, and ultimately, for the audience.

Most novelists who adapt their fiction for the stage are not working toward a staged reading in the spirit of Robert Breen’s method of chamber theatre, but some of the methods for adaptation used in chamber theatre are helpful in understanding choices a novelist might make in adapting her own fiction into drama. In chamber theatre, one way to emphasize the different stances of an omniscient narrator in a novel is to split the narration among multiple readers. Paul C. Edwards, a student of Robert Breen’s, explains in his essay on adaptation, “Adapting Fiction: Chamber Theatre as Criticism of Narrative Structure,” that narration can have multiple poses or stances in a fictional work. In this essay, Edwards takes the work that Breen did with chamber theatre and uses it explain how to use this format to perform and critique narrative structure in a long novel. For example, in his adaptation of Dickens’ *Dombey and Son*, Edwards realized there were several recurring narrative stances in the novel: “near-silent observer of dramatic scenes, omniscient ‘manipulator’ of action, sympathetic commentator, ironic commentator, social critic, comedian, [and] preacher of sermons” (82). The final structure of the adaptation

presented for the audience this variety of narrative stances by dividing them among multiple readers. This division embodied and gave a separate voice to the various narrative stances. The intention behind this kind of adaptation—to increase the reader’s critical acumen in understanding literature—served to externalize for the audience what was previously woven into the fiction.

One novelist who adapted his work for the stage and divided the narration of his novel in ways similar to what Edwards describes is Norman Mailer. In 1967, Mailer’s stage adaptation of his novel, *The Deer Park*, was performed at the Theatre de Lys in New York. Mailer’s wife played one of the lead female roles, and Rip Torn, a friend, played one of the lead male roles. Even though Mailer didn’t specifically write about the collaborative process of writing the play, it is fair to assume that, given the cast he was working with and the fact that the play wasn’t published until after the production opened, he was, in fact, collaborating with others as he completed the script of the play.

Published in 1955, much of Mailer’s novel is told in first-person. Edwards’ explication of chamber theatre adaptation is relevant to the first-person sections of *The Deer Park*; Mailer actually splits and recombines first-person narration for the stage play. The novel opens with Sergius arriving at Dessert D’or and getting picked up by an older woman, Dorothea. Sergius describes her as a “former personality” (6) and goes on to list her many previous jobs, but his description of Dorothea is anchored in the overall description of the physical space of her home, dubbed “The Hangover,” and the recurring parties that gather there. For the play, however, Mailer has split apart these descriptions into dialogue told directly to the audience by two different characters, Dorothea’s former lover and her son (125-6). These two characters take Sergius’ narration from the novel

and then, breaking the fourth wall, they describe Dorothea and her parties to the audience. By dividing the narrator's descriptions and presenting them through other characters who have strong emotional ties to Dorothea, Mailer externalizes the novel narrator's interiority and utilizes the increased tension of family and sexual relationships to create a more dramatic way of presenting Dorothea and her milieu. These characters have more at stake in talking about Dorothea than the narrator, Sergius, has.

However, in the novel, the narrator, Sergius, doesn't always tell the story in first person—at times, Sergius lapses into an all-knowing narrator. In the play, through Mailer's use of stage directions, all of Sergius' inner thoughts, as both a first- and a third-person narrator, are transformed into physical space and he is, in effect, re-cast as an entirely omniscient narrator. When he adapted his novel into a stage play, Mailer kept the thirteen main players from the novel and cast the narrator from the novel, Sergius, as both a narrator of and a character in the play. The stage directions indicate that, "the attempt must be made to suggest that the set bears some relation to the inner space of Sergius O'Shaunessy's memory, that the audience is in effect living within his mind" (33). In this way, Sergius' inner thoughts are completely externalized for the audience to see.

In addition to using stage directions to show the inner life of his narrator, Mailer also divides out different narrative stances from the novel into dialogue for the stage. Even though the narrator of the novel is a single character, as mentioned above, he omnisciently narrates several scenes in the book, often in a telegraphed hindsight. One such scene is near the end of the book, when two of the novel's characters are in a car accident. In the novel, all of chapter twenty-five is dedicated to the months, days, and hours leading up to the car accident. Sergius begins the chapter with this:

What can I say about it? Like his own flesh, Faye knew the loneliness in Elena. It waited for her, the sullen water behind a dike; let a breach be made and she would be carried away over the flooded land of the past. So he knew she was the material out of which suicides are made. (327)

This moment is not about the character Faye telling Sergius his plans for convincing Elena to commit suicide. Rather, it is a transition from first- to third-person narration, a transition that Mailer initiates earlier in the novel, which by chapter twenty-five, is quite comfortable to the reader. Even though Sergius isn't present for the months leading up to Elena's suicide attempt and the subsequent car accident, he narrates all of the details from an all-knowing point of view. In the play, on the other hand, the way the audience first learns about the accident is that Faye admits early on through dialogue that he "was in [jail] for smashing a sports car without a license. Plus one other item. There was a frail in the car with me who got hurt weird to fear. I was in, you may dig, for beauty slaughter" (55-6). Thus, the accident from the novel is no longer told through the frame of Sergius the omniscient narrator, but rather, directly through dialogue from the character responsible for it, which increases the dramatic tension of the play.

The rest of chapter twenty-five in the novel, the months of build-up to the accident narrated by Sergius, is presented in the play through dialogue between Elena—the "frail in the car ... who got hurt weird to fear"—and another character (169-77). Just as Mailer allows Faye to brag about "beauty slaughter," his choice to let Elena tell the story leading up to the accident in which she nearly died increases the dramatic tension of the play. Unlike Edwards' work, which is intended to reveal the narrative structure of the original and to point the student back to the literary text, Mailer's process of adaptation

actually transforms the novel's narration into the script of a stage play that stands entirely on its own, separate from the original text.

Like Mailer, I adapted my own novel, *Three Cubic Feet*, into a stage play. Also like Mailer's stage version of *The Deer Park*, my play, *The Lad Sketches*, stands alone and apart from the original text of the novel. In fact, I wasn't finished with the novel when I began adapting it, and I actually discovered the novel's ending, that the main character must leave his boyfriend, by writing the stage play. *The Lad Sketches* focuses on four of the characters from the novel and many of the same themes, but the setting is entirely different, and the play incorporates a magical character. *The Lad Sketches* was my first attempt at writing a full-length play, so I was learning how to write a play as I was working on it. My position as a student of the process contributed to how I approached the entire project—I was open to collaboration and to what the directors and actors were able to show me about my own play. *The Lad Sketches* was performed in three different venues—the Corner Playhouse at the University of Missouri (MU), and The Missouri Theatre and The Blue Note, both in downtown Columbia, Missouri. With the director of the first staged reading, Dr. David Crespy, Professor of Theatre at MU, I learned how to incorporate theatricality into the play. Under his direction, I realized the magical character was the key to manipulating the world of the play and allowing all of the characters to shift into and out of reality. The second production consisted of two ten-minute sections of the play, minimally staged. Elise Link, a PhD student in Theatre at the MU, directed, and Whit Loy, a Theatre undergrad at MU, played the lead, which he had also done in the first staged reading. With Elise's direction and Whit's work on the character of Theo, I was able to further develop the motivation for the two teenage

characters, realizing that Theo needed to break up with his boyfriend and why. Finally, under the direction of Kevin McFillen, a PhD student at MU, the entire play was fully staged. By working with the cast and crew on every step of the production, I realized how my stage directions affected the flow of the action, and I developed a new scene that comes late in the play, where the main character as an alter-ego superhero character kills his boyfriend. Each director and each set of actors brought different biases and insights to the script, helping me see the holes, the lags, where the lines were false or a character's motivation was unclear. The different requirements of each venue pushed me to clarify and simplify my stage directions and to appreciate the boundary between playwright and director. In learning to trust the collaborative process of playwriting—that I was but one among many in bringing this play to life—I was able to let go of the absolute control I had once had as a novelist.

The collaborative process of discovering and developing a play often brings unexpected insights for writers accustomed to working alone. In his book, *Subsequent Performances*, British director Jonathan Miller describes working on a production at the American Place Theatre with American poet Robert Lowell, who had adapted a group of tales by Melville and Hawthorne into a trio of plays called *The Old Glory*. Miller says Lowell was “constantly surprised” during rehearsal at finding “meanings with which he was previously unacquainted [that] were disclosed by his own play” (81). Miller surmises that this was in part due to “Lowell’s innocence, his inexperience in the theatre, and relief that the play was put on at all” (ibid). Miller’s descriptions of Lowell and his reflection on Lowell’s role as playwright mirror what I felt throughout the process of writing and

producing my own play—it was as if I were part of an always unfolding moment of uncertainty and earnest discovery.

I understood early on when I was adapting my novel that I would have to work to externalize the inner life of my characters. The idea of theatricality—elements that would transform my play into a performance and utilize the unique offerings of the stage—became my lens. The first element of theatricality I introduced was a magical character, someone who could interrupt the regular space/time continuum of the play. He is my “unique factor,” or as David Ball, Professor of playwriting, acting, theater history, and literature at Carnegie-Mellon University, explains, the “something out-of-the ordinary that arises—usually but not always early in the play—and that causes a turn from ordinary events” (87). The magical character enters the stage and when he unlocks a door, lights and noise come up; his command as the principle trickster sets up the world of my play as a place where anything could happen. At certain moments in the play, this character stops the action and forces the parents to re-live childhood memories in front of the audience. The enactment of these moments externalizes the parents’ inner lives in a way that provides for the audience a context for why the parents are struggling with their son.

The next theatrical element I used was an object incorporated into the action of the play: a sketchbook that the main character carries around with him. Buzz McLaughlin explains in *The Playwright’s Process*, a classic text for playwrights, that “[o]ften the dramatic point of a scene can be punched up by having characters refer to, hold, exchange, or otherwise use an item that literally or symbolically represents what’s being talked about” (177). Early in my play, the mother begins looking through the main character’s sketchbook, something she has promised never to do. She reads passages out

loud and then rips pages from the book, which then get projected up on stage. Through her words and actions, the audience begins to see the inner life of Theo, the main character, as he has illustrated it with the superhero characters he has created in his sketchbook. His interiority is made physical, audible, and visual through the sketchbook. Near the end of the play, there are scenes in which Theo and his boyfriend actually enact their roles from the sketchbook, the superheroes Lad and Laddie. In these moments, the audience gets to see Theo embodying a fictional version he has created of himself. Theo as Lad works through what is happening to his character on a subconscious level, figuring out whether he (Theo) is going to break up with his boyfriend and if he can stand up to his own parents. The moments with Lad and Laddie are a small drama within a larger drama, characters playing fictional versions of themselves, externalizing the inner lives of the characters by physically embodying the dilemmas occurring within the characters for the audience to witness.

When an author adapts his or her own works for the stage, it is a means for the author to journey with others into his story in a way that cannot occur when the novelist is working alone. In addition to Jonathan Miller's comments about Lowell's innocence and inexperience in the theater leading to Lowell's surprise at finding hidden meanings in the text of *The Old Glory*, Miller also adds another possible reason for Lowell's openness to interpretation:

As a poet, who worked with complex allusions and extremely elaborate references and traditions, he [Lowell] acknowledged the idea that in writing you are never fully aware of the meanings that are present in a work you make. Although there is a sense in which the maker of a work is in a privileged position to say what he might or might not mean by what he wrote, an intelligent and imaginative person, like Lowell, who was committed to the notion

of the unconscious sources of his own ideas, was prepared to accept the possibility of alternative interpretations and to identify very closely with them once they became apparent in the course of rehearsal. (81)

Lowell was willing to accept from Miller and the actors at the American Place Theatre that there was more to his play than he had realized. In a previous section, when I posed the question of why we should watch the process of a novelist adapting her own work, I suggested that a novelist is uniquely positioned because of her deep understanding of the original text, the novel. This deep understanding does help the writer in getting to the bones of the story, which is in essence what a play script is. However, this deep understanding must combine with an openness to further interpretation in order for a writer to make the transition to a stage play and ultimately realize the performative possibilities inherent within the story. The work the writer does of collaborating with a director and actors, transforming what was once internal and imagined for the writer herself and that now must become external and performed for an audience, mirrors the work the writer does to externalize the inner lives of her characters. The writer's task of adapting his novel for the stage is an ultimate—and instructive—form of learning how to *show* a story, a lesson helpful to writers in single and multiple genres alike, as well as to adapters.

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THREE CUBIC FEET, A NOVEL

I don't know why I'm a one man guy
Or why this is a one man show
But these three cubic feet of bone and blood and meat
Are what I love and know

-Loudon Wainwright, III
"One Man Guy," I'm Alright

Chapter One

The morning was late and everyone else was packed, vans and station wagons loaded with crumpled, tired camping gear. Tiki torches were strapped to car-top carriers, bikes locked into bike racks, and kids were belted into back seats wearing week-old sandy swimwear, surrounded by pillows and sleeping bags. Theo wanted to drive—he needed the practice so he could get his license. And his best friend slash boyfriend was waiting back home in Missouri.

On the day Theo and his family had left for spring break in Florida, Theo and Jonathan had argued. Jonathan's family couldn't come this year. They were moving during spring break, and instead of saying how much he was going to miss Jonathan, Theo had bitched him out. The final blow was something about the new kid, Richard—a stupid dare that turned into a heated bet. Jonathan thought he was gay; Theo didn't. Prove it, Theo had said, and he wouldn't take it back. Now, seven days later, Theo was sick to know the results. It was a fifteen-hour drive home, and Theo was so ready to begin. He needed the practice driving, but even more, he needed to see Jonathan.

The tent, tarp, sunshade, and hammock were still scattered across Theo's family's campsite, deflated into two-dimensional flotsam that Theo and his dad somehow had to fold small enough to fit back into and on top of the van.

"You get the poles and I'll roll the rain fly," Theo's dad said. He was moving slowly, like an upside down turtle tired from flailing its legs in the air. Theo hummed, unhooking each pole, pushing them through the pockets along the seam. He always felt small and mean when he talked back to his dad, so this morning, he wasn't saying much.

"Matt had the right idea... leaving a day early." His dad stood for a minute, scratching beneath his faded Hawaiian shirt, staring, thinking. "We could be home by now."

"Yeah," Theo said. Matt. Gone. The bet – no, the argument – with Jonathan, the days of being away from him wondering what was happening back home, had finally gotten the better of Theo, and he'd taken it out on Matt. The young professor Theo babysat for once—who his parents, out of sympathy, had invited on this trip with several other families—had left a day early. No one else knew why, but Theo did. Matt had shaken hands through the open car window with Theo's dad the previous morning, and finally, when he'd looked at Theo, waved and said something like *Take it easy*. Theo had been poking at the campfire, holding a thin metal rod tipped in charred marshmallow remains, afraid something might get said. But nothing got said.

"So—" Theo said, his voice almost steady. "We're doing the whole drive in one day?"

"Yep," his father answered, picking up two corners of the tent. "Too bad you can't help out."

Theo hesitated, feeling the tightness in his stomach begin, the tightness that might not end until he could be alone, leaning against a tree, puking. He snatched the two opposite tent corners and looked away, folding until the tent was small enough to fit inside its canvas bag.

“Wait.” His dad stopped, staring at him. “You aren’t... did you have a birthday?”

“Well, yeah, Dad.”

“But I don’t remember a party...”

“We didn’t have one.” His entire family had forgotten his sixteenth birthday.

Theo watched his dad take off his glasses, revealing the scar below his eye, the one that mimicked the curve of the metal frame, a tiny piece of the evidence marking his father’s body from the car accident that nearly killed him fifteen months ago. His dad wiped his forehead on his shirtsleeve and then cleaned his glasses in little circular motions, squinting.

“Speed it up, you two!” Della, Theo’s stepmother, called from the picnic table on the other side of the van. “Breakfast is ready!” She had been micromanaging the entire morning, as was often required of her since her husband was about as reliable as his kids since the accident. And Theo, as usual, was losing whatever grace he had left to carry out her commands without arguing. He turned away and made himself busy with shoving the tent into the sack, and his dad looked toward the picnic table, in a daze. The world was like a half-opened shell to Theo’s father—what he saw and what was really there didn’t always add up.

Not stopping to take a break, Theo moved on to folding the camo-green tarp still spread on the ground. He couldn't be angry at his dad for not remembering, for not making things right.

"You heard her," Theo's dad said, stretching with his hands on his lower back and then lifting each knee slowly. The pain was nearly constant. From day to day it migrated from one part of his body to another. Theo's father, however, never complained. He was alive, and that was enough. "You'd better eat while you've got the chance," he said. He found his cane and shuffled away.

"Theo, come on!" Della called again.

"Alright," Theo yelled back. Bitch. Della was nothing like his real mom. Della was a skinny bitch with blond hair. Theo's mom was the plump, huggable type, and she had brown, curly hair. Della was a teacher. His mom was an artist. Had been an artist. She'd died of breast cancer when Theo was only six. She was still nursing his little sister Samantha, almost a toddler. Theo had been too old to nurse, but he'd remembered what it felt like, how he hated seeing that baby girl in his mom's arms, where he was supposed to be. He was glad when he first found out that his mom's illness meant little Samantha couldn't nurse anymore. His last memory of his mom, though, was of her shrunken, bird-like body, swallowed up in the queen-sized bed Sam sometimes still got to sleep in. Theo had wanted to curl up in that bed with his mom, but everything hurt when he touched her, even when he just touched the old quilt she kept folded at the foot of the bed, so Theo had often watched from the corner of the room until his dad found him, hiding under a chair. Theo's dad, with big, strong arms, would hold Theo until he fell asleep.

Theo leaned against the van, hugging the tarp and tent to his chest. A breeze stirred the needles of the jack pines nearby, ruffled the surface of the pool of water at the base of the trees' roots. He put the equipment in the car top carrier, and then searched the bottom of his backpack for *Heart of Darkness*.

"Would you stop already?" Della was standing behind him, holding a steaming bowl of oatmeal. Her presence felt like the confinement of a short choking leash. The closer she got, the more he knew that she would be the one to figure out what he had done to Matt. Theo ate his oatmeal after she walked away, with every swallow trying to keep his breakfast from coming back up again.

Later, after they'd said goodbye to the other families leaving for the long drive home from Pensacola to Missouri, Theo had reminded Della that he needed to log more hours of practice driving. She'd just told the girls they could go play one last time at the beach.

"Do you think I could drive home?" he asked.

"Oh god. Your birthday," she'd said. The tears welled up instantly and spilled over and most of Theo's anger melted away. She'd swallowed hard several times, wiping her cheeks. "I'll make it up to you," she said. She'd touched his shoulder and handed Theo the keys. She was in charge of this family, a family that wasn't entirely hers, and she didn't like making mistakes.

Theo drove, and the black asphalt camp road was soon replaced by concrete ticking beneath the tires. They made their way west from Florida to Alabama and then up the long, straight highway leading north through Mississippi. Pine trees crawled by on

either side. There wasn't any decent music on the radio, but Theo left the dial tuned to an oldies station. That only held off Della for about twenty minutes. She looked back between the seats to see what Theo had already noticed in the rearview mirror—his dad, his little sister Samantha, and her friend Kate were all asleep.

“Maybe you should take your driver's test when we get back home.” She'd apologized a thousand times about his birthday.

“Sure,” Theo said. He'd done the work to get his instructional permit, but he couldn't get the license without her—he needed her to verify his practice hours. He'd had his permit for six months, but with all of his dad's surgeries, whatever Theo asked, Della's answer was almost always *not now*.

She rolled down the window and swung the visor around to block the late morning sun. “I was surprised Matt went home a day early,” she said.

It took Theo much effort not to respond. He kept singing along with Van Morrison. Brown-eyed Girl. His dad's favorite.

Della turned a few more pages of the magazine on her lap. “Weren't you surprised he left yesterday?”

“I guess so,” he said and drummed his fingers during the horn section.

“Did he say anything to you? What about when you rode into town with him?”

“It's not like we had some big conversation.”

Actually, they had. It had been on the day of Theo's birthday. He'd spent most of it on his own. He'd run along the old wall that circled Fort Pickens. From the top of it, he could see for miles—ocean, scrubby forest, beach, and grass-covered dunes. Dawn had been making its way over the horizon. On the bayside of the island, a handful of

fishermen had lines cast off the pier. They stood, leaning against the railings, checking lines, or they sat, smoking cigarettes in folding chairs and reading newspapers, edges flapping in the ever-present breeze between Pensacola Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

As Theo had followed the wall toward the gulf, the fishermen became tiny silhouettes on the pier against the backdrop of smooth, blue bay water. Small whitecaps scattered far out on the ocean; the boats looked like toy ships, stranded on the water even though they were actually gliding across its surface. Even when the seawall rounded back toward the trail, Theo couldn't stop. His life felt like it was about to spin out of control. He missed Jonathan, even though he was angry at him. He ached inside. And it was worse around the new professor—Theo's voice always caught in his throat and his hands felt numb. It was his birthday and he was so, so lonely.

The scrubby trees swallowed the wall into shadow, and he had jumped down and run along the park road, headed mostly toward sunrise. No cars. No people. Just the way he'd wanted it. The long, black road beneath his feet had stretched away and gradually disappeared in a liquid shimmer where the hazy white sky met the horizon. He'd grabbed the neck of his tee shirt and stripped from the waist up, then pulled his cap lower and kept placing one foot after the other on the white stripe of paint. Sand had snaked along the outer edges of the road and then accumulated into a mass of rolling dunes, sometimes covered by grass, sometimes completely bare to the wind. Then the sand met the water, motionless on the bay side and constantly churning on the other. He'd been looking straight into the morning sun, and everything but the ribbon of road and the fresh paint spanning its dark surface had begun to look white. Even the water had lost its color, but

he heard his footfalls as they moved in rhythm with the cresting, tumbling foam of the waves and the race back out to sea of the tide sucking the saltwater over the sand.

The ticking of the van's wheels emptied Theo, but like running, the dull rhythm was not enough to carry him away from himself.

Della was reading her magazine. Theo gazed across the dashboard and focused on staying in his lane when the blow-by from big trucks shook the minivan. Della reached for her water bottle in the cup holder, untwisted the lid and then took a long drink. "He didn't say how things were going with his daughters or anything?" His girls were supposed to come with him to Florida, but Matt's ex-wife had said no, she wanted them to spend the break with her, and Matt had given in. Della closed the bottle and put it away.

"Guys don't talk about things like that, not like girls do."

"You don't have to be a girl to want to talk about things. Are you sure there isn't something—"

"There is nothing." He tightened his hands on the steering wheel, extremely aware of how she was rearranging her legs, folding one under the other and leaning on the armrest toward him. Late in the afternoon, the day of his birthday, Theo had gone with Matt into town. Matt was buying more beer for the adults, and Theo was buying a new flashlight for his little sister. Samantha had broken hers when he'd scared her in the tunnels in Fort Pickens, something that pissed off Della more than Theo could understand. If Della thought he was a fuckup for being mean to his little sister, he couldn't imagine what she would think about his real fuckups.

At the grocery store, he and Matt had split apart inside the entrance. Theo pushed a cart and took his time staring at the displays, wondering what kind of food Matt liked. In the parking lot, Theo found Matt waiting in the car, on the passenger's side. Theo opened the driver's door and bent over to look inside. "What's up?"

"I was thinking you might want to drive us back to the campground," Matt said.

"I don't have a license."

"You have a permit, don't you?"

Theo had stood up and looked around, as if maybe a local cop were watching his every move. He'd rubbed his damp hands on his shorts and sat in the driver's seat. It was just slightly too far back, and he'd considered not moving it forward, but safety won out over pride. Theo rested his hand on the gearshift, only just then realizing that Matt's little blue hatchback wasn't an automatic. He'd taken a breath, thankful that Jonathan—during the many hours back home of letting Theo drive his truck—had taught him how to drive a stick shift.

Theo didn't grind the gears or let Matt's car die at stoplights. He'd followed the highway through town that led back to camp while Matt looked through the *Men's Health and Fitness* magazine Theo had bought for himself. Matt had asked if Theo was looking for a new workout routine, but Theo said no, hesitating a moment. "I don't get it for the workout suggestions."

Matt knew Theo was gay. When Theo had babysat for him, Theo had stayed after listening to Matt play banjo and talking about a Civil War reenactment of a rendezvous in the Ozark Mountains. Matt's dad had introduced Matt to reenactments when he was a kid, and Matt had carried on the tradition by taking up banjo and learning to build his

own instruments and play minstrel-style. Matt had played a few songs for Theo and asked about his schoolwork, his friends, his girlfriend. Usually, Theo didn't tell anyone about his sexual preferences, but with Matt, he couldn't keep from saying the truth. He'd wanted Matt to like him, who he really was, not who he had to pretend to be at school.

Matt stared out the window, at the hotels and condos and dunes passing by. He was lightly stoned. When he'd been sitting in the car waiting for Theo, he'd taken two hits from his pipe, and then he'd stowed it away in his pocket. Matt sighed at the scenery and asked Theo about some old Soloflex ads of a guy taking off his shirt. "You couldn't see his face," Matt said. "All you could see of him were his abs and his arms because the shirt was covering his head." Theo hadn't seen the ads, so Matt had gone on, distracted, describing what he thought about ads with partially clothed guys promoting workout equipment.

Theo hadn't said anything. He'd been straining with the effort to not say too much and to keep the car between the painted lines. But Theo loved hearing Matt talk about guys.

When Theo finally did speak, the sun had dropped to the horizon directly ahead of them, swelling to a brilliant watery red around the edges. White rolling sand dunes dimpled with bushes and swaying oat grass stretched out on each side of the road. There was no shoulder. A thin blanket of sand had been laid over the white stripes along the edge, as if preparing the roadway for nightfall. Dipping lower and lower until it was swallowed by the horizon, the sun had eventually winked out.

"Do you know about the flashlight tour of Fort Pickens?" Theo asked.

“I’m going,” Matt said, “But I think it’s kind of creepy.” Matt told him about some of the research he’d done on the Civil War, and that in the gift shop at the fort he’d found a book full of black and white photos of dead Civil War soldiers—strewn across fields, left near the bases of trees. The photographers had actually arranged the bodies for a more dramatic effect.

“That’s weirder than reenactment?”

“Sure,” Matt said. His voice got quiet as he theorized out loud. “Maybe it’s a fascination people have with what they don’t understand. Take enough pictures of death, or grief... maybe you’ll find some answer you didn’t had before. It’s disrespectful. A private moment. A dead man can’t turn the photographer away.”

Theo’s hands trembled at the wheel. He didn’t know Matt was stoned, hadn’t been around enough people who smoked to understand that they just ramble and don’t always make sense. It was like a conversation he might have had with his dad, a strange mix of before and after, and he didn’t want to think of Matt being like his dad. Theo also didn’t want to talk about death, but Matt had kept on, describing how photographers would take pictures of dead people during the Victorian era as a way of paying homage to the dead and remembering them. It wasn’t creepy to them like it is to us now. It was normal. Strange how things like that could change. Now, it almost seems like an invasion of something sacred, Matt had said, especially since all of the choice lay entirely in the hands of the photographer.

As Matt spoke, Theo had imagined his dad smashed inside his truck after the accident, his head turned at an odd angle so that his bloody face could be captured by a

camera lens, and Theo gripped the steering wheel tightly, trying to force the photograph of his father—dead—out of his head.

“It looks like they’re sleeping,” Matt said, “the Victorian images of the dead. But the soldiers, you *know* they’re not sleeping.” Matt was quiet for a moment, and finally, Theo talked.

“When I first saw my dad after the accident,” Theo said, “his head was bandaged and they had these things on his feet that kept inflating.”

Matt nodded, listening.

“They would fill with air all of a sudden and his whole body would jerk. Like he was trying to fall asleep and they wouldn’t let him.” Theo stared at the road ahead of him. “His legs were crushed and his blood wouldn’t circulate on its own. They had to re-break his knees after they healed. And they’ll probably do it again.” Theo twitched, wiped first one palm, then the other on his shorts. His dad’s brow and nose had been so swollen that part of his face had nearly lifted itself through the bandaging, like maybe someone had jammed a wooden cross up under the gauze. And he had moaned. Every time the machine would make the cuffs on his feet suddenly inflate, he would jump and moan. Theo had dreams, nightmares, of what his dad’s face looked like under the gauze, one of the lenses of his eyeglasses shoved into his eye socket. Theo dreamed once of lying on a steel operating table in a one-room stone castle. There was a chain-link fence—twenty feet high—just outside. Theo’s dad, his body battered by the accident, had been hiding beneath Theo, under the metal table. When there had been no guards around, Theo had helped his father outside the castle and over the fence, knowing for some reason that he couldn’t climb it himself. When Theo returned to the table, he fell asleep, but then he woke later,

panicked, minus both legs and his left arm. He lay on the table for what seemed like hours, expecting to lose his right arm too, but then he fell asleep waiting. He was surprised when he woke to his own room, his own arms and legs still attached.

Della was still talking. Theo definitely had not been listening. "...some offhand comments about his ex-wife," she said.

Matt's ex-wife.

"It's been a long time since you and I have had a serious talk."

"About what?" Theo said. He felt suddenly as if he needed to tiptoe around a carefully set trap. Della and his dad knew he was attracted to guys in a general sort of way—they knew he was gay—but they didn't know he liked anyone in particular. He'd convinced them that he and Jonathan were just friends. And he was certain they didn't know what had happened with Matt. And they never would.

"Well, if you decide to spend a semester abroad, you'll have access to a lot of different, new people," Della said. "You might meet someone you really like." His Spanish teacher had spent hours with him after school looking at exchange program applications and critiquing his letters. He tried to steer Della away by reminding her how many times they'd already talked about this, about him finding someone—he was too busy, he always told her, and anyway, if he got into an exchange program, he'd be even busier and way too nervous to try to meet anyone he'd *really like*.

She took a deep breath, still leaning too close. "I realize I've been letting a lot of things go because of your dad..." She looked directly at him. "Theo, I want you to tell me if you're in a relationship."

"What?"

“I mean a physical relationship with a boy.”

Her words landed in his lap like an iron weight. He kept his eyes straight ahead.

“Look, Della. Everything’s fine. I’ve got friends. My schoolwork is going okay.” He risked looking at her. “Coach says my running is fine—I’m having a great season.”

“Theo, you never go out, the only friend you have is Jonathan, and you’ve been nothing but sullen and distant this entire trip.”

“I’m a teenager,” he said. He shifted his jaw, trying to unclench the muscles.

Theo’s little sister Sam called from the back of the van. Della stretched around to look. “What is it, Hon?” She waited for some response that Theo didn’t hear, then answered that they would stop at the next rest area. “I’m worried about you,” she said in a low voice, still leaning across the armrest. “If there is something you need to talk about, I’m here.”

It was almost two in the morning when they turned onto their street. Jonathan’s house was next door. Jonathan’s old house. He and his family hadn’t come to Florida for spring break this year because they’d spent the week moving their things to a big house on a wooded lot south of town.

Darkness clung to the street and Jonathan’s truck wasn’t parked near the curb in its usual spot. A realtor’s sign glowed faintly in the corner of his yard, reflecting a distant light. Theo couldn’t help staring at the empty windows of Jonathan’s house each time he passed with another armful of gear. He’d washed every one of those windows with Jonathan last summer when Dr. Norton, Jonathan’s dad, had offered to pay them both if they did a good job. They’d switched off, one on the inside and the other outside, making

faces through smeared panes of glass and wet handfuls of folded newspaper. When Jonathan's soccer ball shattered the picture window later that summer, the replacement sucked up all of their window washing money plus every last bit of Jonathan's savings. It had been Theo's kick that did the damage, but Jonathan took the blame. Dr. Norton's temper was explosive, and Jonathan would never have let Theo bear the brunt of it.

Theo and his dad transferred the camping gear slowly to the garage while Della helped the girls to bed. His dad said his knees were aching after sitting all day in the van. It was cold, and his breath came out in steamy puffs. With each armload he walked less and less steadily.

"I'll get the rest," Theo said and finished unloading. He got to his room and shut the door before Della tried to find him.

Theo sat on the edge of his bed with his head in his hands until he remembered the shells he'd put in his swim trunks. The shorts were stuffed inside his backpack. He dug around, recognizing the fabric with his fingertips, and found the right-hand pocket. There were five shells—he set them on his nightstand, and in the darkness pushed them away from the edge. He leaned back and slid his legs between his favorite blue flannel sheets. He wanted to call Jonathan, to find out what happened with the new kid, Richard, to tell Jonathan every stupid thing that had happened with Matt at the fort the night of his birthday. The kiss. The blowjob. Running on the beach afterwards wishing he could make himself keep going out until the water turned deep and sucked him down into its darkness.

The phone call would have to wait. It was too late, and if Della heard his voice, it would give her a reason to knock on his door. To see if he was okay. Theo stared up at the glow-in-the-dark outline of Cassiopeia on his ceiling until he fell asleep.

Chapter Two

Sunlight slanted through the blinds, illuminating a poster of Greg Louganis on a downward spiral into an aquamarine Olympic-sized pool. A corkboard with two postcards from Spain and a Rufus Wainwright CD cover hung on the wall alongside Greg's fantastic dive. Near the window was a movie-sized poster of painted red lips cradling a cross-dressed Tim Curry and dripping letters that spelled out *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Below it was John Cameron Mitchell swinging a head-full of yellow hair as Hedwig of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Three shelves held books and CD's above a computer. Hanging on the wall just under the bottom shelf was a gold pocket watch. On its surface was etched an old-time locomotive, a symbol of the railroad company Theo's grandfather had worked for as a young man.

"Theo, wake up."

Theo wedged his head deep under the pillow. Jonathan was in the hallway, knocking and jiggling Theo's door handle. "Let me in, Bitch, or I'll have to break this door down."

Theo pulled the pillow away from his face. "Jonathan?"

"No, it's the cleaning lady. Open the door, Dufus!"

Theo sat up and reached from his bed to unlock the doorknob. Jonathan pushed it open before Theo could pull away. “Shit. Come in, why don’t you?” Theo said, shaking out his hand.

“Did I hurt you?” Jonathan took Theo’s wrist and rotated his hand a few times. “There. How’s that?”

“Great.”

“How was the trip? I thought you guys wouldn’t be back until tonight.” Jonathan pulled the chair from Theo’s desk and sat in it, tilting back with his feet on Theo’s bed.

His shoes were at the front door according to Della’s command, lined up with everyone else’s. “Those better be clean socks,” Theo said. It sounded grouchier than he felt. Actually—it was a relief to see Jonathan. His dark spiky hair was sticking out from under his knit cap, and week-old stubble was growing along his chin.

Jonathan pulled one foot to his nose, balancing with the other. He took in a deep breath. “They’re clean. Promise.” He put his sock-covered toes back on the bed. “Now, tell me about Florida.”

Theo leaned back against the wall. He pulled the pillow onto his lap and then ran his hands through his tangled blonde hair. He stared at Jonathan. “You first.”

“Why,” Jonathan said in a high, feminine voice, “I thought you’d forgotten our little bet.” He turned, fluttering his hand as if he were waving a fan.

“Did I win?”

“Ah.” Jonathan downshifted several octaves. “Still don’t know.” He pressed his palm into his toes, cracking several of them. “He helped me move. I brought him out for a burger. Maybe, but I don’t think so.” Jonathan wasn’t ready to tell Theo the truth. He

was fairly certain Richard was gay, caught him looking too long, heard him never mention any girls, and of course noticed the choker at his neck, but Jonathan ignored it all. He'd realized he didn't want Richard knowing he was gay, didn't know enough about this kid from Chicago to let him in. Richard went to their school—he wasn't a nameless blowjob at the park or the public library. This was a small Bible Belt town, after all. Besides, if Richard figured out he was gay, it wouldn't take long for him to realize, by proximity, that Theo was gay, too. Jonathan would never put Theo at that kind of risk.

“So I win.”

“For now,” Jonathan said. He shifted his feet and started cracking his other toes. “Now tell me about Florida. What about that one tour guide with the moustache?”

“Nah. There was nobody interesting.” Theo bunched the pillow up in his lap. He wasn't satisfied with Jonathan's answer, but he decided to wait for the details about Richard until Jonathan was ready to tell him. There was no point in pushing. Yet.

Jonathan reached over to the desk and picked up one of the shells. “These are sweet.” He ran a flat pink shell between each of his thin fingers, like he was performing a card trick. “You brought these back for me, right?”

“Maybe.”

“Did you miss me?”

“No.”

“Good, I didn't miss you either.” Jonathan looked down at the shell in his palm. “Someone gave you these. You met someone on the beach, didn't you?”

“No.” Theo didn't look at Jonathan.

Jonathan squinted at Theo and crossed his arms over his chest. “What about that new guy?”

“What about him?”

Jonathan dropped the front legs of the chair to the floor. “You’d better tell me everything.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Bitch,” Jonathan leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “I know you better than that.”

Theo looked down at his lap. He wrapped the edge of the pillowcase around his index finger. Then Jonathan yanked the pillow off Theo’s lap.

“Cut it out!” Theo grabbed the pillow and held onto it.

Sitting up and tilting his chair again, Jonathan said, “Alright. I’m not leaving until you ’fess up.”

Theo scratched behind his ears and then dropped his hands onto his lap. He couldn’t press for details about Richard, but it was no problem for Jonathan to press for details about Matt. It was because Jonathan had no idea how bad it was. “I fucked up.” Theo looked at Jonathan. “I really fucked up.”

“What’d you do?”

Theo didn’t want to say anything. He didn’t want to tell Jonathan. It was his fault, damn it. If they hadn’t gotten in that stupid argument. “Fuck.” Theo took a deep breath. Start at the beginning. Just start at the beginning. “Okay,” he said. “They did that flashlight tour thing. At night. That short woman with the one arm led it. She talked a lot about Geronimo.”

“Only important details, please.”

Theo looked away. “Matt—that’s the new professor—we were near the back. Looking at those excavated arches by the old cannons. His flashlight was running out.” He stared at his hands, tangled in the pillowcase. He told Jonathan he tried to give Matt his flashlight. The tour group had moved on and he and Matt kept hanging back. Every twenty feet or so, those short doorways would open up in the wall. They led to the low hallways where they used to store munitions.

Theo had ducked inside one of the low doorways. “Join me?” he’d asked Matt.

Matt had said no.

“We’ve got time,” Theo had said. He’d backed farther inside.

Matt held Theo’s arm, and then let go. “I don’t think you should.”

“It doesn’t really go back that far.”

“No,” Matt had said.

Theo had come out of the tunnel and stared into Matt’s face. Shadows. Matt was at least an inch taller, maybe two. And he was standing very close. When Matt pushed Theo’s hand to the side, Theo didn’t move. He kept holding the flashlight there between them.

Matt took it, but said, “Theo, I can’t.” Theo’s neck flushed with heat and his armpits tingled. Matt was running his hand through his hair. “I don’t like tunnels,” he said, trying to walk around Theo. “We should probably go... Here,” he said, offering the light back to Theo.

“Matt, I didn’t mean—”

“Take it.” Matt had tried to press it into Theo’s hand.

Nothing was going to happen.

“No,” Theo said. “There’s plenty of moonlight and I can make it back on my own.”

“You could get lost.”

“I won’t get lost,” Theo said. He’d turned away and left before Matt could follow him. Really, there hadn’t been much moonlight at all. Theo was walking along corridors and hallways, his sense of direction so far off that he couldn’t find Geronimo’s room or anything else that looked familiar. He’d hesitated in a doorway and turned when footsteps scraped on the brick floor behind him. It was Matt.

“You should come back to camp with me.”

“I’m alright.”

“Your parents will worry.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I didn’t mean you couldn’t take care of yourself. Just that if I show up without you, your parents will ask where you are.”

Theo’s feet wouldn’t move. “My parents won’t be worried,” he said. “The tour only just ended. If they ask, tell them you didn’t see me.” Theo anchored his hands in his pockets and shivered under his hooded sweatshirt.

“There’s no moon.” Matt was looking beyond Theo’s shoulder. “It’s too dark to be going around without a flashlight. Here.” He offered back the molded plastic handle again, the beam lighting the space between them.

Theo had reached for the light, but instead of taking it, he’d wrapped his hand over Matt’s and pulled forcefully. The flashlight had fallen to the ground.

“I kissed him.” Theo was staring at his hands. “I kissed him.”

“Serious?” Jonathan’s voice was a whisper.

“And he kissed me back.”

Theo had held onto Matt’s jaw. Matt had pushed away, but Theo held tight. Then he slid one hand to Matt’s waist and the other to cup the base of Matt’s skull, and he could feel Matt struggling. But finally, Matt stopped.

“And then I went down on him.” Theo looked at Jonathan, steady blue eyes, still, quiet hands. “I unbuttoned his pants. I told him it was my birthday. Everyone had forgotten.” He stared into Jonathan’s eyes. “I told him the only thing I wanted was him. And he let me.”

Matt had tasted exactly like Theo imagined he would... saltwater and sweat and the flesh of ripe fruit. “Thank you,” Theo had whispered when Matt couldn’t stop shaking after the orgasm. Theo had put his arm around Matt and held him. *Would you go down on me?* Theo had wanted to ask. *Are you sure you’re not gay?* He’d wanted to say it so badly that he wasn’t sure he hadn’t. Matt had wrapped his arms around Theo’s waist, but then his body froze. They’d both stopped breathing.

“We stood there,” Theo told Jonathan. He sighed, looking past Jonathan’s shoulder at the bare branches on the tree outside the window.

“Yeah?” Jonathan said.

“I was trying. Shit.” Theo rolled his head side to side against the wall. He stopped and looked at his blank computer screen, his pocket watch, and the stacks of CD’s on the shelves above.

Jonathan put his chair flat on the floor again. “Just say it.”

“I was still so fucking jazzed. I should have just walked away.” He was quiet for a minute. “At first, it was no big deal. I mean, we were just hugging, and I thought everything was okay. Like, he got through being freaked out, and we were holding each other, and then...” he stopped talking, hoping for some sign from Jonathan. Was he jealous? Did he think he was just an ass?

“Yes?” Jonathan leaned forward. “I’m listening, okay? Just tell me.”

“He started crying. And he was yelling at me. He had a hold of my shirt. And then I left.”

“You left?” Jonathan’s eyes tightened, searching Theo’s face.

“Yeah, I left,” Theo said, but Jonathan kept asking him questions. Theo was trying to leave out the part about shoving Matt against the bricks. The part about them fighting. “He was shaking me. He had my shoulders. I pushed him. His head hit the wall. It didn’t knock him out or anything.” Matt had slid down to the floor and screamed at him to *get the fuck away*.

Theo pushed the pillow off his lap and pulled his knees up to his chest. “So I went to the beach. I had to get away,” he said. “He left the next morning.”

Jonathan raised his arms and put his hands behind his head. He’d put his feet back on the edge of Theo’s bed and was pushing against it, slowly rocking. The shell was in his lap. “Heavy.”

“I know.”

Jonathan picked up another shell from Theo’s desk. It was a conical shaped bone-colored spiral. He rolled it between his fingers and then laid it across the other shell on his lap. Theo stared at it, remembering the tee shirt Jonathan had bought him in Florida

last year—a tight pink tank top that said “Everything’s Better on the Beach.” It was buried in the back of Theo’s closet. The one time he’d worn it—when Jonathan’s parents were gone and Theo had stayed over all weekend—Jonathan had torn the shirt with his teeth, using only his mouth to undress Theo. A handful of shells was pretty lame compared to that shirt.

“Maybe you should just forget about it. You’ll see him somewhere, you’ll feel like a freak, and then it will pass.”

Theo looked away. “I can’t forget about it.”

“Well, give it a rest for a few days, then we’ll see if we can figure something out.”

“We?”

“Of course. You think I’d leave you on your own for this one?”

Theo hugged his knees tighter. “I think my parents might suspect something,” he said through a sigh. “Della was asking a bunch of questions about Matt on the drive home, and about why you are my only friend. She even asked if I’d had any ‘physical’ relationships yet. I told her she’s only worried because I’m going away soon.” He rested his hand on the pillow beside him. “Spain. Remember?”

“You think I’d forget?” Jonathan set the shells back on the desk and let his chair sit level on the floor again. He rubbed his hands across his thighs and looked up at Theo. “We’ll come up with something. Just try to stay relaxed. Think like an innocent man.”

“Fuck that,” Theo said.

“Really. Come see our new house. Let’s go out tonight and celebrate your birthday. There’s a place downtown I’ve been wanting to bring you for months.”

So, Jonathan remembered. “I don’t want to go to a gay bar for my birthday,” Theo said.

“You gotta go if you want your present,” Jonathan said, and he asked what Theo’s parents got him.

“Didn’t you hear me? Everyone forgot.”

Jonathan laughed. “Come on, they were just busy...”

“Whatever,” Theo said, sinking.

Jonathan leaped out of the chair and pounced on him, pinning him on the bed.

“You don’t need a birthday spanking, do you?”

When Theo finally got Jonathan in a scissors hold, he looked at the clock. It was almost noon.

“Just shove some shit in a bag and take a shower at my house.” Jonathan stood and stretched, touching his hands to the highest shelf above Theo’s computer. “Since when did you start listening to Brazilian music?” He took down a jewel case to read the front insert. “Is Brazil your backup plan?”

“Maybe.”

“You’d have to learn Portuguese.”

Theo closed his backpack and slung it across his shoulder. If that’s what it took to get away from his ridiculous family, maybe he would learn Portuguese. “Here,” he said, sliding the shells off the desk onto his open hand. “These are for you.”

“Theo, you shouldn’t have,” Jonathan teased. “Sorry you’ve got to wait until tonight for yours.” He set the CD case on the desk and took the shells from Theo.

Jonathan spread the shells out on his palm and turned each one over, then folded them into his hand and in a more serious voice, said thanks. He put the shells in his pocket with one hand and pulled Theo to him with the other. They kissed, and for the first time in days, the tension in Theo's gut began to unwind. He felt Jonathan reach over to the door, close it and lock it in one movement, but Theo pulled away. "It is totally not cool to do this here."

Jonathan reached around and grabbed Theo's ass. "Fine, I'll meet you outside."

When Theo got to the kitchen, his dad was sitting at the counter on a wooden stool.

"Hey, Dad."

"It took Jonathan that long to get you out of bed?" He turned the paper to the Saturday sports section. He wobbled, and then stuck his leg out to get his balance.

"Yeah, well, someone kept me out late last night." Theo scanned the counter for food. It was supposed to be a joke, but his dad didn't get it. All of his concentration was now on the columns of newsprint. Theo shifted the backpack higher on his shoulder, watching his dad. He picked up an apple from the bowl on the center island countertop.

"Jonathan wants me to go over to his house," Theo said. "Is that alright?"

His dad looked up. "His new house?" He rustled the pages, turning from national sports to his favorite, the college scores.

"Yeah," Theo said through a mouthful of apple. He pushed the fridge door closed with his hip and set the gallon jug of skim milk next to the microwave. "Any good news?" Theo asked, nodding at the paper.

“Nope,” his dad said and set the spots section next to his mug. “Damn if I didn’t miss the end of March Madness again.” He took a sip of coffee and looked out the kitchen window, rubbing his neck. “I’m sure going to miss them.”

Theo drank the last swallow of milk and set the glass in the sink. After the conversation with Della the day before—the questions about a physical relationship—he decided not to ever mention how much he hated that Jonathan was moving to the other side of town. “Their new place is supposed to be nice—way out in the woods.” He grabbed some toaster pastries from the pantry and shoved them in his pocket. “So, it’s alright if I go to Jonathan’s?”

“Sure. Oh—wait.” His dad lifted the other sections of the newspaper, looking for something underneath. “Della left you a note.” It was a lavender sheet from her memo pad.

Theo took it and read it while he put the milk back in the refrigerator. He shut the door too hard. “Come on, Dad. You’ve got to get me out of this.” She wanted him to take all of the sleeping bags and wash them in the triple size washers at the laundromat. A roll of quarters waited for him near the microwave.

“Sorry, Son. I’ve got my own list.” His dad rubbed the spot between his eyebrows and pushed another lavender note to the edge of the counter. Theo read his stepmother’s angular writing directing his dad to do his own list of chores while she was running errands.

“Can’t you tell her I’ll do it tomorrow?”

Theo's dad closed the paper and folded all of the sections together. "I guess, but you know she doesn't listen to me." He tapped his head. "Not since the old noggin got whacked."

Theo winced and looked away. Okay, it was an attempt at being funny. But it wasn't—it just wasn't.

His dad looked at the backpack hanging from Theo's shoulder. "Why the bag?"

"Some extra clothes in case Jonathan and I go out tonight."

His dad sighed. "I'll put a good word in for you. Just don't come home too late."

Theo put the note in his pocket. "I'll probably sleep at Jonathan's house, if that's okay." He started moving toward the door and his dad followed him.

"Overnight?"

"I'll be back first thing in the morning."

"I don't know, Son."

"And you can give me something off your list."

"I think Della's planning to bake a cake... for your big day?"

"It's already been four days..." The heaviness Theo had been feeling sunk all the way to his feet. His dad just stared at him, a pitiful, quizzical look. "Alright, I'll call," Theo said and opened the front door.

Jonathan was waiting on the steps. "What took you so long?" Jonathan stood and saw Theo's dad over Theo's shoulder. "Oh, hey Dr. Williamson. Mind if I take Theo with me?"

"That's fine." He reached out and clapped Jonathan on the shoulder. "Sorry you couldn't make the trip."

“Believe me,” Jonathan said, rubbing his arm. “I would much rather have been in Florida than helping the folks move.”

Theo pulled up the zipper on his hooded sweatshirt. It was too cold and damp for just standing around in front of the house.

“So, you’re all moved in?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan said. “Mom and Dad are still cleaning. My brother drove back to school this morning and the only way I got out of scrub duty was to load my truck with the last of the stuff from the garage and offer to bring it over to the new house.”

“Speaking of which...” Theo stepped onto the sidewalk. “We should go. See ya, Dad. I’ll call later.”

“Take it easy, Dr. Williamson.”

“Alright.” Theo’s dad waved and stood there a moment.

Theo and Jonathan walked down the driveway, and when they got to the truck, Theo let out a long, low breath. “Let’s go before Della gets home.”

The house Jonathan’s parents had bought was south of town, down a gravel road that wasn’t far from a two-lane paved highway. There was a sunny patch large enough for Jonathan’s mother’s garden, but the rest of the land was densely wooded oak-hickory forest. Jonathan eased the truck into the driveway, two ruts of glistening red mud that would harden to permanent ridges once the spring rains were over. He made a three-point turn to back up to the garage. “We can save unloading for later,” he said, pulling the key from the ignition and pressing down the emergency break with his foot.

The walkway was flagstone grown over with last year's weeds. Chrysanthemum skeletons huddled near the foundation on either side of the door. "My mom hates the front. The first thing she said she wants to do is build a front porch." He turned the house key inside the deadbolt. "Or, should I say, she wants me and Dad and my brother to build a porch." The door gave way with a nudge from his shoulder and opened onto a bright, stone-tiled entrance, windows sweeping from the floor to the open second-story ceiling.

"Nice," Theo said, taking in the expansive living room and entryway. The familiar matching blue sofa and recliner were both laden with cardboard boxes and surrounded by stacks of more boxes set randomly on the floor. The kitchen was connected to the living room, resuming the stone tiles from the entryway and continuing the pattern to a set of French doors that opened to a deck.

"Come see." Jonathan led Theo to the view that spread out from the double doors. Trees grew just beyond the deck, giving it a secluded, private feeling.

"This is excellent." Theo leaned against the railing next to Jonathan, looking out into the bare trees and the woods beyond. There was a hint of green in the under story, cushioned by wet brown leaves. Theo rubbed his hands across his arms. There was no wind, but it was chilly.

"Let's get inside," Jonathan said and led him to the stairway. Openly spaced wooden steps climbed to the upper story and carpeted stairs wound down to the basement. At the bottom of the carpeted stairs, Jonathan announced, "This is my domain." He brought Theo to the center of a large carpeted common room that opened to a second wooden deck, several other rooms and an area that looked like a bar.

Theo walked over to the liquor cabinet and checked the shelves.

“Sorry, Sir, but we’re not fully stocked yet.”

“This rocks,” Theo said, turning knobs to test the sink on the backside of the bar.
“Sweet.”

“Wait ’til you see this.” Jonathan beckoned Theo to a doorway near the stairs. It was Jonathan’s room. Theo recognized the dark wooden head- and footboards stacked against the wall. A mattress covered with plaid sheets and matching maroon bedspread was on the floor near the middle of the room. “Don’t mind the mess,” Jonathan said, wading through to open the door on the far wall. It was a bathroom, though most of it was the shower. Ceramic tile and glass brick spanned the entire back wall, facing the same direction as the two decks. The garbled image of thousands of trees filtered into the room.

“Holy shit.” Theo ran his hand along the tiled countertop and caught his image in the round mirror set between two circular windows. “God, I look awful.”

“Nothing a shower won’t fix.” Jonathan moved to the shower and reached in. He turned both knobs, and Theo could see the water cascading beyond his profile. Jonathan pulled his shirt over his head and Theo watched as his abdomen and chest and shoulders were revealed. Jonathan’s hair was darker than Theo’s. Neither of them really had much in the chest area, but what Jonathan had was more obvious because of its color, dispersed between his nipples, disappearing until his navel, then trailing in a thin black line to the patch surrounding his cock. Which was already uncovered. Jonathan stepped into the shower with his back to the nozzle and let the water pour over his head.

It was a relief to see the familiar lines of Jonathan’s body. For as intensely awkward and embarrassed Theo had felt around Matt, he felt just as strongly fluid and

confident with Jonathan. Theo unzipped his sweatshirt, slid out of his pants and tee shirt and threw all of his clothes on the floor in a pile near Jonathan's. He stepped within the ceramic and glass enclosure, opposite his friend, whose eyes were closed beneath the bubbles migrating from the top of his head to his chin. Leaning against the cold tile, Theo watched through the steam, enjoying the sensation of heat and chill and the beginning of an erection.

Jonathan leaned forward and opened his eyes. "I learned a new trick while you were gone." He took a dark blue bottle from the built-in tile shelf and poured green shampoo onto his hand. "Stand over here," he motioned to the glass brick wall on his left, "and face that way."

Theo moved over and stood looking through the small patterned squares of glass.

"And maybe put your hands up."

He lifted his hands and fell forward, glad to follow instructions. Jonathan leaned against him, pushing the top of his head into Theo's upper back, forearms resting across Theo's hips and rubbing the thick liquid between both hands. Branches shimmered in front of Theo, the glass and mortar held his weight, and the water from the shower splashed across his calves and ankles. Jonathan's hands reached for Theo, gliding a mixture of ice and heat slowly up and down. Theo gasped and opened his eyes.

"Relax."

"What is that shit?" Theo's back tensed and he almost shivered.

"Medicated shampoo. A bit chilly, is it?"

Theo didn't answer, he could only moan as Jonathan's hands went slightly faster. He arched his back and Jonathan kept himself curved behind Theo, hugging him hard and

squeezing his arms tighter around Theo's waist. In a shudder that went the entire length of his body, Theo came onto the tile floor between his feet. He stood there a minute, feeling the press of Jonathan's skin against his own. "Now, that was awesome." He turned around to face Jonathan—they were almost exactly the same height—and kissed him. Theo wanted to do something in return, but Jonathan smiled and said he'd get his later.

Theo finished showering alone after Jonathan left to unload his truck. Theo used the other shampoo to wash his hair, the unmedicated kind, and stared at the trees shimmering through the glass brick as the water pulsed across his shoulders. He wondered where Jonathan learned this "new" trick. Theo would rather think that Jonathan just came up with it on his own than admit that someone—Richard—might have shown it to him. A week was a long time to be away. He needed to get the details out of Jonathan, but it was better to wait until Jonathan was ready to tell him. Theo rinsed the bubbles from his hair and leaned against the glass wall again. Who was he to be jealous, anyway? Jonathan was cool about what happened with Matt. Theo needed to be cool like that, too.

Chapter Three

A rainbow flag hung just inside the street front window. The door was held open by a huge white guy dressed in a torn black T-shirt and a striped knit cap. He clicked the stud on his tongue against his front teeth and nodded at Theo and Jonathan, waving them on into the throbbing smoke of the only gay bar in town.

Theo got his wallet out and was digging for his ID and money. “That guy is fucking large!” he yelled into Jonathan’s ear. They stood in the line fanning out from the register, just inside the door.

“Don’t let him find you in the bathroom,” Jonathan said.

“Ten bucks,” the tall person of indeterminate gender told them, holding out a hand wide enough to palm a regulation basketball, long fingers ending in manicured nails. Both boys handed over the money and Theo shoved his ID quickly into his back pocket.

As a first-timer, Theo couldn’t help but stare. Tall, stringy boys in black lounged alongside handfuls of girls looking tough in wife-beater tees and spiky hair. The dance area was raised two feet off the floor and was nothing more than plywood on painted two-by-fours. Tables hugged the edges, and heads were turned, enjoying the show. There was a mix of ages, with groups of older women laughing and pointing at various dancers, middle-aged men standing alone or in pairs staring mesmerized by the bodies on stage, and then every age in between. Among the smoke and gyrating bodies, Theo spotted two thin blonde teens, not much older than he and Jonathan. The two were dressed in tight jeans and even tighter tee shirts, and they faced the crowd, one in front of the other, ass to crotch. Theo looked down at his own crotch, thankful he hadn’t tucked in his shirt. The top three snaps of his shirt were undone and his hand drifted to his chest, but he didn’t fasten any higher.

“Let’s get a drink.” Jonathan tugged at his elbow.

“How are we going to do that?” Theo turned to eye the bar and the bottled liquor lined neatly behind the bartender’s head.

Jonathan looked around, surveying the onlookers flanking them to either side. “Just stay with me and relax, okay?”

“Right,” Theo said and followed Jonathan, turning sideways to slide through bodies that didn’t move out of the way. He couldn’t help but rub against a guy with a tight, flowery button-down shirt. They kept pushing through slowly, and Theo was surprised his ass didn’t get grabbed at least once. He stayed close to Jonathan until the crowd thinned.

When they stopped, it was on a patio that connected two separate areas, one with the dance floor they had just passed, the other with video games placed randomly against the walls. Standing awkwardly for a few minutes, they both scanned the faces around them. “Check that guy out,” Jonathan said, looking back toward the edge of the bar.

Theo turned slightly and saw that it was the guy with the flower-printed shirt. He had a bottle in his hand and was watching the dance floor. Two men approached him. They were well dressed. All three of them were probably twenty-something. “The guy in the flowers?” Theo asked.

“Yeah. What do you think?”

“He’s cute, but he’s with those other guys.”

“Nah,” said Jonathan. “He’s alone. They’re just saying hello.”

Theo kept watching until the two men drifted away. The one in the flower print took a drink from his bottle and turned to look in Theo and Jonathan’s direction, smiled, and then went back to watching the dance floor. A woman with short, spiky hair walked up to him then, an older woman who looked familiar to Theo. “I think I know that lady,”

he said and kept watching her. The woman looked in Theo's direction. "Shit!" He turned to Jonathan. "That's my first grade teacher!"

"No way." Jonathan watched her over Theo's shoulder. "Say hi to her."

"I can't."

"Theo." Jonathan punched him in the ribs. "If she's in here, she's probably lesbian. She's not going to care if you're gay. Come on, she'll introduce us to that guy, and then we'll be able to get a drink."

"Fuck," Theo said. He pushed his sleeves up closer to his elbows and walked slowly toward the bar. Jonathan pressed from behind.

"Mrs. Sherman?" He touched her arm and she turned toward him.

"Yes?" She finished a drink of beer. "It's been awhile since anyone's called me *that*."

"Umm, I'm Theo Williamson...first grade, Lincoln Elementary." He wasn't really sure what to do, so he held out his hand.

Mrs. Sherman took his hand in hers, and her fingers were warm and smooth. "Oh, Theo, you always had such good manners."

"You remember me?"

Smile lines curved out from her eyes and she said of course and she introduced him to Tom, the guy in the flower-print shirt. Theo pushed Jonathan, maybe a little too hard, toward Tom, and they shook hands. Tom offered to buy them all drinks and Jonathan offered to wait at the bar with him. Theo hesitated, not sure he wanted to walk away. But he did. He and Mrs. Sherman went together toward the patio to find a table, away from the loud techno blasting from the wall of speakers. Her hair wasn't blonde

anymore, but platinum and gray and she probably spent more money to have it styled than Theo could make in a month of mowing lawns. Maybe she didn't teach first grade anymore.

"You can call me Carol," she said when they sat down together at the table.

"No, that's too weird."

"No weirder than meeting up here," she answered, and raised her bottle to him in a salute.

Theo agreed. He watched the crowd with her for a few minutes and then excused himself to the bathroom. If he didn't really have to go so bad, he would have headed to the bar to look for Jonathan and that guy. Instead, Theo was jostled along between bodies in the other direction until he found the door marked "Men." Underneath, scratched into the wood was written "Lovely Ladies" and "Boys, Too." He pushed the door open to the smell of old piss and sweat. Two people were kissing near the sink. They were both black, and one was obviously male. He looked like a gymnast, his dark bare shoulders, back and waist ending abruptly in a belt and blue jeans. Seated on the counter was a thin, light chocolate colored, mostly female person dressed in matching striped pants and shirt. Part of her ass was showing, revealing a waist no thicker than the top of Theo's leg. Theo used the urinal farthest away from them and concentrated on the stream splashing over the stained porcelain, trying not to hear the moaning, sucking noises going on behind him.

When Theo got back out to the patio, Mrs. Sherman was alone at the table, two beers set in front of her. "Tom left this for you," she said, pushing the bottle toward Theo.

"Where'd he go?" He looked around as he sat in the chair next to her.

“I think they wanted to dance,” she said, lighting a cigarette with a shiny metal lighter. She inhaled and then sat back with her beer resting on the arm of her chair. “So, what brings you here, Theo?”

He cleared his throat and took a drink. “I guess the same reason most folks are here.” He stared at the people walking past, took another drink and then turned to look at her. “Why are you here?”

She smiled. “It’s not just gay folks who show up at a place like this. There are some straight people too.”

His mouth fell open. “So you’re straight?”

“Yeah,” she said and took a drink and another drag on her cigarette. “And I enjoy watching men with men.” She leaned forward and patted his knee. “Hope I’m not embarrassing you too much.” She relaxed in her chair again, the end of her cigarette glowing bright with a long inhalation. “But really,” she blew the smoke over his head, “I enjoy anything masculine when it comes to sex. Almost like being a woman is just incidental to who I am.”

He nodded and looked away.

“I come here with Tom sometimes. He’s my boss.”

“You still teach?”

“I stopped teaching about ten years ago, after my husband died.” Carol tapped her cigarette over the black melamine ashtray. “I decided it was time for a change.” She stared through the open doorway, her chair offering a better view of the dance floor than Theo’s. “You know, I lost my son too.”

“Oh,” Theo said. He took a long drink of his beer.

“He would be as old as Tom. I guess that’s why I’m so sweet on the guy. Not to mention how cute he is.”

“Jonathan had him pegged by the time we got from the door to the end of the bar.”

“They’re certainly enjoying themselves.”

Theo leaned forward to see the view from Carol’s angle. Jonathan and Tom were dancing near one corner of the raised floor. Jonathan was facing the crowd and Tom was behind him, both hands on Jonathan’s waist.

“Want to join them?”

“Sure,” Theo said. “Do you want to finish your drink first?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean with me,” she laughed. “You go on up there and dance. I’ll save our table.”

Theo drank the last of his beer and scooted his chair back. “Are you sure?”

“No, go ahead. I’ll have more fun watching.”

He had to walk around to the far side of the dance floor to find the steps, passing a tower of speakers tall enough to belt out sound for a rock concert. The music thumped and pulsed through his chest, alternating in rhythm with the strobe lights and fog so that he felt pushed and pulled by sound and light and bodies in motion. Jonathan and Tom were in the middle of a crowd, facing each other, but they moved apart so Theo could join them. Jonathan turned toward Theo and leaned into his shoulder. “This guy is hot. Let’s take him home.” He backed away and smiled.

“Maybe you could get his phone number,” Theo yelled. Jonathan nodded and turned around, backing his ass into Theo’s crotch. Theo put his hands on Jonathan’s

waist. Tom stood in front of both of them. They danced sandwiched almost through an entire song. Jonathan spun around, and then moved to the side so Theo and Tom were facing each other. Tom approached, matching the rhythm of his hips to Theo's. He made his way around Theo, and then danced behind him, running his hands slowly from Theo's lats down to his thighs. Theo went with it. Tom smelled good, and his hands never hesitated. Theo leaned into Tom, pressing back with his ass until they were touching all the way from thighs to shoulders. Jonathan had started dancing with someone else.

“You've never been here before?”

Theo shook his head.

“How did you meet Jonathan?” Tom's mouth was just under Theo's ear. He ran his nose along Theo's neck.

“Neighbors.”

“Same dorm?”

Theo turned so he could face Tom. He pulled him close and spoke into his ear.

“We're both still in high school.”

“Shit.”

“Did he tell you we were older?”

“No,” Tom said, pressing his mouth to Theo's ear, each switching places as they talked back and forth. “Just a guess. Are you guys legal?”

“To drink?”

Tom pushed away, smiling. He pulled Theo in close again. “No,” Tom said. “Not to drink.” He drew Theo by the waist and didn't say any more. When the music faded

into drum machine thumping, Tom signaled toward the table where Carol was sitting. “I need a break.”

Theo nodded and saw Jonathan surrounded by three or four wispy guys. They resembled the blondes from earlier in the evening.

When Jonathan saw him, he raised his arms and stepped forward, meeting Theo halfway. “Where’s Tom?”

“At the table,” Theo said and pointed past the bar.

“What do you think about him?”

“Nice, but he’s too old. He thinks we’re in college.”

“That’s alright.”

“I told him we’re in high school.”

“You dork.”

“Sorry,” Theo said, shrugging his shoulders. He moved in closer to Jonathan.

When they got back to the table, Carol and Tom were talking, and there were four fresh beers. “Here,” Tom said, holding up two of the bottles. “Drink up before we’re discovered. I hear there’s a birthday boy in our midst.”

Theo smiled and they all raised their beers to him and said cheers and happy birthday. The patio was quieter than the dance floor. They were close enough to see the dancers and feel the bass vibrating through the wooden decking, but far enough away that they could all actually hear each other without screaming. Jonathan sat next to Tom and Theo next to Carol. “Thanks,” Theo said, not quite leaning back in his seat. “But we probably shouldn’t have accepted the drinks.”

“Come on, it’s your birthday,” Tom said. “And besides, I did the same thing before I could buy my own.”

“Well, I didn’t,” Carol said. She winked at Theo. “But I don’t mind contributing to the delinquency of minors every once in a while.” She took a long drag off her cigarette. “Don’t go doing anything too crazy just because it’s your birthday.” Smoke drifted from her in a slow arc. Tom lit a cigarette too, nodding and relaxing into his seat. Jonathan looked happy.

“So, how’s your dad these days, Theo?” Carol asked. “Still teaching?”

“Umm,” he started. His mom had died when he was in first grade, so Mrs. Sherman knew what that year had been like for Theo. He took a breath and said that he had a step-mom now and she teaches junior high math, and his dad was still in the Math Department at Missouri University.

She rested her hand on Theo’s arm and said she was still so sorry about his mother. She reminded Theo of that field trip in early fall that his mom had helped with, and Theo saw a glimpse of an entirely different family that he’d almost forgotten. Carol paused, taking a drink of beer and another hit from her cigarette. “Your dad read a Christmas story to our class, didn’t he?”

Theo had forgotten. That year was a blur that he didn’t think about often. He told Carol about the car accident, and when she asked if his dad had been hurt badly, Theo gave her a list of his dad’s injuries in a voice that was distant and flat, telling her how both of his knees and ankles were shattered, his collarbone and several ribs had been broken, and his cheekbone and skull had been fractured. He didn’t say anything about the

way his dad's glasses had carved a permanent scar into his face, or how the doctors had re-broken both his knees to loosen the calcified deposits behind his kneecaps.

"His skull?" Carol repeated.

"Yeah," Theo said, looking away. "Traumatic brain injury. He was in a coma for a week."

"But he's better now?"

"Um-hmm." Theo thought for a minute. He hadn't tried to describe what his dad was like since the accident to anyone in a long time. "He's better, but he's not the same."

Tom and Jonathan were watching the stage, both sort of quiet and listening. Theo couldn't see the dancers, but he didn't want to turn away from Carol.

"I'm so sorry," she said, touching his knee.

"It's okay," Theo said. "It's not so bad anymore." Which was mostly true.

She crushed the end of her cigarette under her shoe, a red leather flat, and sat back. "Oh, I remember what I wanted to ask you," she said. "Do you remember Michael Ashbury?"

"Sure," Theo said, hoping she wasn't going to tell him that Michael had died.

"I saw him a few months ago. He said he goes to some meeting once a week for gay and lesbian youth. Know anything about it?"

"Is it like AA for queers?"

She laughed. "I don't think so. It didn't sound like they were trying to cure anyone." She turned to Tom. "What's that group they have for gay youth?"

“Hmm.” He leaned forward for his beer. “I think it’s called Youth Out or something. I’m not so sure I’d send anyone to it. I heard one of the adult facilitators, some med student intern, was scamming on the younger boys, kids in junior high.”

“Scamming young boys, eh?” Carol’s eyebrows were raised. “That’s not good.”

Tom emptied his beer and sat back.

Theo’s head felt heavy. The music was pulsing just below his heartbeat and he kept thinking he’d said something he would regret later.

“Pardon me,” Tom said and pushed his chair back to leave for the men’s room.

“He’s a good guy.” Carol said when he left. “Just coming off a relationship.”

Theo watched Jonathan turn in his chair to watch Tom walk away. Jonathan fidgeted with his beer, then pushed his chair away after saying he’d be back. Theo nodded. “Maybe we should go soon.”

“Soon,” Jonathan said and then headed to the bathroom.

Carol was saying something. She leaned closer to Theo. “Don’t worry about him.” She was looking at Jonathan. “Tom is a sweetheart. Just a little lonelier than is good for him.” Theo was only getting part of it, like she’d been talking before he started listening. “I used to worry,” she said, “but when I lost my son, and then my husband, something in me said *relax*. I realized there wasn’t much about the world I could change, except myself.”

Theo shifted in his chair and set his bottle on the table. He was trying to keep the thread of what she was telling him.

“You’ve been through a lot, Theo, but I think you’re going to be okay. I think Jonathan’s going to be okay too. He seems like a smart boy. I’ve seen so many kids

hurting because nobody understands them, and because life seems to be dishing out more than they can handle.” She lit another cigarette. Theo had lost count. “It’s hard to give up thinking you can change anyone but yourself, because it feels like you’re giving up. But when you do that,” here she pointed at some *that* in the air with her cigarette, “is actually when you find how strong you are.” She looked at him and then laughed. “I’ve gone and started preaching. I’m sorry.” She squeezed his thigh and then relaxed into her chair. “You’re a sweet one, Theo, and you’ll make it just fine.”

He took a breath. It was the beer making her talk so freely, like Della sometimes did after too many gin and tonics, and it was probably the beer helping him listen without trying to argue.

Jonathan and Tom returned, talking and laughing at something. Theo wanted to be in on it, but he was too tired to pull it off without looking jealous. He watched Jonathan’s hands describing something in the air to Tom, his long fingers forming shapes, and then combing through his glossy black hair. Theo found himself staring at Jonathan’s pockets, at the outline of the fists now shoved casually inside.

“Hey, are you alright?” Jonathan was standing on the other side of the table.

“Yeah,” Theo shook his head.

“Want to call it a night?” Tom asked.

“Sounds good to me.” Carol put out her cigarette in the ashtray. She stood next to Tom and Jonathan. They were waiting.

Theo stood, the music pounding his head as he stretched his legs. It felt like he was swimming as he passed through the parting bodies near the dance floor.

On the sidewalk out front, Tom offered them each a bottle of water. “Drink some of this to clear your head,” he said to Theo

“Thanks,” Theo said, and he took a sip.

They walked to the parking lot, coming to Carol’s car first. “You’re driving?” Tom asked.

“Yep.” She flashed the keys and unlocked the passenger door for Tom, then went around to the other side. “Oh, take care, boys.” She came back and gave Jonathan a hug, and then Theo. “Happy birthday, Hon.”

Tom looked at them both. “G’night, Theo.” He held Theo in a full embrace. “And happy birthday.”

“Thanks,” Theo said into his shoulder.

Tom grabbed Jonathan and kissed him. Theo looked away, trying to remember where Jonathan had parked the truck.

“You alright there, Big Boy?”

“Yeah,” Theo said, buckling his seatbelt into place.

“That bathroom was nasty,” Jonathan said. “If I hadn’t been so damn horny, I would have told him to wait until we could find something cleaner.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Nah.” He put the truck into gear and started driving.

“How did he rate?”

“Hmm.” Jonathan tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “I’d say an eight.”

“Whew,” Theo breathed. “I thought maybe I’d been replaced.”

Jonathan thumped Theo's leg. "You're not serious."

"No," Theo said. He watched out the window as the streetlights gave way to the darker highway. "Maybe."

"What's this? You come home and tell me about some guy you blow?" His voice was too loud for the little cab.

"I wasn't serious, alright?"

"I don't get you."

"There's nothing to get. I'm just tired." Theo leaned his head against the glass behind the bench seat. "It's just shit."

Jonathan was quiet for a few minutes. "Theo, you know I meet guys."

"I know."

"You've never said it bothered you."

"True."

"What gives?"

It took a while for Theo to respond. "I've never seen you with someone else." He'd been putting himself into the stories Jonathan told him about meeting guys at the park. At the library. Theo had been imagining the cold marble partitions in the bathroom stall at the old public library pressed against his own back, his hands on some guy's head, pressing a face to his crotch until he came and not letting go until every last drop was swallowed. Or, it was the reverse—Jonathan standing above him, trying not to moan but unable to keep his voice from bouncing around the marble enclosure, up from the tiny black and white octagonal ceramic floor tiles and all the way to the twenty-foot high

ceilings leftover from some other distant time. Jonathan's stories had never quite seemed real.

The boys turned into Jonathan's driveway and sat in the truck in darkness.

Jonathan turned to face Theo, but he didn't say anything.

Theo rolled his head across the back window, so his body was facing forward but his head was tilted and turned toward Jonathan. "What?"

"I think that vacation fucked you up."

"No shit."

"Maybe we should have gotten a video tonight or something. I didn't mean to weird you out. I just wanted you to have a little fun for your birthday."

"It was fun. I'll get over it. I just need some sleep."

Jonathan led Theo to the back of the house, along a gravel path lined with landscape timbers. A sodium light buzzed overhead. It was mounted on a tree, and Jonathan shot at it with his fingers as they passed. Theo stared up at the light through the outline of branches and clinging oak leaves. His head was still muddy.

Jonathan unlocked the back door and closed it quietly behind Theo. Jonathan's parents had stopped waiting up for him on weekend nights, an advantage of staying here instead of at Theo's. When Theo came out of the bathroom, Jonathan was unrolling a sleeping bag next to his mattress. "This alright?"

"Yep." Theo was unbuttoning his shirt. He went down on the floor and crawled across to the sleeping bag. His head sank into the pillow.

The overhead light was off, but light from the bathroom glowed behind Jonathan. He was taking off his clothes in the doorway, a dark silhouette. “Don’t go to sleep. I’ve got something to give you.”

“Mmm,” Theo murmured. He lay on his back, hands clasped on his chest and ankles crossed.

“Gonna sleep with your clothes on?”

“I might.” Theo put his hands above his head. “I might not.”

“Here, let me help you decide.” Jonathan fell on him and started unbuttoning Theo’s pants. Theo wrestled him half-heartedly, catching Jonathan’s waist between his thighs. It didn’t stop Jonathan. He got Theo’s pants open, and pulled down the elastic waistband of Theo’s briefs and reached inside.

Theo loosened his legs and let go of his hold. “I’m too tired.”

Jonathan slid Theo’s pants down his thighs, ignoring the hands on his shoulders. “Don’t you want your birthday present?” Jonathan began to make his way down Theo’s body. “Just enjoy,” Jonathan said. “Got it?”

“Yeah,” Theo breathed. He put his hands on Jonathan’s head and pushed him the rest of the way down, something he had wanted to do to Matt.

Later, when Jonathan had fallen asleep, Theo lay beside him. The mattress was six inches higher than the floor. Theo reached up and placed his hand on the sheet near Jonathan and watched him breathing in the faint light from the bathroom. Jonathan’s hair fell across his brow. Theo leaned up and kissed the outside of Jonathan’s rolled up fist, and then he was asleep.

Chapter Four

Theo ran that morning in a pair of Jonathan's shorts and the smoky shirt from the night before. He was sluggish and he hated the smell wafting up from his shirt, so he hung it from his shorts and enjoyed the chill of the still morning. Rain during the night had stained the trees dark brown. Wet leaves and twigs blanketed the ground beneath the trunks of locust trees and gnarled oaks lining the edge of the gravel road. Further into the forest, a hint of green, so slight it seemed like a haze, lay beneath the hickory and sassafras and leggy saplings gliding by on either side as he ran. Theo was mesmerized by the damp silence surrounding this solitary one-lane road. Even though his head ached, he couldn't help but be lulled into a quiet kind of thankfulness for the morning and for being home again with Jonathan.

After a breakfast of Mrs. Norton's country potatoes and scrambled eggs loaded with sausage, Jonathan drove Theo home. "Don't be thinking you can keep those," Jonathan said. "That's my favorite pair of jeans."

Theo looked down at the stretched denim. Jonathan had let him borrow a clean pair of jeans and a shirt, both slightly tight. "Maybe you shouldn't have been so quick to lend them," Theo said. His canvas bag lay at his feet on the floorboard, reeking of his smoky, sweaty clothes. "I think I'd have to lose a few pounds." He shifted to pull the fabric away from his crotch. "You're too skinny."

"It's my rigorous workout schedule." Jonathan turned the corner onto Theo's street.

"What workout?"

“You know, keeping the men happy burns lots of calories.”

“Just how many men are you keeping happy?”

Jonathan pulled into Theo’s driveway and put the truck in neutral. “Hmm. Let’s see, I think I got to six last week.”

“What?”

Jonathan laughed. “Joking.” He smiled wickedly.

Theo hoped he was joking. “Straight up. What did you do while I was gone?”

Jonathan reached across the cab and punched Theo’s shoulder. “I helped my folks move. Remember? I was too fucking tired to go cruising.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Lighten up. I’m just dishing shit on you because you look so pitiful.” He rested his hand on the gearshift. “I’ve got something for you.” He pulled out a paper bag from beneath his seat.

“More liquor?”

“Maybe.” Jonathan set the package on Theo’s lap and waited while Theo slowly opened it. Inside was a weathered wooden frame, and behind the glass was a black and white photo of the two of them on a merry-go-round. Theo and Jonathan’s profiles were sharp against a background of blurred trees and grass. Jonathan had set the camera on a timer, a 35mm he’d borrowed from his dad for a photography class at school. Theo had been holding onto a bar and pushing against the ground with one foot. Jonathan had jumped on and then they’d both scrambled toward the middle. The merry-go-round was tilted, so they slid to the lower side with every rotation. The photo caught them just before Jonathan fell into Theo, both laughing too hard to hold on anymore. They’d been

hurled into the mud, nearly knocking the camera off the tripod. Theo had forgotten the day at the park and the mess and thrill of colliding into the ground, completely off-balance and out of control.

“What, do you hate it?”

“I love it,” Theo said. He folded it back into the bag and wished they weren’t already parked in front of his house. He wanted to hold Jonathan. “Thanks,” he said. “I’ve got to get going.” Theo ran his hand through his hair. “This is the only thing about today—about this entire week—that isn’t gonna suck.” He re-folded the bag.

“Let’s see if we can talk the folks into letting us go camping next weekend,” Jonathan said. “It’s warm enough.”

“I’ve got a meet Saturday.”

“I’ll come get you for the basketball game Tuesday night.”

“Alright,” Theo said. They tapped knuckles and Theo got out of the truck and watched Jonathan drive away. There were several black plastic bags of trash lining the street at the edge of Jonathan’s old yard. Theo looked at the empty driveway and the curtained windows and sighed.

Della and his dad were both sitting at the dining room table reading different sections of the Sunday paper. “I expected a call from you, Theo,” Della said as she stood from her chair. She refilled her coffee and leaned against the counter stirring in cream and sugar.

“I’m sorry.” Theo scratched his head and ruffled his hair. “I totally forgot.”

“Don’t let it happen again.”

His dad stood and stretched his back and asked Theo if he was hungry. “We’ve got some bagels.” He opened the paper bag on the table and looked inside, then held the bag to his nose and sniffed. “Two sesame and one cinnamon.” He looked up at Theo expectantly.

“Mrs. Norton made us breakfast.”

“How’s the new place?” His dad sat again, slowly, and Della rejoined him at the table.

“It’s nice. Lots of windows, lots of trees.” Theo leaned against the counter.

“They’re out in the woods,” his dad said. “I feel bad for not helping.”

“You shouldn’t be helping anyone move with those knees of yours. Too bad they picked spring break, though. This is the first time they’ve missed the camping trip in years.” Della looked over at Theo. “Speaking of which. You have some work to do.”

“I know,” Theo mumbled to the counter. He’d leaned forward and was resting his elbows on the tile, his forehead in his hands. “I’ll do it this afternoon.”

“Your father and I are going to a movie, so we’ll need the van, that is, if it’s still working.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“The engine light kept coming on last night. We probably pushed it too far driving all the way from Florida in one day.”

Theo’s dad put the paper down. “Cars are meant to run all day.”

“Then what is it?” Della leaned forward and put her chin on her palm, ready to hear his diagnosis.

“I don’t know. An oil change? How long’s it been?”

“Two months. I keep track of our car quite well, thank you, and everything else in this household.” She looked down at the table. Theo figured he was supposed to feel sorry for her, but he was too tired.

“Thank you, Dear,” Theo’s dad said and reached across to set his hand on her leg.

“Anyway,” she said to Theo, “you need to take care of the sleeping bags this morning and your dad has to go to the hardware store, so you two can go together—without me—now that you and your father can drive.”

Theo and his dad were stuffing sleeping bags into the trunk. “Where’s Samantha?” Theo asked after he closed the garage door.

“She went to church with Kate this morning.”

“Great. Just what I need—a sister who can preach the gospel.”

“That wouldn’t be so bad.”

“When’s the last time you saw a Christian preaching love for gays?”

His dad stood there. He did remember, didn’t he? “Can I drive?” Theo asked.

“Sure, Kid.” His dad reached in his coat pocket and pulled out the keys. He held them a second, thinking, and then tossed them to Theo. “When are you taking that driving test?”

“Whenever I get in enough practice hours,” Theo said. He took the keys and started the car after his dad got in. “Maybe you could give me a ride to school in the morning—I could drive.”

“Della’s leaving early to bring the van to the shop, so I doubt it. She’d probably make *me* walk to campus if she thought my knees could take it.”

Theo felt like a deflated balloon.

“What about your bike?”

“Yeah,” Theo said without much enthusiasm. One minute his dad was dazed, and the next he was problem-solving.

Theo used to ride with Jonathan to school. A lot of things were different now that Jonathan didn't live next door. Theo needed to get his license, but he didn't have a car. His parents had offered to let him use the truck over a year ago, back when there was a truck. Della took him to see it one day. They were arguing on the way home from bringing Theo's dad to physical therapy. The truck could be fixed, he was sure. When they got to the junkyard north of Springbank, she wouldn't leave the van. Theo went by himself to the corrugated trailer marked “Office” and asked an old guy with a stutter and grease beneath his nails if he knew where the truck might be. The man was quiet when he stopped at the end of one of the rows near the back, near a bunch of piles that looked more like metal for recycling than like vehicles. The old guy pointed to one particular pile, and then Theo recognized the dark green paint of his dad's little truck. The metal parts were all smashed together, the dashboard nearly touching the back of the mangled bench seat, except for the few inches of space by the steering column. Near the driver's side door opening were gouges that looked like claw marks, as if the paramedics had saved his dad from some huge grizzly bear attack instead of just a car accident.

The laundromat was mostly empty. After setting the sleeping bags next to the washers, Theo walked out to the car with his dad to get his backpack. He planned to read

the last of *Heart of Darkness* and skim *Men's Health and Fitness* until his dad got back. Or maybe he'd just skim the magazine and leave the book for later.

A blue hatchback had pulled up next to their van while Theo and his dad were inside. Theo thought he recognized it. A man stepped out and then leaned in to grab a basket off the front seat. He had on a cap, so Theo didn't see his face until the guy stood to close the car door. It was Matt. His eyes locked with Theo's, and a wave of something crossed his face before he was able to say anything.

Theo's dad spoke first. "Hey there. I see you made it home safely."

"Hey, David. Yeah. I got in late last night." He hesitated. "Hey, Theo."

Theo had turned away to open the back door and was reaching for his backpack.

"Hey," he said as he shut the door.

Matt lifted his basket of clothes. "They're renovating the washroom at my apartments."

"Theo's washing sleeping bags."

"I've got mine in the back," Matt said and nodded toward his back seat.

"At least you'll have good company."

Theo shifted awkwardly on the sidewalk.

Matt's lips parted to say something. He looked away from Theo, having lost whatever it was. "I've got a stack of exams," he said to Theo's dad. "I guess I left my grading to the last minute." He closed the front door with his hip and adjusted his cap.

"I'm going inside," Theo said. He looked at his dad. "When will you be back?"

"An hour?"

“I’ll be here.” Theo started to let the door to the laundromat close, but his dad said to hold it open for Matt. Theo waited.

After an unmistakable look from Theo to Matt and back again, Theo’s dad said goodbye.

A knot pulled tight in Theo’s gut. Matt had closed the back door of his car and was balancing the basket loaded with clothes and stapled papers with one arm and an unrolled sleeping bag with the other. Theo just stood looking out across the parking lot with his back leaned against the glass door. Matt brushed past him, sleeping bag trailing behind.

The door closed silently and Theo pushed aside a wheeled skeleton cart. He put each sleeping bag in a separate washer and loaded them with quarters and detergent. Matt was on the other side of a double row of washers filling two top-loading machines with shirts and jeans and socks. He faced away from Theo. Matt’s hair tumbled out of the back of his cap and caught on his collar, shifting each time he lifted his arms with more pieces of clothing. He wore a checkered button-down shirt, probably with a T-shirt underneath. He’d look good no matter what he was wearing.

Matt turned and their eyes locked. Theo didn’t look away in time. He tapped the top of the washer. This guy was beautiful and he liked him and hated him all at the same time.

Matt’s hands went to his pockets. Theo looked away, and then took a deep breath. He walked over to the table where he’d set his backpack and chose the book over the magazine. He’d forgotten that the present from Jonathan was in the bottom of his bag,

and his hands paused on the crumpled brown paper. He grabbed the novel and tried to read. And he tried not to look up when Matt left to get something else from his car.

Theo stared at the typed words in the paperback in his hands. Cold air brushed his ankles and he felt the wall vibrate with the closing of the heavy glass door. Matt's footsteps weren't audible, but Theo kept his head down and listened, trying to follow Matt walking back to the washers and gathering his papers, and then sitting with his work in his lap.

"Theo."

Theo jumped. Matt was standing right across from him, leaning against a washer. He settled into a chair two seats away.

The book lay closed in Theo's lap. He straightened his back, his hands resting on his thighs.

"Theo, I want to apologize."

Theo let out the breath he'd been holding. "Don't."

Matt held his students' papers in clenched hands. "What happened was completely my fault."

Theo didn't say anything.

Crossing one leg over the other, Matt set the papers on the chair next to him and turned toward Theo. "I feel really bad about what I said to you. About what happened. I didn't handle it well. I don't want you to think you did anything wrong." He paused.

Theo's ears were pulsing, and he kept running his thumbnail over the ridges along the edge of his book. Why did this guy have to be so perfect?

“If you feel like you need to talk to someone about it, I’ll understand.” Matt had practiced the words in Memphis, over and over. His lover Jeremy had coached him for two days. Matt was in dangerous territory—he could lose his job, go to jail. Lose his girls.

“What?” Theo stared bewildered into Matt’s face.

“It shouldn’t be this awful secret you’ve got to keep.”

“From who?”

“Your parents.”

“God, I would never tell my parents. They’d kill me.”

“No, they’d be mad at me, and that’s not your problem. It’s mine.” He could lose everything, but if Theo needed to tell someone, then Matt wouldn’t stand in the way.

Theo looked away. “I am not going to tell my parents. They don’t need to know anything about it.”

Matt sat there, his hands open in his lap. “You’re a good kid,” Matt wanted to say, but he didn’t want Theo thinking he meant keeping this secret was what made him a good kid. Yes, Theo was a good kid. He’d convinced Jeremy of it, Jeremy who never wanted to trust anyone with Matt’s heart, now that he finally had Matt to himself. Jeremy was the hospice nurse who had cared for Matt’s mother in her final weeks, who had stood by and watched as Matt’s wife, Sharon, had stoked the fire of guilt and doubt when Matt and his family had said yes, it was time to take away the machines. Matt’s parents were ancient when he’d been born, his sisters already in college when his parents brought him home from the hospital. His mother was done with menopause, they’d all thought, when, at age 52, she’d had a strange swelling in her abdomen. Matt’s father, now 86, was still in

Memphis, in an extended care facility, and Matt stayed with Jeremy on his monthly pilgrimages to his father and the home of Graceland and Matt's own childhood ghosts. Matt had only been 26 when his mother died two years before, much younger than the middle aged family members that were usually faced with dying parents and how to let them go. He leaned forward. "Don't let this blow you off course," he said to Theo. "Most adults won't tell you, but they're fucked up, too." He gathered his papers. "I've gotta get some work done," he said.

Outside, it was cold and quiet. No back-and-forth wash cycles. No absence of air to breathe. The laundromat was on the fringe of a neighborhood of two-story houses chopped into apartments for students from the nearby campus. Theo walked, concentrating on the cracks and the brown grass runners tangled along the edges of the pavement. He hated the concrete and the beer cans scattered between the sidewalk and the street. No way was Theo going to this school when he graduated from high school. The further away, the better.

He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets and turned back. The fucking sleeping bags had to go in the dryers. He would act like he was looking to make sure his backpack was where he left it and not even notice the other side of the room.

There were more cars parked out front and more people inside shoving clothes and shit into washers. Matt was gone. The sleeping bags were on spin, so Theo sat and watched. A college girl in pajama bottoms and a ribbed tank top sat tailor style on the folding table near him. She was leaned forward over a magazine. It was too cold to be dressed in so little. She was pretty, but Theo didn't care. Seeing the skin on her arms and the ring through her nose did nothing for him.

Samantha was in the living room with Della, playing a board game on the coffee table. “Hey, Theo. Want to play the next round?”

“Nah,” Theo said. “I’ve got homework.”

“Please, please.”

Della finished her turn and was watching, but didn’t say anything. It wasn’t like her to keep quiet when she could be taking up for Samantha.

“Sorry, Sis.”

“What do you want us to do with these, Dear?” His dad was standing in the foyer next to Theo with the bags draped across his arms.

“Are they dry?”

“I think so.”

She got up from the floor. “Here, let me see.” She ran her hand inside them.

“Nope. Theo, why don’t you take these from your dad? Turn them inside out and hang them on the line in the basement.” She took them from her husband’s arms and told him he shouldn’t be carrying four sleeping bags by himself, and to please take his shoes off and leave them by the door when he was done. Theo rolled his eyes. He knew he should have grabbed at least two of the bags himself.

After his chore in the basement, Theo closed himself into his room and sat on the bed. A Rufus Wainwright CD was in his disc player. He put on the headphones and leaned against the wall, listening to song after song and staring through the blinds. He finally relaxed when his favorite song, the one about being with one guy, started playing. It was one of the few songs where Rufus played guitar instead of piano, and Theo listened to the

words, surprised that such a party boy would ever want to be with only one person. He and Jonathan had been scheming to see Rufus Wainwright in St. Louis the summer before, but they hadn't figured out how to handle whatever questions might arise from the two of them going to see a queer in concert. It was essential that Theo's parents not find out that Jonathan was into guys too. Theo's dad knew about Wainwright—or at least, he used to, before the accident. They had gone to a concert in Kansas City once without ever telling Della. His dad had said they were going to see the Chiefs when he gave Theo the tickets as a present for his fourteenth birthday. They did go to the game, but they also saw Rufus Wainwright in concert the next night. He was Theo's favorite musician. He was young, beautiful, and definitely gay. The concert wasn't long after the Big Talk. Theo had assumed his dad's reaction—quiet and distant—was because he was creeped out about having a gay son, and maybe he was, at first. Theo had never asked. But the concert seemed to be his dad's way of saying everything was okay, and that they could hang out, just the guys, even if Theo was gay.

There was a knock at the door and Theo said come in. It was Della. She sat on the edge of his bed and waited for him to take off the headphones.

“Theo, before your dad and I leave for the movie, you and I need to have a talk.”

“What about?” He hated when she announced that they needed to talk. She was always the one who needed to talk.

She closed the door and then settled further onto the bed, turned semi-sideways so she wasn't quite facing away. “I know your father is getting better every day, better and stronger.”

“Yeah.” Great. He did *not* need a lecture. “Is this about the sleeping bags? I’m sorry, okay?”

“Part of it is... but part of it’s not. I’ve been letting things slide with you and Samantha. Your dad needed so much care at first that I sort of lost track of everything else.” She paused. Della had miscarried a month after the accident. She was three months along—not showing yet, so no one but her and David and her doctor knew. She’d wanted to get past the three-month mark before she told the kids. Two previous miscarriages had taught her not to announce anything too soon. “I guess I’m still distracted,” she said. “I’m so sorry about your birthday.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Theo said.

“We wanted to celebrate with you last night.” She curled the edge of the bedspread in her fingertips, and then went on about how he should have called, but she was going to make his favorite for dinner tonight anyway, teriyaki steak and rice, and she’d already started on the flan he said he wanted to try. She’d gotten the recipe from the cookbook Theo’s school had done as a fundraiser. Mrs. Dominguez had donated several recipes for Mexican dishes, including the one for flan.

That sounded good to Theo. All this talk of his birthday was softening the fact that this exchange with Della had started out as a lecture.

“But, we do need to talk about some other things...”

Theo looked away, ready to put on his headphones again.

“Your dad’s cognitive awareness has gotten better, and he’s been noticing some things that I should have noticed on my own.”

“What things?” he asked, immediately sorry, though, that he’d opened his mouth.

“Well, you seemed anxious during the trip to Florida. And your dad said you seemed very uncomfortable this morning at the laundromat. He and I have been wondering if something is bothering you. Something other than us forgetting your birthday.” She smoothed the bedspread near her leg and plowed ahead, unstoppable and making up for lost time—all that time in the last fifteen months when she had been taking care of his dad and letting things slide.

Theo wished she would just keep letting things slide.

“I think we need to talk about *physical* relationship things.”

“I don’t have any *physical* relationship things to talk about.”

“Theo, I made some calls today—”

Theo groaned.

“Let me finish,” she said.

Theo pulled his knees to his chest and held his legs.

“For years, any time your father or I tried to bring up the subject of homosexuality, you’ve been saying that you could handle relationship stuff on your own.” She waited, biting her lower lip, but Theo didn’t say anything. “I called Jonathan’s parents this morning to see what time you might be coming home. You’d already left, but when I asked if you boys had fun last night, Mrs. Norton said she’d noticed that Jonathan’s clothes smelled smoky and she didn’t know where you two could have gone that was so smoky.”

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to think because even that might be too loud.

“Would you like to tell me where you were?”

“We just drove around mostly.”

She took his hand and held it so that Theo could see the back. The stamp from the bar still stained his skin. He’d completely forgotten.

“I know there are only two bars in town that let in anyone under 21. Which one were you at?”

He looked away.

“Theo, don’t lie to me.”

He didn’t answer.

“Marsha’s Attic?”

He rocked back and forth. “Yes.”

“So, now I’m wondering why you and *Jonathan* would go to a gay bar together.”

Jonathan’s family was gonna shit if they found out about the gay bar.

After waiting for Theo’s answer, she finally said, “Do Jonathan’s parents know he is gay?”

“No,” Theo said. He didn’t tell her that Jonathan’s dad would probably kill him if he knew about the things Jonathan did with guys.

“And do they know that you are gay?”

“No,” he said, his voice tight and small.

She took a deep breath and sat straighter, looking away from Theo and at the slanted sunlight coming through the blinds. “You and Jonathan met when we moved into this house, right?”

“Yeah.”

“How old were you? Twelve?”

“Eleven.” Theo was sinking into his bed.

Della slid to the edge. Buying this house was the first big thing she and David did together after they got married. She’d been so grateful the neighbors had a boy the same age as Theo—he’d needed a friend. He’d frowned during the entire wedding ceremony, pulled and itched at his tuxedo, refused to sleep in the new house, and hidden a picture of his mom under his dad’s pillow the first night they moved in. Della stared at her hands for a minute and then looked at Theo. “You, your father, and I need to have a serious talk.” She stood to leave. “Tomorrow evening, I’ll have Samantha go to a friend’s house after dinner. I don’t want you making any plans with Jonathan or going anywhere with him between now and then.”

“Why?”

She turned the door handle. “This is one of those times that I expect you to honor my wishes. Understood?”

“Sure,” he said. He was already putting his headphones back on. She left and he closed his eyes and pushed the play button again. What a fucking bummer. It felt like every secret he’d ever kept from his parents was about to get set out on the table and examined. He wanted to call Jonathan, to warn him, but Theo shared a phone line with his parents. He didn’t want them listening. He’d somehow make it through tonight and wait until he saw Jonathan during first hour. Which reminded Theo that he had to make sure his bike was ready to ride for the morning. Joy.

Chapter Five

Fog had settled during the night, clinging to the streetlights and blanketing the houses and yards with grey. Gliding through upside-down cones of illuminated mist, Theo pedaled steadily and alternated putting one hand in his pocket and one hand on the handlebar. He hadn't dressed warmly enough and his fingers were frozen by the time he got to school.

Jonathan was waiting. "I called last night. What's up with Della?"

Theo slid open his lock and pulled the metal door harder than he intended. It slammed against the next locker. "She's on to me, that's what."

"You mean the shit that happened in Florida?"

"Maybe." Theo leaned into his locker, closer to Jonathan. "And you."

"Me?"

Theo explained while he put books in his backpack. "Did your mom say anything to you yesterday?"

"She asked why my clothes smelled like smoke, but I told her we got a burger at the diner on State Street. It's always full of people smoking."

"Fuck," Theo said and he closed his locker.

They walked slowly to first hour. Theo told him that he couldn't think of anything to say when Della had just laid it all out there. Jonathan leaned into Theo, avoiding passing shoulders and backpacks and elbows. "She asked the big question, and she asked if your parents know." Theo kept his voice low.

They rounded a corner and went into Mr. Burnett's classroom, Algebra II. Theo hated math, but of course Della and his dad expected him to love it because they loved it. He took his seat in the back, and Jonathan sat in the next desk over. The board was covered in Mr. Burnett's illegible chalk scratches. Most of the students weren't there yet, but he started discussing the day's assignment anyway. It was as if spring break had never happened. Theo was tired of teachers oblivious to everything but their own bullshit. Leaning forward over his desk, but not risking a groan, Theo rested his head on his arm.

The rest of the morning was slow. First hour was the only class they had together, so Theo had to wait until lunch to see Jonathan again. They met in the parking lot and walked to the truck together. An open campus was one of the few luxuries at Central High.

Jonathan got in the truck and reached across to unlock the passenger door. "Want to get a burger?"

Theo got in and mumbled sure. He stared ahead with his backpack at his feet.

Jonathan drove a while without saying anything. He pulled into a drive-up fast food place and ordered the usual for both of them. "What do you think they'll do?"

"I don't know."

"How'd Della leave it last night?"

"She said we're having a *serious* talk—me, her, and Dad." Theo felt black inside. It wasn't just his own secrets that he had to protect; he also had to find a way to keep his parents from saying anything else about Jonathan to the Nortons. They didn't know how crappy Dr. Norton treated Jonathan, and they probably wouldn't believe Theo if he tried to explain what a jerk Dr. Norton could be. Theo remembered the fishermen in Florida

who waded out each morning and slung cast nets across the waves. He felt like he was caught in one of those weighted nets, pulled down into his seat, into a pit. The responsibility of protecting himself and his best friend made him feel small and stupid. “I’m sick of thinking about it, but I can’t think of anything else.”

“Maybe you should try to say as little as possible,” Jonathan said after the server came. He started eating, and he watched Theo squeeze ketchup onto a napkin on the dash.

Theo finished his mouthful. “It’s never that easy with her. She’ll ask me shit outright, and it’s got to be either a yes or a no answer. Or a complete description. I almost wish my dad weren’t so ‘high functioning,’ so she’d still be distracted by taking care of him.”

“You don’t want to wish for something like that.”

“I know.” He ate a few more bites. “You’ll never believe who I saw at the laundromat yesterday.” Theo dipped his fries in the ketchup on the dash. He ate them three and four at a time. “He said he didn’t want me to think I had to keep it a secret.”

“Sounds like fucked-up reverse psychology,” Jonathan said. “If he acts like it’s no big deal and says it’s okay if you tell someone, then he thinks you’ll do just the opposite.” Jonathan rolled up his wrapper and threw his trash at Theo’s feet, and then turned the key to light up the digital clock. “We gotta get going.”

“Don’t leave this shit in here.” Theo grabbed the bag and shoved it into Jonathan’s lap. “Throw it at *your* feet if you don’t want to throw it away.” He thumped the ugly creature hanging from the rearview mirror. “When are you gonna get rid of this thing?”

“Lighten up, clean freak. I love my troll.” Jonathan stopped the pink-haired plastic toy from swinging and rolled down the window to set the bags on the stainless steel platform. One of the bags rolled off as he backed out, but Jonathan drove away without stopping.

Theo watched it roll across the parking lot in the side-view mirror.

“How’d you get to school this morning?”

“Bike.”

“Want me to pick you up tomorrow?”

“Nah,” Theo said.

“Call me tonight, okay? I need to know if your parents are going to say something to my folks.”

“What would you do?” Jonathan said he didn’t know. Theo had seen Dr. Norton slap Jonathan to the ground over something as stupid as breaking the picture window in the living room. He’d warned them not to kick the soccer ball in the yard, and it was all Theo could do not to run up and wrestle Jonathan’s dad to the ground himself. If Theo had been strong enough, he’d told himself, he would have. But he was puny compared to Dr. Norton back then, and even now, he was still at least two inches shorter and 40 pounds lighter than the guy. Theo rested his cheek on his fist, his elbow propped on the window. This could be really bad. He and Jonathan never talked about Dr. Norton. It wasn’t like Theo was going to go on about how he was an asshole, because he was, after all, Jonathan’s dad.

“They’re probably just freaked out,” Jonathan said, “because they’ve been thinking all this time that you’re a virgin.” He didn’t seem to be taking any of this seriously. “Technically you are, but we could change that.”

“Wrong.”

Jonathan found a parking space. “We gotta try new things, you know?”

“How about you first?”

“Okay.”

“Bullshit,” Theo said. That’s what they needed, to get caught trying ‘new things.’ “You talk big,” he said, and he pulled his pack up to his lap. He wasn’t ready to try anything else new.

They got out and walked toward the school, then split up just inside the front hallway. Theo went to chemistry and Jonathan to government.

“Stay strong,” Jonathan said. He mock-punched Theo’s arm. “Until tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” Theo said. He wanted to touch Jonathan, more than just a friendly punch, but that was impossible. He headed to class, to the eternity of afternoon that stretched out before him, wondering if Richard was the kind of guy who would try new things with Jonathan.

At least Theo would get to run during seventh hour, the only thing that might keep him from exploding.

This was the best and the worst part of the day for Theo. Being surrounded by naked guys was exquisitely painful. He had been practicing since junior high how to enjoy all that exposed skin without showing a visible response. Today he was agitated, so

Theo didn't notice the semi-nude bodies around him, not even Donovan, the most beautifully sculpted male in the entire school. He had dark brown hair and blue eyes, and after a day in the sun at a track meet, he'd have a dusting of freckles across his nose and his cheeks, and even his shoulders if he took off his shirt. There was a scar just above his hip on the right side that Theo had always wanted to ask about, but of course didn't. Theo generally kept quiet and distant, and it was better if he didn't talk about his body or anyone else's.

At least two other guys on the team, Stevens and Steadman, were gay. Theo had walked in on a kiss in the deserted locker room last fall, but had never said anything to them. They looked like brothers, or cousins, maybe. Both had shaggy dirty blonde hair and tough, wiry bodies. Stevens was from one of the horse farms on the edge of town that had been nearly swallowed up by car dealerships and new housing developments. Steadman was from a nearby Boys Town. He'd lived in a trailer park and lost his mom in a string of tornadoes several years back and his dad was a crack head, and Steadman didn't have any other relatives to take him in. After a series of foster homes, and a stint at juvenile hall, he'd mellowed out and Coach Eberhardt had personally made sure Steadman stayed with the track team. Because Coach was friends with Theo's step-mom, Theo had overheard more info on his teammates than he'd really wanted to know. He pulled on his socks and tied his shoes and listened to Stevens and Steadman talking in low voices. They had each other, always stretching and warming up together, running as buddies. Best friends—that's how they looked to everyone else.

Then there were guys that Theo *always* avoided. Without fail, he was aware of the location of the shot and discus throwers—stocky Christian farm boys who made a point

of using ‘faggot’ and ‘queer’ every other time they opened their mouths. Theo had nothing in common with them, so it was easy to maintain his distance and give just enough eye contact so they need not fuck with him. The runners who were too pansy, or too tough, got pushed around by farm boys looking to kick some ass—Theo stayed safe by remaining separate and continually alert.

Today he was running behind Donovan, concentrating so hard on matching strides that he didn’t get to enjoy the view. They ran four miles, from the high school to the edge of the university campus and back again. Theo was tired and wishing Jonathan would be waiting at the parking lot to give him a ride. But he wasn’t.

Theo rode his bike and got home before anyone else. It wasn’t until he was in the kitchen heating a bag of popcorn and ripping open a package of breakfast pastries that he saw the letter addressed to him in the bundle of mail he’d grabbed from the box. It was from the Barcelona exchange program. He opened it and unfolded the white paper. He’d already gotten in, but this was about a scholarship. His parents would be happy. He should be happy too, because without a scholarship, he wouldn’t be able to go at all. Most of the family’s savings had been sucked into the great vacuum of health care expenses. Theo’s mood was black enough that nothing short of stepping onto the plane for Spain could lift it.

The microwave beeped. He looked through the rest of the stack, but there were no more letters for him. He poured the popcorn into a bowl, grabbed the pastries and a glass of milk and took the scholarship letter upstairs to his room. He didn’t want his parents to see it yet. Theo sat on his bed and read the letter again, then started his homework.

The front door slammed shut. “Theo?”

“Up here, Sam.”

She pushed his door open and sat on the edge of his bed, breathing fast. Her face was flushed.

“Why so out of breath?”

“I ran home.”

“From the bus stop at the end of the street?”

“No, I got off at Kate’s house.” She brushed her hair back from her face. “Don’t tell Della and Dad, okay?”

“Who’s gonna stop me?”

“I am, because I’ve got information that you really want to know.”

“Yeah, right.” When she didn’t say anything, he nudged her with his foot. “Spill it.”

“Got any popcorn left?”

“Here.” He handed her the bowl. “Now, gimme the goods.”

“Well, last night, after you went to your room, I heard Della and Dad talking.” She ate a few kernels of popcorn. “I heard your name several times, so I figured I’d get a little closer—you know how sometimes you can hear through the heater vents?”

“Yeah. So, what did you hear?”

She looked at him and took a deep breath. “Theo, you know I’m not as innocent as you think I am.”

“Innocent about what?”

“About sex and stuff like that.”

“Who told you about sex?” he asked, only half joking.

“Della of course told me the scientific stuff. But I figured out a lot of other things on my own—like what ‘fellatio’ and ‘cunnilingus’ mean.” Her mouth stumbled over the long words. “And ‘sodomy’.”

“So? What does your big vocabulary have to do with me?” He ate his second pastry, watching her carefully and keeping his face blank.

“Theo, I know what you and Jonathan do, and I think Della and Dad are about to figure it out too.” She ate another handful of popcorn, not looking away.

Theo’s jaw was still moving, chewing his food, but he couldn’t taste it. He made himself swallow and take a drink of milk before he said anything. “And what is it you think I do with Jonathan?” He squinted his eyes, hoping she’d made a mistake.

She set the bowl of popcorn aside and pulled her knees to her chin. Her low-cut jeans and midriff shirt revealed way too much skin for an eleven-year-old girl. “I know you’re gay, and he’s gay, and I’ve heard you two in here when you thought no one was around.”

“Sounds like you’ve been hearing a lot lately.”

“Theo, I don’t care what you guys do—I think it’s kinda gross, but I don’t care.”

“So, why are you telling me this? What do you want from me?”

“First of all, I thought you might want to know.” She hesitated. “And second, I wanted you to finally owe me.”

“Great,” Theo said, leaning his head back against the wall. He wasn’t sure if she knew just how huge a revelation this was, and he didn’t know what her little pre-pubescent brain might figure was a fair exchange. “Okay. Tell me exactly what you heard.”

“It was mostly Della. She was getting kind of hysterical—I heard Jonathan’s name several times—and Dad kept telling her to calm down.”

“Typical. What was Dad saying?”

“Most of it sounded like he was telling her everything would be okay.”

When Samantha didn’t say anymore, Theo thought for a minute. “Is that it?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re sure.”

“Yes. I’m sure.”

“So, what do you want?”

“Your old magazines.”

“What?”

“I’ve seen the stash you’ve got under the bed.”

“You are way too young, and anyway, Della will find them.”

“I already thought of that. When Kate spends the night, you slip two magazines under my pillow, and after she goes home, I’ll put them back.”

“So, you only want them when Kate is here?” He needed Sam on his side, so he didn’t say anything more, and he didn’t laugh.

“Well.” She squirmed and moved toward the edge of the bed. “Not exactly, but I haven’t figured out how to keep Della out of my room.”

“How ’bout a lock?”

Her face lit up in a smile. “Would you back me?”

“Yeah,” he said, realizing that a lock on her door was probably what she had wanted all along. Weird. His sister was doing the same things—looking at naked guys in

magazines—that he had done when he was eleven, but she seemed so much younger. Straight guys were jerks, judging by the shit the guys on the track team said about girls at school. For now, though, magazines were better than her wanting to hang out with the real thing—guys who would surely treat her like shit. “Sure, Sis.”

Dinner was quiet. Samantha stayed through dessert. Theo tried not to meet her eyes too often. Having her as an accomplice felt strange—it kept him from teasing her about the mashed peas stuck in her braces.

Theo and his dad washed dishes while Della cleared the table. Samantha helped and then waited at the kitchen counter until Kate’s mom honked from the driveway. Theo stayed focused on each dish that he handed off to his dad, not wanting to break the silence left in Samantha’s wake.

When the last dish was finally done and the counters were wiped clean and there were no more reasons to stay in the kitchen, Theo dried his hands.

“Guess we’re through here,” his dad said. He didn’t use his cane inside the house. He pressed the walls with his fingertips and teetered slightly as they walked to the living room. Della was waiting in the blue wingback chair on the far side of the coffee table. His dad picked the chair next to her, so Theo sat by himself on the sofa. The leather cushions squeaked as he pulled his feet beneath him.

“Theo, you know why we’re here?”

“Sure.” He picked something from his sock.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because you’re worried about me.”

“And?”

“And... I don't know.”

“Let me refresh your memory.” Here his dad put a hand on her forearm and she hesitated.

“Theo, we *are* worried about you...” his dad said. He cleared his throat, distracted by something on the arm of his chair.

“So I hear.” Theo had dared to look at Della, but her stare on him was hard. He dropped his gaze to his lap again.

“Theo, we know you spent some time alone with Matt on the trip...” His dad's voice trailed off again.

Theo didn't respond, so Della forged ahead, disregarding whatever agreement she'd made with her husband to let him do some of the talking. “Your father said that you and Matt were very awkward around each other yesterday.” She paused. “Theo, please look at us when we talk to you.”

His chest felt like it was wrapped in a canvas strap and someone had just pulled the wench a notch tighter. He raised his eyes and tried to empty his face of all emotion.

“We would like to know what happened between you and Matt on the trip.” She leaned forward in her chair.

“Nothing happened.”

“I saw you two talking on the bridge,” his dad offered. “What were you talking about?”

Theo could feel his face beginning to glow. He had to give them something or they wouldn't let up. "We talked about the fort, about high school... and friends he had in college."

"What kind of friends," Della asked.

"His roommate was big into working out." Theo started making shit up, hoping to lead them away from where they were trying to go. "He ran track in college and Matt was saying how he'd always tried to run with him but could never keep up."

There was a long silence, and then Della asked, "Why was it so odd between the two of you when you saw him at the laundromat?"

"I don't know." Theo tried to think faster. "I was just tired, and probably neither of us really wanted to be there."

"Did you ever talk to him about being gay?" Della asked.

He looked straight at her and answered without looking away. "No, we didn't talk about that. It's not usually something I tell someone I don't know very well."

"But you would tell someone you *do* know well... like Jonathan?" She held his gaze, unblinking and unflinching.

"Yes," he said slowly.

"And when did Jonathan tell you he was gay?"

Theo shrugged. "I don't know. A long time ago." He looked at his dad, trying to gauge if the part about Jonathan was his fight, too. His dad was quietly staring at his hands. Theo looked at Della again. "I've known for a long time, but he's not my type."

"Oh? I didn't know you had a type." She sat straighter in her chair. "Last I heard, you weren't interested enough to have a type."

This time his face burned. “You act like I’m supposed to tell you every detail of my life.”

“I wouldn’t call sexual attraction a detail.”

“But it *is* private.” He put both of his feet on the floor and ran his hands along his thighs. “If I’m attracted to someone or not, that’s my business.” The words came out louder than he’d intended.

“Theo, it’s more complicated than that,” Della said. “If you were interested in girls—”

He couldn’t help but sneer, a look of disgust fluttering across his face before he could stop it. “How is it more complicated?”

“Theo,” his dad said after a moment of tense silence. “It’s more dangerous for a young gay person to be sexually active than it is for a straight person.” Theo protested, but his dad kept going. “Hear me out, Son. We know AIDS isn’t confined to gay men, but it is much more likely for gay men to be HIV positive than almost any other segment of the population.” Theo held his breath. “Emotionally, forming homosexual relationships can be difficult and result in a lot of pain, probably more than heterosexual relationships.”

“You sound like a book. Have you been reading parents-of-gay-kid-manuals or something?” Theo’s hands were shaking and his voice was shaking too. He felt like a specimen, not a son.

“Actually, we have. This is *terra incognita* for both of us,” Della said. “That means unfamiliar territory.”

He bit his lip so he wouldn't scream at her that he wasn't stupid, and he swallowed, and he made himself stare at the coffee table.

"We're worried about you, Theo."

Della's voice was softer, but Theo couldn't stop himself. "I'm gay. I'm not retarded. You're treating me like I'm a freak that you need to diagnose with some special handbook. Just leave me alone—I'll let you know when I need your 'expertise.'" He stood and turned to go. "I'm going to my room."

"You need to tell us what's going on so we can help you."

"I don't need help." He spun around. "I'm not sick. There is nothing wrong with me." He ran his hands through his hair, pulling on it hard before he felt the pain of his own grip.

Della and his dad looked tired and small and sad. He stared from one to the other. "I'll be in my room if you need me." He walked away and took the stairs two steps at a time, fighting the urge to slam his door. He lay flat on his bed staring at the ceiling, and then he pulled his pillow over his head and howled into it. Minutes. Hours. Days.

Jonathan was only a phone call away, but Theo couldn't stand the thought of being listened to by his parents, accidentally or not. When he heard Samantha close the front door, Theo turned off his light and threw his jeans, socks, and T-shirt to the corner of the room. He slid under the covers. Moonlight slanted across his carpeted floor and he listened to an old Pink Floyd CD on continuous play until he could no longer keep his eyes open. Wouldn't it be easier to be a lunatic on the grass? If he were crazy, surely he wouldn't feel so awful. So guilty.

Chapter Six

A chilly wind was scattering clouds across the sky and hurling them toward sunrise. The undersides of the clouds, looking like rippled sand after high tide, were dotted with gold and orange. It reminded Theo of the beach and the fort. His hands were warmer this morning because he remembered to wear gloves. He'd put a note on the counter and left the house carrying his bike through the front door so his parents wouldn't hear the garage closing. He wound through back streets, finding hills to scale, time to think.

On a cross-street, Theo slowed and edged his bike near a tall chain-link fence. It surrounded the public pool where he and Jonathan had gone swimming the summer they met. Every day they'd shown off for each other, doing back dives and front flips from the diving board, and they'd chased nickels and quarters beneath the ropes that marked off the deep end. Theo always brought change. His dad and Della required that he check in every few hours, so he was first in line at the pay phone each day when the lifeguards blew the whistle for break. Jonathan usually managed to pour ice down his back or dunk Theo's towel in the pool while he was on the phone. Before the magazines with the nude pictures, they'd spent the summer hanging out and doing stupid pranks like any other sixth graders. Sam bore the brunt of most of their jokes. Theo had hated her then and was glad to have Jonathan as an accomplice. She was so annoying, but she was usually a trooper. It was only after their dad's accident that she started running to Della with everything he did. Maybe with this magazine thing, she was done with the tattle-tale

phase. He'd thought Della had gone too far when she took Sam out of school every week to see a counselor, but maybe it had been a good decision.

Theo left the pool, suddenly realizing he might be late for school, and was a few blocks away when the first bell rang. He ate two breakfast bars on the way to Burnett's class after locking his bike. Every seat was taken except for the empty desk beside Jonathan. Theo set his backpack on the floor and slumped in his chair unnoticed because Burnett was already scrawling explanations on the board. Jonathan nodded at Theo. "What's up?" he said.

Theo rolled his eyes with exaggeration and said *later*.

For lunch, they drove to a nearby park and sat in Jonathan's truck. The only other vehicle was a black jeep backed into a space in the next lot, the driver staring out through dark sunglasses. He waved at the boys, but neither of them waved back.

Jonathan waited until Theo had eaten most of the extra turkey sandwich he brought before asking about the big conversation.

"It sucked." Theo took another bite. "They think I'm a science experiment or something. Like they have to protect me by reading all these manuals so nothing goes wrong."

"I'm not following."

Theo finished the sandwich and wiped mustard from his cheek. "They asked tons of questions about Matt, and about you. Then my dad—my dad who is *brain damaged*—started in on this shit about how being a homo is dangerous and I'll probably get AIDS or have my heart pulverized if I have a 'physical relationship' with anyone."

"At least he's not trying to talk you out of being a fag."

“They think they’ve got to handle me with latex gloves or something... or like that’s how I’m supposed to handle myself.”

“Maybe they’re just worried.”

“Of course they’re worried, but they act like I’m an idiot and I’ll never figure anything out on my own.” Theo ate one of Mrs. Norton’s chocolate chip cookies in a single bite. “Whose side are you on, anyway?”

“Your parents’, obviously.” Jonathan was resting with his cheek on his forearms, which were crossed over the top of the steering wheel. He watched while Theo ate a third cookie. “I guess it’s a good thing I brought extra.”

“Sorry,” Theo said, his mouth full. “I left before anyone else was awake this morning and forgot to make my lunch.” He put his trash into the plastic bag on the seat between them, grabbing whatever Jonathan had left there too. “Your mom’s cookies are the best.”

“Why don’t you sleep over tonight?”

“Unlikely,” Theo said. He took another cookie, and ate it, thinking. “How do you know,” he said, “that your parents have no idea you’re gay?”

“No,” Jonathan said. “It’s too much of a stretch. You know my dad... he’d be the first one to tell me if he thought I was screwing up.”

“What’s gonna happen if he figures it out?” Theo had a good idea what would happen, but he wanted to hear Jonathan say it.

“I guess he’ll see if he can beat it out of me, and then I’ll go live with Brian until I’m old enough to live on my own.”

“So Brian knows?” Jonathan’s older brother went to the big state university in Columbia, a few hours away.

“Yeah. I think he knew before I did.” Jonathan smiled. “And he knows better than I do what it feels like to disappoint the old man. So,” Jonathan said, leaning back into the bench seat. “What have you told your folks about me?”

“That you’re not my type.”

“Is that so?” He turned his body toward Theo, moving the bag of trash down by the brake pedal and putting one of his feet on Theo’s side of the floorboard. “I’d hate to see what you do with someone who is your type.”

Theo smiled and reached across Jonathan’s leg to check the time. “Too bad we’ve got to get back to school, or I’d show you.”

“Hmm. I’m holding you to that.” Jonathan moved the bag of trash, shifted his legs and started the truck. Theo got out and threw the garbage in a green 55-gallon drum with *City of Springbank* spray-painted in block letters on the side.

“So, what are you going to do?” Jonathan asked after they pulled away from the park, leaving behind the guy in the black jeep.

“Assert my independence.”

“You mean you’re going to openly go against your parents’ wishes?”

“Yeah,” Theo said. “That’s what I mean.”

“That’ll be a first.”

“Thanks.”

“So, what about the basketball game?”

“Yeah, and the sleepover too. Might as well go all out.”

Jonathan was quiet for a minute. “Maybe you shouldn’t push it with them. I mean, what if they get pissed and decide to have a little talk with my folks?”

“That would suck.” Theo slumped against the seat.

“Fuck,” Jonathan said quietly. “Hopefully they’ll keep it to themselves.”

“Don’t worry. I’m leaving soon, and then it won’t matter.”

Jonathan found a parking space and turned off the truck. “An entire year. Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Theo said, catching himself before he said anything about how he wasn’t sure he ever wanted to come back.

They got out of the truck and Jonathan looked like he wanted to say something, but they were surrounded by other students heading back to fifth hour. Before they split apart in the front corridor, he told Theo he’d be at his house by 4:30. Theo felt like a coward—he’d wanted to ask Jonathan to come earlier, to prevent any parental confrontations. “See you then,” he said.

“See ya,” Jonathan said, and disappeared into the crowd.

By late afternoon the sky was overcast. The air was gray, that bright kind of gray when squinting behind sunglasses isn’t enough.

Jonathan was waiting on the bleachers after practice. Theo saw him and waved. The team was huddled around Coach Eberhardt, a slight, soft-spoken guy who didn’t fit the mold of a high school track coach at all. He’d gone to college with Della back east and came to their parties sometimes, which was slightly awkward. Theo almost didn’t try out for the team the year before because he felt weird about already knowing the coach.

Eberhardt didn't treat him any differently than the other runners, which Theo appreciated. Getting special treatment by adults at school was a guarantee for being singled out as a dork, or worse, a fag.

Coach dismissed the team after reading out race assignments for the coming meet. Theo drifted to the bleachers, walking beside Donovan and wondering why coach had insisted on putting them together for stretches at the beginning of practice. Theo hadn't been able to focus, and he'd almost rolled his ankle twice when he and Donovan ran together as 'buddies' through town. Donovan had run shirtless, and every time they'd waited at an intersection for the light to change, Theo stared at the traffic, or nearby pedestrians or storefronts. Anywhere but at Donovan. When they were actually running, though, Theo could have counted the freckles dotting Donovan's shoulders. It was like skin on guys was a magnet, and everything about the body—shoulders, hands, and faces, especially—drew Theo's attention and made him feel empty, hungry.

As Theo left the group of guys huddled around Coach, he realized Jonathan wasn't sitting alone. Richard was sitting next to him. "Hey, Theo."

"Hey," Theo said. Richard looked like he'd been in the Caribbean or somewhere exotic for spring break. He had a deep coppery tan and his hair was streaked with blonde. He wore one of those chokers at his neck with the shells woven in it every few inches. "I thought you were going to meet me at home," Theo said to Jonathan as he put his foot on a bench, stretching forward over his knee. He was horny from the run with Donovan and trying to settle down before Jonathan or anyone else noticed.

"Richard needed a ride, so I thought I'd wait for you. And I've got a surprise," Jonathan said, elbows on knees and chin resting on his hands. He seemed to be enjoying

the view, of Theo and Donovan and the other partially clad teammates gathering their things from the stands, or maybe he was just lingering in the afterglow of a blowjob from Richard.

No.

Theo pulled his sweats up over his shorts and hung his towel across his shoulder. The three of them walked toward Jonathan's truck after Theo unlocked his bike from behind the bleachers. Jonathan took the bike from Theo and pushed it through the parking lot, walking between Theo and Richard.

Theo wanted to ask what the surprise was, but he was hoping Richard wasn't part of it, so he didn't say anything. They threaded through the few cars left in the lot near the tennis courts, Richard asking Jonathan about his next soccer game and if they were planning to go to the basketball game that night. They stopped at Jonathan's truck, and he swung the bike up into the bed. He watched Jonathan's triceps ripple as the bike arced through the air. Theo wondered if Jonathan ever wished for a better-looking lover. And if maybe Richard was the answer to that wish.

The truck was unlocked, so Richard got in while Jonathan loaded the bike, and slid to the middle. Of course. Theo felt like a little kid, jealous over who got to sit in the middle, all squished and folded into the seat but lucky to be smashed up next to Jonathan. Theo threw his bag in back next to his bike and sat pressed against the door, his leg and hip and shoulder feeling hot and sweaty, touching Richard because the space was so tight.

Theo got out when they pulled up to Richard's, an older two-story house with dark wooden shake siding and overgrown trees and bushes brushing up near the foundation and double-hung windows. It looked like a real fixer-upper, and Theo realized

he'd thought Richard was wealthy, but maybe he'd been wrong. The place was kind of charming, and he might have liked it if he liked Richard.

When they got to Theo's, Jonathan waited in the truck. Theo had asked a few too many questions about Richard and Jonathan had told Theo to back off. But didn't he have the right to know?

The house was quiet—it would be another half-hour before his parents got home, and Samantha was probably at Kate's. A few months before, his dad would have been home at this time of day. He had to take lots of naps, but some time after winter break he'd stopped getting rides home in the afternoon and managed to stay awake all the way through dinner. Theo was glad his dad was on the mend—he'd feel shitty for blatantly disobeying Della if his dad were still hobbling around the house in a daze needing her constant attention. The entire time his dad had been recovering, Theo had tried to do everything right—study hard, run hard, help around the house. Della was exhausted, and it was obvious Theo's dad had more than he could handle in trying to get back to some place that felt like normal. Being a good son was about not bringing either of them more pain. They were both over the accident enough—or at least, his dad was over it enough—that Theo didn't think it was necessary to keep tiptoeing through life.

Theo grabbed clothes for school the next day, wrote a hurried message that he left on the counter, and locked the front door. He sat back in the truck and slid his seatbelt on, and then wiped his face on his t-shirt. "Damn," he said. "I need to take a shower."

"No worries." Jonathan backed the truck out of Theo's driveway.

"We're going to your house?"

"Nope."

“Where?”

“That’s the surprise.”

After they passed several frat houses and wrought iron ornamented apartments and entered a quiet neighborhood, Jonathan turned into the driveway of a wood clapboard house with a stone chimney. A holly tree grew on the far side of the front door, and river stones wound from the driveway to the cement steps. “Whose house is this?” Theo asked, dreading that he already knew the answer.

“Guess.” Jonathan pulled up to the garage door and then turned off the truck.

Theo wouldn’t guess.

“It’s Tom’s house,” Jonathan said, watching Theo’s reaction.

“Why?” A knot of anxiety coiled in Theo’s gut.

“He’s a nice guy, he likes both of us, and I thought he might have some ideas about how we should handle our parents.” Jonathan punched Theo’s leg. “I’m sure he’s been through this kind of shit before. Anyway, I’d like to hear what he has to say.”

“Jonathan, you hardly know the guy.”

“Yeah, and this is how we get to know him—hang out for awhile, and if it seems comfortable, ask his advice.”

“Or see if he’s up for a threesome?”

“Well that too,” Jonathan smiled at Theo’s groan. “Let’s go before he thinks a couple of crazies are parked in his driveway.”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want him to think we’re weird or anything.”

They got out together and stood awkwardly before the door until Jonathan rang the bell. Loud music hummed from inside. Jonathan pushed the button again just as the handle began to turn.

“Hey, guys!” Tom opened the door, a pale blue business shirt unbuttoned at his neck and a glass in his hand. He was grinning. “What brings you to my neck of the woods?”

“We were just driving by,” Jonathan said, his hands stuffed in his pockets and his voice a bit tight. “I told Theo you had a sweet place.” He looked at Theo for confirmation.

“Right,” Theo said, noticing the wood floors and carefully painted entryway. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting, but it wasn’t something this nice.

“Come on in,” Tom said and held open the storm door for them. The light scent of Tom’s cologne caught Theo by surprise. A candle was burning on a dark oval coffee table, offering up little smoke compared to the cigarette perched in an ashtray nearby. Tom grabbed the ashtray and used the remote to turn down the stereo. “I’ll just put this out in the kitchen. I try not to indulge in my bad habit when I have guests who don’t smoke.”

The boys stood in the living room, Theo noticing details in Tom’s absence. The fireplace was empty of logs and instead contained several candles on tiered iron holders. Framed artwork hung on either side of the mantel, and behind the sofa, a tapestry of a black park bench and red hat woven into a stark white background was mounted on the wall.

“You guys want anything to drink?” Tom called from the kitchen.

“Sure,” Jonathan said. “Got any soda?”

“In the can or over ice?”

Jonathan looked at Theo with raised eyebrows. “Over ice,” Jonathan called back.

“Comin’ right up.”

Set at an angle from the sofa was a loveseat, where Jonathan made himself comfortable. Theo sat on the sofa because he thought it might look weird if he and Jonathan were both so far away from the only other available seating. “I gotta take a shower,” Theo said, pulling his shirt away from his skin. It was damp and he felt awkward sitting on Tom’s furniture—he knew he smelled like sweat. “Ask him if I can use his shower.”

“You ask, Sissy.”

Theo shot him a look.

“Just a joke.”

“Notice I’m not laughing?”

“You’re just nervous.”

Tom handed drinks to each of them. He sat next to Theo and spread marble coasters across the coffee table, and then leaned back and looked from one to the other.

Theo cleared his throat.

“Um,” Jonathan said, “Theo was wondering if perhaps he could use your shower... I sort of kidnapped him from track practice.”

Tom took a sip of his drink. It looked like soda, but it smelled like whiskey.

“Kidnapped?”

“Yeah, I apologize for stinking up the place. I don’t usually go around in sweats drenched from an afternoon of running.”

Tom took another sip, and this time Theo could see his lips curled in a smile. Theo looked away before he blushed.

“Did you bring a change of clothes?”

“I left them out in the truck.” He held his hand out to Jonathan and waited for the keys.

“Don’t get any funny ideas,” Jonathan said, dangling the keys.

Tom showed Theo to the bathroom. Bedroom doors on either side of the hallway were open, one revealing a dresser covered in change and keys and small objects, an unmade bed, clothes on the floor, and a guitar upright on a stand. The other room was spotless—a double bed, computer and a bookshelf full of books, and more framed artwork on the walls. “Got a roommate?” Theo asked. Tom was getting a towel and washcloth from the closet.

“Used to,” he answered. “Now it’s just the guest room.”

“So, you play guitar?”

“Yep.” Tom set the towel on the counter. “Got a band, too.”

Theo was impressed. He noticed the string choker at Tom’s neck, like Richard’s. “What kind of music do you play?”

“Some old rock covers, but mostly originals... kind of alternative country/rock stuff. You play any music?”

“No, but I love listening.” The bathroom door had closed behind them and Theo was standing too close to Tom. The room felt small. He looked at the reflection of the two of them in the long mirror over the sink. “Well. I guess I’ll take a shower.”

“Right,” Tom said. “Feel free to use my shampoo, unless you brought your own...”

“Thanks.” Theo looked down at his crossed arms. He was clutching his clothes to his chest. Tom left and closed the door.

“What the fuck?” he whispered to the mirror.

Jonathan and Tom weren’t glued to each other when Theo finished his shower. They were still clothed, talking and laughing together on the sofa. Theo had found the cologne and put some at the base of his neck. It had Asian grass and white tea. He didn’t recognize the brand but he tried to memorize it anyway.

“Much better,” Jonathan said, surveying the results of Theo’s shower.

“Thank you,” Theo set the bundle of his dirty clothes in the entryway, not wanting to hold the soggy fabric anymore.

“Where are you going?” Jonathan called.

“Just setting my stuff by the door,” Theo said and came back to the living room. He sat by himself on the loveseat and sipped his soda. It didn’t smell like whiskey.

“Was the shower alright?” Tom asked. “I forgot to tell you that sometimes when the washer kicks into rinse, the flow dribbles down to about nothing.”

“No,” Theo said, “it was fine.” He placed his glass on the marble coaster and sat back. No one said anything. Finally he asked what they’d been talking about.

“You, mostly,” Jonathan said and smiled.

Tom leaned forward and told Theo that Jonathan had been describing the troubles Theo had been having with his parents.

“Theo, don’t get that look.” Jonathan reached across and rested his hand on Theo’s shoulder. “Tom has heard this kind of stuff before.”

“Of course every person has their own specific stuff to deal with,” Tom said and took a sip of his drink. He rested the glass on his knee and said something about how hard it is to put up with your parents when you’re a teenager, but that it was probably worse when they acted like they didn’t know what the hell to do because you’re gay.

Theo shifted on the sofa. His parents had seen the note by now and were likely discussing him at this very moment.

“How long have they known?”

Theo told him years, but then Tom thought Theo had never kept any secrets from them, so he explained that Jonathan was his big secret.

“Well, sex with Jonathan is his big secret,” Jonathan corrected. He’d pulled his legs up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his shins.

“They knew we were best friends—”

“—since sixth grade,” Jonathan finished. “But—”

“They had no idea we were having sex,” Theo said. The statement hung in the air and none of them spoke to break its the spell. Tom asked them both if they were being careful—using condoms—and they both said yes, but Theo couldn’t imagine giving a guy a blowjob with a condom on. As long as he didn’t have anal sex, he thought he’d be okay. But, of course, Theo didn’t say any of this out loud to Tom just in case. He didn’t want to

look stupid. Tom asked how did it change things for Theo's parents if the two of them, Theo and Jonathan, were having sex.

Theo thought for a minute. Tom was much smarter than Theo had given him credit for.

"It would make them feel hopeless," Jonathan said. "Unlike my parents..." When Jonathan didn't say anymore, Tom asked what *his* parents would do. Jonathan hesitated, and then told Tom all about what an asshole his dad could be. Theo wanted to add in a few examples because he was sure Tom wasn't getting the picture of just how much of an asshole Jonathan's dad was. Or what he'd do to someone like Tom. But Jonathan's mom was mostly a pushover. She went to church alone every Sunday and she was appropriately submissive to her husband. Probably neither of them could have comprehended that Jonathan was into guys unless he put it right in front of them, which he would never do. Jonathan had told Theo a long time ago that he was banking on something his big brother had told him—that people usually only see what they want to see.

"My dad asks me all the time when am I going to bring home another pretty girl like Ellen."

"Ellen?"

"His one go at straight sex," Theo offered. "It wasn't exactly successful... thank god, or I would have been crushed." He said this looking at Jonathan. "But his dad would have been apeshit happy."

Tom looked thoughtful. "And *your* parents?"

Theo was quiet for a minute. Tom had his feet up on the table, which Theo wanted to do, but he'd forgotten to bring extra socks. He dug his toes in the carpet and said he thought what would bother them most was that he'd been doing this thing behind their backs for so long.

“Being with Jonathan?”

“Yeah.”

Jonathan jumped in, saying how Theo's parents had all of these rules and shit that seemed lame for a sixteen-year-old. It'd been crazy at Theo's house since the accident, so maybe they didn't realize they should loosen up a bit. Jonathan reminded Tom that they'd forgotten Theo's birthday this year.

Theo winced. He'd never heard Jonathan describe his parents as lame.

Tom looked at Theo. “I forgot about your dad's accident. That must have put a strain on your family.”

“Yeah,” Theo said. He glanced at the clock on the mantel and realized why he was suddenly starving. “We gotta go soon, Jonathan. The game has already started... and I need some food.” Jonathan didn't look like he was ready to go anywhere. They went back and forth until Tom told them he had his band coming over to practice that night, but that they were welcome to stay as long as they wanted. He set his nearly empty drink on a coaster and settled again into the cushions, perhaps just a little bit closer to Jonathan.

Theo wasn't sure if he wanted to stay, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to go either. His stomach couldn't stay empty for long or he'd start being an ass. He and Jonathan went back and forth again, trying to figure out what to eat, but then Tom offered to treat them to Chinese buffet.

“Sure,” Jonathan said, and so did Theo.

Tom stood and stretched and said he’d go grab his wallet. Theo watched the unbuttoned shirt and Tom’s chest beneath it.

The restaurant was crowded, a place near Tom’s house with over three hundred items to choose from and free drink refills. He was buying. Theo elbowed Jonathan while they waited in line for Mongolian bar-be-que. “We can’t go back to his house after this. Your parents are gonna be worried.”

“Nah, I’ll think of something.” Jonathan held out his plate and the chef loaded it with noodles and meat and vegetables. They waited for Theo’s dish. “I know you like him,” Jonathan said.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I want to have sex with him.”

A few heads turned. Jonathan leaned in and spoke in a low voice. “Just give it one more try. That shit with Matt was a fluke.”

“I don’t want to watch you giving head to someone else,” Theo whispered.

“Then I’ll watch you.”

Theo stifled a laugh and would have given a detailed negative response, but his food was ready.

Tom was working on his second helping of sesame chicken and noodles. “What did they cook up for you boys?”

“Noodles, veggies and beef,” Theo said.

“Beef,” Jonathan said. Tom and Theo got the hint at the same time. Theo laughed and looked away.

At Tom's house after the meal, Jonathan called his mom and told her they'd be later than he thought and not to save them any dinner, he and Theo would get a burger on the way home. There was no mention of any calls from Della.

Theo was on the sofa and Jonathan on the loveseat. Theo had listened while Jonathan lied to his mother on the phone. Tom was in the bathroom. After Jonathan set down the phone, he'd asked Theo if he was ready for some fun. Not really Theo had answered, but Jonathan kept pushing, nudging with his foot, punching Theo's arm, until finally an agreement was made. Jonathan had to do all of the work of making it happen, Theo would relax and reap the benefits. Not that Theo could really see anything good coming of this. He would try—he didn't want to embarrass his friend by arguing, and it would be over soon anyway.

When Tom returned, Jonathan disappeared with him behind the wall separating the hall from the living room. Theo waited, trying not to listen to their voices. He lit the candle on the coffee table. It gave him something to do. He let the match burn almost to his fingertips, enduring the heat for a few seconds. Smoke curled slowly from his fingers. There was no ashtray, so Theo went to the kitchen and ran the match under some water in the sink. On the wall, black and white photographs depicting various stages of the erection of the Eiffel Tower caught Theo's eye. He stared at them until Tom came up behind him.

"Been to France?" Tom asked.

Theo stepped aside, making room for Tom to stand closer. "No, have you?"

"Used to go a couple of times a year with my boyfriend."

“I didn’t know you had a boyfriend.”

“We broke up a few months ago.” He touched the edge of one of the frames.

“He’s a great guy. It took us a long time to figure out that we weren’t really compatible.”

Theo leaned against the counter. Jonathan must have stayed behind in the living room so he and Tom could be alone. Theo went along with it. “So, how did you figure it out?”

“We argued a lot toward the end... he never went to see me play music.” He paused. “And the sex, it just wasn’t right for either of us. We get along better as friends.”

Theo was silent. He looked at the Paris photos again.

“Hey, let’s go downstairs.” Tom touched him on the shoulder. “I’ll show you where the band practices.” He opened a door just off the edge of the kitchen and led the way down a wooden staircase. Oriental carpets were draped along the concrete walls, and a full drum kit surrounded by African drums and microphones took up most of the central floor space.

“Sweet,” Theo said, resting his hand on the hide of one of the drums. It looked handmade.

“That’s a *djimbe*, from West Africa. You hold it between your legs like this.”

Tom sat on a stool and leaned the drum back into his lap. “So the sound can resonate through the bottom.” Tom tapped a rhythm, then set the drum back. “My thing is guitar and vocals.” Three guitars were propped on stands, two electric and one acoustic. He scooped up a stray cord and began winding it around his arm. “Sorry for the mess.”

“No,” Theo said, “this is great.”

“My boyfriend says I don’t want to grow up, but it keeps me happy.”

Theo stood near the drums. He rested his fingers on the edge of the *djimbe*.

“You could try it,” Tom offered. “It’s user-friendly.”

“I’m not so good at anything musical.”

Tom was sitting on a stool near the guitars. “Jonathan said you wanted to talk about something.”

“He did?” Theo put his hands in his pockets.

“It’s okay,” Tom said, “if you don’t really want to talk.”

“Well, it’s not exactly that.” Theo couldn’t help but run his hands through his hair. It was becoming a habit. “Jonathan seems to think I need to expand my horizons.”

Tom nodded, interested but quiet.

“He’s been meeting other guys lately,” Theo didn’t know how much to say. “And I was with this guy in Florida.” He shoved his hands back into his jeans. “I tried to seduce this guy.” He moved toward a stool and leaned against it awkwardly.

“And you got turned down?”

“Not quite.” Theo thought of Matt. “I gave him head.” He stared at the floor while he spoke. “Then he freaked out and punched me.”

“That’s awful!”

“Yeah.” Theo looked up, surprised at the intensity of Tom’s response. “Well…” he was going to try to explain how he felt like it was all his fault, but the words wouldn’t come. He sat on the stool with his hands in his pockets for a minute or two, remembering how Matt’s voice had sounded when he cried.

Tom came and stood near him. “Hey, it’s okay.” He put a hand on Theo’s shoulder. “No one should ever treat you like that.”

The knot in Theo's stomach pulled so tight that he gasped for breath. Tom just stood there, waiting for Theo. Was he going to cry in front of this guy? Could he just relax and get over this bullshit? He felt his face burn, heat rising to his cheeks like it always did just before he was about to lose it. Theo rubbed his hands back and forth on his thighs. He wiped the back of his arm across his face and felt the dampness. How fucking embarrassing. Tom sat on the steps near Theo's stool. Close, but not so close that Theo felt he had to get up and walk away.

Tom looked like he had all the time in the world to sit on the stairs and wait for Theo to get himself together. "It's funny," Theo laughed. "Jonathan didn't bring me here to talk, he brought me here so..."

Tom smiled and waited for Theo to finish the thought. When Theo didn't, Tom said, "So we could have a threesome?"

"Yeah." Theo wiped his face again.

"I think he means well." Tom shifted his feet on the stair. "It's a confusing time for both of you, and sex has a way of making all the pain go away... for a while." He stood and leaned against one of the beams supporting the floor overhead. "Don't get me wrong. I don't know any guy who would turn down the chance at an evening with the two of you."

Theo tried to smile.

"But it would probably be a lot more fun if it was something you really wanted, too."

At this moment, Theo could almost imagine putting Jonathan's plan into effect. "I do like you," he said, standing and trying to hold his voice and his legs steady.

“Then call me sometime when you’re ready,” Tom said and pulled Theo into a hug. He held one hand just below the nape of Theo’s hair, and the other at the small of Theo’s back. It felt safe and warm and like a place Theo could stay for a long time. Theo buried his head in Tom’s shoulder and inhaled.

Jonathan was watching music videos, sprawled across the sofa and looking like he might have fallen asleep. He rubbed his eyes and yawned when Theo sat down. Tom stood beside Theo.

“Anything exciting happening up here?” Theo asked.

“No,” Jonathan answered. “Anything exciting in the basement?”

“You mean you didn’t hear us?” Theo teased.

Jonathan looked skeptical, first scrutinizing Theo, then Tom. “What did I miss?”

“Oh, everything,” Tom said. “But maybe we’ll give you a repeat performance sometime.” He sat on the armrest. Theo leaned back, playing along, and Tom draped his arm across Theo’s shoulder.

“Why not right now?”

Theo stifled a fake yawn. “Too tired.”

“That’s the thanks I get, huh?” He swung his legs around to push off the sofa but Theo shoved him back against the cushions.

“Give it up, you whiny ass. Nothing happened.”

“Nothing?”

“Zip,” Tom chimed.

Jonathan looked back and forth between them and shook his head. “Great.”

The doorbell rang. "Come on, I'll give you the full details on the way home," Theo said, pulling Jonathan off the sofa.

"You guys don't have to go."

"Yeah, we should." Theo started inching toward the door with Jonathan. The doorbell rang again.

"Alright," Tom said. He looked at Theo. "Call me."

"Hey," Jonathan stood between them, "What about me?"

"This is for you," Tom said and kissed Jonathan hard on the lips, and then pulled away. "I've got to answer the door." He held Jonathan's hand and led him to the entryway. Theo followed them and just before opening the door, Tom kissed Jonathan again and said, "You can call me too."

"What'd ya think?" Jonathan asked, not even waiting until they were out of Tom's driveway before he started grilling Theo. "Did you guys even kiss when you were down there?"

"No."

"Then what'd you do?"

"Talked. And he showed me his drums and stuff."

Jonathan drove on, taking his eyes away from the road occasionally and watching Theo in the darkness of the truck cab. "What'd you talk about?"

Theo relaxed into the seat, leaning slightly toward Jonathan with his head resting near Jonathan's shoulder. "Matt."

"Yeah? What about him?"

"Nothing specific."

“Come on. What did Tom say?”

“Mostly good stuff.”

“Like what stuff?”

“Like... no one should ever treat me like that.” Theo rested his hand on Jonathan’s leg. “He didn’t really say much. He was nice, and he didn’t make me feel like a moron. He’s not a counselor or something, is he?”

“No, he works for a bank.”

“He’s got nice stuff, nice clothes... and he smells nice too.”

Jonathan put his hand over Theo’s.

“I don’t know why you’re pushing so hard for something to happen.”

“I think it would be good for you.”

“You’re good for me. I hope your parents go to bed early tonight. I’m ready to have you alone.”

“We’re alone right now.” Jonathan pulled the truck to the side of the gravel road and shut off the engine. They were tilted sideways into a shallow ditch. Jonathan unbuckled his seatbelt. He undid Theo’s seatbelt, then Theo’s zipper. “You don’t mind, do you?”

Mrs. Norton was waiting for them. “Is that you, Jonathan?” she called from the kitchen. “Is Theo with you?”

“Yeah, Mom.”

“He needs to call Della.” She was drying her hands on a dishtowel. “Hello, Theo.”

“Hey, Mrs. Norton,” Theo said. He was trailing Jonathan into the kitchen, wishing they could have slipped into the house unnoticed. “Did she leave a message or anything?”

“No, but it sounded like she really wanted you to call her right away.”

“You can use the phone in my room,” Jonathan said. “Mom, we’re going to study and then call it a night, okay?”

“Sure, Hon.” She stayed near the counter and took a moment to flatten the towel.

“I put the leftovers from supper in the fridge.”

“We already ate, but thanks, Mom.” He kissed her on the cheek.

“Well if it isn’t the dynamic duo.”

Theo cringed. It was Dr. Norton. He was the worst kind of bully—a stupid one.

“Dad.”

“Son.”

“Dr. Norton.”

“Theo.”

“We were just going down to finish some homework.” Jonathan nodded his head toward the stairway.

“How’s your father these days?” Dr. Norton was staring at Theo. He was smiling, but he stood in that legs spread, arms akimbo stance that said *answer me*. “I won’t see him much now that were out in the sticks,” he said.

“Getting better every day,” Theo said. His dad and Dr. Norton taught in different departments at Missouri University. Since the accident, his dad seemed to have forgotten that’d he’d once disliked Jonathan’s dad. The man yelled at his sons—shouts and rants that could be heard through the walls and windows, even in winter, when the houses were

closed up tight. Theo's dad had developed a kind of fondness for Dr. Norton, laughing at the cutting jokes, not realizing they were often at his expense. Maybe that was the one good thing about Jonathan's family moving away—no more Dr. Norton next door.

“Homework,” Jonathan said.

“Well, good night, then,” Mrs. Norton said. She'd been standing quietly near the sink, the dishtowel in her hands.

“G'night Mom.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Norton.”

The boys nodded at Dr. Norton, his arms across his chest. He nodded back. Theo skimmed down the stairway with Jonathan, feeling as if they'd narrowly missed something really bad.

Jonathan's room was still mostly packed—half-opened boxes were stacked randomly, pushed up near the wall or left in the middle of the floor. Clothes and a trophy poked out of a box near the door. Theo sat next to it on the carpet and leaned against the wall.

Jonathan disappeared into the bathroom and Theo watched the door close. He keyed his home number into the phone and crossed his legs and pushed his back into the wall. The answering machine picked up, and then he heard his Della's voice. She was fumbling with the buttons so he waited until she said hello.

“Della?”

“Theo? Are you at Jonathan's?”

“Yeah. Mrs. Norton told me you called.”

“Since when do you leave a note on the counter informing us that you’ll be spending the night with a friend?”

He didn’t answer.

“I specifically asked you not to make any plans to be with Jonathan.”

On cue, Jonathan walked in and sat across from Theo. “Della, you don’t need to worry about Jonathan and me.” *Such a bitch*, Theo mouthed.

“You need to come home now.”

“I’m staying at Jonathan’s.”

“No, you’re not.”

“We’ve got to study for an exam tomorrow.”

“Theo.”

“What?” He shot an imaginary pistol at the phone.

“Your father looked for you at the game.”

“Come on.”

“He got there during the first quarter and waited until the game was almost over.”

Theo couldn’t conjure any brilliant lies. “Jonathan picked me up from school and we drove around awhile, then we got some dinner, then we came here.”

“That’s three hours, Theo.”

He didn’t want to argue. “Look, Della. We weren’t doing anything wrong.”

Della was quiet for a minute. She was breathing into the phone, but she didn’t say anything. Theo waited. Finally, in a very quiet voice, she said, “Theo, when you come home from practice tomorrow, I want you to stay here until your father and I get home.”

When Theo didn’t say anything, she added, “Do you understand?”

“Sure, Della.

“I expect to see you.”

“Okay,” he said and hung up. He sighed and rested his head against the wall.

“What a fucking pain in my ass.” He stared at the bare glass of Jonathan’s windows, the reflections of the empty walls and corners of Jonathan’s room, and then looked at the receiver still under his hand.

Jonathan lay lengthways across the mattress on the floor. “Della has to lighten up.”

Theo didn’t want to talk about his parents, but Jonathan wasn’t going to let it drop. “Tell me something I don’t know, asshole.”

“You’re a shitty liar.”

“Shut up.”

“They both treat you like a baby. You let them run your life.”

“Oh yeah, I’m not the one trying to fuck girls so my mom and dad won’t figure out I’m a fag.”

“Give it up—this isn’t about me.”

“Yeah, right,” Theo said.

They went on, Jonathan suggesting stupid things like that Theo should make his parents think Samantha was doing something fucked up so they’d worry about her instead of him. But Theo wasn’t going to do that. Samantha was finally on his side and he needed to keep her there.

“Whatever.” Jonathan kicked at Theo’s legs. “But you’ve got to do something.”

“Get off my case.” Theo shoved Jonathan’s legs away.

“Make me,” Jonathan said and kicked at Theo again.

Theo grabbed Jonathan’s leg and held it with his arm, twisting. They struggled, rolling across the mattress and neither willing to back down. When they stopped moving, Theo was on top. “Give up?”

“No,” Jonathan said. He stared into Theo’s eyes and breathed slowly. “You?” He shifted Theo’s weight to the side, and they were wrestling again, but this time Jonathan finished on top and Theo was face down, his arms pinned behind his back.

“Give up?” Jonathan asked.

Theo tried to twist from Jonathan’s grip. This was fucking stupid.

“I think you’d best give up.” Jonathan leaned forward, pressing his weight against Theo, pushing his crotch hard into Theo’s ass. Jonathan kept Theo’s arms pinned with one hand and with the other reached under Theo and started undoing his zipper.

“Stop it!” Theo raged.

“Too late,” Jonathan said, his lips near Theo’s ear. Theo yelled at him to stop, to get the fuck off, struggling against Jonathan’s full body weight pressed into his back, his ass and his legs.

In a very quiet voice, Jonathan simply said, “No.”

Theo’s chest was heaving. Jonathan was undoing his own jeans. He had a button fly that Theo could feel giving away one button at a time. This wasn’t going to happen. All night, Jonathan had been fucking with him in little ways, pushing him with Tom, saying shit about his parents. Theo struggled free and got on top again. He held Jonathan’s arms out to the sides, staring into Jonathan’s eyes, trying to figure out where the hell his best friend had gone.

“What are you gonna do now?” Jonathan asked.

“I’m gonna kick your ass,” Theo said and pinned both of Jonathan’s arms under his knees.

“You can’t do it.”

“I don’t see you stopping me.”

Jonathan shifted his legs. “I’m just letting you think you’re in charge.”

“Fuck you,” Theo said and backhanded Jonathan across the jaw. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Jonathan was stunned for a second. He looked up at Theo. “My best friend’s a pussy, that’s what.”

“Yeah, well my best friend’s a slut and an ass.”

Jonathan strained against Theo’s knees, but Theo held him in place. “You’re a coward, Theo.” Jonathan swung his legs all the way to Theo’s shoulders and pulled him backwards. They scrambled, each trying to pin the other again. Theo finally kicked Jonathan away and stood, and when Jonathan lunged, Theo punched him, making solid contact with Jonathan’s left eye. Jonathan dropped to his knees, holding his head in his hands. Theo pushed Jonathan backwards, digging into his body. “You stupid motherfucker!” He swung over and over, sending uppercuts to Jonathan’s ribs, his chest, until finally, he realized Jonathan wasn’t giving any resistance. He stopped and Jonathan pulled away, hunched over, holding his head in his hands. Theo watched Jonathan’s shoulders heave, horrified at what he’d just done.

Jonathan sat back on the mattress and Theo leaned his weight into the wall, alert in case it wasn’t really over. Jonathan was bleeding but he didn’t want to touch him.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” Theo asked.

Jonathan pulled at his shirt to wipe his brow. “To see if you could kick my ass.”

“Satisfied?”

“Yeah.”

Theo’s hand ached and he held it in his lap. He straightened his pants and tried to zip them. His fingers trembled.

Jonathan squinted and then winced. He put his hand to his eye. “Yeah. You win.”

Theo couldn’t look at him. It sure felt like he’d lost. He started running his good hand through his hair, pulling until it hurt, and then pulling some more.

Jonathan shifted to his knees and moved nearer to Theo. “Don’t touch me,” Theo said.

“I’m sorry, okay?”

“No.”

The skin below the edge of Jonathan’s eyebrow was turning bright pink. “I was stupid,” Jonathan said.

Theo cradled his clenched fist. His chest was burning and he kept breathing hard. Jonathan sat next to him, sighing heavy into the wall.

“I’ll get some ice,” Theo said, and he went upstairs. He filled a small, plastic bag with cubes from the freezer door and found a hand towel. All of the lights were off except one over the kitchen sink. There was a reflection in the French doors—a shadowed figure with tussled hair and wrinkled jeans hanging off one hip. Theo stared at himself in the dark glass, imagining Jonathan behind him, fucking him up the ass.

Theo grabbed a bag of chips, two cans of soda, and an entire bottle of ibuprofen. Jonathan was on the bed, lying curled on his side, both arms tucked under his head like a pillow. He looked like he was dreaming.

“Jonathan?”

“Mmm.” Jonathan shifted.

Theo set the compress in Jonathan’s hand and kneeled beside the mattress. “Here,” Theo said, holding two pills. He waited for Jonathan to sit upright. He didn’t want to look at Jonathan and he didn’t want to touch him, but Theo couldn’t help but stare at the outline of swelling tissue surrounding Jonathan’s eye. It reminded him of what his dad’s eye had looked like when they first changed the bandage covering his stitches.

“Shit, this hurts.” Jonathan’s face twisted from the effort of trying to swallow. Jonathan groaned and lay back down on the mattress. “See my pillow anywhere?”

“Here,” Theo said. He arranged the bed for Jonathan and set several blankets for himself on the floor.

“That’s too far.”

Theo didn’t want to be near Jonathan, but he lifted the blanket from Jonathan’s shoulder and said scoot over. He slid under and their legs tangled together. Jonathan’s face was all in shadow, only a hint of light coming from the bathroom. “I’m sorry,” Jonathan said.

Theo didn’t answer. They lay there quiet for a few minutes until Jonathan said, “People won’t push you around if you don’t let them.”

“I didn’t need you to try to fuck me up the ass to figure that out.”

“I got carried away.” Jonathan shifted on the bed. “Haven’t you wanted to try it?”

“No,” Theo said.

Jonathan set the pack above his head and moved closer to Theo. His breath was silent, like he wasn’t breathing at all. Theo waited, trying to sort out his feelings and put them into words. He looked at the shadows near Jonathan’s face.

Jonathan shifted. Sound, but not quite words, escaped his lips.

“I’m not ready.” Theo pulled the covers higher over his shoulder. He pulled his arms in tight to his chest, his hands clenched. He didn’t want to feel the skin on Jonathan’s body, the skin he’d bruised and bloodied with his own hands, his own rage.

Jonathan bent his knees, pulling Theo’s legs closer. “It’ll feel better than anything we’ve ever done before.”

If he had to touch Jonathan, wrap his arms around him, rip off his boxers and force his dick inside Jonathan, Theo felt like he would surely kill him.

“Do you want me to stop being with other guys?”

“I don’t care,” he said. “I don’t care.” Theo sobbed, held his hands tighter to his chest. He couldn’t stop. Jonathan pulled him into his chest and tried to hold on. It wasn’t about other guys. It wasn’t about fucking. It was about dying. Killing someone with your own rage, and not even knowing you were angry.

Finally, though, Theo felt quiet, his head completely empty, cleansed. Jonathan hung in some balance between dreaming and pain, unsure of what he had unleashed in his friend, unable to stay with the thought process that might get him to some kind of answer.

Theo lifted his arm and let it rest low on Jonathan’s hips. “Once we’ve done everything, you’ll move on.”

“Never,” Jonathan said, his hand in Theo’s hair.

No one could ever make a promise like that. Theo swallowed the urge to cry again. He felt like a little boy wishing no one had told him the truth about Christmas, about where all those presents really came from. Jonathan had been Theo’s magic—he’d made everything beautiful no matter how fucked up things felt at home. And without that magic, Theo didn’t know how he would be able to face the world—his family—again.

Chapter Seven

The room was beginning to glow with morning. Neither boy had moved all night. When the knock came on Jonathan’s door, it took them both long seconds to rouse. The knocking came again, more insistent. “Jonathan, are you going to school this morning?”

“What time is it?”

“Almost seven. Do you want me to make your lunch before I go to work?”

“Sure. Thanks, Mom.”

“What about Theo?”

Jonathan nudged Theo and got little more than a murmur. “He says yeah.”

“Okay, I’ll leave them on the counter.” The second stair creaked with her weight, and it sounded like she was gone, but then there was another tap on the door. “I’m putting a load in the washer. Anything I can put in for you?” The knob started to turn.

“No, Ma,” Jonathan almost shouted. “I’ll do some laundry later.”

The knob stopped. “Okay. Don’t be late for school.” The stair creaked again, and this time her footsteps went all the way up to the kitchen.

“Why don’t you have a lock on your door?” Theo mumbled into Jonathan’s chest.

“Forgot I needed one.” Jonathan tried to shift his shoulders and lie back, but groaned and stopped mid-effort.

Theo looked up and saw that the skin near Jonathan’s left eye had split and deepened to purple in the night. “Shit, that looks awful.” He touched the swelling along the ridge of Jonathan’s cheekbone.

“Ow.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t been such an ass.” Theo got up and started dressing, and because Jonathan was moving slow, went upstairs to get another ice pack for Jonathan’s eye. Mrs. Norton was gone, and so was Dr. Norton. Two brown lunch sacks sat side by side on the counter. Della hadn’t made Theo’s lunch in years.

At school, time stretched into a slow, boring, eternity punctuated by an odd mix of thoughts about Jonathan, who couldn’t meet for lunch because he had some club meeting he’d forgotten about. Theo ate in the cafeteria. He sat with guys from the track team and tried to participate in their conversation, but he wasn’t interested in tits and ass talk, or who was the easy lay of the week. Theo listened quietly to their stories and no one noticed that he didn’t want to go out and get some ass for himself.

Coach worked them hard after school, singling out slackers for extra pushups and laps, when usually he was more lax. Theo pushed himself so he wouldn’t have to stay late, and so he could get home before his parents. Eberhardt’s uninspiring pep talk for the

upcoming meet agitated Theo. He liked the guy, but it was all he could do not to bolt before Coach finished his diatribe.

His bike was chained to the rack outside school—Jonathan couldn't give Theo a ride after school because his soccer coach had decided the team needed extra practice to make up for spring break. The team usually met before school, but if one of the fields opened up in the afternoon, and if they had a game coming up, they had to practice twice. Their first game was in a week. Jonathan had unloaded the bike from his truck that morning and squeezed Theo's arm before saying goodbye. The ride home was chilly, Theo's clothes damp because he hadn't stayed long enough to shower and change into something dry. No one was home, so Theo showered and grabbed a snack and enjoyed the quiet before the storm that was sure to come once his parents got in.

There was a folded newspaper on the counter and a pile of mail. Two envelopes full of photos caught his eye. He pulled out the pictures—a few from the weekend they'd gone sledding in February, but most were beach and campground shots from Florida. Theo stopped when he got to the night of the potluck dinner. There they were, he and Matt, side by side in a photo—arms almost touching. Matt was smiling and Theo looked nervous.

Theo pulled out three more pictures, two of Matt on the beach and one of him walking alongside Theo's dad. Theo stared at his dad's cane. It had been made by someone who lived a few hours north in a little river town called Rocheport. Theo and his dad had floated in a canoe on the Missouri River the autumn before the accident, a few weeks after the Chiefs game and the Rufus Wainwright concert. The departure point on the river was in Rocheport, near where Lewis and Clark had traveled on their way west to

find the ocean and begin mapping the country three hundred years before. The tour guide also led canoe trips on an underground river in the caves beneath Rockbridge State Park. Theo and his dad had scheduled a cave trip for that March, before the little grey bats woke for spring. Another cool trip that was only going to be for the guys, but which had been completely forgotten by the time the tour guide had called to confirm. Della explained the accident, and the guide offered to get one of the locals to make a cane for David to help with his recovery. Della had said that was thoughtful of him, but really not necessary. It arrived before Theo's dad was ready to walk with only the help of a cane, and it sat in the hallway poking out of a tub of umbrellas and mittens and scarves until that autumn. Now, Theo's dad used it every day.

Theo left the picture of Matt and his dad in the stack on the counter and took the other three photos to his room, along with the phone book and his backpack. Folding the thick yellow book, he fanned open the pages and stopped at 'C.' There was no listing for 'Matthew Clay.' New phone books came out in April according to the front cover, and Matt hadn't moved to town until July. Theo dialed information and got Matt's number, writing it on the back of one of his spiral notebooks, minus the name.

He punched in the numbers and waited, hoping for a recording of Matt's voice. Theo listened to the message four times before he finally set the phone down. Samantha would be home soon, full of questions and information, and his parents would come not long after. Theo savored these last moments alone, lying back on his pillow, staring at the constellations pasted on his ceiling. The phone rang just as his eyes were closing. It was a man asking for David, Theo's dad. Theo didn't think to disguise his voice, and when he asked if he could take a message, the guy said, "Yes, Theo. It's Matt." He had several

calls on his Caller ID from this number, and he asked Theo if he'd been the one who called.

"Yeah," Theo said, trying to clear his throat. When Matt asked what was up, Theo stalled, saying he wanted to talk to him. He sounded almost as smooth as Jonathan.

"Okay, shoot," Matt said.

"Can we meet sometime?" Theo ran his fingers through his hair. "It would be better if we could talk in person."

Matt said he didn't think it was a good idea. Theo stumbled through saying he had some things he really needed to talk to someone about, and that it had been hard since he got home. Matt wanted to know if Theo had talked to his parents about Florida. Theo cringed inside and told him that no, he would never tell them that.

Matt didn't say anything, but Theo could hear him breathing. "Only for a little while," Matt said. "We can meet, but only for a little while." Theo asked if they could meet the next day for lunch, and after listening to some papers rustling from Matt's end of the line, he figured the answer would be no. But then Matt asked if noon worked. Theo suggested 11:30, but he kept his voice neutral and explained that it was when his lunch hour began.

"Do you want me to come get you?" Matt asked.

"Nah," Theo said, though it was tempting. He said he'd ride his bike to Emmett's Place, and Matt said fine, and then they hung up.

Theo lay there with the phone on his chest, unable to believe what he'd just done. Lunch. Tomorrow. What would he say? He had less than twenty-four hours to figure it out.

Theo was almost done with chemistry when the garage door started grinding open. His dad and Samantha were coming up the driveway in the van—without Della. Theo closed his book and decided to hang out in the kitchen, test the waters to see how bad things really were.

“Hey, Theo,” Samantha called.

“Hey, Sis,” he said, shuffling the photos.

She came up next to him, looking over his shoulder and then whispered in his ear.

“You’re in big trouble.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Della was crying last night, and yelling.”

“Great,” Theo said, and would have asked for more details but right then his dad came in from the garage.

“See ya,” Samantha said, and sprinted around the corner and up the stairs.

“So glad you decided to join us, Son.” His dad set his briefcase and a bag of groceries on the counter. “Della will be glad to see you.”

“Somehow, I doubt it.” Theo tried to keep from looking up, staring at the pictures one at a time. “Need any help?”

“Sure. Leave out the vegetables and the pasta, though. They’re for tonight’s dinner.”

“Grilled vegetables and pasta?”

“Yep,” his dad said, unloading folders from his briefcase onto the dining room table. “I decided it’s time to take over some of the workload from Della.”

“Can you add some meat?” Theo set the milk in the fridge and put the box of penne on the counter. “Dad?”

“Yes?”

“What about some meat?”

“What about it?”

“With the vegetables,” Theo said. He placed the bags of zucchini, peppers and onions next to the sink.

“Sure,” his dad answered, sinking into a wooden chair and rubbing his knees. He patted the table. “Come sit.”

Theo folded the paper bag, taking his time.

“You should have come home last night.”

“I needed to be away for awhile.”

“Theo.” His dad rested his chin on his hand. “You do still live here, and there are rules you have to follow.”

Theo leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“Della is worried sick about you, and so am I.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Theo said, exhaling too much.

His dad set his hands on the table, on the papers and folders he’d taken out of his briefcase. “I called someone today.”

“Who?”

He cleared his throat. “I called a gay helpline, and then I called a counselor.”

“Come on!” Theo pushed away from the table. “So I can work on my little gay problem?” He paced behind the counter.

“It’s not a problem that you’re gay.” His dad clasped his hands. “The problem is if you’re sexually active.”

“It’s not like I went out and picked up some guy in a bar.”

“What *have* you done?” He looked at Theo. “Did you use condoms?”

“Would you stop it! Just stop, okay?”

“Stop what? Stop caring about you? Stop worrying about you?”

“No. Stop treating me like I’m stupid, like I’m some stupid kid that has this problem and can’t figure out anything on his own.” He shoved his hands in his pockets to try to keep from running his fingers through his hair.

“But you’re not on your own, see? Sex can be dangerous, and you’re my son and I’m scared of what I see you doing.”

“And what is it you think you see me doing?” Theo put his hands on the counter and leaned forward.

“I see you taking risks,” his dad said. “I see you trying to prove to anyone who will listen that you aren’t a kid anymore.”

“Right. I’m not a kid anymore. I’m glad someone finally fucking noticed. Ever since the accident it’s always ‘Be careful this, be careful that.’ Just because *you* got hurt, that doesn’t mean *I’m* gonna get hurt.” Theo heard the front door open—Della. “I’ll be up in my room.” He started to walk away and then looked back at his dad. “You can send Della up to interrogate me whenever you like.”

“Theo—” his dad said, but Theo was already up the stairs before he heard anything else.

He waited in his room until Samantha came and told him dinner was ready. When she tapped on the door, he was sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. He'd never yelled at his dad since the accident. Theo was sick of being quiet. Of always trying to be good.

“Theo?”

“What.”

Samantha pushed the door open. “Dinner’s ready.”

“Great.”

“Dad sent me up to get you.” She perched on the bed next to him.

“Go away, alright? Just tell him I’m not feeling well.”

Samantha waited a moment, and then stood to go. “Come on, Theo. Don’t make me eat alone with them again.” He looked up, but didn’t answer. She squirmed a bit, digging her toe into the carpet. “Don’t wait too long, okay?”

After she left, Theo listened to the downstairs dinner preparations. He descended the steps and took a deep breath when he got to the final stair. His dad was getting the last dish of food from the kitchen, leaning on the countertop to balance with his free hand. Samantha and Della were already seated.

“Hello, Theo,” Della said. Her eyes skirted away from him and she sipped her ice water.

“Hey,” Theo said. He took the napkin from under his silverware and flattened it across his knee. He hoped he was imagining that her eyelids looked red and swollen.

“Here we are,” his dad announced, setting the bowl of pasta in the middle of the table.

Yeah, Theo thought. Here we are. Joy and happiness.

They ate to the clinking of metal on plates, blanketed by a backdrop of silence.

Samantha was the first to speak.

“I got my science test back today.”

“How did you do?” Della asked, dabbing at her chin with a cloth napkin.

“B plus.”

Theo appreciated that Sam was trying. He attempted to smile at her, but his lips felt like wood.

When Della didn't say anything, his dad offered, “That's wonderful, Sweetheart.”

“Thanks,” Samantha said. She went back to spearing her vegetables with her fork.

“Enough meat for you, Theo?”

“Sure, Dad. Thanks.” Theo took another bite, stifling a nervous smile at the unintended double meaning. Samantha's fork dragged across her plate like she got it too. Theo looked up at her.

“You find that funny?” Della asked.

“No.” Theo met her eyes briefly, and then he shoveled food into his mouth to keep from saying anything more. He clutched his napkin under the table.

“You know, this isn't a game, Theo. You're hurting all of us.”

He looked at Della as heat rose to his cheeks. “Why do you always turn things into something about you?”

She took a slow drink of water. “I don't believe I said ‘me.’ I was speaking for all of us.” She motioned her glass to Theo's dad and sister, and then took another sip.

“I’m not hurting anyone here.” Theo glanced over at Samantha. Her face was white.

“Yes, you are.”

“No, Della. It’s normal that I want some privacy.”

“Samantha, maybe you should leave the table.”

His sister hesitated.

“Samantha.”

“I know what’s going on, probably more than you.”

“Is that so?”

Theo looked at Samantha again, her arms crossed over her chest. “Yeah,” she said.

“And what do you know about Theo?”

“Um...” She dropped her eyes to her lap, realizing her mistake, and mumbled, “Nothing.”

Theo looked away, his resolve and anger draining. He didn’t have any idea how much she knew, or how strong their new alliance was.

“So,” Della directed to Theo. “You think what you’re doing doesn’t hurt any of us?”

Theo didn’t say anything.

“When were you planning to mention that your best friend is gay?”

“Della, let’s save this for later. Okay?”

Theo’s hands were shaking. He couldn’t take another bite—he might puke across the table, all over her face. “Like I said,” he put his fork down. “You always turn things

around so they're about you. So what if Jonathan's gay? What the hell does it have to do with you?"

"You will not use that language, and it has everything to do with me. I expected more from you. You're sixteen years old, Theo. I expected you to make better choices while I was taking care of your dad. You've let us all down."

Both his dad and Samantha were staring at their plates. Theo was in this alone. "Della, this isn't about you. Or Dad. Or Sam. It's about me! It's my life!" Theo stood to leave.

"Theo, sit down," his dad said.

"No. I've had enough!" He stared at Della across the table. "Stop trying to control me, and stop trying to use Dad's accident to make me feel guilty. He got hurt, you took care of him, and now he's better. Get over it."

"Don't you walk away from this table!" she called after him.

The door from the kitchen to the garage slammed behind him. He ducked under the opening garage door with his bike.

"Theo, come back here!" She was standing inside the garage.

"Fuck off," he mumbled as he looked back from the end of the driveway.

Passing under streetlights, Theo pedaled through the chill of evening. He was wearing only a T-shirt and jeans, and the temperature was dropping. He kept aiming his bike along back streets, pedaling harder and faster each time he thought of Della's face across the table, or the top of his dad's head, bent over a half-empty dinner plate. As far

away as possible, that's where Theo wanted to go. And not just on his bike, but in a plane flying east across the ocean.

Theo found himself in a neighborhood bordering the college campus. He was shivering so he let go of his handlebars to blow on his hands, trying to keep them warm. He recognized the huge old houses that had been converted into bed and breakfast places and law offices. This was close to Tom's house. Across the railroad tracks and two streets over, then about five blocks down. Watching for traffic, though there wasn't any, Theo crossed the streets and found his way. Maybe he should have called Tom today instead of Matt. Shit, lunch tomorrow with Matt. He'd forgotten.

The street was dark, with a light overhead only every fifth house or so. Theo accidentally passed Tom's place and realized he had to turn back when he got to the cross street that connected to the business district. He made a wide arc with his bike and rode slowly, scanning each house on his left. They all seemed to look familiar, but when Theo saw the stone chimney he knew he was in the right place. He leaned his bike against a tree, unsure whether to lock it. There was a truck parked in front of the garage. Theo had never seen Tom's car, and he wondered if this was his. Once he clicked the lock in place, he walked over to the truck, thinking it looked a lot like Jonathan's. Low lights were on in the front room and Theo could hear music, or maybe talking from inside. He got to the passenger door and froze. It was Jonathan's truck. The stupid troll with pink hair that Theo hated hung from the rearview mirror, and fast-food trash was piled on the floorboard.

Instantly, he was angry. His armpits tingled and he couldn't stop saying *fuck*, *fuck*. After walking around in circles for a few minutes, Theo leaned against the truck and

bent forward, hands on his knees and blood pounding in his head. Now, both laughter and music were coming from the house, and most of the laughter was unmistakably Jonathan's. Theo wanted to get on his bike and ride away, but where else would he go? Back home to a screaming match with Della?

Theo rubbed his palms on his thighs, trying to warm himself. He pushed away from the truck and raked a hand through his hair, and then he shoved his fingers in his pockets. The doorbell button glowed next to the storm door. Theo rested his palm on the wood siding a moment, then pressed, listening to the faint chime that followed.

Tom opened the wooden door in his bare feet. "Hey, Theo." He pushed on the storm door and held it open. "Come on in. You must be freezing."

Theo felt numb inside and out. "I was just in the neighborhood...."

"A little cold to be riding without a jacket, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Theo hovered near the threshold. On the other side of the entryway, he would be able to see into the living room. He'd be able to see Jonathan.

"Let me get you a sweatshirt." Tom nodded his head toward the next room. "I guess you know Jonathan's here."

"I saw his truck in the driveway."

Tom put his arm around Theo. "Come on."

Jonathan was sitting on the sofa, a glass in his hand, the outer edge of his left eye dark and swollen.

"Look who's here," Tom said, standing beside Theo. Tom paused a moment, and then excused himself to find a sweatshirt for Theo.

Theo held his hands balled into tight fists in his pockets. He waited, rigid and trembling, watching the doorway where Tom had disappeared.

“Hey, Theo.” Jonathan had put his feet on the floor and set his glass on a coaster. “Surprised to see you here.”

“Likewise,” Theo said. He inspected the candles below Tom’s mantelpiece.

Jonathan cleared his throat. “What brings you?”

Theo looked at him. “The same reason you’re here.” He put his hands back in his pockets—he didn’t want Jonathan to see that his fingers were shaking. He stared at the Oriental carpet spanning Tom’s wooden floor and his voice grew quiet. “I needed someone to talk to.” Theo wanted to think of something mean to say, but nothing came. He leaned against the mantel with his arms across his chest, watching Jonathan. With the swollen eye, Jonathan’s face looked off-balance.

“Sit down.”

“I’m not going to stay long,” Theo said, watching to see if he could detect relief, but Jonathan’s look was blank. “I should get home.”

“None of that, now,” Tom said, carrying a grey sweatshirt into the living room. “You just got here.” He handed the shirt to Theo. In navy blue lettering, *Columbia College* was spelled out across the front. “My alma mater,” Tom explained, “a soccer scholarship. Let’s make you something warm to drink... hot tea?”

“Nah,” Theo said. He took the warm fabric and held it a moment, then slid it over his head. “My folks are probably worried.”

“Your folks are always worried,” Jonathan said.

“Yeah, that’s what you keep telling me.” Theo pulled the fleece material down to his waist.

“Let’s sit down,” Tom offered. He pulled Theo toward the loveseat diagonal to the sofa.

“I really should get going,” Theo said, but he let Tom pull him, and then settled into the soft brown cushions. He was still cold.

Tom leaned back and spread his arms, one on the armrest, and the other along the back of the loveseat, behind Theo. “At least stay here until you warm up a bit.”

“Sure,” Theo said.

Jonathan leaned back into the sofa, staring at the coasters on the coffee table.

Theo watched him.

“That’s quite a shiner you gave ol’ Jonathan,” Tom said. “I take it you boys had an argument?”

“You could say that,” Theo said in a tight voice. He shivered and wrapped his arms across his chest.

“We were arguing about his parents.”

“Jonathan seems to think I should stand up to my parents, when he’d never do anything against his own folks.” Theo knew why Jonathan went along with whatever they said, but he couldn’t stop himself.

“That’s not true.” Jonathan looked as if he’d been stung.

“Okay,” Theo said. “When have you ever gone against their wishes?”

“I do it all the time. They just don’t know about it.”

“Just because my dad won’t beat the shit out of me doesn’t mean I need to broadcast my every move to them.” Theo looked away, knowing he shouldn’t have mentioned Jonathan’s dad. He tried to soften it by explaining that his days of secrecy were over. Jonathan’s face remained as immobile as stone as Theo described how Della was on hyper alert to his every little move, and his dad was so clear-headed that he’d been calling hotlines and therapists to figure out what was wrong with his son.

“Hotlines?” Tom asked. “But they already know you’re gay.”

“It’s the relationship part. Sex. They think I’m gonna get sick.” Theo looked at Jonathan. “And they don’t want me spending so much time with him.” Something dull ached low in Theo’s gut.

“Do they know where you are now?”

“No. I just left.”

“It sounds like you stood up to them.” Tom looked at Jonathan.

“I don’t care what he thinks,” Theo said quietly. He leaned forward and then stood. “I’ve got to go. Thanks for letting me hang out, Tom.” Theo started to grab the neck of the sweatshirt.

“Keep the shirt,” Tom said. “And stay awhile. You don’t have to go so soon.”

“Yeah,” Theo answered, looking at Jonathan. “I do.”

Tom followed him to the front door and out onto the front lawn. “Really, Theo. You don’t have to go. I could ask Jonathan to leave.”

“No, he was here first.” Theo reached to unlock his bike.

“Theo,” Tom touched him on the shoulder. “You and Jonathan have something special.”

“We had something,” Theo said, snapping his U-lock into place.

“He’s your best friend.”

“Things change.” Theo leaned against his bike. “You shouldn’t keep him waiting.” His throat was so tight he could barely get the words out.

“I’m sorry, Theo.”

“Yeah, so am I.” He swung his leg over the bike and rolled across the grass, and then coasted down the driveway.

“Take care,” Tom called.

“Thanks,” Theo said. Enjoy my best friend.

There were still lights on at home. Theo rode into the driveway of the empty house next door—Jonathan’s old house. He brought his bike around back and hid it behind the bushes near the patio and then checked to see if the window in the garage was locked. Jonathan had snuck him in many times through the unlocked window after a night of wandering the streets together. It didn’t have a screen. Usually the door from the garage to the dining room was unlocked because the handle was broken. He tested the window, and it slid open easily. Jonathan wasn’t there to give him a boost, so Theo had to pull himself up and heave his body over the sill. It was rather ungraceful. He closed the window behind him, and jiggled the door handle. Still loose.

The house was dark, the only noise coming from the refrigerator. A twelve-pack of sodas sat inside on the second shelf next to a half-empty water bottle. Theo pulled a can from the box and pressed the metal tab into place.

The rooms felt cavernous. Most of the curtains on the windows that faced the back yard were open. Light filtered in, but not enough to penetrate the corners. Theo sipped his drink and walked slowly up the carpeted steps, and then turned left to Jonathan's room. He knelt near one of the windows and pulled up the blinds—his room was across the way. The light was on. His parents were probably going through all of his stuff, trying to figure out why he was such a lost cause.

Gazing across the distance, he remembered all of the times he'd stared into the window he was now kneeling in front of. Coded flashlight messages, magazine photos pressed to the glass, binocular enhanced viewings of a proudly displayed erection. When Jonathan wasn't physically present, he was in Theo's head. Jonathan had been with Theo every step of the way in Florida, cheering him on in the back of Theo's mind, laughing at Theo when it seemed that all might be lost, welcoming Theo when the consolation prize of a solitary hand job required the image of Jonathan's back and shoulders and lips. Everything Theo had ever known about sex was tied up with Jonathan, and now it was tied up in knots and it killed Theo to think that it wasn't the same anymore for his best friend. Jonathan could get turned on by anyone, wanted to get turned on by anyone. Tom. Guys at the park. At the public library. On the dance floor at Marsha's Attic. He was leaving Theo behind. But he kept saying Theo could come along for the ride, could even get in on the ride, but Theo wanted to *be* the ride.

Theo had set the soda can on the sill and leaned his back against the wall under the window. He lay sideways, placed almost exactly where he would have been if Jonathan's bed were still here, if he were curled next to Jonathan. With both hands tucked under his head, he scanned the walls in the semi-darkness, imagining where Jonathan's

posters had been, the bulletin board over his dresser filled with movie stubs and film negatives arranged to spell out the obscene word of the week, and the photo collage Jonathan had made the summer after 8th grade of the camping trip when the two of them had gotten lost in the woods near the Buffalo River. Intentionally lost for the first hour, but hopelessly, really lost for the last three or so hours until they finally heard Theo's dad slapping his paddle on the water—the best sound in the world for two scared kids. Theo hadn't seen the collage in Jonathan's new room. He wondered if it would just stay at the bottom of some pile in the back of his closet, forgotten until Jonathan's mother cleaned his room and threw it away.

That camping trip was the first time he and Jonathan had done anything more than jerk off together. At night, they usually went to the river by themselves. If they were quiet and the adults were sufficiently drunk, no one noticed when they slipped away. After the episode of getting lost, Theo didn't want to let Jonathan out of his sight. When he couldn't talk Jonathan out of crossing the river, Theo followed him and sat on the far gravel bar watching for shooting stars in the moonless sky. Some nights, the streaks of light crossed the sky every few minutes, and sometimes not at all. That night, they waited a long time before spotting one, but it was worth it because the tail stretched across the entire black space of sky above the river. Jonathan had turned to him and said he'd made a wish. When Theo asked what he'd wished for, Jonathan kissed him for the very first time. They eventually found their way into each other's clothes. Jonathan was the first to fumble through giving a blowjob.

Light poured through the window over Theo and flooded the wall opposite, waking him from his reverie. Or had he fallen asleep? He didn't sit up because he

realized with that much light, he could probably be seen by someone on the outside looking in. His parents might be staring out his window at home, uncovering all of his secrets and gasping in shock as they realized just what a pervert their son was. He edged to the side of the window and looked out slantways. The front light was on at his house, and so was the back porch light. Inching slowly near the panes of glass, he saw that the light in his room was actually off. He almost moved entirely in front of the window, but then he realized he wouldn't be able to see if there was anyone in his room across the way watching him—they'd be in darkness, and he'd be fully lit by the light streaming in Jonathan's window.

His parents must be worried. Theo didn't have a watch, but he didn't think it could be very late yet. He crawled to the doorway and then glided down the stairs. The clock over the oven said 9:57. Maybe he *had* fallen asleep.

He left through the door from the dining room to the garage, then out the window. It was shielded by a thick maple tree so Theo was covered in shadows. When the window was in place, he tried to gauge if anyone would be able to see him walk toward his bike. He listened for a full minute, and then decided to free his bike from the bushes. Theo got to the end of Jonathan's driveway without hearing an alarm go up, so he rode away from his house, and then doubled back around the block so that if his parents saw him approach, they wouldn't see him come from Jonathan's.

The garage door was open, so he rode his bike inside and set it against the far wall. Theo hit the button and the door ground downward, and then he took a breath and opened the door to the kitchen. His parents were both sitting at the dining room table, just as he had left them, but by now the dishes had been cleared and the flat space of the table

was bare. They both looked up when he entered, but neither said a thing. Della was holding something in her hands, something metal that she kept turning over in her fingers. His dad got up and dialed the phone. “Martha, Theo’s come home... Yes, I’ll call you if we find anything out about Jonathan.” He hung up the receiver silently. “You have some explaining to do, young man.”

Theo closed the door behind him and hesitated near the fridge. “Why’d you call Mrs. Norton?”

“Why’d you run away?” Della asked, her hands closed around the shiny object. She looked up at him. “Why did you lie to us?”

His dad, still standing, but leaning against the wall, cleared his throat and folded his arms across his chest. He didn’t say anything to stop her tirade.

Theo stood there, unable to take a step further. With his hands in his pockets, he leaned against the refrigerator and planted himself.

His dad pulled a chair away from the table and sat down, his face heavy with exhaustion. “We thought you might go to Jonathan’s, so we called, but it turned out Jonathan hasn’t been home all evening.” He drummed the fingers of his left hand on the table. “Did you see him while you were gone?”

“No,” Theo said, shifting from one leg to the other and wrapping his arms around his chest. “I was just out riding.”

“That was a long time to be out riding,” his dad said. “Where did you go?”

“Just around.”

His dad nodded. “And the sweatshirt?”

Theo looked down. He'd forgotten about the shirt Tom gave him. "Oh, it's one I borrowed from Jonathan a few days ago. I left it on my bike so I'd remember to give it back."

Della looked up and studied the lettering partially hidden under Theo's arms. "And who does he know that goes to Columbia College?"

"I don't know, some friend of his brother's."

Della sat there, lips slightly parted, silent. Theo almost felt sorry for her. Almost. She stood slowly and moved toward the counter. And then told him that until his behavior changed, he was grounded to his room except for school—she'd be bringing him to and from school—and talking to Dan Eberhardt to let him know Theo wouldn't be running for the team anymore.

Theo's mouth hung open, but he could hardly breathe. *You bitch, you fucking bitch*, he would have said if he could have spoken.

But, his dad spoke for him instead. He argued with Della, saying maybe she was being too harsh and that they should talk about it first. She wouldn't be budged, finally saying in a quiet voice that she'd been making all the decisions on her own for a while now and that if he thought he could do better, then he should do it. They argued back and forth, the first time Theo had seen them like this since the accident. The tight feeling in Theo's chest, like he couldn't take a deep enough breath, reminded him of how he used to hold his breath when they'd yell at each other downstairs before the accident.

"I expect to see you waiting on the driveway at 7:10 am," Della said. Theo had slowly shifted back toward the fridge, hoping they'd forget about him, but Della was staring so hard at him that he just stood there, frozen. "Goodnight to both of you," she

said and started to leave, but then she stood in the hallway and said without turning, “I will be sleeping in the guest room, David, so don’t wait up.” She gave him the shiny metal thing she’d been turning over in her hands, and said he could decide what to do with it. And then she was gone.

His dad sat there, silent and still a few moments, and then he motioned toward the empty chair. “I think you should take a seat, Son.”

“I want to go to bed, Dad. It’s late.”

“No, I’ve got a few things to say.”

Theo moved around the counter and pushed the seat away from the table. He leaned back with his arms folded and tried to look at his dad, but could only stare at the floor.

“Della... this is tearing her up inside.” Theo started to protest, but his dad said, “Hear me out, Theo. I was your age once. Even though I’ve forgotten a lot since the accident, I can remember what it felt like to be a teenager, horny twenty-four/seven, and ready to be rid of my parents. You know, Della put a lot of trust in you because she thought you could handle yourself. She *needed* you to handle yourself responsibly... but you haven’t. Being gay doesn’t give you license to have a secret life—”

“You can’t tell me you told your folks everything.”

“No,” his dad continued, “I didn’t, but I also didn’t give them reason to worry.”

“Because you never did anything wrong?”

“Well, perhaps I was more discrete, but I didn’t have as much to lose as you do. Times are different now, more dangerous.”

“Dad, you’ve said this already.”

“I know, and you never want to hear it. But this time, you need to listen.” He paused. “Before, I always felt at a loss as to how to help you—”

“I don’t *need* help—”

“I mean *guide* you. When we, your stepmother and I, realized you were attracted to boys, I wasn’t angry, or repulsed.”

Theo squirmed. “You really don’t have to tell me all of this.”

“I know I don’t, but I’m telling you anyway. So be quiet and listen, okay?” He held his hand to his right temple, near his scarred cheekbone, on the side that always gave him headaches.

“Fine,” Theo said, looking at the floor again.

“When we found out, I was lost, like I’d been thrown a curve ball and I realized too late that my old man had never shown me how to swing at a curve ball.”

Great, Theo thought. A bedtime story when really he just wanted to go to bed.

“Your grandpa and I had never been all that close, but when he died I was only twenty and we hadn’t spoken to each other in over a year. I’d pissed him off, and we were both wrong, but neither of us would apologize. I made a promise to myself, listening to the priest and friends and family—everyone but me—list off all these ways he’d been helpful and strong when they needed him. Your mom was there. She knew what it was like. When I made this promise to myself, I guess I promised her, too.” He looked away a moment. Theo always wondered if he ever thought about her. In most of the memories Theo had of her, she was already sick, leaned over the toilet puking or sleeping in the middle of their big bed under her favorite green blanket.

“If we ever had kids,” his dad started again, “I was going to do right by them... sort of a way of saying sorry for being an ass and not realizing my father was a good man despite all the shortcomings I saw in him. And to show your mom—I hadn’t proposed yet—that I would be a good father to our children. That’s part of why I gave you this watch of his.” He looked directly at Theo and handed him the shiny metal object. “He died and I never got the chance to tell him thank you.”

“For what?” Theo held the watch, wanting to know why it wasn’t hanging by his computer, but afraid to ask.

His dad paused. “That part you’ll have to figure out for yourself, maybe when you’ve got your own kid.”

“I probably won’t be having any kids, Dad.”

His dad took a deep breath. “I hadn’t thought of that... You know, I sometimes think I’ve failed my dad, because I can’t give you what he gave me... because you’re gay, which seems to make you so different.”

“Dad—”

“But really your not so different than I was as at sixteen,” he continued. “If I’d had a best friend that was a girl, I can see how it might have turned into more than friendship...”

Theo tried to imagine his dad as a teenager, remembering the album full of 3 x 3 black and white photos he’d stared at so many times before his dad had come home from the hospital.

“Della and I thought we knew what it meant, you being gay, but really we forgot to put crucial pieces of information together, like that you spent lots of time alone with

someone you cared about—Jonathan—who also happened to be the gender you are attracted to, or that you've spent time alone with someone else you might be attracted to."

"Who?"

"Matt."

"Dad, nothing happened with Matt."

His dad frowned and sat thinking a minute, his finger resting again near his temple. "Theo, are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Alright," his dad said through a sigh. "Go to bed now. And be sure you're ready at 7:10." He yawned and stretched. "And you weren't with Jonathan tonight?"

"No," Theo said. "I wasn't with Jonathan."

Theo went upstairs and collapsed on his unmade bed, his grandfather's pocket watch clutched to his chest. What would his mom think if she could see him now? Theo pulled the covers up over his head.

Chapter Eight

Samantha's knocking woke Theo at 6:45. He'd forgotten to set his alarm. "The bathroom's open," she called from the hall.

Theo moaned into his pillow. "Thanks."

The water was hot, and the shower felt good. He leaned forward into the spray with his head down, watching the stream fall from his chin to the drain. No bike. No track....

Theo squeezed the shampoo into his left hand, remembering the medicated green liquid Jonathan had used on him Saturday. Jonathan. Theo considered skipping first hour so he wouldn't have to endure Jonathan's smirk. After Mr. Burnett's class, it would be easy to avoid Jonathan. That would please Della. It burned him that doing what he wanted might make her happy.

Della was silent and cold on the drive to school. Samantha sat up front, Theo in back. He didn't move forward when his sister got out first, so Della had to drive the last mile like a chauffer.

"I'll be here at 2:30," she said, staring out the windshield, hands clutching the steering wheel.

"Great," Theo said. He opened the sliding door and pulled his backpack over his shoulder.

She turned and looked at him. "I expect you to be here, at the front entrance."

He didn't say anything as he grabbed the handle and pushed the door closed, and he didn't look at her. He walked away, losing himself in the crowd. *At the front entrance my ass.* He'd made a commitment to the team, and he intended to be at practice, and if she wanted to find him, she could come looking for him.

It was so early that Burnett wasn't even at the chalkboard when Theo took a seat. There were sometimes a few empty desks in the far corner of the room, as if the janitors went a little crazy and shifted desks from one room to another and lost track of what went

where. Theo considered sitting in the corner, but didn't. He set his backpack in the usual spot. He hadn't finished the homework from last night—the call from Matt had interrupted the power nap he was taking between assignments. Lunch with Matt. In less than five hours. What a fucked up day this was going to be. He got out his textbook, notebook, a pencil and his calculator. He tried to lose himself in the equations, but the sound of shuffling feet was distracting, especially because he was trying to figure out without looking up if any of them were Jonathan's shuffling feet.

A cough, and then a slow deep breath tipped him off that Jonathan had entered the room. Theo focused on each digit on his calculator. Black sneakers came into Theo's peripheral view, frayed jeans and Jonathan's green backpack with the Rufus Wainwright button Theo had given him on the pocket. Theo realized he was tracing the shiny black lettering with his eyes and he looked back at the lines on his notebook paper. What a drag.

Burnett's chalk scratched on the front board and his voice began droning in its familiar monotone. Finally, Theo looked over at Jonathan. He stared at Jonathan's darkened left eye.

Meet me for lunch, Jonathan mouthed.

Theo didn't say yes or no, he just let his eyes fall to Jonathan's hands, and then to the floor. He couldn't make himself say no, but he sure as hell couldn't say yes. Matt would be waiting for him at 11:30.

Jonathan folded a piece of paper and slid it onto Theo's desk. MEET ME FOR LUNCH. Theo scribbled underneath that he already had plans and handed it back.

AFTER SCHOOL Jonathan wrote, PRACTICE Theo responded, and Jonathan wrote AFTER PRACTICE. Finally Theo wrote OKAY.

Passing notes. They hadn't done that in years. Theo reached over and took the note from Jonathan's desk and crumpled it, shoved it in his pocket, and then tried to pay attention to Burnett's painfully boring explanations of the homework problems. Theo resorted to writing numbers back and forth across the page, not caring if they looked like real math problems or not. He wanted to cry and scream and run, but he could only sit there and listen to Jonathan's slow breathing.

At the end of class, Theo gathered his books and made for the door. He didn't get much further than the end of the hallway before he heard Jonathan calling him. Theo almost kept walking.

"Wait up," Jonathan said.

Theo turned and let the crowd behind him split and stream around on both sides. He watched Jonathan's face. Theo wanted to throw his books at Jonathan and shove him into a locker. Instead, he stood there calm and still.

"What are you doing for lunch?"

"Meeting a friend."

Jonathan looked puzzled. He knew who all of Theo's friends were, and the list of names was pretty short. "Who?"

"Nobody," Theo answered. He shifted his backpack and watched students walking by. He didn't want to give in.

"Did you go home last night?"

"Yeah."

“My mom said your parents called.”

“Yeah.” Theo didn’t want to ask, didn’t want to know when, or if, Jonathan had ever gone home last night. “I gotta go. The bell’s gonna ring for second hour.”

Jonathan reached up to touch Theo’s forearm. “I’m sorry about last night.”

Theo lifted his arm away and took a step back. Jonathan had never touched him like this at school. Never more than a punch to the arm or slap on the ass—the kind of touching allowed for straight guys. It was too little, too late, if Jonathan was trying to take some risk by showing affection, showing that he gave a shit. “Forget about it,” Theo said, not sure if he meant last night, or Jonathan’s attempt at an apology. “I’ll see you later.”

The next three classes were even more painful than Burnett’s. Theo couldn’t pretend to pay attention—he stared at whatever his eyes settled upon, a window, the back of a boy’s head, a wad of paper on the hard tile floor—and his mind drifted from one face to another... Jonathan, Matt, Tom.... He had no idea why he’d asked Matt if they could meet for lunch. He didn’t care anymore. It had been a crush, and now it was just a nothing.

The front entrance was empty. Students who were leaving school grounds for lunch usually went through the side doors near the parking lot. Theo looked for the blue hatchback, and not seeing it, settled himself near a brick wall. He was so hungry his stomach felt like it was caving in on itself. It took several minutes and no sign of Matt for Theo to remember that he’d told him they could meet at Emmett’s Place. Without his bike to remind him, and after the crazy, fucked-up night, Theo had completely forgotten.

He started walking, hands in pockets and head down, feeling like a stupid ass. It would take fifteen minutes to get there on foot—he almost turned around several times. Matt would probably be relieved if Theo didn't show.

After the third block, a truck honked at him from across the street. "Theo?" It was Jonathan.

"Hey," Theo called from the sidewalk. Jonathan pulled the truck to the other side of the street and Theo crossed over.

"Where're you headed?"

"Up the road." Theo shifted his backpack.

"Did you have lunch yet?"

"No. That's where I'm headed."

"Want a ride?"

"Sure," Theo said, giving in to his hunger. He didn't really want a ride but he was starving.

"Where to?" Jonathan asked, pulling away from the curb.

"Back that way." Theo pointed the opposite direction. Jonathan made a U-turn and continued in the direction Theo had been walking. They came up on an intersection and Jonathan slowed.

"Which way?"

Theo sighed. "Emmett's Place."

Jonathan waited for cars to pass and then turned left. "Why didn't you ride your bike?"

"Remember how I said Della was trying to ground me?"

“Yeah.”

“She did. Last night when I got back from... Tom’s house. No bike. No track.”

Jonathan looked at him. “That’s harsh.”

“Let’s not talk about it, okay?” He stared out the window, wishing he’d just said no thanks for the ride.

“So, I guess you’re not going to tell me who the mystery person is.”

“It’s Matt.” Theo slumped down into the seat and pulled his knees up to the dash.

“A date?”

“No,” Theo said. “I don’t know what it is.”

Jonathan drove several blocks and then pulled over and turned off the truck. Theo stayed low in his seat.

“We’re here,” Jonathan said.

“Great.”

“Look, Theo. I’m really sorry about last night, about Tom’s.”

“Don’t say you’re sorry. You wouldn’t be apologizing if I hadn’t shown up.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you first.”

“You’re free to do what you want.”

“I know, but... Did you say Matt has long hair?”

“Yeah.”

“I think I see him.”

Theo sat up. Matt was standing on the front porch to Emmett’s Place, a renovated older house turned into a bar and grill with a baseball theme. Faded pennants hung from

the eaves, frayed and fluttering in the chill breeze. “Fuck,” Theo said. Matt was looking the other way and hadn’t seen them yet.

“You didn’t tell me he was six feet tall and gorgeous.”

“You think he’s gorgeous?”

“Of course.”

“Shit. What am I doing?”

“I don’t know.” Jonathan leaned forward over the steering wheel. “How about I go with you and we fuck with him a bit.”

“Fuck with him how?”

“I’ll think of something.”

Matt looked their way and recognized Theo. “I don’t think so,” Theo said.

“Come on. I owe you one. I won’t be too hard on the guy... but he does deserve a little punishment after what he put you through.”

“He didn’t do it. I did,” Theo said, watching Matt walking toward them.

“Alright,” he finally said. “But nothing too weird.”

“Right,” Jonathan answered and they both got out.

“Hey,” Theo said to Matt. “This is Jonathan... Do you mind if he eats with us?”

“Sure,” Matt said. He held out his hand to Jonathan, his gaze lingering on Jonathan’s swollen eye. He was wearing a long-sleeved, light peach button down shirt and jeans. And his hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Theo wondered what Matt thought of Jonathan’s bruise. He wondered what Matt thought of Jonathan.

“Do you still have enough time to eat?” Matt asked. He checked his watch. “It’s almost noon.”

“Yeah,” Theo said.

“Okay then,” Matt said. “Let’s eat.” He turned and they followed him up the sidewalk to the front porch of Emmett’s Place.

To say it was awkward wouldn’t have been saying enough. Theo almost tripped on the steps and then a strand of pennants caught on his shoulder and came unattached from one of the columns. It was dark and smoky inside, with tables covered in red and white vinyl gingham. Theo wanted to turn around and leave. He’d been stumbling over himself like a kid going through a growth spurt and he was thankful for the low lighting so that no one could really see his face.

They waited near the door for a table. “I was surprised when you called,” Matt said to Theo.

Theo was looking around, spacing out. “Yeah,” he said, but he didn’t say anything more.

Jonathan spoke up. “So you work at the university?”

“I’m a postdoc. Got a fellowship to try to turn my dissertation into a book.”

“Mathematics?” Jonathan asked.

“Yes,” Matt smiled. “Is it that obvious?” He looked down at his shoes.

“Nah,” Jonathan said. “Just a guess. My dad’s in the English Department.”

The waitress stepped between them to grab menus and then offered them a table. “This looks fine,” Matt said. His voice, though a bit strained, was like a delicate thread that Theo wanted to wrap around his own neck and tie into a noose. Jonathan was good at this small talk stuff. Theo was glad he was there to deflect some of Matt’s bullshit. Was

this guy faking it? Did being a little older give him such an edge over Theo's utter loss for words?

"Hey... Earth to Theo," Jonathan said. "Want to order anything?"

"Sure," Theo looked down at his menu. He tried to shake off his stupor, but it felt like he was in a dream and Matt and Jonathan were the repeating images that made no sense. "I didn't have much breakfast."

"You must be starving," Matt said.

"Yeah," Theo answered. Smoke from nearby tables was wafting their way. He was going to smell like he'd been out drinking, which had already gotten him into trouble the past weekend. Maybe he should just skip the rest of the afternoon, that way he could avoid teachers' questions, Della... but if he missed practice, he wouldn't get to run in this weekend's meet. That is, if Della hadn't already talked to Coach.

Matt ordered a burger with fries and a soda. Theo was going to order the same, but decided on a chicken sandwich instead. Chicken for a chicken-shit. Jonathan ordered a burger, and Theo almost called the waitress back, but didn't.

They were talking, some bullshit about string theory and the golden ratio. Theo got enough of that kind of stuff at department events. He didn't see how Jonathan could find any of it interesting enough to actually hold a conversation with Matt. Theo was glad, though, that the topic of Jonathan's black eye hadn't been mentioned. Music filtered to their part of the restaurant, weaving through curling haloes of smoke. The tunes were rock classics. Theo was humming and about to sing along. He remembered where he was and stopped himself before the words actually left his lips.

The waitress brought glasses of water to the table, which gave Theo something to do until he decided to join the conversation. He crunched melting cubes with his molars and watched Matt run his finger along the drops of water accumulating on the outside of his own glass.

There was a lull in the conversation and Matt turned to Theo. "How's it going with your folks?"

Theo kept chewing, thinking. "I don't know what the hell is wrong with them," he finally said. He was feeling bold. "They're both being bitches."

Jonathan laughed and Matt cleared his throat. "That's hard to imagine," Matt said.

"For you, sure. They put on a front for you."

"They're probably more formal in public. Most people are like that."

"Then most people are assholes."

"Here, here," Jonathan said. He raised his glass. "To all the assholes."

Theo joined him with a loud gulp, and finally Matt leaned forward and sipped his own water. "Your dad called yesterday."

Jonathan nudged Theo's leg under the table and then pushed his chair back.

"Um... I'll be back."

"Right," Matt said and watched Jonathan leave.

Theo sunk into his chair, feeling like he weighed a thousand pounds. "What did you say to my dad?"

"He left a message and I haven't called back... yet."

“Fuck,” Theo said, almost choking. His stomach was devouring him from the inside and his throat was next to go. He took a few more drinks of water, wishing the damn waitress would come back with his soda.

Matt rested both of his forearms on the table, hands clasped as in prayer, or confession, and he was silent for a while. “Theo, I’m really sorry for what happened—”

“Yeah, well, maybe I’m not,” Theo interrupted. “Maybe I wanted more.” Prickles stung his armpits. He’d managed to keep his voice quieter than the music, but if he said any more, he would be screaming.

Matt’s eyebrows were up, opening his face into an expression of surprise, or maybe fear, that Theo thought he recognized. The waitress inserted herself between them, setting down Theo’s drink first and then Matt’s and Jonathan’s. She lingered long enough that Theo could see she was flirting, not with him but with Matt. *The bitch has no idea.* Theo sipped his soda, willing himself to be calm, or at least, calmer.

“Maybe I should clarify,” Matt said after a few minutes of silence dulled by the background noise of people talking, glasses clinking, and music. He spoke very quietly, and slowly. “I’m sorry for my emotional outburst, Theo, and the way I pushed you. That was incredibly wrong, and stupid.”

Theo watched him, afraid if he spoke that he might laugh or cry or yell, or all three. Instead, he swallowed whatever words were creeping up the back of his throat, like *fucker* and *pussy* and *I love you*... All of it stupid shit like that because what the hell did Theo know about love? He leaned forward and whispered, “What about the part in the fort?”

Matt breathed. “I made a horrible mistake.”

“Your mistake is messing with my head. Okay?” Theo’s voice was too high.

“Have you—” Matt hesitated. “Have you told anyone?”

“Yes,” Theo said, watching as Jonathan and the waitress approached the table. “I told him,” he said. Matt looked up and saw Jonathan, and then he looked away. Jonathan stood and waited while the waitress set the plates on the table.

“Anything else?” she asked, lingering near Matt.

He looked briefly at Theo. “No,” he said. “I think we’re fine.”

Jonathan sat and said, “So, what did I miss?”

Theo poured ketchup on his plate and said, almost under his breath, “Not much.”

The three of them started eating and after a few bites, Jonathan said to Matt, “I don’t think you realize what an impression you’ve made on Theo.”

Matt looked from Jonathan to Theo and back again. “What is it you want from me?”

Jonathan turned to Theo. “Yeah, Theo?”

Theo sat back in his chair. He felt like he was gulping for air.

Matt was staring at his plate and finally lifted his glass to drink, but didn’t look at either of them.

When Theo could take a full breath, he said, “Alright,” and sat up straighter, looking at Matt. “Alright. I have a question for you.”

Matt took another drink and then swallowed. “Okay.”

Theo tried to figure out what he really wanted to ask. He ran his hands through his hair a few times, and then crossed his arms over his chest. He stared at Matt, not just his face, but like he was giving him the once over—his chest, arms, crotch, legs. “Tell me

this,” Theo said, looking into Matt’s eyes, “because I’ve never actually heard you say it. Are you gay?”

Matt wiped his lips with a napkin. “I’m bi,” he said quietly.

Theo hesitated. “Bi? You’re either straight, or you’re gay. Bi just means you haven’t figured it out yet.”

“People are more complicated than that, Theo.”

Theo looked away, his body deflating. Jonathan pressed his leg against Theo’s under the table. “You knew what I wanted from the beginning,” Theo asked. “Didn’t you?”

“No,” Matt said. “I was so into my own stuff that it didn’t hit me until that night, when you were trying to give me your flashlight.”

“So, you weren’t interested in me at all?”

“Well, yes. But not sex.”

Theo leaned back and groaned. “How *were* you interested in me?”

“Someone to talk to. Someone young, with lots of questions and a different view of the world than mine.”

Jonathan squeezed Theo’s leg. “We should be getting back to school,” he said.

“Yeah,” Theo answered. “Yeah, we should.” He ate a few more French fries, trying to make sense of the sudden despair he felt at Matt’s response. Didn’t Matt find him at all attractive? If he’d been smooth, like Jonathan, would it have gone better?

Theo walked to Jonathan’s truck without waiting for either of them. It was locked so he leaned against it, feeling smaller and smaller as he replayed Matt’s “answers” in his head.

Jonathan hung back near the restaurant while Matt walked to the truck. “Theo,” he said. Theo was standing on the curb, his body angled toward the truck and his forehead resting on his arms, staring into the cab.

“What?” he answered.

“I don’t know what to do to make things okay. Do you want me to tell your folks?”

“Of course not.”

“It was my mistake, not yours. I know this isn’t an excuse, but I’ve been fucked up since my wife left. I haven’t seen my daughters in two months.” He touched his hand to Theo’s elbow.

Theo pushed away from the truck. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Nothing,” Matt said. “I’ve just been stupid and lonely and once it started happening, I couldn’t stop. I mean, with you. At the fort.” He looked into Theo’s eyes, a soft, slow look that Theo couldn’t hold. “I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

“If you’d just be an asshole so I could hate you—”

“I *am* an asshole and you *should* hate me. I’m the worst kind of asshole because I knew it was wrong... and I genuinely like you.”

“Don’t,” Theo said. He’d begun trembling, but couldn’t think of how to signal to Jonathan to come save him. “Don’t be ‘genuine.’ Don’t like me. Just be an asshole and leave.” He wanted to say more. He desperately needed to know if what happened that night was because Matt had wanted him. So Matt used to be straight. He had kids. He’d had a wife. Did he ever really want Theo the way Theo had wanted him? “How do you know you’re bi?”

“I’ve had lovers,” Matt said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Theo thought back to that night he’d babysat, the banjo, the confession that he didn’t have any girlfriends because he was into guys.

“I wasn’t ready.”

“But I told you the truth.”

“Yeah. It was a total shock. This is Missouri. I didn’t expect the first kid I met to be gay.” And he’d been high that night. He shouldn’t have been driving, but stoned made him more cautious instead of less, so he figured he could handle it. It was a last-minute department meeting he couldn’t miss, two hours of boring, and he’d taken several hits in the parking lot before he headed home. He knew the girls would be asleep and figured Theo would be ready to go home. The evening barely registered for Matt—it got lost in the swirl of arguments with Sharon, worries about the girls, and departmental bullshit sucking him down that first semester. He’d mostly forgotten about the conversation until he and Theo had gone into town together in Florida. Even then, he was hardly aware of Theo’s feelings for him until they were on top of each other, kissing and groping in the fort. What an idiot he’d been.

“We’ve got to go,” Jonathan said.

Matt nodded. “Right,” he said. He turned and walked toward his car.

Jonathan pulled the truck into the school lot. “I’ll see you at practice,” he said.

“Yeah,” Theo got out and shouldered his pack as they walked together. The bell that ended fifth hour was ringing when the glass doors closed behind them, and they separated in the hallway. There hadn’t been much of a goodbye in the truck. Which was actually fine with Theo.

Fifth hour was Brit Lit. Because of lunch with Matt, Theo almost missed the last class on *Heart of Darkness*. The exam next week would suck. Life was a horror alright. Though maybe not the kind of horror where you have to impale skulls on fence posts, just horrible enough that Theo felt like he was impaled on something...

Seventh hour. It was as if Theo had walked into a cloud of blackness and inhaled deeply. By the time he'd reached the outdoor track, that blackness had found its way into his brain to take up residence beneath the blank expression cemented to his face. Coach had his clipboard and pen in one hand, a whistle in the other, poised to blow at any time. Blow it, Theo thought, blow it like any good fag would blow.

Stretching was long and slow. They were supposed to buddy up, but Donovan was absent and Theo was the odd man out. He stood off by himself, trying to shake out his arms and legs. Theo said no thanks when Coach offered to be his partner. Eberhardt seemed surprised, but didn't push. A good thing, because Theo might have erupted, spewing green shit like vomit and his head spinning in a circle on his neck.

By the time warm-up exercises were over, the final bell echoed out over the field, signaling the end of the school day. Theo wiped the thought of Della waiting in her dumb ass van from his head. He kept an eye on the empty stands, though, so he wouldn't be surprised when she came looking for him.

On one of his final passes around the track, Theo saw Jonathan finding a place to sit near the edge of the bleachers. Theo was on the opposite side of the field, so Jonathan probably hadn't recognized him yet. Maybe he should exit near the locker rooms before the bend in the track, but he couldn't get away unnoticed by his teammates, or his coach.

Murphy and Bryant, two teammates of the husky farm-boy type, pounded the blacktop of the inside lanes. Theo was lapping them, hard not to do unless he were walk-jogging like they were. He slowed and stayed behind them.

Jonathan waved. The skin close to his eye was an even darker shade of purple than it had been at lunch. Theo paused at the fence.

“Think Coach will let you out early?”

“Doubtful,” Theo said. He lifted his shirt to wipe the sweat from his brow, noticing when he dropped it that Jonathan was watching.

“Let me give you a ride home.”

“Della grounded me, remember? From you, the phone, my bike.” He looked around, scanning for her. “Everything’s fucked.”

Eberhardt blew his whistle and called for the team to gather around him.

“Gotta go.”

Jonathan looked over at the other runners. The whistle blew again and Theo edged away from the fence.

“I’ll be in my truck,” Jonathan said. “Come find me when your coach lets you out.”

“Fine,” Theo said. He jogged away, anxious to leave before Della showed her face somewhere on the field, but also wishing he hadn’t told Jonathan he’d meet him after practice. Theo needed to be alone.

The locker room was noisy, crowded with runners and basketball players and swimmers. On unlucky days like this one, all of the teams finished at the same time.

Theo slid sideways to his locker, trying to take the path of least resistance. He stripped in front of the wire mesh and grabbed his towel.

The middle showerhead of a row of nine was empty, so Theo turned the knob and backed into the stream of water. It blasted from the one unclogged nozzle hole, scalding heat that felt like it could pierce the skin across his shoulder blades.

“Williamson!” called a voice from near the door.

“In the shower!” Theo answered. He opened his eyes when the last of the shampoo rinsed down his face, the hot water drilling a hole in the top of his head. Coach was standing near the cinder block wall that divided the showers from the lockers.

“Della’s here.”

“Fuck,” Theo said.

“What?”

“Sorry, Coach,” Theo apologized. He rinsed his armpits and turned toward the nozzle to rinse his crotch while his coach waited at the edge of the wall and then shut off the water and grabbed his towel. “What did she say?” Theo asked as he knotted the towel over one hip.

“She says you’ll need to be excused from the meet this weekend.”

“What?”

“Something about you being grounded...”

Theo closed his mouth and his nostrils flared. He stepped away from the showers and leaned against the painted brick wall, fighting the urge to smash his head against it.

Eberhardt shifted his clipboard and lifted his cap, wiping his face against the inside of his cotton sleeve. “So, you’re having problems at home?”

“Um, too personal to talk about here.” Theo ran his hand through his wet hair. He couldn’t look Coach in the eye again or he’d crack into about four thousand pieces.

“Theo.” Eberhardt hugged the clipboard to his chest. “You don’t have to work through all of this on your own.”

Theo’s body nearly convulsed at Coach’s words. “Thanks,” Theo said. “But I don’t need any ‘help’ with my problem.”

“Alright,” Eberhardt answered, lingering. “But if you need—”

“I won’t.”

“Well, Della’s waiting for you by the stands,” he said, and then he walked away.

Great, Theo thought, but he didn’t say it because he didn’t want to completely burn this bridge, though it was obvious Della had already seriously fucked things up. Theo watched Eberhardt disappear through the fog rolling from the showers, then dressed and exited. Not to the practice fields, but the hallway. His hope was to find Jonathan without being spotted by Della.

And he succeeded. Almost. Theo made it to Jonathan’s truck and nearly off school grounds before he caught sight of her, and she of him. “Fuck. She saw me.”

“You want me to stop?” Jonathan asked.

“No,” Theo said, “Yes.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

She was walking toward them. Theo got out of the truck and met her across the parking lot. Arguing right in front of Jonathan wasn’t Theo’s top choice.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m catching a ride after track practice.”

“You weren’t supposed to even *be* at practice.”

“Yeah, well you’re not supposed to be here either.”

“Don’t get smart with me. I told you I’d be waiting at the front entrance.”

Theo looked back at the truck. Jonathan was turned in the other direction, looking away from them. “I’m not going home with you.”

“I beg to differ.”

“I’m not going home with you and I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t broadcast to the world that you have a problem child.”

She crossed her arms over her chest.

“You told Eberhardt, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not his business!” he screamed.

“Why not, Theo? Why not? You won’t talk to me, you won’t talk to your dad. We practically begged you to tell us if anything happened between you and Matt.”

“And I told you no.”

“The thing about lying, Theo, is that you usually get caught.”

His hands went cold. His entire body went cold.

“Would you like to hear how I’ve spent my afternoon? I had to leave school early to get your dad. He called me from his office because his head hurt and he was distraught and exhausted from a conversation with Matt.”

Everything in Theo stopped.

“I suppose I should tell you what happened back in Florida, because you seem incapable of remembering.”

“Don’t.”

“So you remember?”

“Of course I remember!” Theo could no longer keep his hands in his pockets. He ran his fingers through his hair. He pulled until it hurt. “If I were straight, you wouldn’t be doing this.”

She planted her arms on her hips. “Theo, if you were straight, this is *exactly* what I’d be doing. You don’t seem to comprehend what he has done.”

“I know what he did. I was there.”

“Theo, it was wrong. It was illegal, and he’s put you at risk for HIV.”

Suddenly, he thought his legs might buckle beneath him. “What?”

“He’s been with other men.”

“How do you know this?”

“You’re dad made some phone calls.”

“No,” his voice was shaking. “Don’t blame it on *him*.” The words came out in nearly a whisper. “I did it. I’m the one who should be in trouble.”

“You *are* in trouble, but because *you’re* the kid and *he’s* the adult, he’s responsible. What he did with you was illegal, Theo. He could go to jail.”

“Because of me?”

“If we press charges.”

“No, it was me, okay?” He wiped his palms across his face. He didn’t want to cry.

“Okay, Della? It was me.”

She was holding her fingers to her lips, watching him.

“I made him do it.”

“You’re not responsible. It’s a mistake you may be paying for the rest of your life.”

“God, it was just a blowjob.”

“Was he wearing a condom?”

“No!”

She stood there, as if she were stunned to the point of not being able to move.

“Haven’t you been paying attention?”

He couldn’t stop shaking. She went on, telling him things he already knew but had never quite believed. If he let himself listen to her, he might fall to his knees. What about all those times he’d gone down on Jonathan? Who else had Jonathan really been with?

She stepped forward and held his face in her hands. “This is what I wanted to protect you from, Theo. This is the big, bad world.” She wrapped her arms around him and held him, trembling.

He felt so tired and so small. The sun was dipping behind the trees at the edge of the practice field, low enough that it shone through strands of Della’s loose hair.

“We need to get you home.” She wiped a stray tear from his cheek.

“I really need to talk to Jonathan.”

She shifted her weight, watching his face intently. “Alright,” she said. “Five minutes.”

“Fine—” he turned, and ran to Jonathan’s truck.

Jonathan had the radio on and the windows rolled up. He turned the music down when Theo slid onto the seat next to him. “How did it go? I thought for sure you were a goner.”

Theo could hardly breathe. “She was crying,” he said, wondering if one or both of them were already sick with something.

“I hate when parents do that shit,” Jonathan said. His eyes settled briefly on Theo’s face. “Still grounded?”

“Yeah.” Theo wiped his cheeks on the back of his sleeve and reached for his bag. “Matt talked to my dad today and told him everything. Della says they might press charges. That Matt might have exposed me to HIV.”

“But you just gave him a blowjob, right?” Jonathan asked.

Theo told him yeah, and Jonathan went on for a bit about how there was no way, and eventually Theo looked away from Jonathan and stared at the empty parking lot with its faded stripes, the trees on the far side of the practice fields, bare branches silhouetted against a darkening blue sky. How could he have done this? “I gotta go,” Theo said. He grabbed his bag and slid out of the truck, then closed the door.

Della was waiting in the van, but she didn’t say anything when he slid into the passenger seat. She didn’t say anything the entire ride home, a small, kind thing for which Theo was very thankful.

Theo thought that because she’d been nice to him in the parking lot, Della might still let him run in the track meet. But she didn’t. He’d been grounded to his room, the phone removed. After school Friday he’d gone to the front of the building, where Della

was waiting, and instead of bringing him home, she brought him to the health clinic. At first, he'd refused to get out of the car with her. She wanted him to get tested for HIV, and he wanted her to back the hell off. He gave in when she explained how he could be tested anonymously and that no one other than him would be able to see the results. Then, when he actually went into the little white room with this old guy named Bill, Theo decided to put his name on the form anyway. Theo stared at the posters, in both English and Spanish, explaining ten ways to keep himself and his partner disease-free, where to call if someone he loved was hurting him.

Theo wanted to say no when Bill asked if he'd ever had unprotected sex, but after the guy listed all the different ways to get HIV and specifically asked Theo if he'd ever given a blowjob without a condom, Theo said yeah. He couldn't look in Bill's eyes, and he couldn't watch while the needle slid into his skin, so Theo read about the ten ways to stay disease-free in Spanish and wished he'd never met Matt. That fucking liar. If only he could go back to that night and shove him against the bricks even harder, and maybe kick him for making Theo feel like such an idiot. He'd been wrong about the guy, and then right, and then wrong again and he just felt all fucked up inside, and Theo didn't know what he'd do if he tested positive.

Usually, when Theo was moody, it was an angry, sick-of-the-world-and-all-its-bullshit kind of mood. On Friday, it was more like he'd given up. He felt quiet—there wasn't any angry dialogue going on in his head. There was no dialogue at all. At lunch, Jonathan had told Theo he had a plan to kidnap him. Of course, Theo declined. All of Jonathan's recent "kidnappings" hadn't gone well. There was no way Theo could be gone at any time during the entire weekend, so Jonathan had told him to plan on something

interesting for Monday. Theo had given in, hoping it would shut Jonathan up, but he had no intention of blatantly defying his parents any time soon.

Something had changed inside Theo when he'd seen his dad that Thursday night, after the big conversation with Matt and the crying jag in the parking lot. Just enough of the old fear Theo had felt from when nobody knew if his dad was going to live or die came back, and it paralyzed Theo. He'd dreamed that night again about the one-room stone castle. Only this time, Theo somehow found his way to a large outdoor practice ring, and there was a prince riding an animal in the ring that looked like a horse with a bear's head. Beyond, there was a sharp line where the carefully manicured grounds suddenly became a tangled overgrown forest. Theo had gone into the forest, following a white stallion, and when he finally caught up to it, the stallion turned and Theo saw that the horse's left eye had been gouged out and blood was smeared in a diagonal pattern across the horse's neck and shoulder. Its mane was long and matted with the fluid flowing from the open wound. Theo moved to touch the beast, entirely unafraid, and then he saw that there was a pony of the same bright shade of white, covered in the same markings of blood from an oozing, empty eye socket. The two horses were identical, but the pony was small enough that it could hide itself beneath the legs of the stallion. Theo had woken with words on his lips that he couldn't make himself remember.

Theo's weekend was dedicated to homework, sleep, listening to music and turning over the garden for Della. By hand. It was still early spring, so the ground was heavy and damp, but he stayed at it until the entire plot was done. He jogged several miles both mornings, which, along with the physical exertion of digging in the garden, further quieted Theo's mood. His sister popped up every few hours, checking on him in

the backyard or from the hallway outside his room, trying not to be too obvious. He actually played a game of chess with her, and she nearly won because he couldn't keep his mind on the board or the wooden chess pieces. If he wasn't physically moving, Theo felt like he was drifting somewhere above his body, watching but unable to focus on anything around him.

Theo's dad had spent all of Friday in bed, the shades drawn, his head aching so bad that he could hardly speak. Della wanted to bring him to his specialist, but by Saturday he was well enough to join them for dinner. By Sunday night, the mood of the house seemed almost normal. Della and his sister even laughed out loud when his dad attempted a joke—not a very funny joke—and seriously bungled the delivery. Theo tried to laugh, and he responded when anyone spoke to him, but it was a struggle.

When he and Della were alone cleaning the dishes after dinner, she tried to get him to talk.

“... but your father and I have the final say,” she was explaining as she placed a handful of sudsy utensils into his side of the sink. She didn't like putting certain items in the dishwasher, so washing the pots and spatulas and skillets after dinner had become a kind of ritual. One that Theo would have preferred to bow out of.

“Well?”

“What?” he said, rinsing a skillet and turning it upside down in the dish drain. He grabbed a towel to start drying.

“I want to know how you feel about changing some of the rules.”

“What rules are you talking about?” He felt a twinge of anger shoot through his gut. It focused his attention for a moment, on the serrated bread knife at the bottom of the sink, and then passed. He gently rinsed the knife and set it alongside the pans in the drain.

“... and curfew,” Della said. He hadn’t heard the first part of her answer, but didn’t bother asking. He kept rinsing and drying.

“Your father and I have been talking about helping you get in some practice time driving so you can take the test for your license. We might match your savings so you can buy a car.”

“But I’m using that money for Barcelona.”

“I think Barcelona may be out of the question at this point.”

His fingers squeezed tightly around the dishtowel.

“Your father and I don’t think you’re ready to take on the responsibility of a year overseas—”

“Come on!” He backed away from the sink, feeling suddenly furious and not wanting to stand anywhere near her. He threw the towel onto the counter. “Okay, here’s my input: I want to go to Barcelona. I want to see Jonathan. I want my phone back and I want you to stop telling people about my personal life.”

Della rinsed the last dish and shut off the water. She finally turned to face him. “I understand that you want those things, but I don’t know that they are all possible. You’re going to have to work to regain our trust. I couldn’t let you go to Barcelona without knowing that you would conduct yourself properly. You’d be living with another family, and in the end, your dad and I would be responsible for your actions.”

“I wouldn’t do anything stupid. You know I wouldn’t—”

“No,” she interrupted. “I don’t really know that anymore.”

“So, how do I ‘regain’ your trust?”

She leaned against the counter. “Stop the lying. That would be a good place to start. If you say you’re going to be somewhere, then be there.”

“But I shouldn’t have to tell you where I am all the time—”

“And it’s about time you made some friends other than Jonathan.”

“Jonathan will always be my best friend. But I’ve never had lots of friends. I doubt that’s going to change just because you want it to.”

“About Jonathan, there are definitely going to be some changes.”

“Like what?”

“Technically, he’s not just your best friend. He’s your boyfriend and should be treated as such. Sixteen-year-olds don’t have sleepovers with their boyfriends.”

God, he hated her sometimes. He hated her fucking logic and the pretense that she was going to include him in any decisions. “You win. You don’t want my ‘input.’ Why don’t you just tell me how it’s gonna be so we can get this over with?” She didn’t say anything for a minute.

“Your dad and I have talked, and we want things to change in a way that we can all accept...” She picked up the damp dishtowel and hung it through the drawer handle near the sink. Theo watched her, wanting to leave so badly but forcing himself to stay.

“This isn’t easy for us. Your dad has had some difficult days—”

“Yes, I know, Della. You don’t have to lay any more on me because I already feel guilty enough.”

She smoothed her hair back before she responded. “I appreciate that, and I don’t mean to make you feel any worse, but I’m getting tired of feeling like I have to protect him... from life... from you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, Theo. It has been very difficult for him to deal with the recent ‘revelations,’ and if you’re sick—”

“I messed up—yes—but I’m not responsible for every setback of his. He doesn’t need you to baby him.”

She could have slapped him. But she told him instead in a tight, strained voice that the conversation was over.

“Because you say so, it’s over. Fine. I’ll be waiting by the van in the morning.” He’d walked away slowly, trying not to storm out slamming things, trying not to announce his defeat.

Chapter Nine

Monday morning came too soon. Theo was waiting by the van, like he’d said, when Della and his sister came out of the house together. It was a clear, cold sunrise and he wished he’d had keys so he could have gotten in and turned on the heater instead of freezing his ass off waiting.

“I didn’t even know you were out here.” Della clicked the remote and the doors simultaneously unlocked. “Good morning,” she said when he didn’t say anything.

“Good morning,” he answered, grabbing the door handle and shoving his book bag onto the backseat. He would obey the “rules” and try to be respectful, but he wasn’t going to be friendly. He’d come up with a kind of a plan the night before. He’d had his homework done long before dinner, so when Theo had left Della after the conversation in the kitchen, he’d had the entire evening to do basically nothing in his room. When he’d gotten tired of listening to CD’s, he decided to actually think about what had happened and try to figure out his next move. The argument with Della had sharpened his focus, pulling him back into his body—unlike the floating nothingness he’d felt every time he stopped moving during the weekend. That feeling of disconnectedness had been okay while it lasted, but now that it was gone, Theo was ready to move on. Hours of overhearing Della’s self-help tapes finally came in handy. It didn’t really take a genius to figure what he had to do to make the situation better—Theo needed to make his parents trust him again, and he needed to figure out what was worth fighting for and what he needed to give up.

He’d written down what was important and tried to put it all in order from most to least. Theo tested each one by asking himself if everything else on the list would be worth it if he lost any one particular thing. He quickly realized nothing else mattered much if Jonathan weren’t somewhere in the picture. Theo’s health was important too, but he kept telling himself he couldn’t think about whether or not the test might come back positive, that he just had to wait for the results and move on in the mean time. Next on his list was Barcelona, then track, then getting a license (maybe even a car), then a phone.

In front of Sam’s school, Della turned in her seat and told him to move to the front, that she wanted to talk before dropping him off. He grabbed his bag and then got out and sat in the front. He kept his backpack on his lap, zipping and unzipping one of the pockets.

“Have you thought about what I said last night?”

“Which part?”

“Well, all of it.”

“I guess.”

“And did you come up with something you want to say about new ground rules?”

Of course he'd thought about it, but Theo didn't like being coerced into what felt like fake participation. He was tired of things always being on her terms, on her time, but he didn't see many other options. “Yes,” he said, trying to sound steady. “Like I said last night, I want to see Jonathan, I want to go to Barcelona, and I want my phone back. *And* I want to run track, that is if you didn't already ruin it for me by talking to Coach.”

“Dan was very understanding.”

Theo clenched his jaw and pulled the zipper back and forth faster. “It wasn't your place to tell him something so private about me. How would you like it if I told Jonathan about the dildos you've stockpiled since Dad's accident.”

The van stopped, tires screeching, at a stop sign. “You will not talk to me like that.”

“Like what? It's true, and it's only fair since you seem to think it's okay to tell the whole world about my sex life.”

A car honked behind them and she pulled over, then she put the car in park and gripped the steering wheel. “Have you been going through my things?”

“No. Samantha has.”

“God damn it!”

He glanced out the window.

“Are you lying to me? Don't pull your sister into this.”

“I’m not lying. I’d say Samantha knows a lot more about your sex life than you realize.”

“Why didn’t you say something? You know she’s been having problems. You should have told me if you knew she was snooping around.”

“I guess I thought it wasn’t a big deal—it’s not *abnormal* for her to be trying to figure things out.”

“Don’t get sarcastic with me.”

“Fine,” he said, adjusting his backpack. “I’m going to be late for school.”

She took a deep breath. “Theo, your sister has had a hard time dealing with your father’s accident. I would appreciate if, in the future, you’d let me know when she does things like this.”

“Okay, but I think you’re overreacting.”

“I know some things about your sister that you don’t know, and you don’t need to know, but she is definitely struggling.” Her voice had gotten quieter. “She really needs a good big brother these days.”

“I *am* a good brother!” Theo made himself stare out the window so he wouldn’t say all of the mean things that were exploding in his head. He was sick of his family being in some kind of eternal recovery from his dad’s stupid accident. They needed to get over it.

Della started driving again, but she didn’t say anything more. For a few blocks. Then she started up again. “Back to what I asked earlier, I will take into consideration the things you’ve said you want, and maybe you, your dad, and I could talk tonight.”

“Why don’t you two just talk without me and let me know what you decide.”

“Don’t take that attitude with me. I’m trying to be kind and it would help if you would do the same.”

“Fine,” he said, still staring out the window and counting the blocks to school.

“And about your boyfriend—”

“Do not call him my boyfriend!”

“What do you want me to call him?”

“Jonathan.”

“Alright, if you insist.”

“This is not a joke. People at school don’t know about either of us, and if we want to keep it that way, it’s our decision. You don’t out someone else.”

“Out?”

“Yeah, tell the world a person is gay, like you told my coach.”

Finally, the school appeared and she pulled in to the circular front drive. “I did it because I knew you needed someone to talk to.”

“Well, don’t do it again. It’s like that test I just took—it’s confidential.”

“Theo, I’m sorry. I was distraught.”

“*You* were distraught. *You* needed someone to talk to. So find someone not connected to my life next time.” He opened the door and grabbed his bag, grunting his goodbye when she told him to try to have a good day.

“Yeah, you too,” he said and shut the door just short of slamming it. He merged with the crowd, shaking off the stupid conversation and looking forward to seeing Jonathan after the long, long weekend.

But Jonathan didn't make it to Burnett's class. Theo didn't get to talk to him until after an hour of Burnett's scratching on the chalkboard and a dull, dreary lesson. Jonathan was waiting for Theo in the hallway.

"You missed a great class," Theo said as they fell into step together.

"Let's go somewhere."

"Where?" Theo drifted beside Jonathan.

"Away from here."

"I'm seriously grounded."

"After school."

"I can't. Della will be waiting. What about lunch?"

Jonathan shifted his books and leaned into Theo. "Can't you skip some classes?"

"Not really..." Theo looked at Jonathan. His hair poked out in tufts from under his knit cap and he hadn't shaved in a few days. The left eye wasn't quite as swollen, and it was slowly turning from purple to green and yellow around the edges. The split along Jonathan's cheekbone was a small pucker of dark skin.

"Shit." Jonathan looked away. "Let's meet after lunch, okay? And then I'll get you back by the last bell."

"No," Theo said. "After 5th hour."

"Alright," Jonathan finally said, giving in.

Theo walked on a few steps, but when he turned and looked back, Jonathan was already gone.

At lunch, Theo ate with some of the guys from the track team. The tits and ass talk wasn't too bad, and he was near Stevens and Steadman and Donovan. Theo was quiet at

first, but when he finally relaxed, he realized that Donovan was actually funny. Stevens and Steadman didn't say much, but they laughed a lot at Donovan's jokes about the track meet Theo had just missed, at Donovan razzing Theo for letting the team down.

Theo dumped his tray after Donovan and Stevens and Steadman. They had to split up in the hallway, but not before Donovan got in one last jab about Theo missing the track meet. "Hope Coach doesn't work you too hard for not showing this weekend."

Theo wanted to say something funny, but he just said *later* and turned down the hall toward 5th hour—Spanish. Mrs. Dominguez began was nice, but her class was pretty boring. Theo found the scholarship letter in his backpack at the end of the hour, and when class was dismissed, he went to her desk.

"Mrs. Dominguez, I got something in the mail," he said.

She looked up at him from a stack of quizzes. Her shiny black hair fell just past her shoulders. She was from Mexico City, but her skin was pale, unlike any of the other Mexicans Theo had ever met.

"Yes?" she said. "¿Que?"

He handed her the letter. She read it quickly, eyes skimming each line. "Théo, congratulations!" She stood and came around the desk to hug him. Which was something most teachers would never do. Theo hugged her back.

"Are your parents excited?"

He hesitated. "They don't know yet..."

"What?"

"I was grounded last week and they're saying I might not be able to go."

She pushed her chair away from the desk and sat down. "Théo, what happened?"

He shifted his weight. “I did a few stupid things. I wanted to wait a few days before I showed them so maybe they’d be more receptive.”

Students began entering the room. “Do you want me to talk to them?” she asked. She handed him back the letter.

“No,” he said, folding it into his bag. “At least, not yet.” He slung his backpack across his shoulder. “I gotta go, but I wanted to say thanks for your help.”

“De nada, Théo.”

Jonathan was driving and it was warm enough to have the windows down.

“I hope your weekend was better than mine,” Theo said.

“I doubt it,” Jonathan said. “I guess you don’t know about Della calling my mom.”

Theo’s gut tightened. “You mean she had one of her little ‘talks’ with your mom?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck,” Theo said. “Fucking bitch.” Jonathan didn’t say anything, but Theo was sure he was thinking the same thing. “Do you know what she said?”

“Enough,” Jonathan answered. “My mom talked to my dad and he tried to beat the shit out of me. I called my brother and he told me about this place I could stay. I haven’t been home all weekend.”

They rode in silence, leaving town behind and following country roads that could have been leading to Jonathan’s new house, but Theo didn’t really know where they were because he hadn’t been paying enough attention. Jonathan slowed when a meadow opened on a hill to the right.

“My brother has a friend whose family owns this place. They used to come here to go swimming—there’s a stream, and the house is empty.” The truck crested the hill, revealing a field of tall brown grass that lay bent in tufts. Patches of weeds sprouted along the gravel tracks. Jonathan pulled the truck up to the house, a small bungalow with faded blue wood siding and weathered aluminum storm windows. He cut the engine and opened his door. “Let’s go see the stream,” Jonathan said. He didn’t wait for Theo’s answer.

Theo watched him and finally got out of the truck when Jonathan disappeared around the side of the house. Shit, he thought. But he followed Jonathan anyway, down a path mostly overgrown with scraggly bushes and vines. Probably poison ivy.

Finding the creek took several minutes of walking, some of it sliding, as the path descended lower and lower. Theo heard the sound of water tumbling over rocks before he saw the stream. It was clear, but only deeper than his knee in a few places where it gathered around fallen trees and a low bluff. Water dripped off the rock ledge, each drop clinging to the last tendril of moss in a dark haze of green that had spread along the rock face.

“Like it?”

“Yeah,” Theo said, his voice hushed. He released a slow exhalation of breath, watching it blow like a plume of steam—it was cooler here by the stream bank than it had been by the truck. He broke off a twig near his leg, snapping it with one hand and then bending it between his fingers until it was broken into several pieces. Each piece rippled the water, bobbing between rocks and gravel until disappearing downstream. “How long are you going to stay here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Your dad hit you?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan said. He didn’t explain any further and Theo didn’t want to push, yet. “Come on. I want to show you something,” Jonathan said. There used to be a bridge to the right, past the low bluff, and a mill. The people that owned it made moonshine. Jonathan asked Theo if he wanted to see it.

“No,” Theo said, looking up into the branches of the trees across the creek, noticing that the day’s light didn’t seem quite so bright anymore. “It’s getting late.”

“Let me show you and then we’ll go.”

They walked along the edge of the stream, Theo following Jonathan again.

“There it is,” Jonathan said. A wall of squared stones jutted halfway across the stream. Jonathan climbed up onto it and sat on the edge, his feet dangling near the water. Theo sat next to him.

“This is like that stone wall that goes around Fort Pickens,” Theo said, running his hands along the pitted surface.

“Yeah, I guess it is.” Jonathan threw a few pieces of loose gravel into the flowing water. “I really wish I’d gone to Florida with you.”

“Me too,” Theo said quietly. A lot of things would be different if Jonathan had been there instead of here in Missouri.

Jonathan nodded. He pulled up his knee and rested his chin. “Last week—”

“I don’t want to know.”

“I wanted to say I was sorry.”

“You already did.”

“I shouldn’t have been there.”

True, Theo thought, but he didn’t say anything.

“I’m not going to see him anymore.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to be with you.”

“What makes you think I want to be with you?”

“Don’t you?”

Theo didn’t speak for a while. He’d gathered some sand from the wall—he tilted his palm, slowly emptying it into the water near his feet. “Everything feels different.” Theo leaned back, resting his weight on his palms. He stared up at the trees, at the patch of clouds lit bright again with sunshine. “Della called you my boyfriend the other day.”

Jonathan turned his head so that his cheek rested on his knee, his eyes boring into Theo.

Theo’s face felt warm. He didn’t know what Jonathan was to him, and a word like boyfriend was too hetero, too weird. Lover? Best friend?

“This weekend, the shit with my dad... it made me think...” Jonathan didn’t finish. They were both quiet for a while until Jonathan said, “I want to show you the house.”

“I want to stay here,” Theo said, enjoying just being still and quiet for once.

“No, you’re gonna love the house.” Jonathan stood and pulled Theo with him.

The front door was locked, but the back was open. The smell inside was close and damp, almost musty. Jonathan lit a taper candle, but it leaned to the side of the cup and started dripping.

“Here, put some wax down in the bottom,” Theo said. He took the candle and let the drips pour into the cup, and then pressed the taper into place. His stomach fluttered when he handed it back. Jonathan leaned into Theo and they kissed. It felt good, just like it always felt good.

Jonathan led Theo to a bedroom, holding the candle high, and Theo sat on the bed while Jonathan undressed. Theo watched, unable to take his eyes away from the shadows sliding across Jonathan’s long, thin body as Jonathan raised both arms to pull off his tee shirt in the candlelight. After he got his jeans off, Jonathan began undressing Theo, and then they kissed, and then Jonathan told Theo he loved him. Which is when Theo said fuck it—Theo decided he finally wanted to do the thing Jonathan had been asking for.

Jonathan wanted to know if he was sure, and yes, Theo said, he was sure. Theo was trembling when Jonathan’s lips touched his neck, collarbone, ribs, hips.

They needed slippery stuff and a condom. Jonathan was prepared, but it still hurt anyway. It always hurts the first time. Which would have been okay, except that the bedspread smelled like a towel that had been left in the washer too long and Theo was face down, so he wasn’t having a lot of fun. They stayed like that awhile, Theo on his stomach, Jonathan kissing the length of Theo’s spine, and Theo tried to relax.

It got better. In fact, it got a lot better. Finally, even with the musty bedspread in his nose, Theo had an orgasm, and so did Jonathan.

Jonathan spoke into Theo’s ear. “I think I just died.”

“Me too,” Theo said, the feel of Jonathan’s body enveloping him like a second skin.

“You might be sore for a few days,” Jonathan said.

“Is that so?” Theo asked. “How do you...”

“Because—” Jonathan’s voice stopped. A car door slammed. They both sat up in bed.

The glass on the front door shattered and the door crashed into the wall.

“Jonathan? Where the fuck are you?”

“Oh my god.” Jonathan flew off the bed, pulling the bedspread with him and wrapping it around his waist. It was his dad. Theo grabbed his jeans and ran after Jonathan.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I needed a place to stay,” Jonathan screamed. He held the bedspread to his stomach with both hands. Dr. Norton’s eyes swung from his son to Theo, who was still pulling on his jeans and struggling to button them. Jonathan’s dad closed the distance between them.

“You little fucker,” he said, and as his hand came up to grab Theo, Jonathan lunged and caught his dad’s arm in mid-air. Dr. Norton threw Jonathan off like he weighed nothing. Jonathan tumbled backwards over the coffee table and landed on the floor, naked. Dr. Norton looked around and picked up a baseball bat that had been leaning against the front door. He swung it once against the coffee table. Theo jumped on him from behind as Dr. Norton raised the bat again, and instead of crushing Jonathan’s skull, it glanced off his temple and ripped through his shoulder. Theo tightened his arms around Dr. Norton’s neck and held on despite one hand clawing at Theo’s face and arms and the other swinging the bat overhead, sweeping it across Theo’s hips. Dr. Norton fell back into the doorframe, slamming Theo’s body between the wood and broken glass of

the front door and Dr. Norton's own 200 pounds of bone and flesh. Theo slumped to the floor onto more broken glass and watched as Dr. Norton made his way back toward Jonathan, who was splayed between the coffee table and the sofa. Dr. Norton had dropped the bat and this time lunged toward Jonathan's neck, but Jonathan kicked him in the groin, and Dr. Norton collapsed on one knee beside the table.

"I'm gonna kill you," Dr. Norton whispered. He put his hand on the table, trying to push himself to standing, but he couldn't move.

Jonathan shoved the table toward him and crawled around it, pulling Theo to standing. "Let's go," he said, and they limped to the back room where Jonathan grabbed his jeans and his keys. They slid out through the back door as Dr. Norton was still trying to rise to his feet.

Jonathan couldn't move his left arm, so Theo had to drive. His breath was coming fast and he didn't know which way to go, but Jonathan talked him through each turn until Theo recognized the streets. Theo's left hip was aching and he was shivering. He pulled slivers of glass out of his side and wiped the blood on his jeans. Jonathan was huddled against the door, his hand over his temple, blood oozing through his fingers.

"We need to get you to a hospital," Theo said. He touched Jonathan's shoulder and Jonathan winced.

"No," Jonathan said.

"Where?"

"I don't know." His voice was dull and flat.

Theo drove to his house. He didn't know where else to go. The van was in the driveway and Della was unloading bags from the side. She looked up when he pulled in. Her first expression was unmistakable fury, but her second was fear.

Neither Theo nor Jonathan had shirts on. She saw Theo's cuts first, but Theo said he thought Jonathan needed to go to the hospital and she saw the blood dripping from his hand and the swelling of his shoulder and told Jonathan to stay put. She was calling an ambulance.

"Let's just drive him to the hospital," Theo said.

"I don't know," Della yelled back from the garage. "I'm calling 911."

Theo went to Jonathan's door and opened it slowly. Jonathan moved slightly, keeping himself from falling out of the truck, but he didn't respond to Theo's voice. Blood was soaking into Jonathan's jeans and the seat of the truck. Theo didn't want to leave him. Della came out with the portable phone.

"What happened?"

"Dr. Norton hit him with a bat."

"Oh God. It looks like he's been hit on the head and the shoulder," she said into the phone. She touched Jonathan's cheek. "Jonathan?" She put her hand on the top of his head. "He's not responding... Go get some towels and a blanket... Okay. I'll stay on the line." She looked at Theo. "You. Get some towels and a blanket. They're sending an ambulance."

Theo came back and the sirens were already a few streets away. Jonathan still wasn't responding to Della. She held the phone between her ear and her shoulder, and

placed the towels gently on Jonathan's chest and near his head. She tucked the blanket around him and told Theo to wrap the other blanket around himself.

Theo rode in the ambulance sitting on a bench seat while a paramedic wiped his cuts. Jonathan was on a stretcher, his neck in a brace, his eyes closed. Della held Jonathan's hand and leaned over him, telling him everything was going to be okay. Theo closed his eyes, remembering how good Della was at comforting the wounded.

Jonathan was in the hospital for three days. He had a concussion and a broken collarbone. His dad was under house arrest and Jonathan's mom came to see him in the hospital once. She said she would pray for him. She didn't apologize. She went home to her husband, took care of him, and even when she had the chance at the hearing months later to say anything against him, she was silent. Jonathan's brother Brian would become his guardian and his dad would get six months probation for child endangerment. No assault charges were filed. No other questions asked.

When he got out of the hospital, Jonathan stayed with Theo's family for one night. He slept on the sofa in the basement. He had a bus ticket to Columbia, where Brian lived. Where Jonathan would try to finish high school.

Della and Theo's dad drove Theo and Jonathan to the bus station. They both said goodbye to Jonathan, Della squeezing him a little too tight, and Theo's dad hugging Jonathan with one arm, the other holding tight to the wooden cane. They left Theo and Jonathan to wait for the bus.

Theo and Jonathan sat side by side on a bench, Jonathan shifting his arm every few minutes to try to find a comfortable position. Finally, Theo leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “Did he fuck you?”

Jonathan looked at him, turning his head so the bandage on his temple wasn't blocking his view of Theo. “Yeah,” Jonathan said. “I was trying to tell you.”

Yes. Jonathan *had* tried to tell him, but Theo had thought he didn't want to know.

When it was time to say goodbye, they hugged, Theo pulling away first. “I'll call you,” he said.

Later, on the way home, Della and his dad tried to ask him questions, but Theo did little more than mumble.

When his bedroom door was closed and locked behind him, Theo lay down on the bed and buried his face in his pillow. Some day, maybe he'd look back and it wouldn't hurt like this. But at that moment, he could hardly endure another second without screaming.

He put on his headphones and pushed in the CD he'd listened to so many times the past few weeks, Rufus Wainwright's *Poses*. When he got to track ten, Theo pushed the button to repeat the song and got out the liner notes. As he scanned the tiny print, he caught something that he'd never heard before. “...these three cubic feet of bone and blood and meat are all I love and know/ 'Cause I'm a one man guy.” And it wasn't even written by Rufus, it was his dad's song, Loudon Wainwright, III. Theo had always thought Rufus was singing about being in love with only one guy at a time. But his dad was seriously straight. The song meant something different.

Theo's head emptied and his body ached. He felt broken, like the way his dad's body had been smashed up and broken in that little truck. Like the way Jonathan had crumpled under Dr. Norton's pounding. It was no accident that he loved Jonathan, that he had kept himself from seeing how much it hurt to share Jonathan with anyone else. Part of him had wanted to get in that bus with Jonathan, ride away with him and create a life together. But there was another part of Theo, too. The song that he couldn't stop listening to was about more than being with only one guy; it was about being your own guy. It was about how this little bit of flesh and blood and bone is all we have. We're alone in our body, whether we're with someone else or not, whether someone loves us or not; we only occupy this one body, and we've got to take care of it.

After dinner, Theo went to his parents' room with the scholarship letter. "I got this in the mail," he said, sitting on the edge of their bed. "I forgot to show it to you... All that stuff with Jonathan." His dad was propped on a few pillows, letting a recent dose of pain medicine take effect and take the edge off this headache that just wouldn't stop. Della was getting out her students' work, organizing it so she could get all of her grading done after her husband went to sleep.

"Why don't you read it out loud?" his dad asked.

"I'll read it," Della offered. She came around to his dad's side of the bed and sat next to Theo.

"Dear Theodore Williamson," she began. By the time she was done, Theo was having trouble not getting choked up. Because Della was crying long before she got to the signature, and his dad was squeezing his hand so hard that Theo's fingers ached. And

he realized that this plan to leave for Spain had been something he'd been carrying inside for months, quietly, secretly pushing himself to get away from his family and from Jonathan.

“A full scholarship,” Della said. She grabbed a tissue from the bedside table and turned the envelope so she could look at the postmark date. “How long have you known about this?”

“I got it last week.” Theo finally looked up at Della. “But I didn’t want to show you because I didn’t think you were going to let me go.”

She bit the edge of her lip and set her hand on Theo’s knee. “We still haven’t decided to let you go.”

“I know.”

“What does your Spanish teacher say?”

“She said she hopes you’ll forgive me, even if I’ve done some pretty stupid things recently.”

“Did you tell her—”

“No.” God, would Della ever stop?

“But she said ‘stupid’?” his dad asked and smiled, a hand pressed to his forehead.

“Not exactly,” Theo answered. “But she said she’d talk to you both if you wanted her to.” When neither of them answered, Theo looked down at his hands in his lap.

“Della, I’m really sorry about all the lies.”

“We know, Theo.” She reached over and squeezed his hand. His dad’s eyes were already closed. “Well, I’ve got some grading to do, and your father needs to rest.” She turned and pulled the blanket up on his dad’s shoulder.

“Can I go for a run? My homework is done.”

“A run, this late?” She shuffled her students’ papers.

“Yeah. I need the exercise.” He stood and moved to the door, not wanting her to know how intensely he needed to get out of the house.

“Fine,” she said, uncapping a red pen. She looked at him over the first stack of papers. “Be back in an hour.”

He didn’t wait around.

It was chilly out, so he grabbed his shorts and a tee shirt, a pair of sweats and a hoodie. After jogging several blocks, Theo circled back and found his way to Jonathan’s old back yard, hoping the phone was still in service. Theo tried to let himself in through the back window again, but it was locked. He leaned his head against the cold pane of glass and found the slip of paper with Brian’s number in his pocket. He could see Jonathan’s beautiful black hair and those jeans he’d been wearing this afternoon. Theo reached into the pocket of his hoodie and found the shell he’d dropped in earlier—an orphan from the handful he’d given Jonathan. He held it like the glass stopper of a perfume bottle, and he dabbed it along his neck and his collarbone, wishing it were damp with an exotic scent like white tea and Asian grass, or even better, a new scent of his own.

He couldn’t do it anymore. He couldn’t keep holding onto Jonathan like this. Theo walked away from the window, crossed the lawn and began a slow jog down the street. He would tell Jonathan that he loved him, but then he would tell him it was over. Not just because of Tom, but because Theo needed to be on his own. Jonathan needed him, yes. Jonathan had never really needed Theo like Theo had needed Jonathan, until

now. Brian was Jonathan's only support, but Theo wasn't going to hold on out of pity. Jonathan would land on his feet—he always did—and it was time for Theo to figure out how to take care of himself.

I love you, Jonathan. He started running, the shell in his hand, pressed tight into his palm. I love you, but I can't do this. He held onto the shell like it was a gift, something small that he had to take care of—like his own three cubic feet. Theo kept running, alone, until he was ready to go home again.

The End

THE LAD SKETCHES, A PLAY

CHARACTERS

HEAD WANDERING WAITER, (HWW), magical pizzeria worker

1 to 6 WANDERING WAITER(s), (WW), male and/or female pizzeria workers

PIZZERIA PATRONS (can be actual or implied)

DAD, Steve Williamson, 51, English Professor

MOM, Della Williamson, 48, High School English Teacher

THEO, 18, High School Senior, son of Steve and Della

JONATHAN, 18, High School Senior, best friend to Theo

MALE VOICE 1

VOICE ON PA (public address)

5-10 BOYS BASEBALL TEAM MEMBERS, 12-13-year-olds

MALE VOICE 2

TIME

The present, early evening

SETTING

Marlowe's, a pizzeria (like Shakespeare's in Columbia, Missouri) in a college town in the Midwest.

On brick walls USR, USC, and USL is an eclectic mix of abstract art nouveau and outdated advertisements for tractors, sodas, and cigarettes. USL is a bathroom; USC is a video game against the brick wall; CS are several tables with chairs; SR is a countertop and a cash register with a menu on the wall behind; DSR is a free-standing door. Low lights on door. Rest of stage is dark.

NOTE: Depending on the venue, this play can be adapted for larger or smaller spaces. The directions are all written for a traditional proscenium stage, but can be altered as needed to fit a smaller space, such as theater-in-the-round or interactive theater in a restaurant setting, where audience members can double as pizzeria patrons. Additionally, the number of WANDERING WAITERS can be increased for a larger space or decreased for a smaller space, and they can be mute (except for the few lines in the script designated WW), or can be developed into improvisational characters who carry on small interactions with each other and/or the audience throughout the performance and/or before the start of the play.

Enter HEAD WANDERING WAITER (HWW) DSL. HWW walks DSR, pulls the door DSL as lights follow his progress. HWW unlocks door and opens it to peak through. HWW snaps fingers. Noise erupts. Lights up SR illuminating menu, WW(s) tossing pizzas, and WW(s) at cash register; low lights on CS over tables and chairs where WW(s) wander occasionally with push broom; specials on ads and art which remain on for entire play. The restaurant is chaotic—hand tossed pizza flying, orders being called, the buzz of patrons. HWW closes door and walks DSC, stops to check pocket watch, looks back at door, and then exits DSR.

DAD, MOM, and THEO enter DSL. THEO is carrying a sketchbook; he opens door and follows his parents into pizzeria. Door is unobtrusively pulled off DSL. MOM, DAD, and THEO join a long line of patrons waiting to order, with MOM and DAD looking at the menu selections. THEO shifts his sketchbook, inserts earbuds and then turns away, paying attention to anything but his parents.

ACT I

MOM

You'd think we could order without looking at the menu. It's not like we get anything different than sausage with extra cheese.

DAD

I think it's time we tried something new.

(Looks toward THEO to see that he's not listening.)

Maybe we could try to build a gay pizza and show Theo how proud we are that he's being honest about his sexuality. We could get lots of colorful stuff like peppers and eggplant and broccoli.

MOM

(Also looks to see that THEO isn't listening.)

Honey, maybe we should stick to the usual.

(Both MOM and DAD look back toward menu.)

MOM (cont'd)

Oh, but what about that pepper jack? It has lots of color...

DAD

I say we go for a rainbow effect.

MOM

Speaking of rainbows, if he's interested in Jefferson University, we need to find out if it's a gay-friendly campus.

DAD

I really wish he'd told us years ago, say maybe *before* puberty. When he was twelve, I think I could have handled his 'revelation' a little better. All he ever wanted to talk about was how to increase his batting average and who should be his all-star pick. But he's practically an adult. How am I supposed to give him advice now?

MOM

Did you ask him about that letter?

DAD

Um... you ask him.

MOM

You're the one who wants him to go to Southwest.

DAD

Too much pressure.

MOM

Okay, tough guy.

(turns to THEO)

Oh, Theo... your dad told me you got a letter from Jefferson University.

(touches him to get his attention)

Theo?

THEO

Yeah?

MOM

What was that letter about?

THEO

What?

MOM

Would you take those things out of your ears? That letter?

THEO

(reaches to turn down music, but doesn't remove earbuds)

What letter?

MOM

The one from Jefferson University.

THEO
Just some information.

MOM
About...

THEO
The graphic arts program.

DAD
What about Southwest State?

THEO
I never said I don't want to go to Southwest.

DAD
(beat) Do you know if the campus is LGBTQ friendly?

THEO
(slightly horrified)
No. I didn't ask that.
(moves a step away from parents and reaches down to turn up music)

DAD
Well, there is definitely a group at Southwest that meets once a week—a homosexual advocacy group.

MOM
Is it the school that has that new study abroad program? I think I saw it profiled in the paper recently...something about a sister university in Barcelona...

THEO
(increasingly annoyed)
Yeah. That's the one.

DAD
You're not thinking of going to Spain? Are they friendly to gays?

THEO
Would you stop? I just asked them to send me some information. It's not a big deal.

(THEO, MOM and DAD speak simultaneously, repeating and improvising around

the lines below.)

DAD

Let's just order a pizza and talk later.

MOM

Why can't we talk now?

THEO

It's not a big deal.

(All three cease simultaneously, and then sigh with exasperation. MOM puts her hand on Theo's arm.)

MOM

Come on, we'll go find a table and let your dad order.

(to DAD)

Try ordering something new, okay?

DAD

Sure, Dear.

(MOM and THEO move to DSC. Lights over tables brighten; DAD goes to order, lights over DAD dim, and then fade out entirely when conversation begins between THEO and MOM. MOM leads THEO through patrons and several full tables until finally choosing an empty one. WW(s) unobtrusively clear tables, pick trash from the floor, and rearrange paintings and advertisements along the wall. Patrons notice the handiwork but no one actually interacts with WW(s). After MOM and THEO sit, patrons leave other tables gradually.)

MOM

Honey... Please turn down your music.

(resumes after THEO has reached down)

You know your dad is just trying to be helpful.

THEO

He's acting like I'm a freak or something.

(opens the sketchbook and begins to draw)

MOM

No, he's just trying to understand. We both are. When we were young, no one talked about sex. You remember that story I told you about when I was a little girl—

THEO

I remember. You don't have to tell me again.

MOM

Well, I just want you to see that we're trying to do things differently than our parents.

THEO

I get it Mom. I'm not an eight-year-old.

MOM

I know you're not...

(gestures affectionately)

But you've changed so much.

THEO

I'm still me, Mom.

MOM

(pause) I'll go get some plates and napkins. Save our table, okay?

(Exits.)

THEO

Sure. I'll just sit here and play with my crayons.

(THEO turns up his music—Rufus Wainwright, “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk”—which comes through to the audience as background noise fades slightly, and continues sketching, entirely in his own world. Enter JONATHAN from stage L.)

JONATHAN

Hey. What's up?

(gets no response from THEO, so surprises him from behind)

THEO

Cut it out!

(relaxes when he realizes it's JONATHAN)

Bitch.

(pulls out earbuds [music fades], straightens hair and rearranges his clothing)

When did you get here?

JONATHAN

I've been waiting on a pizza forever.

(leans in as if telling a secret)

I've been checking out the action in the bathroom.

THEO

Didn't you get enough "action" at the bar last night? Don't be stupid in this place... you know some square head's gonna kick your ass.

JONATHAN

I say bring it on. I'm sick of looking over my shoulder.

(He looks around.)

Speaking of which, who you here with?

THEO

The Fogies.

JONATHAN

Sounds painful. I left mine at home.

(JONATHAN pulls a chair from another table and faces THEO, straddling the chair)

THEO

(moans)

Wish I had my own car so I could do the same.

(closes sketchbook when he realizes JONATHAN is looking, and then puts the book on his lap)

I'm so ready to get out of here, anywhere without my folks.

JONATHAN

So, where are they?

(looks around)

THEO

Ordering pizza.

(THEO slides sketchbook between his butt and the chair and keeps talking while JONATHAN is looking around. A folded piece of paper falls out of THEO'S sketchbook.)

THEO (cont'd)

Probably trying to figure out how to order a gay pizza.

JONATHAN

Gay pizza?

THEO

Yeah. Gay pizza for their gay son... they've joined a gay parents group and they want to know if I'm going to a gay university.

JONATHAN

What is gay pizza?

THEO

I don't know. Fruity? I bet they get pineapple or some other bullshit goofy topping.

JONATHAN

Well, whatever they get, you guys'll be here all night.

(notices paper on floor)

Carryout is at least an hour wait.

THEO

(picks up paper quickly and puts in his back pocket)

Great.

JONATHAN

C'mon. I've got some money—let's play a video game. It'll help ease the pain.

MOM

(returning to table carrying supplies; to JONATHAN)

Hello there, Jonathan.

JONATHAN

(stands)

Hey, Mrs. Williamson.

MOM

This place is popular tonight. Is your family here for dinner?

JONATHAN

No, just me. Mom didn't unpack the kitchen boxes yet so she sent me out for a pizza.

MOM

How was the move? I miss having your family next door already...

(MOM notices a mark on the back of JONATHAN'S hand. MOM is too obvious and JONATHAN shoves his hand in his pocket when he realizes MOM is trying to see it.)

MOM (cont'd)

...and it's only been a few days.

JONATHAN

It wasn't my favorite way to spend Spring Break. I would have much rather been in Florida...

MOM

It's a shame your family couldn't come this year.

(arranges plates, napkins and utensils throughout conversation)

Did you boys have fun last night?

(looks up and watches JONATHAN'S hand as he runs it through his hair)

JONATHAN

(puts his hand quickly back in his pocket)

Sure...

(looks at THEO)

We had a good time. Right?

THEO

Yeah, the theater was packed.

MOM

Now, what were you telling me this morning? Was it the new *Spiderman*?

THEO

(looks to JONATHAN for help)

No, Mom. *Batman*.

MOM

(crosses her arms)

Hmm... and did *you* like it, Jonathan?

JONATHAN

Umm... yeah, you gotta love the dynamic duo.

(MOM looks away to finish setting out items. JONATHAN signals to THEO, indicating the video games.)

MOM

Mm-hmm. I don't know, I never cared for them much myself... Um, that's a pretty (beat) tattoo.

JONATHAN

(looks at his hand and then shoves it back into his pocket)

Yeah, it's just a fake tattoo. Well... it was nice to see you Mrs. Williamson.

MOM

You too. Tell your mother hello for me.
(stands still after setting table, watching him)

JONATHAN

Will do.
(awkwardly draws away from the table)
Hey, Theo. You should come check out this new video game.

THEO

(stands and makes sure his sketchbook is secure on the chair)
I'll be back when they call the pizza...okay Mom?

MOM

Sure, Hon.
(to JONATHAN)
Tell your mother I can't wait to see the new house.

JONATHAN

Okay. Take it easy, Mrs. Williamson.
(THEO and JONATHAN move to USC; video game is illuminated briefly while they put money in and begin to play, then fades. MOM notices sketchbook, then discreetly slides it off chair and begins looking at it, grimacing and occasionally laughing despite herself, but gradually she becomes more disconcerted. She turns several pages, and then begins reading out loud.)

MOM

"Episode 43, *Lads of Bedlam Strike the Attic*"... Hmm... "We enter the scene after Laddie has been drawn into a non-stop dance party at the Attic by a mysterious buff man in a flower-printed satin chiffon shirt. Lad moves in to save Laddie, but too late...the flower chiffon man has a" (raises eyebrows) "lip-lock on Laddie and there is no way to set him free"...Oh, my... "But wait—Lad thinks of an idea...he unbuttons chiffon-man's pants, lowers them to the floor, and manhandles chiffon-man's throbbing..." (mouths *member*)

(MOM continues reading silently with lips moving until light fades over her. SR lights up—DAD's cell phone is ringing. He is still waiting in line to order and fumbles through his pockets until he finds the phone and awkwardly opens it. WW's drift near him during conversation.)

DAD

Hello?

(talks much louder to speak over the noisy buzz of the pizzeria)

Hello. This is Steve...Oh, hey old buddy!

(looks around)

Sure, this is as good a time as any. Hold on, I can't hear you...

(switches phone from one ear to the other and plugs finger in open ear)

Okay... bat? You're talking about a bat? Oh! Matt, the new professor... Well, not sure I really need to know anything private about the guy—I mean, I just work with him...

Well, yes, we invited him to Florida for Spring Break because he seemed kind of lonely... You remember how we all drive to the beach—

(louder)

I said he seemed kind of lonely.

(looks around again and speaks in a softer voice)

But he's a nice enough guy.

(does lots of head nodding, looking around, "Um-hmm", "I see", and "I wasn't aware of that," and scrunching up his face when given bits of news, like he's watching someone getting punched; gradually DAD gets louder until he looks around and realizes suddenly how loud he is, then speaks much softer with hand cupping phone)

With another man?

(clears his throat)

Well... I'd rather hear it from you than from my son—I mean, I'd rather hear it from you than from anyone. Thanks, I guess. Tell Patricia and the girls hello from me... You too. Goodbye now.

WW(s)

Sir, would you like to order?

(louder)

Sir, would you like to order?

DAD

Yes, I think I would.

(DAD begins ordering as light fades out on him. Lights up USC over THEO and JONATHAN at the video game. THEO is playing the video game, at times with much gusto, and JONATHAN stands to the side, facing the audience. WW(s) eventually continue cleaning, this time nearer to THEO and JONATHAN.)

JONATHAN

You saw Matt at the laundromat today? What, did you have to wash the family sleeping bags?

THEO

Yeah.

JONATHAN

So, what did he say? Did he try to take you home with him?

THEO

Fuck, no. He said some creepy shit like if I wanted to tell to my parents, I could.

JONATHAN

About him?

THEO

Yeah. Like I'm going to tell them what we were doing while *they* were at the beach.

JONATHAN

What did you do? I still haven't heard any details.

THEO

Believe me, nothing you wouldn't have done.

JONATHAN

Theooo...

THEO

No. It was bad. Besides, I'm not into that.

JONATHAN

What?

THEO

Picking up guys. Having sex with someone I don't really know.

JONATHAN

Come on, it's not that bad.

THEO

No, Jonathan. I don't like it.

JONATHAN

You're looking in the wrong places. Maybe you need to start with guys who are ready to admit that they like men... unlike Matt. Now, take Marsha's Attic—we could have found someone for you...

THEO

I don't want to pick up guys in bars—

JONATHAN

—But I met a nice one. Remember that guy I met last night—Tom? Well, he turned out to be... nice.

THEO

How would you know? You just danced with him for a few minutes.

JONATHAN

Well, he called me today...and...

THEO

And what?

JONATHAN

Told me where he lived...

THEO

And?

JONATHAN

I told my parents I'd forgotten a few things at our old house...but really I went to Tom's. He lives alone and he's got a sweet place.

THEO

Mm hmm. I'm sure you spent a lot of time looking around his house.

JONATHAN

I had to be polite. I didn't want to just jump on him the minute he opened the door.

THEO

Does he know you're only in high school?

JONATHAN

He knows, but what's important is that I'm eighteen...so I'm legal. And so are you.

THEO

Nah. Not interested.

JONATHAN

Dude, you've got to explore. There's a whole world out there.

THEO

I've already found what I want.

JONATHAN

(mock swooning actress voice)

Oh, Darling, you're so sweet....

(normal voice)

Come on, Theo. You can't just settle on one person. You're too young.

THEO

(stops playing and looks at JONATHAN)

Jonathan, I don't want anyone else—I know you do... I understand... but being with lots of guys just isn't for me.

JONATHAN

(puts hand on THEO'S ass, speaks in a low tone—almost serious)

You incurable romantic...

(in THEO'S pocket, JONATHAN finds the piece of paper THEO took from sketchbook earlier, and JONATHAN takes it)

What's this?

(starts to unfold it)

A love letter from your vacation sweetheart?

THEO

(takes the paper back)

It's nothing...

(refolds paper and puts it back in his pocket and returns to video game)

Just some information I got from Jefferson University.

JONATHAN

I thought we decided to go to Southwest.

THEO

We did... but Jefferson has a program in graphic arts.

JONATHAN

They've got that here.

THEO

The program here isn't really that good...and besides, Jefferson has a sister school in Barcelona. I could put my Spanish to good use.

JONATHAN

You don't have to go to Spain for that. You're going for those hot guys.

THEO

I'm not interested in Spanish guys. And it's not like you're going to miss me.

JONATHAN

(almost joking)

Shut the fuck up. You know I don't want you going anywhere.

THEO

Why not?

JONATHAN

Because I would miss you...

(light-hearted)

I'd miss... you know... all the things we do together.

THEO

Right. You'd have plenty of replacements.

JONATHAN

Is that it? Are you jealous?

THEO

No... I know you want to see other guys.

JONATHAN

But you don't like it.

THEO

It's not my favorite... but I can't tell you to stop.

JONATHAN

(quietly)

But I would.

THEO

(stops playing video game)

Would what?

JONATHAN

Would stop if you asked me.

THEO

(looks at JONATHAN, measuring him)

Nah... I've known you too long.

JONATHAN

How long have we been best friends? Since sixth grade, right? Who else have I ever wanted to be with if I had the chance to be with you? (waits) Right. No one. So, don't give me this bullshit about (high voice) "Oh, I couldn't possibly ask you to change, that's not what love is about"...

(pulls THEO to him by grabbing the front of THEO'S sweatshirt, voice is serious)

I love you, you dipshit. And don't forget it.

(Lights fade over THEO and JONATHAN; lights up on MOM. Sketchbook lies open on the table in front of MOM. She turns a page every now and then, shaking her head with a look of deep concern, and has a cell phone to her ear. Again, WW(s) drift near her during her phone conversation.)

MOM

Hi Dorothy, this is Della...I know, I know, I just can't believe my eyes every time I look next door and see your empty house... Oh, the new place sounds just lovely—I can't wait till we get to see it. Jonathan tells us it's beautiful...

(responds with "Mm-hmms" and "Oh's,")

Dorothy... I know this sounds odd, but... speaking of Jonathan... you didn't happen to notice if his clothes from last night smelled awful, did you? I was going through Theo's laundry this afternoon and it smelled just like a—Do you think maybe they went somewhere smoky—not that they'd ever go anywhere they weren't supposed to...

(listens a bit longer with several um-hmms and Oh dears, and then tries to end the conversation)

Okay Dorothy. Talk to you soon, and congratulations on the new house...yes, let us know when the party is...

(presses the end call button and sits thinking a moment, then turns to a page in the sketchbook and reads aloud again)

"*Lads of Bedlam Strike the Attic*"... the Attic... hmm...

(punches in another phone number)

Springdale... "Attic"... Oh, yes, hello... I was wondering if you have a listing for "The Attic"... No? Can you look up bars in the business section? ... "Marsha's Attic"? Yes, that would be the one. Okay...got it. Thank you.

(ends the call and hurriedly punches buttons)

Yes, is this Marsha's Attic? Um, well, I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions... Police?! No. I'm not a police officer... Well... What I wanted to ask is, do you usually have any "alternative" patrons? Say, people with slightly different lifestyle choices?

(flustered)

Yes, yes, I mean gay and lesbian... I'm sorry, I didn't want to offend anyone...

(louder)

MOM (cont'd)

Yes, I know there is nothing to be embarrassed about, I have a son that's gay for God's sake.

(lowers voice)

I mean I know someone who is gay...

(pause, flustered again)

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to waste your time... Thank you... I just had one more question... Do you allow minors into your establishment?... But you don't let them drink, right? You mark them with some kind of stamp or ...

(long pause)

Oh, you've been very helpful.

(MOM closes the phone and sits thinking, her face getting angrier and more contorted as she begins looking through the sketchbook again. She slams the phone onto the table, picks up the book, and begins ripping pages out—they land on the floor where most of them remain until the WW(s) pick them up. Lights over MOM fade slightly while lights on DAD and THEO and JONATHAN come up. All three stations are now dimly lit: DAD ordering at the cash register, MOM ripping pages from the sketchbook, and THEO and JONATHAN continuing to play the video game. General buzz is louder than earlier, and calls for pizzas and salads become more pronounced. WW(s) stack several pages from the sketchbook on a table, then pull hammers and nails out of their utility pants (or overalls), and begin hanging the pages. Each time they pick one off the table and hang it, the sheet becomes life-sized. Lights up as DAD approaches table. After looking thoughtfully at each picture, WW's eventually drift off-stage R. Enter DAD, joins MOM at the table, unaware that she is upset.)

DAD

I just got off the phone with Greg—remember Greg Anders? Honey, you'll never believe what he told me. He said Matt... Della? Honey... are you okay?

MOM

(leans forward over the sketchbook, very distraught; torn bits of paper litter the ground around her feet)

No. Would you be okay if you just found out our son and his best friend went to a gay bar last night?

DAD

Well, no I wouldn't be okay—WHAT? Theo?... and Jonathan?

MOM

(clipped)

Yes. Last night. A gay bar. Our son. And his best friend.

DAD

Is the whole world turning gay?

MOM

(pushes sketchbook toward DAD)

Look at this.

DAD

“Episode 37... Lad encounters his old flame, an older man, in a hot, steamy exchange of sweat...spit...and—”

(mouths “sperm,” then keeps looking over page in disbelief, scratching his head and mouthing words)

MOM

You’re drooling.

DAD

What?

MOM

You’re reading our son’s pornographic artwork and you’re drooling. Close your mouth.

DAD

(closes his mouth, and swallows hard)

Della, this cartoon... I just got off the phone with Greg Anders...

(looks back at sketch)

MOM

Yes? And what did he have to say? Stories about how one of his perfect daughters has won yet another award in interpretive dance? Or maybe abstract art like our prodigal son here.

(slams the sketchbook on table)

DAD

No. It was about Matt.

MOM

What about Matt?

DAD

He taught in Greg’s department before coming here...and he’s gay, or bisexual, or something...Anyway, Matt’s wife didn’t leave him for another man, she left him because he was with another man.

MOM

Steve, forgive me, but I'm a little frazzled and I don't see how that has any relevance to our family.

(DAD shakes the sketches and tries to marshal his confidence; begins to pace and then speaks quickly, as if trying to get the story out before she cuts him off)

DAD

This phone call... it reminded me that Theo and I saw Matt at the laundromat today...and it was awkward—Theo was tongue-tied and nervous. It's been bothering me all afternoon, and I keep remembering odd things from the trip—all those conversations between Theo and Matt, and do you remember that night Theo didn't come back to camp until late? You know, Matt came back not too long after.

MOM

(mouth opens wide in horror as she figures it out)

You think he had sex with our son? What? Do we have to monitor Theo around each and every guy he meets?

(looks away, staring vacantly)

Oh my god....

DAD

(sits next to MOM)

Honey, it's okay. We'll get to the bottom of this.

MOM

(very distraught)

The bottom of what? (louder) Of our newly liberated son's sexual escapades?

(Enter THEO and JONATHAN)

DAD

(looks around, patting MOM'S arm awkwardly)

Della, keep calm now.

(Lights up over THEO and JONATHAN, then follow THEO as he walks to each of his pictures that are now on the wall. He circles around horrified, then sees the paper on the floor. He and JONATHAN follow the paper trail to the table. THEO picks up pieces, becoming enraged as he approaches the table.)

MOM

(shrugs off DAD'S hand)

Stay calm?

(increasingly louder)

MOM (cont'd)

We found out just last week that our son is gay, and now he's having sex with your colleagues...he's going to gay bars with Jonathan. How, the hell, am I supposed to stay calm?

THEO

What the hell are you doing? Those are my sketches!

(JONATHAN hangs back, looking on awkwardly.)

DAD

(stands)

Don't use that language, Son.

THEO

This is bullshit!

MOM

No, Theo...

(points at the sketchbook)

This is bullshit.

(stands)

We've been supportive, right?

THEO

What are you talking about?

MOM

Having sex with every guy you meet?

THEO

What?!

DAD

Sit down, you two, and keep your voices lower. Okay?

(JONATHAN drifts away, drawn to THEO'S pictures on the walls and eventually exits SL.)

THEO

(sits and grabs his sketchbook before his MOM sits)

Why, when I could be somewhere else having sex with every guy I meet?

MOM

(doesn't sit completely, and then she rises to standing with hands on hips)

That notebook is yours because we let you have it.

DAD

(pulls MOM to chair again)

Now Della, sit down so we can talk.

THEO

There is nothing to talk about.

MOM

Oh yes there—

DAD

Okay, you two. We are in a restaurant. We can either talk about this quietly, or we can discuss it later.

(DAD looks back and forth between them. THEO crosses his arms and turns away from the table. MOM finally sits, slightly turned away from the table.)

DAD (cont'd)

Good.

(sits)

I think it would be much better if we worked this out at home.

MOM

I didn't say we were done talking...

(to THEO)

You have some explaining to do. Would you like to start with Matt, or with Jonathan?

THEO

I don't have to explain anything to you.

DAD

Theo, calm down. Your mom and I are here for you. We want to help you.

THEO

I don't need help—there's nothing wrong with me!

DAD

I didn't mean I thought something was wrong with you... I just meant—

THEO

—Admit it, Dad. You think I’m a freak. What the hell is so hard to understand? I’m gay. I want to have sex with guys.

MOM

With your best friend?

DAD

With my colleagues?

THEO

(to DAD)

It was only one colleague...

(to MOM)

And what I do with Jonathan is none of your business.

MOM

Wrong. What you do is our business. Great, you finally told us about being gay... but all this time you’ve been having sex every chance you could get. We didn’t raise you to be a sneak and a liar.

THEO

There are some things that I don’t need to share with either of you.

DAD

Theo, this has got to stop.

MOM

We deserve better than this.

(THEO stands, ranting as he picks up remaining papers and tears them into pieces, rolling them into a ball. HWW and WW(s) enter DSL, quietly rolling door back onto DSL.)

THEO

You deserve better? I’m the one who deserves better! You treat me like I’m some kind of freak show, and then you accuse me of being a gay slut. I’m sick of it! I’m sick of you both—your bullshit liberalism and “open minds”... Well, open your minds to this!

(throws the wadded paper off stage L)

Fuck this. I’m out of here.

HWW

(claps once loudly)

Freeze!

(Silence. Everyone but HWW and WW(s) are frozen. WW(s) move toward THEO and push him off SL through the door. WW(s) turn to MOM, help her stand, and then push her toward shadows USL. Low lights on DAD sitting alone at table with his head in his hands. WW(s) approach and clear the table, and then set up bathroom stall SR. HWW sits next to DAD and puts a baseball cap loosely on DAD'S head, and then hands him a baseball jersey. HWW stands and moves away from table, facing the audience.)

HWW

(loud, like an umpire)

Let's play ball!

(Lights shift color [yellow or other bright color] and DAD stands suddenly, straightening the baseball cap. He puts on the jersey, looks around quickly, and makes his way to the bathroom stall. He closes the door and leans against it, and then faces the toilet and begins to unbuckle his belt and unbutton his pants. HWW and WW(s) exit DSL.)

MALE VOICE 1

(off-stage, angry) Steven!

DAD

(in a young voice) Yeah, Pops?

MALE VOICE 1

You'd better be done in there, boy.

DAD

Almost.

MALE VOICE 1

What'd I tell you about embarrassing me in front of my friends? Now I'm gonna miss the god-damned ninth inning.

DAD

I'm sorry, Pops.

MALE VOICE 1

(bangs on door)

Flush that toilet and get out here.

DAD

I'm not done.

MALE VOICE 1

You already pissed yourself. (banging on door is louder) I know you're not peeing in there.

DAD

It was just soda. I spilled my soda.

MALE VOICE 1

Open the damn door!

(Banging on door gets louder until door crashes inward. DAD falls away from door, cowering and protecting himself from (imagined) blows. He burrows into corner of stall, whimpering, and gradually becomes quiet. DAD'S cell phone rings and he looks around, stands and straightens himself, and then answers the phone.)

DAD

(hesitant)

Hello? Steve Williamson here.... Hello?

(looks at phone)

God-damned things are never loud enough.

(presses a button several times and then puts phone back to ear)

Hello?

(listens, and then finally puts it phone away while muttering)

VOICE ON PA

Advice on Steve... whole wheat with pineapple and advice on Steve.

(Loud talking off-stage R—sounds of a boys' baseball team savoring a victory. DAD adjusts his clothes and runs his hands through his hair. He takes a deep breath, leaves the bathroom, and greets the team [THEO and JONATHAN and BASEBALL TEAM MEMBERS, all in jerseys] as they enter.)

DAD

(recovering)

Hey... what a game!

(General agreement and high fives from THEO and JONATHAN.)

DAD (cont'd)

Down two runs in the ninth and you came back and beat 'em! That's my boys!

(directs the team toward table)

I got a table over here. With this crowd, you gotta score quick.

(DAD leaves as boys set caps, gloves, shirts, etc. on table and chairs, and then exit SL as a group, calling out shouts about who will verse whom on the video games. DAD returns loaded with napkins, plates and cups and returns to the table to find no one there.)

DAD (cont'd)

(annoyed)

Hey! I left here with the bases loaded. Where'd everybody ...

(DAD begins arranging plates around table and putting shirts, etc., on chairs, and then looks up when THEO and JONATHAN approach the table.)

THEO

(eagerly)

Got any money for video games? Jonathan and I want to verse each other.

DAD

Well... I—

THEO

—Come on, Dad. It's a new machine and I forgot my money...

JONATHAN

Yeah, Mr. Williamson. It's more fun if we can play one on one.

DAD

Alright.

(digs in pocket and hands coins to THEO)

Come back when you hear our pizza called.

THEO

Thanks, Dad!

(JONATHAN and THEO exit, stumbling over each other in clumsy excitement.)

DAD

(to himself as he sits)

You're welcome, boys.

(DAD waits at the table, clearly bored. Buzz of patrons becomes gradually louder. DAD looks around, notices sketches and is intrigued. He gets up and walks around to inspect them. Enter HWW SL, watching DAD. Music of "Dance of the Sugarplum Fairies" begins over PA. Enter THEO

and JONATHAN USC [as if emerging from a sketch], in superhero costumes, unseen by DAD. JONATHAN is holding THEO'S hand high between them as if leading him to a dance position. HWW snaps his fingers and the music stops, and then HWW puts tutus on THEO and JONATHAN. Music begins again and they flutter about the stage and settle behind DAD, looking and pointing at same drawings that DAD is looking at. DAD knows someone is behind him and keeps turning to see the two, but never quite gets a good view of them. THEO and JONATHAN exit USC followed by HWW, and DAD finally sits down and looks grumpy. Enter THEO in baseball uniform.)

THEO

(to stage L)

I'll be right back—play my turn if you want.

(to DAD)

Hey, Dad—

DAD

(attentive, grateful for a distraction)

Did I tell you how proud I was today? Seeing you shut down that runner at 1st—Now, that was priceless.

THEO

Gee, thanks, Dad. (sits) What I was wondering was... I need some advice.

DAD

That's what I'm here for, Son. Throw it at me.

(DAD assumes thoughtful demeanor—hand on chin, occasional nods, eyebrows up as if pondering deeply as THEO talks)

THEO

Well, there's this guy I like, and I get so nervous every time I see him, and he's cute, and nice, and I'm just wondering...

DAD

(hanging on THEO'S words)

Yes, what is it?

THEO

How do you tell a guy you like him? I mean, without making yourself look totally stupid?

DAD

(without hesitation)

Well, I'm no expert when it comes to guys... but... Courage—that's what it takes. You just jump right in and take a swing... how old is he?

THEO

Well, he's my age. He's twelve.

DAD

Starting a little young, aren't you?

THEO

I really like him...

DAD

(stands, demonstrates with hand gestures, becoming gradually more and more animated)

Well, I guess I had my first kiss when I was twelve... so... let's see, you probably don't want to put your heart out there too much... yes, walk up to him like you know what you're doing, but don't give away your entire hand in the first five minutes. Stay cool—think of it like playing the green diamond—keep your wits about you and your eyes on the ball. So, where'd you meet this boy?

THEO

He's on the team.

DAD

(with too much intensity)

Arnold?

THEO

No.

DAD

(more intensity)

Benjamin?

THEO

No. Come on, Dad. Don't make me say.

DAD

(as if he's about to burst)

Okay. But you just remember that I'm here for you...if you have any more questions.

THEO

Well... once he's interested, what do I do?

DAD

(increasingly serious, and sinister, imitating Pops' speech)

Hmm... with your mother, I took it nice and slow—but I knew it was for keeps. Before I met her, I pitched a mean curve ball. They never even saw it coming. When you're on the mound, you're in control. Why walk 'em when you can strike 'em out? The quicker you make your play—if the other team's not too experienced—the higher you score. And when it's your turn at bat, why shoot for a double when you can hit a home run?

(stops and looks directly at Theo)

Sure you won't tell me who the lucky guy is?

THEO

(shaking)

No, Dad.

JONATHAN

(from off-stage L)

Theo, it's your turn!

THEO

(stuttering)

I'll let you know how it goes.

DAD

(angry)

Alright then, Son. Alright.

(watches THEO walk away; becomes even angrier)

I'll be cheering for you.

VOICE ON PA

We've got a congratulations on white crust with extra cheese for Steve... Steve-a-roni, come get your congrats on the cheese.

(DAD looks up and around, not quite sure what to make of the announcement. HWW comes over and takes ball cap off DAD'S head. DAD returns to earlier position at table—leaning forward with head in hands. Lights out.)

End Act I

DSR is a street bench, DSL is the free-standing door. CS is the bathroom. Lights up CS on MOM, facing the audience, leaning over sink, staring at herself in a (false) mirror. She pats her face with a dampened paper towel, then wipes around her eyes with a tissue. MOM begins re-applying eye pencil and lipstick—all of her movements are agitated and she mutters throughout to her image in the mirror. Enter HWW with a mop. MOM realizes someone has entered the bathroom and makes a point of turning away. When HWW gets to other side of MOM, MOM reaches for more paper towels and HWW snaps. MOM freezes and HWW replaces MOM'S lipstick with a different tube. Lights change to red [or other deep color like purple]. HWW goes into one of the stalls and begins mopping the floor, etc. Enter THEO and JONATHAN, both dressed in superhero costumes. They go into the bathroom as HWW comes out of the stall—so all four are in the main area of the bathroom shuffling and bumping—and when it's done, THEO and JONATHAN are in one stall, HWW is in another, watching MOM from over the stall door. MOM is flustered. She turns toward mirror.

ACT II

MOM

(hiss)

People can be so rude.

(continues applying lipstick, and speaks in a low voice)

Now, why would two people need to go into one stall?

(Moaning comes from THEO & JONATHAN'S stall. MOM looks toward stall and then back at mirror. Moaning becomes rhythmic, louder.)

MOM (cont'd)

Oh my god. That is disgusting!

(listens for a bit, and then gets more makeup out of purse—dark red rouge, black eyeliner—and begins applying.)

I would never do something like that in a filthy place like this... No, I'd never do something like that at all...

(tilts head to listen to moans)

No, I was nothing like these little sluts...

(continues applying makeup and begins disrobing)

MALE VOICE 2

(from stall [or off-stage], deep and authoritative)

Now, Della, aren't you a bit young to be sneaking around with these boys?

MOM

(little girl voice, part-mocking)

But, I didn't mean to be a bad girl. Please don't tell my mommy.

MALE VOICE 2

I can keep a secret, but what's important is, can you keep a secret?

MOM

(little girl voice)

Cross my heart. Hope to die.

(She crosses her heart and begins caressing one breast and holds other hand below her waist, moves rhythmically with moaning issuing from stall, and appears to reach a climax in unison with THEO and JONATHAN'S moans, then slowly recovers and looks in mirror.)

MALE VOICE 2

Wasn't that nice?

MOM

(breathless)

Yes. Yes it was.

(THEO and JONATHAN come out—THEO now has on a collar connected to a leash, willingly submissive. JONATHAN holds the handle to the leash. JONATHAN gets paper towels and wipes THEO'S mouth with lingering gestures as MOM watches in mirror. JONATHAN slaps THEO on the ass and MOM turns to watch as JONATHAN pushes THEO out the door making a show of "walking" him. HWW comes out of other stall mopping the floor. MOM turns back to mirror and begins to see herself—the garish makeup and scant clothing. HWW hands MOM a paper towel and she begins removing makeup. HWW watches patiently a moment leaning on mop, and then continues working. When makeup is gone, MOM begins re-assembling clothing in an increasingly dignified manner.)

MOM

(harsh adult whisper that sounds like a hiss)

You little whore. Get that look off your face before I slap it off.

(more calm voice)

That's better. Now, no more secrets, right Della?

(clothing entirely returned to normal, hands are still, small child's voice)

Yes, Mommy...

(Lights out CS. Bathroom is unobtrusively removed and replaced with pizzeria table(s) and chairs. Dim lights DS. Enter THEO SL, dressed in jeans, sneakers and sweatshirt from earlier. He carries tattered remains of his sketchbook and walks slowly across DS, past the door, kicking at

imaginary rocks, head down and slouching, and then stops at bench DSR. THEO sits on the bench, pulls up his knees and wraps his arms around his legs, and lays sketchbook on bench, where it will remain until last scene. Enter HWW SL, pushes door open and looks stage L and stage R. Enter JONATHAN SR, and HWW retreats into restaurant and slowly closes door, remaining near it.)

JONATHAN

I've been looking everywhere for you... they called my pizza and I couldn't find you to say goodbye... what happened?

THEO

Nothing... Everything.

JONATHAN

(He joins THEO on bench.)

That was a bad scene.

(He twists to look inside restaurant at spotlighted sketches.)

Did you get your drawings?

THEO

No.

JONATHAN

Come on. Let's go take them down.

THEO

Just leave them. I don't care who sees them anymore.

JONATHAN

Yeah, you do.

THEO

No, I don't.

(gets off bench and turns away)

JONATHAN

Yes, you do. You never even let me look at your stuff. I know you don't want a bunch of strangers staring at it.

(stands)

Come on.

THEO

I said leave them. I don't care anymore. They're just a bunch of stupid, fucked-up drawings.

JONATHAN

(pauses)

Fuck this.

(gets no response)

I said, “Fuck this.”

THEO

(turns toward JONATHAN)

What?

JONATHAN

(pushes THEO so THEO almost falls into the bench)

Fuck you feeling sorry for yourself.

(pushes again)

So your parents are assholes.

(pushes again)

So your precious drawings are no longer a secret—

THEO

(pushes JONATHAN back)

Back off, Bitch.

JONATHAN

(in THEO’S face)

No, I won’t back off. I’m tired of your pouting, moody bullshit. Do something, don’t sit here and let them treat you like shit.

THEO

(pokes JONATHAN’S chest)

You’re the one treating me like shit.

JONATHAN

(pushes THEO’S hand away)

What the hell are you talking about?

THEO

(backs off, and starts to walk away)

Nothing. Nothing. You’re right—my parents are assholes and I’m a whiny bitch...

(turns back and shoves JONATHAN)

And I’ve got a slut for a boyfriend...

(shoves again)

Who fucks me over just like my parents fuck me over.

(begins to unfasten his pants)

Come on. Why don’t you just fuck me right here. Right here.

JONATHAN

(shoves THEO very hard, knocking THEO'S hands away from pants)

Stop! Stop being an asshole.

THEO

Fuck you!

(THEO shoves JONATHAN and they tussle. HWW notices from other side of door and begins cleaning the frame. THEO eventually gets in a hit that stops the fight—JONATHAN has a busted lip.)

JONATHAN

(wipes blood from his lip)

What the hell!

THEO

(backs away)

Just leave me alone.

(nearing stage R)

When I want some casual sex, I'll give you a call.

HWW

(claps once loudly)

Freeze!

(Silence. Everyone but HWW is frozen. HWW pulls THEO back through door, into restaurant, and then brings THEO upstage of table. Light over THEO changes to blue. HWW pushes THEO into a crouch in the shadow of the table and [helps] THEO undress, holding onto each piece of THEO'S clothing conspicuously. HWW steps away and exits restaurant through door and takes JONATHAN off SL. HWW snaps and DS lights go out. THEO emerges from table on all fours in superhero costume and approaches the illuminated sketches, constantly on alert for onlookers. Enter JONATHAN stealthily from SL, also in superhero costume, with another costume underneath exactly like THEO'S. A towel is attached to JONATHAN'S costume. Both whisper loudly.)

JONATHAN

(as "Laddie," THEO's sketched superhero)

Psst. Lad.

THEO

(as "Lad," THEO's sketched superhero, crouches, leaving sketch in place)

Who is it?

JONATHAN as Laddie

It's me. Laddie.

(scoots across floor, remaining in shadows)

Why didn't you call me?

THEO as Lad

I told you to stay home tonight.

JONATHAN as Laddie

I thought you might need some help.

(looks around)

Are they all gone?

THEO as Lad

Yeah.

(stands)

Except sometimes those fairy-ass waiters come back to check on things.

(walks around, looking at each sketch, and then speaks in deep voice)

But, you can stop whispering.

JONATHAN as Laddie

(matching deep voice)

Right.

(stands and follows THEO from sketch to sketch)

What have you decided?

THEO as Lad

Well, the situation is obviously hopeless.

JONATHAN as Laddie

So we torch it?

THEO as Lad

Torch it? No. Something has to be saved.

JONATHAN as Laddie

But why? You want them all to figure it out?

THEO as Lad

No, but it's up to me to keep them safe.

JONATHAN as Laddie

You? Them? Why are you leaving me out?

THEO as Lad

(turns to JONATHAN)

Laddie, there are some things I can't tell you.

JONATHAN as Laddie

Like what? Like that time you saw your old flame and you didn't want me—

THEO as Lad

(interrupting)

Yes, Laddie. But this is no place to discuss such things.

(Enter WW(s) SL, approach door and fumble with keys.)

THEO as Lad

Shh!

(Both crouch. WW(s) enter restaurant looking around, aware that something isn't right. WW(s) approach sketches and adjust each one, then go to table and set on it the baseball cap, lipstick, leash, and collar. WW(s) leave through door and exit SL.)

THEO as Lad (cont'd)

(stands, moves toward sketches, lingering over each one)

Okay, alternate plan.

JONATHAN as Laddie

(stands, moves toward table)

Yeah?

(begins fingering items and puts on baseball cap, applies lipstick, and fastens collar around his neck)

So, what's your plan?

(clips leash to collar and holds handle toward THEO)

Think this might help?

THEO as Lad

(turns and looks at JONATHAN, pauses before speaking)

Yes. Yes, I think it might.

(moves forward and takes leash, begins circling table with JONATHAN in tow)

How long have I known you, Laddie?

JONATHAN as Laddie

Um, since we were kids?

THEO as Lad

Right. And how many times have I asked you to stay behind?

JONATHAN as Laddie

Never.

THEO as Lad

(stops and faces JONATHAN)

So, why, on this one night, could you not do what I asked?

JONATHAN as Laddie

(falls to his knees)

Lad, I'm sorry. I only wanted to help.

THEO as Lad

Take off that stupid hat. What kind of superhero are you?

(THEO moves hand toward cap and JONATHAN flinches.)

THEO as Lad (cont'd)

And why are you wearing lipstick?

(JONATHAN flings off the hat and tries to wipe lipstick off with his towel.)

THEO as Lad (cont'd)

It's not coming off, let me...

(THEO crouches and takes the towel from JONATHAN and wipes too hard.)

JONATHAN as Laddie

Ow! You're hurting me.

THEO as Lad

Isn't that the point?

JONATHAN as Laddie

The point of what?

THEO as Lad

You and me.

JONATHAN as Laddie

I'm not in this to hurt you.

THEO as Lad

(with the leash, pulls JONATHAN very close)

Do you remember how I asked you to stop getting yourself into messes? Remember how I said I'm tired of cleaning up after you?

JONATHAN as Laddie

We were only having fun.

THEO as Lad

See, Laddie. It isn't 'fun' watching you with everyone else. It isn't 'fun' saving your ass and picking up the pieces afterwards.

JONATHAN as Laddie

But why didn't you say that before?

THEO as Lad

Because it took this for me to see it.
(indicates sketches)

THEO as Lad (cont'd)

Laddie, stand up.
(pulls JONATHAN to standing)

It's over.

(THEO begins undressing JONATHAN, revealing matching "Lad" costume underneath.)

THEO as Lad (cont'd)

Now you can go... to your dance-your-brains-out parties. Go. The fags are waiting for you in bathrooms all over town.

JONATHAN

(deeper, more authoritative voice, speaking now as "Lad" #2)

But I don't really want those things. I want you.

THEO as Lad

(unclasps collar)

You're free to go.

(THEO stands back and they begin circling each other stealthily. THEO grabs lipstick from table and runs with it, smearing it across the sketches in between being chased by JONATHAN. Gradually, their voices sound more and more like THEO and JONATHAN and less like "Lad" and "Lad #2".)

Stop it! JONATHAN as Lad #2

No. It's over. THEO as Lad

Stop! Do you want to ruin everything? JONATHAN as Lad #2

It's already ruined. THEO as Lad

Do what I tell you for once! JONATHAN as Lad #2

For once? What about what I want? THEO as Lad

What do you want? JONATHAN as Lad #2

I wanted you! Alone. Just you. Just me. THEO as Lad

JONATHAN as Lad #2
(looks down at himself, raises his arms partially)
Look at us! It is just you. Me.

(THEO picks up the baseball cap, lipstick and collar and leash from off the floor and puts all of them but the collar on table. THEO looks at JONATHAN slowly and walks to him, as if to embrace. JONATHAN welcomes him, but THEO puts the collar to JONATHAN'S neck, and JONATHAN lets him, trusting, and THEO walks around behind JONATHAN and slowly strangles him. THEO falls with JONATHAN gently to floor and lies behind him, holding JONATHAN.)

THEO
(sounds entirely like THEO)
No. It's just me.

(Blue lights out, dim lights up DS as buzz of patrons gradually comes up. Exit THEO and JONATHAN unseen. DAD sits at table in earlier position

with his head in his hands. HWW pushes a broom and winds through tables and chairs sweeping remnants of torn sketchbook pages, stopping occasionally to rest on broom and stare wistfully at DAD.)

VOICE ON PA

A pizza for the Williamson Family... we've got a pizza with part old stuff, part new stuff for the Williamson Family.

(DAD lifts his head and looks around, then runs his hands through his hair and stands, straightening his clothing, and then exits SR. MOM returns to table slowly, looking around and patting her hair and clothing, trying to look normal. She sits at table and waits with purse clasped to her chest, looking shell-shocked. HWW takes a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and drops it on the floor, then sweeps DS. MOM watches him and notices the piece of paper. She waits for HWW to move to another area, and then walks over, picks up the paper, and stands DS reading it. She looks up and notices again the sketches on the wall and moves US toward them. Buzz of patrons becomes quieter, gradually becoming entirely silent. MOM goes from sketch to sketch touching each one, tracing lipstick marks.)

MOM

(with great emotion)

What happened, Theo? ... I'm so sorry.

(wipes her face and eyes, backs away slightly and touches the sketch again)

I did... I've done exactly what I said I wouldn't—

(pauses, and then speaks with great emphasis)

MOM (cont'd)

I swore I wouldn't treat you like she treated me.

(wipes her eyes one last time and takes a deep breath, collecting herself, and then sits at the table.)

DAD

(enters with pizza) Oh—Della.

(MOM sets the paper on the table. DAD sits next to MOM.)

DAD

I guess we can go ahead and eat. I don't think Theo...

MOM

(clears her throat, and speaks with difficulty)

Right. We should probably start without him.

(DAD serves MOM a piece first, then himself. They both attempt to eat, but neither can actually take a bite, and instead sip their sodas, wipe their mouths, and sit awkwardly for a moment.)

MOM
Steve, I ripped his sketches...

DAD
But you were right—we didn't raise him to be a sneak and a liar.

MOM
He had so many secrets.

DAD
He's been a little shit.

MOM
What?

DAD
I twisted myself into knots for that kid.

MOM
That's what parents are supposed to do.

DAD
Maybe a little more discipline—

MOM
Would have made him straight?

DAD
Would have made him honest. Fucking little brat.

MOM
Oh. You never lied.

DAD
(slowly)
I had to.

MOM
We all did.

(Silence, and then both finally pick up pizza and begin eating. MOM hands DAD paper.)

DAD

What's this?

MOM

A scholarship letter.

DAD

(reading)

“Dear Theodore Williamson. We are pleased to inform you that you are the recipient of the Antoni Gaudi Scholarship... for participation in the Jefferson University Graphic Arts Abroad Program... we hope that your studies in Barcelona are an inspiration to your growing talents as an artist....”

(pauses)

No. Way.

MOM

Steve, he's going to leave someday, and we can't follow him to every game.

DAD

(He looks at her, incredulous.)

This isn't baseball.

MOM

So, you have the answers?

DAD

Maybe we're just supposed to figure it out as we go.

(MOM and DAD bite into pizza.)

DAD

Gay pizza? What were we thinking?

MOM

I don't know. It's not bad.

(MOM and DAD resume eating. THEO enters SR dressed in hoodie and jeans from first scene, slightly dazed and looking around, cradling his right hand. He approaches the door and hesitates, and then enters restaurant.)

THEO
So the pizza finally came?

DAD
Oh, Theo. We thought maybe you walked home.

THEO
No, I just needed to cool down.
(sits and an awkward silence follows)
Look, I'm sorry—

MOM and DAD
Theo, we need to—

THEO
(picks up letter)
Where did you find this?

MOM
It was on the floor. Why didn't you tell us?
(touches his arm)
We're proud of you.

THEO
(pulls away)
This was in my sketchbook. Which is private.

DAD
There is a difference between having a private life and lying.

THEO
I was going to tell you about Jonathan.

MOM
When? The same time you were going to tell us about Matt?

THEO
But I couldn't tell you about Matt—it was my fault. He didn't do anything wrong.

DAD
(slowly)
Theo, when a kid has sex with an adult, who do you think is responsible?

I am not a kid.

THEO

Being 18 for a few weeks doesn't exactly make you an adult.

DAD

Theo, who do you think suffers years later?

MOM

The adult... I guess... if he gets put in jail.

THEO

(quietly)
Son, any time you have an adult and a kid, it's the adult calling the shots.

MOM

(even quieter)
And it's the kid who has to live with it.

THEO

Are you guys trying to tell me something?

(MOM and DAD look away)

DAD

We don't want you to ever be hurt.

MOM

Ever.

THEO

Nobody hurt—

DAD

Maybe, some day when you have kids, you'll get it.

THEO

When's the last time you saw two gay guys around here with a kid?

DAD

Maybe you're better off. Kids are a pain in the ass.
(takes another piece of pizza and starts eating)

MOM

I don't know if I'd go that far...

(takes another piece of pizza and starts eating too)

THEO

(grabs a piece and stares at it)

What kind of pizza is this?

DAD

We thought we'd try something new.

THEO

Next time, you should ask me first.

(pushes box away and sits back in chair and cradles right hand)

I'm not hungry any more.

MOM

What happened to your hand?

(reaches for his hand and holds it to see his bruised knuckles)

Did you get in a fight?

(touches his face to check for injuries)

THEO

No, Mom.

DAD

(slams table)

Damn it, Theo. What the hell is happening to you?

THEO

I got in an argument—

DAD

You got in a fight!

MOM

Why can't you just tell us?

DAD

Because he's a god-damned liar!

MOM

(to THEO)

Are you lying again?

Okay! I got in a fight!

THEO

Who was it?

MOM

(looks away)

THEO

No one.

MOM

It was obviously someone.

DAD

(quietly)

Matt. I'll kill him.

(starts gathering things as if to leave)

MOM

(pushes chair back, very angry, stands and starts to clear table)

Let's get the hell out of here. I'm gonna kill that bastard myself.

THEO

(shrinking away from table, watching them)

Dad? Mom?

(MOM and DAD don't hear THEO, and continue bussing the table noisily, muttering and getting louder.)

THEO (cont'd)

It was Jonathan.

(MOM and DAD continue, oblivious.)

THEO (cont'd)

(stands)

It was Jonathan... I... I hit him.

(very loud)

It was Jonathan!

(MOM and DAD stop.)

DAD

Jonathan, what?

THEO
(cradling his hand)
The... fight. Our fight. I hit him.

MOM
And Matt?

THEO
It wasn't Matt. He doesn't want anything to do with me.

MOM
I doubt it.

THEO
He made it very clear. He was going to talk to you guys... but I begged him not to.

MOM
He's the one who's going to beg.

DAD
You punched Jonathan?

THEO
Yeah.

MOM
I'm talking to the dean about this.

DAD
(hopeful)
He's not your boyfriend anymore?

THEO
He... I... I've... got to figure some things out.
(looks around and sees sketches)
I think I'm going to walk home.

MOM
But—

DAD
We should all go.

MOM
Right. You should ride with us.

Let me go, okay?

THEO

MOM and DAD

(simultaneously)

But you said... we thought...

MOM

What if Matt...

THEO

It's NEVER going to happen again.

DAD

Jonathan?

THEO

I'll let you know.

DAD

(holds out pizza box)

Maybe you'll want some pizza? Later?

THEO

Yeah. Maybe.

(THEO leaves table and walks toward door. MOM and DAD engage in conversation and when they aren't looking at him, THEO goes behind them and takes down the sketches as HWW watches. THEO leaves with (paper) sketches under his arm and walks slowly stage L. When he reaches the bench, he picks up the sketchbook and exits. Lights up on JONATHAN at bathroom CSL, with a towel held to his lip. He walks US, then DSL, avoiding being seen by MOM and DAD, and leaves Marlowe's through door. JONATHAN hesitates at door, looking both ways, and continues walking SR. Lights down over MOM and DAD.)

THEO

(from off-stage L)

Jonathan! Wait!

(JONATHAN stops, but says nothing and doesn't turn around—enter THEO SL with sketches and book, which he sets on bench.)

THEO

Jonathan... I thought you were gone already.
(reaches JONATHAN and puts his hand on JONATHAN'S
shoulder)

Jonathan—

(JONATHAN turns toward THEO, shrugging off THEO'S hand.)

THEO (cont'd)

I didn't mean to—

JONATHAN

Don't apologize. It's not a big deal.

THEO

(moves closer)

I'm sorry.

JONATHAN

(draws away)

I've got to go. My parents will be worried.

THEO

Don't go. I'm really sorry.

(He reaches JONATHAN and touches his shoulder again, this time
JONATHAN turns and pushes THEO'S hand away.)

JONATHAN

I said it's not a big deal. Just let me go, okay?

THEO

Can't you wait one minute, and let me apologize?

JONATHAN

Alright. One minute.

THEO

(begins pacing, emphatically trying to explain)

Listen, you were right. I've been lying all this time—I can't stand to think about you
being with anyone else...

(THEO waits for a response, but JONATHAN only shifts his weight—he
doesn't speak.)

THEO (cont'd)

I thought if I ever told you how I really felt, that I'd lose you. And I couldn't stand to lose you...

JONATHAN

So, you lied to me, and then when you couldn't stand yourself anymore, you had to punch me?

THEO

No, I mean yes—I hated myself, and I was beginning to hate you—

JONATHAN

(looks at his wrist)

Time's up.

THEO

Listen! I was wrong. I love you and I was stupid. I'm sorry.

JONATHAN

(angry, voice gets increasingly louder)

Me too, Theo. I'm sorry you think I'm a slut. Sorry you thought I was incapable of changing, or whatever the hell you thought about me that kept you from saying something, from saying anything...

THEO

Okay! You're right. Everything you say is right. I'm an asshole and I fucked up—

JONATHAN

Give it up, alright?

(turns to go and begins walking)

THEO

I wanted to tell you I'm sorry because I've decided to leave.

JONATHAN

(He stops, but doesn't turn.)

For Barcelona?

THEO

Yes—but I don't want you to think it's because I'm running away, or that I don't want to be with you... I'm doing it because... I'll never have a chance like this again.

JONATHAN

(turns to face THEO)

Then it sounds like you should go.

THEO

I don't want to lie anymore—I don't want to leave you, and I don't want you to be with other guys... but maybe you could get it out of your system while I'm gone... then when I get back—

JONATHAN

It will be different.

THEO

(moves toward JONATHAN)

But—

JONATHAN

(holds up his hand)

—But you should still go. Even if you stayed, it would never be like this again.

THEO

Because?

JONATHAN

Everything's changing... we're in high school... we're about to go to college and have the "time of our lives."

(pauses)

I don't want you to go...

JONATHAN (cont'd)

(quietly)

But if you do... I'll still be here when you get back—

THEO

You'll wait?

(MOM and DAD carrying a pizza box, approach door and open slowly, not interrupting THEO and JONATHAN)

JONATHAN

I'll be here when you get back.

(He pauses.)

If you had asked me... I would have done anything for you, Theo.

THEO

I know that now.

(He takes away the towel and touches JONATHAN'S lip. They kiss tentatively. MOM moves toward them, but DAD pulls her back, puts his arm around her and turns her SL. Exit MOM and DAD SL. HWW)

approaches door and watches as THEO and JONATHAN step away from each other.)

JONATHAN

I gotta get home.

THEO

Me too.

(THEO walks toward SL and JONATHAN walks SR.)

JONATHAN

(picks up sketchbook and sketches from bench)

You forgot these.

THEO

Oh, I meant to throw them away. I just couldn't find a garbage can.

(takes pile from JONATHAN)

JONATHAN

You're throwing it all away?

THEO

Yeah. I'm too old to be drawing superheroes.

JONATHAN

Can I keep this?

(takes sketchbook)

THEO

Sure. Just don't show it to anyone...else.

JONATHAN

I promise.

(tucks it under his arm)

Take it easy, Theo.

THEO

Right. You too.

(They both hesitate, and then JONATHAN turns and exits SR, leaving as THEO watches. HWW steps through the door unnoticed, closes it and locks it. HWW looks at THEO and then exits SL as THEO continues gazing SR. THEO pulls out his earbuds and puts them in his ears. When

he pushes the button, Rufus Wainwright plays again, “One Man Guy.”
After first stanza, exit THEO SL. Lights out.)

The End

VITA

Lania Knight was born in Slidell, Louisiana, and went to public schools in Texas and New Hampshire. She has a Bachelor of Science degree in Plant Science with a minor in Environmental Studies from the University of New Hampshire, and her Masters degree is in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing-Fiction from the University of Missouri. She writes fiction, nonfiction, and drama.