

A Novel

Marilyn Hill Mansouria

Time Present and Time Past

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Time Present and Time Past



*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.*

—T. S. Eliot

PART I



CHAPTER 1



Time Present: April 22, 1994

Matthew

“Let me go!”

Coming out the back door of the bar into darkness, I glance toward the sound of a scuffle at the end of the alley. There’s no shortage of scuffles and knife-fights in this rowdy area outside town. It’s none of my business, so I tell myself to keep walking. Just walk to the car, get in and drive away.

My feet don’t obey me. Instead, they stop, and I swing my head to the left. Squinting my eyes to focus on a knot of men at the end of the alley, I see four bikers, one of them holding a smaller man in an arm lock. He’s struggling to break away, and again he says, “Let me go!”

Against my will, my feet lead me a few steps closer to the fray. Close enough to see that the captive is not a man, it’s a boy. Though his jaw is clenched and he’s defiantly eyeballing the men gathered around him, he’s got to be scared out of his mind.

“Walk away,” I tell myself again. Then, shaking my head at my folly, I move down the alley and approach the motley group of bullies, over-muscled butch bikers predictably dressed in black leather.

“Hey, Johnny,” I call out. “What the fuck are you doing with these guys?”

Every head swings toward me, though surprise keeps them silent for a moment. “Johnny,” I say again, bending a hard look at the boy, “your mom sent me to look for you.”

“Hey dude, fuck off,” the guy who’s acting as leader growls menacingly. “This ain’t none of your business.”

“Yeah, it is,” I contradict, and then brazenly I lie, “he’s my fuckin’ nephew, so I’ve got no fuckin’ choice. Come here, Johnny.”

The man grasping the boy’s arms must have slackened his hold; the boy breaks away and moves quickly toward me, but Bully Number One grabs onto him before he takes three steps. “He ain’t going nowhere.”

“Chill, dude,” I roughen my voice to sound tough (I hope). “Back off. He’s my sister’s kid, I’ve come to take him home.”

“Bullshit,” he growls. “It don’t matter anyway, there’s four of us, you’re outnumbered.” He grins then and tightens his hold on the boy’s arms.

With something approaching resignation—there’s no way to avoid a fight, I have stupidly committed myself to getting my ass kicked tonight—I draw breath to challenge him again, when I see the boy raise his right leg and bring his heel down hard on the instep of the bully holding onto him. The guy yelps in pain and loosens his grip.

It’s a good move in a one-on-one fight, but there’s four of the bruisers; and while Number One drops to the ground to grab his injured foot, the other three come at us. The boy has whipped around behind me, as if I’m some protective mama tiger. At the moment, I feel more like a fucking pussycat, but squaring my shoulders, I take a deep breath and assume what I imagine to be a kick-boxer’s stance. Why didn’t I take those karate lessons years ago, like Gramps suggested?

Surprisingly, the boy immediately moves out from behind and stands next to me, copying my stance. I hope he knows how to fight for real. I sure as fuck don’t.

In a moment they’re on us, all grabbing arms and kicking legs. The boy and I are taking some blows, and now I remember why I never took up fighting: it hurts to get hit. A clenched fist connects with my eye, making me see stars. I’m knocked backwards but don’t go down, and now there’s flashing lights along with the stars clouding my vision. Suddenly the blows stop. I become aware of the sound of a police siren, and the flashing lights resolve themselves into red and blue lights on top of a patrol car that has squealed to a stop at the end of the alley.

The bullies have stopped attacking. They take off in three different directions, while the one on the ground struggles to rise and follow them. Two cops jump out of the car and run after the fleeing men and, never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, I take the opportunity to grab the boy’s arm and drag him

away. He sticks close to me as we slip inside the back door of the bar. I peer outside the door, waiting for an opportunity to make a run for it.

"You have a car here?" I ask breathlessly, and when he says no, I move on out the door, towing him along beside me to the parking lot. Unlocking my car, I mutter, "Get in, get in." He's barely inside before I'm burning rubber out of the parking lot and speeding down the street, heading back toward town.

We're silent for a few minutes catching our breath, and I'm concentrating on not driving off the side of the road into a ditch. Now that the danger is past, I'm starting to get angry—angry at myself for getting involved, but even angrier at this boy for being the cause of my most unnatural foray into danger.

"What the fuck were you doing there?" I demand at last, slowing down to the speed limit and taking my eyes off the road long enough to glare at the boy huddled next to me. He's hugging his arms over his chest and staring at the floor. Then I remember to ask, "You okay? Hey kid, are you hurt?"

His head comes up and he turns toward me. I thought he might be crying but his eyes are dry, though open wide, and his face looks pale in the darkness. "I'm okay," he says. "A few bruises, but nothing major. Thanks to you."

"Thanks to luck," I repudiate him. "If someone hadn't called the cops, we'd both be hamburger smeared on the pavement by now."

"You fought all of them," he says then, his voice marveling, like I'm some fucking superhero.

I'm having none of that bullshit. "I pretended to fight them, God knows why. Totally out of character, believe me. But you haven't answered my question. What the fuck were you doing there?"

"Oh," he takes a deep breath, then casually he says, "I was just in the neighborhood."

"Live nearby, do you? Out for a moonlight stroll?" When he says nothing, I demand, "Do you know what kind of place that is?"

"Yeah."

"Do you belong there?"

He glances away, out the window. "Maybe yes. Probably yes."

"Maybe yes," I repeat. "Maybe yes, but not yet. You're still shiny around the edges."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you're too new. You attract too much attention. The wrong kind."

"What's the wrong kind?"

"The kind you were getting." Do I really have to spell it out for him? "Another few minutes and you'd have been gang-raped by that biker and his buddies. Do you realize that?"

The kid is silent, and I'm tempted to give him some gory details; tell him what it's like getting fucked against your will by a rowdy bunch of drunks, but I can't bring myself to do it. Instead, I say grimly, "That biker-bar crowd is too rough for you. If you're into leather, go to The Eagle on Capitol Hill."

"I thought I might see somebody I know there."

I can't help snorting before pointing out, "If you see someone you know in a gay bar, he's gay too."

"Oh."

"But you don't need to be hanging around bars, gay or otherwise. Stick with kids your own age."

"My age?" He turns to look at me again and demands, "How old do you think I am?"

"Sixteen, seventeen."

"Oh."

He's deflated. No doubt he thought he was passing for nineteen or twenty. "There aren't any kids my age like me. Not in my school anyway."

"The fuck. If you can't sniff them out now, you will, in a few years."

"What good does that do me now?"

"You can keep your dick in your pants for a couple more years. It won't kill you to stay a virgin till you get to college."

"Who says I'm a virgin?"

I laugh then, I can't help it. "Give me directions, I'll drive you home."

"I can't go home. I'm supposed to be at church camp this weekend."

"That's inventive. Where were you planning to spend the night, in that biker's trailer park?"

"I don't know," he admits sheepishly. "I didn't plan that far ahead."

Christ, this is one stupid kid. But a hell of a beauty, with thick blond hair curling over the collar of his jeans jacket. I don't like them this young, thank God. "So, where to then? You must have a friend you can call."

"Not that kind of friend." He hesitates a moment, then asks tentatively, "Could I maybe stay with you?"

"No way," I growl. "Besides, you shouldn't trust me. I could be just as dangerous as those guys in the alley."

"I can tell that you're nice."

"Nice? Me? Christ, are you a bad judge of character!" I feel insulted, and have to laugh at myself, insulted by a compliment.

"Besides," he adds, "you rescued me. That makes me your responsibility."

"Think again. I'll drop you downtown. You can sleep in the bus station."

"Okay." He gives up without more argument, looks out the window again. We ride in silence for a few minutes.

"What's your name?" I ask finally.

"Lucas. What's yours?"

"Matthew."

"Pleased to meet you," he says politely, extending his hand across the gear-box. Surprised, automatically I shake his hand. He's got a strong grip for a kid, his hand is warm, his skin smooth.

"Matthew, what were you doing in that bar?"

"I was just in the neighborhood," I say airily. "Out for a moonlight stroll." No need to explain to him that sometimes a man likes to get down-and-dirty. He'll find that out for himself in a few years.

Lucas goes back to staring out the window. A few minutes later we pull up at the bus station. "Here we are."

He stays put, staring out the window at the small building looking nearly deserted at this hour, it's past 2 a.m. "I don't want to stay here," he murmurs.

"Then where to?" I'm exasperated. "I'm not a fucking taxi service."

"Can't I please stay at your place tonight?" He twists around in the seat and adds quickly, "I promise not to be any trouble. I can sleep on the floor. I just don't want to be alone." When I say nothing, he adds, "I guess that sounds dumb."

I just stare at him, keeping my face blank. He's probably all traumatized or something. I'm not a babysitter and I'm not a taxi service, and I'm sure as hell not a social worker. And I am not bringing this brat home for a sleepover.

"It's okay." He turns away again and pulls up the door handle. "I shouldn't have asked."

"Wait."

Lucas looks over his shoulder, unable to keep the eagerness off his face.

"All right," I cave in. "Shut the fucking door." He does, and I burn rubber for the second time that night, taking out my annoyance on my new steel-belted radials.

Pulling into the covered parking lot at the marina, we get out of the car and Lucas follows me across the gravel, then hesitates when I open the gate and enter the fenced-in main dock area.

"You live here?" he asks warily. "On a boat?"

"I have a houseboat, yes. It's down this way." I take a few steps and then stop. Lucas isn't following. I'm annoyed that, after telling him not to trust me, he's apparently not trusting me. "Relax," I snarl. "You're safe now."

"Oh, I know," he assures me hastily. "I know I'm safe with you. I've just never been on a houseboat before." After a moment he adds, "It's cool."

Without another word, I turn and move toward the west-end dock where my house is moored. It's quiet in the darkness, just a few security lights are still on at this hour. The only sound is the soothing shoop-shoop of water gently slapping the sides of the dock.

When we reach my door, I unlock it and move inside, pull off my jacket and carry it into the living room to examine under a bright lamp, looking for rips or blood stains. It seems okay, but when I fold it over my arm and take a closer look at Lucas, who has followed me into the light, I do a double-take. His face looks bruised. For a brief moment I'm ashamed, caring more for my jacket than for this boy who's been pummeled tonight.

But the jacket cost five hundred bucks.

I come close and reach out a hand to tilt up his chin. "You're bruised, all right. You'll have a shiner by morning." I realize now, seeing him for the first time in good lighting, how truly beautiful this boy is. He's not tall, the top of his head barely reaches my chin; he has fair skin with blue eyes. Not that common faded blue but deep, deep blue, almost azure. Christ, what a looker.

Or he will be, when he's older. Luckily I'm not into chicken.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" I ask gruffly, turning away and heading for the bathroom. "Come with me, you can wash up."

"Thanks. I can't tell if I'm hurt, mostly I'm numb and kind of sore all over. Like when you fall off a horse."

"When did you fall off a horse?" He follows as I push open the bathroom door, flip on the light. "Are you in the cavalry?"

"No," he laughs. "I had riding lessons a few years ago."

Hmm, a rich kid—I'd suspected as much when I saw his expensive tennis shoes and designer jeans with patch pockets. I loathe rich kids, on principle.

"Do you ride?" he asks.

"Nope."

The only horse I've ever been on was a mechanical pony stabled outside Blodgett's Market. If you put a quarter in the slot, you could climb aboard his hard plastic saddle. I was maybe six or seven when we lived in that neighborhood. My mother had no quarters to waste on fake horseback rides, merely

shaking her head sorrowfully as she hurried into the grocery store. But sometimes I sat on the horse anyway, pretending to ride, and once some white-haired old fart came by while I was sitting there, and put a coin in the slot for me. He watched me ride, never taking his eyes off me, smiling wistfully. He could have been a child molester, I suppose, but he was probably just a lonely old man wishing for a grandchild. He never said a word, just watched me have my ride, and then wandered away.

Pulling myself back abruptly from Memory Lane, I tell Lucas to take off his shirt and I do the same. We look at ourselves critically in the big mirror over the sink, turning this way and that, checking for bruises. His skin is pale ivory, looking smooth as silk; his nipples are tiny rosy nubs, and I really am not, I am not looking at his nipples, for Christ's sake. Clearing my throat, I say, "You look okay, you were lucky tonight. We both were. A few bruises, no broken bones. Put your shirt back on now."

"Can I take a shower?" he asks, and I notice his eyes in the mirror checking me out, which is a laugh. He is definitely not in my league. He does not fit inside my selective parameters for potential tricks. I haven't fucked a teenager since I was a teenager, and I'm not going to start tonight with this juicy little blond boy.

I leave him to it, return to the living room and step outside onto the deck for a smoke. When I come back in, the shower's still running. Lucas is taking his own sweet time. Annoyed, I crack open the bathroom door, prepared to hurry him up, but through the fogged-up glass I can see that he's jerking off. Chagrined, I softly close the door. A moment later there's a loud yelp, and I stick my head inside again, demanding, "You okay?"

He rubs a clear spot on the steamy glass and peers out. "Yes," he says, then adds, "the water got cold!"

"No shit. You've used up all the hot water, you've been in there forever." I close the door with a bang and head off to the kitchen.

I'm standing at the fridge with my back to the door when I hear him padding barefoot down the hall. He stops just inside the door.

"Hey," Lucas says.

Turning around, I see that he's wrapped a towel around his hips; he stands clutching his hands together on his bare stomach.

"Hay is for horses." That makes me laugh and add, "Christ, that's Gramps talking. I can't believe I just said that."

"It's funny."

“No, it is not funny. It has never been funny.” The fridge door closes silently behind me while I stare at Lucas. “I haven’t thought about Gramps for a long time. It must be your fault—you make me feel old.”

“You’re not very old.” He moves forward a few steps, leans against the counter-island in the center of the room.

Leaning against the other side of the counter, I feel myself smiling as I tell him, “I’m twenty-eight.”

The smile is immediately wiped off my face when Lucas exclaims, “Wow, you’re older than I thought.”

Now I’m pissed. “Why aren’t you dressed? You can’t stand around all night in nothing but a towel.”

“You said I could sleep here,” he reminds me. “I don’t want to sleep in my clothes.”

Leaning back against the fridge and crossing my arms, I declare, “I have no jammies for you to wear. I’ll give you a blanket, you can bunk down on the sofa.”

“Okay.”

“The guest room’s full of packing boxes and that bed’s not made up. I’m not even sure the bed’s still in there, I haven’t seen it since I moved in.”

“Did you just buy this house? Houseboat, I mean?”

“Yeah,” I agree, before contradicting myself. “No, I’ve been here a few months. I just haven’t had time to unpack everything.”

“That’s why it looks so bare,” he nods, glancing around the kitchen, which is furnished with a small round table and two chairs. The counters and walls are pristine, the way I like them.

“It’s not fucking bare,” I insist. “It’s austere, it’s supposed to be this way.”

“Everything I say pisses you off.”

“Then don’t say anything. Go to bed. I’ll get you a blanket.”

“Okay,” Lucas agrees. “Only, could I maybe have a glass of milk or something first? I’m kind of hungry.”

“No, you cannot. I don’t have any milk.” I pull open the fridge and look inside again, as if I’m miraculously going to find some food there.

Lucas moves around the counter to stand beside me. “Wow. All you have is bottled water and beer. Don’t you ever eat?”

“I eat out, mostly. Wait.” Closing the fridge and pulling open a few cupboard doors, I locate a box of crackers and hand it to him. “Will that hold you, or shall we call for pizza?”

"Pizza sounds cool!" I can hear his stomach growl with anticipation. "Oops, excuse me."

"I was joking," I say flatly, then add, "but if you're starving—"

"Oh, I'm all right. I'll eat a couple crackers. I don't want to be any trouble."

"You're nothing BUT trouble."

Pulling a gallon jug of water from the fridge, I grab a glass from the cupboard and fill it, then hand it to Lucas and lead the way to the living room. "Wait here," I tell him, before heading to the spare room. Returning a moment later, I find Lucas perched on the edge of the sofa, stuffing crackers into his mouth.

Tossing down a pillow and blanket, I sit on the back of the sofa and watch Lucas inhale a few more crackers. After he drains the glass of water, I stand up. "Go to sleep now. But it can be damp on a houseboat, as I've discovered, so if you get cold, come wake me up and I'll find another blanket."

Lucas stands up too and assures me, "I'll be okay."

Suddenly, the towel slips off his hips and he grabs at it, but not before he's flashed me with a glimpse of his naked flesh. I'm amused to see that he's blushing; he drops his eyes and watches his hands fiddle with the towel. Holding it closed with one hand, he glances up and catches the grin on my face before I can erase it. Lucas blushes even redder and looks away again.

"Go to sleep now," I tell him. "It'll be light in a few hours. Good night."

"Good night," he murmurs, and I feel his eyes on me as I walk away down the hall toward my bedroom.

I'm awakened an hour or two later by the sound of my door being pushed open.

My only excuse is—for a moment I thought he was Dean. I'm more than half asleep and I forgot that I'd let a stranger, a young kid, sleep over on my sofa. When I hear the door, I open my eyes a crack and see a figure standing beside my bed in the darkness.

"I'm cold," the figure says.

Without thinking, I throw back the blankets and murmur sleepily, "get in."

He does, and still without remembering who he is, or rather who he isn't, I turn over and pull him into my arms, and I feel his quivering flesh. "He really is cold," I think. And I push my face against his and kiss him, snaking my warm tongue into his mouth and tightening my hold around his shoulders.

Then he gasps and jerks in my embrace, and my eyes fly open—really open this time, and even in the darkness I can see that this is not Dean. How could I

think this is Dean, the man who'd walked out of my house and out of my life over two years ago?

I sit upright then, just jerk up to a sitting position on the bed, reach over and switch on the lamp. We both squint in the sudden light. I stare at him in dismay and he stares at me in shock.

"Sorry," I say then, "I'm sorry, uh, I've forgotten your name—"

"L-Lucas," he shivers, his eyes open so wide the whites show around the edges of his pupils, which look almost black in the dim light.

"Lucas, that was a reflex, I didn't mean to—"

"Matthew!" he gasps breathlessly. "Do it again."

"What?"

"Please, Matthew? Do it again."

He closes his eyes and leans towards me. And God help me, I do it again. Pull him hard against my chest, kiss him and hold tight to his trembling arms, running my hands over the silky ivory smoothness of his skin. I push him gently down on his back on the twisted sheet, and taste those delicious tiny raspberry nipples, filling my senses with the feel and smell and taste of this beautiful young man who is so exciting, so enchanting in his innocence and his desire.

His desire is equal to my own, I'm not fooling myself about that. He's young, but he knows what he wants. And it's my great pleasure to give it to him.

CHAPTER 2



Time Present: April 23, 1994

The minute I open my eyes in the morning, I remember the night.

I'm lying on my back, one arm flung outward. Wan daylight filtered through morning overcast peeks through a crack in the curtains. My other arm has betrayed me—it's wrapped around the shoulder of the boy still sleeping beside me, his body sprawled comfortably against my side. Too comfortably.

I try to pull my arm away gently without waking him, but he begins to stir, so I stop and hold my breath. He slides right back into deep sleep, merely murmuring "Mmm" as his body relaxes once again, and a long sigh escapes his lips. I stare at him for a while, alternating between wondering if I've lost my mind, and wondering if last night really happened. It's a blur to me already.

Bullshit. Last night is no fucking blur, I remember every bit of it. This boy, who in sleep looks like a dozing Raphael cherub, his long eyelashes brushing his pale round cheeks, was last night an insatiable imp from Hades. With a demon pitchfork of his own—my God, he's got an amazingly large cock for a guy his age. For a guy any age.

He was not an imp at first—oh no, at first he was shy and a little nervous, but he was determined to experience all the pleasures of first-time sex. "I want to do everything!" he'd insisted, making me smile and catch my breath. I feel myself smiling now, almost chuckling out loud, when I remember his demands to "show me, teach me, let me do it!"

And I showed him everything, or almost everything; he's too young for some of the wild stuff. I feel almost maudlin when I realize that someone else will be showing him those things.

Finally THAT thought snaps me out of my reverie. Abruptly I pull my arm away from the boy and sit up, moving away from his arms trying to twine around me the way ivy twists around the trunk of a tree.

“Huh?” he murmurs, still half-asleep. He sits up slowly in the rumpled sheets, stretching his arms and yawning hugely, showing all his teeth. His very white and very perfect rich boy teeth. He’s used to getting what he wants, this boy, and last night he wanted me. I fell into his trap. I find myself getting angry, mostly at myself, for succumbing to the lures of an impetuous and underage virgin brat.

“Get up,” I order sharply, turning my back and pushing off the bed, almost stomping into the bathroom, flipping up the toilet seat and letting go a loud river of piss. In a moment, the boy is beside me, and without the slightest hesitation he grabs his dick and aims it at the toilet. Peripherally I’m aware that he’s shivering—the floor’s cold. The floor of a houseboat is always cold. I make a mental note to buy carpeting for the bathroom.

Without a word, I pull open the shower door and slip inside, turn on the faucets and adjust the temperature to its hottest bearable degree, soaping up as I enjoy the scalding water cascading over my head. A few moments later, the boy pulls open the shower door and joins me.

“Ow,” he says. “It’s too hot.”

“If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the shower.”

Lucas laughs then, and I feel my shoulders relaxing in spite of myself. And only slightly reluctantly I reach out and adjust the knobs, bringing down the temperature of the steamy water.

“Mmm, that’s nice,” he murmurs, closing his eyes and shoving his head under the water close to the nozzle, till his hair is sopping wet and dripping into his eyes.

Lucas uses his hands like a squeegee to wipe the rivulets of water from his face, and in spite of my annoyance and general irritation that this kid has intruded on my Saturday morning ritual, I can’t resist reaching out to touch his slippery wet skin, which has turned pink all over his body from the warm water. I rub a hand on his shoulder and he looks up at me, through water-darkened lashes, and his blue eyes hypnotize me (that must be the explanation) into jettisoning my plan to kick him out as soon as possible. Instead I’m pulling him into my arms, and my mouth finds his mouth again, but this time gently caressing the lips bruised by last night’s urgent kisses.

"Matthew," he murmurs against my mouth, his arms sliding around my neck and his body pressing up against mine. "Matthew," he breathes, his body trembling, "I love you."

That stops me cold, like the slap of a wet towel on my face. Taking a step backwards, I grab his hands and remove them from their hold on my neck. "No," I tell him, hearing the harshness of my voice. "No, you do not love me. You don't even know me."

"But I want to know you!" he insists urgently, trying to grab onto me again.

"No," I repeat. "You're not going to know me. And I'm not going to know you." I'm staring hard into his eyes. "Do you understand?" I demand, shaking his shoulders. "We had a fuck, that's all. You're going to get dressed and get out of my house."

"But, Matthew!"

"Come on." I use my shoulders to push open the shower door, and push-pull the boy outside the stall. Reaching in to turn off the faucets, I come out again and grab two towels from the rack, shoving one into his arms and using the other to dry myself off. I'm paying no attention to him, but I'm aware that he's standing motionless, just staring at me. "Move it," I say briskly, throwing my towel towards the hamper and heading out the door. "I'm late for the gym. I'll drop you someplace. Get dressed."

Quickly grabbing a pair of navy sweats from a drawer, I pull them on, shoving my feet into tennis shoes. Striding back into the bathroom, I see that Lucas is still toweling off. "Hurry the fuck up, I don't have all day," I tell him, plugging in the blow dryer and turning it on high. He says something but the sound of the dryer drowns him out.

When I've snapped on my watch, grabbed my wallet and gym bag and headed down the hall, the kid is crouched beside the sofa, tying his shoes. "Ready?" I barely glance at him as I move to the door. He hurries to join me and watches in silence as I lock the door behind us.

Turning abruptly and heading for the parking lot, I'm halfway there when Lucas grabs my sleeve and asks breathlessly, "Why are you mad at me?"

I stop then and look down at him. His forehead's furrowed, he's upset. "I'm not mad," I say, not very truthfully. "I just want to be rid of you." He opens his mouth to say something, but I forestall him. "You're a trick," I explain impatiently, "and tricks should never sleep over, just clear out before the sun comes up. It's less complicated."

"What do you mean—I'm a trick? I didn't trick you."

"A trick is a fuck, a one-night stand."

“Does that mean you don’t want to see me again?” Eyes wide, Lucas is twisting his hands together.

“That’s exactly what it means,” I confirm, ignoring the hurt reflected on his face. Softening my voice, I add, “Lucas, last night was just sex. It means nothing. We had a great fuck, but now it’s over, we go our separate ways and that’s the end of it.” When he stares at me uncomprehendingly, I frown and add, “That’s the way it works. Get used to it.”

“But we like each other,” he insists. “I want to see you again.”

“It’s impossible.” I’m losing patience. “Find a kid your own age to be with. Stay away from older guys, you’ll only get hurt. Understand?”

Without waiting for an answer, I turn away and head for the car. Unlocking the door, I slide in, and Lucas gets in beside me. As the car crunches across the gravel parking lot, he asks quietly, “Can I at least call you sometimes? I don’t have anybody to talk to about gay stuff.”

“No.”

He’s silent then. After a few minutes, I ask, “Where can I drop you?”

For a moment Lucas doesn’t answer, then he says, “The first McDonald’s you come to.”

I’d forgotten that he must be starving; he was hungry last night. “You can’t eat that crap, you need real food.” I almost add, “You’re a growing boy,” my grandmother’s voice echoing inside my head.

Lucas says nothing, just stares morosely out the window.

Anyway, why should I give a damn what he eats? But I realize that I’m moving into the turn lane and heading toward Capitol Hill. A few minutes later, I pull into the parking lot behind The Cat’s Pajamas. “Come on,” I say, getting out of the car and slamming the door. Lucas obediently follows me into the coffee shop and we slide into a booth near the back. We were lucky to get a table so quickly; the Pajamas is usually packed on a Saturday morning.

“Hey, handsome,” Patrick greets me with a smile and a wink, dropping two menus on the table.

“Hey, Pat,” I return his greeting, “Why are you waiting tables?” He’s the manager, usually he’s manning the cash register or helping in the kitchen when the place is crowded.

“We’re short-handed today,” he replies. “What else is new?” Patrick’s a slightly overweight, sandy-haired man just shy of fifty. Like so many men of his generation, he wears his hair long, pulled back into a ragged ponytail, and this morning he’s got an apron tied over faded jeans and one of his large collection of tie-dyed shirts.

Turning to regard Lucas, Pat says, "Whoa, handsome times two. What's your name, chickie?"

"Lucas."

"Pleased to meet you, Lucas, I'm Patrick." He extends his hand to the kid and they shake. "You boys want some coffee?"

"Sounds good," I agree, returning his smile. He's an old friend; he tried to fix me up with his nephew a couple years ago when I first moved to Seattle.

"Yes, please," Lucas answers. "And a glass of milk."

"Coming right up." Patrick moves away. I relax against the vinyl cushion of the booth and fold my hands on the table.

"The omelets are good here," I tell Lucas. "If you like eggs."

"I do." He's not smiling, he's still upset. Too bad. He might as well learn the ropes right away. "Thanks for bringing me here," he says, "but I already made you late for the gym, now you'll be extra late."

"That's right. You've ruined my Saturday."

Lucas leans his head on one side and regards me.

"What?"

"Matthew," he hesitates, then says in a rush, "can I ask for a favor?"

"No."

He pays no attention. "You see, the church camp thing is all weekend. I'm not supposed to be home until Sunday. So I need a place to stay tonight."

"No. Absolutely not."

"I promise to stay on the sofa this time. Even if I get cold."

I'm exasperated. "How many times do I have to say no?"

"But—"

"No!"

"Here you go." Patrick's at the booth unloading his tray—two cups of coffee, a large glass of milk. "So, you boys ready to order?"

"Yes," Lucas answers eagerly, picking up the menu and glancing at it. "Cheese omelet, and some bacon, and French toast."

Christ, that's two days' worth of calories.

"Sure thing, sweetie," Pat grins. "How about you, Matt, egg-white omelet as usual?"

"No, thanks. Just grapefruit juice and an English muffin. No butter."

"Okie-doke. Maybe your little friend will share his bacon with you."

My little friend already shared his bacon with me; it was delicious.

Pat leaves, and we're left to sip coffee and stare at each other. Why'd I bring him here anyway?

"Where do you work?" Lucas asks, picking up his milk glass and looking at me over the rim.

"Downtown."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an architect," I answer reluctantly. That's enough information; tricks shouldn't ask personal questions.

"Oh, that's cool," he says. "You design buildings and stuff?"

"That's what architects do."

"Are you good at it?"

I lean back against the booth and give him a look. "I'm good at everything."

He drops his eyes and blushes, and I have to struggle not to smile as he makes a business of sipping coffee. A few minutes later our food arrives, Patrick bustling as he unloads his heavy tray.

"Can you get through all that?" he asks Lucas, as I eye with horror the loaded plates of food wafting steam and eggy smells across the table.

"Sure," Lucas insists. "Besides, it's not all that much. I didn't have dinner last night."

"Don't go skipping meals," Pat wags a finger at him. "A healthy diet is very important."

"Yes, sir," Lucas agrees, before shoveling an impossibly large forkful of omelet into his mouth.

"Sir?" Pat's surprised. "Where'd you learn such good manners?"

Lucas speaks through a mouthful of egg, dispelling the "good manners" sobriquet. "My nanny was very strict," he says, "and at school we have to say Sir and Ma'am."

"What school is that?"

"Regency Prep."

"That's a private high school, isn't it?"

When Lucas merely nods, his mouth too full for even a mumbled answer, Pat swings his head around and stares at me, raising both eyebrows in silent question.

I want to say, "It's not what you think." But it's exactly what he thinks. I try to stare him down, and finally he turns away, to go wait on other customers.

Taking a gulp of coffee, I decide to tease Lucas. "You have a nanny?"

"No," he denies it. "I mean, yes, but no."

"Ah."

"I just mean," he pauses with a forkful of eggs halfway to his mouth, "Mrs. Goodwin was my nanny when I was a kid. I don't know why Dad doesn't get

rid of her, I haven't needed a stupid babysitter for years. I guess he just likes having someone oversee the house when he's between wives."

"Between wives?"

Lucas explains, "Clancy, he's my only friend at school, he says my dad's a serial monogamist. He's so involved in community shit, he won't do anything to mess up his image, so if he finds a woman he wants to fuck, he marries her first."

"How many times has he done that?"

"Actually, only twice. But I like Clancy's explanation." Lucas chews the bite of egg and reloads his fork.

"You said he's your only friend?" When he nods, I ask, "Is he gay too?"

"No. But in our school, if you don't go out for sports, you're automatically a fag or a loser. Nobody knows I'm a fag, so they all think I'm a loser. I just can't get into that rah-rah mentality. It's so boring, you know?"

I nod agreement. Apparently not much has changed since I was in school.

"Clancy's a loser, too," Lucas continues. "But he's got asthma, so he has a good excuse not to play sports. Do you like sports, Matthew?"

"No." Full stop. I've finished my muffin, I've drunk two cups of coffee, so why am I sitting in the Pajamas on Saturday morning, having a conversation with a school boy, when I could be at the gym? Clearing my throat, I slide out of the booth and stand up, pull out my wallet and toss some money on the table.

Lucas swallows a bite of bacon and asks, "Are we leaving? I'm not finished."

"I'm leaving, you're staying." My voice is rough, I want to finish this unwelcome little tête-à-tête, I want to get the fuck out of here. "Try to keep out of trouble today," I tell him. "And stay away from biker bars. Got it?"

"Matthew," he says anxiously, laying down his fork, "are you mad at me again?"

"I'm not mad," I deny it, though that's not really the truth. I am angry, but mostly at myself, for getting involved with this kid. "I'm in a hurry," I explain. "I told you I was late for the gym."

Lucas leans forward eagerly, his hands clasped tight on the table. "I want to thank you—"

"Forget it," I cut him off, turning on my heel and throwing over my shoulder, "good-bye."

He says something I can't hear but I keep on moving, pausing to give Pat a wave, then hurrying out the door and flinging myself into the car. Metaphorically brushing my hands together, I congratulate myself on finally getting rid of

the teenage pest with the beautiful eyes and the most perfect God-damned ass I've ever seen.

By the time I get to the gym, all the early morning regulars are already gone. It's boring to work out by myself, and besides, when I'm alone I have to fend off more guys hitting on me. If you're with a group, most guys will leave you alone. Not that it's hard to freeze a guy's balls with just a frosty look, but it's annoying to be continually interrupted when I'm trying to count reps.

Normally by the time I reach the sauna, I'm relaxed and ready to accept a blow-job, if there's a looker who's interested, but this morning I discover that I'm not in the mood. That kid nearly wore me out last night. I close my eyes and lean my head against the wall, remembering how eager he was, the way he trembled under my touch, the feel of the incredibly smooth skin of his inner thighs quivering under my caressing fingertips, the salty-sweet taste of sweat on his upper lip when I kissed him so long and so hard, he was gasping for breath.

I feel a hand on my knee and my eyes fly open. "Hey," a tall redhead with a crewcut smiles, rubbing the erection tenting the white towel wrapped around his hips. He's asking permission. Good, something to take my mind off ... other things. I nod, close my eyes again, and give myself up to the pleasure of the trick's talented tongue. If I'm imagining a different mouth, a less experienced but no less eager partner, one whose hands are shaking with excitement, no one needs to know that but me.

CHAPTER 3



When the knock comes, I curse, “Who the FUCK—” but I can make a pretty good guess who is banging on my door. It’s nine o’clock and I’m getting ready to head out. It’s Saturday night, time to hit the clubs. I’m wearing jeans and nothing else, I haven’t decided on a shirt yet. The knock interrupts my dressing ritual.

Striding quickly to the door, I jerk it open so hard it leaps out of my hand and bangs against the wall. The pathetic figure on my doorstep jumps backward and both hands fly to his face, covering his mouth to muffle a cry of surprise. “M-Matthew!” he says. “Hi.”

It’s Lucas. “What the fuck are you doing here?” I demand, scowling and blocking the doorway with my body when he tries to move inside.

“Well, umm,” he gathers his scattered wits, “I was thinking that maybe, possibly, you might have changed your mind? About letting me stay at your place tonight?”

“Why the fuck would you think I’d change my mind?”

“It wasn’t so much THINK as HOPE,” Lucas clarifies. “Because, you know, I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“That’s not my problem.”

“And then,” he continues as if I haven’t spoken, “I had this idea that, you know, at least maybe you’d let me sleep in your car. That way I wouldn’t be bothering you in your house.”

“My car has other plans tonight.”

“Huh?”

“Lucas, I’m going out. My car is not available for a sleepover.”

“Oh,” he says, brightening. “Well then, if you’re going out, there’s no reason I couldn’t sleep on your sofa.”

“There’s lots of reasons,” I contradict. “Most of all because I said no and I meant no, and you can get the fuck out of here.” When still he doesn’t turn away, I insist, raising my voice, “Go!”

Lucas spreads his arms wide and implores, “Go where?”

Now I’m thoroughly exasperated. “Go home!”

“I can’t! Dad will ground me. And I just absolutely CANNOT be grounded right now. It’s a matter of life and death!”

Why am I standing in the doorway, shirtless and shivering in the chill night air? Why don’t I just slam the door in the face of this annoyingly persistent brat? Lucas is shivering too. There’s a light misty rain haloing the porch lamp. I can see that he’s been in the rain for a while—his hair’s plastered to his head, his jacket’s soaked. He’ll probably catch pneumonia. Naturally I don’t give a damn about that, so why am I taking a few steps backward and gesturing Lucas inside?

He smiles happily as he moves into the living room, unzipping his jacket and pulling it off.

“You’re not staying,” I frown. “I’m just tired of talking in the doorway. So tell me—why is being grounded a matter of life and death?”

“Because!” he exclaims, “I’ve got the lead in the school play, and if I’m grounded, I can’t make rehearsals and they’ll replace me!”

“Which role do you have—Romeo or Juliet?”

“We’re doing *Cuckoo’s Nest*, and I’m McMurphy.”

When I stare blankly, Lucas elaborates, “The Jack Nicholson role!”

A chuckle escapes me and I raise a hand to my mouth, pretending to cough. The thought of this pretty-boy, open-faced teenager playing a character so complex and so serious has to be a joke. The teacher must have been very hard-up to cast the roles in this high school production.

After I get my coughing under control, Lucas demands, “So, you see, don’t you? That I can’t go home. Please let me stay.”

Tired of arguing, I realize that he’s worn down my resistance. “All right,” I give in. “You can sleep here tonight. But I’m going out, and I’m not leaving a stranger alone in my house to go through my things and probably rob me.”

“I wouldn’t do that!”

“You’ll have to come along. But if you do anything to embarrass me, I’ll murder you and dump your body in Puget Sound. Got it?”

"Sure!" The smile spreading across Lucas' face is million-megawatt-bright. "Where are we going?"

"Hotshot, it's a club. If you can pass for twenty-one. Do you have a fake I.D.?"

"Yes, but it's not very good." Lucas pulls a slim wallet from his jacket pocket and produces a Washington state driver's license. "The guy in the picture has black hair," he points out as he hands it to me and watches while I peer at the face of what looks like a forty-year-old plumber.

"Has this ever worked?" I ask, glancing from Lucas to the photo and back again.

"Well, no," he admits. "Or anyway, I haven't tried it yet."

"You could say you bleached your hair," I'm thinking out loud. "But I don't know how you'll explain the square jaw and five o'clock shadow."

Lucas has another thought. "Are my clothes okay?"

"No. Your jeans will do, but I'll loan you a shirt. First you need a shower though—you're soaked to the skin. Give me your pants, I'll throw them in the dryer. Your tennis shoes must be wet too?"

Obligingly, Lucas kicks off his shoes, unbuttons his jeans and pushes them down his legs, steps out of them and hands them to me. I am not looking at his large cock nestled in the crotch of his white jockey shorts. "Um," he says, "my underwear too?"

"Your underpants are wet? Did you piss in them?"

"No," he laughs, he's relaxing now that he got his way (damn him). "I sat on a bench and didn't see that it had a puddle on the seat. Eww, wet underwear feels awful."

"I'll throw them in the dryer too," I say offhandedly, not letting my gaze linger over Lucas' slim naked legs and his roundly curved buttocks covered by superfine white cotton. When he pulls off his shorts, I realize that I've turned away, averting my gaze like some modest damsel in a morality play. When he shoves the shorts into my hand, I move toward the kitchen where the washer and dryer are hidden behind a louvered folding door in one wall. "Grab a shower," I tell him over my shoulder, "but make it quick."

"Okay." He's right behind me in the hall and goes through the bedroom door into the bathroom. While he's showering, I have time to pick out a shirt for myself, and I go through my wardrobe looking for something not too outrageously large for Lucas to wear. I also have time to curse myself for being a pushover and a fool, and remind myself sternly that this kid is not getting in my bed tonight.

A few minutes later, I'm wondering what it is about a slim fair-haired young man wearing only a towel that is so fucking hot?

But not irresistible.

"Try this," I thrust a navy tee shirt at him. It got shrunk in the laundry and I meant to throw it away, but now I'm glad I didn't. He pulls it over his head and turns to look at himself in the mirrored closet doors. "It'll do," I conclude. It's a bit loose in the shoulders, but that's okay. If it were skin-tight, the kid would probably attract a lot of attention.

He's going to anyway. Plenty of chicken-hawks always on the prowl for juicy boys like this one. "Maybe I'll let you stay here alone, after all," I decide.

"Oh no—I want to go!" Lucas assures me. "I've never been to a gay club. I want to see what it's like."

"It's a meat market." I bend down and grab shoes from the closet floor rack, sit on the edge of the bed to put them on. "Guys will be hustling you. But you will NOT slope off with anybody, do you understand?"

"I promise," Lucas says earnestly. "I'll stick close to you."

"I don't want you sticking close to me, I'll be busy." Then I have a different idea. "Maybe I'll park you at The Cat's Pajamas for a couple hours. You can read a book or something."

"But I want to go with you, Matthew! You promised."

"I did not promise, I conceded. But I'm changing my mind. Besides, that I.D. won't work anyway." Waving aside any further arguments, I retrieve Lucas' clothes from the dryer and, leaving him to get dressed, go into the spare room. After a few minutes shifting boxes back and forth, I come to one marked, grandly, "Library," open it and dig through the contents.

"I'm ready." Lucas is standing in the doorway.

Straightening up, I hand him a paperback book. "Here's *Cuckoo's Nest*. You can practice your lines at the Pajamas. You're probably hungry anyway. Did you have dinner?"

"I had a Big Mac, but it was a while ago, so I am hungry again," he admits. "But," he's crestfallen, "I don't want to sit in a café for hours and hours."

"Then go home." Lucas looks back at me, defeated and (finally) wordless, so I tell him, "Grab your jacket and let's go." But when he joins me at the door, I remember that his jacket is soaking wet. "Wait," I say, returning to the bedroom and selecting the smallest of my leather jackets. I push it into his arms, then we're out the door and moving across the dock to the parking lot.

I dump Lucas at the Pajamas and shove a twenty in his pocket, despite his protests that he doesn't need money. Finally I'm rid of him, ready to enjoy myself for a while.

About an hour later, I come out of Hotshot's backroom buttoning up my pants after receiving a B-minus blow job. I'm ready to step outside for a joint and then come back in, to dance and to find someone worthy to drag into the backroom for a rough-fuck. Then I'll pick up the kid at the Pajamas and take him home to sleep on my sofa. And before I leave here, I am going to make damned sure that I have no desire to fuck that kid again tonight.

"Guess what, it worked!"

I jump slightly and turn to find Lucas standing at my elbow. "What the fuck?"

"My fake I.D.—it worked," he exults. "The guy didn't even look at the picture. Matthew, this place is majorly cool!"

"You're not supposed to be here."

"But—"

"I've had enough of your manipulative bullshit," I growl. "Get the fuck out of here—go back to the Pajamas, or wait in the car, or better yet, just GO HOME. I mean it!"

Lucas recoils from my angry outburst, then bites his lips together and turns away. Still fuming, I watch him push his way through the crowd. I follow at a discreet distance, to be sure he leaves Hotshot.



Lucas is half a block away when I catch up with him. I have no idea why I followed him out of the club, but for several minutes I've been watching him walk slowly, disconsolately, down the alley. I hesitate as a man approaches him, but Lucas quickly veers away from the guy and picks up speed. I hasten my own steps, and when I catch up with him, I reach out to grab his shoulder.

Lucas gasps and whirls around, his eyes wide with fear. He's probably remembering the bikers from last night. "It's okay, it's me," I assure him. Then I think to ask, "But where the fuck were you going? The Pajamas is back the other way."

"I—I don't know," he says.

"The car's over here," I tell him, keeping my hand on his shoulder and pulling him along beside me.

“But,” he says, a bit breathless as he hurries to keep up with my long strides, “you’re mad at me, you said go away.”

“Damn right, I’m mad at you,” I agree. “But I decided to go home early, so you might as well stay at my place after all.”

“Oh, thanks,” he’s relieved. “I promise not to be any trouble.”

“Yeah, right.” Pulling out my keys as we get close to the car, I tell him to get in and we drive in silence to the marina.

Lucas ends up in my bed, which is hardly a surprise to either of us. He practices his newly acquired blow-job skills and I fuck the shit out of him. Then I fall asleep, resolutely turning my back.

Waking up in the dimly-lit bedroom—we’d fallen asleep with a small lamp on—I glance at the clock on the bedside table and, sure enough, it’s 3 a.m. So often I wake in the middle of the night, a holdover from living with Dean.

It’s hell on your sleeping patterns, living with an intern on rotation. Living with Dean was mostly hell, period. I knew moving in together was a mistake, but his schedule was so demanding, then his building went co-op and he couldn’t afford to buy his apartment; his income was virtually nil. Financial aid covered his basic expenses and left a bit over, but it was tough. During a weak moment, I invited him to move in with me, fool that I was.

Christ, I’m not going to start rehashing that shit again, or I’ll never get back to sleep. I need a cigarette. Moving slowly, an inch at a time, I slip out of bed without disturbing Lucas, then stand for a moment staring down at him. So angelic in sleep, such a pain in the ass when awake. One hand is curled under his chin, his knees are pulled up to his chest, drawing attention to his fabulous round ass. He shivers slightly and I reach for the blanket, pull it slowly over him; he doesn’t wake. How the hell did this kid end up in my bed again? Well, he’s out of here in the morning, and I’ll make it perfectly clear that he’s never coming back.

Moving into the living room and grabbing a pack of cigarettes from the coffee table, I notice that Lucas has left his jeans-jacket in a wet lump on the floor by the sofa. I pick it up, drape it over the back of a chair. Lighting up, I pull open the drapes a few inches and stare out at the water. There are some drawbacks to living on a houseboat—dampness being the worst—but it’s so peaceful at night. I’m looking forward to warm evening weather, so I can sit on the deck and unwind, listen to the water slosh against the pilings, watch the stars turning in the sky. The sky looks bigger here in Seattle than it did in San Francisco—all those skyscrapers blot out the stars.

I didn't expect to miss the place so much. It's not like San Francisco was my home town (and I couldn't possibly miss my real home town), but I moved there when I was hired after graduation for an entry-level position at Grant & Ellis. Competition in the city is fierce, but if you're the best in your field, promotions come quickly. Barely twenty-two then, by twenty-six I was well established as an architect on the way up. If I'd stayed, I'd have climbed even higher up the ladder of success by now.

"Don't think about it," I tell myself, to no avail.

It would be easy to blame everything on Dean, but he was only part of the problem. I was living too hard and too fast; drinking, drugs, an endless parade of tricks and late nights took a toll. Nothing I couldn't handle under normal circumstances. But getting involved with Dean was distracting. To say the least.

After a tumultuous year and a half, we called it quits. That was Dean's choice; he walked out on me. Like I always knew he would. And I was okay with it. In fact, I welcomed it, reclaiming my freedom with a vengeance. Commitments tie you up and tie you down and ultimately sap your energy and fuck up your life.

Stop it, I tell myself again, taking a deep drag and holding the smoke inside my lungs till it leaps forth in a burst of blue cloud. I cough to clear my throat, and a moment later I hear the boy's feet softly slapping the hardwood floor as he comes out of the bedroom, and then his footsteps are silenced by the living room carpet. "Go back to sleep," I tell him without turning around.

Lucas moves to stand beside me and looks out at the water. "It's nice here," he murmurs. "So quiet. I think I'd like to live on a houseboat, too."

"Ask your daddy to buy you one."

"I wish you wouldn't talk about him." A moment later he asks, "Why don't you come back to bed? It's cold there without you."

"You want me to warm you up?" I ask mockingly, half turning toward him, but Lucas misses the sarcasm. He slides his arms around my waist and presses his body against mine.

"Yes."

"No." I've made up my mind. Not ever again with this kid. I disengage his arms and push him—not roughly but not gently—away. "Go back to bed," I insist. "Now."

Without another word, Lucas turns and walks away, walks slowly into the bedroom, and a moment later I hear the springs squeak slightly as he gets into bed. I light another cigarette, turn back to the window and wait for him to fall asleep.

Inevitably my thoughts return to Dean, there's no hope of getting any more sleep tonight. Pulling the drapes open, I drag a chair near the window and sit staring out over the water. I reach out to touch the glass, it's cold against my fingertips, making me shiver. I should get a robe from the bedroom, but I don't want to wake up Teen Sex Monster, so I decide to tough it out. I learned how to be tough at an early age, first from living with my parents, and later from living with Grandma and Gramps.

Time Past: May 1975

"So, you're my grandson. You don't look like a Morgan." The old man's staring at me. "Do you look like your father?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know if you look like him, or don't know who he is?"

"I know who he is. His name's Peace."

"How old are you?"

"Nine."

The old man nods. "And where is your father, this man named Peace?"

"He went ahead." Easing my grip on the strap of the backpack, I let it slip down to rest by my feet.

"Went ahead where?"

If I knew that, I'd go look for him. I'd look for him and my mother too, somehow convince them to take me along.

"Bill," the old woman touches the sleeve of the man's blue denim jacket, "Bill, let's go to the car, folks're staring at us."

I glance around the bus station waiting room, nobody's staring. In fact, the room is nearly empty, only a few people sitting on long wooden benches. Weak afternoon sunlight filters through some high dirty windows, but most of the room is shadowed. It's nearly dinnertime, I can feel my stomach rumble a complaint—all I've eaten the past two days were apples and a bag of corn chips.

"Answer me, boy," the old man demands. "Where'd your folks go?"

"Comfort said they were going to the mountain. Some place far away, on an airplane. That's all I know." I bite my lips together hard, I won't cry in front of this harsh old man with the sunken eyes and sunburned cheeks.

"Who's Comfort?"

"My mother." His daughter.

"Comfort? Your mother's name is Carolyn."

"No, it's not," I contradict. "It's Comfort."

"Peace and Comfort, eh?" The old man snorts. "Damn fool nonsense. And what's your name?"

"My name's Miracle. It's in the note I gave you." It's bad enough getting dumped onto my mother's parents while Peace and Comfort go somewhere far away, but I wonder if my mother knows her dad is so stupid?

"Your real name, damn it. What's your real name?"

"My real name's Miracle."

The old man puts aside the note mother had written and which she'd safety-pinned inside the pocket of my flannel shirt to be sure it didn't get lost. Then he tears open the large brown envelope that she'd stuffed inside my backpack, with dire threats to me not open it myself. I'd thought about opening it anyway on the long bus ride to Spokane, but I was scared to see what was inside.

Pulling out a sheaf of papers, my grandfather lifts a white card and unfolds it. "Ah," he notes, "this here's your birth certificate. Says your name is Matthew Morgan."

Matthew. "That was my Christian name." Funny, I'd almost forgotten that once upon a time I was called Matthew. "We don't use Christian names." I'm repeating something I'd heard someone say, though I can't remember who.

"Everybody uses Christian names," the old woman contradicts, "except heathens and foreigners. Where have you been living, in a commune or something?"

We've lived lots of places, the last one was the worst, an old building with boards like giant x's nailed over the windows and doors. We'd had to come and go through a broken basement window. Water ran through the pipes but there was no heat. All winter we'd huddled in blankets, and I remember being so happy a few weeks ago when mother told me we were going away. Later I found out she meant, we were going away to different places. Comfort and Peace are going to the mountain, and they sent me to live with Comfort's parents.

"Huh," the old man's bushy eyebrows twist together as he looks again at the card he's holding. "The place for your father's name is blank. Is your father this man you call Peace?"

"Yes," I answer slowly, "but sometimes Mother calls him Robert." The last time she did that, he hit her. I won't tell, though; I promised not to tell any secrets.

"Were they married, Matthew?" My grandmother fixes me with a hard stare. "Carolyn and Robert, your parents. Were they married?"

"Of course they were married," the old man growls in a whisper, glancing around to see if anyone's listening. "Besides, what difference does it make now?"

"The boy has his mother's last name, so there's no 'of course' about it. If they weren't married, he's a bastard."

"Shh!" He waves a hand at her. "Shush! The boy's here now, let's take him home."

The old man stands up and reaches for my backpack. I grab it quickly away and hold it tight in my arms. "Listen," the old woman hisses at me then, wagging a finger in my face, "you can stay at our house tonight, but we haven't decided yet if you're going to live with us. You got that?"

Biting my lips again, I manage to nod. I don't want to stay at their stupid house anyway.

My grandfather reaches out a big hand toward me and I flinch away. I move backward a step and stand staring at up him, clutching the backpack against my chest. I want to turn and run away, but I don't know where to go.

The old man crouches down in front of me and his voice changes, gets softer. "You'll be okay, Matthew, no need to cry."

"I'm not crying!" I never cry. Almost never.

He just stares at me for a moment, then nods. "Right."

Standing up again, the old man leads the way out of the bus terminal. Gesturing for me to follow him, the old woman moves behind me, and in silence we walk single-file out of the building and across a gravel parking lot to a big blue car with a dent in the front fender. Pulling out a ring of keys, the old man unlocks the car and points at the back seat. "Get in," he says, so I do, and he closes the door behind me.

Late in the night, huddled in the middle of a soft bed, I pull covers over my head and shove my face into a pillow to muffle my sobs. I don't understand what I did that was so terrible, that my parents sent me away. I've always been good at panhandling; in fact, people give more money to me than to either of my parents. I can steal more food in the grocery stores, because nobody pays attention to kids. I can run fast if someone sees me filching fruit from some seller at a farmer's market. I don't complain about being hungry all the time. I don't complain about anything, mostly because complaining earns a cuff on the ear from Peace, but also because of my mother. If I ask for something to

eat, she might start crying, and if Peace is around, he'll smack me for upsetting Comfort, and then he'll smack Comfort for being upset.

But I must have done something really terrible, because they went someplace far away and didn't take me with them. Three days ago, I heard them talking and talking, their angry voices kept low so I couldn't hear the words. They talked deep into the night, and then next morning, Peace had sat down cross-legged on the blanket where I was sleeping on the floor. He said nothing for a few minutes, just stared at me. Finally he placed a hand on top of my head and said, "Goodbye, Miracle, be a good boy," before getting up and moving down the hall. I heard him hitch himself up on the box below the basement window and climb out.

Though I didn't understand what was happening, in my heart I felt a sense of doom. I didn't cry when he left, and I tried not to cry when Mother put me on the bus a few hours later.

As soon as Peace was gone, Comfort shoved my other shirt and a paper bag full of apples into my backpack, along with a big brown envelope which she'd licked and sealed shut. Then she walked with me downtown, to a large building jam-packed with crowds of people, their voices a buzzing background noise. She made me sit on a bench where she could see me, while she stood inside a phone booth and called somebody. She talked for a long time, though I couldn't hear the words. When she hung up, she took my hand and towed me along beside her as she joined a line of people waiting to buy tickets.

"Child's ticket, one-way to Spokane," she told the man on the other side of the counter. She pulled out her coin purse and paid him, then took the red cardboard ticket and shoved it into my shirt pocket. Pulling me over to stand by a wall, Comfort took out a piece of notepaper on which I could see her handwriting, folded it, and stuck it in my pocket too, fastening it there with a safety pin.

"Where are we going?" I'd managed to ask, breathless with fear.

"Peace and I are going to the mountain," Comfort had answered, ducking her head and not looking at my face. "Peace has gone ahead, and I'm going to follow. You can't come with us, Miracle. It's too far away."

"I can keep up," I insisted, my heart in my throat. "I won't be any trouble!"

Still she wouldn't look at me. "Mother!" I begged, "I'll be good. I promise I'll be a good boy!"

Mother knelt down on the dirty tile floor and put her arms around me, hugged me tight. "You are a good boy," she whispered, reaching up a hand to ruffle my hair. Then she lifted her tear-stained face and murmured, "And you

be a good boy for your grandpa and grandma, too, do you hear? You're going to go live with them. They are going to meet your bus when it gets to Spokane."

"Where's Spokane? I don't want to go there! I want to go with you and Peace." I couldn't help the tears squirting out of my eyes. Big boys don't cry, and yet sometimes, we have no choice. Like I had no choice about going to the mountain or going to Spokane. Mother wouldn't listen to me; she just hugged me again, stood up and took my hand. I followed along blindly, tears clouding my vision. She bought a bag of corn chips and stuck it in my backpack, then we walked outside the building, and she told me to get on the big silver bus waiting at the curb.

Frantically I held onto her hand, sobbing and begging, "Don't make me go, don't make me go!"

Mother was crying too, but she pulled her hand away and put it on my shoulder, pushing me toward the open door. I knew it was hopeless. I turned and stumbled up the high steps of the bus, moved down the narrow aisle all the way to the back where there were lots of empty seats. I pushed my face against the window, and there was Mother staring back at me. "Goodbye, Miracle," she mouthed, raising a hand to wave. I just leaned my head on the window and bawled; I couldn't even wave back at her. Then the bus made a big farting noise and pulled away, and I just kept staring out the window as my mother got smaller and smaller in the distance. In my heart I was sure I would never see her again.

Waking up in a strange but very soft and comfortable bed, I sat up, rubbed my eyes and looked around. I remembered where I was, and I remembered crying myself to sleep. I pledged not to do that again; nine-year-olds don't cry. I had to stay with my grandparents, because I had no choice, but I was determined to find a way, some day, to go looking for my parents.

Time Present: April 24, 1994

Eventually, I realized that my grandparents were poor, but to me at first, their home seemed luxurious. There was hot water any time you turned the faucet, a noisy furnace churned out heat through metal registers set into the floor. Clean sheets on my bed, clean clothes on my skinny little body, and most importantly, food in the refrigerator and hot meals three times a day. Who could ask for anything more?

Yet it didn't seem a good trade for my old life, because Peace and Comfort weren't there to share it. Life had been pretty uncomfortable with my parents,

in more ways than one, but I loved them, and most of the time I'd been pretty sure they loved me too. At least until they sent me away. For a long time, I tried to figure out what I'd done wrong to be punished so severely, to make my mother and father not want me around anymore, but I couldn't find the answer.

Later I discovered that people leave you all the time, no matter how hard you try to be good.

At last I'm able to sleep for a few hours. By nine o'clock, I'm in the shower, and I'm prepared when Lucas comes into the bathroom and calls, "Matthew, can I join you?" I don't answer and he doesn't ask again. He's not in the bedroom when I come out to get dressed, and I wonder if he's gone.

But no, he's sitting on the sofa in the living room. I glance at him and ask offhandedly, "You're still here?"

"I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye."

"Goodbye." I move into the kitchen; he follows, but pauses in the doorway.

"Matthew," he says, "I want to thank you for everything."

"Mmm-hmm." I keep my back turned, pull out the coffee pot. "Goodbye."

"Can I please call you sometime?"

"Nope." I don't turn around; instead I start filling the coffeemaker.

"Okay." I feel him staring at my back for a minute, then he gives up, turns away and moves through the living room to the front door. When I hear the door close, I'm relieved; finally I'm rid of that annoying brat.

I'm not really surprised when Lucas calls me the next day; he must have jotted down my home number. He leaves two messages on my phone the first day, two more the second, but by the third day, he calls only once. "I won't bother you again," he says in his last message. "Bye."

"Bye," I say out loud, my finger still pressing the Play button on my answering machine. I know that he won't call again.

CHAPTER 4



Time Present: May 12, 1994

As luck would have it, I'm just leaving the office for a lunch break when the alarm sounds.

Not that I was planning to eat, I only have lunch with clients; but I've spent the entire morning rejecting preliminary sketches by the new drafting assistant and I'm in a foul mood, brought on from withholding the worst of my scathing commentary. Since she's new and this is her first project, I go easy (for me), but if she fucks up again, she's finished. I won't tolerate fools or incompetents.

Kathryn waits about three seconds for the new hire to leave the reception area outside my office before strolling in and stopping on the other side of my desk. Taking one look at my face, she says cheerfully, "Why not have lunch at your club today, boss?"

My "club" is a long-running joke between us. Kathryn's been my assistant for almost two years, and early on we established a no-nonsense rapport. She knows that, while many Seattle businessmen have a reverently hushed retreat like the Silverlake Club where they go to recuperate from the stresses of the office, I'm more likely to get my stress relief at the Club Z Baths on Pike Street.

"Don't try to cheer me up," I growl. "I'm going to have to fire that wretched girl. I don't want to lose my edge."

"She looked wretched all right," Kathryn nods. "But you didn't have this one in tears, at least not yet. Maybe she's tougher than she looks."

"I don't care if she's tough, I care that she can't prepare a simple schematic to order. She's got one more chance to prove herself, then she's history."

"You might have to clear that with Dave," Kathryn contradicts. "He hired her."

"That explains a lot. He probably wants to fuck her."

Lowering her voice, Kathryn tells me, "I think he already did." When I make a face, she laughs and adds, "With that image planted in your brain, I'll bet you're going to have lunch at your club after all."

"You're right. Can you clear my calendar for a couple hours this afternoon?"

"There's a Siwash Project budget meeting at four, otherwise you're free."

"Good," I grunt, standing up and pulling on my suit jacket.

Kathryn flips closed my briefcase, snapping the locks and handing it to me. "So you look like you're going to a meeting," she explains.

Since I'm a partner—junior, but still a partner—in the firm, I'm not worried about taking the afternoon off, but I accept the briefcase and I'm out the door with a murmured farewell.

There's a group standing near the elevator. I have just a moment to nod hello to Jim Davis, head of Systems, before a bell sounds loudly, making most of the assembled group jump, and one skinny girl in a red pleated skirt squeals.

"That's the elevator alarm," Jim announces. "I had a feeling something was wrong, we've been waiting quite a while for the elevator."

"Somebody call Maintenance," I suggest.

"There's a phone in the elevator, they're probably calling for help," Jim says. "I'm late for a meeting cross town, so I'll take the stairs. You coming, Matt?"

"No."

I'm annoyed that the small group is dispersing toward the stairs. Doesn't anyone care that somebody's trapped in the elevator? Then again, why should I give a damn? "Yes," I change my mind, joining Jim and the others as we start walking down seven flights to the ground floor. I remind myself that stairs are good exercise.

After a few minutes, the skinny girl stops and leans against the wall. "Ooh," she says, fluttering her eyelashes at me. "Would you mind if I held onto your arm? These high heels are killing me. I'm afraid I'll turn my ankle or something."

"Take 'em off," I suggest, "and hold onto the handrail. Or stop at the next level and wait for the elevator."

I hear the girl huff as I move past, and Jim barks a laugh as soon as we've left her behind. "Chivalrous bastard, aren't you?"

"She didn't need help, she was just flirting."

"She's a looker."

“Not interested,” I reply, as we round a corner and start down another flight.

“So I’ve heard.”

Son of a bitch. “You heard right,” I say blandly, then clamp my mouth shut. I’ll never play coy. Jim has nothing more to say and we finish the descent in silence.

When we reach the lobby, a gray-uniformed maintenance worker appears to be dismantling the elevator control box, while another stands by scratching his head. Jim and the others move on through the lobby and out the door, but I stop and watch the workmen. They get the elevator outer doors open and peer upward at the elevator, stuck halfway up the shaft. After some more fiddling with the electronic controls, the elevator jerks and lurches downward a foot or so before leveling off, and then it begins a more gradual descent. But when it almost reaches the lobby, it comes to an abrupt halt, still about three feet above floor level. The inside doors won’t open.

A supervisor arrives, and after he takes a turn fiddling with the control box to no effect, the men decide to force the doors open. “Stand back,” the supervisor yells at the so-far-silent passenger or passengers inside.

“Please hurry,” a tense female voice implores. “I’m claustrophobic, and I’m going to start screaming in a minute!”

“It’s okay, we’re okay,” a calm male voice reassures her. “Let’s stand away from the doors like he told us. They’ll get us out soon.” The voice is vaguely familiar, but I can’t place it. Our firm leases only three floors of the building. I don’t know all the other tenants.

After a few minutes struggle, the strength of the three maintenance men is not enough. Maybe I was stung by Jim’s “chivalrous bastard” remark earlier, because I plop down my briefcase, shed my jacket and join the men pushing on the doors. My added strength creates enough brute force to disengage the locked doors, after a couple moments of sweating and swearing. The doors slide open about eighteen inches and then stop.

“Oh please, let me out!” the woman cries.

“Sit down and scoot over to the edge,” the supervisor tells her. “Swing your legs over and we’ll lift you down. It’s just a few feet to the floor.”

“Let me out, let me out!” The woman’s nearly hysterical, I’m not sure she’s even hearing the supervisor now.

“Here, I’ll help you,” the disembodied male voice in the elevator says gently. “Get down on your knees. I’ll hold on, you won’t fall.”

“Okay,” the woman warbles; we can hear her ragged breathing, and then we can see her, or anyway we can see part of her. Fortunately for all concerned, she’s wearing a pants suit. She does as the man trapped with her suggests, gets on her knees, and scoots over toward the opening. We can see his legs now; he’s wearing jeans and sneakers. He’s on his knees beside the woman and he’s got both arms around her waist.

I’m the tallest so I move between the workmen and reach up my arms. “Come to the edge and bend down, move into my arms,” I tell the woman. “I won’t drop you, I promise.” She hesitates a moment, then we see her bend down so her head and shoulders come through the opening.

“Oh dear, it’s so far!”

“Not really,” I say soothingly. “Just a few feet. Piece of cake.” Stretching upward, I get my arms around her waist and finally she pushes off and into my arms. I swing around and hand her off to the maintenance guys, who help her get her feet firmly on the ground. She sways for a moment, but then stands upright.

“Oh God, thank you, thank you!” she exclaims, then a workman leads her to a chair and she almost collapses on it, drops her head into her hands and weeps.

I turn back to the opening and reach up my arms again. “Your turn,” I tell the man. “Scoot to the edge, I’ll help you.” I can tell that he’s small, he has slim legs and a narrow waist; he’ll be a cinch to hang onto and swing out of the elevator. He repeats the motions of the woman, scooting forward and swinging his legs over the side, then he bends his head and shoulders into the opening and pushes off, right into my arms.

He’s a lightweight all right, and I realize that I’ve had him in my arms before.

“Oh, God,” he exclaims, hanging on tight to my neck as I swing around and lower him to the ground. “Matthew! Is it really you?”

It’s Lucas. The boy from the biker bar.

“Hey,” I say, grabbing his hands to disengage the choke hold he has on my neck. There’s a slight pause as we stare at each other, then I ask, “What are you doing in my building?”

“Your building?”

“Hey kid, you all right?” It’s the maintenance foreman. “Any injuries?”

“Huh?” Lucas glances at the guy and answers, “No. I’m perfectly fine. But what an adventure!” And he laughs.

Christ, when he laughs his incredible bright blue eyes crinkle up at the corners and his wide smile is infectious. He swings his gaze back to me and I realize that I'm smiling too. With an effort, I turn my smile upside down, take his arm and pull him to one side of the lobby.

"Answer me," I demand, *sotto voce*. "What are you doing here? Did you track me down?"

"No," he denies it. "I came by to see my dad, his office is on the third floor. Denholme, Richards and Sansome."

"That's a legal firm. Your dad works there?"

"Yes." Lucas confirms. "My dad's David Denholme."

The kid really is rich. David Denholme is not only a big shot corporate attorney, he's active in a dozen civic organizations. I've never met him formally, but we've exchanged nods in the elevator.

"Matthew," Lucas says now, "it's so amazing, to meet again like this!"

"Hmm." I move away, grab my suit jacket and slip it on, pick up my briefcase. "You'll probably have to take the stairs," I tell him. "Likely the elevator will be out of order for a while." Then I'm out the door and moving quickly down the street.

"Wait. Please wait." The kid's right behind me, hurrying to catch up.

I come to a halt on the sidewalk, annoyed. Lucas is perfectly capable of following me to the ends of the earth, the tenacious little puppy. I turn around, wanting to kick him to the curb; but exactly like a frisky little pup, he's bristling with good nature.

"You have to see how amazing it is," he says eagerly. "Us running into each other again, it's like kismet! Or karma. One of those weird eastern things!"

"You know nothing about karma. It's a fucking coincidence."

"No, seriously," he insists, "it's like a—a sign, or something!"

"Yeah," I snort, "It's a sign, all right. And the sign says 'Dead End.' Or 'Sorry, We're Closed.'"

Lucas laughs and punches my shoulder. "You're funny! But don't you think it means something? That's the second time you've saved my life!"

Exasperated, I curl my lip. "I did not save your life—the elevator was merely stuck, not plummeting to earth, there was no danger. A minor mechanical failure—an inconvenience, that's all it was. And the fact that I work in the same building as your father is sure as fuck a coincidence, nothing more."

Lucas is silent for a moment, looking crestfallen. I clear my throat and prepare to say goodbye—and good riddance—to this beautiful nuisance, when his eyes light up and he announces happily, "If it was a mechanical failure, then

the builder's at fault—right? I can sue him for a million bucks—for negligence!”

“A mechanical failure doesn't prove negligence,” I growl. “You were never in danger. And,” I add angrily, “what a greedy little bastard you are! Your daddy's not rich enough already?”

That wipes the happy smile off his face. “I'm not greedy,” he insists seriously, “and I was just kidding. Besides, my dad's rich, but I'm not.”

“Don't tell me you're not spoiled rotten, because I won't believe it. Private school, riding lessons, and clothes that, despite looking like Salvation Army rejects, I know for a fact cost a mint, and—”

“That stuff,” Lucas spreads his arms, “that superficial stuff, it doesn't matter. What I really want, what I really need, my dad won't give me.”

“What's that?” I demand, “A private jet? Your own limo?” In the back of my mind, I realize the anger I feel is a remnant of my own impoverished youth; jealousy, in fact, of the “superficial stuff” Lucas is so casually disclaiming.

“No.” He drops his arms and loses the histrionic tone. “What I really want is to become an actor. I told you, remember? I want to study acting, and my dad is forcing me to study something he considers ‘serious’—poli-sci, economics. Nothing in the arts. If I don't do what he wants, he won't pay for college.”

I'm taken aback at first, and then I laugh. “You're not serious? You want to be a movie star when you grow up?”

“I didn't say movie star!” His eyes flash at me then, his face flushes dark red. Now it's his turn to be angry. “I want to be a serious actor—I don't care about fame and fortune and all that bullshit.”

“Then do it,” I tell him. I'm getting impatient to be on my way, I don't have time for this. “Stop whining and feeling sorry for yourself, it's boring.”

I feel the smallest twinge of remorse when I see that my words have hurt him. Well, that's tough, and he needs to toughen up if he plans to make his own way in the world. My voice softening slightly, I add, “You don't need daddy's permission or his money. If your grades are good enough, you can get a scholarship.”

“Yeah.” Lucas shoves his hands in his pockets and turns away. “Sorry I bored you.” He begins to walk off, and I surprise myself by reaching out, grabbing his arm.

“You should be,” I say lightly. “Sorry, I mean. I have a very low tolerance for boredom.”

“Whatever.” Lucas shrugs.

“So,” I hear myself saying, “you need a ride someplace? Or—is your father expecting you at his office?”

“No, it’s a school holiday today, and I was just going to see Dad about something. I can do it another time. Oh!” he brightens. “Maybe we could go to lunch!”

I’ve played right into his hands. I could have been rid of him by now. Probably my laughing at him, making fun of him, would have ensured my freedom from his unwanted advances, and I’d never have had to see his face again.

Which would be a bloody shame.

“Lunch, huh? You buying?”

“Sure!” Lucas agrees eagerly. “Well, umm,” he backtracks, “actually, I’m kind of short right now, so would fast food be okay? Do you like Taco Bell?”

“No,” I shudder. “But there’s an Italian place a couple blocks from here, in Pioneer Square, that’s not bad. I’ll pay.”

“Okay! And then next time, I’ll pay.”

There won’t be a next time. But I don’t have to tell him that right now.

“It’s this way.” And I begin to walk rapidly down the block, with Lucas hustling to keep up.

CHAPTER 5



Lucas

Matthew rescued me again! Well, I wasn't exactly in danger this time, but it must be karma or something, finding each other after all this time, almost three weeks after he saved me at the biker bar. Not that Matthew was looking for me. I wasn't looking for him either; I'd given up when he never returned my phone calls.

This morning, after he saved me from the broken elevator, it seemed like Matthew still didn't want to see me. But then he agreed to go to lunch, and now here we are sitting across from each other in this cool restaurant. He's finished his Caesar salad and he's leaning against the wall, one elbow resting on the back of his chair, holding a nearly empty wine glass. He's smiling at me, but I don't think he knows he's smiling, otherwise he'd make himself frown instead. It's almost as if he doesn't want to like me.

I've had the most delicious lunch, pasta shells with chicken, and help myself to the last breadstick from the basket between us.

"Aren't you full yet?"

"Yeah," I admit, "but I have room for this."

"So tell me," Matthew says, setting down his glass and leaning his head on his hand. "Tell me why you want to be an actor."

I look at him closely to be sure he's not just faking interest, then swallow a bread crumb and answer simply, "It might sound dumb, but it's almost like I have no choice. I just actually sort of NEED to." I'm waiting for him to scoff, nobody ever seems to understand.

But Matthew just nods. "Are you obsessed with movies, films, the theatre?"

"No." I'm annoyed at the question, then I hedge, "Well, yeah, sort of. But that's not it. I mean, I love watching films and plays and stuff, but mostly when I do, I'm thinking of the acting that's going on, not the plot or anything. Do you know what I mean? Like, wondering how the actor found his motivation, and stuff like that."

"Hmm. So, you're the star thespian at your high school?"

"No," I admit. "Dad won't let me enroll in drama class."

"Then how'd you get a part in the school play?"

"Well, I tried out," I explain reasonably. I mean, that seems pretty obvious.

"Are you that good," Matthew asks, "or were they desperate to fill the role?"

"I am good. Believe it or not." Now I'm feeling defensive, just like I do with my father. I haven't told Dad yet about the play. If he doesn't find out till later, he can't forbid me to be in it, until it's too late.

When Matthew says nothing, I feel compelled to explain, "I've read a lot of books about acting, and I just sort of know how to do it." He looks skeptical so I hasten to add, "Oh, I know that's not enough, I know I need training, but I have a—a natural affinity for it. Some people do." I hesitate, then explain, "I know it will be hard work, but it's what I want to do more than anything in the world." I brace myself, expecting him to make fun of me.

But he doesn't. He just nods, and there's that accidental smile again. "If you want something bad enough," he says seriously, "if you're willing to work your ass off for it, you can succeed."

"Is that the voice of experience?" I wonder. "Did you have to work your ass off to become an architect?"

Matthew loses his smile and I think he's going to tell me to mind my own business. Instead he says, "Yeah. Do you want dessert? Or, if you're ready to go, I can give you a ride someplace."

"Okay. Thanks."

Once we walk back to the office complex and find Matthew's car in the parking garage, we get in and he asks, "Where to?"

"Umm ... could we maybe go to your place?"

"Why?" He turns sideways in the seat to stare at me.

"Well, duh. Why do you think?"

Matthew's face is blank. "I've got a meeting at four."

Pointing at the clock in the dashboard, I say, "That gives us almost three hours."

At first he maintains his stone face, then cracks a reluctant smile. "Christ," he says, "is sex all you ever think about?"

“Well, yeah, I’m seventeen. My hormones are peaking.”

“So what’s my excuse?” Matthew mumbles under his breath, but he puts the car in gear, pulls out of the garage and heads off toward the marina.

By now, I am completely experienced sexually. With Matthew, I’ve done every possible thing I’ve ever imagined, and some things I never imagined at all. You’d think a guy his age would’ve slowed down by now. But he works out a lot, belongs to a gym, and says he runs a couple miles most days. His body is beautiful, broad shoulders, narrow hips; his legs are long and muscled, and his skin’s a beautiful light golden tan.

We had sex like a zillion times already, just in those two nights I stayed with him. So I was sure nothing could surprise me anymore, but just now when we come through the door of the houseboat, Matthew rips off his jacket and grabs onto me so hard my breath escapes with a loud “Oof!” I don’t get a chance to recover from that, before he’s kissing me, his mouth just eating my mouth in one big bite, sucking hard on my lips and snaking his tongue inside to capture my tongue and suck it into his mouth, suck it right down his throat.

Pulling away an inch or two, I gasp, “I can’t breathe, I can’t—”

“You don’t need to breathe,” Matthew assures me, growling a short laugh deep in the back of his throat, before his mouth captures mine again and his strong arms hold me so tight against him I can’t get away. I don’t want to get away, I grab him right back and struggle to get my hands under his shirt. My heart is pounding so hard, it’s going to explode!

Matthew pushes me up against the door and rips off my shirt, like literally rips it off over my head. I’ve practically got whiplash he’s moving so fast, and then I start shaking, my whole body is quivering, and I’m demanding, “Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me now!”

“Take it easy,” he murmurs in my ear, and when I just shake my head back and forth, my eyes squeezed shut, I hear him laugh again, but gently. “Okay,” he says, “okay Lucas, a fast one just for you, and then we’ll take it slow.”

I nod and gasp “Yes!” and press back against the door, shivering, while Matthew pulls off my shoes and then my jeans and throws them on the floor. He kicks off his own shoes and steps out of his pants, pausing to dig in his pocket for a condom. Then he half-leads, half-pushes me backwards down the hall to the bedroom.



When we're dressed and heading out to the car, Matthew announces, "This is not going to happen again."

"Wait." I grab onto his arm and he stops in the open doorway.

He looks down his nose at me. "I've got to get back to work, and you've got to go—wherever. Come on," and he pulls his arm away.

Slipping quickly around him, I lean against the door so it closes with a loud thunk. "You have to stop throwing me out of your house," I say. "It's very rude. And why can't you stop pretending not to like me?"

Matthew snorts. "I like fucking you," he says. "So what? I like fucking lots of guys. There's no deeper meaning there, sorry to disillusion you."

"We're friends now," I insist.

"I have enough friends. I don't need to add some high school kid to my Rolodex."

"But I don't have enough friends."

Matthew lowers his head and studies his feet for a moment, then looks up at me and says quietly, "Lucas, I'm sorry, but that is your problem. Not mine."

I just stare back at him, I can't think of anything to say. In a moment he takes hold of my arm and pulls me away from the door. "Let's go," he murmurs. "I'll drop you someplace, if you want."

Pulling away from Matthew's hand, I turn and walk ahead of him out the door. When we reach the parking lot, I stay on the path and keep walking. I can tell that he has stopped moving, that he's watching me walk away, but I just keep going, out of the parking lot and onto the street beyond, without looking back.

I hear the car tires spitting gravel as Matthew drives out of the parking lot, waits for traffic, turns onto the street and drives off, in the opposite direction. I keep walking for a few minutes, then stop and glance back at the lake. There's a low stone wall around the perimeter of the marina. I drop down onto it and sit staring at the water, feeling real, actual pain in my chest. I am so unhappy that Matthew doesn't want to be friends.

I told him the truth, I don't have a lot of friends. In fact, not any really.

Clancy is the closest thing to a friend I've got. We've known each other since junior high, but we're not really tight or anything. When we were fourteen, I got him to show me how to fake asthma so I could get out of gym. Whenever we had to run the track, I'd pretend to choke and fall down, clutching my

chest. Finally, Dad had Mrs. Goodwin take me to the doctor; they did tests, and I flunked. That stupid doctor said I was healthy as a horse.

It's not that I don't like exercise, I do. I love to ride my bike and I like to swim. Which is funny because, until about a year ago, I couldn't swim at all. That really annoyed Dad. He can't stand imperfection, so he sent me to two different psychiatrists. They each told him the same thing, that I was majorly traumatized when I was three years old and saw my mother drown. That's silly. I can't even remember that.

Finally Dad got me a tutor, Chad, who's a lifeguard at the country club. He took me on as a private student, and got me to relax in the water. I discovered that I could float instead of sinking like a stone every time I got in the pool, and after that, it was easy to learn to dog-paddle and do the breast stroke. This summer, Chad's going to teach me how to dive.

At first I could hardly look at him without getting a hard-on. He's tall and built like Hercules or one of those other Greek gods. Maybe Hercules was Roman. Anyway, he has an amazingly beautiful body, and I was afraid if he touched me, I'd spontaneously combust. But right from the beginning, Chad has been friendly but formal. I'm not even sure he likes me, but he's very patient, and he never made me feel stupid for being scared of the water in the beginning.

Chad started me off slow in the shallow end of the pool, probably the way they teach babies. I was embarrassed, and I'd thought about not learning to swim on purpose, just to annoy Dad. But I really wanted to learn, for my own sake. I don't like to be afraid of things.

Dad can be such an asshole sometimes. When he was pushing me to learn how to swim, he said stuff like, "What if your plane went down over the ocean?"

"I don't have a plane," I answered. I kept my face straight, but he almost hit me anyway.

Lucky for me, my dad's not violent. Or not lately. He hasn't hit me for a long time. He calls me a smart-mouth, which is basically true, and he wants to hit me lots of times, I can always tell. His lips get very thin and a muscle jumps up and down in his cheek. But he hasn't actually smacked me around since I was a little kid. Anyway, if he really believed in physical punishment, he'd probably hire someone to hit me, just to save time.

I don't remember my mother at all. There are no pictures of her hanging around. Mrs. Goodwin told me years ago that Dad couldn't bear to see pictures

of my mother, because it broke his heart when she died. I don't know the truth, but I seriously doubt he ever had a heart to begin with.

I've never met any of my mother's relatives, though I know she came from New York; there might be family still there. Years ago when I was a kid, I tried asking questions, but my dad always got mad and wouldn't answer. Mrs. Goodwin stuck up for him; she always has. She told me not to talk to Dad about it, because all of my mother's family were strange.

Or anyway, that's what I thought she said. It wasn't till I got older that I realized she meant they were estranged. I never knew why. Maybe they didn't like my dad, but it's not something I'm allowed to talk about.

In a way I liked it better, thinking that my mother's side of the family were "strange," because then I could pretend that if I was with them, maybe I would have fit in. I knew I was strange, or anyway very different from other kids, by the time I was nine. I didn't know I was gay then, of course. But everything I've ever done seems to annoy my dad. When Mrs. Goodwin took me to see a production of *Annie* at the repertory theatre, Dad's birthday present the year I turned ten, I remember thinking that maybe I was an orphan too, like Annie. Maybe my real parents just dropped me off on Dad's doorstep, and someday, they would come back to claim me. Needless to say, they never did.

Time Present: May 27, 1994

During the week after the Elevator Karma adventure, I tried calling Matthew a couple times, but he never answered the phone, and I didn't want to leave some kind of lame message. Instead, I decide to go see him.

I get to his house on Friday night just before nine, when I'm pretty sure he'll be getting ready to go out. When he opens the door to my knock, I'm prepared for him to yell at me to go away. But he doesn't.

Unexpectedly, when he sees me there, Matthew laughs.

"I can explain," I say quickly. "I have a good reason to be here."

"I can't wait to hear it." His voice is sarcastic but he doesn't look mad, instead he opens the door wider and gestures for me to come in. As I expected, he's dressed to go out—he's wearing jeans and a tight black tee shirt.

I watch him close the door, then he crosses his arms over his chest and leans against the doorframe. He's waiting, so I take a deep breath and begin.

"I want you to come and see my play, it's next Friday."

Whatever he was expecting, it wasn't that. His mouth drops open and he demands, "You can't be serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious. The play is really good, and I want you to see me act. And I have to sell a block of tickets, too." Then I add the clincher, "You'll like the play, I promise. I have a big part."

"I know you have a big part," he smiles slightly, snaking out his hand to brush against my dick.

I gasp a laugh, I can't help it. I can even feel my face turning red.

Immediately Matthew is serious again. "Lucas, I can't come to your play."

"Why not?"

"Oh, Jesus, I don't know. A man my age, unrelated to you, showing up at the high school to cheer you on? And afterwards I could meet your father, you can introduce me. 'Dad,' you can say, 'This guy—this older guy—who works in your building, he's fucked me a couple times, and now I won't leave him alone,' and—"

"Well, I wouldn't introduce you that way," I interrupt. "But don't worry, my dad won't be there. I told you he doesn't want me to be an actor, no way will he come to my play."

"Maybe he'll surprise you."

"Dad's been to my school only once, for this really awful father-son thing last year, and he only did that so his picture could be in the paper."

It seems like maybe Matthew's weakening, so immediately I plead, "Please come, I want you to see me perform. Then maybe you won't think that me becoming an actor is such a terrible idea."

"No, it's impossible." When my shoulders slump in defeat, Matthew adds more gently, "I'm sorry, but you have to see how crazy it would be for me to show up there. You're just a school boy and—"

"I'm a man now, not a boy!" I exclaim, standing up tall and holding my head high. "You just don't want to see me act."

"Actually, I do," he contradicts. "I would like to see you. Maybe you can do your part for me sometime, here at my place." Quickly he adds, "We're not having sex though, not ever again. So don't even think about it."

"This isn't about sex!" I turn away and move toward the door, then glare at him over my shoulder. "And saying my lines for you is not the same as seeing the real play. That's so—so insulting, Matthew, to even suggest it!"

I can't believe how disappointed I am. When I decided to come over here tonight, I'd been sure Matthew would slam the door in my face. Somehow, the fact that he's being nice makes me feel even worse.

"I'll buy your tickets anyway," he offers. "You said you have to sell a block of them, right?"

“Yeah, and how cool would that be? I sell a block of tickets and nobody shows up. ‘Lucas has no friends.’ That’s what they’d all say.”

“You already told me you don’t have friends, so why would anyone be surprised?”

I grab the doorknob and rip the door open, but before I can storm off, Matthew pulls me back inside. “Lucas, I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. Come here for a minute.”

I come back inside but I can’t say anything, I can’t believe how much his words have hurt me. Even so, I have to be honest. “It’s the truth,” I mumble, staring at my feet.

“I’m sorry,” Matthew repeats, lifting my chin with his hand so I have to look at his face. “I’ll buy some of your tickets, okay? I can’t come to the play, but I’ll buy some tickets.”

“It’s okay, I understand,” I force myself to shrug, as if it doesn’t matter very much. “I just thought I’d, you know, ask. In case.”

“Let me buy a couple tickets.”

“Sure, okay.” I pull the packet from my jacket pocket, tear off a couple green cardboard tickets. “Here. But you don’t have to pay for them.”

“Take it,” he’s got his wallet and hands me a ten. “Then you can say you sold them and you won’t be lying.”

“Thanks,” I make myself smile. “Are you going out tonight?” When he nods, I take a deep breath and say, “Well, have fun. I guess I’ll see you around.”

“Sure,” he agrees, holding the door open. Then he stands on the porch watching me walk away into the darkness.

Time Present: June 3, 1994

I’m going to throw up. I can’t remember my lines. I can’t possibly go out there in front of the crowd in the auditorium. In fact, I can’t move. I can hardly breathe. The director, Mrs. Carruthers, is standing in the doorway of the boys’ dressing room, she’s speaking but I can’t hear a word she’s saying. When she turns and walks away, I just stare blindly after her retreating figure.

“Hey Luke, you okay?”

My eyes swivel to the right, and I see Jimmy Crawford giving me a funny look. Jimmy plays Harding, but he’s also the understudy for McMurphy. If I pass out, he’ll take my place on stage.

“Fine, I’m fine,” I manage to croak, jumping out of my chair and quickly pulling on my jacket. Leaning forward, I peer closely at the mirror, to be sure

my makeup hasn't smeared. With my pale coloring, I disappear under the footlights, so Ginny, the makeup and costume and props manager for the play, has smeared pancake makeup on my face, penciled in dark eyebrows, and she drew lines around my eyes, to make them show up to the audience.

The audience. My heart skips a beat.

I was so disappointed when Matthew turned down my invitation to come tonight, but now I'm thanking God he won't be here to see me make a fool of myself, by blowing my lines or falling off the stage, or doing something equally stupid.

My dad won't be here either. I thought he might come after all, out of curiosity if nothing else. But when I told him about the play yesterday, his reaction was absolute fury.

That's what I expected, and I was prepared. Or as prepared as I can ever be, faced with my father's really very powerful anger. He used to scare me when I was a kid. Now that I'm grown up, he doesn't scare me anymore. Even so, I could feel myself shaking and my hands were all sweaty.

"You're doing WHAT?" he demanded, his voice so harsh that I flinched and took a step backward away from his desk, in spite of my determination not to let him bully me this time.

"I'm in the school play," I repeated, keeping my voice level and looking him in the eye.

"You are NOT in the school play," he denied, dropping into his chair and clasping his hands on top of his desk, giving me his Darth Vader death-stare.

Dad's desk at home is as perfectly tidy and organized as his desk at the office. I had thought about going downtown to tell him about the play, thinking maybe he wouldn't go postal if there were witnesses, but in the end I decided to tell him at home. I just had to keep reminding myself that he was not going to kill me. Even if he really wanted to. Murdering his son would be bad publicity that could hurt his standing in the community.

"I have a big part in the play, and the drama teacher says I'm good."

"Since when did you enroll in drama? I specifically forbade you to take such a course."

"I'm not enrolled in drama class." I folded my arms on my chest, partly to look tough and partly to keep myself from shaking to pieces under that killer stare. "I tried out for the part and got it. We've been rehearsing for weeks."

"Well, no son of mine is making a fool of himself at Regency. You'll resign immediately."

"I won't. Besides, I can't," I said, then cleared my throat and repeated, "I can't, it's too late. The play's tomorrow night."

"I don't give a damn," Dad insisted. His frown deepened. "I'm calling the school and taking you out of that play."

"The programs are printed. With my name on them. If you pull me out, the whole school, the whole world, will know about it." I took a deep breath and plunged ahead, "They'll think you're a—a tyrant."

Dad's eyes narrowed. "Are you ... threatening me?" His voice was dangerously quiet.

"No," I gulped, digging my fingers into my arms. "It's just the truth. And anyway, I thought maybe you'd like to come to the play. Maybe if you see me, you'll understand why I want to act. I'm good, and I am going to be an actor. With or without your help."

I don't know how I had the balls to stand up to him this time. Except what I told him is the truth. I am good. I am going to be an actor.

"Over my dead body."

Pretending to be all calm and cool, I insisted, "I am doing the play. This is really important to me. I won't back out, no matter what you say."

Dad's face went dark red, a look he gets when I've managed to completely infuriate him. Mrs. Goodwin has always warned me that I'm going to kill Dad when he gets this mad. "You'll give your father apple-plex," she's warned me time and time again. Dad's face gets as red as a Washington delicious apple, and I always imagine his head bursting open, spraying apple juice and brain chunks all over the study.

"Lucas," he growled at me through gritted teeth, "you're an idiot for trying to ruin your life this way. I've always done my best for you, but now," Dad shook his head and stood up. He's very tall and I guess I'm never going to catch up to his height at the rate I'm growing, or not growing. "Now," he repeated, staring down his nose at me, "If you don't resign from this play of your own free will, there'll be no summer vacation for you this year."

My heart sank as Dad went on, "You're going to enroll in summer classes. You're going to be so busy, you won't have time to get into trouble—or to dream up more ways to drive me crazy. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

I understood all right, but he could not make me quit the play. And once I'm eighteen, he won't be able to stop me from becoming an actor. I know he won't pay for college if I don't do what he wants; he's made that perfectly clear.

But he doesn't know that I'm going to apply for scholarships, and then I won't need his help.

Dad walked around the desk to confront me and it took all my will power not to take a step backwards. He stopped about a foot away and lifted his chin. "This is your last chance, Lucas," he said quietly. "Will you resign from this play or not?"

"No," I answered, though no sound came out. I cleared my throat and repeated, "No."

He turned on his heel then and walked across the dark green carpet toward the door. "Dad," I called after him, "won't you at least come and see me, and then decide if I can act or not? Give me a chance to prove myself."

He stopped then but didn't turn around. After a moment of silence, he said, still without turning, "Lucas, I don't give a damn if you can act, that's irrelevant. You're deliberately disobeying me, and you're going to suffer the consequences." He pulled open the door and walked out of the room.

I felt like a balloon with all the air let out of it. I leaned against the desk and just stood there for a few minutes, staring at the carpet, taking deep breaths. I went upstairs to my room, threw myself down on my bed, and laid there for a long time. I couldn't believe I'd actually stood up to Dad this time, but I didn't feel like celebrating. I felt like crying, but I hadn't shed a single tear. That's when I knew for sure that I was finally grown up.

CHAPTER 6



Matthew

It's Friday night, I'm headed home, but somehow I end up driving by Regency Prep a few minutes before Lucas' play is to start. I'd worked late at the office, stopped by The Cat's Pajamas for a sandwich, and then took a different route home. A route that included a very long detour which lands me in the high school parking lot just before 8 p.m.

Coincidentally, I still have in my wallet the play tickets I'd bought from Lucas last week. I might as well use one of them. As long as I'm here.

I remember once when Dean and I were arguing—we were always arguing—he'd asked if insanity ran in my family. A throw-away insult that he couldn't know would stab me in the heart. I'd never told him about my parents, and at that moment I was really glad he didn't know. Because my parents were insane. Or, if not insane, incredibly stupid. Why else would they abandon their child, their family, even their country, to seek spiritual enlightenment—or whatever the fuck they thought they were doing—traveling a world away, to find some mythical holy place they'd called “the mountain?”

Insanity or stupidity, I'll never know which it was, because I'd never heard from them again. All my life, I've been waiting for that insanity (or stupidity) to manifest itself in me, their only child. And finally it has: I'm walking through the hallowed portals of Regency Preparatory School for Spoiled Rich Kids, handing over a green cardboard ticket to a giggly girl about four feet tall with freckles and purple hair, and taking a seat in the rear of the school auditorium. All this to watch some kid who's infatuated with me prance onto a stage and probably take a pratfall, or in some other way make a fool of himself.

The lights dim and a hush falls over the crowd of families and students; there's a rustle of programs and the sound of a dozen proud parents digging out their cameras. Just before the lights go out, I sit forward and glance around the auditorium, trying to locate David Denholme. Lucas said he wouldn't be here, but somehow I can't believe that he'd miss his son's big moment.

I wish I had skipped Lucas' big moment myself, because I'm sure that he's going to be very, very bad. I base this certainty on nothing but fear. A strange kind of fear—for Lucas, not for myself. I'm not sure why, but I want very much for him to be the good actor he proclaims himself to be. As the curtains draw open, I realize that I'm gripping the armrests on either side of my chair with white knuckles, and I have to remind myself to breathe in, breathe out. I almost feel like I'm the one on the stage, and I have a fleeting but very real desire to throw up.

Lucas

Three curtain calls!

I can't stop smiling, and hearing that applause, hearing everyone congratulate me, shake my hand, pat me on the back, and I'm grinning-grinning-grinning. I feel about as close to happiness as I could ever imagine feeling. I don't even care that my dad didn't come. I knew he wouldn't, it's no big deal.

And then I'm really glad that Dad's not here, because when I take my fourth curtain call, I spy a tall man in the back of the auditorium moving toward the aisle and out the door. Even this far away, even from the back, I recognize Matthew.

He came to see me! He couldn't cheer my name from the audience, he can't come backstage, but my God! my God! Matthew came to see me!

A lot of parents and friends come backstage. The dressing rooms are crammed with people and flowers, I'm just completely eating up the attention I'm getting. I don't care if it goes to my head. It's got to last me another year at least, this brief happiness, because Dad will make damned sure I never get another chance for this while I'm living under his roof. In fact, he told me as much this morning. Told me that, if I went through with this, I'd be under virtual house arrest for my senior year.

I don't care, because now I know that I can do this. It's no longer just a dream. Mrs. Carruthers told me she's never seen a better on-stage Randle McMurphy—and she saw a production of *Cuckoo's Nest* a few years ago in Portland, so she should know. And all the kids, even the ones who've always

ignored me, they are telling me the same stuff. And their parents too. For the first time in my life, I feel like I belong someplace.

Everybody hangs around backstage for punch and cookies, talking and laughing, but finally people begin trickling away, and the actors change into our street clothes. Clancy came to the play with his parents, and they offer me a ride home; Clancy knows my dad didn't come tonight. As we leave the auditorium, there are only a few cars left in the parking lot. Immediately I spy a silver Mercedes parked at the far end of the lot beneath a street lamp.

"Oh, Clancy," I grab his arm. "I won't need a ride after all, there's a—a friend of mine over there. He'll give me a ride. But thanks anyway!"

"Huh? Oh, okay," he nods, glancing at the car I've pointed out. "See you in class Monday," he adds, then he punches my shoulder and grins. "Hey man, you were really good tonight! You're going to be famous. I'm going to know a famous actor!"

Laughing along with Clancy, I punch his shoulder too. "Shut up! But thanks. Bye now!" I turn and hurry toward the Mercedes, my heart in my throat. When I reach the car, I rap my knuckles on the window and peer inside. Matthew smiles as I pull open the door and climb in.

"Need a ride?" he asks, and when I close the door, he reaches for my hand and squeezes my fingers.

But that's not enough for me, not with my spirits soaring, so I lean across the seat and throw my arms around his neck. "You came to see me!" I exclaim, and plant a big kiss on his lips.

For a moment, Matthew's arms go around me, he hugs me back, and he murmurs against my mouth, "Lucas, you were so fucking amazing!"

I don't have time to respond; almost immediately I hear him mutter, "Oh, shit." He grabs my arms and pushes me backward.

"What?" I ask, bewildered, then I notice his eyes looking over my shoulder so I turn around quickly, and see Clancy standing there, staring in the car window.

"Oh!" is all I can think to say, and then Clancy turns and hurries away.

"Fuck," Matthew growls, pulling away from me and reaching inside his jacket for a pack of cigarettes. "Fuck me," he repeats as he lights up and exhales a burst of blue smoke. "I knew I should just drive away. Why the fuck did I wait for you here?"

"I'm glad you're here." But I'm feeling kind of dazed.

"Who was that boy?"

"That's my friend, Clancy."

"Does Clancy know that you're gay?"

"Well," I swallow the lump in my throat, "he does now."

"Can you pass me off as your uncle, or something? We were only kissing hello, after all."

"The only uncle I have is a municipal court judge in Bellingham. I've met him maybe twice in my life."

We sit in silence a moment as Clancy's dad drives his car out of the parking lot, slowly passing the Mercedes. In the back seat, Clancy is staring out the window, his nose pressed up against the glass. All I can do is stare back at him, wondering if he's putting two and two together. Will he tell his parents? Will he tell everybody in school on Monday? Will he ever speak to me again?

Matthew

What the fuck possessed me to wait for Lucas in the parking lot?

Pure selfishness. I wanted to see him. Wanted to tell him how amazing he was up there on that stage.

Okay, he was no Jack Nicholson. He's untrained, his performance was all over the place; at times it was almost over the top. Lucas could probably best be described as a diamond in the rough, but there's no denying that he has—something. What are the buzzwords? Charisma? Stage presence? Anyway, there was something so amazingly honest and beautiful in his performance, despite being an inexperienced and somewhat gawky teenager in an overly ambitious high school production of *Cuckoo's Nest*.

But he really can act, and there's no doubt at all that with training and experience and self-discipline, Lucas can have a bright future as an actor. And I wanted to tell him all that, for his sake, for my own sake, but also because his father rejected him. I know what it's like to face the world alone, to have nobody on your side, nobody cheering you on. I wanted to make that up to Lucas. He deserves it.

Instead, I fucked up. Lucas' friend saw us kissing in the school parking lot. It wasn't much of a kiss, maybe Lucas can pass it off next time he sees the guy. But it's possible that this kid, this Clancy, could turn on him. It happens sometimes, when friends find out you're gay; I know that from first-hand experience. And now, because of me, Lucas might be exposed to his classmates, to his teachers, even to his father.

"Let me take you home," I say at last, rolling down my window to toss out my cigarette, starting the car and revving the engine.

"Can't we go to your place for a while first?"

Christ, I'd like nothing better, but "No," I tell him as I pull the Mercedes out of the parking lot. "It's already twelve-thirty." I shake my head again, reminding myself that I've been fucking a kid with a curfew.

"I don't care," Lucas murmurs, but I ignore him and we drive in silence to the North Admiral district in West Seattle.

Naturally I can't deliver him to his door, though I drove by the place once to take a look. It's a three-story English Tudor style house, built about 1910, surrounded by luxuriant dark green lawns, mostly hidden from the street behind a high ornamental iron fence. Lucas said there's a view of Elliot Bay from a terrace in the back. The place must be worth at least a cool million.

I stop a block away from his house and he opens the door, then closes it again and turns to face me. "Thank you for coming to my play," he says, sounding formal and polite.

"Lucas," I admit, "it was my pleasure. But I'm sorry I ruined your evening, and even sorrier if there are going to be repercussions for you."

"Don't worry," Lucas comforts me—he's comforting me! "Clancy is my friend, he won't give me away. I'll call him tomorrow."

"Call me too, please. Do you remember my number?" When he says yes, I add, "Let me know if everything's all right."

"Sure," he smiles. "Bye now!"

I sit in the car for a few minutes, watching Lucas walk quickly down the sidewalk and disappear into the evening fog. And now I'm wondering all over again—does insanity (or stupidity) run in my family?

Lucas

Mrs. Goodwin is lying in wait; she attacks when I reach the top of the stairs. She seems to jump out of the shadows, though probably I'm just so hyper from the play that everything takes on more drama than real life.

"You're late," she scolds, folding her hands on her high round stomach and tilting her head to one side. She has a long beaky nose and small yellowish eyes that never seem to blink. I've always thought she looked like a tall bird, a crow or a black bird—she almost always wears black dresses and sensible black shoes with thick soles. "Your curfew is midnight," she reminds me, pursing her lips.

"I was at school." I try to slip around her but she shoots out her hand and grabs my arm. "It's true," I insist, "I had a part in the school play, and—"

"So your father told me." Her fingers dig into my arm, almost-hurting.

She's a master at almost-hurting, careful always to maintain some kind of imaginary line between publicly caring nanny and secretly cruel prison guard.

She's not really cruel, but she's not really caring, either. It was confusing when I was little, because Mrs. Goodwin would speak so softly and smile so sweetly when others were around, then when we were alone, she dropped the pretense and was efficient and business-like, supervising my bath, tucking me into bed, fulfilling the role of a paid mother-substitute.

Sometimes I used to complain about Mrs. Goodwin to my father. He'd listen, but there was never anything concrete to accuse her of. Did she take good care of me? Yes. Was she unkind? No. So what was the problem? All I could ever come up with was, "She doesn't like me," to which my father had a routine answer: "If you tried harder to be a good boy, maybe Mrs. Goodwin, and everybody else, would like you better."

Each time my father got married, people congratulated me on getting a new mother. But the new mothers didn't stick around very long. I was seven the first time Dad re-married. My new mother Debra was blonde and very beautiful. Mrs. Goodwin said I was too young to attend the wedding, but I met the new Mrs. Denholme afterwards, when they came to the house to pick up luggage on the way to the airport. They were going to Greece for a honeymoon.

Mrs. Goodwin had me clean and shiny and waiting with her in the hall when Dad and Debra came breezing in, all happy smiles, and I was thrilled when my new mother leaned down to give me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. Then they were gone, and when they came back a couple weeks later, Debra threw herself into the role of a successful corporate attorney's wife. Dad was always working, even at home. I was used to not seeing him much, but somehow I'd expected that my new mother would spend time with me. She didn't. Apparently she didn't spend time with Dad either. At any rate, within a year they were divorced.

I was ten the next time my father married, old enough for a wedding, but this time my dad and his new wife were married in Brazil, and I didn't meet this one—Alhambra—until a month later. Alhambra was crazy, and I loved her. She was tall with long dark hair and sparkling eyes; she was always singing and she laughed a lot. Sometimes she'd take me with her when she went shopping or visiting friends, and she always held my hand and kissed my cheek when we were together, and she'd give me sips from her wine glass—in my memory, she is always holding a wine glass.

Mrs. Goodwin didn't approve of children drinking wine, and I suspect she didn't approve of singing and laughing either. She complained to Dad that Alhambra spoiled me, and he decided I couldn't go out with her anymore. I don't know if Alhambra argued about it with Dad or not, but the visits

stopped. After a while the singing and laughing stopped too. On my eleventh birthday, Mrs. Goodwin told me that Alhambra had moved back to Brazil. Dad never married again after that.

“Shame on you,” Mrs. Goodwin frowns, bringing me back to the present. She’s still digging her fingers into my arm. “Deliberately disobeying your father—after all he’s done for you!”

Twisting my arm out of her grip, I assure her, “I know all that Dad’s done for me. But I’m grown up now and I’m going to choose my own career.” I sound pretty brave, but the truth is, Mrs. Goodwin can still scare me.

“Shame on you,” she says again, but I just turn my back on her, move away down the hall toward my room.

“By the way,” I say breezily, “I know you don’t care, but I was really good in the play, everybody said so. And I AM going to be an actor someday.”

She’s following me, and asks, “Do you imagine anyone would tell the truth if you were bad?”

For a moment I’m frozen with sudden uncertainty—until I remember Matthew. He wouldn’t say I was good unless he really believed it. We reach my room and I turn around to face Mrs. Goodwin. “Good night,” I say firmly, closing the door. I don’t care if I am being rude.

I hear one more muttered “Shame on you,” before the sound of footsteps fades away down the hall, then I throw off my clothes and jump into the shower. I’m all sweaty from my performance and the anxiety that preceded it. In the privacy of my bathroom, I can imagine that Matthew is in the shower with me, his arms circling around from behind, holding me tight. He’s whispering into my ear the words he said in the car: “Lucas, you were amazing!”

Time Present: June 6, 1994

Matthew

Long ago, I learned to compartmentalize work and everything else, by keeping my private life separate from the office, and by closing the door on personal feelings and emotions, problems and crises, to focus on the work at hand. This skill has helped my success tremendously, and nothing interferes with my concentration at the office. So when Kathryn buzzes the intercom and tells me I have an urgent call on line two from Mister Randle McMurphy, I’m surprised to acknowledge to myself that worries about Lucas have been colliding inside my brain like atoms in a nuclear reactor.

When I take the call, Lucas' voice explodes in my ear. "Matthew! Matthew!"

It's been two days since the play, since Lucas' little friend caught us kissing. I didn't hear from Lucas all weekend, and this morning it was all I could do to behave perfectly normally, driving to the office and putting on my Monday morning face.

Lucas sounds almost hysterical, so I say, "Shh, calm down. Calm down, and tell me what's happening."

"Can you come and get me? Please?"

"I can't leave the office, I have a meeting in a few minutes. What's up, Lucas? Where are you?"

"I'm at school. Or I was, I walked out. Ran out." He gasps then and his voice breaks. "Ran away, like a fucking coward!"

"Shh," I repeat, "Where are you now?"

"I don't know. I'm sort of lost. I'm outside a donut shop on ... umm ..."

There's a pause, then Lucas says, "It's called Bailey's Donuts, on Hampton Court Road. It's a few miles from my school."

"Tell me what happened. Why'd you leave school?"

"Matthew, it's Clancy! He—he told everybody. In gym! It was too awful, I just ... I ran away. Like a fucking coward!"

"Sometimes running away is a good thing." Then I toughen my voice and add, "So stop beating yourself up, and get a grip." Sympathy right now might make him feel worse.

"Okay." Lucas clears his throat. "I'm sorry."

"Do you have any money? Can you get a bus or a taxi to Capitol Hill? I could meet you at The Cat's Pajamas in a couple hours. Can you hold out till then?"

"I guess." Lucas is disappointed. "Yes," he says then, his voice sounding stronger, "sure. I'll be okay, Matthew. I just kind of panicked and," he drops his voice and murmurs, "all I could think of was, I wanted to be with you."

That little admission tugs at my chest. "You can be with me this afternoon. I have this fucking meeting I can't cancel. Unless," I amend, "you really can't wait?"

"No," he contradicts, his voice even stronger. "I can wait, I'll be okay. Sorry I'm acting like a wienie."

"Hmm," I lower my voice. "Shut up, you're making me hungry for your wienie."

Lucas laughs then and I relax; he'll be all right now. "So," I glance at my watch, "I'll be there in less than two hours. I'll bet you're hungry right now."

Have lunch soon, so you don't pass out before I get there. You can put it on my tab at the Pajamas, if you're short of cash."

"Okay."

"And Lucas?" I pause, then say forcefully, "Try to forget about this until I get there, and we can talk it out. It'll be okay. I promise."

And where the fuck do I get off promising him anything?

Lucas

I'm trying to do my algebra assignment, though I can't concentrate very well. When Matthew slides into the booth across from me, I slam the book shut and say, "Hi." I'm feeling kind of embarrassed to see him, after I made such a fool of myself on the telephone. Maybe he's mad that he had to leave work to see me.

But he doesn't look mad, he smiles and reaches across the table to take both my hands in his. "Hey," he says, and my hands reflexively clutch his and hang on tight. And now I start to shake, damn it. I wanted to be cool and calm by the time he got here.

"Easy," Matthew says, and I stare at our clasped hands as I take a deep breath, calming myself. I relax against the back of the booth, pull my hands away and fold them on the tabletop. Now I can look at him and tell him what happened.

"Start at the beginning."

"Okay. Well, first off, I couldn't call you on the weekend, because Dad took away my phone privileges, in fact he wouldn't let me leave the house. I'm probably grounded for the rest of my life. Or for the rest of my life that I live at home."

"He's mad about you being in the play?"

"Yeah, I told you he wanted me to drop out. Actually, he ordered me to drop out, so when he found out that I did it anyway, he went ballistic. He took the phone and TV out of my room, and said I was under house arrest all weekend, and after that I could only go to school and come straight home. 'Until further notice,' he said."

Matthew's surprised. "That's pretty harsh. I guess I didn't understand that he was so angry about the play. I still don't understand why."

"Dad says everything I do now will reflect on my future. Like, if I make a fool of myself on stage, someday I'll be sorry and it could be used against me."

"Used against you?"

"Like, if I go into politics, it could look like I wasn't a serious student in school."

"I'm sorry, Lucas, but that is patently ridiculous."

"Well, yeah!" I agree eagerly. "And besides, I'm not ever going into politics! But he says, someday I might change my mind, and then I'll be sorry I did stupid stuff when I was a kid."

"Being in a school play is not stupid, for Christ's sake. Besides—you were magnificent!"

"Really?" I feel myself blushing.

"Yes." And he smiles with a look that melts my bones. "Go on now," he urges.

"I couldn't call Clancy either, so I couldn't try to do what you suggested, you know, tell him you were my uncle or something. Then, when I saw him this morning at school, he seemed normal and said hi, and told me again I was good in the play. It seemed like he'd forgotten it or something, so I decided just to leave it alone."

"Good," Matthew nods.

"Yeah, except, he hadn't really forgotten, he was just pretending. We have algebra together at eight, then he's in my gym class at eleven. We were playing basketball, shirts and skins. Clancy has asthma so he doesn't do any sports with running in them, but he has to suit up, and he was watching from the sidelines. Then we headed for the showers, and Clancy bumped into this guy, Paul, and Paul pushes him and says, 'Get off me, faggot.' He pushed kind of hard and Clancy fell down."

"Did the teacher hear?"

"Yeah, but you know, everybody calls everybody else faggot all the time. Didn't they do that when you were in school?"

"Yeah," Matthew nods. "Some things never change."

"So anyway, Clancy's trying to get up, we're in the locker room, and Paul pushes him again, and says, 'Don't come in here to watch us shower, you're always staring at us when we're naked.' Clancy falls against a bench and says, 'I do not, that's not true, I'm not a fag,' and stuff like that."

"Do you think Clancy's gay?"

"No," I say. "Clancy's normal."

"Jesus Christ, Lucas, being gay is normal!"

"Yeah, I know. But not in high school it's not. Anyway, Clancy's straight. He likes girls. He had a girlfriend in eighth grade, I saw him kiss her once."

“That’s hardly proof,” Matthew points out, but adds, “never mind that, go on with what happened.”

“Okay. So anyway Paul pushes again and Clancy falls on the floor again, and this time he hits his head on the bench. So I go over to give him a hand, help him up, and when Clancy gets to his feet, his face is all red, and he uses both hands to shove me away. ‘Get off!’ he yells at me, then he turns to Paul and he says, ‘Luke is the faggot, not me!’ And I just—I just stood there staring at him, I couldn’t think what to say.”

Matthew’s frowning but he nods for me to continue. “Then this guy Jim says, ‘Luke ain’t a faggot, at least he can play ball,’ and another guy says ‘Yeah, but he can’t sink a basket,’ and everybody laughs. Because actually that’s true, I suck at basketball. And I think it would have been all right then, but Clancy wouldn’t let it go. ‘Luke is so too a fag,’ he yells at Paul, and he looks around at the faces of the boys gathered around us in the locker room, and he says, ‘I saw him kissing a guy after the play Friday night.’”

“Christ,” Matthew says.

“Yeah. So I try to laugh and say, ‘That was my uncle, he came from Bellingham to see me perform,’ and Clancy says, ‘I saw them doing tongues, uncles don’t kiss with tongues!’”

“He couldn’t have seen that through a car window,” Matthew objects. “Besides, it’s not true.”

“‘That’s not true!’ is exactly what I said! And then Paul turns on me and says, ‘I always thought you were a faggot, Denholme,’ and somebody else says, ‘All actors are fags,’ and somebody else says, ‘Luke’s always staring at me in the shower,’ and—and Matthew, then everybody jumps in and starts saying all this stuff—they kept saying stuff like I never had a girlfriend and I can’t play sports and on and on, and it was this crowd of faces staring at me, all of them getting madder and madder.”

I stop to take a breath, and Matthew nods for me to continue.

“And then,” I tell him, “Paul shoved me against the lockers. I shoved him back, and then the teacher comes over finally, and says, break it up. I just grabbed my clothes and my bag and got the fuck out of there. I didn’t run, but I walked really fast, and kept walking and walking. I didn’t know what to do. So I called you. And then I came here and changed my clothes, and now you’re here, so tell me what to do!”

Matthew

"Tell me what to do!" Lucas begs, his face all eager and hopeful, as if I'm fucking Superman, Batman and The Avengers all rolled into one. How did I let myself get sucked into the middle of some teenager's identity crisis?

I could just get up and walk away. I have no responsibility for this boy. So, I fucked him a few times, that doesn't mean anything. The kiss in the parking lot ... that was my fault. But if Lucas had handled himself differently in the locker room instead of running away, the situation could have been defused, and he wouldn't be sitting here now, looking at me with such hope and trust in those big blue eyes. Christ.

Dean always said I'd do anything to avoid emotional entanglements, and he wasn't half wrong. Melodramatic weeping and wailing and other manifestations of human frailty are all forms of manipulation; they have no effect on me. I was a tough kid—had to be—and I grew up to be a tough man. I'm responsible only for myself. All I have to do now is stand up and walk away. Let Lucas deal with this situation himself; he'll be stronger for it later.

And yet ... and yet, I realize that, even if I hadn't kissed Lucas, even if his problems had nothing to do with me, I simply cannot abandon him. Amazingly, I don't even want to.

"It'll be okay," I say soothingly. "It'll work out." A tremulous smile appears on Lucas' face, and the knowledge of his trust in me is a heavy weight on my shoulders.

"Here's what you should do," I begin, mentally shaking my head as I hear my own voice sounding unrecognizably gentle. "Go home this afternoon right on schedule. Do your homework, go to bed early, and then tomorrow morning, go back to school. Act as if nothing happened. I really think this whole incident will blow over, if you ignore it and move on."

Lucas looks doubtful, so I add, "I know that kids can be nasty—I know that very well." (Christ, do I know that!) "But if you tough it out, laugh it off, if you let the teasing roll off your back—then I think it will soon be forgotten."

"What about Clancy? Should I say something to him, to the others, if they accuse me of being gay? Should I deny it?"

"Lucas, at some point in your life, you'll come out. Maybe you're not ready now, but you might not have a choice. And you must never deny who you are. Don't do anything now that you'll regret later."

"So you think I should admit it? Everybody will hate me."

“Bullshit,” I’m annoyed. “Everybody won’t hate you—but so what if they do? You can’t live your life to please anybody else. Be true to yourself. That’s the only way to live.”

He’s silent then, looking down at the table. “Okay? Lucas, are you okay with this?” I have a sudden wave of doubt about all the alleged good advice I’m giving this kid. How well do I really know him? Maybe he’s not strong enough to handle it, if he’s forced out of the closet at school right now.

“I’m okay,” he assures me, looking into my eyes. His forehead is furrowed, his eyes are crinkled up. I can tell that he’s worried, but he’s putting up a good front. “I’m okay,” he says again.

“You don’t need to volunteer anything though,” I backtrack a bit. “I do really think this whole thing will blow over, if you brazen it out, act like it’s not important. But Lucas,” I emphasize, “I can’t tell you what to do. This is going to be your call. It will be your decision to do whatever the situation warrants. Have faith in yourself that you’ll do the right thing. I’m sure you will.”

I wish I were as confident as I sound. Now I’m getting worried. But I try to brush off my own as well as Lucas’ concerns. “It’s almost three o’clock—are you ready to go home now? I can give you a lift at least part way, or do you think you should take the bus?”

I can’t drive him home in daylight, especially after the incident at school today. I’ll bet most kids in Lucas’ neighborhood, whose parents have incomes equivalent to David Denholme’s, have their own cars. But surprisingly, Lucas has never even driven a car. He told me his father wouldn’t buy him a car, wouldn’t even let Lucas take Driver’s Ed at school. I’m coming to realize that Denholme’s a much stricter parent than I imagined.

Glancing at his watch and then shoving books into his backpack, Lucas asks, “Could you drive me cross town, so I can get a direct bus home? Then I won’t have to transfer. I don’t want to be late.”

“Sure.”

When we’re in the car, I glance around to be certain no one’s nearby before kissing Lucas. We’re in the gay ghetto, in the parking lot behind the Pajamas, but still, at this moment, I don’t want any of his little friends to see us. The kiss has a surprising result—it melts Lucas’ veneer of cool confidence, he’s actually shaking as he slides his arms around my neck and holds on tight. I feel my own body responding, as I tighten my grip around him, willing some of my strength into his slim body.

Lucas is the first to break our embrace. He pulls away and sits up straight, squaring his shoulders. "I'm ready," he says. And I realize that I feel very proud of him.

CHAPTER 7



Lucas

“Lucas! Where have you been?”

I’ve just come in the front door, heading down the hall toward the kitchen. My father’s voice stops me in my tracks. I turn around and see him standing outside the door of his office, darkly frowning.

“Dad! You’re home early.”

“Come into my office,” he orders, turning away and holding the door open as he ushers me inside. Dad’s never home this early; it’s got to be bad news that he’s here now, and he’s obviously angry. He passes by me and sits down behind his desk, but when I move toward one of the other chairs, he snaps his fingers. “Don’t sit. This won’t take long.” So I stand in front of his desk, dropping my backpack to the floor.

“Where have you been?” he repeats, his eyes hard as marbles. I open my mouth, but before I can speak, he adds, “And don’t lie. Remember that I can always see right through you.”

“I was walking, for a while,” I answer honestly. “Then I was far away from home, so I took a bus. I’m not very late, am I?” I know I’m not, it’s just three-thirty.

“Apparently you’re nearly four hours late,” he corrects me sharply. “If you left school after your physical education class, as the teacher reports that you did.”

“Mr. Johnson?” I can’t imagine my gym teacher calling Dad. Now I wonder what happened after I left school. “Why’d he call you?”

“You were involved in an altercation of some kind apparently, then you ran away and cut your other classes. Johnson told the principal, who called Mrs.

Goodwin. She called me at work. And I am asking you again: Where have you been?"

"I was walking." Best stick to my story now. "I was—upset. Some guys were picking on Clancy, and I tried to stop them. Then they started in on me. Paul Michaelson shoved me, I shoved him back, and then Mr. Johnson stepped in. I was upset, so I left. I didn't run away. I walked away, so I could cool off."

Dad's staring hard at me, his eyes boring into my skull. "Did you meet someone on your walk?"

"M-meet someone?"

"Someone with a silver Mercedes?"

Now I'm feeling panicky. "You saw us?"

"So, there is someone!" He stands up, and with his voice as sharp as a knife, he demands, "Lucas, who do you know with a Mercedes?"

"What do you ... I don't know what you mean?"

"Mr. Johnson took your little friend Clancy to the principal's office. Clancy claims he saw you get into a silver Mercedes after the play Friday night. The play that you were forbidden—FORBIDDEN! to take part in."

I'm frozen to the spot. I can't think of anything to say. Why is Clancy doing this? "I came home right after the play," I hedge. "Mrs. Goodwin was here—she knows what time I got home."

"DID YOU, or DID YOU NOT, get into a car with a stranger after your damned play?"

"N-no." I swallow the lump in my throat and stare back at him.

"How dare you lie to me, Lucas? How dare you? You were SEEN. There were WITNESSES." He comes around the end of his desk. I don't want to back up, but I do anyway. I take two steps backward. He's so tall and so menacing when he's this awfully angry.

"I'm not a criminal on trial," I try to object, but he's shaking his head.

"Oh yes you are, young man, you sure as HELL are on trial right this minute. Tell me the truth. Did you get into a car with a stranger?"

"I am telling the truth," I insist. "He's n-not a stranger," I gulp. "He's just somebody I know."

Dad's grimacing now, his mouth stretched wide with anger. "Somebody you know? A Hollywood producer maybe, checking out the local acting talent? Is that it, Lucas?"

He's being sarcastic, but I answer anyway. "No, he's just a friend."

"What kind of friend?"

He keeps moving toward me and I keep moving away, till abruptly my back is up against the wall. Dad stops then, and I don't want to be scared, but I'm scared anyway—his face is so red and his eyes are almost bulging out of his head. A vein in his temple is throbbing, and I'm really afraid that Mrs. Goodwin was right after all, I am going to kill my dad, his head is going to explode any minute.

"Dad—"

"WHAT KIND OF FRIEND?"

I just stare back at him. I can't answer.

Dad shakes his head then, back and forth, back and forth. His voice suddenly quiet, he asks, almost conversationally, "Has he touched you, Lucas? Has he—soiled you, Lucas?"

"Soiled me?"

"IS HE A HOMOSEXUAL?"

From somewhere deep inside, I find a tiny kernel of courage. Or foolhardiness. I stop cowering against the wall, I stand up straight and face my father.

Be true to yourself, Matthew said. "Yes," I answer, as bravely as I can. "Yes, he is. And so am I."

I'm not ready for the open-handed smack across my face. I hear the crack of Dad's hand against my head before I even feel the blow. It knocks me sideways, but I don't fall down. My hands press against the wall and I stay upright, staring at my father. I'm shocked. He hasn't hit me for a long time, and he's never hit me this hard.

The second blow is not such a surprise, I'm able to dodge sideways. His hand connects with my face, but the force of the blow is deflected. Even so, the wind is knocked out of me, the shock of being hit finally registers in my brain, and still holding onto the wall, I slide down to sit on the floor with a thump.

I look up at my father, and for a moment I have this vision of him raising his foot and kicking me in the head. Staring up into his eyes, so wide and so red with anger, I realize that he's thinking about doing exactly that.

I struggle to rise, but as I do, Dad turns away. He turns and walks swiftly toward the other side of the room, and then raises his arm and slams his fist into the wall. Bang! He hits the wall, it makes a big dent. With a shiver, I realize that if Dad had hit my head that hard, I would absolutely be dead.

Maybe he realizes it too, because now he is calm. The anger seems to drain out of him as he stands staring at the wall. He's silent for a few moments, then he turns and walks behind his desk and sits down again. "Come here," he says.

Cautiously getting to my feet, I move forward until I'm again standing in front of his desk.

"This is what you are going to do," Dad informs me, his voice terribly calm and controlled. "You will go back to school tomorrow—Mrs. Goodwin will escort you to and from school every day for the rest of this term. You will apologize to each of your teachers for cutting class. You will refrain from speaking to any of the boys involved in today's altercation. If they speak to you, you will ignore them. You will never see that—that person again. You will finish this term at school, and then I am sending you away."

"Sending me away?" I try to ask, then I cough and cover my mouth with my hand. When I pull my hand away, I discover with amazement that it's splattered with blood. I touch my mouth and realize that my lip is bleeding.

"There are schools that deal with—difficult—boys like you, Lucas. They can fix this problem, and they are very discreet. No one will ever know. And then you WILL go to the university I select for you. No more nonsense about acting. Do I make myself clear?"

Ignoring everything else Dad has said, I pick out the one thing that bothers me most. "I don't need to be fixed. I'm not broken."

"Stop that smart-ass nonsense right now," Dad orders. He takes a deep breath and blows it out before declaring, "There has never been a homosexual in this family, and there never will be." After another pause, he adds, "You will do exactly as I say, Lucas—or else."

There's a long silence as we stare at each other across the desk. Finally I dare to ask, "Or else, what?"

"Or else, Lucas, you are out on your ear. You will leave my house and you will never come back. You'll be disowned and disgraced. You will no longer be my son."

I stand staring at him, struggling to understand that he really means this. I've never measured up to his standards, to his expectations, but somehow I never believed that he was prepared to throw me away, only because I am not the son he wants me to be.

Not surprisingly, I feel tears gear up behind my eyes and start sliding down my face. I drop my head into my bloody hands and I'm sobbing.

"Do you understand, Lucas?" I hear Dad asking, and I can't speak, but I nod yes, I understand. Then I grab my backpack and head for the door. Dad gets up and follows me, holds open the door and stands watching as I walk down the hall. When I pass the foot of the stairs and keep walking, Dad calls, "Where are you going? Lucas, where do you think you are going?"

I don't answer, I can't answer, I'm too busy sobbing and trying not to fall down. I pull open the front door and move outside, stumble down the steps without falling, and I keep walking, walking and crying. I hear Dad's voice calling after me, "Come back here, come back here," but I just keep on walking away from my father and my home and any hope I ever had of making my father proud of me, of making him love me, even just a little. I keep walking.

Matthew

I've got a project deadline tomorrow, so I leave the office early to work undisturbed at home. The phone rings once and I let the answering machine pick up. I have a fleeting thought that Lucas might be calling, but I know that's impossible; his father took his phone away. When the phone rings again five minutes later, I grab the receiver.

"Yes?" I bark, prepared to cut off the caller with a few harsh words.

"Matthew?"

It is Lucas, after all. He says nothing else, but I can hear his ragged breathing. "What is it? What's wrong?" I've jumped to my feet and I'm clutching the telephone almost hard enough to break the plastic. There's silence on the other end. "Lucas! Talk to me."

I hear another voice in the background, and then somebody comes on the phone and says, "Matt, this is Patrick, at The Pajamas? Your little friend is here, and—"

"Pat! What's going on? Is Lucas all right? What the fuck—"

"He'll be okay. Relax, he's okay. Only, I think you'd better come down here right away. Can you do that?"

"Yes, I'll be right there. But what happened?"

Patrick says quietly, "The boy won't talk, he just asked me to call you for him. He's been hurt, and—"

"Hurt?" Immediately I'm picturing a traffic accident, the bus Lucas took to get home smashed into some cars, I picture bloody carnage all over the street. Something's squeezing inside my chest and I can't breathe.

"Matt, he's okay. Honestly, he's all right. Apparently his dad hit him, that's all I can get out of him. But you need to come down here. I'd drive him to your place, but I can't leave the café right now. It's only Raul and me, three waiters called in sick, and I—"

His dad hit him. His dad hit him. Christ almighty! And I'm the one who sent him home.

"Matt? Are you there?"

“Give me ten minutes, I’ll be right there.”

“Well, don’t kill yourself or anybody else getting over here,” Patrick says but I barely hear him. I slam down the phone and rush out the door, running to the parking lot.

It’s a miracle that I don’t kill myself on the way to the Pajamas on Capitol Hill. I’m not speeding, I’m stopping for red lights, and outwardly I’m sure I appear cool as a cucumber. But inside, I’m raging, angry, furious. With myself. I sent him home. I sent Lucas home. Christ almighty, I should have known better.

Should have known better, because the same thing happened to me. Got in a fight at school and ran away, ran away from school and then hung out in the park till it was time for Gramps to come home. I didn’t dare tell Grandma. I was sure she would kill me and bury my body in the back yard. Like she’d buried the neighbor’s cat she accidentally ran over with the car. “No one will ever know,” she’d said at the time, swearing me to silence.

Time Past: September 1975

“Dummy!”

“I am not a dummy!” I hotly deny Billy Banner’s accusation.

But I feel like a dummy. Before coming to live with my grandparents, I never was in school before. Comfort taught me to read and write, and Peace taught me arithmetic, but I never was in a classroom in my life. When Grandma took me to the big brick school building, a man in a dark blue suit asked me lots of questions. Then he sent me to a room where a lady made me take some tests.

I’m nine years old and the man who’s called Principal said I’m supposed to be in fourth grade. But the lady told him I could only do second-grade work. I was ashamed and felt like crying, but I didn’t.

Then the man and lady and Grandma talked a while, I had to wait in the hall. They called me back in and said I was going to be in third grade, but that I had to work really hard to catch up with the other kids. They said the teacher would give me extra lessons after school sometimes.

A couple days later, I started school. Mostly I like it. I love to read and now I get to do it all day, and have my very own books that I get to bring home. I like all the things we do in school. Except recess.

I’m older and bigger than the other boys in my room. There’s so many boys and girls, I never was around so many kids before. There were kids in some of

the camps and communes we'd stayed at, but Peace moved us around so fast, I didn't have time to make friends. Peace always got mad at somebody in the camps, and Comfort would have to hurry and pack up our stuff, and we'd follow Peace, moving away somewhere else.

I hate recess. And lunch time. We have to stay outside on the playground. Billy and his friends are the bosses of the third-graders' corner of the playground. They pick on everybody, but especially me.

I stare Billy in the eye and say again, "I am not a dummy!" Peace told me never to turn my back on an enemy, and I guess Billy, and most of the other boys in Miss Clarkson's class, are my enemies.

"Dummy," Billy says again, making a mean face. Here come Jack and Tommy. They are mean too, I don't like them. Then Billy sings, "Dummy, dummy, got no mummy!"

"I do so too have a mother," I contradict him. A big crowd of kids gathers around to see what's happening.

"No, you don't," Tommy laughs. "You're an orphan, I heard Miss Clarkson tell another teacher. That's why you're so dumb, you were raised in the forest by wolves!"

"I am not an orphan!"

It's no use. Jack and Tommy start to sing with Billy, "Matthew is a or-fink, Matthew is a or-fink, Matthew is a inky, stinky or-fink!"

I move forward and put my hands on Tommy's chest and push him, push him right down on the ground! Nobody moves for a minute, then Tommy jumps up and he pushes me back, but I'm bigger than him and I raise my fist and hit him in the face. It feels good for a minute, and then it feels really bad, when I remember Peace raising his arm and hitting Comfort in the face. So I drop my hands and feel hot with shame.

Then they come at me, Jack and Tommy, they come at me and shove me, knock me to the ground, and keep hitting and kicking me for a while, until somebody gets Mr. Campion, the playground monitor, and he pulls the boys off.

"Who started this?" Mr. Campion demands. Every finger points at me.

Mr. Campion drags me to the principal's office, and after a lecture (I say nothing, nothing at all. Peace taught me to never say anything to officials), the principal tries to call my grandparents. Nobody's home, they're both at work. So he gives me a note for them, and sends me back to class. But I don't go back to class, instead I escape out a side door and run away.

Then I wait in the park for Gramps. Grandma gets home first, so I hang out another hour until it's time for Gramps to come home. As soon as I see him, I run down the street and get to the door of the house at the same time as he does. I'm out of breath and can't say a word. Gramps opens the door and I follow him inside.

"Where the Dickens have you been?" Grandma says. She grabs my collar and pulls me to stand in front of her. "And what happened to your face, it's all bruised! And your clothes are torn."

"I ran away from school," I admit. I know I have to tell the truth. I pull the principal's note from my pocket and hand it to her, then back up a couple steps so I can be closer to where Gramps is standing.

"Good grief!" Grandma huffs, reading the note. "In trouble for fighting! You were hitting other children, this note says." She looks up from the note to glare at me, then looks at Gramps and says, "I told you he'd be trouble!"

"Now, Sharon—"

"Don't 'now Sharon' me, Bill. We took him into our home and I swear, he's turning out to be a snake in our bosom! I told you so." Grandma grabs me then and shakes me really hard.

"I'm not a snake," I deny it, but she pays no attention.

"Sharon, stop."

"I will not stop!" Grandma cries. "I told you a million times, we're too old to take on this burden. We didn't work our whole lives just to have a decent roof over our heads, then we get this boy dropped on us to feed and clothe! And what thanks do we get, I ask you, Bill, what thanks do we get? He's nothing but trouble, and now we find out he's a bully too. He's beating up little children on the playground."

"Maybe there was a reason for the fighting," Gramps says, laying a hand on Grandma's arm. She brushes his hand off, but Gramps goes on, "at least he should get to tell his side of the story."

"Baloney," Grandma says. "There you go, making excuses."

Gramps asks, real sharp, "Matthew, why were you fighting?"

I look up at him and swallow a big lump in my throat. "They called me names. And I'm not a snake."

"Names!" Grandma snorted. "Don't you know that sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt you?"

I never heard that before, but it's not true anyway. It makes a pain deep inside when other kids call me names, and Grandma does it too. It does so too hurt.

“What kind of names?” Gramps asks.

“Dummy,” I blurt out. “And orphan.”

“Well, you are an orphan,” Grandma says. “Or as good as.”

“Shut up! I am not either an orphan!” I yell at her, my face is burning hot, and then Grandma leans forward and slaps my face, hard. I fall backward, fall right on my butt on the floor.

“I am not an orphan,” I insist, trying so hard not to cry. “Orphan means your parents are dead. Comfort and Peace aren’t dead, they just went to the mountain!”

“Don’t raise your voice to me, young man,” Grandma warns, leaning down to smack my face again. It hurts so bad, I start crying anyway, even though I don’t want to.

“And now you’re going to be punished. You were a very, very bad boy, and you have to learn your lesson. You’ll march straight up to bed right now, and no supper for you tonight.”

My mouth drops open and I ask desperately, “No food?” Now I really can’t stop the tears. “Can’t you just spank me instead?”

Then Gramps puts his hands on my shoulders, lifts me to my feet and pulls me along behind him. “I’ll punish Matthew,” he informs Grandma. “I’ll take him down to the basement and teach him a lesson. You get supper on the table, woman. For all of us.”

“But—”

“I think this skinny boy’s missed enough meals for one lifetime. Go on now, Matthew, get down those stairs, right now!”

I’m scared to think of Gramps punishing me, but I’m relieved that I won’t have to miss supper after all. I scramble ahead of him down the stairs to the damp-smelling basement, rubbing the tears from my burning hot face. I wait at the foot of the stairs and then follow as Gramps leads the way to the other side of the basement near the furnace where he has his workbench.

“Sit there,” he points to a high stool in one corner, and then he sits down on the other stool. Gramps pulls a big plastic box with a handle off a shelf and opens it up. He takes out two spools of some kind of wire, he unrolls two long pieces of it, and cuts it with a sharp tool. I’m starting to shiver, staring at the wire. I wonder if he’s going to tie me up?

Then Gramps opens another box, and he takes out a shiny thin curved piece of metal with sharp hooks on it, and I shiver even harder, trying to imagine what torture he’s planning. Then Gramps reaches up on a high shelf and

brings down a small box. He opens it and takes out something that looks like feathers, brightly colored bird feathers.

Gramps settles on his stool and he puts the curved thing with sharp hooks into some big metal thing with jaws, he flips a handle and tightens the hook thing inside it. Then he takes the feathers and starts tying them to the hook thing with the long pieces of wire.

Finally I can't stand waiting any longer, I have to know what he's going to do to me. "Gramps," I gasp, breathless with fear, "Gramps, what are you going to do with those things?"

"Hmm?" Gramps glances over at me. "What's the matter, son, you never saw fishing lures before?"

"Fishing lures?"

"Yep. I make my own, and they're the best in Washington state, mark my words. If you're a good boy, I'll take you fishing with me next weekend. Would you like that?"

"But Gramps," I don't understand. "How are you going to punish me?"

"You're sitting in the corner, aren't you? With no TV? I think that's enough for this time. Next time, I'll spank you though, I sure as hell will!" he growls. "So no more fighting. Understand?"

"Yes," I nod, relief making me almost fall off the stool.

"And," Gramps adds, "when Grandma asks if you learned your lesson, just say 'yes, ma'am.' Got that?"

"Yes," I agree eagerly. "Yes, Gramps, I promise."

Time Present: June 6, 1994

Matthew

I pull into the parking lot behind The Pajamas with a spray of loose gravel and jump out of the car, moving quickly into the café. I glance around but don't see Lucas anywhere. Then Patrick's beside me, putting a hand on my arm.

"He's in my office," Pat says. "He's okay." Then he leads the way through the kitchen to the tiny cubicle he calls an office, a cramped space with a small desk and two chairs. Lucas is huddled on one of the chairs, head in his hands. When he hears us approach, he looks up, and I stifle a gasp as I see his face. It's red and swollen, there's dried blood on his mouth and chin and down the front of his shirt.

His eyes are also red and swollen. Obviously he's been crying, crying his heart out. And his eyes are bruised, too, dark with pain. Christ almighty.

Lucas

Matthew's here! I want to jump up and throw myself into his arms, but I can't. I turn my head away and bite hard on the inside of my cheek to stop crying. I'm so embarrassed. Now he can see what a coward I am. Now he'll be disgusted, he'll hate me, I'll never see him again.

I expect him to tell me to grow up, to stop being such a crybaby. I don't know what I expect, really, but he surprises me. He moves over by my chair, hunkers down next to me, and pulls me into his arms. He hugs me tight and murmurs, "I'm so sorry, Lucas."

That brings my head up and I pull away slightly—just slightly, I love the feel of his strong arms around me—but I pull back a few inches so I can see his face. "You're sorry?"

"Sorry I sent you home. Sorry I underestimated the situation. Sorry you got hurt."

"It was my fault," I admit. "It was my own fault."

"You beat yourself up?" he asks. "You banged your head against a wall?"

"No, but ... I let him hit me. My dad. I should've fought back."

"Don't be stupid." There's the rough, commanding voice I'd been expecting. "Don't be a fucking martyr. This was not your fault." Matthew gets up then and sits down on a corner of the desk facing me. He fixes me with a hard stare. "You're a kid. Your dad hit you. It happens to lots of kids. It's not your fault, and you would have been insane to hit him back—I've seen your dad, remember? He's got sixty pounds on you and he's almost a foot taller."

"Not a foot," I choke on a laugh. "That would make him six-seven or eight!"

"Yeah," he agrees, "and he'd be in the NBA, not a fucking attorney, and he'd get paid for knocking guys around every week."

"He didn't just hit me. He kicked me out. Disowned me."

Matthew denies my words. "That was anger speaking, he didn't mean it. People say stuff like that when they've lost their temper. Probably by tomorrow, he—"

"No, he did mean it," I say earnestly, leaning forward in my chair. "He—he knows, Matthew. He knows I'm gay, and he says there's never been a homosexual in our family and there never will be!"

"How does he know you're gay?"

"I told him."

"Holy shit. Is that why he hit you?"

"Yeah, mostly. And because I refused to do what he says. He was going to send me away! To be 'fixed,' he said. To make me be straight."

"Fixed?" That's Patrick, he's standing in the doorway listening. I don't mind, he's nice; he called Matthew for me, and let me wait in his office for privacy. "Fixed?" he repeats. "You don't need to be 'fixed,' Lucas. You're not broken."

"That's exactly what I told him!" I exclaim, sitting forward. Then I remember the look on Dad's face, the feel of his hand smacking me, and I slide backward in the chair again and turn my head away.

"Well," Matthew says, "first things first. We need to get you cleaned up. I'm surprised, Patty, that you didn't clean him up?"

"Don't give me that look," Patrick tsks. "I wanted you to see Lucas this way, see the real damage. And also," he lowers his voice and adds emphatically, "I think you should take him to an emergency room, maybe have some pictures taken."

"Pictures?" Matthew and I speak at once.

"Yeah, photographs. Document the injuries this kid's father inflicted on him. For future reference, in case this guy decides to make trouble somewhere down the line. I assume you're taking responsibility for Lucas now?"

There's a pause and quickly I say, "I can take care of myself."

"Yes," Matthew says. "Yes, he'll come home with me. Temporarily. Till we figure out what to do."

"I can take care of myself."

"No," Matthew denies it, frowning. Then his face softens and he says, "No, Lucas, you can't. You're coming home with me."

"I don't want to impose on you!"

"That never stopped you before," he answers dryly. "You've been imposing on me since the night I saved your ass, remember?"

"This is different!"

Matthew leans over then and presses his forehead on mine. With his eyes just inches away from my own, he murmurs, "Shut up," and then kisses my left eyebrow. "Okay?" Then he stands up and moves behind the desk. "Can I use your phone, Patrick?" he asks, then pulls a small notebook from his pocket. He turns a few pages, picks up the phone and dials.

"Jennifer!" Matthew says cheerfully. "Glad I caught you, this is—well, how flattering, you recognize my voice? I'm impressed." He listens and then says, "No time for chitchat, Jenn, I need your help. Yeah, well," he chuckles, "fuck

you, too. But seriously, I need you.” He waits and then says, “Who knew that that cold day in hell would finally arrive? Anyway, I have a young friend who’s been injured. He needs a doctor, but we need to be discreet, and we also might want to take photographs of his injuries, just in case.”

Matthew waits again and then says, “He’s been beaten up. He’s here with me now. Can you see him at home or—? Okay, we’ll meet at your office, in about fifteen, twenty minutes?” Nodding, he says, “Yeah, I’ll owe you big time for this, yeah-yeah. Thanks, Jenn.”

With his hand still on the phone, he tells Patrick, “Jennifer’s a friend, a physician, she’s agreed to see Lucas. She thinks it should be in her office, to make it official. We’d better get moving; I need to run by home and pick up my Polaroid.”

Matthew stands up, so I do too. He hugs Patrick and, though I feel a bit shy, I shake his hand. “Thank you very much,” I say formally, but Pat just smiles and pulls me against his chest for a hug.

“You’ll be okay,” he assures me. “Matt will take good care of you. Though I suspect that he’s been ‘taking care of you’ for a while now.”

“Fuck you,” Matthew punches his shoulder. He takes my hand and leads me from the office, through the kitchen and out the back door to his car.

Matthew

“When you said ‘young friend,’ you really meant young.” Jennifer gives me a look before turning to Lucas. “How old are you?”

“Almost eighteen,” he answers hastily. Too hastily.

“When will you be eighteen?”

Lucas glances away from Jenn’s hard stare and mumbles something. “What?” she demands, and more loudly he answers, “I’ll be eighteen in April.”

“Eleven months from now. So you’re jailbait.” Jennifer’s shaking her head.

“He’s not jailbait,” I’m annoyed. “The age of consent in Washington is sixteen. Not,” I add quickly, “not that there’s anything for him to consent to.”

“Mmm-hmm. So,” she returns to the business at hand. “Take a few photos, I’ll document the damage, initial and date the photos. Your father did this?” she’s asking Lucas, and he nods. “Why?”

“He found out ...” Lucas glances at me and I nod. “He found out that I’m gay.”

“Lovely,” Jennifer nods. “A not-unusual parental response, unfortunately. Are you going to press charges?”

“Huh?”

“For assault,” Jenn clarifies, as she pulls a plastic-covered tray from a cabinet and removes the wrappings, snaps on a pair of latex gloves.

Lucas mumbles, “No.”

Jenn glances at me. “It’s his call,” I say. “Okay, Lucas, let’s get these pictures taken.” He’s reluctant, but I insist. I think Pat was right that the whole thing should be documented. I snap a few pictures, and then Jennifer beckons for the kid to sit on an exam table. She adjusts a lamp to shine bright light on his face and begins clean-up operations.

Involuntarily, I flinch right along with Lucas as the doctor uses first soap and water to clean his face, then liberally applies Betadine to the cut on his lip. Looking at it more closely, Jenn grunts. “Matt, take a close-up picture of this cut. We’re going to need a few stitches or it won’t heal properly.” Then she asks Lucas, “Do you know what caused your lip to tear like this—was your father wearing a ring or something?”

“He wears a signet ring on his right hand,” Lucas confirms, then asks nervously, “stitches?”

“Don’t worry, it won’t hurt,” the doctor lies (they always lie), and she fills a hypodermic and injects Lucas’ lip. I have to turn away then, and I wince sympathetically as I hear the boy gasp with pain. But in a few minutes when I turn back again, he’s more relaxed, and wordlessly allows Jenn to sew him up and put on a bandage. Jenn says to use ice packs on Lucas’ bruised and swollen face for a few days.

We wait while the doctor fills out some forms, dates and initials the Polaroids, and promises to send me a typed copy of her report—and a bill for services—tomorrow. Jenn and I agree that I owe her a drink sometime, then we all leave the office together, and I drive Lucas home to the houseboat. He’s gotten quieter and quieter until he’s completely silent. I know he must be reliving the incident with his father, and no doubt feeling very sorry for himself.

I decide to settle him on the sofa. I still haven’t sorted out the guest room. He doesn’t put up a fight, and when he’s lying down, I bring an ice pack wrapped in a towel to hold against his swollen face. “Good night,” I tell him, and he murmurs a very subdued “good night” as I turn out the lights and head off to my room.

It’s early, but I don’t want to disturb Lucas, so I undress and get into bed. But I’m not really surprised a bit later to open my eyes and find him wordlessly standing beside the bed. I raise up the covers, and he slides across the sheets, then turns over, turns around and leans his back against my chest. Without hesitation, my arms go around him, holding him tight. And I murmur in his

ear, “It’s okay, Lucas, it’ll be okay. Go to sleep now.” In a few moments, I feel his muscles let go, and he slumps into sleep with a long exhausted sigh.

CHAPTER 8



Time Present: June 7, 1994

Matthew

“Well, what do you recommend, Russell? Yes. Yes, I see.”

I’m on the phone with a friend of a friend who works in family law. I’ve called Kathryn and told her to cancel my morning meetings. I need to get a handle on what to do about Lucas. I glance up and here he comes now, moving slowly down the hall from the bedroom, the sheet wrapped around him like a toga. When he gets close to me, he yawns, and a small cry escapes his lips as he covers his sore mouth with his hand. I utter a tiny moaning sound in sympathy.

Gesturing him toward me, I point to the chair by my desk. He plops down, and I see his tongue come out to feel the stitches in his lip. While listening to Russell and nodding, I lean forward to peer more closely at Lucas’ still-red face. The swelling’s gone down a bit, but with those stitches, there’ll be no blowjobs for a while. A pity, he was really getting the hang of it.

Reluctantly returning my mind to more mundane matters, I thank Russell for his advice and hang up the phone.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine. Well, you know. Okay, I guess.” Lucas looks very unhappy; I’m sure thoughts of his father’s rejection are dominating his mind right now. I remember the feeling well enough to be empathetic.

“You didn’t have dinner, you must be starving.”

“I guess.”

This apathy about food is worrisome—I know this kid’s appetite all right. With heartiness a bit forced, I suggest, “How about some eggs?” as I stand up and move down the hall. “You probably should eat soft foods for a few days.”

“Okay.” Lucas answers listlessly and follows me to the kitchen, perches on a stool at the counter while I play Julia Child.

I’m not much of a chef, but I make one hell of a great omelet. I put on the kettle and when it boils, fix a cup of weak tea with lots of sugar for Lucas to sip. “Let it cool off a bit, so you don’t burn your mouth,” I hear myself say, sounding suspiciously like Grandma, a horrifying thought. I put the toaster, bread and butter on the counter, and set Lucas to making toast while I show off my one-handed egg-cracking skills and whip up a damned fine diced ham and shredded Swiss cheese omelet, dividing it in half and slipping it out of the pan onto two plates. Then I take the stool next to Lucas and we dig in, the silence broken only by an occasional tiny “ouch” uttered by my breakfast companion.

I’m feeling surprisingly chipper today, a far cry from my normal Surly Morning Man persona (a nickname invented by Dean several years ago, not without reason). And chipper, too, for a man voluntarily saddling himself with onerous responsibility, facing God knows how many legal impediments to helping the minor son of an important Seattle citizen find a niche for himself.

I wait till Lucas has finished eating, carefully wiping his mouth with a paper napkin and finishing a large glass of milk. Surprisingly, I’d found a box of straws in a drawer—how they got there, I’ve no idea—but Lucas was grateful to be able to suck up his milk without hurting his lip.

Turning sideways on the stool, I ask, “Ready to hear what this lawyer acquaintance of mine recommends you do next?”

Lucas’ brow furrows as he nods warily.

“You have some options now, and so does your father. You said last night that you don’t want to press charges for assault. Still feel that way?” When he nods, I continue. “Option one is, simply go back home and do what your father tells you.”

Lucas gasps and his eyes get wide, but before he can speak I raise a hand to stop him. “That’s only one of several options, so don’t panic, okay?”

“I won’t do that,” Lucas insists. “I won’t!”

“Hear me out.” I lean forward and stare hard into his eyes. “Before you queen out on me, hear me out. Okay?” He nods.

“Option two is, you call him and arrange a meeting. Not alone!” I reassure him; he’s alarmed. “You don’t have to meet him alone, Lucas, I promise. But the lawyer says you need to find out if he was serious, about disowning you,

kicking you out of your home. You're a minor, but you still have some rights, and you also have leverage, with the evidence of yesterday's assault. Legally, that's child abuse. As a lawyer himself, your dad has got to know that he can be in deep shit trouble for that."

"He did mean it," Lucas objects. "About kicking me out. I'm a hundred percent sure of that."

"But," I hold up a hand and say, "legally, you have to get him to confirm it. Otherwise, he can claim that you just ran away."

"Okay."

"Then," I continue, "you can ask him to put in writing—that he agrees that you can file papers to become an emancipated minor. Which means that you become an adult in the eyes of the law, and he has no more rights as a parent to make decisions for you. I think that's the way it works," I add. "This is all new to me too."

"What if he won't do that?"

"It's a gamble, but again, you have evidence of abuse, and you can threaten to file a police report against him. Police reports are public documents, newspapers could get hold of it. I don't think your father wants that kind of publicity, not in his line of work, not with his reputation to consider."

"No, he'd shit a brick," Lucas marvels. "Wow. Can I really do that?" He thinks for a moment. "But," he adds quietly, "I'm—to be honest, I'm kind of scared to do that."

"You wouldn't be alone," I remind him. "What can he do?"

"Maybe he'd shoot me."

"Lucas," I reach over and grab his hands that are wrestling with each other on the countertop, hold them still. "Why didn't you tell me your father is violent?"

"Well," he explains, "he usually isn't. Not really. He used to hit me sometimes, when I was little, because I never could do anything right. Then when I was about eight or nine, he stopped. He wasn't around much after that, so I guess I didn't annoy him enough to punish me. Besides, it was never, you know, a beating-up type of thing, just a slap or a smack, hard enough to hurt but not like a real injury. Not like—not like this."

"He wasn't around much?"

"He kind of lost interest, when I didn't want to do sports and stuff. He got married a couple times, then he got involved in politics and community service. He was busy all the time." Lucas glances at my face. I don't know what he

sees there, but quickly he adds, "It's not like I cared, you know. I didn't care at all."

You're so transparent, Lucas, I want to say, but don't. He hasn't yet perfected a façade of nonchalance; pain is still obvious in his deep blue eyes. I remind myself that, on the whole, parental neglect is preferable to corporal punishment, but it's still child abuse. And it seems that the rich are just as capable of cruelty as the poor, an obvious fact, but one that's easy to overlook. I'd thought of Lucas as merely a spoiled brat, but now I realize he's a survivor of neglect. In a way, we are brothers under the skin.

Before I get sentimental, I take a deep breath and suggest, "So—how about you call your father this morning, and see what he has to say? Depending on his response, we'll take it from there."

Lucas stares hard at my face for a moment and finally I have to ask, "What?"

"You won't make me go back, will you?"

"No," I say firmly, looking him in the eye and letting him see my promise. "Absolutely not."

"Okay," he says. "Okay."

I gather our dishes and carry them to the sink. It's important to get Lucas on the phone right away, before he loses his nerve. I take his hand and lead him into the living room, over to my desk and gently push him down on the chair. "I'll be right here beside you," I encourage. "And we'll tape the phone call. The lawyer says you have to tell him you're taping the call; it's the law."

Lucas takes a deep breath and picks up the phone. His fingers hesitating only a moment, he dials a number and waits. I move to stand close to him and put a hand on his shoulder. I'm rewarded when I feel his muscles relax slightly under my hand.

"Hello," Lucas says, sounding calm. "This is Lucas Denholme. May I speak to my father please? Yes, I'll hold."

I press a button on the answering machine to begin recording the call.

Lucas slumps over, then sits up straight again and clears his throat. He waits a few moments, then he says, "Hello Dad, it's me." He closes his eyes and shakes his head, then murmurs, "Okay, I'm sorry. It is I."

Christ. On top of everything else, his father's a grammar-Nazi.

Lucas listens for a moment, then says, "It doesn't matter where I'm at. Well okay, I'm with a friend. It's not important. No, it's not. Listen Dad, I'm supposed to tell you that our call is being recorded."

Lucas jumps slightly. I can feel his muscles tensing under my hand. "Dad, it's not a joke, I'm—I'm getting legal advice, and they said to record this call."

I'm supposed to ask if—if you really meant that you're, you know, kicking me out. Disowning me." He listens for a few moments, then says, "No. No, Dad, I won't do it. I won't. You can't make me."

Before the conversation can deteriorate any further, I quietly remind Lucas, "Tell him you want a meeting."

Denholme is obviously just repeating his orders to Lucas, maybe making more threats. The lawyer predicted this and that's why he said it was important to have a face-to-face meeting.

"Dad. Dad. Dad! Listen, I'm not going to talk anymore right now. No. No, I said no!" Lucas is starting to crumble and I squeeze my hand harder on his shoulder. He sits up straight again and says, "Dad, we need to have a meeting." He pauses and then agrees, "Yeah, yes, okay. Okay. But I won't be alone. It doesn't matter who. Whom. Just—"

Lucas waits a second, then puts his hand over the mouthpiece and looks up at me. "Today at three o'clock?" he whispers and I nod agreement. Fuck work today, Lucas needs me with him.

"Okay, Dad. I'll be there. We'll be there. It doesn't matter who. Whom. I'll see you then, good-bye."

Quickly Lucas hangs up the phone with a hand visibly shaking. I slide my arm around his shoulders and bring my face close to his. "You did great. It'll be okay." Lucas nods and swallows a couple times.

"So," I stand up straight. "Three o'clock. Where?"

"At home." Lucas glances up at me. "Are you sure he can't—can't force me, to do what he wants? He's so angry! God." Lucas shivers and adds, "He never was so mad at me before. I never was so afraid of him before. I'm such a wimp."

"Stop the drama princess shit," I order sternly. "It's fucking normal to be scared of someone who's just beat the crap out of you. But remember that you won't be alone this time. He can't hurt you now."

Not physically anyway.

"Oh," Lucas says, "I just remembered, it's Tuesday. Don't you need to be at work?"

"Yes. I'll go in for a while, but I'll be back here by two o'clock, to drive you—" I almost said "home"—"drive you to your dad's place. You can just kick back and relax for a while, or do homework, or watch TV."

"Homework," Lucas repeats. "There's just two weeks left of school, but I won't get to finish now. I'll be a high school dropout."

“Don’t borrow trouble. One way or another, you will finish high school. And go to college.”

And where the fuck do I get off promising this kid anything about his future? Ignoring that annoying inner voice, I tell him, “I’m going to work now.” I make a mental note to run by the courthouse and pick up some forms the lawyer told me to get. “I’m going to grab a shower. Want to join me?” Lucas’ smile is his answer. I take his hand and lead him to the bathroom.

In the shower, I kneel down and give Lucas a quick blowjob. Blowjobs are still generally quick for him; he’s seventeen, after all. As I knew it would, it relaxes him, and since he wants to reciprocate, I let him jerk me off. I also come quickly, mostly because I’m in a hurry to get to the office. But once in the car, driving cross town, I have time to consider the ramifications of my hasty decision to champion this boy—this young man—in his struggle against a homophobic father.

Say we are successful in wresting Lucas from his father’s care. Then what? I’m sure, in fact I’m certain, that the thought of his future hasn’t entered Lucas’ head. He’s completely caught up in the drama of the situation, dealing with his physical injuries and his fear of retribution from his dad. He’s told me something of his upbringing. I know his mom died when he was very young and he’s always had a nanny to look after him. He’s never had a job (he said he wanted to work, but his father wouldn’t give permission). The kid was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. And despite the fact that that spoon is being used to hit him over the head and force him into submission, it still remains that, if Lucas’s father disowns him, he won’t have two pennies to rub together. How will he support himself? How will he stay in school?

The short answer is, he won’t. He can’t. He’s seventeen. He has no place to live. He’s unemployed and virtually unemployable, except for the most menial jobs. If he hopes to get a scholarship to college, he’ll need to concentrate all his energy on schoolwork. There’s a price tag for independence, and in Lucas’ case, that price tag is—Christ, I was going to say, “enrollment in the School of Hard Knocks”—one of Gramps’ favorite expressions.

Time Past: September 1982

“This is where your easy-going leads, Bill. This is the thanks you get, your grandson is turning into a criminal.”

“I’m not a criminal, I wasn’t arrested. Jesus, Grandma—”

And *whap*, she slaps me across the face. She has to reach up to do it, I'm taller than she is, I could pick her up and throw her across the room. She sees it too, sees that thought in my brain. "Just you try it, mister. Just you try it." Her chin waggles as she glares at me, hands on her hips, her feet spread wide apart. Fighting stance. Like a banty rooster, Gramps used to say.

"I'm sorry," I say—Grandma can't stand swearing—"but if you'll only listen to me, I can explain!"

"Explain the shame you've brought on our house, Matthew—is that what you want to explain? Explain why you were delivered to our door in a police car, for the neighbors to see? There is no explanation good enough for that."

I turn to Gramps. "Please, let me tell you what happened. It was just a bunch of kids fighting after school. I wasn't one of them. I wasn't fighting, honest! But the cops came to break up the fight and they took everybody's name, and because I have a record—"

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Grandma prays, looking up at the ceiling as if she can see Them. "The boy brags about having a police record."

"I wasn't bragging! And you know perfectly well that's not my fault either. Those Banyan brothers are always picking fights with me, I have to defend myself!"

"You should take that karate class at your school, I told you so," Gramps points out. Useless to remind him that the class is held on Wednesday nights, when I work at the supermarket till ten o'clock.

"Anyway, the police were just giving me a ride afterwards—they were afraid everybody would start fighting again, so they drove some of us home. Why don't you call them, if you don't believe me?"

"Not just fighting," Grandma brings the discussion back to my police record. "You were arrested for stealing, too," she reminds me. As if I could ever forget the humiliation of that.

"I was nine years old! I didn't know better."

I was caught stealing cookies from the corner grocery, and the owner had called Grandma. It was her idea for me to be arrested—she insisted to the man that I needed to be taught a lesson, so he called the police. I won't repeat to Grandma that my parents taught me to steal food. She already knows that, and besides, I can't stand it when she starts in talking mean about them. I know they did bad things, and I know they abandoned me, but I can still remember a time when my mother loved me, when she hugged and kissed me. Nobody's ever kissed me since Comfort put me on that bus and waved goodbye, seven years ago.

Gramps is shaking his head.

“Gramps, please!” He usually listens to me. Grandma always believes the worst of me, but Gramps will let me explain. But not this time. He holds up a hand to stop me.

“No,” he frowns. “Your grandma’s right. I’ve been too soft on you, and look where it leads. No, Matty!” He holds up a hand to stop me; it feels like he’s physically pushing me away. “Talk to your grandma, don’t talk to me.” And with that he turns and heads off for the basement, his refuge from the battles always raging between Grandma and me.

I stand and watch him walk away. As usual, Gramps is leaving me alone to deal with my grandmother. As soon as he’s gone—we listen to his shuffling steps descending the stairs—Grandma says, “Go right this minute and get me the spoon.”

Without turning around, I say simply, “No.”

The spoon is a big wooden spatula carved from a solid piece of hickory. Grandma’s been using it to punish me ever since I came to live with them. She keeps it hanging on a nail in the pantry, and always makes me go fetch it and hand it to her for a spanking.

“You have ten seconds,” she begins. Then I do turn around and say again, “No, Grandma. I’m sixteen, you can’t do that anymore. Spanking’s for children. I’m not a child, and anyway, I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“Nine, eight, seven—”

“Grandma, I won’t do it. I’m too big for that now.”

“Huh,” Grandma snorts. “You’re too big for your britches, that’s what you are. You’re just like your mother. She was just as bad as you, and look where it got her!”

I’m shocked for a moment, when I realize that Grandma probably used that same spoon on my mother. No wonder she ran away.

But I don’t want to run away. I like living here—in spite of Grandma’s strictness. She cooks good meals, and I like my little room upstairs with a tiny window that opens to the sky. I like school—except for some of the other kids—and I get good grades. I work hard on my school work, and at my part-time job at the supermarket, bagging groceries. I want to go to college, though I haven’t said anything to Gramps about that yet. He thinks I’m going to get a job like his when I graduate, doing mechanic work on the cars in the railway yard.

Grandma clears her throat. “You got two choices, Matthew. You bring me that spoon, or you get your butt out of this house, right now.”

“Are you kicking me out?”

“You need to learn your lesson,” she says—Christ, how many lessons have I learned at Grandma’s hands?—“and if you’re refusing to take your rightful punishment, then you can get out of my sight.”

“Just for tonight, or forever?” I’m starting to get scared now. I have no place to go; what will I do? “Grandma—”

“You’re not sleeping in your nice warm bed that me and Gramps pays for, and you’ll get no dinner tonight, and no breakfast tomorrow. You can sleep in the shed, I don’t care, but you’re not eating our food or sleeping in our house tonight. Now, get out. Get!”

My shoulders slump. I’m unhappy to be pushed out of the house, but I’m relieved that it’s not forever. “Can I take my books? I have an algebra test tomorrow.”

“You should’ve thought of that before you got in trouble.” She folds her arms over her chest and waits. She’s waiting for me to leave. My stomach rumbles. I can smell dinner cooking, and I think of the seventy-five cents I have in my pocket. Maybe it’s enough for a burger.

So I have a burger at McDonald’s and hole up in the shed behind the house, sitting on a box of tools, leaning against the wall with my arms crossed over my chest. It’s chilly, but luckily it’s mid-September, the nights aren’t freezing cold yet. I doze off now and then, but don’t get much sleep, and next day in school I get a B on the algebra test because I’m not prepared. After class, Mr. Cunningham says he’s disappointed in me, but I don’t bother to explain. I head for the supermarket, and Fred lets me have a carton of milk and some cupcakes in advance of my next paycheck. This morning, when I went inside to wash up and get my books, I was hoping I could snatch some bread, but Grandma was standing guard in the kitchen. She just shook her head and pointed at the door. She didn’t make me lunch either. I get off at eight, and I’m hoping that Grandma will have saved me some dinner when I get home.

And she did! I feel shaky with hunger, something I was used to feeling when I lived with my parents, but it’s funny how you get used to having regular meals; it spoils you. I eat two big bowls of beef stew and about six pieces of bread and butter. Grandma leaves me alone in the kitchen to eat, but when I’m washing up my dishes afterwards, she comes in and says, “When you’re finished, you go downstairs and talk to Gramps.”

My stomach does a somersault; I’m scared what he’s going to say. I wish he would believe me about the fight yesterday—I really was not involved. I told

the truth—but he won't hear it. "No more excuses," he says grimly, pointing at the other stool by his workbench for me to sit down.

"Me and Grandma have talked it over," he begins, and I try to brace myself for whatever's coming. "And we decided, you just plain have got too much time on your hands to get into trouble," he tells me, lowering his head and looking at me over the top of his glasses. "So we decided that you need another job, after school."

"But I already work three nights a week, and half a day on Sunday!" I exclaim. "I need Tuesday and Thursday afternoons for track, and on Saturday I have my Youth for Business meeting all afternoon. And I need time left over to study, Gramps!"

"Well son, that's tough." Gramps looks sad, but he's not backing off. "You'll have to give up your other activities. I'm going to see if I can get you hired on down at the railroad. They need part-time helpers to wash down the train cars and such. Grandma and I have agreed, you can't be trusted with time on your hands. You just can't stay out of trouble."

"That's so unfair!" I complain. "The only trouble I get into is fighting, and that's not my fault, you know that, Gramps!"

But he won't listen. "Grandma says you won't learn your lesson any other way. My mind's made up, Matty. No more excuses. You'll come to work with me. And after that ..." He pauses, then nods his head twice. "After that, if you still get in trouble, we're pulling you out of school."

"No! No, Gramps, I have to finish school, I have to graduate! I want to go to college!"

"College?" Gramps snorts, as if he's never heard of it before. "College is for rich folks. We can't afford to put you through college. You'd best forget about that, that's pie in the sky for poor kids."

"No, it's not," I contradict eagerly, leaning forward on the stool. "There's scholarships for poor kids, if you get good grades! I'm trying my best, Gramps, I'm working really hard and I have good grades in school. I'm going to go to college, I am!"

Gramps frowns. "Don't get your hopes up, Matty," he says dismissively. "College is not meant for boys like you. The only education you'll ever get is in the School of Hard Knocks."

Time Present: June 7, 1994

I don't want Lucas to suffer like I did when I was his age. Hours of grinding, mind-numbing labor, with not much energy left over for the important things, for studying hard enough to get a college scholarship, to follow his dreams.

My dream came true with a scholarship to Washington State University, though I'd had to work many hours each week on campus to pay for the dorm, clothes, and entertainment. "Entertainment"—a grand word for an occasional movie or game of pool. I'd made it through, but it was a hell of a struggle, and I don't want Lucas to endure that same difficult struggle.

Why not? I ask myself, after picking up minor emancipation forms at the courthouse and heading to the office. Why should I care that some young trick of mine is going to have a rough time?

I know that Lucas is not as tough as I was—he hasn't had to be. But I don't want him to get tough.

And why is that?

Fuck me. I don't have to answer all these questions. I'm in a position to help someone in a difficult situation; what's the big deal about that? It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean that I care about Lucas. He's just a kid that I'm willing to help.

And besides, it's not like he'll appreciate it in the long run. This is all probably going to come back and haunt me. All doing good deeds gets you is a kick in the head.

Christ, I sound like Grandma.

Resolutely pushing away all these unwanted thoughts, I park the car and hurry to the elevator. I've got a ton of work to do today, and only a few hours to do it in, if I'm to be home by two o'clock to take Lucas to the meeting with his father.

Lucas

I was sitting at the table pretending to do homework when Matthew left, but as soon as the door closed behind him, I dropped my head into my hands and gave in to self-pity. Only for a moment; it was just a relief kind of thing, like a sneeze. Then I went into the kitchen to wash the breakfast dishes. After that I wandered around for a while; I just couldn't settle to anything. Finally, I turned on the TV and watched soap operas. It was a relief to watch other people's melodrama lives, instead of thinking about my own.

Matthew came back at two, and now he's walking with me through the gates and up the steps at home. I wonder if I should ring the doorbell? It feels strange not to just walk into the house. Before I can decide, the door is pulled open, and Dad is standing there in the entry. I feel myself flinch backward, even though I know he can't hurt me. Matthew's here. He's almost as big as my dad, and I already know how strong and courageous he is. He fought off four biker bullies single handed, to save me. Remembering that helps me relax.

"Hello, Dad," I manage to say, glad that my voice sounds normal.

"Come in." He steps back and pulls the door open wide. We move inside, then Dad says, "And who is this—your so-called 'friend' with the silver Mercedes?"

"Dad, this is Matthew Morgan." Dad glances at him and then does a double-take.

"I know you," he says.

"Yes," Matthew agrees pleasantly. "We work in the same building."

"What are you doing with my son?" Dad demands, his eyes narrowing as he glowers at Matthew. "Never mind," he lowers his voice. "Wait till we're in my office. Come along." He leads the way to his office; we follow him inside and wait while he closes the door.

"Sit," he orders, so I take a seat in front of his desk, but Matthew keeps standing. He moves behind me, and I can feel him put his hand on the back of my chair. Not touching me, but it's comforting anyway.

There's silence for a moment as Dad sits down behind his desk, then ignoring Matthew, he says, "Lucas, you wanted this meeting, so speak up."

"Yes," I begin, then clear my throat. "Yesterday you—you kicked me out. You said I was disowned."

"No," he denies it. "No, Lucas, I did not. I said that if—if—you do not obey me, you'll be very, very sorry. All you had to do, all you have to do now, is obey me. I'm your father, you're a minor child, you have an obligation to do as you're told."

"You said," I dare to contradict him, "that you were going to send me someplace where they'd 'fix' me, so I won't be gay. That if I didn't do it, I was out on my ear; that you'd disown me."

"You are not gay," Dad narrows his eyes. "Lots of boys your age go through this phase, Lucas; you just need counseling and education to get over it. I've researched it, I know what I'm talking about. As your father, it is my duty to help you become a normal man."

“With all due respect, Mr. Denholme,” Matthew interrupts, “you are full of shit. Being gay is normal for at least ten percent of the population. And no amount of ‘education’ will change a man’s sexual orientation.”

“Ah, yes,” Dad leans forward, templing his fingers together on top of his desk, smiling coldly at Matthew. “You apparently are the one who’s been encouraging my son—who, may I remind you, is merely seventeen years old—to experiment with sexual deviancy. You can be arrested for that, for contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Are you aware of that, Mr. Morgan?”

“Your son’s no delinquent,” Matthew answers coolly. “And are YOU aware, Mr. Denholme, that YOU can be arrested for child abuse? Have you looked at Lucas today? You caused these injuries. They’ve been treated by, and documented by, a licensed physician, who is prepared to accompany Lucas to the police to make a report about your assault on him yesterday.”

“Reprimanding one’s child is not abuse,” Dad says quickly, but Matthew contradicts him.

“Reprimanding does not normally require medical treatment and stitches. Please be aware that we have every intention to follow through with this.”

“You can’t threaten me,” Dad says, but Matthew contradicts him again.

“Yet we are threatening you, Mr. Denholme. As an attorney yourself, I’m sure you’re aware that police records are public documents. Are you prepared for a police investigation of alleged child abuse? Are you prepared for the public attention this will create? You’re an important man, Mr. Denholme, but you don’t have the power to hush up a police investigation. All of Seattle will know about this—we will make sure of it! They’ll know that esteemed counselor and civic leader David Denholme beat up his son for being gay.”

“I didn’t, I did not! This is ridiculous,” Dad sputters. “You can’t—”

“We can,” Matthew’s voice is cold as ice. “And we will.”

There’s sudden silence in the room as Dad glares over my shoulder at Matthew. The silence goes on for a couple minutes, then Matthew speaks again.

“Alternatively,” he says, his voice cool and measured, “you can sign an affidavit giving permission for Lucas to petition the court to be declared an emancipated minor. He will no longer live with you, and he won’t be subject to parental control.” Matthew pauses, then adds, “In exchange, Lucas will agree not to pursue legal action against you for assault.”

“This is blackmail! You’re entering dangerous waters, Mr. Morgan.”

“No,” Matthew contradicts, “it’s not blackmail. Lucas wants nothing from you, nothing but his freedom.”

“Freedom!” Dad sneers.

There's silence again, then Dad moves his eyes from Matthew to me and back again. He leans back in his chair. "I'm wondering," he says casually, "what's in this for you, Mr. Morgan? Is it your intention to take young Lucas under your ... wing? To have him share your ... bed and board?"

"Lucas will be emancipated," Matthew answers unemotionally. He's not letting Dad get to him. "He will decide where he wants to live, and with whom."

"If he leaves his home, he'll be penniless," Dad points out. "If you follow through with this outrageous charade, then I truly will disown Lucas. I won't support him any longer, won't pay for his education; he'll be completely and utterly on his own. I'll even write him out of my will. There'll be nothing in it for you, do you realize that?"

Quietly Matthew says, "Fuck you."

Ignoring him, Dad turns to me and asks, "Are you prepared for that, Lucas? Are you prepared to be destitute, no better than an orphan?"

"I've always kind of felt like an orphan," I answer honestly.

"What nonsense," Dad scoffs. "You felt like an orphan? I gave you everything, Lucas. Poor little rich kid, spoiled rotten!"

"I know," I admit, nodding. "I've been very lucky. You gave me everything money could buy."

Dad continues to stare at me, then pushes back his chair and stands up. "You think you want freedom, Lucas? Well, I'll give it to you. You will find out what kind of happiness your freedom, and poverty, will bring. I wash my hands of you." And he brushes his hands together symbolically.

Matthew pulls a sheaf of papers from his briefcase and sets them down on the desk. "This is the emancipation petition for Lucas," he says. "The places you need to sign are marked with a red X."

Dad harrumphs, throwing a look of disdain at the papers and then at me. "Just remember," he says, "you asked for this. There's no turning back now." When I nod that I understand, Dad grabs a pen from his desk and signs all the paperwork.

"Your signature needs to be witnessed," Matthew advises. "Can you ask someone from your staff to come in and sign?"

Hesitating only a moment, Dad picks up the phone and dials a number. "Mrs. Goodwin," he says pleasantly, "please come to my office for a moment."

We're all silent again, and then Matthew says, "Two more things. Lucas needs to finish out this school year. Will you make that difficult for him?"

"The tuition is paid for this term," Dad answers tersely. "But there'll be no more after that."

“Secondly,” Matthew adds, “will you allow Lucas to take some of his clothes and things?”

I’d been afraid to ask Dad, sure he’d say no. But he just nods, then gives me a look and says, “You have fifteen minutes, Lucas. Take whatever you want, because you’re never coming back here.”

Then I stand up, though my legs feel shaky. “Thanks,” I murmur. “Thanks, Dad. For signing the papers, and for all that you’ve done for me.” He just stares at me, his face blank, and I turn and head for the door. I won’t cry while he’s watching.

“I’ll wait for you here,” Matthew says, and I move through the door and hurry upstairs. I pass Mrs. Goodwin coming down.

“Where have you been?” she demands, but I ignore her and run on up to my room. Once inside, I close the door and look around. How do you decide what to take from a lifetime lived in a room, in a house, knowing you’ll never see it again?

Determinedly swallowing tears that threaten to overtake me, I move to the closet, pull down a suitcase from a high shelf and open it on my bed. Besides taking a bunch of clothes and shoes, I fill a duffel bag with books, then add a few of my favorite CDs to my suitcase and grab my savings account passbook. I have only two photos of my mother, which I’ve kept hidden in the back of an underwear drawer, and a silly small plush monkey that has been hidden away in a secret place for years and years. I don’t remember my mother, but I remember that she gave me the monkey, and somehow I remember that she called me “Monkeyshines.” Cramming the photos and the monkey inside my duffel bag, I take a final glance around the room.

I’m pushing down waves of emotion that pour over me; I know that I’m leaving home for the last time. The suitcase and bag of books are heavy, but I manage to shift them to the stairs, and I’m halfway down when Matthew hurries up the stairs to help me, grabbing the suitcase. When we reach the bottom of the stairs, Mrs. Goodwin is the only one present.

“Goodbye, Mrs. Goodwin,” I tell her as we pass by on the way out the door. The last thing I hear is her murmured “Shame on you, Lucas Denholme.” Thank God, I won’t have to hear that ever again.

CHAPTER 9



Matthew

It's early but I suggest, "How about we stop someplace for dinner?" We've just left Denholme's and are driving cross-town. Lucas didn't say a word as we loaded the car with his bags. He hadn't eaten much breakfast and probably skipped lunch; I'm sure he must be starving. He may be too emotional to eat, but at least I'll find out when he answers.

"Lucas?"

"What?"

He'd been staring out the side window, maybe bidding goodbye to his old neighborhood, but I don't let myself romanticize the boy's grief.

"How about we stop someplace for dinner?"

"You mean, like a restaurant?"

Patience, Matthew, give the kid a break. "Yes," I answer, not allowing myself to be sarcastic. "Are you hungry?"

"I don't know. I guess so. But ..."

"But?"

"If we go inside someplace, maybe the car would get robbed? Maybe somebody would steal all my stuff?"

There's so little chance of somebody breaking into the trunk of the Mercedes in a public parking lot in broad daylight as to be laughable under normal circumstances. But I don't laugh.

"There's a hofbrau near here that's good. I'll get sandwiches to go and you can wait in the car." I'm not sure I should humor his paranoia, but the kid's so obviously upset and distracted that he's probably incapable of sitting in a restaurant right now anyway.

“Okay.”

We ride along in silence again. Lucas returns to looking out the side window, and I leave him alone. When we get to the hofbrau, I park in the lot and say, completely without irony, “I’ll lock the doors, and be out in a few minutes.”

The face Lucas turns toward me is nearly blank; he’s trying hard to put up a brave front to conceal his pain. He can’t know that I’ve got a damned good idea how he’s feeling. Abruptly leaving behind the world you know for some unknown future can be fucking overwhelming. I don’t bother asking what he wants to eat, I’m sure everything will taste like sawdust right now. Before getting out of the car, I reach over and gently rub the back of his neck, giving an encouraging squeeze, and a slight smile as I make eye contact and say, “Be right back.”

“Okay,” he agrees, and his mouth turns up in a horribly fake smile.

I get out, lock the doors, and move quickly into the hofbrau to pick up some dinner that neither of us really wants. While I’m waiting for my order to be filled, I lean against the wall near the cash register and, without in the least wanting to, I’m thrown back on my own childhood memories—which I have no fucking desire to relive, thank you very much; and I feel my neck muscles tensing up and my jaw tightening. Christ, I dumped all that baggage years ago.

Grabbing the brown-bagged sandwiches from the cashier, I turn on my heel and march out to the car. I forgot that I locked the door, and when I grab the handle, I jam my thumb sideways and curse out loud, “Fuck!” Lucas is startled, and I tell myself to calm down. He unlocks the door for me and brusquely I mutter, “Thanks,” before starting the car.

Finally, a bit late—too fucking late—I wonder what the hell I’m going to do with this homeless, unhappy, aching teenager? Pulling the Mercedes out of the parking lot with a grinding of gears, I have to ask myself, what the fuck have I done?

Lucas

What have I done?

I’ve left my home. I’ve walked away from my father and my home and my school and my whole entire life, and now what? Now what’s going to happen to me?

I try to tell myself that I had no choice, and really, I had no choice. I mean, I couldn’t let my father send me away to some concentration camp for reformed

homos. I couldn't! And besides, I'm scared of him now, after the way he attacked me. Scared to live in that house.

I think I've always been scared of my father, though until yesterday he hadn't hit me in a long time, not since I was a kid. He's hardly even talked to me, except for our weekly meetings, when I had to report to him about school and collect my allowance.

There'll be no more allowance; I'll have to find a job. I don't mind working, I've wanted to get a part-time job for years, but Dad would never let me. He said teenagers could do only menial jobs, and if you do menial jobs, it makes you a menial person. He said that kind of work is degrading and no son of his would ever wear a McDonald's uniform.

Tomorrow I'll have to find a job. I don't know how to do that, except I guess you look in the paper at the want ads and call places. Matthew can tell me how to do it.

Matthew rescued me. It seems like he's always rescuing me, from bullies and from elevators and now from my dad. Probably he's tired of it. I glance at his face and he looks angry. He's sort of glaring out the windshield and loudly shifting the gears of the car. Probably he's sorry that he's stuck with me now.

"Matthew?" I say tentatively.

"What?" his head whips around and I'm startled by the harsh look on his face.

"You don't have to take me home with you," I tell him earnestly, leaning over the gearbox.

He says nothing for a moment, glancing at the traffic, then he stops for a red light and turns sideways to face me. "You have someplace else to go?"

"No. But it's—it's not your problem. It's not your responsibility, to take care of me. Or, you know, anything."

"Huh," he jerks his head. "You're always telling me that you ARE my responsibility."

"Well, that was sort of joking. This isn't a joke now."

Matthew's hands grip the steering wheel. "Relax, Lucas, you're staying with me tonight. Tomorrow we'll figure out what to do next."

"I won't go back home."

"No. Your dad made it pretty clear that's no longer an option anyway. Just stop worrying, for now. Plenty of time to worry later."

I can tell that he doesn't want to talk about it. So I shut up and sit facing forward like he's doing. He seems to be thinking really hard, and doesn't want to

be interrupted. Probably he's wondering why he bothered to get involved with a dopey kid like me.

When we get to the marina, Matthew grabs my suitcase and I carry the heavy duffel bag of books and the bag of sandwiches. I follow him over the docks to his place and wait while he unlocks the door, then follow down the hall to the spare room, where he dumps the suitcase on the floor.

"I know there's a bed in here somewhere," he says.

There's piles of stacked boxes all over the room, but the bed is clearly visible. I guess he was joking, so I laugh slightly in case that's what he wants.

"Let's clear it off," he says. I set down my bags and join him in lifting boxes and stacks of clothes and things off the bed. "Get some sheets from the shelf above the washer," he tells me. I go into the kitchen and pull back the folding doors that hide the washer-dryer, and pull some sheets from the shelf. When I come back he takes one look at them and says, "Those are kings. There's some single bed sheets there, they're blue. And grab one of the pillows off my bed on your way back."

I return to the kitchen, my heart sinking into my stomach when I realize that Matthew doesn't want me to sleep with him. He doesn't want me in his bed. The knowledge that he's tired of me makes a big lump in my throat.

When I come back with the blue sheets, Matthew has finished clearing off the bed. "Help me make it up," he says, unfolding a sheet and flapping it in the air before letting it settle on the mattress. I watch closely to see what he's doing, and imitate his movements in smoothing the sheet on the bed and tucking in the ends.

"Have you ever made a bed before?" Matthew asks, as we finish that one and he flips out the top sheet and lets it settle on the bed.

"Yes," I lie. I never actually made my own bed at home, but we had to roll up our own sleeping bags at summer camp, and making a bed is not exactly rocket science.

Glancing at the labels on several large cardboard boxes, Matthew grunts. "I knew there were more blankets somewhere." He opens the flaps of a box and lifts out a couple blankets. "Are you hungry yet?" he asks, as we smooth blankets on top of the sheets.

"Sort of. I can eat anytime though, it doesn't matter."

"It's early for dinner, but let's get it out of the way. I've got a project to work on tonight."

"I'll be very quiet," I tell him seriously. "I'll stay out of your way."

Matthew throws me a look I can't interpret. "Don't be mealy-mouthed, Lucas," he says. "It doesn't suit you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I already know you're a pain in the ass. You always make a mess, you make a lot of noise; I know all this already. Relax, be yourself. If you bug the shit out of me, I'll let you know."

"Okay."

"Now, let's eat."

"Sure," I agree, starting to feel hungry after all.

Matthew

After dinner, I set Lucas to washing up our few dishes, then tell him to study or watch TV until bedtime. There's an empty chest of drawers in the spare room, and I consider telling him to unpack his stuff; but I haven't decided if I want him to feel at home here or not. I haven't decided what to do with him. There was no planning or forethought to this dramatic Good Samaritan rescue bullshit. Lucas was hurt, he needed help, and without thinking, I stepped in.

In the abstract that might sound admirable, but the truth is, I didn't give a thought to the consequences of my actions. I'm sure I would have done the same for anyone else in his situation.

Except ... that's not really true. I would not have done the same for a stranger. So maybe I do care about him, a little bit. But not enough to let him take up permanent residence in my small house. Yet where else can he go? If the court accepts the papers Denholme signed, making his son an emancipated minor, how is Lucas to live, support himself, go to school? I outright promised Lucas he would finish high school and go to college, but how is he supposed to do that, with no viable means of support?

No wonder he's so upset, he's apparently given more thought to his future than I have. I'm sitting here pretending to work—and fuck, I need to be working—but all I can do is chase thoughts around in my head. Lucas has finished the dishes and is sitting on the sofa pretending to read a book, but he hasn't turned a single page for half an hour. Damn it, I can feel his misery clear across the room. I'll send him to bed. I can't concentrate with him sitting there.

"Lucas." He doesn't hear me, so I raise my voice. "Lucas!"

His head jerks up and his bleary eyes focus on my face. "Yeah?"

"Go to bed now."

I halfway expect him to argue, but he doesn't. He closes his book and rises from the sofa, walks down the hall to the spare room. Finally I can turn my

thoughts to the Hooperman project. I hunch forward in my chair and concentrate on the stack of papers in front of me.

Ten minutes later, I give up; my concentration is shot for tonight. I might as well go to bed and get up early tomorrow. I can head into the office at the crack of dawn.

Turning off the lights, I move quietly down the hall and pause outside the door of the spare room. There's no sound from within, and I'm going to move away, go into my room, yet I'm rooted to the spot. I watch as my hand comes up and grips the doorknob and silently turns it, pushing open the door a few inches. The lamp's off, but light from the dock filters in through the curtains to outline Lucas' form on the bed. His breathing is even, but I can tell that he's awake.

Pushing the door further open, I approach the bed, hesitate, then go around the other side and sit down on the edge. "Can't sleep?" I murmur.

"No." His eyes are dark and shadowed in the dim light from the hall.

I'm pleased to see that he's not crying. I mean, it would be okay if he were crying, he's been through a lot today, but Lucas is proving to be stronger than I'd given him credit for, all things considered.

"Sometimes it's hard to fall asleep in a new bed."

Lucas is silent for a moment, then he agrees, "Yeah." He sits up, folding his legs under him. He's wearing white briefs. I wonder if he usually sleeps in his underwear. He leans back against the headboard and says, "Matthew, can I ask you something?" When I nod, he goes on, "Can you tell me how to find a job? Do I call those ads in the newspaper, or do I go places and ask?"

I'm surprised. "What kind of job are you planning to get?"

"Well, I don't know what I'm qualified for."

I refrain from answering that he's not qualified for anything. "You can probably get a summer job," I hedge. "But you don't need to think about that yet."

"But I do need to," he says earnestly, leaning forward. "I want to start looking tomorrow."

"Tomorrow—no, not tomorrow, you need another day to rest up; but on Wednesday, you're going back to school." Lucas gasps and opens his mouth, but I shake my head emphatically. "You've got a couple weeks left of this semester," I remind him. "You can worry about a job when school's out."

"I'm not going back there!" he exclaims, his eyes wide with shock. "Matthew, I'm not going back!"

"Yes, you are," I contradict. "You have to finish this year, it's too late to switch schools. Next fall you can probably go to public school, but we can worry about that later."

"No," Lucas insists urgently. "No!"

I put out my hand and grab Lucas' shoulder, intending to give him a shake, but instead my hand moves from his shoulder to the back of his neck and squeezes gently. Leaning close, I look into his eyes. "You won't be on your own, I promise." (Another promise, fuck me.) "I'll go to the principal's office with you, and we'll let him know about your changed circumstances."

Lucas doesn't answer, but his eyes tell the story. He's scared, he's shivering. "You'll be all right," I say firmly, my throat tightening. Christ, it's like looking in a mirror. Looking in a mirror at myself so many years ago, scared to death of the playground bullies. Well, I survived a rotten childhood and Lucas can do the same. Besides, he's not a child. It's time he toughened up.

All the same, I feel like I might just beat the shit out of any fuckers in that school who try to harm this kid. Somehow, without words, Lucas must sense my thoughts, because I feel his shoulders relax under my encircling arm.

He looks away and mutters, "You must think I'm a coward."

"No," I answer truthfully. "It's common sense to be wary of a difficult situation. But remember, you won't really be alone. I'm on your side, and there will be plenty of others on your side, too. Patrick, Dr. Jennifer, and you will make other new friends who'll look out for you."

"I need to look out for myself."

"Right," I agree, standing up. "Start now, and tell yourself to go to sleep. See you in the morning." I cross the room and close the door behind me. It will be good for him to sleep alone tonight. He can shed tears alone if he needs to, relive the scene played out with his father, begin to get used to being on his own.

Yet once I'm in bed, I realize that I'm waiting. Waiting for Lucas to come creeping into the bedroom, slip under the blankets and scoot across the bed to slide into my arms. I brace myself, knowing that if he comes in, I must send him away. For his own good; but also, perhaps, for mine. He's not a child, and I'm not some kind of ersatz parent figure providing false comfort. He's lost his home and his family, and now it's important for him to face the reality of that loss alone. To grow up, in effect. Therefore, it is important that Lucas stay put tonight, in his own room.

"It's not his room," I remind myself with a start. This is my house, not a dormitory, not some halfway house for homeless teens. Even so, I realize that

my haven, my home, my freedom are all lost. Only for a while. But for the time being, my spare room has become, by default, Lucas' room.

And here he comes now. My eyes are closed, but I feel more than hear the door open. There's a long pause, then slowly, Lucas tiptoes across the carpet until he's standing beside the bed. Still feigning sleep, I wait, and Lucas waits. After a moment, he gives up and turns away, heads back for the door.

That's good. I'm glad he found the strength to return to his room alone, and I'm glad I was strong enough to resist inviting him into bed beside me.

So I don't understand exactly what causes me to open my eyes, clear my throat and murmur, "Lucas." The room is dark, but I can make out his shape, his fair skin almost luminescent in the dimness. He moves back to the side of the bed.

"Come here." I lift up the blankets.

"You don't mind?" he asks humbly, and it's the humility that grabs my gut.

"Yes, I mind. But come here anyway."

Ignoring the gruffness of my voice, Lucas happily slides into bed beside me. Moves eagerly into my arms, pressing his cool shivering skin against my warm body. And I wrap my arms tight around him, holding him close. "Go to sleep now," I order, and I feel his head nod where it's tucked up under my chin; almost immediately he's asleep.

Time Present: June 8, 1994

Lucas

I wake up with a start, to find Matthew once again sitting on the side of the bed, but I'm in his bed, and this time he's dressed for work. He's shaved, he's wearing a business suit. I didn't even hear the shower. I sit up, rubbing my aching eyes.

"I'm going to the office," he says. "Stay here today. I'll be home about six-thirty, seven."

"Okay," I agree groggily, but ask, "what will I do all day?"

"Rest up, watch TV." He stops, then adds, "And call your school, find out what assignments you've missed. Maybe you can catch up before you go back tomorrow."

I don't want to go back tomorrow, but this is not a good time to argue. Instead I deflect him by asking, "Can I do anything to help, like fix dinner or something?"

"Can you cook?"

"Not exactly. But I can make scrambled eggs."

"Make yourself some, for breakfast. I'll pick up take-out for dinner."

"I'd like to do something to help." I mean it too, I don't want to feel like a moocher.

"Can you do laundry?"

"Sure." Anybody can do laundry.

"Okay then," He stands up, picks a piece of lint off his trousers and flicks it away. "Do a load of towels and sheets. Fold them right out of the dryer, so they don't get wrinkled."

"Sure."

"Try to relax today," he says. "Don't worry about anything. Remember, things always work out, one way or another. You'll be okay."

"I know," I assure him, making myself smile. I don't really believe it, but obviously that's what he wants to hear. "I am okay."

Nodding, Matthew leaves the room. I hear him stop to lock the front door and I wonder if he is protecting his house, or making me a prisoner?

It's still early, so I pull the covers over me and go back to sleep.

Matthew

It crossed my mind to wonder if I'd run into David Denholme at the office complex, and while I was pretty confident he'd do nothing to cause a scene, I was a bit relieved not to see him. I've been at LaRoche & Lee for two years and I've seen the guy only a few times, so it's unlikely our paths will cross much, unless either of us were to force a confrontation. And that's unlikely.

Taking a break after two morning meetings, I grab a taxi to the courthouse so I won't have to hassle with parking. Russell told me which office I need to drop off the emancipation papers signed by Lucas and his father, and said that it's merely a matter of paying a filing fee and waiting. There'll be a brief hearing, and a judicial decision will be made about granting Lucas' petition for minor emancipation. Russell had assured me that, with David Denholme's signature secured, most likely it will be just a matter of form.

While waiting in a long line at the county clerk's office, I'm tapping my foot impatiently, glancing around the room, when from the corner of my eye I spy a bird outside a high window almost fly into the glass, braking at the last minute and twisting away to avoid a collision. The flutter of its wings makes me blink, and in that moment, I'm transported back in time to the Spokane County courthouse.

Time Past: September 1975

Besides the bus station and the brick schoolhouse where Grandma took me yesterday, I've never been inside such a big building. The ceilings are real high and the hard shiny floors are slippery under the soles of my new shoes. Grandma holds tight to my arm, but it doesn't feel safe like when Comfort holds my hand. Grandma doesn't like me, and she told Gramps this morning she had half a mind to take me back to the bus station and leave me there. She said I was more trouble than I was worth.

Gramps said, "Now, Sharon, the boy can hear you," and Grandma just made a sniffing sound in her nose like she didn't care.

It was Grandma who took me into the small bedroom at the top of the stairs the night I arrived and told me to put on my pajamas and climb into bed. "I don't have pajamas," I admitted. We always slept in our clothes, so we could get away fast if we needed to, but I didn't tell Grandma that part. She'd made that sniffing noise, turned and went out of the room, closing the door hard behind her. I slept in my clothes, wishing Peace would wake me in the night for a fast getaway, but next morning I woke up still there.

When I came downstairs, Gramps was sitting at the table eating breakfast. He looked up and waved for me to join him. "Hungry?" he asked as I sat on one of the narrow wooden chairs, and I nodded, staring in amazement at all the plates of food on the table. I ate scrambled eggs and three strips of crispy bacon, toast with purple jam and a big glass of milk that was cold and delicious. Gramps told me to eat as much as I wanted! That was the best breakfast I ever had in my life.

When I was full, Gramps said he was glad to see I had a hearty appetite, but Grandma made her sniffing noise and said, "He'll eat us out of house and home at this rate." I glanced at her sideways to see if she was mad. It was hard to tell with Grandma, she was always frowning. Then they talked about taking me to school, and I started getting excited and scared at the same time.

After the tests and meetings at the school, Grandma took me to a bus stop and waited, and when a bus came, we got on. I thought she might put me on the bus alone and leave me there, but she didn't. We rode in silence, me looking out the window and her sitting next to me, her back straight as a stick, her handbag clutched on her lap.

Grandma didn't tell me where we were going, so I didn't ask any questions. We got off the bus and went into a K-Mart store, where she made me try on clothes and shoes. She bought me jeans and two new shirts and new under-

wear and a pair of black shoes with laces. I got to pick out my own pajamas and I chose blue ones with pictures of dogs on them. She bought me a jacket too; it was big and loose but she said I'd grow into it. I was excited to have nice new clothes, but the whole time Grandma kept looking at the price tags and frowning harder and harder and making tsky-tsk sounds with her mouth. I knew she was mad to spend so much money on me. I felt bad, but I didn't know what to say, so I stayed quiet. Peace always said, never let anybody know what you're feeling; it gives them power over you. Grandma already had a lot of power over me, so I kept my mouth shut.

That night at dinner, Grandma complained about how expensive children's clothes and shoes are. I felt so guilty I could hardly eat. I was afraid to eat them out of house and home, so I just had a few bites of mashed potatoes. Then Gramps said, "You can do better than that," and loaded up my plate with two chicken legs and a mountain of mashed potatoes and a pile of green peas. I could feel my mouth fill with water just smelling that chicken, and when Gramps asked, "Can you manage all that?" I nodded eagerly and picked up my fork and proved it. There was even apple pie for dessert, and Gramps put a spoonful of ice cream on top of his, and then leaned over and put some on mine, too. It's hard to believe, but I think they eat like this every single day.

They talked a lot that night, and I lay unmoving and silent in my upstairs bed, straining to hear their words. They were talking about me, and I remembered the night Peace and Comfort talked about me, and the next morning they sent me away. My grandparents were talking about sending me away, too. Grandma was telling Gramps that the school principal said, if they decided to keep me, they had to sign some papers downtown so that I belonged to them.

"It's a big step, Bill," Grandma said. "It's a big commitment to raise this boy. Are you sure we need to do this?"

"Sharon," Gramps answered, "he's Carolyn's son, our grandson. We need to do this. He has no place else to go."

"There's the orphanage," I heard Grandma say, and I held my breath. "That's not such a bad thing. Even the principal says that grandparents aren't legally responsible for their grandchildren."

"Sharon," Gramps said again, "he's Carolyn's son."

There was silence for a long time and I was so tired my eyes kept sliding shut, but I bit my tongue really hard to make myself stay awake, I had to hear Grandma's answer. Finally she said, "All right, Bill, you win. But I'm the one who'll have to do all the work. And I'll bet you a million dollars, this one will turn out just as ungrateful and ornery as his mother was."

Relieved that they weren't going to send me away, I finally fell asleep. When I woke up, Gramps was already gone to work, and it was only me eating breakfast alone. "Next time you sleep late, you won't get any breakfast," Grandma warned. "You're too late for eggs. You'll have oatmeal and like it."

"Okay," I agreed, vowing never to oversleep again. The oatmeal was good though, not the thin, lumpy gray stuff that Comfort made, but thick smooth mounds swimming in melted brown sugar, with sweet milk poured on top.

"Take a bath after breakfast," Grandma told me. "And wear your new clothes and shoes. We're going downtown."

I was pretty sure we weren't going to the bus station, and I was right. Instead we come inside this big building with the high ceilings.

We wait for a long time in line. Grandma makes me stand close by her and warns me to behave myself and not run off. The floor is slippery and I wish I could run and slide on it, but a look at Grandma's frowning face tells me I'd better stand still like she said. So I look around the big room, staring up at the ceiling and wondering how people build such tall buildings. There's a row of glass windows way up high near the ceiling, and through one of the windows, I can see white birds flying against the blue sky, above the tops of swaying green trees. Then Grandma grabs my shoulder and says, "Quit craning your neck, you're leaning over so far, you're going to fall down."

So I stop looking at the ceiling and the birds and stare at the floor instead. Finally it's our turn. Grandma talks to a lady behind the counter, saying she and her husband want to sign papers for guardianship of their grandson. The lady gives Grandma some papers and then we turn away and walk back out of the building, and wait at the bus stop again.

"Well, Matthew," Grandma says, "we're going to a lot of trouble and expense for you. I hope you're going to be a good boy and not make us sorry later that we took you in."

"Yes," I answer. "I promise to be good."

Time Present: June 8, 1994

Matthew

"Next."

I tried so hard to be good, but I could never measure up to Grandma's impossibly high standards, and it seemed like she stayed angry at me all the years that I lived with them. She nearly wore out her wooden spoon on my ass,

till I got too big to spank. Worse than all her punishments was the way she was always trying to turn Gramps against me.

“Next!”

I start slightly, taking my eyes off the fluttering bird outside the window; the line has moved forward and now it's my turn. I hand over the papers, pay a fee, and the uninterested clerk stamps the documents, gives me a receipt, and yells, “Next!” before I've pocketed my wallet and headed for the door.

I've got a client meeting at four, then I might go home early and check in with Lucas to be sure he's okay. Instead of ordering take-out, maybe we'll go someplace nice for dinner.

Lucas

“Holy shit!”

Matthew stops dead in the kitchen doorway, staring at the flood of soapy water covering the floor.

“Holy fucking shit! What the hell have you done?”

“Laundry. You said I should do laundry. But I must have done something wrong, soap suds keep coming out of the machine. Matthew, I'm so sorry! I don't know how to stop it!”

“Have you ever done laundry in your life?” he demands, looking at me like I'm a complete idiot. Which I guess I've just proved I am.

“No,” I admit, biting my lip.

“Why the fuck didn't you say so?”

I don't have an answer for that. How can I tell him I just wanted to be helpful? And now he'll never forgive me. I've ruined his washing machine.

“How much soap did you put in?”

“I used that cup on the shelf by the soap box. I didn't know how much, so it seemed like two cups was a good idea.” I pause, looking at his face to see how mad he is. He's pretty mad.

“Two CUPS?”

“I guess that was too much.”

“Did you read the fucking directions on the fucking box?”

“No,” I admit, “I didn't think it was, you know, so complicated.”

“Holy shit,” Matthew says again, but not yelling this time. Instead, he rubs a hand over his face and mutters, “Bring me the spoon.”

“Spoon?” I'm confused. “What spoon?”

“Never mind.” He looks at the soapy floor again and repeats, “Holy shit.”

“I'm so sorry! Matthew, I'm sorry.”

"It's okay," he says, kind of bleakly. "We'll get it cleaned up. Grab all the towels, the clean ones from the shelf, and start mopping up the floor." He turns and walks away and I do as he says, pulling towels from the shelf and spreading them over the sticky mess.

He's back in a couple minutes, wearing only briefs. "Take your clothes off, you're a soggy mess," he tells me, then moves to the washer and pulls it away from the wall and unplugs it. "Now spread towels around the floor to absorb the water, then wring them out in the sink," he says, and together we work at soaking up the mess with towels.

When we're done, I watch from the sidelines as Matthew gets a mop and wipes down the whole floor, rinsing off the stickiness till the floor is clean and shiny. Then he messes with the washing machine for a while, plugs it in and turns it on.

"Umm, Matthew, it's empty," I point out, moving to stand next to him.

"I'll run it through a couple cycles empty, rinse out the soap," he explains. Then he barks a short laugh and turns to look at me. "I hope that'll work anyway. I'm not very mechanical."

"Me either."

I can't tell if Matthew's still mad, but he smiles slightly and murmurs, "No shit." He leans against the washer and folds his arms on his chest. "Did you call school today?"

I consider telling him I forgot, or that I was too busy with the laundry disaster, and as I hesitate, I can see his eyebrows pull together and he frowns. "The truth, Lucas. Always. This will work only if you're going to be honest with me."

"Yes," I agree. I don't know what he means by "this will work," but it doesn't seem like the right time to ask. Instead I clarify, "I mean, yes, I understand. But no, I didn't call school. I'm sorry, I kept putting it off all day, and then it was too late."

"Procrastination's a bitch," he nods. "But it won't make a difference. You're going back tomorrow morning."

"I don't want to." I sound wimpy, even to myself. But I don't want to go back to school.

"That's irrelevant," Matthew pushes away from the washer. "You will finish the semester at your school. That's not optional. After that ... we'll figure out what to do with you. Got it?"

Reluctantly, I nod.

“Don’t worry,” he adds. “You’re not being fed to the wolves. I’ll go with you to see the principal in the morning. So forget about it for now, and let’s get cleaned up. We’re going out to dinner.”

Nodding again, I follow Matthew through the bedroom and into the bathroom, where he beckons for me to join him in the shower. We rub each other with bars of soap and now I can relax, forget about everything but the slippery hardness of his body and the warmth of the steamy water cascading over our naked bodies. Matthew gently kisses the side of my mouth that doesn’t hurt.

“Mmm,” he murmurs, leaning his forehead against mine. “How about we go out for Chinese?”

So we get dressed and head out for dinner at The Silver Dragon. I wonder if Matthew will let me share his bed again tonight?

CHAPTER 10



Time Present: June 9, 1994

Matthew

Lucas is nervous about this meeting with Dr. Campbell, the principal of Regency. I'd called to schedule an appointment, but Campbell keeps us waiting in the outer office a few minutes before opening the door of his office and beckoning us inside.

"I'm Matthew Morgan," I step forward, holding out my hand. The principal shakes hands, and we settle on chairs in front of his desk. Lucas told me he's only talked to the principal—nicknamed not very imaginatively "Cranky Campbell"—once or twice before.

As Campbell takes his seat, he says, "Before we begin, Mr. Denholme has advised me that he is no longer responsible for tuition or other school expenses for Lucas."

"Yes," I agree pleasantly, crossing my legs and casually leaning against the back of the chair. "Lucas no longer resides with Mr. Denholme, but he will finish up this school year at Regency."

Dr. Campbell leans forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "Perhaps Lucas would prefer to finish the year at another school."

"No, he would not," I contradict. "I understand there's about two weeks left of the term?"

"A week and a half."

"It would not benefit Lucas to transfer schools at this late date. Mr. Denholme assured me that tuition for this year has already been paid. Therefore, Lucas will finish the term, and get his final grades with the rest of his class."

The principal says nothing for a moment. Resolutely I continue, "Lucas will attend his regular classes, and he will be treated exactly the same as any other student of this school. If there is any disparate treatment of Lucas, for any reason whatsoever, be assured that there will be legal ramifications for the school."

Campbell frowns. "Lucas is on probation, Mr.—" he glances down at a paper on his desk, "Mr. Morgan, for fighting on the school grounds. This makes him ineligible to participate in extracurricular activities of any kind for the balance of this term. And—"

"Wait." I turn toward Lucas and ask, "Do you want to participate in extracurricular activities?"

"No," he assures me immediately. "The only thing I cared about was the school play, and that's over with. I don't do sports and shi—stuff."

Campbell continues, "Naturally, Lucas' grades will be affected by his recent unexcused absence, and—"

"Look at him," I interrupt, gesturing at the bruises on Lucas' face. "You can see that he's been injured. Do you need a doctor's note to verify the reason for his absence the past few days? We'll provide one, if necessary."

Pressing his lips together, Campbell says, "Very well. I'll advise his instructors that the absence is excused. Is there anything else?"

"Yes. You will also advise those instructors that they will be held responsible for any students harassing Lucas in class. And I'll hold YOU responsible, Dr. Campbell, for any harassment of Lucas on the school grounds outside of class." I stand up and Lucas quickly follows suit.

Campbell also stands up. He's still keeping his face blank, but it's obvious that he's angry. "The school has no control over student behavior outside of class," he says, but he gets no further.

"Bullshit," I interrupt. "At the first sign of harassment of Lucas Denholme, be assured, Dr. Campbell, that the King County police department will be asked to provide security at this school. That wouldn't be very good publicity for Regency, would it? No doubt the newspapers would be interested in a story about gay bashing at your very elite private school."

Dr. Campbell is frowning heavily now, his brows pulled together and his mouth working. "There will be no harassment of Lucas at Regency," he sputters. "And now if you'll excuse me, I have another appointment, and Lucas is already late for his first class."

"Thank you." Inclining my head graciously, I add, "Your cooperation is appreciated."

Then I turn toward Lucas. "Go to class now," I tell him. "If anyone bothers you today, come to the principal's office and use his phone to call me right away. Got it?"

"Yes," he assures me eagerly, grabbing his backpack and making for the door without another glance at the principal.

Once we're outside the office, the door closed behind us, I emphasize, "I meant what I said. If anyone bothers you, call me at work. Okay?"

"Yes." Lucas grins and adds, "Wow, I can't believe the way you made old Cranky back down! You really pissed him off!" He laughs, but before I can respond, his smile quickly turns into a frown. "I wonder what Dad told him?"

"It doesn't matter. I'll be here at three o'clock to pick you up. Do you have money for lunch?" When he nods yes, I quickly reassure him, "The time is going to pass quickly, and then you'll be out of here for summer vacation. Right?"

"Yeah."

"See you later!" And with that, I move down the hall and out the school's main entrance. I know that Lucas will be okay, and yet it's hard to walk away and leave him there alone.



Work has been demanding this week, since I've missed quite a few hours tending to Lucas-business, and Lucas has been working hard to catch up in his classes. The time passes in a blur, and it's Friday before we know it. He's told me no one's bothering him at Regency, and I don't push for details—he's promised to call if there are problems. There hasn't been time to talk about or even think about the future, but by the end of the day when I pick up Lucas and drop him off at home before returning to the office, he doesn't get out of the car at the marina. Instead, he turns to me and asks, "Matthew, what's going to happen when school's out?"

I've resisted thinking about the future—I haven't had time to think, and I haven't wanted to think about it. Somehow, I've become this boy's keeper, his guardian angel. I've completely immersed myself in work the past few days, coming home late every night, making Lucas sleep alone in his own bed, confining our conversations to breakfast chat, and asking about his day when I pick him up after school. Logically, I know that he must be very worried about

the future, and I know that I have purposely given him no chance to talk about it. The reckoning had to come sooner or later, and now it's here.

"What's going to happen to me?" Lucas asks, his eyes wide and his hands twisting nervously together in his lap.

"I've got a meeting this afternoon and a project to finish up tonight, I'll be home late—again—but we'll have the weekend to talk, to decide about the future. So hold off till tomorrow, can you?"

Lucas solemnly nods agreement and turns to get out of the car. I reach my hand across the seat toward him, but he's moved out of reach. He closes the door without looking back. I sit watching him walk through the gate and over the dock toward my house, and I feel a tiny surge of guilt mixed with anger. Anger not at Lucas, but at myself, for getting into this position of responsibility for another person.

On the way home from work, I stop off at the Pajamas, ostensibly to pick up something for dinner. But as soon as Patrick comes from the kitchen to greet me, I realize why I've come here instead of going to the deli or Pizza Hut. I want to talk to someone about Lucas, and Pat's the only one who knows him, knows the circumstances. I'm not a man who confides in people, and I don't know why I'm doing it now, but I feel at a loss about how to handle this situation.

Feeling at a loss is something else I never do.

"Hey, Matt, got time for a cup of coffee? I need a break," Patrick greets me, taking my unresisting arm and pulling me toward an empty booth. We sit across from each other and he signals Jose the waiter to bring us coffee. As soon as our cups are filled and Jose moves his nearly-perfect bubble butt away, Pat lowers his voice and asks conspiratorially, "How's your little twink doing?"

With a grimace, I correct him: "He's not my little twink, he's just this fucking kid that somehow ended up at my place."

"Somehow, mmm-hmm," Pat nods, smiling blandly. "Fell from the sky into your arms, did he?"

"Fell from an elevator into my arms," I'm tempted to reply, but that's a story I've no intention of sharing.

"It was a convergence of circumstances," I say instead. "But just tell me this: What am I going to do with him now?"

Pat relaxes against the vinyl seat. "What do you want to do with him?" I shake my head, but he's having none of it. "What do you want?"

Instead of shrugging off the question, I'm forced to face it head on. "I want to keep him around." Then I laugh reluctantly. "Damn it."

Patrick doesn't laugh. "So, this was not merely a Good Samaritan act for your average anonymous battered kid. It was Matt looking out for someone special."

Nodding, I close my eyes and repeat, "Damn it."

"I take it your feelings are reciprocated?"

"Christ, Pat!" I explode. "It's not a question of ... It's not like that."

"Like what?"

"He's seventeen. He doesn't know his own mind, he's still a school boy. He's just a kid."

"Kids grow up."

"Yeah," I agree, "they grow up and move on. And," I add hastily, "That's exactly what I want him to do. But meanwhile, he needs a place to stay, and I don't think I can stand living with anybody, least of all some bratty teenager."

Patrick hunches forward and takes a swig of coffee, returning his cup to the saucer with a clunk. "So, you don't want him living with you, but you do want him within reach."

"Pat—"

He adds quickly, "So, you're looking for a temporary home for Lucas? Like, a rooming-house or something?"

I hadn't actually gotten that far in my thinking, but I nod agreement.

"Hmm. Well, you know Angie Carpenter, the woman who owns Bangers Bakery around the corner?"

"No. Friend of yours?"

"Yeah. Well, she's the pie and cake supplier for The Pajamas. Anyway, she's a lesbian; she's got a couple rooms she rents to UW students mostly. She only rents to gay kids, so obviously she doesn't advertise in the paper. Shall I see if there's a room available now, and if she'd be willing to have somebody Lucas' age live there?"

"Oh." It's a good idea. Probably. "You think maybe she'd look out for him, though? He's kind of young to be on his own."

"Matty," Pat smiles, "if you want to keep a close eye on Lucas, let him stay at your place."

"I don't want him at my place."

"Okay." Pat slips out of the booth, leans a hand on the table, and says, "Wait a second, I'll go call her."

I watch as he moves to his office in the back. What I said is the truth. I don't want Lucas living in my house. I don't want him underfoot. I don't want to worry about mealtimes and homework and all that parental bullshit. And I

don't want him in my bed. Or anyway, I want my bed available for other visitors.

In a few minutes, Pat returns and resumes his seat. "One of Angie's tenants will be moving out this weekend. She said you can come and talk to her now, if you want—she'll be there a few more minutes till it's time to close the shop."

Suddenly, I'm feeling unsure. Things are moving awfully fast.

Patrick says gently, "If you want to keep the boy with you, just do it. What are you so worried about?"

"I'm not worried about anything." I stand up and reach for my wallet but Pat grabs my hand and says, "Don't."

"Thanks. How about you fix a couple of turkey sandwiches to go—and a quart of three-bean soup—and I'll come pick them up after seeing your lady friend about the room."

I walk out of the café, down the street and around the corner to Bangers Bakery. A bell tinkles over the door as I push it open, and a plump woman in a pink blouse turns to smile a greeting. The nametag on her collar proclaims her to be Angie.

"Hello, Angie, I'm Matthew Morgan," I extend my hand and we shake. "Patrick said you have a room for rent?"

She nods. "For a student, Pat said. High school senior?" When I nod she goes on, "Usually the kids who rent my rooms are at UW." She gives it the slang "U-Dub" pronunciation. "I'm not sure I want to deal with a younger boy. Is he responsible?"

"Yes, very," I answer, mentally crossing my fingers. "He's an emancipated minor."

Or at least he will be, if the court agrees.

"And you're his—?"

Angie leaves the question hanging in the air, and I wonder, what am I, anyway? His lover, his mentor, his friend?

"We're friends," I answer. "I helped him get away from a difficult home situation, and now I'm helping him get settled someplace safe and comfortable, so he can get on with his life."

Angie studies me for a moment before saying, "You need to know, up front, that my boys are not allowed to have overnight guests. I think you know what I mean?"

I want to say, "I have no idea what you mean," but instead I just nod agreeably and say, "Good." I realize I'm glad to hear Angie say that, for several reasons. First, because Lucas doesn't need to have overnight guests. I don't want

this teen sex fiend to be dragging guys home with him; it's not safe. But it also means that Angie will be keeping an eye on him, just like I'd hoped. If she knows who's coming and going from his room, that probably means she'll be acting parental in other respects too. "Good," I repeat. "Would it be possible for me to see this room that's available?"

"I'm on my way home now, you can come along. But," Angie adds as she gets her purse from the back room and slings the strap over her arm, "I want to meet this boy, before I agree to rent him the room. If he's got a pierced nose and is covered in tattoos, he's not staying at my place."

"Perfectly reasonable," I agree blandly as she pulls out a massive key ring, gestures me out the door and follows, then turns to lock up the bakery.

"I'm parked across the street; it's a tan Honda Accord. You can follow me."

Hurrying back up the street to the parking lot behind The Pajamas, I pull out just in time to fall in behind the Accord, and follow Angie for several miles, turning onto a quiet residential street with large but modest clapboard houses and wide lawns. Angie's house is second from the corner.

Pushing open the back door, she enters the house. We're in the kitchen, there's a built-in breakfast nook paneled in knotty pine at one end of the large room.

Sitting at that table is a lanky young man with long dark hair pulled back in a pony tail. He looks up at Angie and then his eyes slip over her shoulder to meet mine, and I see a telltale spark light up his face. He smiles, his lips full and red, and he pushes a swag of hair off his forehead. "Hey Angie," he says, but he's looking at me.

Angie's lips thin into a frown. "This is Mr. Morgan, he's checking out Tim's room."

"Great!" the boy says enthusiastically, his eyes flashing an invitation so obvious as to be nearly hilarious under the circumstances. I'm reminded why I'm not attracted to young guys; there's no subtlety, no challenge in that open glance.

Quickly Angie warns, "None of that, Petey," and she throws a warning look in my direction, too. "A friend of Mr. Morgan's might be moving in. You keep your mind on your studies. You've got that English final tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yeah," he agrees, looking back at the papers in front of him.

"Come this way, Mr. Morgan," Angie crooks her finger and I follow. We pass through a living room crowded with overstuffed sofas and chairs and up a steep flight of stairs to the second floor. "The boys' rooms are on the third floor," she explains. "They're big rooms and the boys share a bathroom."

They're responsible for keeping the third floor clean, and I expect them to help with meals and laundry and yard work, that's part of the deal."

"Good," I grunt again, making a mental note to teach Lucas how to do laundry before I move him here. If I move him here.

The room is large and airy, with a big window overlooking an expanse of green lawn. There's a single bed, a desk and chair, a chest and lots of shelving; plenty of room for a kid to spread out.

Angie throws open another door to expose a large bathroom, with an old-fashioned claw-footed tub surrounded by a white shower curtain, twin sinks and a large mirror. The bathroom's spotless, so Angie enforces her rules pretty strictly.

I'm liking the feel of this place more and more—it's definitely homey and comfortable, and I'm confident that Angie can make Lucas feel safe and secure. She can provide a sense of normalcy for this homeless boy who's just been set adrift. He'll be much better off here in this environment than kicking around my place, alone without an anchor.

Before I get too caught up in oceanic metaphors, I nod and clear my throat. "I like your home, Angie," I tell her sincerely, "and I think Lucas will like it too. But he's, umm, a bit unhappy right now."

"Oh?" she crosses her arms and leans back against the sink. "Why's he unhappy?"

Honesty's best with this woman, I can tell. "His dad just disowned him, kicked him out, and he has no friends his own age."

"Kicked him out for being gay?" When I nod, Angie says slowly, "Sometimes parents come around later, especially mothers."

"His mom died years ago."

"Ach, poor kid," Angie sympathizes. "Well, I don't play mom-and-pop to the boys who live here, I don't have time. They need to be responsible adults. Is your boy ready to be on his own?"

"Yes," I insist, wondering if I'm convincing Angie or myself. "He will be. He's an honor student. He's a good kid," I add, "I'm sure you'll like him." I stop then, I don't want to sound like I'm selling a used car. "Maybe I could bring him by to meet you, to see the room, and you can make up your own mind about letting him stay here."

There's a pause, then Angie says, "Can I ask you a personal question?"

I brace myself, wondering what's coming next.

"Mr. Morgan, are you romantically involved with Lucas?"

"No," I answer briskly. "Romantically? No."

“Sexually?”

Surprised by Angie’s bluntness, I hesitate and nearly look away. But keeping my eyes on her face, finally I nod. “I have been. Yes.”

“Past tense?” she pushes, lowering her head and trying to stare me down. “You’ve been involved with this boy, and now you want to be rid of him?”

“It’s not like that,” I’m annoyed. “I want what’s best for him. He’s seventeen, he’s a school boy.” After a pause, I say again, “I want what’s best for Lucas.”

“Okay,” Angie’s convinced. “You can bring him around to see me this weekend, Sunday. The bakery’s closed and I’ll be here most of the day. I’ll give you my number so you can call first.”

“Fine, that’s good.” I follow Angie back downstairs and wait while she writes her name and number on a scrap of paper.

Folding the note and shoving it in my pocket, I take my leave. Angie walks me to the door and holds it open. She stands in the doorway and when I get in my car, I see her still there as I pull out. She waves and I wave back, breathing a very long sigh of relief. This will be a good place for Lucas, I feel sure of it. But on the way back to The Pajamas to pick up sandwiches, I decide to say nothing to him for the time being. I’ll tell him tomorrow.

CHAPTER 11



Matthew

Lucas devours most of the soup, all of his sandwich and half of mine. I have no appetite tonight. I also have no desire to discuss the future. So after we wash up our few dishes, I take his hand and lead him into the bedroom.

“Oh!” Lucas laughs happily, toeing off his shoes and pulling down his pants. He’s naked before I’ve finished hanging up my trousers. I glance at the pile of his discarded clothing on the floor but say nothing. No need to nag him about it, he won’t be living here much longer. On that not-very-cheerful note, I pull him into my arms and begin kissing his face, his mouth and his ears, smiling as I listen to his little gasps. Christ, he’s an exciting armful.

It feels so good to hold him in my arms, to feel him tremble with excitement. It’s an amazing feeling, to hear the little moans of pleasure Lucas makes, his gasps loud in my ears, the way his body goes limp and he sinks into the mattress when we’re finished. And I don’t let go of him afterwards, just roll off to one side and drag him along with me. I keep holding him close in my arms as we drift off to sleep.

We’d gone to bed early, so it’s not surprising that we both begin to rouse in the early morning. I’m aware that our bodies are beginning all over again—before we’re really awake, our legs and thighs rub together, our hands knead and rub and tickle, our mouths find each other in the near-dark of the predawn stillness.

Lucas’ cheek is pressed close to mine, his breath tickling my ear as he murmurs, “Matthew.”

“Hmm?”

“More donuts.”

He's talking in his sleep again.

Sometimes he says whole sentences, sometimes just a few random words strung together, meaningless but sounding sweet or sometimes funny. Once he said, "I want a puppy," and I'd been sure he was awake. When I answered, "No dogs," Lucas had whined, "But mommy, you promised." I laughed before I realized that he really was asleep. Next morning when I told Lucas what he'd said, he not only had no memory of it, but he said he was only three when his mother died, so it seems unlikely he'd ever asked her for a dog.

Three's a fucking young age to lose a mother. It's hard to imagine a child that age dealing with death. I wonder if Lucas felt abandoned when his mother died? He says he doesn't remember her, but surely even three-year-olds retain memories of early experiences, especially traumatic ones? He doesn't want to talk about it, and I respect his wishes. After all, I have no desire to talk about losing my own parents. Things in the distant past should be left in the past. I've never told anyone about my parents, not even Dean. Well, I tried once, but by then it was too late.

It was never my intention to have a serious relationship with anyone, but meeting Dean had thrown my resolution out the window. Ours was a tumultuous relationship, and when we parted, I was determined never to let anyone get that close to me again. And yet now, despite the anguish I experienced after the break-up with Dean, somehow I can't entirely regret everything that happened. There was pain, but for a while at least, there had also been joy. Dean and I may have ended with a fizzle, but we started with a bang.

Time Past: September 1989

Recruited by the prestigious architectural firm Grant & Ellis right after graduation, I moved to San Francisco directly from Pullman. I enjoy the city, and by working my ass off, I've already had two promotions in two years.

I've never been a morning person, but I like the early commute from my studio apartment on Russian Hill to the office in the Financial District. Morning fog usually shrouds the city, but on this first Monday in September, there's a clear blue sky promising warm afternoon sunshine. I'm crammed together with hundreds of other commuters in the underground Muni station below Montgomery Street; and after joining the crowded queue on the escalator, I'm impatiently tapping my fingers on the handrail as we begin to move slowly upward.

Suddenly there's a commotion up at street level—people are shouting and screaming. Before those of us at the bottom know what's happening, the column of humanity massed on the escalator above us abruptly begins to fall backward. Like a row of human dominoes, an avalanche of bodies, arms and legs windmilling, topples down toward the platform below in a horrifyingly inescapable tumble.

Luckily, I'm near the bottom of the escalator; I'm knocked sideways over the handrail and fall onto my hands and knees. Stunned, unable to move, I stare in dazed confusion at the writhing, moaning bodies scattered around the station floor. I try to stand, but immediately my feet go out from under me. Blinding pain in my left shoulder stabs down into my fingers and up into my neck. Again I try to stand, but this time I fall over sideways, hitting my head; everything goes black.

When I open my eyes, I hear the wail of sirens. There's a paramedic crouched beside me. "What happened?" I ask through gritted teeth as he does a cursory examination of my injured shoulder.

"Not sure," he answers absently. "Apparently some junkie kid on a bike tried to elude the cops chasing behind him by plowing head-first down the up escalator."

"Jesus." I turn my head sideways and notice for the first time a twisted bicycle lying on the far side of the platform. Then I forget the bike when the paramedic hits a nerve in my shoulder with his gently probing fingers. "Oh, God," I murmur breathlessly.

"You might have a broken collar bone," he decides. "We'll get you to a hospital soon, but we have to deal with the most seriously injured first."

I manage to sit up, though the pain in my shoulder is excruciating. I watch as ambulance crews hurry up and down the escalators, loading the injured onto gurneys and carrying them to street level. Finally it's my turn, and I share an ambulance to San Francisco General with a woman who has two sprained wrists but nothing at all wrong with her mouth. She bitches nonstop about the paramedics, the cops, juvenile delinquents in general and the hapless idiot on the bicycle. Her grating voice and the wail of the siren combine to make my head pound almost unbearably. By the time I'm transferred by wheelchair to a hallway outside the emergency room, I'm weak from exhaustion, pain and the after-effects of shock.

I feel invisible in my corner as hospital staff scurry past me through the hallway. When finally a doctor approaches, I expect him to brush off my injury as inconsequential. But the young man in the white coat who grabs the clip-

board hanging from the side of my wheelchair reads aloud, "Fractured clavicle," then glances at my face. "You look pale, do you feel light-headed?"

"Yes," I manage to gasp. For several long minutes, I was sure I'd pass out and slide from my chair onto the floor. "I think I'm going to—" I say desperately, but before I can finish my sentence, unconsciousness carries me away.

When I awake, I'm lying on a gurney in the hallway. My left arm is fitted tight against my chest with a narrow cloth sling. Apparently, I've been unconscious for a while—long enough to have my injury treated—and when I flag down a passing nurse, she consults my chart and reports that I'll be released as soon as I can call someone to come and get me.

I lie there trying to think of someone to call. I have many acquaintances at the office and within the gay community—I'm well-known at a few favorite gay bars and clubs in the Castro neighborhood. But I cannot think of a single person who is the kind of friend to call in a personal emergency like this.

It's sobering to realize that I've never had that kind of friend, not ever. I've never needed one before. And as I lie there with my arm strapped to my chest, dizzy from whatever drugs I've been given for pain adding to my general feeling of helplessness, I begin to wonder just how fucked up my life might be. Working hard, playing hard, with no time left over for anything else. With no interest in having anything else, or anyone else, in my life.

It is in this uncharacteristically melancholy mood that the young doctor finds me when he returns to sign the hospital's release papers. He confirms that my collar bone is broken. I've been x-rayed and a cast was put on while I was unconscious. He tells me to see my own doctor as soon as possible for follow-up treatment.

"Now," he concludes, "have you called someone to drive you home?"

I have to turn my head away. Embarrassed, I finally admit, "There's no one to call."

Interpreting his silence to be disinterest, I quickly add, "But I'll take a taxi, it's no problem."

"You have no family in the city?" he asks quietly, and when I glance at his face, I see nothing but concern reflected there.

"No."

Nodding, he checks his watch. "Hold tight for another hour, and I'll drive you home myself. I get off at two."

"Oh no, I can manage," I assure him, my face hot with embarrassment. "Thanks very much, but you don't need to bother."

"No bother," he smiles slightly. "You're probably a bit woozy from the pain meds. We don't want you tripping on a curb or falling downstairs."

Regaining my air of confidence, I lightly mock, "You do take your Hippocratic oath rather seriously, doctor. Going above and beyond the call of duty for a stranger."

"My name's Amherst, Dean Amherst. And you're not exactly a stranger."

"I'm not?"

"I've seen you around," he explains. "Mostly at The Patio."

"Oh!" Pain must have short-circuited my gaydar. Dr. Amherst is definitely in the hunk category. "How come I don't remember you?"

I'd already noticed that the doctor is attractive—mid-twenties, about five-ten, slim but looking toned and healthy in his wrinkled green scrubs. During the time I've been patronizing The Patio, I've picked up more than my share of tricks, but I honestly can't remember him.

"I had a boyfriend, until recently," he explains. "I wasn't in the market, so to speak. Besides, you always seem to go for older guys. I haven't seen you cruising the younger crowd."

That's true enough; I've always been attracted to older men, and Dr. Amherst is about my age. Still, I'm embarrassed not to recognize him, since he obviously has been observing me. "Sorry," I say ruefully. "I must've been blind." I hesitate, then add quickly, "you said you had a boyfriend 'until recently'—right?"

His smile widens. "Right. So, can I give you a ride home?"

"Yes," I agree quickly. "By all means. Thanks, Dr. Amherst."

"Dean. See you in a bit." And when he turns and walks away, I admire his really very nice ass as he moves off down the hall.

Time Present: Saturday, June 11, 1994

I've got a project to finish before Monday which requires me to spend a few hours at the office this morning. I'm writing a justification for denying a client's request for changes in the original renovation plans. The client's going to be irate, and MacKenzie, the firm's head architect on this project, is going to side with the client at Monday's meeting. MacKenzie's no fool; he'll agree privately that I'm right, but for the sake of client relations, he's going to pretend to disagree. In the end I'll win out—my argument is water-tight, unlike the plumbing would be if the client's requested changes were implemented.

So I'm in a dark mood and pressed for time. I should wait till later to break the news to Lucas, but at breakfast I ignore my better judgment, take the bull by the horns, and inform him that he'll be moving into a rooming house as soon as his term ends at Regency High.

"What?" he screeches, dropping his half-eaten piece of toast and jumping to his feet. "You're getting rid of me?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I also stand up, grab my plate and take it to the kitchen sink. "I'm not getting rid of you. I've found a very nice place for you to live, something a hell of a lot more appropriate than this house, which anyway isn't big enough for two."

"It's big enough. I have my own room!" Lucas follows me to the sink.

"It's not your room," I correct him, glancing over my shoulder but not letting my eyes linger on his face. "It's the spare room," I insist. "I need that space for storage."

That sounds lame, even to me. There's a storage-locker place just up the street.

"Anyway, that's beside the point," I say firmly, shutting off the water and turning to lean against the sink. I do look at him then, and keep my face stern. After all, Angie's rooming house really is the best thing for Lucas. I'm not being selfish, I'm looking out for him. "You can see the place tomorrow. You'll like it. You'll have your own room and be around other boys. And you'll help Angie—Mrs. Carpenter—cook meals and clean the house. It'll be just like living with a real family."

"I don't want to," he says stubbornly. "I want to stay here with you!"

"Well, you can't. I've made up my mind, so don't argue." Pushing off from the sink, I move into the living room and grab my briefcase. "I'm going to the office for a while," I tell him—he's followed me, and stands silently while I pull on my jacket. "And," I add, as I turn to give him an unyielding look, "I want you to get all your homework caught up before you watch TV today. I'll be back in the afternoon, but I've got a lot of work to do this weekend, so you cannot be ragging on me. Understood?"

Lucas frowns mutinously but says nothing.

"Lucas?"

He doesn't answer, just glares at me before turning abruptly away and stalking off—stalking off as only a teenager can do—through the living room and down the hall to his room (I mean the spare room), loudly slamming the door.

Which naturally convinces me all the more that Lucas needs to live with someone like Angie, who can deal with his moods and temper tantrums, and make sure he does his homework.

Lucas

I can't believe that Matthew is getting rid of me. I thought he liked me. He rescued me, and I thought he wanted me to live here with him. But already he's tired of me. He thinks I'm too much trouble.

Maybe it's because I screwed up the laundry. I probably damaged the washing machine. If I buy him a new washer, maybe that will prove I can be responsible?

So instead of doing my homework, I take the spare key Matthew left on the kitchen counter, walk to the bus stop and ride to the mall where there's a Sears store. Before I go in to find the appliance department, I decide that I should go to the bank, then I can pay with cash. There's a branch of my bank across the street from the mall.

After waiting in a very long line, finally it's my turn. I give the clerk my passbook and a withdrawal slip I filled out. I've got about five thousand saved. I'll take out a thou; that's probably enough for a new washer.

The clerk checks my ID and types on her keyboard, then says, "Excuse me for a moment," and walks away—carrying my passbook. I watch as she approaches some old guy and talks to him for a minute. When he glances my way, my stomach clenches. If somehow Dad took my money away, I'm going to be sick. When the old guy gets up and comes to the window where I'm waiting, my heart is thumping in my chest.

"Mr. Denholme? This account has been closed."

"Oh, no," I can't help saying. "Oh, no." There's silence as we stare at each other, then I ask, "Was it my dad? Did my father close my account?"

"It was closed yesterday," he answers. "There's two names on the account: Lucas Denholme and David Denholme. Could David have closed this account?"

"Yes." I'm numb, I'm absolutely numb. "David is my father."

"He was co-signatory," the old guy informs me, lowering his voice. "Legally he had the right to terminate the account." I say nothing—I can't even open my mouth. I just stare at him, letting his words sink in. "I'm sorry," he says at last, handing me the useless passbook.

I can't answer, can't say a word. I turn and walk away, push open the exit door and walk away, not seeing anything or anybody, just walking and walking like a stupid robot.

Now I'm broke. Dad not only kicked me out, but he took the money in my savings account. I want to shout or scream or something, but I can't. I just feel numb all over. I try to convince myself that it's no big deal; I didn't do anything to earn that money. It was mostly leftover allowance money, or birthday and Christmas presents. But still, it belonged to me.

And now I can't help out with expenses at Matthew's house. I can't buy a new washing machine. I can't even buy a box of soap. I have no money, none at all. I stop in my tracks and pull out my wallet. I have exactly three dollars and forty-seven cents.

I'm a homeless, penniless pauper.

Matthew

When I get home about 2 o'clock, I knock on Lucas' door—damn it, I mean the spare room door—to be sure he's in there. He's sitting on the floor on the other side of the bed and he doesn't even look up when I stick my head inside the room. "I'm home," I say unnecessarily. He nods but doesn't look up. Since he's still pouting, I turn and close the door behind me, go to my desk and unload my briefcase. I focus all my attention on refining the renovation denial justification statement.

When I finish working on the document, it's after six and still Lucas hasn't come out. He must be hungry by now. In the kitchen, I check for evidence that he cooked something for lunch, soup or sandwiches. But a glance into the garbage can shows the remains of my breakfast toast and nothing else. That's kind of worrisome. Maybe it just means he went out to eat; maybe he indulged in one of his favorite greasy burgers.

I move down the hall and stop outside his room. It's not really his room, but I'm tired of correcting myself. "Lucas." He doesn't answer, so I rap my knuckles on the door perfunctorily and push it open. He's still on the floor by the bed. "Lucas," I repeat, "are you hungry? We can call for Chinese. Or," I'm feeling generous, "how about pizza?"

He raises his head, and I'm surprised by the look on his face. The pouting is gone; in its place is something subtly more disturbing. Lucas' face reflects nothing at all. "No, thanks," he says quietly. "I'm not hungry."

"You must be hungry." I move into the room and sit down on the side of the bed.

Looking away, Lucas murmurs, "I can't afford pizza."

"I'm buying."

"No."

I notice what he's looking at on the floor; it's not his textbooks, it's a newspaper opened to the classifieds. "What're you—"

"I'm going to get a job," he says defiantly. "I have to, I don't have any money."

"You can get a job this summer." I told him that already, damn it, and I hear my voice take on an edge. "You don't need to work right now."

"Matthew, I don't have any money at all. None. I went to the bank today, and found out that Dad closed my savings account. I didn't know he could do that, but he did."

"Fucking bastard!" I exclaim, jumping to my feet. "Son of a fucking bitch!" Christ, what a rotten thing to do, to take away his kid's money. It's immoral as fucking hell. "And it's probably not even legal," I add, as if I'd been speaking aloud.

"It is, though," Lucas says. "The bank guy told me. It was in my father's name too, so he had a right to close it and keep the money. So you see," he concludes, "I really don't have any money at all." He shows me a face unbelievably blasé, unbelievable because I know how much it must have hurt him, this further repudiation by his dad.

"Never mind." I'm surprised by the sudden gentleness of my voice. "Never mind, you'll be okay. I'm looking out for you."

"No," Lucas says. "I can't take your money."

"It's no big deal," I assure him hastily. "I earn a good salary, and I have nothing much to spend it on. Giving you a hand is not a problem."

"But why should you?" he asks, getting to his feet.

"Why should I what? Help you out?"

"Yeah. Why should you? I'm no relation to you. I'm just a kid you fucked a few times."

"Lucas," I lean toward him, earnestly repeating, "Lucas—"

"It's not like we're good friends, or anything," he says, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows a gulp. "It's not like you love me. Or anything."

"Lucas—"

"You don't, do you? You don't love me, Matthew. Do you?"

"No," I agree quickly, "but—"

"Well then," he gulps again.

I don't want him to cry. I want him to be tough; I want him to be a man. I sure as fuck don't want to see him cry.

"Lucas—"

"Somehow," he goes on, "it would be okay, if you did. If you loved me, I mean. It would be okay for you to pay for things. But you don't. So that means, I'm really not anybody special to you. So why should you look out for me? I don't want you to."

"Lucas, that's ridiculous."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is."

Christ almighty, he's talking like a three-year-old and he's dragging me down with him.

"We're not arguing about this," I say firmly. "You need looking after, and I can afford to do it. You are my responsibility, whether you like it or not. You'll be moving in to Angie's place and that's final."

"Maybe I'll go away instead."

"Lucas," I'm getting exasperated, "don't be ridiculous. You have no place to go."

"Everything I say is ridiculous to you!"

"You're right about that."

He swings away then and rushes down the hall and into the living room, with me on his heels. He pulls open the front door, but I grab onto his arm and he stops abruptly, almost falling down. I swing him around and push the door closed with a bang.

"Stop," I order grimly, "just stop this drama princess routine, you're being—"

When I pause, Lucas fills in the blank: "Ridiculous?"

Still keeping a tight grip on his arm, I say softly, "I'm sorry, Lucas. I'm sorry. I don't know how to get through to you. Just believe me—believe me when I tell you, I want to look out for you now. I want to be responsible for you, okay? I can afford it, and it's something I want to do."

"But Matthew," he persists, "how would you like to be somebody's responsibility? Somebody's albatross around their neck? How would you like to have no money, and be homeless, and have somebody who doesn't even love you or anything, pay your way? How would you like that, huh?"

"Oh, Lucas," I move closer, taking him into my arms. He struggles briefly against my embrace, but I hold him tight, and in a moment he stops struggling, drops his head onto my chest.

"Shh," I say into his hair, one hand rubbing comforting circles on his back. "Shh, it's okay. It's okay."

"I don't want to be an albatross!"

I want to laugh but I can't. I really can't. "You are not an albatross, I promise." Then I do laugh, but gently. "But you are a bird-brain sometimes."

Lucas pulls away a few inches and looks up at me, his face so unhappy, so miserable; I really cannot bear it. Taking a deep breath, I perjure myself: "I do care about you."

Strangely enough, once I say it out loud, I realize it's true.

"Okay?" I demand then, but my voice is gentle. "And we are friends. It's right for friends to look out for each other."

"Do you sort of love me?" he asks, almost desperately. "Just a little bit maybe?"

Not even for Lucas can I go that far. "I don't love anybody," I answer. "I never have and I never will. But," I conclude, making sure he sees the truth in my eyes, "I like you. I do. Okay? That will have to be enough."

"Okay. I know you like me. And not," he appends, "not just because of my ass."

That makes me bark a laugh. "Not just because of your ass. Though it's a very fine ass."

"I know." He clears his throat and asks, "Can we order pizza now? I'm majorly starving."

"Sure. Go ahead."

Lucas pulls away and moves around the sofa to pick up the phone. He's already memorized the number for Pizza Hut. "Pepperoni okay?" he asks rhetorically, not waiting for an answer, but launching into a greeting to the pizza man on the other end of the line.

Walking across the room, I stand by the window, pull open the curtain and stare out at the mist on the water. I'm feeling hungry myself, or at least, I'm feeling a bit shaky, it must be from hunger. I loathe emotional scenes, and by claiming responsibility for this boy, I've guaranteed myself innumerable emotional scenes in the next couple years.

But somehow, after dinner and a night in my bed, Lucas must be made to see, not only the appropriateness of me looking after him, but also the practicality of his living with Angie Carpenter. It will be for the best, for both of us.

CHAPTER 12



Time Present: Sunday, June 12, 1994

Matthew

“Angie Carpenter, this is Lucas Denholme.”

“Hello, Lucas,” she sticks out her hand and he shakes it.

“Nice to meet you, ma’am,” he says politely. He’s not exactly pouting, but he’s subdued to the point of appearing gruff.

Angie picks up on the note of grumpiness and tilts her head to one side. “Don’t call me ma’am, honey. Call me Angie.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lucas mumbles, then blushes and quickly corrects himself, “I mean, Angie.”

“Don’t often meet anybody with such good manners nowadays,” Angie flicks her eyes to me and I smile.

“Thank his nanny.”

Immediately I’m sorry; a glance at Lucas reveals his deepening blush.

Angie picks up on my throwaway comment. “Nanny? Well la-di-da.” She laughs gently as she peers more closely at Lucas, but he’s not looking at her, just scowling.

“Wait a minute,” Angie’s suddenly on the alert. “Did you say Denholme?” When neither of us answers, she demands, “Are you one of those Seattle society Denholmes?”

“No,” Lucas and I say together. He clamps his lips tight after that brief denial, but I elaborate. “Lucas is on his own—he’s an emancipated minor. He has no family in Seattle.”

Lucas glances at me then, but I can't read his look. Quickly I change the subject. "Angie, why don't you show him the room that's going to be available?"

"Sure thing," she hurries to bridge the awkward moment. "Come with me, honey, it's upstairs. You coming, Mr. Morgan?"

"Matthew. No, I'll wait here." I slide onto the chintz-covered seat in the breakfast nook, folding my hands on the table top. Lucas is hanging back, but after the briefest hesitation, he follows Angie. From where I sit there is an enjoyable view of his bubble-butt in snug jeans ascending the stairs.

They're back in a few minutes and I'm annoyed that he's still looking glum. Angie is enumerating the rules of the house, he's nodding but not looking at her. When they reach the kitchen and stop by the table, he shoves his hands in his pockets and stares at the floor.

"Lucas," I say sharply, "did you like the room?"

Raising his eyes to my face, he mumbles, "Yes, sir," so politely that I want to smack him. He must interpret my frown correctly, because immediately he straightens up and looks at Angie. "It's a very nice room."

"Thanks," Angie nods, then turns to me. "It seems that Lucas is not exactly enthusiastic about living here?"

"It's not his first choice," I answer without elaboration.

She's silent for a moment, then nods again. "I take it his first choice is not practical?"

"Correct."

"I'm right here, I can speak for myself," Lucas interrupts crankily. "It's a nice room, okay? It's a nice house. It's a nice place to live. And I'll live here and obey all the rules and I'll help with cleaning and stuff, and I'll be so fucking nice, no one will be able to stand me."

"Lucas—" I say warningly, but he doesn't wait for more. He strides quickly out the door and across the lawn.

Getting abruptly to my feet, I tell Angie, "I'm sorry, he's—"

"A teenager," she nods, unperturbed. "I'm familiar with the breed."

"I'll call you later," I throw over my shoulder as I push open the screen and hurry off in hot pursuit.

My long strides catch up with him before he reaches the end of the block. "Stop," I order, and surprisingly, he does.

"I'm sorry," Lucas turns then and raises his eyes to my face. "I'm sorry, Matthew," his voice is small, defeated. "I'll go back now and apologize. I know I was rude."

"Yes, you were," I agree, but when he heads back across the lawn toward the house, I move to put my arm around his shoulders and lead him instead down the sidewalk toward the car.

"Let's get some lunch," I suggest. "I'll call Angie later."

"Okay." Lucas doesn't shrug off my arm, but when we reach the car and I unlock the door, he pulls away and says earnestly, "Don't be mad."

"I'm not."

It's an honest answer; I'm not mad at him. But when we get in the car and drive off, neither of us speaks for a while. I'm feeling suddenly introspective; can I really be having second thoughts? I know that he is unhappy right now, but I'm sure he'll get over it.

There's a dozen good reasons for moving him in with Angie, and only one reason for letting him stay with me. That reason has nothing to do with sex. It's connected somehow to my own memory of being shuffled off when it became inconvenient for my parents to keep me. I will never forget that feeling of being unwanted.

But this is different; the circumstances are entirely different. I'm not getting rid of Lucas. I'm just trying to do what is best for him. Living with Angie and the other boys in the rooming house is best for him right now. I nod to myself as I turn the corner and head the car for home.

And then, as if the memory of being abandoned by my parents isn't enough to aggravate me, other thoughts intrude. Against my will, I'm remembering the breakup with Dean, the disaster that was my only experience of living with another man.

Moving Lucas from my place to the rooming house has nothing to do with that either; it's completely unrelated. It is, isn't it?

Gritting my teeth, I try to keep at bay these jumbled thoughts about the past swirling around inside my head. In the subdued silence inside the car, I give up the struggle, and allow myself to remember the way my relationship with Dean came to an abrupt end, on a cold winter day in San Francisco.

After meeting on the day of the Muni accident, Dean and I had dated casually for a while, gradually discovering that we'd rather be together than fucking around, though I'd never stopped tricking completely, even after Dean moved in with me. I'd insisted on an open relationship, and he had apparently been okay with it—he stayed anyway, and didn't give me grief for late hours or unexplained absences. We had a pretty enjoyable time for more than a year.

And then Dean began leaning on me to bare my soul, to share my feelings, as if we were a couple of moony lesbians. He insisted that it was time to "take

our relationship to the next level,” whatever the fuck that’s supposed to mean. To him, it meant sharing our bullshit childhood experiences, meeting each other’s families, exchanging declarations of love and commitment.

I didn’t want that level of intimacy; I never have. I was always honest with Dean, and convinced myself that he would settle for what I could give. If I’d thought about it consciously, I would have said it was a gamble, but that the odds were good he would stay. Dean gambled too—apparently thinking he could make me change. We’d both lost our gambles, and then he was walking out the door.

In a desperate last-ditch attempt to keep Dean from leaving, I’d tried to tell him about my family. Even now, more than two years later, I feel a warm flush suffuse my face as I remember that embarrassing final scene.

Time Past: December 1991

Dean’s walking out. He’s leaving me, as he’s threatened to do so many times. But this time he means it.

He came back this morning after spending Christmas with his family. He’s harassed me a dozen times to go home with him, to meet his parents, and always I’ve refused. Finally this Christmas I agreed, mostly to get him off my back—I can’t stand nagging. But at the last minute, an important client blew into town unannounced and wanted preferential treatment from the firm. I volunteered, telling Dean I had no choice.

That was not strictly true; there are one or two capable junior architects who could have handled the client. But it had been a good excuse to get out of going to Delaware with Dean. I’d been dreading the visit—I loathe family bullshit at the best of times, and during the holidays there always seems to be an excess of sentimental nonsense.

Dean didn’t argue, which should have tipped me off that he was really angry. I remember feeling grateful that we’d avoided that particular fight this time. But as it turns out, my cancellation was apparently the final straw.

As he enters the study now and stands in front of my desk, Dean is silent, hands in the pockets of his new fleece jacket. When I look up from the blue-line print of the third floor of the Galloway Building, he announces without preamble, “This is it, Matt.”

“This is what?” I’m stalling for time.

"Don't," he murmurs quietly. "Just don't. I've packed a few clothes and things, and I'm leaving now. I'll come back in a couple days to get the rest of my stuff."

"Dean," I will myself to stay calm, refusing to get into another fight. We've wasted so much time arguing. "Don't do this. It's so—" I search for a word as I stare up at his face. "It's so unnecessary."

"Unnecessary," Dean's lips twist with scorn. "How reasonable you sound. How rational. Well, I'm sick of your rationality, I'm sick of your damned stoicism. I'm leaving you, Matthew, and you can't even pretend to care!"

"I do care." Standing up abruptly, I scowl and insist, "Damn it, just because I don't get all hysterical and throw my arms around and wail every time we disagree, that doesn't mean I don't care. Oh!" This is going all wrong. I copy his stance, shove my hands in my pockets. "I didn't mean—"

"Do you really have to insult me right in the middle of our final confrontation? I've never wailed in my fucking life, you asshole."

"Sorry. I'm sorry. I just meant, I am not unemotional. Just because I'm calm, just because I'm rational—"

"Fuck rational. And fuck you." Dean's not shouting, which confirms (as if I need further proof besides the suitcase he's dropped at his feet) that he's serious about leaving me this time. He never actually packed anything before.

We stare at each other for a few seconds and I'm the first to look away. "I'm not unemotional," I repeat. "I just need to be in control. I need to, Dean," I lift my head and stare into his eyes again, let him see that I'm sincere.

"I know." His shoulders slump. "But I don't know why. You've never told me. Never shared any of your worries and fears with me, so how can I know what turned you into this person who needs to be in control every single minute of every single day?"

It's at this point that I always put on the brakes. Not just with Dean, but with everybody. Nobody gets inside my head; nobody needs to get that close.

But if I don't let him in, he's walking out on me.

"Okay," I say. "If you have this unbearable need to dissect me, to analyze me, then I'll tell you—tell you those things you think you need to hear."

"What things?"

"Christ!" I explode. "All about my fucked-up childhood, and all that bullshit you think is so important."

"Don't do me any favors, Matt."

"No," I'm exasperated. "It's just that I hate talking about it. I never think about it anymore. Talking about it makes it seem important."

“But things that happen in our childhood are important,” Dean insists.

“Christ, ever since your Psych rotation at the hospital—”

“Don’t,” he says. “Don’t belittle my experiences.” He turns away. “Just forget it.”

“Wait.” He stops, but keeps his back to me. “Dean,” I argue plaintively, “you know I don’t believe in that psycho-babble bullshit.”

Still not moving, he answers quietly, “It doesn’t matter that you don’t believe in it. The thing is, I do—but what I believe doesn’t matter to you. Don’t you get it?” He turns then and frowns. “You’re brushing off something that’s important to me. You’re brushing ME off, Matthew. And you don’t even recognize what you’re doing.”

We stand like statues for a minute, unmoving. Then I relent. “If it’s so important to you to peer at my fucked-up childhood under your microscope, and analyze what ‘made me the man I am today,’ then fine. Then I’ll tell you, okay?”

Dean’s shoulders slump. “Christ. Never mind. Just never mind.”

“I’m going to tell you!”

He fixes that green-eyed stare on my face. Those eyes that can get hard as glass sometimes. Like right now. “It’s too late, Matt. I won’t be humored, I won’t be condescended to.”

Dean moves abruptly, grabs his suitcase and moves out the front door and down the sidewalk.

I follow him to the door and watch until he’s a dozen steps away, then I hurry to catch up. “Wait,” I say, and when he doesn’t stop, I repeat more loudly, “wait a minute.”

Still he keeps walking, and I know, for sure now, that he won’t turn back, that he won’t come back to me. I feel the ground shift under my feet; suddenly, it’s real. Dean is actually leaving.

“Wait,” I call urgently, moving faster. He’s already unlocked his car, thrown his suitcase in the back and he’s sliding into the driver’s seat. I reach out and grab the door, but he wrests it away from me and slams it.

“Come inside,” I mouth at him through the closed window. My voice choking in my throat, I repeat, “Please come inside.”

“No.” His jaw is hard, his lips a thin line locking up his mouth. He shoves the key into the ignition and the engine roars to life.

“Dean,” I shout, pounding my fist on the top of the car. “You win, all right? I’ll tell you.”

He doesn't look at me; he bows his head and stares at nothing. Then he shuts off the engine and rolls down his window a few inches. Peering up at me, Dean says, "It's too late, Matt. It's too fucking late."

"It's like this," I say quickly, words tumbling out of my mouth almost incoherently. "My parents threw me away. When I was ten. No, I was nine. Nine! They—"

"Threw you away?"

"Yes," I gulp, "or I mean, my mother did. They died in the south. South America. Brazil maybe. Somewhere down there. They put me on a bus. My mother did. And—"

"Bus? What bus? In Brazil?"

"No, Colorado."

"You said you grew up in Washington."

"I did! This was before that. They died later."

Dean's frowning, he's getting angry. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"My name was Miracle. I mean, first it was Matthew, but they called me Miracle, not Gramps but they did. And—"

"Don't bullshit me."

"It's the truth! My mother called me Miracle, and my father hit her. All the time! And me, too, but mostly her. And—"

Dean snorts angrily. "You're trying too hard, Matthew. You're bullshitting me now, and it's not going to fucking work. Do you understand?"

"Yes! I mean, no. I was only trying to—"

"Trying to what—invent some kind of falsely-insane childhood, just to appease me?"

"I just thought, if I told you—"

"If you invented some horrible nightmare childhood, I'd believe you?"

"You don't believe me?"

"Do you think I'm stupid, Matthew? Do you?"

"No," I choke, staring at him, a lump in my throat cutting off my voice. It's hopeless.

Dean scowls. "You're pathetic, you know that? Pathetic." He looks away then and rubs a hand over his face.

Is he crying? I've never seen him cry. "Dean—"

"No," he murmurs, then, "no," he growls, and viciously he turns the key again and the engine roars to life. "Fuck you, Matthew." Dean guns the engine and repeats, "fuck you."

The car pulls away from the curb with a grinding of gears, and my feet slip on the sidewalk. I was leaning on the roof of the car and when he pulls away, I almost fall headfirst into the icy street. I stand there with my mouth open and my arm still outstretched, hanging empty in the air, and I stare after the car as it speeds away down the street and makes a right at the intersection, tires squealing.

Dean pushed me to talk. For months, he's hassled me to spill my guts, but now when I'm ready to talk, he won't listen. I tried, but he wouldn't listen; he just left me. He drove away and left me standing on the curb. Alone.

I'm not surprised. I knew that he'd leave me eventually.

Everybody does.

Time Present: Sunday, June 12, 1994

With a start, I look around and realize that I've driven several blocks past the marina. A glance at Lucas shows that he's still staring morosely out the side window. I turn left and then left again, and in a few moments I'm pulling into the parking lot. Lucas jumps out of the car and hurries ahead of me. Whipping out his key and throwing open the door, he keeps moving quickly, down the hall and into his room, closing the door with a loud thump.

Moving into my own room, I pull off my jacket and hang it up, feeling so drained emotionally that I have a fleeting desire to crawl into bed, pull the covers over my head. Instead I have a stack of drawings to review. I have to think about lunch for the pouting boy in the other room, and I have to sort through these fucking conflicting feelings about moving Lucas into the rooming house, that are screwing with my peace of mind.

It's the right decision, it's the right thing to do. At least, I think so.

Time Present: Monday, June 20, 1994

Lucas

When the phone rings, I almost don't answer. I've been lying face down on the bed all morning, like I'm paralyzed or frozen, a corpse who doesn't know he's dead. I thought maybe it was some kind of natural relief or something—school's finished, I aced all my finals, it's officially summer time.

But I can't move. My arms and legs weigh a thousand pounds each, and every time I raise my head to look around at the piles of clothes and things I'm supposed to be packing, I get these squeezing pains in my chest and my head swims till I almost pass out. I must have the flu or something. I feel like I could sleep for a month.

I know I have to get up soon. I have to pack my stuff, I need to be ready to go to Angie's when Matthew gets home from the office. But I can't move yet. In a minute probably I can. Just not yet.

So when the phone rings, I want to ignore it. If I stand up, I might pass out or something. But I have to answer—if it's Matthew and I don't pick up, he'll think I ran away.

Which I thought about doing. I thought about it all night, instead of sleeping. I hoped maybe Matthew would take me to bed with him last night, sort of like one final time. But he didn't, so I lay alone in the narrow bed, shivering as if I was cold. Even though I wasn't. And I couldn't sleep all night long.

Scrambling off the bed, my foot catches in the sheet, tripping me. I pull quickly away, hopping on one foot down the hall, dragging the sheet right along with me. "Hello?" I'm breathless when I pick up the phone.

"Are you okay?" It's Matthew. "You're gasping."

"I was in the bathroom," I lie. Then I improvise, "I was taking a dump, you interrupted me, I had to run for the phone."

"Charming," he answers. "Well, I won't keep you long. I just wondered if you've finished packing yet?"

"Almost," I lie again. "Practically."

"Well," he says, there's a long pause. "Well, don't."

"Don't what?"

"You don't need to pack."

"What?"

"Lucas, you don't need to pack. I've changed my mind."

"About what?"

"I've changed my mind," Matthew repeats. "You're not moving to Angie's."

"I'm not?" When he doesn't answer, I ask quickly, "then where am I moving? I have no place to live."

Has he forgotten that I'm homeless? He promised to help me.

"You do have a place to live," he contradicts. There's another pause and then I hear him clear his throat. "You're going to stay with me."

"I am?"

"If you want to. Do you still want to?"

“Well, yeah!” I exclaim. “Duh! But you said if I lived here, I’d drive you crazy.”

“I know. I’m sure you will. Are you trying to talk me out of it?”

“No. No! Oh, I can’t believe it!”

“Me either,” he sighs.

“Matthew,” I have a horrible thought. “You don’t feel sorry for me, do you?” I don’t want his pity.

“No,” he contradicts. “I feel sorry for myself. God help me.”

“Oh, it’s going to be great,” I eagerly reassure him. “You can teach me to do laundry, and I promise to do anything you want.”

“Anything? Don’t tempt me,” Matthew answers dryly. “Now I have to go, I have a meeting, but I’ll be home about six. You can order pizza. Jesus Christ,” he complains, “I wish I’d bought Pizza Hut stock years ago.”

“Probably I can learn to cook things!”

“Don’t start tonight. I don’t want to come home to find firemen chopping holes in the roof. Just relax and enjoy the first day of summer vacation. Okay? And when I get home, I’ll help you unpack.”

“Oh, I’ll do that myself,” I say quickly.

“And Lucas? You can put your stuff away in that chest of drawers. We’ll get another one this weekend. And you’ll need a desk in your room, before school starts in the fall.”

“Is it mine now, Matthew? Is it my room now?”

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Fuck yeah, it’s your room. Of course, it’s your room. Now get off the phone and go clean it.”

“Okay, I will! Bye, Matthew. Bye!”

Hanging up the phone, I grab the twisted sheet off my ankle and dance down the hall to my room, twirling the sheet around my head like a flag.

CHAPTER 13



Time Present: Tuesday, June 21, 1994

Matthew

Almost immediately, I am sorry I agreed to let Lucas stay. He starts right in on me this morning, the very first day he's officially living on the houseboat. He's urging me to help him find a summer job. He has no experience and no references, yet he expects to be hired for some kind of high-paying responsible position.

"All the openings for bank president have been filled," I point out over breakfast.

"I think you enjoy being mean," Lucas accuses, through a mouthful of masticated scrambled eggs.

"I do," I agree blandly.

He swallows the enormous bite and I watch in fascination as his pink tongue quickly pokes out, perfectly encircling his lips to clean them of any stray egg bits. I resist the urge to lean over the table and suck that tongue into my own mouth. Business before pleasure.

"There might be something for you at my office."

Lucas is alarmed. "What if I ran into my dad? His office is right below yours."

"He's on the third floor, my firm's on the seventh through the tenth. It's highly unlikely you'll run into him." His eyes are still wide, so I further reassure him. "I've worked in that building for two years and I've only seen your father

a couple times. Besides,” I add, when he’s still unconvinced, “You’ll be with me. Just ignore him, and it’s likely that he’ll ignore you, too.”

Which may not be exactly as comforting as I meant it to be.

He chews another bite of egg. “I guess.” Looking thoughtful, he asks, “What kind of job?”

“Manning the Xerox machine or helping out in the mail room.”

“Ugh,” he scowls. “That sounds boring.”

“Entry-level jobs for kids without experience ARE boring.”

“I want to do something important and interesting! I’m smart. I’ve got good grades, and I can learn really fast.” Lucas is sincere, but he’s dividing his attention between convincing me of his superiority and struggling to open a foil packet of Pop Tarts.

Taking the packet from his hands and ripping it open, I give him the pastry and explain, “Frankly, there’s just not that many jobs you’re qualified to do. Unless you’d enjoy asking, ‘Do you want fries with that?’ eight hours a day.”

Lucas nods, his mouth too full of pastry to answer. We continue to eat in silence, though I can almost hear the wheels spinning inside his brain. As we get up to take our dishes to the sink, he says, “I want to call some of those ads in the paper first, okay?”

“Okay.” I resist the urge to tell him it’s useless. I’ll check with our personnel director today; see if there’s an opening for a beautiful blond teenager with a great IQ and an even greater ass. Though I probably won’t word my query in quite those terms.

Time Present: June 27, 1994

Lucas

It’s my first day at Matthew’s office and I’m really nervous. Not about the job itself—he already warned me that it’s grunt-work. But no matter what he says, I’m worried about running into my dad. He probably wouldn’t do anything—what could he do? The court approved my emancipation papers and I’m a free, legally adult man now. Dad can’t make me go back home, and he can’t hurt me now. Besides, I’m a lot tougher already; I don’t even care that he hates my guts. I just don’t want to see him, that’s all.

Matthew warned me that while we’re in his office, we have to keep our relationship private. Well, he didn’t say “relationship,” he insists that we’re just

friends. But if we're living together and eating together and having sex, isn't that a relationship? He says no, we're just roommates who sometimes fuck.

"Sometimes" is right—Matthew insists I sleep in my own room almost every night. He works at home a lot and stays up late. I'm a night owl too and told him so a million times, but he insists that I go to bed by eleven on week-nights, and he won't budge. I guess he's trying to be a parent substitute or something, which is ridiculous. I'm emancipated. I should get to decide my own bedtime. But finally I just stopped nagging, because I can tell I get on his nerves sometimes. I guess he's always lived alone, so he's not used to somebody being around making noise and stuff. In fact, he moved the TV into my room the third night I was there, to make a noise-free zone in the living room. And he says absolutely no to video games, like never.

We make it safely from the parking lot to the elevator and I don't see anybody I know. When I realize that I'm kind of hovering behind Matthew's shoulder, I take a deep breath and move up to stand beside him. He doesn't turn his head, but when I glance up, he slants his eyes down at me and smiles. He's laughing at me, but just a little. When the elevator stops at the seventh floor, Matthew touches my sleeve and leads the way down the hall to a door marked LaRoche & Lee—Internal Ops. That sounds awfully impressive, but inside the door it's just two desks with a carpeted divider in between them.

"Morning, Irene," Matthew greets a lady sitting at one of the desks. She's got dark blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail low on her neck. She looks up at him over the top of her half-glasses and smiles. She has some lipstick on her front teeth, and the white blouse she's wearing under a navy blue blazer is unbuttoned down low enough to see cleavage. It looks gross on someone her age; she's got to be forty at least. I try not to look there, instead move my eyes quickly to her face. She's smiling at me and I smile back.

"Irene, this is Lucas Denholme. He's going to be the new 'It Boy' at LaRoche & Lee this summer."

"Hello, Lucas," Irene extends her hand and I shake it. "Any relation to—?"

"No," I say quickly, then turn to Matthew and ask, "what's the It Boy?"

He smirks. "The It Boy is the answer to every go-get-it question. 'We need a box of folders—who's going to get it? We need coffee, who's going to make it? We need twelve thousand copies of this report, who's going to Xerox it?' That's you, Lucas—you're It."

I feel my face fall and they both laugh, but Irene assures me, "It won't be that bad. You're going to be a big help to the staff, and you'll learn a lot about the firm in the process. And everyone's really nice here, you're going to like it."

“Okay,” I agree tentatively.

“Not everyone’s nice,” Matthew corrects her. “Steve Sorrano, the head architect, isn’t nice. Molly in the drafting room isn’t nice. I’m not nice.”

“Hmm,” Irene nods, “You’re right on all counts. But,” she turns and winks at me, “everyone else is, and as long as you keep out of the way of the meanies, you’ll be all right.”

“I’ll leave you with Irene,” Matthew bends a stern look on me then and I know he’s finished joking. If he was joking. “Mind your P’s and Q’s. You’ll get off at five o’clock and go straight home then, right?”

“Yes.” I almost say “Yes, sir,” but I decide not to.

I’m feeling very subdued. Matthew’s acting so strict with me. I thought it would be fun to live with him, but it’s not all beds of roses. Maybe he’ll loosen up later, when he gets used to having me around. I’m determined to learn how to cook and clean and stuff, so I can pull my own weight around the houseboat. I have to let him pay for things; I don’t have any choice. But I don’t want him to be sorry he rescued me and gave me a home.

When Matthew’s gone, Irene gestures for me to sit on a chair in front of her desk, then she pulls out a sheaf of papers and tells me how to fill everything out—all kinds of personnel forms, tax papers, insurance papers. Then we move to the other desk where there’s a camera set up. She takes my picture and makes me an employee badge to wear on my shirt.

Matthew had me put on plain black slacks, a pale-blue striped shirt and my black Ducat loafers; he said jeans and sneakers aren’t proper office wear. I never realized, till I watched him get dressed this morning, that he’s into fashion. I never looked in the floor-to-ceiling closet in his bedroom till this morning, so I was surprised to discover that it’s chock full of expensive suits and shirts and blazers. I peeked at the labels, famous names like my dad wears. And he has way more suits than my dad. He must make a lot of money.

Matthew

It’s almost inevitable that Lucas would run into his father his first day on the job. I’d assured him confidently how unlikely such a meeting would be—after all, I’d seen David Denholme only a handful of times in the past couple years. So the coincidence of Lucas and his father coming face to face in the elevator on the way to lunch was just plain trickery by the gods of mischief.

I’d invited Lucas out to lunch on his first day, a soft-hearted and soft-headed gesture totally out of character for me. But he’d cleaned up so well for

the office, looking really rather cute in his neat shirt-and-trousers with polished shoes and his hair slicked back with my styling gel.

I'm sure the Nosey Parkers at the office are clamoring to discover what's up with Lucas and me. In the first place, I can't believe I just called them Nosey Parkers, one of Grandma's expressions. In the second place, it's nobody's business, and I've given Lucas strict orders to keep our—well, Christ, our roommate status—to himself. I'd considered various explanations for publication, but in the end I decided, "least said, soonest mended." Another of Grandma's hideous expressions.

I corral Lucas in the Xerox room at noon, waiting a minute for him to finish a copying project, then lead the way to the elevator. There's no one else in the car, and when the doors close, I smile at the image of the two of us reflected in the mirrored doors. The top of his head just brushes my chin, and I'm tempted to lean down and kiss the part in his hair. I refrain, but Lucas sees my smile and grins back at me. Just then, the elevator stops at the third floor, the doors open, and who should be standing there but David Denholme and one of his fellow attorneys, Anthony Blankenship.

Lucas freezes—I can feel his body stiffen beside me. I gently push him to one side, to make room for the new passengers. Blankenship gives me a smile and automatically I smile back at him. "Morning," we both murmur, as he and Denholme come aboard and turn around to face front. The doors slide silently closed, and in the mirrored door I can see that Lucas' face has turned paper-white; I wonder if he's even breathing. For a moment, I think he might pass out, but I've underestimated him. No one speaks, the descent continues, and when the doors open into the lobby, Denholme gets out first and walks briskly away without a backward glance. I grab Lucas' wrist and turn him the other way, toward the garage, and we move quickly from the lobby into the cool and dimly lit parking facility.

Only then it seems does Lucas start breathing. "F-fuck," he gasps.

"Shh, it's okay," I reassure him. "Nothing happened."

"But that was my dad! He saw me!"

"You work here now," I remind him, keeping my voice calm while ushering him through the garage toward my car. "You're allowed in the elevator. And you see, he said nothing to you. He didn't, and if you happen to see him again, he won't. There's nothing he can do to you now."

"But he didn't look at me." His voice disbelieving, Lucas repeats, "He didn't even look at me!"

I want to point out that David Denholme has disowned Lucas, and that by filing for emancipation, Lucas has in effect disowned his dad. I want to remind Lucas that his father hadn't even bothered to show up for the emancipation hearing last week, so it's fucking unlikely Denholme will acknowledge his son ever again.

And then I remember how upset Lucas was when Denholme didn't show.

Lucas had been a nervous wreck before the hearing, though luckily I'd anticipated as much and didn't tell him about it until the day before we were scheduled to appear in court. Russell had explained that if the parent agreed, the matter was generally cut and dried. The hearing itself was merely an opportunity for the parent to object to the minor's petition for emancipation. Since Denholme had signed the petition, there were unlikely to be any last-minute problems.

Lucas wore his black suit—the only really dressy clothes he owns besides his school blazer. I'd been surprised that someone with his background and his father's income level didn't have more formal clothing. Lucas explained that his father never took him out to dinner, not to friends' houses, not anywhere in fact. I'm beginning to understand the level of neglect that's been normal life for Lucas, at least since his mother died. The fact that David Denholme sent his attorney to the hearing to represent him, instead of appearing on his own behalf, was further evidence of his lack of interest in his son.

I'd assumed that Lucas must be glad his father did not appear. And in fact, without knowing Lucas, the calm and poise he exhibited at the hearing would convince any observer to conclude that he is as mature as the emancipation process requires him to be. But I do know him, and I know that he is a damned good actor. I've seen him act on stage, and it took only a few moments before I recognized that Lucas was handling the hearing in just the same way as he'd handled the lead role in his school play. It was only afterwards, as we drove home from the courthouse, that his façade of detachment began to crumble.

"Well, that was easy," I'd noted as we buckled up. "How about we celebrate with a special lunch at—"

"C-can we just go home? I'm not—not hungry."

I'd thrown a surprised glance at Lucas and realized he was visibly trembling. Without thinking, my hand moved to his shoulder but he quickly leaned away and repeated, "Home?"

"Sure."

I'd started the car and drove quickly cross town to the marina, throwing occasional glances at the boy staring fixedly out the side window, refraining

from offering any more unwanted comfort. Almost before the car was parked, he'd thrown open the door and rushed across the gravel to the houseboat. When I got there a few moments later, Lucas was fumbling with his key. He was fucking distraught, and I tried to move ahead of him, to get the door unlocked, but he growled, "No-no-no," so I stepped back and let him open the door himself. Then I stood inside the entry and watched Lucas hurry off down the hall and into his room, closing the door behind him.

I must have stood there five minutes just staring at the closed door, torn between pushing it open and forcing what was apparently unwanted comfort on him, or just leaving him be. Since that seemed to be what he wanted, solitude, I left him alone. I waited about a quarter hour, and when he hadn't come out, I knocked softly on the door.

There was no response, so I called, "Lucas, I need to get back to work."

After a long pause, I heard him say, "Okay."

"Are you all right?" I asked, feeling at a loss.

"Yes." His voice sounded normal, so finally I gave up.

"I'll see you tonight then."

"Okay."

And I left. I was mildly worried all afternoon, and finally I called Lucas a couple hours later. "Hey," he'd greeted me, sounding cheerful. "I'm free now, huh?"

"You still have me to answer to," I'd joked, realizing immediately that I sounded like I was making some kind of commitment. Feeling vaguely trapped, I pondered how to rephrase my comment, to negate any sense of prolonged responsibility on my part. Finally I admitted to myself that I wanted to be responsible for the brat. God knows why.

By evening, Lucas was acting perfectly normal; and though I was on the alert for any repercussions from the hearing, life went on as it had been, settling into a routine of shared meals and an occasional fuck. Very occasional—it wouldn't do to make a habit of bedding this kid—excuse me, this emancipated young man. So I ignored his often transparent attempts at seduction—walking naked into my bedroom on his way to the shower; coming to my desk when I sat working on a project, wearing only tighty-whites with an obvious (and very large) boner center-front; offering to give me a massage any time I "felt stiff." It was hard not to laugh at these ploys, and truth be told, hard to resist them.

So maybe I missed seeing some signs that Lucas was not over his father's rejection. Now, as we move through the parking garage after the confronta-

tion—or non-confrontation—in the elevator, I can feel how tense, how tightly wound up he is. We get into the car and fasten our seatbelts, then Lucas drops his face into his hands. Something twists in my stomach, and I—a man who loathes weakness and who has zero tolerance for emotional outbursts—can’t resist reaching over to pull him hard against my chest and hang on tight.

“I’m sorry, Lucas.”

My voice is strangely gentle. I should be shaking him; I should be telling Lucas to grow up, to suck it up. Nothing really happened, after all.

Despite that, I hear myself saying, “I’ll take you home now. You don’t have to work at my office.”

“Mmppff,” he replies unintelligibly, his face tightly pressed to my neck. Then he pulls away and clarifies, “No, no.” He clears his throat and pulls away a few more inches, so he can see my face. “No,” he repeats more firmly, looking me in the eye. “I want to work here. I’m okay. I’ll be okay. I was just, kind of, I don’t know—”

“Surprised. Shocked. Emotionally unprepared.”

“Uh, yeah. All those things.” Lucas shifts back onto the passenger seat and lifts his chin. “But I’m okay now. I’m not a wimp, not really, not essentially, you know? I’m okay now, honest.”

“You’re sure?” I’m unconvinced. “Because—”

“I’m totally sure.” Clamping his lips tight together, he nods and says, “Totally.”

There’s a pause, then he raises his arm and glances at his watch. “We’d better hurry, I only get an hour for lunch.”

“Right.” Putting the key into the ignition and starting the car, I add, “But you have special dispensation from the boss to be late today.”

“You’re not my boss,” Lucas scoffs. “Irene is. And she’s very strict about tardiness.”

“Hmm, I see. Okay, let’s go eat. The hofbrau okay?” Without waiting for an answer, I pull out of the garage and head east.

Time Present: July 18, 1994

Lucas

Despite what I told Matthew, I continue to worry about running into my father at the office, but it’s been three weeks and I haven’t seen him again. I’m

into a regular routine at work now, and even though I was sure I'd hate it, I don't. I like almost all of the things I do.

Irene says I'm doing a good job. I do lots of different stuff and so far I haven't been bored. Well, Xeroxing big booklets and long reports can be boring, but I like being sent on errands, like to the bindery a few blocks away, or even to Starbucks on the corner. There's a coffee shop in the building, but a few of the big shots insist on special coffee drinks.

Matthew is one of the big shots. I knew he was, but knowing that and seeing him at work are two different things. He says he's really just a medium-shot, not a full partner in the firm. He's a junior partner, but I can tell that everyone really respects him and looks up to him. Not everybody likes him though, he was telling the truth when he warned that he was one of the not-nice ones at LaRoche & Lee. He's impatient and demanding and super critical. Not that I've seen him in action—I'm not in his meetings; but I've heard other people talk about him. Especially at first, before people knew that Matthew and I are friends. They talked more freely when I was around.

One of his office nicknames is "Simon Legree." I couldn't remember where I'd heard that name before, and stupidly decided to ask Matthew one morning on the drive to work. We ride in together, but usually I go home alone. He works late a lot.

"Who is Simon Legree?" Matthew had repeated. "He was the slave driver in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Haven't you read that book in school?"

"I've heard of it, I just haven't read it yet. I will though."

"Wait a minute," he asked suspiciously. "Why are you asking about Simon Legree now?"

"Umm." I couldn't think of an answer.

We had come to a red light and Matthew jammed on the brakes so hard, we jerked in the seat.

There was dead silence for a moment, then he barked a laugh. "Is that what they call me behind my back?" He turned to stare at me and I tried to keep my face innocent.

"Who?"

"Lucas, you are busted. Who called me that?" When I didn't answer, he snorted. "Always protect your sources."

"I don't think it was meant like a bad thing," I'd tried to back-pedal.

"It's okay. I'm sure they call me much worse names than that. It's not my goal at work to be universally loved."

I almost said, "That's good," but luckily common sense prevailed and I kept my mouth shut.

By now everyone in the office knows that something's going on between Matthew and me, though I'm not sure that they know what's what.

I'm not sure that I know what's what. Especially now, when Matthew has started going out a couple nights each week. I guess that was his routine before I moved in, and now he's resumed his normal activities. I found out that "normal activities" means Matthew goes to bars and picks up strangers and has sex with them. Sometimes he brings them home.

The first few times he went out, I asked where he was going. I'd be reading or watching TV, thinking he was working at his desk, and then I'd hear the shower running and go into his room later to find him getting dressed to go out. He has special going-out clothes, really sexy jeans, tight tee shirts and leather jackets. He looks totally different than when he's a businessman, younger and hotter, and I can just imagine the effect he has on guys looking for sex.

Stupidly, I tried to get myself invited along. "Can I come too?" I asked the first time.

"No, you cannot. I'm going tricking," he explained.

"Tricking?" I never knew "tricking" was a gay verb before. I didn't even know it was a gay noun, until the night Matthew rescued me from the bikers. It's a noun meaning somebody you pick up and fuck and then kick out the door.

"Mind your own business, Lucas," he warned, pulling a very tight sleeveless black tee shirt over his beautifully muscled shoulders. He doesn't have bulging muscles like a body-builder, but he definitely has a beautiful body that he works hard to maintain.

"But," I insisted, "You don't need to go find somebody to fuck. You've got me right here."

"Your naïveté is charming," Matthew chided sarcastically, reaching in the closet for a black leather jacket and pulling it on. "But hear what I said—mind your own business." He strode down the hall with me close on his heels.

"When will you be home?" I shoved my hands into my pockets to keep them from grabbing onto him.

"Lucas," he huffed, stopping to zip his jacket, "go to bed, it's nearly eleven."

"Why are you sending me to bed? I'm not tired. And besides, I'm emancipated now, I'll decide when to sleep."

“Oh, Christ,” he snorted, “we’re not going there, are we? You’re a kid. I’m older than you and this is my house. Ergo, I make the rules.”

“You’re not my dad, you know?”

“If I was your dad,” Matthew growled with gritted teeth, “I’d kick your—” He stopped abruptly.

“Fuck you!” I backed away from him, but he reached out and grabbed me, pulled me against his chest.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean that.”

I tried to twist out of his arms, but he hung on tight. “Let go!”

“Lucas, I’m sorry.” I stopped struggling but couldn’t speak. He murmured, “That was a terrible thing to say. I swear, I didn’t mean it.”

We were quiet for a bit and then I told him, “You don’t understand what it’s like. Having your dad beat up on you and push you away.”

“Yes I do,” he contradicted, “and that’s why it was such a terrible thing to say. But believe me, I’d never—”

“You mean, your dad was mean to you?” I pulled back to stare at him. “Like mine?”

“Never mind that, just believe me, I would never—”

“Matthew,” I grabbed onto his arms and shook him, “Matthew, did your dad not love you, either?”

“I said, never mind.” Matthew pulled away, moved toward the door. “Go to bed now. Or as soon as your emancipated little butt feels like it, but pretty soon. Got it?”

“Wait. Talk to me.”

“I’ll see you in the morning.” And with that, he turned and walked out the door, closing it almost in my face.

I just stood there staring at the door, feeling ... I don’t know what I was feeling. Confused, hurt, rejected maybe. Curious too, wondering if his dad beat him up when he was a kid. He won’t tell personal stuff about himself, like never. I wish he would.

I’m also feeling stupid, for imagining that Matthew felt about me like I feel about him.

I am stupid sometimes, or anyway, kind of slow. Like, retarded. That first time Matthew went out, I decided to wait up for him. Not just wait—I decided to clean the kitchen—he’d harassed me on the way to the office in the morning about spilling soda on the kitchen floor and not mopping it up, and he complained that the floor was all sticky. So I started cleaning the floor, and then I cleaned the counters, and the fridge, and then I decided to rearrange stuff in

the cupboards. I'd just gotten everything down, the counters were covered with jars and bottles and cans, and I was standing on the stepstool with my head inside a cupboard when Matthew got home.

I didn't hear the door; I had some kickin' tunes blaring on my CD player that I'd brought into the kitchen. Suddenly I heard Matthew shout, "What the FUCK!?" and my head whipped back and I lost my balance and almost fell off the stool. Matthew grabbed the waistband of my jeans and hung onto me, but he kept yelling.

"Lucas, God damn it, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Well, duh," I couldn't help saying, what did it look like I was doing? Then I glanced over his shoulder and saw—a guy. A guy in tight jeans with long hair pulled back in a ponytail. He was laughing and pulling off his jacket.

"Who's this?" the guy asked. "Your little bro?"

Matthew didn't answer, instead he continued to glower at me. "I told you to go to bed an hour ago. What the fuck are you doing?"

"What the fuck are YOU doing?" I wanted to shout back at him, but I didn't. Because I may be stupid and I may be slow and I may be retarded, but I figured out exactly what Matthew was doing. He bought a guy home to fuck. I just stared, probably my mouth was hanging open like an idiot. I just stared at him and stared at the other guy, and then I jumped down off the stool, ran into my room and slammed the door. I stood there not moving, my back pressed against the door, listening.

I couldn't hear anything, then Matthew must've turned off my CD player. It was quiet for a minute, and I waited to hear the guy leave, waited to hear the front door close. Instead, I heard them coming down the hall. They weren't talking, but I heard their footsteps. I heard Matthew say, "In here," and I heard his bedroom door close. They were going to have sex. They were going to do it, with me right across the hall!

They did, too. After a minute, I pulled off my clothes and threw them on the floor, crawled into bed and pulled the covers over me. I shoved my head under the pillow and held it tight against my head. But I couldn't stop hearing the sounds from Matthew's room.

Finally, I fell asleep; and next morning, I woke up when Matthew came into my room and sat on the edge of my bed. "Hey," he said quietly.

"Hey." I sat up and rubbed my eyes, then glanced at him experimentally from behind my hands. He didn't look mad.

"I'm sorry about the mess in the kitchen," I said. "I'll clean it up tonight."

He nodded. We just looked at each other, then he said, "Lucas, sometimes I'm going to bring guys home. That's the way it is."

I swallowed hard and made myself not look away from him. "Okay," I nodded maturely, pretending it was cool with me. Then Matthew let me come into the shower with him, and kissed me a lot. Then he knelt down and blew me while I held onto his head and hid my face in the shower spray. After that, I pretended I was cool with it, with him bringing tricks home sometimes. I'm not really, but like Matthew says, that's the way it is.

So I know that he doesn't love me. Not just because of the tricks, but because he's made it clear he doesn't feel those kinds of feelings. Not just for me, but for anybody. And how do I feel about him?

I love him.

I'm young, but I know what I feel. Maybe at first it was hero-worship, because of him rescuing me. Or maybe some dopey romance thing, before I knew much about him. But the thing is, I do know Matthew now, and I can see the bad things about him as well as the good ones, and I love him anyway.

He likes me, I know that. And he wants to help me. But he doesn't love me, not the way I want him to, and I don't know how to change that. He says that he's never loved anybody in his whole life.

I know you can't force somebody to love you against their will. My dad doesn't love me, probably he never did, and nothing could change that. And I'll never know if my mother loved me or not. I didn't have time to find out.

CHAPTER 14



Time Present: September 6, 1994

Matthew

“Do you want me to go in with you?”

Lucas turns to look at me and asks, “What?”

“Do you want me to—”

“God, no,” he answers irritably. “I think I can handle the first day of school on my own!”

“Right.” I keep my voice noncommittal as he sits frozen in the front seat, one hand on the door handle.

“Okay.” He pushes open the door and gets out. Squaring his shoulders as he faces the entrance of West Seattle High School, Lucas mumbles, “See you later,” moving to close the car door.

“Your bag—”

“Oh!” He pulls open the back door, retrieves his backpack and shoulders it.

“Call me, if you need to. Okay?”

“I can take care of myself,” he repeats, but more calmly this time. “Remember, I’m emancipated now.” Then closing the door, he is gone, marching resolutely up the walk to the school entrance.

If he reminds me one more time that he’s emancipated, I won’t be responsible for my actions. Even so, I realize that I feel obscurely proud of him. Glancing in the rearview mirror to be sure that my face shows absolutely nothing at all, I start the car and turn the wheel, but I find that I’m unable to drive off until I see Lucas disappear inside the entrance of West Seattle High.

Lucas

Matthew dropped me off early so I can walk around the halls and find my locker before classes start. Regency Prep is much smaller; I'm not sure what it's going to be like at a big public school like this. Based on my transcript, they've put me in advanced classes, so I'm not worried about the academic stuff. The biggest thing is that West Seattle High has a drama department. Because I had the lead role in Regency's production of *Cuckoo's Nest* last spring, they let me enroll in the advanced drama class.

First I had to be approved by the drama teacher, Mr. Edwards. There was a teacher's orientation day this summer, and the principal arranged for me to meet Mr. Edwards to discuss placement in his class. The teacher's an old guy, maybe fifty; not fat exactly, but kind of lumpy, with dark hair turning gray at the temples. He was wearing a sports jacket and had an ascot knotted around his neck.

Mr. Edwards asked about my background, and I explained that I haven't taken any drama classes, but that I played the lead in *Cuckoo's Nest*, so he had me do one of McMurphy's speeches from the play. We were alone in his office, which was crammed with piles of books and stacks of videotapes. It was not easy to stand there in that small space, spouting the character's dialogue. But Mr. Edwards said that I did well, or well enough to be placed in the advanced class. He warned that I have a lot to catch up on, basic acting stuff, and he loaned me three books about acting to read during the summer.

It's nearly eight o'clock now; the halls are filling up with students. I try to observe them, partly from curiosity—they seem so different from the kids at Regency. Maybe it's just because they don't wear uniforms and they're a lot noisier. Partly, I'm observing them as an actor studying human behavior. That's what one of the acting books said to do. Right away it gets me in trouble.

"Who you lookin' at, faggot?" some guy two lockers away from me demands. I'd been staring at his hair, its coarse blackness twisted into long narrow braids all over his head.

"Nothing," I answer quickly, then amend, "well, your hair. It's majorly cool."

"You never seen dreads, boy?" The guy shoves a backpack into the locker and turns to give me a searching look. "Where you been, Beverly Hills or something?"

"Sure, I've seen dreads. Just not, you know, such long ones." I turn away, put a couple books in my locker.

Why'd he call me faggot; is it obvious? But no, everybody's calling each other faggot, up and down the hall. It must be normal everywhere; they did it at Regency too.

The guy loses interest and turns away. He's wearing baggy jeans—everybody's wearing jeans. Matthew told me things would be a lot more casual at public school. I find my first class, English, upstairs at the end of the hall. I sit in the middle of the second row, my favorite spot in classrooms. If you sit in the front row or way in the back, teachers call on you more often.

At lunch time, I move through the line and take my tray outside onto a patio area, sit down at an empty table and eat. Nobody sits with me. Glancing around, I can see that everybody's in cliques already. They all know each other, they're all laughing and joking together. I feel more alone than I did at Regency.

Drama is my last class of the day; it's held in a room off the auditorium. I'm the first to appear, so I take my normal middle-row seat and watch the others drift in and take seats all around me. A few kids nod and I nod back; it's obvious they all know each other already. This is the advanced drama class. It's equally obvious that some of them are whispering about me, maybe wondering where this stranger came from. Nobody speaks to me though.

Then a guy saunters in and stops abruptly, framing himself in the open door. He's tall and strikingly handsome, with thick dark hair, a Roman nose and strong chin. He's wearing jeans like everyone else, but he's also wearing a radical fringed leather vest and long-sleeved purple shirt. I feel my eyes widen; this guy is absolutely drop-dead gorgeous.

"No applause," he insists, spreading his hands humbly. "As you were, nobody get up."

"Hey Phil," several voices call, and a girl two seats away from me boos loudly. "You were expecting a standing-O, Philip?"

"Mmm, baby," the guy coos, leering suggestively at the girl as he walks near. "If you're wanting an O, standing or otherwise, I'm the man to give it to you!"

Some kids groan, there's a few whistles and laughs, and I realize that he means O as in Orgasm. The girl does too; a sideways glance shows that she's blushing. "Screw you," she mumbles, looking down at an open book on her desk.

"Sure, Sarah," he laughs at her. "But you'll have to take a number."

"What an ego," a guy behind me whispers to the girl sitting next to him.

“Hey,” Phil notices me and demands, “who’s the stranger?” He stops in front of the class and leans an elbow on the rostrum atop the teacher’s desk as he stares at me.

I’m embarrassed, and mad at myself for feeling shy, so as casually as possible I say, “Hey. I just transferred to this school. My name’s Lucas.”

“Hi, Lucas,” the girl two seats away smiles. “I’m Sarah Hicks, and this asshole is Phil Covington.”

Phil nods. “How’d you get into the master’s class?”

Before I can answer, Mr. Edwards soars through the door and announces loudly, “He auditioned for it, Mr. Covington, and would you please take your seat?”

Phil moves away from the desk and pushes between two chairs in the front row before plopping down in the seat between me and Sarah. He surprises me by extending his hand and giving me a strong handshake. No one else has talked to me all day.

“I hope you’re a lousy actor,” he grins.

“Philip hates competition,” Sarah stage-whispers, before Mr. Edwards shushes the class.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Remember, when you enter my classroom, you cease being useless, annoying teenagers, and instead you become serious drama students. I refuse to waste my valuable time on sophomoric hi-jinks and misbehaving cretins.”

There’s a few giggles and he pauses, waiting until the room is silent. “Now,” he folds his hands on top of the rostrum and says, “for the benefit of the new thespian in our midst, you will each introduce yourself and briefly—briefly!—list your theatrical vita. You may start, James,” and he points to the first guy in the front row.

One by one the students stand up and tell about their experiences. When it’s Sarah’s turn, she says she played Blanche last fall and was Juliet this spring, and she’s studied voice and ballet since she was seven. Then Phil gets to his feet and announces, “I’m Philip Michael Covington, future star of stage and screen. When I was six years old—”

Mr. Edwards interrupts. “Restrict your remarks to your major accomplishments, Mr. Covington, or we’ll be here all day.”

Phil laughs and executes a bow. “Last fall, I was Stanley in *Streetcar* and then Romeo in the spring, for which I got not one, not two, but three standing ovations. And—”

“Thank you, Philip. Next?”

I stand up and glance around. “Hi, I’m Lucas Denholme. I played Randle McMurphy in *Cuckoo’s Nest* at Regency Prep this spring. Uh,” I hesitate and then admit, “that’s all I’ve done.”

“How many standing ovations did you get?” Phil jokes.

Tossing my head, I look him in the eye and answer honestly, “Four.”

“Oh-oh,” Sarah pokes Phil in the ribs, “You’ve got competition!”

“Quiet, class,” Mr. Edwards scolds. “Next?”

The rest of the class take turns telling about their experiences on stage, and then the teacher talks about his own experiences in the theatre—not in a bragging way, but explaining about auditions and rehearsals in community theatres, and then the bell rings and class is over.

That hour went by fast! The whole time while I was paying attention to the teacher and the other students, I was also very much aware of the beautiful guy sitting so close to me that I could smell the light scent of his soap. I kept stealing glances at his long narrow fingers carelessly flipping pages of a notebook as he listened to the teacher.

There’s a rush as everyone gathers their things and prepares to leave, but Mr. Edwards raps a pencil on his desk to get our attention. “Before you go, I have an announcement,” he says, and we all sit back down again and wait. When we’re quiet, he clears his throat and says, “this semester’s drama production is going to be *Fiddler on the Roof*.” There’s a brief silence, then everyone starts talking at once. They stop immediately when Mr. Edwards says, “Auditions will be held a week from Friday. Copies of the script are on reserve in the school library. If you’re interested in trying out, read the script.”

“Mr. Edwards!” someone in the back asks, “how many speaking parts?”

“Two leads: Tevye and Golde, naturally. Six secondary roles: the three eldest daughters and their suitors. Various supporting roles: the Matchmaker, the Butcher, the Police Chief.”

My breath catches in my throat. I’m so excited! At least, until someone calls out, “Mr. Edwards! Will we have to sing something at the audition?”

“Well,” he replies mockingly, “There aren’t any roles for tap-dancers or saxophone players, so yes, you should be prepared to sing something.”

My heart sinks. I don’t have any musical training, unless you count six years of piano lessons and a lifetime of singing in the shower. With downcast eyes I follow the crowd toward the door, but I stop when Mr. Edwards calls my name.

“Mr. Denholme,” he asks, “why the long face?”

“Oh!” I stop and adjust the strap of my backpack. “I can’t try out for the play. I’m not a singer.”

"Few of these students are singers, and it's unlikely our production of *Fiddler* is headed for Broadway, so a trained voice is not required. But perhaps you're the kind of man who gives up at the first sign of difficulty?"

I feel a blush start up my neck and make my cheeks hot. "I'm not a quitter, if that's what you mean," I answer in a rush. "But I've never sung in front of anyone before."

"Then next Friday will be your first opportunity to do so." Mr. Edwards turns away and sits down at his desk. I stand uncertainly for a moment, then move toward the door.

In the hallway, I walk past Phil and Sarah, who are sharing a laugh. Then Phil reaches out and grabs my arm, pulling me around to face the two of them. "Hey," he says. "Which part are you going for?"

"I don't know." Then in a rush I admit, "I'm not a trained singer."

"That doesn't matter," Sarah says eagerly. "Unless you sing off-key."

"Do dogs howl when they hear you sing?" Phil asks, leaning back against the wall in an elegant sprawl. "Do babies cry and scream for their mommies?"

That makes me laugh. "No."

"Then you'll do all right," he says easily. "Just don't try out for Tevye, that's MY part."

"You wish," Sarah scoffs. "You'll be lucky to get a role as a villager carrying a broom."

Phil shoves her, but gently. "Bitch. Hey Lucas, see you tomorrow!" And then he wraps his arm around Sarah's shoulders and they move off down the hall. Sarah glances back and waves at me, so I raise a hand and wave back.

Stopping at my locker to pick up my jacket and the rest of my books, I leave the school both happier and sadder than when I entered this morning. So far, I like all my teachers, and it's possible I'll fit in with the drama students. But I'm feeling really down about the play. I want to get a part so bad, but I don't hold out much hope of being picked for a singing role. I've seen the film version of *Fiddler*, all the best parts have to sing a lot. When I reach the sidewalk I hear a horn beep, and glancing across the street, I see Matthew in his silver Mercedes. I hurry across the street and get in the car.

Matthew

"What a great surprise!" Lucas beams. "You came to get me."

"I had a meeting nearby," I answer glibly. It wasn't too far out of my way to swing by and give Lucas a lift home his first day of school. "So," I ask, as I pull away from the curb, "how'd it go?"

“Really good!” he answers eagerly, then his face falls and he amends, “well, pretty good.”

“Something wrong?”

“No.”

“What?”

“The school play this term is going to be *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tryouts are in two weeks, and I can’t sing!”

I’m momentarily flummoxed at the thought of a high school production of *Fiddler*. “That’s ambitious. Are there enough drama students for all those roles? By the way, did you like the drama class? And was the teacher nice to you?”

“Yes. And yes, and yes.” Lucas laughs. “There’s about twenty students in the advanced class. And the teacher said—yes, he was pretty nice to me—he said you don’t have to be a trained singer, to get a part in *Fiddler*.”

“Well, there you go.”

“Yeah. Maybe. Except you know, probably not.”

“You give up fucking easily,” I say dryly, casting a sideways glance at his unhappy face.

“That’s what Mr. Edwards said.”

“Going to prove us wrong?”

Lucas returns my look, his face serious. “I’ll try.”

“No, no. Say, ‘I am going to get a part in this play.’”

Lucas groans.

“What?”

“You’re not going to try and, like, motivate me, are you?”

“Fuck you. And here I was going to suggest we go out for pizza tonight, to celebrate the first day of school.”

“Cool!” He’s immediately happy again. Lucas could eat pizza five nights out of seven. “Can we go to Round Table? They have that special, with five kinds of meat.”

“The Cholesterol Express?”

“No,” he snorts, “Carnivore’s Delight. I’m a carnivore. I like my meat.”

“I like your meat too,” I agree seriously, and I’m rewarded with his happy grin.

Time Present: Monday, September 12, 1994

Lucas

"Luke!" Half a dozen voices chant in unison as I move toward the drama class table in the cafeteria. All the advanced drama students eat together and they've welcomed me into the group. I'm part of a clique for the first time in my life.

"Hey," I give a general greeting, then set down my tray next to Sarah. She and Phil have moved over to make room for me on the end of the bench.

Phil reaches across Sarah and grabs the apple from my tray, takes a huge bite and then laughingly returns it. I laugh too. I don't mind, though Sarah punches him and calls him a pig. Phil just grins cheekily and then opens his mouth wide to show her the mess of chewed apple inside. Sarah hits him again. "Eww!"

Picking up the apple, I take a few bites and then show Sarah my own open mouth. She hits me too. Everybody's laughing, and I can hardly believe I'm part of a group of friends. I never thought this would happen to me.

Conversation turns to the tryouts on Friday. Everybody's excited and nervous, and I'm glad I'm not the only one filled with gloom and doom because I can't sing very well. Last week, Sarah offered to help me practice a song for the audition. She's guaranteed a good part in the play; she's taken voice lessons since she was seven. When I hesitated, she added, "I'm helping Phil too, why don't you join us? In the music room after school today?"

"Okay," I quickly agreed.

I'd have gone even if I didn't want to practice singing. I like hanging out with Sarah and Phil. He told me they're not dating; they're just good friends since grade school. When I asked if he has a steady girlfriend, Phil said no, he likes to play the field. "There's too many pretty girls to choose from," he explained. "I don't want to settle down yet. How about you?"

"Oh, me too," I quickly assured him.

"Janey Withers thinks you're hot," he told me the other day, out of the blue.

It was after school. We were sitting in TJ's, this café near the school, sipping Cokes and waiting for Sarah.

"She does not!" I could feel my face get hot. Janey's sits behind me in drama class. Now that Phil says she likes me, I realize that she's been talking to me a lot lately, asking about tryouts and what it was like at Regency and stuff.

"Ask her out sometime, you'll see. She likes you."

"No."

“Why not?”

I just stared across the table at Phil, not knowing what to answer. Finally I said, “I don’t have time for dating right now. I have to study hard so I can get a scholarship.”

“That’s cool,” Phil assured me. “Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you come to UCLA with me? I mean, you know, if you want to.” Phil hunched over the table and added eagerly, “UCLA has a great drama department, and it’s near Hollywood, so there’s chances to get parts in movies and stuff.”

“Maybe I will.” I smiled and Phil smiled back. We pounded fists together on the table.

“Will your family help you with college?”

I could feel my shoulders tighten, but I answered carelessly, “I don’t have any family. I’m emancipated.”

“Yeah, I know—you’ve told me that about a hundred times already. What about this old guy you live with—will he help?”

“We’re not related.”

Matthew and I discussed how I should explain my living situation, if anyone asks. He said to be as honest as possible; that’s always the best policy. I’d wondered if I should come out at school, tell people I’m gay right from the start. Matthew insisted that was my own decision, but he said that I’m not required to discuss my sexual orientation with anyone, and that high school could be hard enough without dealing with discrimination on top of everything else. I’m not anxious for a repeat of what happened at Regency.

I’m not ashamed to be gay, and I don’t want to pretend to be something I’m not. But in the end, I decided not to talk about it at all. So far it’s working out okay, though finding out that Janey Withers likes me in a girlfriend way makes me uncomfortable.

I also decided to tell people I’m emancipated and living on my own. Or rather, that I have a room in a guy’s house near school. I never said Matthew was old, but I never said he wasn’t.

Sarah arrived and Phil threw himself back in the booth, sprawling against the vinyl cushion. “Where the fuck you been?” he harassed her.

“Some of us work for a living,” she replied haughtily. Sarah works a few hours a week in the principal’s office, filing and Xeroxing. I told her that I had a job like that in the summer, at an architect’s office, so we commiserated about how boring office work can be. Phil claimed to have us both beat; his

dad got him hired on as a construction worker for the summer. He worked long hours carrying lumber, which he said was better than membership at a gym. He bragged that now he has the body of an Adonis.

Then he asked, "Want to see my muscles?" Without waiting for an answer, he pulled off his jacket and shirt.

I didn't gasp or anything, just coughed and took a quick swig of Coke. Phil's shoulders are wide and his arms are nicely muscled, smooth and rounded, and his chest is taut. His nipples are dark brown, though naturally I didn't look at them. His torso tapers down from wide shoulders to a narrow waist and hips.

It was all I could do to keep my dick soft. I flicked my eyes to Sarah, and tried to picture her with her blouse off. I tried to imagine her naked breasts, and that's what saved me. Sarah laughed at Phil showing off; she said she was losing her appetite. I just nodded nonchalantly, thinking tits-tits-tits, and luckily he finally pulled his shirt back on.

Phil is not in my gym class, so I don't have to see him in the showers. I'm just in the general class, but Phil's taking fencing, which is so cool. He got special permission to take the fencing class at the University of Washington, which everybody calls U-Dub. Phil says it's really fun and besides, it's good practice in case he ever plays a musketeer or a pirate.

Time Present: Thursday, September 15, 1994

Matthew

I've been so involved in getting the Halstead project off the ground this past week that I've barely had time to keep tabs on Lucas, but he seems to be settling in well at school. He says he likes his classes, and apparently Regency was more advanced than the public schools, so he's had no trouble excelling. He's made friends with some of the other drama students, which is good. I haven't had a chance to hear many details about the new school yet, but I made Lucas promise to tell me if he were having any problems.

I'm working so many late nights that sometimes Lucas is already in bed when I get home. I'm pleasantly surprised he is not harassing me for attention like he did this summer, glad he's not so needy. I sure as hell don't have time to devote to some lonely, horny teenager. It's a relief not to wake up and find him standing by my bed, wordlessly waiting to be invited in. Even when I'm home, he's no longer hanging over my desk where I'm getting caught up on work, try-

ing to cajole me into going for a drive or to the movies. He's developing his own circle of friends now, and nothing could be better.

Better for both of us. I was almost getting used to that smothering Lucas-attention, which would be a bad idea. A very bad idea. Lucas is a temporary distraction. He'll be moving on soon; it's important to keep that thought clearly in mind.

Finally today I was able to leave work at a reasonable hour, and I find Lucas sitting at the dining table eating leftover Chinese takeout, with his nose shoved into a book.

"Good read?" I inquire, loosening my tie before dropping down in the chair across from him.

"Hmm? Oh, it's one of those acting books Mr. Edwards loaned me. Tryouts are tomorrow." Lucas closes the book and lays it beside his plate. "Want some chow mein? There's plenty left."

"No, thanks, I had a late lunch. Why aren't you singing something?" It seems like whenever Lucas is still up when I come home from work, he's singing something from *Fiddler*. If I have to hear *Sunrise*, *Sunset* a few more times, I'm buying earplugs.

"Sarah told me to rest my voice tonight, not to sing anything till we're warming up before the audition tomorrow."

"Sarah's one of your new friends?"

"Yeah, I told you before, she's helping us with singing. Phil hasn't had any training before either." Then Lucas frowns. "But he's better than me, lots. His voice is deeper."

"Phil is Sarah's boyfriend?"

"No," Lucas' frown deepens. "You never listen to me. I told you a million times, Phil and Sarah have been friends forever and now I'm their friend too."

"You never listen to me" has a whiny feel to it, but I'm too tired to argue so I let it go. In fact, I'm so tired, I was looking forward to just vegging out tonight, getting to bed early for a change. "I'm going to take a shower," I announce, standing up and moving away.

"Going out?"

"No," I throw over my shoulder. "I just want to relax tonight."

"Oh!" Lucas exclaims eagerly, jumping up and following me into the bedroom. "Does that mean I can sleep with you?"

"God, no," I deny it, then catch sight of Lucas' smile turning almost comically upside-down. Resigned, I push down my utter exhaustion and move quickly around the bed to grab his hand as he's turning away. "Come here," I

say, sliding my arms around his waist, pulling his hips hard against me. “You can’t sleep with me,” I clarify, “but you can give me a total body massage, how’s that?”

Since the term “massage” has become shorthand for an all-out fuck-fest with my little live-in bottom boy, Lucas’ beaming smile appears once more. “Take a shower with me,” I suggest, hoping the warm water will revive me enough to give Lucas the attention he deserves.

“Great!” he exclaims happily. “Phil says he read somewhere that it’s good to have sex before a performance.”

For a moment I almost say, “Then go have sex with Phil, whoever the fuck Phil is,” but I keep my mouth shut and just smile. “Sounds like a plan,” I agree, leading Lucas into the bathroom.

CHAPTER 15



Time Present: September 16, 1994

Matthew

We're rushing around getting ready. Lucas has his audition today and he's skit-tish as a pup on roller skates. He's bumped into me twice as we've moved around the small kitchen, once while I was pouring juice and again when I was rinsing my glass in the sink; his mind's clearly far, far away. I refrain from harassing him, and after a couple questions elicit no other response than "Huh?" I decide to keep mum and leave him to his thoughts.

Until I open the towel drawer and discover the wad of cash I put there, still wrapped in a rubber band, apparently untouched.

"Lucas, what the fuck?"

"Huh?"

I grab his arm and turn him around to look at me. Pointing at the bundle of money I've pulled from the drawer and clutched in my fist, I repeat as patiently as possible, "What the fuck?"

"Oh," he glances at the money and then back at me. "Oh, that."

"We settled this," I remind him, letting go his arm and leaning back against the counter. "I put this cash here for your school expenses. You agreed to use it."

"Well," Lucas prevaricates, "I didn't exactly agree. I just stopped arguing."

"You've been spending your summer earnings, haven't you?"

"They're my earnings. I guess I can spend them if I want to."

"No, you fucking cannot. You agreed to save that money for college. You agreed to accept an allowance for school this year, God damn it!"

Without thinking, I've raised my voice, I'm almost shouting. Lucas moves around the other side of the kitchen island, putting space between us. "I told you," he says belligerently, "I didn't agree, I just—"

"Stopped arguing."

"Yeah."

We stare at each other wordlessly for a moment. I'm so angry that I'm biting my tongue to keep from lashing out. I thought we'd cleared this up months ago.

I'd insisted that Lucas keep the earnings from his summer job separate. In fact, I'd gone with him to the bank to open his own savings account. I'd procured forms at work for him to sign so that his weekly paychecks would be direct-deposited into that account. He'd protested, at length, that he wanted to share living expenses with me, which I told him was admirable but ridiculous. It costs nothing for Lucas to live here. Except for groceries, but that's no big deal; in fact, it's convenient to have food in the house, so I'm not grabbing sandwiches from the deli or wasting time in restaurants.

Thinking back, I realize that at some point, Lucas had indeed stopped arguing. I thought he'd finally agreed to my conditions, but now I'm chagrined to realize that the damned brat was merely humoring me. God knows how much of his savings he's been frittering away.

We've reached impasse with the glaring. "Why are you fighting me about this?" I demand. "I'm just trying to do what's best for you."

"No," he disagrees. "It's another one of your orders. You won't let me get an after-school job, you don't want me to spend my own money, you're always ordering me around." He hesitates and then adds, "Maybe I don't want you to take care of everything, you know? I'm emancipated, and—"

I hold up a hand to stop this familiar tirade, and he bites off in mid-sentence. A glance at the clock over the sink reminds me that I'm going to be late for an eight-thirty meeting. I open my mouth to warn Lucas that the issue isn't closed, that we'll continue our argument when I get home tonight, when I remember he has play try-outs after school today. I don't want him to be fretting about our disagreement, I don't want it to interfere with his audition. So I cave in, for the time being.

"All right, we won't argue. I can give you a ride to school, if you want, but hurry, I'm running late."

He looks surprised that I've apparently given up, then says, "Thanks, but Phil's picking me up."

We move together down the hall, and at the door of Lucas' room, I pause. "Ready for your audition?"

He cuts his eyes to my face. "No."

"You'll do great. I've heard you singing around the house for the past two weeks. You're very good."

"Really?"

"Absolutely."

A little perjury won't hurt, Lucas needs the confidence. Besides, he's not bad, not bad at all.

"Thanks." Lucas' wobbly grin is reward enough. "But actually," he admits, "I'm kind of scared."

"Bullshit. I've seen you stand up to four biker bullies, remember? You can't be scared of a little audition."

"That was easier," he laughs.

Bending my head, I give him a small kiss. "That's for luck."

"Not luck!"

"Sorry, I forgot. Break a leg."

With a grin, Lucas turns away and goes into his room, murmuring, "See you tonight," and I mentally switch gears as I get dressed, preparing for the meeting with Montmarcy & Smith.

Lucas

The audition is just as terrifying as I knew it would be. Everyone has to wait in the drama classroom till we're called individually into the auditorium. If I strain my ears, I can hear bits of music as Mrs. Clemmons pounds the piano while each student sings his or her prepared piece, but I can't hear the singers themselves, so there's no way to tell who is good and who isn't. A few kids murmur in small groups, but most of us sit silent, tense; I can see some kids moving their lips as they quietly practice lyrics. I can hardly stand the tension.

Sarah is the least nervous person in the room, but that's because she's probably the best singer in the school. She sits between Phil and me, holding each of our hands. I'm surprised that Phil is just as nervous as I am. I'd expect him to be jumping around making jokes, making fun of everybody else's nerves. We both want to play Tevye. He plans to sing *If I Were A Rich Man*, a song I'd wanted to do too, but Sarah talked me out of it. She said my voice comes across better in *Sunrise, Sunset*. She agreed to sing it with me, which would not only

give me more confidence but would also showcase our two voices together, in the husband and wife roles. Surprisingly, Phil doesn't mind. In fact, he encouraged us to sing together. I think that was hugely generous.

We've been practicing singing after school, Phil and Sarah and I. The music teacher lets us use a small voice room which is soundproof and which Sarah says has great acoustics. She made us sing scales and nonsense stuff to warm up our vocal chords, then we took turns practicing our songs. Phil has a good voice, low and melodic. I'm sure he's a shoo-in for Tevye. I like Phil, but I can't help hoping that I get that part anyway. Mr. Edwards says there are no small parts, only small actors. That sounds good in theory, but I still want to play the lead.

Finally, it's Phil's turn. He leaps to his feet, and Sarah stands up to give him a hug. Phil and I pound fists and he flashes the thumbs-up sign along with a cocky grin as he hurries into the auditorium. Sarah and I sit silently straining our ears, but we can't hear anything. Then it's our turn! I'm embarrassed when Sarah takes my hand, my palms are sweaty.

Mr. Edwards gave permission for us to audition together, and he tells us to start whenever we're ready. First, we have to do a bit of dialogue, so we've chosen to do the scene where Tevye asks Golde if she loves him.

I forget all about being nervous the minute Sarah and I begin. We're doing Russian-Yiddish accents (or what we imagine that might sound like, after watching the movie ninety-seven times in the basement family room at Sarah's house), but Mr. Edwards stops us right away and insists that we use our normal voices. You'd think that would throw us off, but actually it makes me feel more natural, and we have to concentrate harder. I think that improved our audition.

After we finish, Mr. Edwards pauses for a moment, then says, "Now, your musical number."

My nerves come back full force and I miss hitting the first note of our song, but Sarah covers for me by singing a bit louder till I get back on track. I can't tell if we were any good or not—well, I know Sarah is good but I have no idea if I'm off key or what. Mr. Edwards says, "Thank you," and then one of the student assistants escorts us to the back entrance of the auditorium. As we burst out into the light, there is Phil waiting for us. We're so excited that we jump up and down, hugging each other; even Phil and I hug, which is strange but nice. We've never touched each other before. I know he's straight; it doesn't mean anything to him. Then we all start talking at once and laughing, so glad the

ordeal is over. The bad thing is that it's Friday, and we have to wait till Monday to get the results.

"Let's celebrate tonight anyway," Phil suggests. "We can drive over to Alki Point and have a picnic on the beach!"

"A picnic?" Sarah exclaims. "It's too cold, it's almost October! Look at the sky, it's going to rain."

"Don't be so negative," Phil complains. "We've got jackets, we're not going to melt." When she still frowns, he adds, "Lucas wants to go! Don't you, Luke?"

"Sure," I sort-of lie. I really do want to go, but Sarah's right, it's already chilly and the breeze is picking up. Yet it's hard to say no to Phil, he's always so enthusiastic and full of high spirits.

"Oh, all right," Sarah groans. "But let's stop by my house first, maybe I can steal some beer."

"Radical!" Phil cries, putting an arm around each of us as we hurry toward the student parking lot. He's got a really cool car. It's old, but it's like a classic or something, a red '74 Chevy Malibu. Phil's older brother is a mechanic and he souped up the engine so the car runs great.

Sarah insists we come in with her, to distract her mom while she slips into the basement to liberate some beer. Mrs. Hicks welcomes us warmly, inviting us to stay for dinner. We argue, because we're in a hurry to get to the beach, but she offers to let us eat right away instead of waiting for Mr. Hicks. Still Sarah puts up an argument, but I glance at Phil and he nods, so we outvote her and throw ourselves down at the dining room table, then pig out on homemade meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

Mrs. Hicks is nice, probably what a normal mother is like. Sarah says she's kind of strict and awfully boring, but then, people that age usually are. Last week we three spent an afternoon in the family room studying for a chemistry test—it's the only class we have together besides drama—so Mrs. Hicks knows us already. Well, she's known Phil forever. Last Saturday, when Matthew was out of town, Phil and I spent the day at Sarah's house, watching the movie version of *Fiddler* on video three times in a row, each of us mouthing all the parts and singing along.

Sarah tells her mom we're going for a ride, we pile into the car again and head for Alki Point. Matthew and I had a picnic on that beach once in the early summer. Not an official picnic—we'd just been shopping for shirts for me to wear to work, then picked up sandwiches at a deli and drove here to the beach. We took off our shoes, rolled up our jeans, and walked through the warm sand, to sit on a log and watch the tide come in as we ate. Seagulls circled over our

heads, and we pulled off bits of bread and threw it on the sand, laughing at the greedy birds fighting over it.

It's dark by the time Phil parks on the street that runs parallel with Alki Beach, but he knows a shortcut across the dunes to a curve of the beach. He sets us to collecting driftwood and builds a fire, where a couple big logs are pulled together into a V. After the fire's going, we three huddle down on the sand, leaning against a log, drinking beer.

Phil's disappointed that Sarah was only able to sneak a six-pack, but it's actually plenty. Sarah drinks one, I drink two, and Phil drinks the rest. He says Sarah and I are cheap drunks. I can't argue with that, I'm not much of a drinker yet. We talk about the play tryouts; there's a chill breeze but it's not raining. Sarah gets quiet after while, and we laugh softly when we realize that she's fallen asleep, curled in the sand with her head resting against the log. Phil wants to tie her shoelaces together, but I won't let him. Then he gets up to go take a piss.

Phil's drunk. He sways on his feet and says, "Help me, Lukey, I can't stand up." So I walk beside him, holding his arm. He leans heavily against me as we move through the sand down to the waterline, where we both unzip and pull out our dicks. We piss into the shallow wavelets lapping against the shore. It's dark, but there's moonlight on the water. Naturally I don't look at Phil's dick, but I can sort-of see it by slanting my eyes far sideways.

When we finish, Phil struggles with his zipper. He leans too far forward and almost tips over. I grab onto his hips to steady him, and he sways some more. He leans against me, his bent head resting for a moment on my shoulder. I can smell his hair. He must use herbal shampoo, it's nice. There's also the smell of beer, and a slight scent of clean perspiration. I make myself laugh and give Phil a shake. "Careful," I warn him. "You'll fall in the water and drown."

"You'll save me, won't you?" He turns his head to look into my eyes; our faces are very close together. "Won't you, Lukey?" he repeats, slightly slurring his words.

"S-sure," I answer, clearing my throat. "But stand up now. Stand up, Phil."

He's still leaning against me. He sways again, then raises his arms and wraps them around my shoulders, bringing our faces close together again. We're staring into each other's eyes, and I remind myself that he's drunk. He's doesn't know what he's doing.

Phil won't stand up, just holds on tighter. What am I going to do? "Stand up," I repeat again, hearing my voice quaver.

Phil moves then, stands up straight, but doesn't let go. "Hold onto me," he says, and his body shifts slightly. His chest presses tight against mine, and he's staring into my eyes. His legs move slightly, and my cock, that's been having a struggle of its own to stay uninvolved, is losing the battle. I'm sure Phil can feel my hard-on through our jeans.

And suddenly I'm scared, scared shitless, because I know that Phil's straight. Even though he's drunk now, tomorrow he'll be sober. Tomorrow he might remember feeling my erection rubbing against his leg. Then he might figure out that I'm gay. He might get mad and not be my friend. So quickly I move backward, putting space between our bodies, and I give him another shake. "Come on," I urge. "It's cold here, let's get back to the fire."

Phil gives me a strange look, then nods and pulls his arms away, standing up straight. "Okay," he agrees, sounding less drunk now. "Let's go wake up Sarah."

We walk silently side by side up the beach. Sarah's already awake, sitting up with her back against the log. "Hey," Phil greets her. "We went to take a piss and I almost fell in."

"I know," she nods. "I was watching."

Now I'm really glad I pulled away from Phil. What if Sarah thought we were doing something? What would happen to our great friendship, if they figure out that I'm gay? Would I lose the first real friends I've ever had because I can't control what my cock wants to do? Does Sarah suspect—

But no; she laughs and says, "I almost sneaked behind and pushed you BOTH into the ocean. Serve you right for leaving me alone. Someone could have come along and raped me!"

"Nah," Phil throws himself down on the sand. "You're a mouth-breather when you sleep, and you snore. Nobody'd want to rape you."

"Huh," Sarah snorts, pretending to be insulted. "I'll have you know that plenty of guys want to rape me."

"Name one," Phil challenges her, and she punches his shoulder.

I sit down on the other side of Sarah and we all laugh, then she says seriously, "Bill Cummings asked me out yesterday."

Phil sits up straight and exclaims, "Sarah, he's a nerd!"

"Who's Bill Cummings?" I ask.

Phil makes a face. "He's president of the Future Freaks of America."

"Future Businessmen," Sarah corrects him. "He's not exactly a nerd, just a computer geek, but he's kind of cute, and hella smart. We're in Trig together. I like him."

"You can't," Phil denies it. "You can't like him, and you can't go out with him."

"Says you. Besides," she adds mock-seriously, "I have my reputation to consider. Everybody thinks we're the freaks. You, me and Lucas. We've been inseparable since school started. They think we're doing some kind of kinky ménage-a-trois thing."

"No way," Phil sneers, then laughs. "Wow, really? Actually, that's kind of cool, huh?"

I'm dumbfounded. "You're not serious, are you, Sarah?" She must be joking. Who in their right mind would think that the three of us—

"Do you care, Lucas?"

"What?" I turn to look at Phil. He's sober now, and he's serious.

"I don't know," I hedge. "It's just kind of, I don't know. Weird."

"I think it's cool," he repeats. "We're infamous! That's almost as good as being famous."

Sarah takes my hand. "Does it bother you?"

"No. I don't know. Do you mean, they think that we're ... doing things?"

"Yeah," she nods. "Having orgies and stuff."

Then she laughs, and I can't help but join in. Phil laughs too, and the more we think about it, the funnier it gets. We laugh and laugh, we can't stop laughing, and we fall against each other, hugging and hanging on. We're sprawled on the sand, huddled close together. Then we all stop laughing, right at the same moment. The log's behind us, the fire's at our feet, and we're lying close together, kind of holding onto each other, hiccupping from laughter and too much beer.

There's silence for a moment, and it feels like we're each holding our breath. It's black dark except for the light of our small fire and the distant glow of streetlamps. There's a few clouds blown across the moon, but stars twinkle in the dark night sky overhead. The sand is cold, the breeze is cold, but it's warm in our huddle of bodies, and the silence stretches out. I feel a hand on my hair, touching the side of my face. I can't tell whose hand it is, but the fingers are warm and they tickle my ear, making me shiver.

Out on the street, a car alarm goes off, blaring loudly into the quiet night, and we jump. All three of us jump, and then we roll apart, and then we sit up, all without a word. Sarah's the first to break the silence. "It's getting late," she murmurs. "We'd better go home."

"Yeah," Phil and I agree. We stand up, brush sand off our clothes, kick sand onto the fire to put it out. We trudge silently over the dunes to the street and

pile into Phil's car. Instead of the three of us squeezing into the front like we normally do, I crawl into the back. When Sarah gets in front, I can see that she sits pressed up close against the door. I'm not sure exactly what was going on down at the beach, but it's left us kind of shaken.

They drop me off first, the marina is closest, and we say goodbye. I can tell that Phil and Sarah are trying to sound normal. I feel strange, I don't know what's happening. I'm so afraid our very special friendship is changing, and it scares me.

I go through the gate and pull out my key, but before I can use it, the door is jerked roughly open. Matthew's standing there, and he's glaring.

"Hey," I say experimentally, edging into the house, keeping an eye on him. His face is red and he's frowning so hard, there's white lines around his mouth.

"Where the FUCK have you been?" he demands, slamming the door closed. "It's after midnight!"

"It is?" I'm surprised. "Well that's okay, it's Friday. There's no school tomorrow."

"It is not okay. Where the fuck have you been?"

"We went to Alki Point." I don't know what's bugging Matthew. I'm trying to remember if I left dishes in the sink or something.

"Alki Point? The beach? It's fucking cold, Lucas, have you noticed? What were you doing there?"

Shaking off the strangeness I've been feeling since whatever happened—whatever didn't happen—at the beach, I become aware that Matthew really is angry. This is more than just his normal bellowing. "I was with my friends," I say defensively. "What's it to you?" I turn away to head off down the hall.

He grabs my arm, whirling me around. "Listen!" he growls. "While you're living under my roof, you're accountable for your actions. You will not just take off, stay out till all hours, without even a phone call. Without checking in."

"Checking in?" I'm outraged. "I don't need to check in with anybody. I'm emancipated now, and—"

"Aaaggh," Matthew lets go of me, grabs his own hair and pulls on it. "If you say that one more time—"

I've never seen him do that before and it almost distracts me. Then I insist, "But it's true! I'm not some little child to be ordered around. I don't need your permission to stay out late. It's not even that late, and it's not a school night!"

Matthew takes a deep breath. "Listen," he says. "You are still a minor, and you're living with me. My house, my rules. And Christ almighty," he adds,

leaning his head close to my face and sniffing. "You've been drinking! Are you insane, or just stupid?"

"I had a beer—so what? I drink a beer sometimes when we have pizza! Big deal!"

"You just answered my question," he growls. "You really must be stupid! If I let you have a beer sometimes, it's while you're safe at home, not out driving around town, liable to be pulled over by the cops. Who was driving anyway, one of your friends? Were they drinking too?"

"Yeah," I admit, "Phil was driving. But he wasn't drunk."

Well, he wasn't very drunk. Matthew's staring hard at me and I don't let myself look away.

"How old is Phil?"

"Seventeen, same as me. So what?" I'm getting tired of this stupid third degree.

"So what? Lucas, do you have any idea what would happen if this kid was pulled over, if he was stopped for drunk driving? The fact that you're an emancipated minor means that YOU would be held responsible. You'd be treated under the law as an adult." His eyes bore into mine. "You can go to jail, Lucas. Prison! And then you can kiss college good-bye, probably forever."

I don't want to believe him, he's probably just trying to scare me. "Well, Phil didn't get pulled over. Nothing happened, so can you just drop it now?"

That was the wrong thing to say. I can see Matthew's blood start to boil again. "You fucking listen to me, Lucas, and you do exactly as I say! No more drinking, and no staying out late, not unless you check in with me first. Got that?"

"No."

"Yes," he insists. He's glaring, his voice is getting rough again. "And because you didn't call to let me know where you were tonight, you are grounded. For a month."

"Grounded?" I'm almost shrieking. "You can't ground me, like I'm some little kid! I'm emanci—"

"FUCK!" Matthew shouts, his voice shaking the whole room. "If you tell me one more time that you're fucking emancipated, you'll be grounded for the entire fucking school year. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

I cannot speak; I'm practically shivering with anger and frustration, and even, sort-of, fear. Matthew looks scary, his eyes are bugged out, he's towering over me and his fists are clenched. I can't answer. Instead I turn and hurry

down the hall to my room, slamming the door as hard as I can. A picture falls off the wall and I pick it up, throw it across the room. The glass shatters.

Now I'm scared. Scared that Matthew is going to come slamming into the room and—and maybe hit me. Or throw me out of the house.

I just stand there for a few minutes, hugging my arms to my chest, straining my ears to hear if he's coming after me. But he doesn't. It's silent, totally silent for a while. I tiptoe to the door, press my ear against the wood panel. Finally I hear the sliding door to the deck being pushed open, then closed. Matthew must have gone outside. Sometimes he sits on the deck staring at the sky, he says he does that when he wants peace and quiet.

I've ruined the peace and quiet of Matthew's life. He took me in, he let me move in with him, gave me my own room, and he's supporting me. And how do I repay him? I yell at him and make him mad. Not just now, but all the time. Well, he's not mad all the time, but I know I probably annoy him all the time, making messes in his clean house, playing music too loud, eating too much. And tonight, I didn't call to tell him I'd be out late.

I honestly never thought of it, which in a way is worse than doing it on purpose. Maybe he was worried. Probably he was worried, since he didn't know where I was and had no way to find out.

Now I'm feeling sick to my stomach. I perch on the edge of the bed, feeling very shook up and guilty. And sorry, sorry, sorry. I wait a few minutes, but don't feel any better. I feel worse and worse. So I stand up, move to the door, and make myself walk down the hall and into the living room. I hesitate, but only for a moment, then I ease the patio door open. Matthew's sitting in a deck chair, smoking, staring out over the water. He turns his head toward me as I step outside.

"I'm sorry." My voice is all shaky and I cough to clear my throat. "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I should have called you, and I promise it won't happen again."

Matthew's face, which was looking hard as granite, relaxes. "Okay," he says, and his voice is gentle again. I'm so glad, I hate when his voice is rough with anger. "Okay, Lucas. Thanks."

"And," I add, gulping, "I'll be grounded. I mean, I accept it, okay? But, what if I get a part in the play? There'll be rehearsals, and—"

"Yes, you can do your play," he assures me. "How did the audition go?"

"Oh, I don't know. We won't find out till next week."

Matthew stands up then and pulls me into a hug. I gasp with relief that he's not mad now, and I slide my arms around his back and cling on real tight. "You'll get a good part," he tells me. "I'm sure of it. Another success for Lucas

Denholme!” He smiles and gives me a kiss. Just a small one. I try to make it more but Matthew pulls away. “Go to bed now.”

“Let me sleep with you.”

“Not tonight.”

“Are you still mad at me?” I thought things were okay now.

“I’m not mad. But not tonight. Go ahead, I’m going to have another cigarette.”

Reluctantly I turn away, my shoulders sagging. I really wanted to sleep with Matthew tonight. Mostly because I want to feel close to him, but also partly because I’m so horny, I could hump a tree trunk. The things that happened—or didn’t happen—at the beach have my insides all shook up. I guess I’ll have a shower now, and I can take care of business in the warm water, maybe relax enough to fall asleep. It’s been a long, very strange and exhausting day.

Matthew

I know that Lucas wanted to sleep with me, and naturally I’m almost always in the mood to have him curled up next to me, returning my kisses with a youthful ardor that’s addictively exciting. But I knew it wasn’t a good idea tonight, not after the strict-parent/disobedient-child confrontation we had earlier.

It’s tough trying to be the grown-up in this situation, looking out for a boy emerging into adulthood, one who is still as immature and irresponsible as most kids his age. I came down pretty hard on Lucas tonight, but I had no choice. Truthfully, he was not out that late. It wasn’t yet one o’clock when he got home, but I’d been worried sick. Literally sick, not knowing where he was or whom he was with, thinking of all the worst-case scenarios: car crash, kidnapping, the works.

When I’d not heard from Lucas by eleven-thirty, I foolishly got in the car and drove to the school. It was in darkness, everyone was long gone, and yet I’d parked and walked around the deserted grounds. As if I’d find some evidence, some hint of where Lucas might have gone. I hoped that he was with his new friends. I’ve been hearing choruses of “Phil-n-Sarah, Phil-n-Sarah, Phil-n-Sarah” for the past two weeks, but I didn’t know their last names or where they lived.

But what if Lucas were alone? I’d asked myself. What if he’d fucked up the audition? What if the teacher hadn’t give him a part in the play? Would Lucas have over-reacted, would he have gone off the deep end? He wouldn’t have done anything stupid, would he?

I'd refused to define to myself what I meant by "stupid." And finally, feeling like an idiot, I drove back home again. That's when I started getting angry.

I listen as Lucas gets the broom and cleans up the broken glass in his room. I wonder what he smashed during his temper tantrum? Then he heads for the bathroom, and I wait till I hear the shower shut off and I'm sure Lucas is in bed, before opening my stash jar hidden in a locked box on the deck. I pluck out a previously rolled joint and light up. The sweet smell of the weed is soothing. I begin to let go of my anger. Anger at Lucas, and at myself.

I've had way too much time tonight to examine my tumultuous feelings as I worried and fretted and fumed. If it weren't absolutely ridiculous, I might think that I'm feeling hurt because Lucas didn't rush right home from school, to tell me all about his audition. He no longer needs me to validate himself. That's a good thing really, a healthy thing. I should be relieved and happy that he is moving on, moving away from an emotional dependence on me.

I realize something else: part of what I'm feeling is jealousy. Lucas is making friends in school, and maybe—probably—he'll soon meet someone he wants to have sex with. Maybe Lucas will decide he wants to have a boyfriend. How can he have those kinds of normal growing-up experiences if he's having a sexual relationship with me?

I'm beginning to wonder if maybe I'm taking advantage of him, of the situation we're in. Sure, I'm looking out for him, providing for him. Maybe it puts him in an awkward position. It's awkward for me as well. There's something really terrible, even frightening, about my feelings of jealousy. I've joked to myself about how addictive sex with Lucas has become, but I wonder if there's more to it than that. If my feelings for this boy, this young man, are maybe much stronger than they should be? Stronger than I want them to be.

Lucas is growing up. He'll be in college soon, leaving my house and leaving me behind as he moves forward into his new life. That's the way it should be, the way I want it to be. Maybe now it's time to begin to let him go.

That sounds so reasonable and so right, yet somehow, that thought causes a sharp, almost unbearable pain in the middle of my chest.

Maybe it's the weed. Probably that pain is just a muscle spasm from inhaling too deeply on the joint clutched tight in my fingers. I crush it out in the ashtray at my elbow, and stare at the black-dark sky, letting the shoop-shoop sound of water lapping against the deck relax the taut muscles in my neck and shoulders. Things will look better in the morning, they always do. As Grandma used to say, "It's always darkest before the dawn."

As I get up and make my way inside, I mutter under my breath, “Fuck you, Grandma.”

CHAPTER 16



Time Present: Saturday, September 17, 1994

Matthew

“Lucas! Telephone.”

I’m working at my desk this morning. The ringing phone jolted me, made me lose my train of thought. I really should get an extension phone for Lucas, if his new friends are going to be calling him often.

He hurries to take the phone. I turn away, concentrate on the drawings, not really listening to his conversation until I hear him say, “I can’t go out tonight. I’m grounded.”

I brace myself, waiting for him to start ragging on me to let him go somewhere. I won’t do it, it’s important that I stick to my guns. Lucas apologized for being late last night, but if I’m going to maintain any kind of discipline, I’ve got to make him abide by the rules.

The idea of me being all parental makes me grouchy. Till now, “discipline” meant hot guys wearing leather and handcuffs, not teenagers busting curfew. I give up my pretense of not-listening and raise my head, watch Lucas’ face as he talks to his friend.

“Because I didn’t call to say I’d be late. No, he’s not my guardian or anything, but I broke the rules.”

I don’t know how much of Lucas’ obvious agitation is attributable to regret about last night, or how much might be an acting performance for my benefit.

“It’s the truth. Also, he smelled beer on me. Phil, I’m not making it up.”

I'm not sure how much of his life story Lucas has shared with his friends. We agreed he should just tell people he was Emancipated (a word that in my brain has become capitalized; a word that also has begun to choke me) and that he is rooming with someone. Now it occurs to me that this explanation is rather vague and ambiguous, maybe one that's difficult for a high school kid to explain to his friends' satisfaction. Adults don't push for explanations of personal things, but kids do.

Lucas is silent for a moment, listening; his breathing has quickened and when he raises a hand to his face, I realize his hand is trembling and his face looks anxious. "Phil," he says urgently, lowering his voice and turning his back to me. "Don't be mad! I want to, I just can't. Can you explain to Sarah that—" He listens for a moment, then says fretfully, "Wait! Wait a—"

Apparently Phil hung up on him. Lucas holds onto the phone with both hands for a moment, then turns and drops it back into its cradle. I'm staring at his face, but it's blank, completely blank.

"Lucas, what is it?"

"Huh?" he raises his head and glances at me. "Uh, nothing." Then he turns away and heads back to his room.

I'm left sitting there in the sudden silence, wondering what the fuck to do. Obviously the caller got angry because Lucas can't go out tonight. Well, that's tough. There are consequences for every action, and Lucas has to accept the repercussions of his behavior. His friends will have to recognize that, too. I'm sorry, but that's life.

So why do I feel like Scrooge, Attila the Hun and Grandma, all rolled into one?

Lucas has told me that he never had real friends before, and he's been over the moon with happiness being part of a circle of friends. In the past two weeks, I've seen him blossom from a somewhat shy boy, timid about switching schools, to a more confident, cheerful kid who jumps out of bed every morning, sings in the shower, and rushes excitedly to school.

Fuck.

Fuck me. Fuck discipline. With a groan, I get up from my chair and go down the hall, stop outside Lucas' room and knock on the door.

"Come in."

He's sitting cross-legged on his bed. He looks unhappy, but he's not begging me to bend my rules, which I'd really expect him to do.

Moving forward, I stop at the foot of his bed. "I've reconsidered," I tell him. "Because you apologized, and because this was a first-offense situation, I'm not going to enforce grounding you. This time."

"Oh!" he exclaims, sitting up straight and staring at me unbelievably.

"But!" I raise a hand to halt his excitement. "If there is any repetition of this behavior, just one more time, the grounding goes back into effect immediately. Understood?"

"Oh, yes!" Lucas leaps off the bed and throws himself into my arms, hugging me hard. "I promise!" he shouts into my ear, then lets go and tears out the door, making a bee-line for the phone in the living room.

"Answer!" I hear him yell into the phone. To avoid eavesdropping, I detour into my bedroom, open my closet and glance at my going-out clothes. If Lucas is going out tonight, then so am I.

I won't bring anyone home though. Last night, when I was forced to realize that I was jealous about Lucas meeting other boys and maybe wanting to have sex with them, it occurred to me that maybe Lucas felt jealous when I'd brought men home and fucked them within hearing range. In fact, I knew he was jealous. I'd always known, but I'd refused to let it bother me. I won't do that anymore. Besides, there's no need. I'll just pick up someone who has his own place. It's no big deal.

I can hear Lucas' voice on the phone, though I can't hear his words and I start humming so I don't try to listen. I stop abruptly when he comes rushing down the hall.

"Matthew," he asks breathlessly, "Can my friends come over here sometime?"

I stop then, holding a sleeveless black shirt in my hands. I guess it's a natural request, for a kid to bring his friends home. But my house is not really a family type of place.

"Are you sure you want to?"

"They want to," he whispers, glancing over his shoulder as if they're waiting outside the door. He must have laid down the phone to come get my answer. "They know it's a houseboat, they've never been on one before."

"I guess that's all right," I answer uncertainly. Do I want more teenagers invading my home?

"Are you going out?" Lucas has noticed the shirt in my hands. When I nod, he asks, "Well then, could they maybe come tonight? We could get pizza and watch *Fiddler* on my TV."

It's not his TV, I only moved it into his room because I wanted quiet in the living room. But that's semantics; to Lucas, anything he touches becomes his property.

When I hesitate, he goes on, "Because Sarah's parents are having a dinner party tonight, and Phil's parents are going out and they said ABSOLUTELY NOT. So we don't have any place else to go, except the beach again, but it's raining."

"Okay," I cave in. "But no beer, no drinking at all, and I mean it. And they're to go home by midnight."

"Jeez, Matthew! We're almost eighteen!"

"One o'clock. That's final. No more harassment, I mean it."

"Thanks!" he gushes, turning to hurry back down the hall. This time I do eavesdrop, and I hear Lucas say, "It's on! Yeah, he said okay. But Phil—no beer. No, he means it, otherwise my grounding is back on. Besides, you act stupid when you're drunk. Yes, you do. I don't remember either, I was drunk too, you know? But I'm pretty sure you acted stupid."

So the other boy HAD been drunk last night, which raises my quasi-parent hackles again, but it's too late. I've released Lucas from being grounded. I have to trust that he'll keep his word now. At least he'll be home safe and sound, not riding around somewhere with a drunk driver.

But how the fuck did I get painted into this corner? Now I have to go out, and I can't come home till after one. That's no hardship, but living with Lucas is really messing up my carefree single lifestyle.

Lucas

"This place is cool!" Phil exclaims.

I'm giving him and Sarah a tour of the houseboat. They dropped their coats in the living room and I've taken them through the kitchen and into my room. Matthew's door is closed. I don't think he'd appreciate having people peek into his bedroom.

"You can't tell the house is on water," Phil points out. "I thought it'd be rocking around like a real boat."

"It's on pilings," I explain. "Want to see the deck?" I lead the way back down the hall past the guest bathroom and slide open the outside door. They both ooh-and-ahh at the view from the deck, lights sprinkled on the shore and the distant hills, then we come back inside. It's chilly and damp, it rained earlier today. "You guys hungry? We can order pizza."

"Sure," they agree, and we have our usual argument about pepperoni vs. sausage. Moving into my room, Sarah puts in the videocassette of *Fiddler*. She and I sit on the floor in front of the TV while Phil throws himself down on my bed.

"Your bed's kind of small," he says.

"No, it's not," I contradict, twisting my head around to look at him. "It's big enough for me."

"What if you had company sleep over some time?" he asks, then quickly laughs and adds, "Or, you know, an orgy or something?"

I try to laugh too, but I don't like where this conversation's going. Neither does Sarah. "Shh," she says. "Turn up the volume, Lucas, the overture's starting."

After the way last night ended, with all of us quiet and sort of keeping our distance, I'd wondered if we three would feel different around each other today. At first everything seemed back to normal. Phil picked up Sarah and they were cheerful and laughing when I greeted them at the door and showed them around the houseboat. But now that we're settled in my room and Phil starts joking about the size of my bed, awkwardness creeps back in.

Turning up the volume and sitting cross-legged on the carpet, I glance around the room to make sure there's nothing on my walls or on my desk that would make anyone think that I'm gay. I'm not hiding, I'm just not ready to tell my friends yet. Maybe if I did, they'd no longer be my friends. I'd made a slow tour of the houseboat earlier this evening, squinting my eyes and looking at everything closely to see if there were any clues.

Matthew noticed me wandering around the living room staring at things. He'd been working at his desk, but he stopped what he was doing and came over to stand next to me by the bookcase. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Nothing," I said, then admitted, "I'm trying to see if our house looks like gay men live here."

"Our house?" he asked deliberately, and I thought he was going to insist that it's his house, not our house; but his mouth snapped shut and he let it pass. I could tell him that, since I'm living here now, it's my house too, even if I don't pay for anything. Possession is nine-tenths of the law.

"Lucas," he sighed, in that voice he uses when I've annoyed him, "there's no track lighting, no posters of Bette Midler, no comprehensive collection of Streisand CD's, no rainbow flag flying from the rooftop. As long as they don't find my extensive assortment of leather toys, I think we're safe."

"But," I pointed out, "this place doesn't look anything like Phil's or Sarah's houses."

"What do their houses look like? Suburban sprawl? Barbecue pit in the backyard? Lots of chintz, and china cabinets full of Precious Moments figurines?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "They're just different."

"I'm an architect. My house is a reflection of clean design, no clutter. Or anyway," he'd added, glancing pointedly at the pile of my textbooks on the coffee table, "there didn't used to be any clutter."

"I like to study in here with you," I said defensively. "It gets lonely in my room."

Matthew's face softened then, and he smiled. "You're right. It's nice to have company sometimes." And he kissed me. Just a little kiss, then he returned to his desk.

He works so many long hours, staying late at the office many nights, bringing work home on weekends. Sometimes if he finishes or gets tired, he'll wander over and sit beside me on the sofa, or come into my room to watch a few minutes of TV. Or he'll go outside for a cigarette. Matthew used to smoke in the house, but now he only does it on the deck. When I asked why, he said that if he wanted to kill me, he'd drown me in the lake, he wasn't going to do it with secondhand smoke. He's glad that I don't smoke, and warned me never to start. He says it's more addictive than heroin. Then I had to ask if he ever used heroin, and he just made a disgusted face and smacked me (gently) on top of my head.

Remembering that conversation, I imagine that I smell smoke. Glancing over my shoulder, I see that Phil has lit a cigarette. "I'm sorry, there's no smoking in the house."

"Says who?"

"It's the rule."

"This guy has a lot of rules," he frowns, rolling off the bed and moving toward the door. "Old people are so damned fussy. Can I smoke on the deck?"

"Sure." I want to follow him but I stay put, glancing at Sarah. She wrinkles her nose and says "Ick, that stinks. I'm glad you don't smoke, Lucas."

"Yeah," I agree, and then we shush. The film's overture has finished and here comes Tevye down the road, talking to God about his lame horse. Naturally we start doing the dialogue, and Sarah says it's easier now, since Mr. Edwards won't let us use the accents we'd been practicing.

"Lucas," Sarah whispers, "have you ever kissed somebody who smokes?"

“Uh, yeah.”

“It’s nasty, isn’t it? I was at a party once and we played a kissing game. I had to kiss Jack Potter and he was smoking a cigarette. It was like licking an ash-tray!”

“Hmm.”

“Who did you kiss, Lucas?”

“Shh, Tevye’s coming into the village.”

Then Phil’s back and he booms out his voice, taking over the Tevye role from me by sheer loudness.

I know he’s going to get the part, he’s much better than I am. Or anyway, he’s a lot bigger, he’s almost six feet tall, he’s got dark hair and eyes. He looks more like Tevye than a guy my size, five-seven with blond hair. I lean back against the bed again, feeling sorry for myself.

In a few minutes, the doorbell rings and we rush to intercept the pizza man. We pooled our money ahead of time, even though Matthew had insisted I take money from the towel drawer to pay for it. I didn’t argue with him, but I didn’t take his money either.

Matthew

I haven’t been out on a Saturday night for several weeks, and I’m looking forward to it. But I’ve left the house too early to hit the bars, clearing out well ahead of the arrival of Lucas’ friends. I slide into a booth at the Cat’s Pajamas, surprised to see that Patrick is still on duty, it’s nearly eight o’clock. He probably works as many long hours as I do myself.

“Matty!” Pat hurries from the kitchen to greet me with a hug, then slides into the booth across from me. “It’s been ages, my friend! Working all the hours that God sends, I imagine?” When I nod, he laughs. “As usual! And how’s the little orphan boy you adopted? Has he settled in?”

Annoyed, I correct him. “He’s not an orphan, and I did not adopt him.” Then I laugh ironically, and relax against the seat back. “He’s settled in too damned well, actually. He’s upset my well-ordered life.”

“He’s in school now, right? Has the transition been hard for him?”

“Not at all, it’s been a snap. I didn’t tell you about it?”

“No,” Pat says. “We haven’t talked for two or three weeks. Last time I saw you was when you were taking him shopping for school clothes.”

“That’s right.” Lucas and I had stopped in for lunch at the Pajamas before hitting The Gap. “He was pretty nervous the first day, but he was thrilled to get into a drama class, and he’s already made a few friends. In fact,” I grimace, “the

friends are coming over tonight, so I had to clear out. I told you my life's been turned upside down."

Patrick smiles, but he's giving me a funny look.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," he says quickly, then adds, "I'm just kind of surprised you'd let a bunch of teenagers overrun your house."

"Me, too," I admit. "Strange, isn't it? Now," I hurry to change the subject, "Can I get some coffee?"

"Coming right up," Pat promises, slipping out of the booth and heading for the kitchen.

Lucas

Right before the final scene of *Fiddler*, Sarah gets sick. There's no time to make it to the guest bathroom, so I usher her through Matthew's room. There's barely time for her to lift the toilet seat and then double over as she gags and vomits. I'm alarmed and embarrassed to witness her throwing up. At the same time, I'm feeling vaguely nauseated, out of sympathy.

"Go away," she groans, so I leave her there and close the bathroom door. Phil has followed us and is standing uncertainly by Matthew's bed.

"She okay?"

"I don't know. Well, she's vomiting her guts out." Not that I have to tell him. We hear her let loose again.

"Maybe it's the pizza," Phil suggests. "You feel sick?"

"I don't think so. Do you?"

"No, I'm okay."

We stand there helplessly, waiting for Sarah to come out. After a minute, Phil begins to glance around the room. I forgot to check for gay clues in here, but I don't see anything, except that the room is really neat. Probably some straight guys are neat. Well, my dad is neat, so that proves it. There's a large framed print above the bed in red and black. It's abstract, but I've always sort of thought I could see penises in it. But when I told Matthew, he laughed and said, at my age I see penises everywhere.

Then Sarah opens the door and stops abruptly when she sees us waiting there. "I'm okay," she answers, before we can ask. "But I want to go home."

"Sure, Sarah, I'll take you home," Phil answers, trying to put an arm around her shoulders.

She pulls away. "Don't touch me, I need to stay perfectly still."

"Maybe you're seasick," Phil suggests, "since we're on a boat?"

"It's a house," I put in defensively. "It's not really a boat."

"No, no," Sarah insists. "I've been feeling shitty all day, dizzy and shaky." She perches on the edge of Matthew's bed and holds a hand to her forehead. "I thought I was getting my period, but now I think I've got a fever." She looks up at us apologetically. "Gee, I hope I didn't infect you guys."

"Don't worry about that," we both assure her. Phil says, "Come on, I'll take you home."

Sarah nods and stands up, a bit unsteadily. "I'll get your coat," I offer, hurrying into the living room.

"Thanks, Lucas." Sarah puts on her coat before adding, "I'm sorry to ruin our first visit to your house. But Phil can drop me off and then come back. No reason the night should be spoiled for everybody."

Phil glances at me. "Would that be okay?"

"Sure. We can watch *Fiddler* again."

Phil grabs his coat and I walk them to the car. It's only twenty minutes or so before he's back. He says he had to stop the car once, so Sarah could throw up again. He was worried about leaving her alone, but luckily her parents were home.

"Do you want more pizza?"

"Ugh," he makes a face. "Not after listening to Sarah." He leans against the kitchen counter watching me wrap the leftover pizza and put it in the fridge. Then he follows me to my room and we take up our places again in front of the TV, me on the floor, Phil on my bed.

In silence we watch a few minutes of *Fiddler*. I guess neither of us feels like doing dialogue now. I jump when I feel Phil's fingers on the back of my head, and I turn around to look at him.

"Sorry," he says, pulling back his hand. "Your hair looks so shiny, I just wondered, you know, what it feels like."

We just stare at each other for a minute.

"Uh," he says then, "you use conditioner on it? To make it so soft?"

"I—" For a minute, I can't remember. Then I make myself laugh. "I don't do girly stuff like that."

"That's not girly," he contradicts, sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "Everybody uses conditioner, you're supposed to. It's a health thing, not a beauty thing."

Phil slides down until he's sitting next to me on the floor. "I use conditioner," he goes on, "but my hair's not as soft as yours. Feel it." He grabs my hand and raises it toward his head. My fingers brush against his hair. "See?"

“Uh-huh.”

We sit frozen like that for a moment. Phil drops my hand and asks, “Can I get another Coke?” We move down the hall into the kitchen. Grabbing a couple Cokes from the fridge, I hand one to Phil, then hoist myself up onto a barstool at the island counter and he does the same. We drink our sodas in a silence that begins to grow uncomfortable.

Finally Phil clears his throat and says, “Lucas....”

The front door opens, and a glance at the kitchen clock shows that it’s almost two. I forgot about the deadline for my friends to go home. I hope Matthew’s not going to yell at me in front of Phil. We sit there in silence and listen to the door close, then Matthew calls out, “Lucas? Why are the lights on all over the—”

He comes in through the kitchen doorway and stops abruptly.

“Hey,” I greet him. “Um, I lost track of time. This is my friend Phil Covington. Phil, this is Matthew Morgan, he’s—this is his house.”

I glance at Phil and he’s staring at Matthew. He swings his head toward me and exclaims, “But you said he was old.”

“I did not!” I can feel myself blushing. I never said he was old, I just never said he wasn’t.

Matthew says sarcastically, “Nice to meet you too, Phil.”

“Oh!” Now it’s Phil’s turn to blush. “I’m sorry. Nice to meet you, Mr. Morgan.” He gets off the stool and holds out his hand and they shake. There’s an awkward moment, then Phil says, “Well, I’d better push off, Lucas. Thanks. See you at school on Monday.”

He moves by Matthew without another look and I follow. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

Phil puts on his coat and together we crunch across the gravel parking lot and stop beside his car.

He’s silent, so I have to ask, “Is something wrong?”

“Huh? No,” he denies it. “See you Monday. Good night!” After he drives away, I walk slowly back toward the house, wondering what’s up with him. And wondering if Matthew’s going to yell at me for letting Phil stay late.

Matthew

Apparently Lucas does not know that Phil is gay. Maybe Phil himself doesn’t know that he is gay. Or anyway, I’m pretty sure, from the way the boy’s eyes furtively crawled all over me. Even allowing for my own ego, there was no mistaking the interest in that boy’s eyes.

I suppose I could be wrong. Phil's a drama student, and Lucas has told me that actors closely observe everyone around them all the time. Maybe Phil looks at everybody that way.

Bullshit.

I'm having an internal argument, part of me wanting to warn Lucas that his new friend might be gay. Closeted friends can turn on you if provoked—look what happened at Regency with Lucas' friend in the gym. In an effort to protect himself, the boy outed Lucas to the teacher and to the other students. The same thing could happen with Phil. Maybe I should warn Lucas to be careful.

On the other hand, part of me questions my own motives. If this kid really is gay, surely the two boys will soon figure out what they have in common.

And then what? Am I worried that Phil will out Lucas, or am I worried that Phil and Lucas will ... Christ, I can't even say it. Surely I'm not worried about Lucas finding a boyfriend his own age. I should want that to happen. I really, really should want that for Lucas.

CHAPTER 17



Time Present: Monday, September 19, 1994

Lucas

Drama class is in an uproar by the time Mr. Edwards shows up. When he comes in the door, everyone immediately falls silent.

“Good afternoon, students,” he says casually, setting down a stack of books on his desk and resting his forearms on the podium. Glancing at us over the top of his silver-frame glasses, Mr. Edwards announces, “Today we’ll be doing some exercises in projection, and—”

Before he can finish his sentence, a hand goes up, waving frantically. It’s Tommy Pasco. Mr. Edwards pointedly ignores the waving hand, but Tommy can’t contain himself. “Please, can you tell us about tryouts?”

The teacher scowls. “Come now, ladies and gentlemen, don’t you know that patience is a virtue?”

There’s a chorus of moans and then Mr. Edwards laughs and relents. “All right, all right. I’ll post the cast sheet for *Fiddler*—and you will have exactly five minutes to express your excitement or your disappointment, and then the class will proceed as scheduled. Understood?”

There’s a murmur of voices, then a group intake of breath as Mr. Edwards pulls out a sheet of paper and turns to tack it up on the corkboard behind his desk. Everyone—except me—stands up at once and prepares to rush forward, but Mr. Edwards turns around quickly and holds up a hand to halt the stampede.

“Wait!” he orders, and they all freeze. “Remember,” he admonishes, clearing his throat and intoning dramatically, “there are no small parts, only small actors. Who said that?”

“You did,” Phil answers cheekily. “Just last week.”

“Mr. Covington—ten demerits, for unexcused levity.” Everybody laughs. I’ve already discovered that demerits in Mr. Edwards’ class are a joke. Then the teacher moves aside as everyone pushes forward.

Phil is the first one to see the list, and immediately he beats the air with his fist, shouting, “Woo-woo-woo!” I’m sitting tight in my chair, my hands gripping the armrest. I know exactly what Phil’s excitement means. Mr. Edwards’ voice rises above the hubbub, confirming, “It will come as no surprise to most of you that the lead role of Tevye will be played by none other than last year’s Romeo: Mr. Philip Covington.”

Despite my heart sinking into my shoes, I force a big smile on my face and join the others in yelling congratulations. I tried so hard not to get my hopes up for this role.

Sarah doesn’t whoop, but the huge smile on her face as she turns away from the cast sheet confirms that she got the part of Golde. Phil throws an arm around her shoulders and they laugh happily together. I need to go over there and congratulate them, but I feel like I’m glued to my chair. I tune out all the voices. I know Mr. Edwards is speaking, but I don’t hear him; everything’s a blur of noise around me. I clap when the others clap but I don’t hear what anyone’s saying.

Then Sarah is beside me, she leans over to plant a loud kiss on my cheek. I realize it’s my turn for everyone’s congratulations, but I don’t know what part I got. I’m trying to be a good sport and not let my disappointment show, but I realize that I don’t even care what role I was given. I no longer believe there are no small parts, because I’ve got one.

“Settle down, settle down,” Mr. Edwards is telling us, as he returns to his podium and begins to talk about projection. I’m trying to listen, I really am. But inside, I am bleeding and dying and dead.

When the bell rings at the end of class, I jump about a foot, then quickly bend over to retrieve my book bag from under the desk. I wish with all my heart that Phil and Sarah would just move out of the classroom and leave me behind. I know it’s unworthy, but I’m jealous as fucking hell and I don’t know how to hide it.

“Mr. Denholme, may I see you after class?”

My head comes up and my eyes focus on the teacher. “Uh, okay.”

What I want to do is get the hell away from school till I can pull myself together, but no such luck. I glance sideways and see that Phil and Sarah are hesitating by the door. Mr. Edwards shoos them away.

"Goodbye, children," he says dismissively, and peripherally I can see that they're going out the door. When it closes, I turn to Mr. Edwards and put a very nonchalant look on my face.

"Mr. Denholme, you're disappointed."

"I—no, not really."

"Your disappointment is palpable, so there's no point pretending otherwise." He gives me a sharp look over the top of his glasses. "But it's a fact of life for actors, you know—there will always be parts you want that go to other actors. Even to actors less talented than yourself."

"Phil's not less talented than me." I rush to his defense, clutching the strap of my book bag tight in my clenched fist.

"Your audition was excellent, as I'm sure you must have realized. Your singing," he waves a hand, "was adequate. But your passion for the part came through clearly, and I know you would do a bang-up job as Tevye."

"Then, why?"

"Philip was also excellent. He has a better singing voice, and his physicality is more appropriate for the lead role. Of course," Mr. Edwards adds, "that was not the deciding factor." He drops his voice. "Remember, Lucas, that Philip has paid his dues at this school. This is another fact of life for actors." He leans forward and emphasizes, "Sometimes, it's just not your turn."

"You mean, I'm the new kid on the block type of thing?"

"That's simplistic, but accurate," Mr. Edwards agrees.

"So high school is sort of like real life."

Mr. Edwards barks a laugh, then pretends he was coughing. "Yes, well," he nods back at me, his eyes are twinkling now. "Yes it is, more or less." He begins to gather up his books and shove them into his battered leather briefcase as I turn to go.

"Mr. Denholme." He calls me back, snapping the briefcase closed and giving me an intense look. "It's a cold, cruel world out there. Are you determined on an acting career?"

"Yes," I answer a bit uncertainly. Then I square my shoulders and stand up tall. "Yes, I am."

"Each part is a stepping stone. Learn from the experience, and remember that, in the hands of a good actor, even a small role can be pivotal to your career."

"Thanks, Mr. Edwards," I say sincerely, turning to go. I'm still crushingly disappointed, but maybe I'll feel better later. "Oh!" I stop and turn back abruptly. "Um—what part did I get?"

He doesn't seem surprised that I hadn't been listening in class. "You'll play Perchik, the young student from Kiev. It's a good part, Lucas, something to sink your teeth into."

"Yes. I guess so."

"Make it yours. Never model yourself after another actor in a film or play, bring originality and your own passion to the role. Can you do that?"

"I'll try." I push open the door, then hesitate when I see that Phil and Sarah are waiting in the hall. Pasting on a smile, I move toward them and say heartily, "Wow, congrats you guys, you did it!"

Sarah's wringing her hands. "Oh Lucas, I'm sorry you both can't play Tevye."

Phil is also looking unhappy. "I'm sorry, Lucas."

"Jeez, what a couple of maroons," I joke with them. "You guys got the lead roles, you should be jumping up and down. Besides," I add philosophically, "I've got to pay my dues."

"Is that what that old fart told you just now?" Phil demands, "That's bullshit."

"No, he's right," I contradict. "You've been acting a lot longer than me. And besides, you're going to make a great Tevye!"

"Yeah, let's stop the doom and gloom," Sarah agrees. "Perchik is a good role, too! Let's go have a celebratory Coke."

"How about pizza?" Phil asks slyly, just so Sarah will punch him.

"Ugh," she says. "Don't even mention pizza!"

We all link arms and march down the hall, Sarah in the middle. "Rehearsals start tomorrow," she reminds us. "Or anyway, the read-through and blocking are supposed to begin. We'd better celebrate while we can!"

Phil and I agree, and we all pile into his car. By the time we leave TJ's café and drive to Sarah's house, I'm feeling slightly better; resigned to playing Perchik and anxious to watch *Fiddler* again so I can pay more attention to the actor who plays that role in the film. Mr. Edwards said to come up with my own interpretation, but first I want to see what the other actor did with it. My thoughts are spinning and I'm just able to say good-bye to Sarah and congratulate her again for landing the Golde role, so I don't notice right away that Phil misses the turn for the marina.

"Lucas," he interrupts my thoughts, "let's stop at the beach for a few minutes before we go home."

"The beach? It's kind of cold, isn't it? And dark."

"I don't mean go swimming," he explains patiently. "I mean, just sit and watch the tide come in. That always relaxes me."

"Okay." I love to watch the waves, it relaxes me too. Soon we're parking at Alki Point, we get out and walk down to the beach, moving toward what we've come to think of as our place by the big logs. We don't build a fire, just sit companionably in the darkness, side by side on the biggest log, watching the tide roll in. It's chilly but not really cold. For a change there's no evening mist, the sky is clear and a million stars twinkle overhead.

Phil turns toward me and murmurs, "I'm feeling awfully guilty about the play."

"Don't be stupid," I lean over and bump my shoulder against his. "If I got Tevye, I wouldn't feel guilty at all."

"Yeah, you would."

"Maybe. But I'm okay about it now."

"You sure?" Phil slides closer, puts his arm around my shoulders. "I would never want to hurt you, Lukey," he says softly.

"I—I know that," I answer, a bit breathlessly, looking into his eyes. Our heads are close together, and I gasp when Phil leans even closer and touches his lips to my mouth.

Without thinking—without thinking at all—my mouth opens under his. When our tongues touch, there's a jolt of electricity that makes my whole body jerk, I almost slip backwards off the log. Our heads pull apart sharply, and we're staring into each other's eyes.

"Oh, my God," Phil gasps. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!"

I can't speak, I just stare at him.

"Lucas, don't be mad, okay? But I thought, I sort of thought, that maybe you might be ... gay?"

Still I can't say a word.

"Lucas, are you?" he asks. "Are you, um, gay?"

Swallowing hard, I nod once. "Yes."

"Oh, thank God! I was afraid that you'd kill me, or something."

"How did you know?"

"I didn't know," he says quickly, "I just kind of hoped so, because otherwise, this doesn't make sense."

"What doesn't make sense?"

"That I—that I would feel like this around you." Phil scoots backward a bit on the log.

"Huh?" I'm confused. "Me being gay makes you feel like this?" I frown and insist, "It's not my fault, Phil. I never came on to you."

"Oh, I know," he assures me. "I just mean, I've never had a gay friend before, and I've never felt like this before, so it must be because of you."

Now I'm getting mad. "No, it's not. I didn't turn you gay!"

"I didn't mean that! Oh, I'm just so..." Phil stands up, turns his back to me and stares out over the ocean. "I just don't understand why I would feel this way," he says finally. "I never did before. That's all I mean."

We're both silent for a few moments, then he groans, "Oh, Christ. Does this mean I'm gay?" When I don't answer, he turns toward me again. "Lucas—am I gay too? How do I know if I'm gay?"

"You just know."

"How?"

I'm still angry, though I'm not sure why. "If you want to fuck guys, then you're gay."

Phil says nothing for a moment, then asks, "Have you fucked guys, Lucas?" I nod, though he probably can't see me in the darkness. In a whisper he asks, "What's it like?"

Without waiting for an answer, he returns to the log and sits down close to me again. "What's it like, Lucas?" he whispers, and he's waiting.

We stare at each other as I move my hand, slide it over Phil's leg and slip it between his thighs. He gasps, but doesn't take his eyes from mine. When I gently squeeze, he inhales sharply but keeps staring at me.

"Tell me to stop," I murmur, but he shakes his head, no. I move my fingers to his fly, unzip his jeans. He's hard, and I feel the heat as I slip my hand inside his briefs.

"Tell me to stop," I insist quietly, but all Phil does is moan. Then I slide off the log into the sand, and spread his legs apart. With a final glance at Phil's face—his eyes are closed now—I lower my head and take him into my mouth.

"Oh, God," he groans, "oh, God."

Then my brain shuts off and my body takes over. I don't feel the hard dampness of the sand, the chill breeze off the ocean. I bring him off quickly, shocked by his sweet taste. The only other man I've tasted is Matthew, and I'm surprised to discover that men taste different.

Rubbing the back of my hand over my lips, I stand up and stare down at Phil. He's dropped his head into his hands and he's half-gasping, half-crying. I

want to comfort him, but I'm afraid. Afraid of the repercussions of what I just did.

I've just sucked off a straight boy. What's going to happen now? I turn away quickly and head off across the sand, moving toward the surf. I stop at the water line and stare out over the ocean. Didn't I learn anything from my alleged friend Clancy at Regency High? I want to scream or cry, or curse at the moon hanging low in the sky.

When Phil grabs my shoulder and spins me around, I nearly do scream—I didn't hear his footsteps in the sand. "You okay?"

"Are you mad at me now?" I can't help but ask.

"God, no!" he insists. "Are you mad at me?"

"No, Phil."

"Does this mean I'm gay too? Because I wanted you to do that?"

"I don't know," I answer helplessly. "I could ask Matthew."

"Matthew's that guy you live with. Oh!" He moves sideways and stares. "Is he gay too?" When I nod, he demands, "Is he your boyfriend?"

"No. It's not like that."

Well, that's my first lie to Phil. But it's not really a lie, because Matthew is not my boyfriend. He fucks me sometimes, but he's not in love with me.

"But he's gay? And he knows that you are, too?"

"Yeah."

"Wow." Phil digests this information, then says, "Don't tell him, okay? Don't tell him about this. And you won't tell Sarah, will you?"

"I won't tell anybody."

"No offense," Phil goes on, "but I don't want to be gay. I want to have a normal life, like my parents. I want to get married and have kids, all that regular stuff." He pauses before repeating, "I don't want to be gay."

What can I say to that? "For some of us, it's not a choice."

I keep my voice noncommittal but I'm feeling slightly angry. Definitely angry. Phil is saying that I'm not normal. Maybe I want kids someday, I don't need a wife for that. Gay people have kids too. I turn abruptly away and head back across the sand. Phil falls in behind, and we walk in silence toward the car. We get in and he drives me to the marina.

"Bye." I push open my door and get out.

"See you tomorrow," he calls softly as I hurry across the gravel and through the gate.

I wonder what tomorrow will be like? Will we feel awkward now? Will Sarah notice, will anyone else notice? I'm feeling sick to my stomach when I realize

maybe I'm going to lose my new best friends. I almost want to throw myself into the lake and drown.

But another part of me wants to watch my *Fiddler* tape, so I can practice becoming Perchik, the rabble-rousing student from Kiev. I unlock the door and move inside the houseboat. I guess I'll watch the video now. I can always drown myself later.

CHAPTER 18



Time Present: Monday, September 19, 1994

Matthew

The house is silent and dark when I get home. Lucas has gone out, on a school night, without telling me. And he didn't call me at the office as I'd asked, to let me know the results of his audition. Due to a meeting that just wouldn't end, I'm home later than expected, and exhausted. And I'm annoyed with Lucas—something that's happening more and more lately.

Taking out my temper on the door by shutting it harder than necessary, the sound of the slam echoes throughout the house, confirming its empty state. I feel let-down to find myself alone, and acknowledge the irony that I, who require massive amounts of solitude, am now disappointed not to find my live-in teenage sex fiend making some kind of mess in the living room, with the stereo blaring loud music.

But as I move through the silent living room and enter the hall, I realize that light is shining from under Lucas' door. He's home after all, and I stop to rap lightly on the panels. There's no response, and no sound when I press my ear to the door, so I move into my bedroom, change clothes. I'm hungry, but I was sure Lucas had already eaten, so I didn't stop for takeout.

Coming back into the hall, I try rapping again. When still there's no answer, I push the door open a few inches to be sure he's in there.

He's lying on the floor wearing earphones. His eyes are closed, he must be asleep. I crouch beside him on the floor and gently remove one earphone. "Lucas," I murmur, "anybody home?"

"Huh?" his eyes fly open as he jerks awake. "Oh, hey," he rises to a sitting position, pulling off the earphones and dropping them to the carpet. "You're finally home."

"It's not really late." I stand up again and consult my watch. "Eight-thirty. But if you're tired, you should go to bed."

"I'm not tired," he denies, standing and stretching. "I was reading my boring World History book and it put me to sleep." He plops down on the side of the bed. "I'm starving, did you bring food?"

"No. Call for pizza or something, why don't you? I don't want to go out again."

"You don't like pizza."

"Chinese then. Whatever. Why didn't you eat earlier?"

"Oh," he turns away, looking at the window. "I wasn't hungry earlier."

"Why not?"

Lucas shrugs casually, but I'm onto him. Naturally I can sense his moods after living together for the past three months. "What is it?" When he doesn't answer immediately, I sit on the edge of his bed. "Is it the play? You didn't get a part?"

"Yeah, I did." He looks back at me then, and his sad eyes belie the fake smile he's pasted on his lips. "I got a good part."

"But not the one you wanted." It's a guess, but his demeanor gives it away.

"No," he admits. "But I knew I wouldn't. Phil got it, the lead role. Tevye."

"I'm sorry. I know you're disappointed."

"No," he lies, "Not really."

"I'm sorry," I say again. "You would make a fantastic Tevye."

His eyes lift to mine, searching for the truth. "Really?" When I nod, he sighs. "I thought so, too."

"So, what part did you get?"

"Perchik." Lucas pauses and then, shaking off his ennui, becomes more animated. "He's this student from Kiev, an outcast in the village, and later he goes off to lead a student revolt against the government. It's pretty cool." He grins quickly, but just as suddenly, he's downcast again. "But," he adds tragically, "It's not a very big part. And Perchik doesn't even have his own song."

"Well," I try to be practical, "you were worried about the singing, weren't you? This way you can focus all your attention on the character."

Lucas' eyes light up. "Oh, you're right," he says. "You've put a positive spin on it for me. Thanks, Matthew."

"Wait a minute." I have a thought. "Perchik. Is he the guy played by Paul Glaser in the film version?"

"Yeah," Lucas agrees. "How did you know that? I never heard of him before."

"Oh, God," I roll my eyes and grin. "He was famous in the seventies. He played Starsky on *Starsky and Hutch*, a cop show."

"You had the hots for Paul Glaser?"

That makes me laugh, remembering. "Well," I admit with chagrin, "yes, I did. That was about 1976 or '77, when I first realized I was gay."

"How old were you?"

"Eleven."

"Wow," he marvels, "I'm really slow. I was almost fifteen before I knew for sure."

"There's no timeline," I remind him. "Everybody's different." Then I have an idea. "Hey, maybe we can rent videos of some of those old shows? If you're interested, I'll check it out?" Lucas nods eagerly and I go on, "The guys who played *Starsky and Hutch* became gay icons. There were plenty of boys having wet dreams about them in those days."

I hear Lucas' stomach growl, and we both laugh. "Let's order dinner," I say, and we move to the kitchen.

Lucas

Matthew seems tired. I suggest he go take a shower while we wait for the restaurant delivery, it'll refresh him. He agrees and heads for his bedroom, but pauses in the kitchen doorway. "Want to come with me?" he asks off-handedly, like he doesn't care one way or the other.

"No, thanks. I need to finish reading a chapter of my Uta Hagen drama text before bed."

He almost seems disappointed, but I know that must be my imagination. Or wishful thinking.

The thing is, I'm upset about what happened with Phil at the beach. I can't stop worrying that he's going to tell everybody. Even though he said he's not mad, what if he changes his mind later? What if he tells Sarah? What if he tells his parents what I did?

Oh God, I have a pain in my stomach again. I had it when I got home tonight, but it went away for a while. Now it's back.

I wish I could talk to Matthew about what happened, but Phil swore me to secrecy. Besides, I'm embarrassed to admit that I did something so stupid, sucking off a straight boy. If Matthew knew, maybe he'd be angry.

I also feel guilty. That's even dumber than being embarrassed, because I don't think Matthew cares if I have sex with other guys—he does it all the time. At least, he does it sometimes, though he hasn't brought guys home for a while. But I know when he's going out to have sex, because he puts on his fuck-clothes. Tight jeans and no underwear. I hate those nights when he leaves in his fuck-clothes and stays out late.

He doesn't invite me into his bed very often now, not like he did when I first started living here. He's probably tired of me.

God, I feel sick to my stomach.

In a few minutes, Matthew's back in the kitchen. He's pulled on a pair of sweat pants and rubs his wet head with a towel. "That was a great idea," he says. "I feel a lot better. Energized. And," he grins as he snaps the towel at me, "I'm as hungry as a teenager!"

I laugh like he wants, but not even the sight of his beautiful body damp and glistening, nearly naked, can make my stomach stop hurting. Then the doorbell rings and Matthew motions for me to answer it, pointing at the towel drawer so I'll take a handful of cash to pay the delivery guy. When I return, he grabs the take-out bag and plops it down on the counter. "Mmm, smells good, doesn't it?" he asks cheerfully as he pulls open one of the boxes.

The sight and smell of mu-shu pork makes my stomach turn over. I slap a hand to my mouth and move quickly past Matthew, hurrying to his bathroom. Barely in time to lift the lid, I almost fall on the floor as my stomach clenches one last time before I'm hunched over the toilet, hurling into the bowl.

Matthew is right behind me. He slides an arm around my chest and presses his other hand to my forehead, just in time to hang onto me before the next spasm hits; I gag and hurl again. Nothing much is coming up, which is scary, till I realize that I haven't eaten for hours, not since lunch time.

"You're okay," he murmurs soothingly. "Get it up, get rid of it, you'll feel better."

"Oh," I moan, feeling dizzy. I collapse backward against Matthew, losing my footing. He's got me though, he holds on and gently lowers me to the floor. He crouches beside me and holds on tight. Weakly I lean sideways, rest my hot cheek against the cool tile and close my eyes. "Oh," I moan again.

"Can you make it to the bed? You need to lie down before you pass out."

"I don't know." I cough, my throat hurts from vomiting.

"Come on." He helps me to my feet, keeps an arm around my shoulders and leads me from the bathroom. Gently pushing me down on the side of his bed, Matthew asks, "Do you feel faint?"

"I'm okay. Just shaky. Oh," I can't help groaning, "my stomach hurts."

Matthew sits beside me and rubs one hand very gently on my stomach in soothing circular motions, doing the same with his other hand on my back.

"Poor kid," he commiserates. "Probably you've got the flu." He feels my forehead with the back of his hand. "You're flushed," he concludes, "but I don't think you have a temperature."

"It's not flu," I confirm, though I don't want to say more than that.

But Matthew starts ragging on me. "Then what?" When I don't answer, don't look at him, Matthew gives my shoulders a gentle shake. "What is it, Lukey?"

My eyes fly to his face. "You never called me that before."

"Sorry."

"No, it's nice."

"Then tell me, Lukey-Luke, what made you puke-puke?"

I laugh a little at his silly rhyme, in spite of feeling like shit. And I really, really don't want to tell him.

He figures that out, and stops joking. "If something's wrong," he says seriously, "you need to tell me. I won't pry into your business, but I'm here for you, if you need to talk about something."

"Oh," I moan, bending over and grabbing my stomach again. "But I promised not to tell you."

"Promised whom?"

Turning my face away, feeling ashamed of myself for not keeping the secret, I whisper, "Phil."

"Were you guys drinking again?" he guesses. "Doing drugs?"

"No, no."

"Did you steal something? Smash up his car?"

"No."

"Jesus Christ," he's losing patience. "Stop the Twenty Questions already and just tell me."

I'm shocked when I hear myself blurt it right out. "I blew him. On the beach. Now I'm scared!"

"Oh!" Matthew exclaims, "is that all? I thought you killed somebody."

"It's not funny!"

"And I'm not laughing, so cool the hysterics." He stands up, pulls me to my feet to face him. "See? No laughter. Now tell me why having sex with another boy makes you throw up?"

"You don't understand!" I pull away and back off. "He's not gay! Phil is straight! And now I'm scared that he'll tell everybody."

"What makes you think he's straight?"

"He said so!"

"Okay," Matthew nods, though I can tell by his face that he's not convinced. "But then, why do you think a straight boy is going to tell all his friends that he let another boy blow him?"

"Because Clancy did, at Regency, remember? I mean," I add quickly, "I never touched Clancy, but when he saw you and me kissing in the parking lot, he told everybody!"

"Lucas, think for a moment. Why would Phil tell? Did he say he would?"

"No, he promised he wouldn't, we swore each other to secrecy. But what if he does?"

Matthew asks seriously, "And what if he does? You're not the same boy who was outed at Regency. You've matured, you've grown up a great deal these past few months. And most importantly, you're not alone now. If something happens at school, I've got your back. That is my promise."

Looking into his eyes, I feel my shoulders relax.

"I—forgot," I say then. "I forgot for a minute that you're looking out for me."

Matthew pulls me into his arms and hugs me tight. "Yeah," he murmurs in my ear, "I'm here for you. Okay?"

"Okay. Thanks."

He holds me close for a couple minutes, then asks, "How's the tummy?"

"Better. But I don't want Chinese food."

"Chicken soup, maybe some toast. Then early to bed. Oh, God," Matthew moans, "I sound just like Grandma." He lets me loose but grabs my hand and pulls me behind him down the hall.

Sometimes Matthew mentions his grandparents, but never his mom and dad. I've tried to ask about his family, but he always shuts me up. I don't try tonight; I'm too exhausted to think about anything but my stomach and school tomorrow and what Phil might do. I guess Matthew's right, I don't think Phil will say anything to Sarah and the others. I can't help worrying anyway.

Very kindly Matthew puts away the Chinese food without eating any. He can tell the smell bothers me. Instead he fixes two cans of chicken-rice soup, and sits beside me at the kitchen island while we eat it from thick china cups. He takes our empty cups to the sink and rinses them, then turns around and lounges against the counter.

"So," he says lazily, "how was it? Sex with another boy."

I can feel my cheeks flushing and I have to look away.

"That was your first time, wasn't it?" he asks. I nod but still can't look at him.

"Did he like it?" When I shrug, Matthew asks, "Did he come?"

"Yeah," I admit, glancing at his face to see if he's making fun of me, but he's not laughing. "Really fast," I add. "Worse than me."

"Coming quickly is no sin for a teenager." When I say nothing more, he asks, "Did you like it too?"

"Yes and no." I'm getting more relaxed. Matthew is not being judgmental, I should have known he wouldn't be. "Mostly I couldn't believe I was doing it."

"Did you use a condom?"

"For a blow job?"

"Some people do. It's safer. Have you had safe-sex instruction in school?"

"Yeah," I grimace. "We had to put a condom on a banana."

Matthew smiles and leans his folded arms on the counter, moving his face close to mine. He gives me a look that I've learned means, "Pay attention."

"Start carrying a condom in your wallet now—always be prepared. If you don't want to use it for sucking, at least get a good look at the guy's cock to be sure there's no visible sores. And no sucking if you have sores in your mouth or on your lips. It's probably safe to swallow, but 'if in doubt, spit it out.' Did you swallow?"

"Yeah," I nod, feeling my face redden again. "He tasted different." When Matthew raises his eyebrows, I elaborate. "Sweet. Not like you."

"Ha," he pretends to be insulted. "So what am I, sour?"

He knows what he tastes like, I'm not going to remind him. I just grin and say, "Yeah, like a pickle. A kosher dill."

"I'm kosher all right," he agrees, "though I'm surprised my parents bothered to have me circumcised. It doesn't seem like something they'd do."

"Why?" I dare to let my curiosity show, though at first he just stares at me. I hold my breath, and finally he answers.

"They were religious fanatics. They turned me over to my grandparents to raise, then went to the mountain."

“What mountain?”

“I don’t know. Someplace in South America.” Abruptly he stops talking. Standing up straight, he turns his back, opens the refrigerator, and stares inside.

That was his way to end the conversation. I know I should shut up, he’s very touchy about his family, and now I have a clue why. “Your grandparents must have loved you a lot,” I hazard a guess, “to raise you when your parents left?”

“Yeah,” he agrees, “they were peachy-keen. Now it’s bed time. Don’t forget to brush your teeth and put on your jammies. See you tomorrow.”

He still hasn’t turned from the fridge, so I give up. “Okay,” I say to his back, “goodnight. And thanks.”

He glances over his shoulder and asks, “For what?”

“For taking care of me tonight. And everything.”

“Mmm-hmm. Good night.” He goes back to staring into the refrigerator, and I hop off the stool, move down the hall to my room.

Matthew

I always knew that Lucas would have sex with other boys, so I shouldn’t be surprised to learn that something’s started between him and his friend Phil, the boy my gaydar already told me is one of us. Just because that boy’s in denial doesn’t change the fact that now that he’s made the first move, he’ll probably come out of his closet—roaring out, slipping out slowly, or going back and forth. Like I told Lucas, everybody’s different.

I’m not particularly worried that this kid is going to out Lucas. It’s a different situation than what happened at Regency. But if I’m not worried about the repercussions of his first sex act with another boy, why is it preying on my mind, keeping me awake?

Surely I’m not feeling jealous again? Christ, that would be insanely stupid, on many counts. First off, Lucas is just a temporary visitor here. He’s with me only till he’s ready to spread his wings and fly away, make a life for himself totally separate and apart from me.

Secondly, if by some absurdity I’ve grown attached to this boy, probably that’s just from a sense of obligation, or empathy, or something completely ordinary like that. It sure as fuck is nothing like “love,” that ludicrously romantic excuse people use to become proprietary toward the object of their affection. Love is an excuse people use to jerk each other around. As if saying “I love you” gives someone the right to make impossible demands—to demand that

you fulfill all of their needs. And then, when you don't live up to their expectations, they disappear, leaving a fucking gaping hole in your life.

Time Past: December 1991

It's been three days since Dean walked out, and each evening I enter the house expecting him to return. He'll tell me that he's changed his mind. He'll ask me to take him back.

I have not decided how I'm going to handle that first meeting. The question is not whether I'll take him back—I've acknowledged to myself how much I miss him. No, the question is: Will I now have to concede to some of his demands, or will he agree to maintain the parameters of our open relationship?

Though I think I'm prepared to see Dean in the house again, when I open the door just now and discover him standing in the living room staring out the window, I'm momentarily frozen in place. Quickly recovering my equanimity, I close the door and walk in. Deciding to let him make the first move, I clear my throat and murmur, "Hello, Dean."

I didn't intend to smile at him, but I feel my mouth curving up in silent welcome, despite my intention to remain aloof. I hear myself adding, "It's good to see you."

Turning from the window, Dean coolly announces, "I'm not staying." Immediately dispelling any illusions I might have of reconciliation, he adds tonelessly, "I've just come for the rest of my things, and to give you my forwarding address. It seemed cowardly not to do that in person."

I feel the smile die on my lips, though I try to ignore the crushing disappointment I'm feeling. Turning away so he can't see my face, I force myself to carelessly mutter, "Whatever. You could have left me a note."

"That seemed cowardly," he repeats, falling in behind me as I stride into the kitchen.

Opening the refrigerator, I pull out a bottle of apple juice, twist off the cap and take a swig. What I really want is a shot of whiskey, but I won't drink in front of him. I won't let Dean see how much this meeting has upset me.

"Do you imagine I care about that?" I drawl, pleased that my voice is not giving anything away. The juice is cold, icy cold, its temperature matching the blood in my veins.

“No,” Dean agrees. “No, I don’t suppose you give a damn one way or the other.” He pauses, then adds, “You know, I always felt like there was no room in your home for me. No room in your life for me.”

“You’re not going to get maudlin, are you?” I inquire languidly. “Spare me the drama.”

Without another word, Dean turns away. I listen to his footsteps as he goes down the hall, I can tell when he enters my study. Probably he’s writing his new address on a notepad on my desk. His footsteps come back again, but he doesn’t enter the kitchen. He passes by without hesitation, and I hear the front door open and close. The sound of the closing door echoes in the sudden stillness.

Time Present: Monday, September 19, 1994

Groaning, I roll over and clutch my pillow, remembering how I felt after Dean walked out. At the time, I convinced myself I was glad. My life could be entirely my own again—much easier, thinking only of myself. That conclusion kept me going through the loneliness and despair that nearly sunk me the first few months after he left. I drank a lot more, took a lot more drugs, and nearly fucked myself up at work, coming in hung over, acting like a complete asshole to everyone around me.

In the end, it was easier to move away than try to make amends, and I chose Seattle to make a new start, for lots of reasons. The proximity to my grandparents in Spokane, just three hundred miles away, seemed like a coincidence, but now I can admit that I did feel a weird kind of pull toward home. Whatever the fuck “home” had come to mean after my unhappy growing-up years.

Seattle was immediately a good fit. I enjoy the climate, despite frequent rainfall and damp winters, and I’ve been able to fulfill my desire to live on the water by buying this houseboat. I finally feel like I’ve settled down for good.

My new office is also a good fit. I came in as a junior partner and I’m on my way up the ladder. The gay ghetto is small here, but encompasses enough bars, clubs and baths to provide plenty of sexual recreation. I’ve made a few friends like Patrick and Dr. Jennifer. My houseboat is adequate for my needs until I design and build a bigger house to replace this one, and the “coincidental” proximity to Spokane has allowed me to keep an eye on my grandparents. With one glaring exception.

Christ, I wish I could go to sleep. I’m tempted to get up and have a drink, but I know only too well where that can lead. I’m no alcoholic, but I’ve learned

the hard way that solace doesn't lie in the bottom of a bottle of whiskey. Besides, if I get up, I might wake Lucas, and he doesn't need to find me passed out on the deck in the morning.

Speak of the devil, here he comes now. I can sense him standing just inside the door, though I didn't hear it open. With my eyes resolutely closed, I feel him move slowly forward across the carpet. I'll ignore him. He'll give up and go back to bed.

I'm annoyed at myself when I open my eyes. Lucas' pale skin glistens in the darkness as he hovers near the bed. Then I remember that he was sick earlier. Maybe he needs me again. So instead of barking at him, I speak gently. "You okay?"

"Yes. Mostly."

When he doesn't go on, I prod, "Mostly?"

"I can't sleep. I thought maybe I could sleep in your bed?"

Reluctantly I lift the covers and invite him in.

Reluctantly? Who am I kidding?

Lucas slips in beside me. He's cold, so I pull him into my arms and feel him shiver slightly. I also feel the enormous boner confined inside his tight white briefs, pressing hard against my thigh.

"Hmm," I murmur, "I think you're just horny because your boyfriend didn't get you off."

Lucas gasps, "He is not my boyfriend!"

"Shh," I laugh gently. "I'm just teasing. But you are horny." I move my hand down to caress Lucas' cock, and he shivers again.

"I'm always horny," he says simply. "But you don't have to fuck me, if you don't want to."

"What a relief—I don't have to fuck you!" Then I lower my voice and whisper, "But what if I want to? What then?"

Lucas laughs and slides his arms around my neck, pressing the length of his body against mine. His lips tickle my skin as he whispers his answer against my shoulder: "Well then, if you want to, I guess you can."

CHAPTER 19



Time Present: Tuesday, September 20, 1994

Lucas

Phil's been driving Sarah and me to school every day, but after what happened on the beach last night, I wasn't sure he'd show up this morning. But he's here on time and he's alone. Since I live closer than Sarah, he always comes here first. I get into the car and murmur "Hey," wondering if I should say something about last night, or if he will, or what?

I couldn't eat breakfast, I was afraid of throwing up if things went wrong. Phil just says, "Hey" all casual, and drives out of the parking lot. We don't speak for a few minutes, then he turns onto a side street and pulls over, parks by the curb. I turn toward him, wondering what's coming next.

"Lucas," he says, swinging his head to the side to look me in the eye. "I had a lot of time to think last night, I couldn't sleep very good," he begins.

"Me either."

"Yeah, well, anyway, you know that we are true friends, right?" He doesn't wait for me to answer, just hurries on. "The thing is, we are true buddies and I want for us to always be. Always! Only ..." He stops for a moment, then hurries on. "The thing is, I'm okay with you being gay—I mean, seriously."

All I can do is wait.

"But see," he goes on in a rush, "Even though I sort-of liked what—what you did last night, it's just not for me. Being gay, I mean. See?"

"I guess." I fold my arms over my chest.

"I heard what you said," he goes on. "I mean, about it not being a choice for some people. But I think that for me, it is a choice. And I don't want to choose it."

What can I say to that?

Quickly he adds, "There's nothing wrong with it! Being gay. I'm totally cool about that, for you and your Matthew guy, and anybody really. But it—it makes life more complicated, you know? Like, what about my parents? They're old, and I'm their youngest child, they'd probably die or something, if they thought I was gay. You know?"

"Yeah." How can I argue with that, since my own dad nearly killed me when he found out that I'm gay?

Phil is still talking. "And you can't be, like, totally honest with people because you never know if they'll like you or not."

"I'm honest," I can't help contradicting. "I don't tell everybody, because it's nobody's business, but I wouldn't lie about it either. And Matthew is honest too—they know at his work. His bosses are cool with it."

"He's an architect! What does it matter if an architect is gay? But I want to be an actor, and—I'm sorry, Lucas, but it does matter if an actor is gay. It shouldn't!" he adds earnestly, "but it really does. You know that, right?"

I have to turn my head and look out the windshield. "Is that why I didn't get the part of Tevye?" I can't help asking. "You think the teacher knows I'm gay?"

Phil laughs then and I swing my head back again, surprised when he says, "Mr. Edwards is gay, too, Lucas, didn't you know? He lives with some guy, everybody's always whispering about him."

"Oh." I feel stupid. "I mean, I wondered, but ... are you sure?"

"Yeah! Well, I think so. Everybody says so."

We're both silent, thinking about Mr. Edwards. "See?" Phil emphasizes, "that's what I mean. People gossip about you if you're gay. Maybe he's just an acting teacher instead of a real actor because of it. Maybe nobody wanted to put him in a film."

I'm starting to feel sick again. I'm glad I didn't eat breakfast.

"Oh," Phil reaches across the seat and punches my shoulder. "I'm saying this shit all wrong. I know you'll be a big famous actor someday, we both will. But you'll probably have to pretend to be normal—umm, straight, if you want to get good roles in films. Like what's-his-name that died, Rock Hudson."

I have nothing to say. I have to concentrate on not throwing up.

Phil can tell that I'm upset. He leans toward me and says softly, "Lukey, I'm sorry, I'm really fucking this up. All I meant to say is, I don't want to be gay,

and I'm not going to be. So can we just forget about what happened last night? Can we just go back to being tight friends, you and me and Sarah?"

I nod, still not looking at him. He waits for a moment, then I hear him sigh before starting the car. We don't speak again till we get to Sarah's house. He beeps the horn once, and when Sarah hurries to the car, I jump out and let her get in the middle.

"Hey," we all say, Phil and I pretending to be cheerful to match Sarah's mood, and we talk about rehearsals that are going to begin after school today.

I'm glad Phil wants to still be friends—besides everything else, I really like him. I like Sarah a lot too. I don't want to lose this great thing we've got going, all because of a blow-job on the beach. If Phil can choose not to be gay, I guess that's his business. Maybe he's luckier than me, because for me it's not a choice.

It takes all my acting skill to hide my sad and confused feelings as I say goodbye to Phil and Sarah, and we make plans to meet up at lunchtime. I waste most of my first period English class brooding about Fate and how fucking hard Life can be.

By noon, I'm totally starving since I skipped breakfast. Lunch is like always, we sit with the other drama students in the cafeteria. I'm starting to look forward to our first rehearsal this afternoon.

We meet at three-fifteen on the stage, everyone dragging chairs to form a circle. Mr. Edwards gives us photocopied scripts and tells us to mark our character's dialogue. I'm concentrating on everything he's saying, but I can't help stealing little glances at him, looking for hints that he is gay. He's very sarcastic but in a funny way; he wears an ascot under his shirt; and he has nice shoes. Other than that, I don't see any clues that would make anybody think that Mr. Edwards is gay.

Later, when Phil drops me at home, it's getting dark and lights are on in the house. Matthew's home early for a change. But he greets me with a menacing frown and blasts me the minute I walk in the door.

Matthew

"Please tell me," I rip into Lucas acidly, "that you were in a ten-car accident and barely escaped with your life. Or that a dozen murderers invaded the high school and were holding everyone hostage for the past three hours."

"Huh?"

"You're late, Lucas, and you didn't call me. I want to hear a fucking good excuse, for Christ's sake."

He opens his mouth to speak but I hold up a hand to forestall him. "I told you last night, you are NOT to go out on a school night. I don't enjoy playing this fucking supervisor routine, and I refuse to keep tabs on you! You will cooperate with my rules or," I pause, then finish lamely, "or else."

Christ, no wonder parents say such stupid things, I can't think of any alternative to "or else."

"I wasn't out!" Lucas exclaims, his face turning red with anger that matches my own. "Jesus, Matthew, I wasn't out! I was at school."

"Till six-fucking-thirty? Bullshit."

"It's not bullshit!" Lucas throws his backpack to the floor. "We had rehearsal after school, for the play I'm in, remember?"

"Oh." I'm brought up abruptly. "I didn't know rehearsals started so soon," I explain, then I'm angry again. "You couldn't have told me that? Couldn't your little pea-brain wrap around the fact that maybe I'd be worried?"

Lucas' mouth turns down mutinously. "You never get home till six-thirty or seven, Matthew, I didn't think you'd be home yet."

"Not never," I correct him, though I guess he's right in a way. I've been coming home pretty late the past few weeks. But after what happened last night, I wasted a lot of time today thinking about Lucas. I knew he was going to face his friend Phil, and I worried that maybe Phil would out him after all.

After thinking about Lucas all day, to come home to a dark, empty house had just blown the lid off the simmering concern that had been nagging me.

Immediately I move forward, reach for Lucas and pull him into my arms. He struggles for a moment, but gives it up when I say, "Christ, I'm sorry I bit your head off, Lukey. I was worried. Just tell me next time, if your schedule changes, okay?"

Relaxing against me, I feel Lucas nod. "Okay. I'm sorry too."

"Have you eaten?" I pull away to ask. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving!" he confirms, which tells me everything I need to know: Phil didn't out him at school, classes went okay, and he's feeling better about his role in the play.

"Me, too." I realize that I am also starving, I didn't eat lunch today. Not because I was worrying; just busy. "Let's change our clothes and see if we can throw something together. How about eggs and toast?"

"Yum," Lucas agrees. "I can eat a dozen eggs and a whole loaf of bread!"

That would be a joke coming from most people; for Lucas, it may be the plain truth. Whoever said that two can live as cheaply as one must never have fed a hungry teenager.

Together we prepare our humble meal, a routine we've repeated many times in the past few months. I'm the omelet chef and Lucas is in charge of making toast and setting the kitchen island where we sit on the stools to eat. When we're settled and munching away, I ask Lucas about his day. While at first he seems forthcoming, I sense an undercurrent of something-or-other that he's not sharing.

"So tell me," I keep it casual, "how'd it go with Phil today? Was it awkward or uncomfortable?"

"Umm," Lucas finishes chewing a bite and swallows, but keeps looking at the toast in his hand. "It was okay. He wasn't mad at me."

"Why should he be mad? I assume he willingly stuck his cock in your mouth."

Still keeping his eyes averted, Lucas nods. "I guess. But it was sort of a mistake."

"A mistake," I repeat.

Yeah, I remember a few straight boys who made that kind of "mistake" with me when I was in college. Curious boys, made brave by liquor or pot, wanting to see "what it's like," with no strings attached.

Since Lucas seems reluctant to say more, I decide to let it go, only asking, "Do you think it will affect your friendship?"

"I don't know. I guess not, everything was pretty normal today, after we picked up Sarah. Phil said he wants us to always be tight friends."

"Good." I know how important these new friendships are to Lucas. No point putting doubts in his head about Phil's motives, or what I perceive to be the other boy's sexual orientation.

After washing up our few dishes, I say lightly, "I'm going to read the paper and check out a schematic, but I'm not staying up late. When you finish your homework, maybe you'd like to come to bed with me tonight?"

I'm watching Lucas' profile and I see him catch his breath and smile. "Oh, okay," he murmurs casually, but I can tell that he's eager all right.

I've been limiting the times I allow myself to invite Lucas into my bed. For lots of reasons. Sometimes I remember how very young he is, and that I'm the first man with whom he's been intimate; I'm reluctant to take advantage of Lucas' inexperience. And other times I wonder just how attached to this boy I want to let myself get.

Lucas is no longer merely an occasional fuck. He's a young man I've accidentally come to care about, more than I ever would have imagined. For his

sake, and for my own, I don't want to create any false sense of codependency between us.

Lucas

I can't help feeling rejected by Phil—not just because I'm gay, but because I can't have the same future as him. He said there aren't any famous gay actors and I guess he's right, I can't think of any. I want an acting career, but I don't care about being famous, so I wasn't really worried that being gay would make a difference. But Phil pointed out that directors don't put gay actors into films, period. Maybe I'm wasting my time.

I've been so fucking depressed all day, I could hardly concentrate on anything.

Sleeping with Matthew makes me feel better. And he really does let me sleep with him tonight. Instead of sending me off to my room afterwards, Matthew murmurs, "Stay," and I relax in bed beside him, stretching out my legs and twining them between Matthew's legs. It feels so good to lie close to him, my face pressed into his shoulder. Sometimes in moments like this, I let myself imagine that someday, Matthew will fall in love with me.

I know that will never really happen, Matthew does not believe in love. But sometimes I pretend that he does.

Time Present: Monday, October 3, 1994

Matthew

When the call comes, I'm reminded of that spring day when Lucas phoned me from the cafe, when his father beat him up and kicked him out. But the boy on the phone today is not the same Lucas, though he's sounding pretty desperate, all the while pretending to be calm.

"I just sort of hoped that you were free to pick me up? It doesn't matter," he adds quickly, "if you can't, it's okay." I can hear that he's breathing fast and I imagine his fingers tightly gripping the phone.

"Lucas," I say smoothly, though I feel vaguely panicky myself, "are you all right? I can be there in twenty-thirty minutes, can you hold on till then?"

"Oh," he says breathlessly, "I—yeah. I think so. Or maybe you can just tell them to let me go home?"

"Tell whom?" I'm confused; Lucas said he was calling from school.

“Matthew,” Lucas lowers his voice, I can barely hear him. “They sent me to the fucking nurse. She wants to give me an aspirin or something! Aspirin!”

His voice rises and I murmur, “Shh, shh, it’s okay,” though I have no idea what’s going on. “Can you just kick back and relax for a few minutes, until I get there? Can you do that, Lukey?”

“Oh,” he groans, “Don’t call me that. Not now. Not right this minute, okay?”

“Okay,” I agree soothingly. “I’ll be there in just a little while. Will you be okay until then?”

“Yeah. Yes. Well, I have to, don’t I?”

“Bye for now, I’ll see you in a few.” When he says nothing, I repeat, “Okay?”

“Yeah. Bye, Matthew.” And the phone is disconnected.

Confused and worried, I tell Kathryn to cancel my afternoon appointments, grab my briefcase and I’m out of the office at a near-run. The elevator arrives and I ride all the way to the lobby with my thumb on the “down” button, jabbing it anxiously. Then I’m moving quickly through the parking garage, throwing myself into the Mercedes and burning rubber onto the street, driving as quickly as possible toward West Seattle High.

The door to the nurse’s office has a frosted glass window and it’s locked. I rap impatiently and the door is pulled open to reveal a middle-aged black woman with a very large bosom in a tight-fitting white uniform. “Mr. Morgan?” she guesses, and pulls the door open wide enough for me to enter.

Lucas is sitting on a large wooden chair. He leaps to his feet when he sees me and exclaims, “Matthew! Let’s get the fuck out of here!”

“Hold on,” interrupts the nurse, pointing at the chair. “Sit down for a minute.” She lowers her head and gives him a sergeant-major stare until he obeys, which he does with obvious reluctance.

“Now,” the nurse turns toward me again and says, “you’re Lucas’ guardian?”

“Yes,” I answer quickly, waving at Lucas to shut up when he begins his familiar emancipation spiel. It will be easier to pry him away from the nurse if she can turn him over to a responsible adult. “Is Lucas sick, or is he in trouble?”

“Neither!” Lucas exclaims loudly, but the nurse ignores him and answers, “He had a problem in one of his classes today.”

“What kind of problem?”

“It was nothing,” Lucas mumbles, but he turns his head away and won’t meet my eyes.

“An emotional outburst,” the nurse explains. “Shouting and throwing furniture. Behavior which is considered by school policy to make Lucas a danger to himself and others. He was brought here until he could settle down and control himself.”

“Okay,” I take a deep breath, glancing again at Lucas, who still won’t meet my eyes. “I’m sorry about the trouble. I’ll discuss this behavior with Lucas at home. Do I need to sign some kind of paper, to get him released into my care?”

The nurse picks up a clipboard from her desk and hands it to me; there’s a form for me to read and sign. I scan it briefly and then take a pen from inside my jacket and sign on the dotted line. It seems pretty standard: I acknowledge that I’ll take responsibility for Lucas, and I understand future incidents may result in disciplinary action. It seems that he is off the hook for a first offense. There’s a place for Lucas to sign, so I move toward his chair and hand him the clipboard.

“Sign at the bottom,” I tell him.

“No. I didn’t do anything wrong. I’m not signing any damn thing.”

“Sign the paper,” I insist. “It’s not a confession to murder. It just says you’re aware that your behavior was unacceptable and you promise not to do it again.”

“All I did was throw a fucking chair at the wall,” he mutters. Then he looks up at me and I see utter misery in his eyes.

Gentling my voice, I squat down beside Lucas’ chair and softly explain, “Read the form. It doesn’t say you threw a chair, it just says that you know your behavior was unacceptable.” When he looks away without responding, I ask, “Lucas, was your behavior unacceptable?”

With a world-weary sigh, he mutters, “I guess.”

Standing up again, I hand him my pen. “Sign the form.” He takes the pen and writes something, then signs his name. Taking the clipboard from him, I see that he has written, “Signed under duress.” He’s a lawyer’s kid all right.

“Thank you, Mrs.—?” I give the nurse a smile as I hand her the clipboard.

“Mrs. Williams. You’re welcome. And Lucas,” she nods her head at him, “you can go now. If you need to stay home tomorrow, call the office first thing in the morning.”

Without answering her, Lucas stands up and moves stiffly to the door, grasps the knob and pulls it open roughly. I grab onto the door to keep it from banging against the wall, and follow as he hurries through the hallway and out the main portal.

“Over here,” I direct him to the car. Once we’re inside and buckling up, I assure him, “Whatever it is, we’ll work it out. Okay?”

Lucas nods, but I can tell that he’s too emotional to speak. “Let’s wait till we get home to talk,” I suggest. He turns his head to stare out the side window. I decide to leave him alone, let him get his feelings under control, and we drive home in silence.

He’s calmer by the time we reach the marina. Once inside the house, I take Lucas’ backpack and drop it to the floor, then lead him to the sofa, pull him down beside me on the cushions. “Shall we talk now?”

He heaves a heavy sigh, like the weight of the world is resting on his young shoulders. “Just start at the beginning,” I urge. “Something upset you, you reacted a bit strongly in class, and you ended up in the nurse’s office. Relax now, and tell me what happened.”

“I don’t really know, exactly,” he begins, hunching forward and clasping his hands between his knees.

“Okay,” I’m being as patient as possible, not a trait for which I am famous. “Start with breakfast. You were running a bit late, you grabbed a toaster pastry and ran out the door when Phil beeped his horn.”

“Yeah.”

“Were things okay with Phil?” I prod. “You guys argue, or anything?”

“No. It was normal. We picked up Sarah, drove to school. It was a normal day.”

“Until ...?”

“Oh,” Lucas grimaces. “It started at lunch time. Everybody was talking and joking, like always. Then somebody asked who-all was going to the dance on Friday.” He glances at me and explains, “There’s a stupid theme dance every term. This one is called ‘Carrousel’ or something dopey like that.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“So anyway,” he continues, “kids were asking who was going. And then somebody asked Phil, was he going, and he says yeah. And I sort-of laughed, so did Sarah, because really, we don’t believe in those things, us three. We’ve talked about it, you know? How stupid these teenage ritual things are.” Lucas curls his lip in derision.

I nod, waiting.

“So then Sarah pokes her elbow into Phil and teases, ‘As if you’d be caught dead at a school dance,’ and she laughed, and I laughed, but Phil, he didn’t laugh. He just looked at us and says, totally serious, ‘Well, I’m going to this one.’ Sarah throws a slice of apple at him and says, ‘How radical, Philip Cov-

ington crashes a party.' Then Phil announces, 'For your information, I am not crashing the party, I have a date.' And he was serious."

Lucas looks at me and I see the unhappiness on his face, and I don't know what to say. So Phil really is straight, or else he's using some girl to pretend to be.

"Sarah and I were, like, amazed. We just stared at him. Sarah still thinks he's joking, so he tells her, 'I'm taking Kelly Chesterfield.' I glance at Sarah and realize—and I should've known all along—but suddenly I realize that she likes Phil. Not just in our friends-way, but in a girlfriend way. They've known each other forever, and he never asked her out once. I'm sitting next to her, and I can feel how upset she is, but she's making herself smile and laugh, telling him he should buy a tux and rent a limo, to impress this other girl.

"Then Sarah turns to me, puts her arm around my neck, and says, 'Oh, Lucas, let's you and me go to this dance, too. I always wanted to go out with you!' And Matthew," Lucas' eyes are tragic, "I almost pissed my pants, because she was serious! She kisses my cheek and asks, 'Lucas, do you want to?' and everybody's staring, and I don't know what to say. There's this dead silence at our table, and then Phil says, 'Why don't we double date?' Then I really did almost piss my pants!"

Lucas takes a deep breath. "Finally I can talk, and I remind myself that I'm an actor. I smile and say, 'Sure, that sounds like fun.' And then I pretend that I have to go to my next class early, to talk to the teacher."

I'm sorry that Lucas is upset about Phil, yet for the life of me, I can't see what about this melodrama caused him to run wild and throw furniture. But I bide my time and just nod understandingly, though my patience, I must admit, is wearing pretty fucking thin.

Lucas is silent for a moment, so I prod, "And then—?"

"Oh," he clears his throat. "Then, everything was okay. I mean, it's not such a big deal, and I knew that later I could talk Sarah out of going to the dance. So I was all right before my last class, drama. But then Mr. Edwards had us do this exercise, a method-acting thing called 'sense memory.' You focus on an object and explore it with all your five senses. It's pretty basic stuff, I've done it on my own lots of times. I don't know why this time it got so...."

His voice trails off and I wait for a moment.

"Explain this exercise," I urge him, "I don't understand."

"Okay. We drag our chairs far apart so each of us is alone, and then we choose something to focus on. Mr. Edwards told us to imagine that we are holding a cup of coffee, and we're supposed to focus on it, noticing the feel of

the cup in our hands, the smell and taste of the coffee, everything associated with holding the cup."

I'm totally in the dark, but I curtail my impatience and let Lucas tell his story.

"Sometimes, Mr. Edwards says, doing this kind of exercise makes you remember other stuff, emotional stuff somehow connected to the cup of coffee, or whatever you're focusing on. So someday when you're on stage, if you need to portray that specific emotion, all you have to do is remember holding the coffee cup, and the experience immediately comes back to you."

"Okay," I'm struggling to understand. "Like, if you were drinking coffee when you found out you won the lottery, after that, you would associate coffee with excitement or happiness?"

"Yes, sort of," Lucas agrees. "It's a lot more complicated really, but it's kind of like that."

"And then?" I keep prodding Lucas whenever he pauses, and I realize that he doesn't want to tell this story. Something about this acting exercise apparently triggered an emotional response in Lucas, though it's hard for me to imagine why holding an imaginary cup of coffee could make him go off the deep end. "What happened then?"

Lucas glances at me and his face visibly pales. "It—my coffee—it turned into tea."

"Tea?"

"Herbal tea."

"Lucas, you don't drink herbal tea, do you?"

"No-o," his voice falters and he looks quickly away. "But ... my mother did."

"You told me you don't remember your mother, that you have no memories of her."

"I don't. At least, I didn't think so." Still he's not looking at me, and I sense that Lucas is looking inward; he's thinking, maybe remembering, and it's upsetting him. As it must have done in class. I can't decide if I should stop him or let him keep talking, maybe get it out of his system. I press my lips together to keep from interrupting, and wait for him to go on.

Almost as if he's in a trance, Lucas finally continues. I realize that he's speaking more to himself than to me. "I'm looking at the cup, it's—I imagine that it's just an ordinary cup, a big blue mug. But then, all by itself, it turns into this thin white china cup, with yellow roses painted on it. Somehow it looks familiar, but I know there's no cups like this in our house, it's a lady's cup." Lucas

swallows before going on. "And then, the coffee starts smelling funny, not like coffee. It smells like burned raspberries."

Lucas wrinkles his nose as if he's smelling the tea. "And I'm holding that cup," he says, "and then somebody says—I hear somebody say to me, 'Here, Monkeyshines, take a sip of Mommy's—of Mommy's tea.'"

Lucas is staring off into space and I see a tear well up in the corner of his eye and spill over, run down his cheek. He seems unaware of it but I'm wrenched, my gut twists and I realize that Lucas is reliving a moment in his childhood. His mother drowned when he was three, and watching him now, I can see how very real this experience is, and how fucking painful it is for him. I want to grab Lucas up into my arms, but I hold back, I don't move, while he sits there remembering his mother.

Another tear runs down his cheek, and then I can't bear it, I have to reach out and touch his arm. He starts slightly, and turns to look at me. "It was her," he whispers. "My mother. I didn't know that I remembered what she looked like."

"Lucas," I tighten my grip on his arm. "You don't have to tell any more."

"It's okay." He wipes his cheeks with the back of his hand. "I'm glad I remember her. But ... but at the time, in class, I—oh Matthew, I started crying! Sitting in my chair, holding my imaginary cup, I started crying. It was so embarrassing! And I couldn't—I couldn't stop."

"That's all right," I try to reassure him. Now my hands are clutching each other tight and I'm grinding my teeth. That fucking teacher and his fucking sense-memory shit!

"Mr. Edwards sees me; he comes over and says, 'Whatever you're feeling, Lucas, go with it, this is exactly why you're all doing this exercise. To be able to recall just such an emotional response on stage.' And I just kind of looked at him, and tried to make myself stop crying."

"And then," he goes on, "Mr. Edwards says to the class, 'Now switch gears. Imagine a moment in your childhood, the very happiest family memory you have. Try to remember what clothes you were wearing, what your shoes felt like on your feet, how your hair was combed and the smell of your shampoo. Get a picture in your mind of the happiest day you can remember, notice every single sensory detail.' And," Lucas glances at me, embarrassed, "and then, right then, well, that's when I lost it."

"Why? I mean, why did you 'lose it' right then?"

Lucas drops his head into his hands. Gasping rough short breaths, he goes on brokenly, "I couldn't think of anything! Not anything. I don't have any happy family memories. I don't have any happy memories at all!"

"Oh, Lucas," I feel so helpless. "You will have happy memories some day," I promise. "Someday you will!"

"No," he sits up straight, he clears his throat and rubs his face on his sleeve, "no, I won't," he says seriously. "Not in my whole entire life." He pauses and then adds, matter-of-factly, "Anyway, that's when I went bonkers. It made me so mad, I was just so fucking pissed off, that I don't have any happy memories. I jumped up and grabbed my chair, and threw it as hard as I could against the wall!"

I'm feeling nearly as angry as Lucas must have felt. I want to grab David Denholme and throw him against the wall! Maybe that's what Lucas was doing in the classroom. Maybe his anger was really at his father.

But I'm no shrink, and I don't believe in that psychoanalysis bullshit anyway. "Lukey—"

"Don't call me that. Phil calls me that."

"Lucas," I ask seriously, as a new thought occurs to me. "Are you in love with Phil?"

"No," he answers quickly, swinging his head to look at me, and I see the truth in his eyes. "No, there's only one person I love and I can't—I can't have him."

To say I'm shocked would be a lie. I've always known that Lucas has a crush on me. It's normal for a kid to fixate on the first person he has sex with, but it means nothing. "It's not—"

"Oh!" He's angry. "I know you don't love me and never will. I know that I'll be alone my whole life, nobody will ever love me. And then I found out," Lucas takes a deep breath, "well, Phil told me that I can never make it as an actor, because they don't put gay guys in films. He's right. There's no famous gay actors. And I—that's part of the reason I went kind of crazy in class. Because I couldn't stop crying, and I was so unhappy, and it just feels like my whole life is over!"

Hurrying on before I can say anything, Lucas continues, "So, then I kept throwing chairs around. I don't exactly remember that part. I just kind of lost it, and Mr. Edwards, he grabbed my arm and took me to the nurse. I couldn't stop crying, and she kept trying to give me a fucking aspirin!"

Lucas jumps to his feet and begins to pace around the living room. Without looking at me, he says, "Don't tell me any nice lies, Matthew, please don't. I really can't stand it if you do."

Jesus Christ, what am I supposed to do now? I get slowly to my feet and join Lucas where he's finally come to a stop, he's staring out the window at the water. The sun is setting and the sky is pink and gray, there's little ripples on the surface of the lake. "Lucas," I say at last, "I'm sorry you had to experience that grief from your childhood. But maybe—maybe someday, you'll be glad you can remember it."

He doesn't respond, so I go on quickly. "But it was a shitty thing to happen in front of everybody, and I'm sorry it upset you so much."

We stand shoulder to shoulder, staring out over the water. "Secondly, about the acting. Phil is full of shit. I'm sure that many actors are gay, Lucas, but most of them are in the closet, for precisely the reason you state. If you're set on an acting career—and I know that you are, and you should be, you're incredibly talented—you might have to pretend to be straight. But you cannot let that stop you from pursuing your dream. You can't."

Lucas nods, he's with me there. "Yeah," he agrees listlessly.

"And third," I begin, then I have to draw a deep breath. I feel like a fucking teenager myself. "Lucas, you're wrong that I don't care for you. I do care for you, too damned much. It's just wrong for me to take advantage of you. You're seventeen, you have your whole life ahead of you to meet someone your own age, to fall in love. What you feel for me is just a crush, it's a normal—"

"Bullshit!" Lucas shouts. "Don't tell me what I'm feeling. I know what love feels like, probably more than you do, because you don't believe in it. You've told me so about a million times, okay?" He stops for a moment, lowers his voice. "And I know that you're trying to be nice, saying you care about me and stuff, but it's only in a semi-dad kind of way. You feel sorry for me! I don't want your pity, Matthew, so don't pretend it's anything else!"

I just stare at him. We're looking into each other's eyes, and I want to tell him that he's wrong-wrong-wrong. Because I don't feel like a 'semi-dad,' whatever the fuck that feels like. And I don't pity him, not really. What I feel for Lucas is much, much bigger, stronger, almost painful as it fills my chest and makes me want to shout, or smash the window, or do something, anything, to relieve this unbearable pressure inside me.

Instead of doing any of those things, I grab onto Lucas and pull him against me. I'm holding him so tight that I never want to let him go, and I crush his lips with my mouth, kissing him so wildly, with such abandon, that I'm almost

afraid of the power of my emotions. I have never in my life felt this way about another person.

Lucas is returning my kiss, he's hanging onto me so tight it's like a stranglehold. I almost laugh, because I want to be strangled by Lucas, strangled and hugged and kissed almost to death.

Lucas

When I wake up in Matthew's bed in the middle of the night, I lie perfectly still, listening to him breathe. I almost can't believe what happened tonight, I'm afraid to believe it. Matthew loves me! He really does love me.

He didn't say it. Those words. But I knew, he looked at me and I saw it in his eyes, then he grabbed me and kissed me and it felt so right, so real. We made love then, actually we fucked then, really fast and really hard, right there on the living room carpet. But later we made love, in Matthew's bed. Slowly we kissed and touched, and it was like something new. Like something we'd never done before. That second time he was lying on top of me, kissing and kissing my face. I was so happy, and yet, right at the very end, instead of shouting out loud like I usually do, I burst into tears!

Oh God, I was so embarrassed.

"Lu," Matthew whispered, I could tell he was surprised, "what is it? Are you okay?"

"I'm just so happy, Matthew! I'm just so happy!" I cried, and then he laughed. Matthew laughed, and held onto me really tight, and he murmured, "I know the feeling, Lucas; believe me, I know the feeling."

Matthew

A glance at the bedside clock shows that it's nearly four. We've been asleep for several hours. Lucas is still sleeping, he's sprawled comfortably beside me, his head resting on my outstretched arm, his breathing deep and regular.

At first I blame my wakefulness on habit, insomnia reminiscent of the time I lived with Dean. And I was dreaming of Dean when I woke up, yet again reliving that night he walked out the door. After what happened tonight, I guess it's hardly surprising I would revisit my only other experience of love. If I did love Dean. And if I am really in love with Lucas.

Oh, I am not back-peddling, not really. I'm not reneging on the things I said last night. But the fact remains that I am not sure I know what "love" is. I'm not sure I really believe it exists.

Above and beyond the philosophical bullshit about the existence of love, more than anything else, I am feeling very nearly panicky at the thought of repercussions from tonight's revelations. Despite Lucas' feelings for me and mine for him, the facts remain unchanged. He is a teenager, a high school kid. And despite his vaunted "emancipated minor" status, I am still the responsible adult in his life, his guardian in everything but name. It just feels wrong, like I am taking advantage of this boy, this young man. In the eyes of the world, that's exactly how it must appear.

In all the ways that count, Lucas has crossed the threshold of adulthood. Still, I can't help feeling uncomfortable about our differences, counted not just in years but in experience. Lucas says that he loves me, but I wonder if he knows what love means, any more than I know myself.

Nothing has to change, I comfort myself; not really, not essentially. Lucas can continue living here, going to school, having fun with his friends. I'll insist he sleep in his own bed, keep his own schedule, and I'll keep mine. Maybe he'll share my bed a bit more often, maybe we'll spend more time doing things together.

But I know that the time will come when Lucas grows tired of me. He'll grow up, he'll go away, he'll move on to bigger and better things. He won't forever be content to share his life with me. And that's okay.

Well, it doesn't matter if it's okay or not, it's the natural order of things.

I feel my head nodding on the pillow. Live in the moment, I remind myself. Enjoy this changed relationship with Lucas, no matter how long or short a time it may last. I roll over, pull him so gently into my arms that he doesn't wake up, just shifts his body closer to mine. I lean my cheek against his forehead, smelling the sweetness of his hair, and I can't help the smile turning up the corners of my mouth.

PART II



CHAPTER 20



Time Present: Monday, November 15, 1994

Matthew

“Matty—long time no see!” Patrick hurries from the kitchen and slides into the booth across from me, setting down the coffee pot he’s carrying.

“Hey, Pat,” I stretch my hand across the table and we shake. I haven’t been at the Pajamas for nearly two months. “It’s been a madhouse at work,” I explain. “The senior partners are scrambling for new business, and we’re spread a little thin. It’s letting up now with the holidays approaching, thank God.”

“Oh,” he sympathizes, “sorry you’re run off your feet! But that’s no excuse for not dropping by for a meal once in a while—you still have to eat!”

“I know,” I acknowledge a bit awkwardly, quickly adding, “but I’m here now, so tell me, what’s today’s special?”

“Roast beef hash, and it’s good. The new cook is working out great, he’s not so heavy-handed with the seasonings. Some of our regulars are golden oldies with sensitive digestions.”

“I feel like a golden oldie myself,” I confide with a laugh. “Haven’t been able to keep up my exercise regime as often as I’d like.”

Patrick nods, but adds, “Never know it to look at you—you look healthy as a horse. Hard work must agree with you.”

“Hmm.” I’m noncommittal. “I’ll try the hash, and a side salad. Can you take a break and eat with me?”

“Sure thing—the dinner rush is just about over.” He hurries off to the kitchen to put in my order. When he comes back a few minutes later with a

loaded tray, I help him lift off the plates and coffee cups, then dig in hungrily. I skipped lunch today and I'm starving.

When our first hunger's satisfied, Pat takes a swig of coffee and leans back. "So," he says, "can I assume you're up for our usual Thanksgiving?"

That was the reason I made time in my schedule to drop in at the Pajamas today. I've been meaning to come by anyway, but work—and a real aversion to letting my personal business become public, which it will at Thanksgiving—kept me postponing this visit.

"Delivering Meals on Wheels in the morning, then dinner at your place in the afternoon?"

"Same old, same old. I was hoping we could count on you again this year."

"Sure thing. Oh, by the way ..."

"One small change," Pat interrupts. "You remember my friend Angie, the lezzie with the bakery?"

"Yes. I was going to move Lucas into her rooming house but ... changed my mind."

"How is that kid, he's settled down okay?" When I nod, Pat goes on, "What a beautiful boy, he's going to be a heartbreaker when he grows up, you mark my words."

"What about your lezzie friend?"

"Oh, she's going to help out with the Meals on Wheels this year, so I invited her to my place for dinner afterwards. It'll be the usual crowd, but every year we seem to add another one or two, and my house will be bursting at the seams."

I'm not sure what my face is showing, but Patrick reacts to it. "You don't mind, do you?"

"No, it's not that." I hesitate, then quickly add, "it's just that I was wondering if it would be okay for me to bring someone new. Too. I mean, bring someone new, also."

"Someone new? Oh, my God!" Patrick beams at me, and reaches across the table to punch my shoulder. "You've met someone? You sly dog, you never said a word."

"It's not like that. Or, not really." I can feel my face redden. I should have known I'd be embarrassed to tell anyone about Lucas. Probably that's why I never found time to drop by the Pajamas till now.

"Not like what? It's a guy, isn't it?" Patrick's still grinning at me over his dinner plate, food forgotten. He's always been after me to find a steady boyfriend, despite my frequent declarations that I didn't want that kind of relationship.

When I hesitate, Patrick picks up on my reluctance and settles back against the booth, regarding me seriously. "You can tell me. Whatever it is."

"I know," I agree, feeling annoyed, backed into a corner by my own unwillingness to divulge the truth about Lucas. I glare down at the hash on my plate, mad at myself for feeling embarrassed. Pat waits, and finally I look up at him, pick up my fork and lay it down again.

"It's Lucas."

"Lucas," Pat repeats. "The kid?"

"Yeah," I repeat, somewhat belligerently. "The kid."

"You and he—?"

"Yeah. Okay? Yeah."

Patrick says nothing for a moment, just stares at me wide-eyed, and finally I raise my chin. "Say what you have to say," I challenge him. "It won't change anything."

"Oh," he says, "I'm sorry, Matty, I didn't mean to seem—disapproving or something. I'm just—well, frankly, I'm surprised."

"Shocked."

"No, just surprised."

"I'm a cradle-robber. Taking advantage of an innocent little twinkie. I know what you're thinking, so go ahead and say it." I feel my neck and shoulders stiffen.

"Well, girlfriend, you do not know what I'm thinking, as it happens," Patrick scoffs. "I'm just surprised, like I said, that you've fallen for somebody at long last."

"Nobody said anything about falling for anybody. He's just this kid that I'm ... involved with. That's all. End of fucking story."

Pat laughs then, but quietly, and reaches across the table to lay his hand on top of mine, which is now gripping my fork like a dagger. "Matty, I'm sure fucking has a lot to do with it. You're keeping up with an eternally horny teenager? Phew, I'm impressed!"

"He's keeping up with me," I correct him, feeling my fingers relax their grip on the fork.

"Hmm, hmm, hmm," Pat grins, regarding me with his head turned on one side. "So, I was right about that kid turning into a heartbreaker."

"Hearts have nothing to do with it."

"I won't tease you," he assures me, which I doubt very much is true. "And Lucas is welcome to join the party, both parties, if he wants to help with Meals on Wheels too."

"I'm sure he will." I haven't talked to him about it yet, I wanted to check the reception with Patrick first. "He's a good kid, Pat, smart and hard-working, and he's had a rough time of it."

"He's in good hands now."

"He's not in my hands." I'm getting annoyed again. Obviously I have to work on this self-consciousness I feel about my relationship with Lucas. "He'll be in college next year, on his own. Actually, he's on his own now, more or less." I stare down at my plate. "Fuck."

"Okay," Pat nods agreeably, then we're quiet again as we go back to eating dinner.

Time Present: Tuesday, November 16, 1994

Matthew

If anyone had told me that I'd be volunteering my free time to help behind the scenes with a high school drama production, I'd have said they were crazy. I have no idea what prompted me to show up at Lucas' school for the volunteers meeting. If anything, you'd think I'd want to keep a wide berth away from my teenage lover's high school.

Sometimes I stare at myself in the mirror while I'm shaving, asking my reflection if I have lost my fucking mind.

So okay, he asked me to help. Lucas explained that the school district has almost no budget to support drama productions, so parents and friends volunteer to help with creating costumes, set designs, program printing and other production details. And against my better judgment, I ended up at the high school one night and got sucked into helping design and build the stage set, an oversized lazy-Susan type of construct that will be manually rotated between acts, to change the scene.

I met the drama teacher, Gregory Edwards, who (so Lucas told me) is rumored to be gay. Rumor in this case is an understatement. Edwards is positively flaming, in a fairly subdued blend-into-suburbia way. I also met some of the parents, including Gretchen Hicks, mother of Lucas' friend Sarah. She's in charge of costumes for this production.

Gretchen is an older, slightly faded version of her daughter; an attractive woman with upswept blonde hair. "Sarah's mentioned you," she told me when we were introduced. "And I've been meaning to invite you and Lucas to dinner. She's very fond of him. He's your nephew, I think?"

“No,” I correct her, “we’re not related. Lucas is an emancipated minor, living in my house while he finishes school.”

That’s our story and we’re sticking to it. Since Lucas is not ready to come out, we’ve agreed to keep a low profile about our changed relationship—which made it all the more imprudent for me to get involved in the school play. But damn it, Lucas asked me to. Making him happy seems to have become a hobby of mine. And hopefully most people won’t think twice about a teenage boy having an older male friend.

Yeah, right.

Time Present: Thanksgiving, November 24, 1994

Lucas

I’m so excited, I’ve never been to a holiday party before. Mrs. Goodwin always took me out to dinner at a restaurant on Thanksgiving. Dad was usually traveling on business, but even if he were home, he didn’t want the house smelling like turkey. He hates all the fuss that goes along with holidays.

But first we’re meeting Patrick at The Cat’s Pajamas. Every year a bunch of his friends get together to cook and package and deliver Thanksgiving dinner to shut-ins who live around Capitol Hill, mostly guys living with AIDS, but also some elderly people who can’t get out.

Even though I’m excited, still it was hard to wake up at 3 a.m. I didn’t hear the alarm, and Matthew had to practically roll me out of bed and into the shower.

I’m awake now as we park behind the café, though it still feels like the middle of the night. All the lights are on inside; there’s a bunch of people here already. Patrick greets me with a hug, and I see him wink at Matthew. There’s such a flurry of activity that there’s really no time for chatting. We’re both put to work peeling potatoes. We shed our coats, Matthew grabs aprons from a corner, we tie them on, then roll up our sleeves and tackle a mountain of potatoes. People come in and out of the room, some introduce themselves, but I’m concentrating on using the peeler without removing skin from my fingers instead of potatoes. It’s such a madhouse of activity that I can’t keep track of names and faces.

After a while, the peeling settles into a routine, I relax and begin to look around the kitchen. Through the open door, I can see into the café itself, where people are opening bags and containers and sorting food items into boxes. Matthew explains that many people in the community donate food for today, some people volunteer to pick up donations or bring food from home, while others like us work in the kitchen. Patrick is presiding over the whole event, and while at first it all seems impossibly disorganized, after a bit it begins to take on a rhythm and momentum, almost like a play rehearsal. I pause for a moment to glance around at all these generous people working together to help others who are less fortunate, and the breath catches in my throat.

Matthew murmurs, "You okay, Lu?" I swing my head around, look up into his face. We smile into each other's eyes, he leans down and kisses my lips. Just a small kiss, but it's the first time he's ever kissed me with other people around. Matthew's smile widens and he presses his forehead against mine and whispers, "Getting tired?" I shake my head no, but I lean against him for a moment and he kisses me again, just a little touch of his lips on mine.

Then out of nowhere this loud voice hisses in our ears, "Tsk-tsk!" We both jump slightly and twist around to see Patrick standing close behind us.

"Now, boys," he admonishes, wagging a finger, "there's no time for hanky-panky." He's just teasing, laughing at us, but in a nice way, and I see him pat Matthew fondly on the shoulder before moving away. Pat takes up his position at the big stove, where he's presiding over a dozen huge pots and pans, and we go back to our potatoes.

The potato mountain is reduced to a hill. My fingers are sore and my hands ache from the unfamiliar task, but I don't complain. I must be slowing down though, because Matthew says, "Take a break, go find Patrick and see if he needs someone to run an errand or something."

"I'm okay," I insist, but he lowers his head and gives me a look. I lay down the peeler, secretly relieved. It seems like we've been peeling forever, but it's really only been a couple hours. Wiping my hands on my apron and moving into the café searching for Patrick, I find him talking to some guys near the entrance. He glances at me and smiles.

"Hey, chickie," he beckons. "Looking for me?"

"Matthew said to ask if you need somebody to run errands or something?"

"Actually, I do," he agrees, nodding at the guys to wait a second. "Could you run over to Bangers Bakery and give Angie a hand? She called a minute ago, she needs help with the pies she's baked for today."

"Sure thing." He gives me directions to the bakery down the street.

Returning to the kitchen to tell Matthew where I'm going, I pull on my jacket and go out the back door. It's chilly and sprinkling, but not raining hard. At the bakery, I'm surprised to discover that the owner is the lady with the rooming house where Matthew almost moved me. She remembers me, too. "Luke, isn't it?" she asks when I tell her Patrick sent me over.

"Nice of you to help today. There's several dozen pies, pumpkin and apple, cooling over there on that counter against the wall," she points. "They're sliced and ready to be packaged, then we'll take them to the café for the dinner boxes. Can you manage on your own?" She doesn't wait for an answer but hurries on, "I'm finishing up the dinner rolls, and then we'll be good to go."

In less than an hour we're finished. I've packed the pie slices in individual containers, and when the rolls are out of the oven, I help pop them two at a time into paper bags. We load everything up into huge baskets that are almost too heavy to carry, but luckily we don't have far to go. Someone in the café sees our approach down the sidewalk and pulls open the door, not a minute too soon. The rain's begun in earnest. The wind blows us in, the heavy baskets are handed over. In the kitchen, I rejoin Matthew, still in his apron. The potatoes have been boiled and mashed and he's scooping fluffy white clouds of them into cardboard cartons. "Last one," he says, as he hands it off to a lady fitting plastic lids on the cartons before carrying a tray full into the other room.

Angie told me that Patrick has done this every Thanksgiving for about ten years, so the assembly line preparations are down to a science. He's got an army of volunteers helping with the cooking and packing and delivery of the finished dinners to a couple hundred homes in neighborhoods on or close to Capitol Hill.

Matthew pulls off the apron and rinses his hands at the sink, then stands close to me, unbuttoning my jacket and pulling it off. For the moment we're alone in the kitchen. "Take it off, or you'll get a chill when we go out," he murmurs. Just standing that close makes me feel anything but chilly. "Did you manage okay at the bakery?"

"Sure," I nod. "And some of the pie slices were not perfect, so Angie let me eat the rejects."

Matthew laughs softly and moves in even closer, slipping his arms around my waist. "Good," he says, "I was afraid you'd be fainting from hunger by now." Tilting his head, Matthew's about to kiss me when Patrick comes bustling through the door.

“Oops,” he says cheerfully. “Sorry to interrupt, boys. We’re all done here and the trucks are nearly loaded. We’ve got plenty of folks for delivery, so why don’t you two go home and relax for awhile?”

Matthew has pulled back, letting me go. “No,” he says. “We’ll help clean the kitchen first. You’re not getting stuck with this mess, especially when you’re cooking dinner for us this afternoon!”

“Ah thanks, but it’s no big deal,” Patrick contradicts. “Besides, I’m only cooking the turkeys, other folks are bringing all the trimmings.” A couple of women come in from the café, and they join Patrick in shooing us away. “See?” he says, “everything’s under control. Thanks for your help, but go away now, and I’ll see you about three o’clock at my place.”

“Okay,” Matthew acquiesces. “I’ll bring that case of wine I promised—it’s an excellent California white that’ll go great with turkey.”

“Thanks again, Matt,” Patrick gives him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Then his eyes twinkle as he grabs me and pulls me into his arms. “How about a big hug for your Aunt Patty?” Then Matthew and I give Patrick a wave as we go out the back door to the parking lot.

Buckled into the car, Matthew turns to ask, “Tired?” I want to deny it, but a huge yawn splits my face open and he chuckles. “Hmm,” he teases, “it’s nap-time.” His voice is whispery, my breath catches in my throat. He didn’t have time to shave this morning, and his whiskers scrape gently on my face as we kiss. I’m starting to wake up.

“Let’s go home now,” I urge eagerly.

“Oh, yeah,” he nods, pulling away to start the engine.

“Really fast.”

“Oh, yeah,” he agrees again with a chuckle. “You got it.”

Matthew

As I introduce Lucas to the motley crew assembled for dinner at Patrick’s modest home, I can’t help wondering if it’s my imagination that Lucas has a “just fucked” look? His youthful shyness makes him blush through introductions, but his glassy eyes and loose-limbed posture seem like obvious clues disclosing exactly what we’ve been up to in the hours preceding our arrival.

It’s my imagination, all right. I’m definitely embarrassed, introducing my young lover to these folks I’ve come to regard as friends. They know that I’ve been the most outspokenly cynical of confirmed gay bachelors, and now here I am, with my arm around this beautiful young man. The fact that I can’t make

myself remove my arm is a giveaway to myself (if I needed it) that I am doomed. I cannot even pretend to nonchalance where Lucas is concerned.

I'd assumed that Patrick would have provided a bit of background before our arrival, but it's obvious that he didn't—and I've taken everyone by surprise. I'm relieved that each of them warmly welcomes Lucas into the fold, but I'm not imagining the curious glances. I decide to brazen it out, act as casual as possible. But "casual" is hard to achieve when I can't keep my hands off Lucas, or keep this silly smile off my face.

I'm doomed all right, but I never realized before that doom could feel so good.

Lucas

There's twenty-five or thirty people gathered in Patrick's house, and everyone welcomes me to the party. Matthew introduces me as "my friend Lucas." They all smile and shake my hand. Mostly they're older people, Matthew's age all the way up to really old people with white hair, but there's a couple young guys, students at UW who live in Angie's rooming house. When she introduces me, the guys and I bump fists and say "Hey," and then it feels like Matthew tightens his arm around me, before leading me away to the kitchen.

Pat's pulling a huge turkey from the oven, and the delicious smell wafts around my head. I wonder why Dad was so against the smell of roast turkey, it's fantastic. Pat sets down the big pan, drops his pot holders and grabs onto me, pulling me away from Matthew and lifting me off my feet! He twirls me around in a circle, laughing out loud, then sets me down again and plants a loud kiss on my cheek. "Welcome, chickie," he says. "I hope you're hungry—we've got a ton of good food today."

"He's always hungry," Matthew replies as he slides his arm around my waist again and pulls me close. When I look up at him and open my mouth to protest, Matthew lowers his head and kisses me smack on the lips.

The living room is crowded with tables and chairs. Pat moved the furniture into a bedroom to make space for all of us to eat together. It's crowded when everyone sits down, but Matthew pulls my chair even closer to his, and he keeps slipping his hand under the table to squeeze my knee. I can't resist sliding my hand into his lap too, or grabbing onto his hand and squeezing his fingers. It's hard to eat one-handed; sometimes we have to let go for a minute so that we can cut our turkey.

Matthew keeps putting more food on my plate, and sometimes he feeds me a bite of something from his. I push my finger into a black olive and wave my

hand at him, he laughs and when his mouth is open, I push my finger into his mouth; he sucks the olive off my finger, chews and swallows. He lowers his head and I lean close to whisper in his ear, "Olive you!" He laughs again and then kisses me. The room gets quiet and we break apart, looking around self-consciously. Everybody's staring!

Patrick scoots his chair back noisily and stands up, taps a knife against his glass. He thanks everyone for coming, and says how grateful he is to have so many wonderful friends. Everyone raises their glass and cries, "Hear, hear!" Some guy stands up and makes a toast to our host Patrick, and everybody joins in. I glance around the room at all the happy smiling faces, and suddenly, it's just too much.

It's too much. I push back my chair, mumble "Excuse me," and move quickly around the table, escaping into the kitchen and out the back door.

Matthew

Lucas' quick departure takes me by surprise. One minute he's there, the next he's moved swiftly out of the room. I hesitate before following; maybe he just needs fresh air. We're not joined at the hip, I don't need to pursue him all over the place.

Well, fuck that. I push back my chair and pursue him anyway, despite my attempt to be philosophical; to give Lucas space, if that's what he wants. I find him in the back yard, leaning against the side of the garage. Hurrying over, I reach out to touch his shoulder, asking, "Lu? What's wrong?"

He jumps slightly, he must not have heard my approach across the damp lawn. "What's wrong?" I ask again, concern making my voice unaccountably gentle. Hazarding a guess, I ask, "Are you maybe missing your father?" It's his first holiday away from his home, he's surrounded by strangers on this traditional family celebration day.

"Oh, no," Lucas denies it. "I'm not missing him at all. I just never—never knew it could be like this."

"Like what?"

"I never knew what family stuff felt like. Being surrounded by people who love each other and are so—" He swallows and adds, "So happy to be together. I just never knew."

For a long time, I've known that Lucas' upbringing was anything but normal, yet I didn't realize that he'd never experienced some kind of family togetherness. I should have. I remember him telling me, at the time of his

blow-up in drama class, that he didn't have a single happy family memory. I guess I'd assumed he was exaggerating.

Pulling Lucas into the circle of my arms, I murmur, "Now you know."

He clears his throat, slides his arms around my waist. "What about your real family?" he asks. "Do you have happy memories, Matthew?"

Exhaling sharply, I want to pull away from Lucas, to disengage from a conversation that's getting too close to the bone. I've always been convinced that the past is irrelevant, but now I acknowledge that it's too damned emotional. I don't want to remember.

But this time feels different. "There was some happiness," I admit at last. "My parents loved me at first, a long time ago. Later, living with my grandparents, was not a very happy time." That's an understatement, but I resist reverting to my usual snarling cynicism. Instead I simply stop talking, close my lips and determine to say nothing more.

But apparently I haven't finished baring my soul. "I never thought I'd need or want any family togetherness. But I do like it now—with Patrick's friends, who have become my friends. I enjoy being part of this group. And now you're part of it."

Lucas smiles, and I smile, too, holding nothing back.

Then quickly I remind myself: Don't get complacent. This is temporary. The knowledge that someday Lucas will leave me twists my gut. But for now, he is my family, and I am his.

Before Lucas can ask more questions, I shut him up with kisses. And more kisses. Then I realize that it's started to sprinkle. It's cold and wet and Lucas is shivering.

As I pull him toward the house, he pleads, "Don't stop, Matthew! Kiss me some more."

"Mmm," I murmur, "but then we might miss dessert. Pumpkin pie?"

"Oh!" he exclaims. "I forgot about dessert. Let's go!"

And together we move back to the house, pausing to wipe our muddy feet on the doormat, sharing one last kiss before we push open the door and move into the warm kitchen. Pat's there, alone. Probably he's been peeking out the window. He envelops the two of us in a crushing bear hug, and I hug him right back.

CHAPTER 21



Time Present: December 9, 1994

Matthew

Lucas has told me of his stage-fright before *Cuckoo's Nest*. And now, the afternoon before the opening night of *Fiddler*, Lucas looks sick as a dog. He's pale, shaky, jumpy and completely preoccupied. He almost forgets his backpack in the car, and when I urge him to "Break a leg," he stares at me like he's never seen me before. "Okay," he nods seriously. He probably hasn't heard a word I've said on the drive to school. He hurries across the lawn toward the rear entrance of the auditorium without saying good-bye, and I'm left to stare after him, trying to calm my own nerves.

In my role as volunteer stage designer and assistant carpenter, I was at the school last night for dress rehearsal. It was a disaster. Beside myself with nerves for Lucas, for all the kids really, I was slightly comforted by Gretchen Hicks, who assured me—the voice of experience gained from many times she's helped out with these things—that dress rehearsal is almost always pandemonium.

The stage set which I helped build has four different set-ups that turn to face the audience for the various acts, and it has worked smoothly the past two weeks, but last night it got stuck in one position and wouldn't budge. While some of us were struggling to fix that, several female cast members fell off the stage into the orchestra pit. Luckily they were not hurt, but their costumes were torn and the girls were loudly wailing and crying. Some of the music for the show is on tape, but the school band is providing live music for several important numbers, and one of the musicians didn't show up at rehearsal. A

frantic phone call to his home revealed that the kid had been rushed to the hospital with appendicitis. On top of these disasters, none of the actors could remember their lines or find their marks on stage.

When the kids retired backstage to change from their costumes, I left the auditorium to wait outside. Shivering, smoking, feeling horribly sick, I reminded myself to put a good face on things for Lucas, who was bound to be hysterical after the cataclysmic dress rehearsal.

To my absolute amazement, Lucas and his friends came rushing out the auditorium door, leaping around in circles on the back lawn, laughing loud and long. "It was great, don't you think?" Lucas eagerly asked me.

"Uh, yeah, uh, great."

What the fuck? Maybe Gretchen was right and this is a normal dress rehearsal. Christ, I hope so. Please, please, I silently begged that great Director in the Sky, let the play be a success.

I don't really believe in God, but I'm not above asking Him to look out for Lucas on stage tonight.

Lucas

I'm paralyzed again. Maybe I don't want to be an actor after all. Maybe I'm not good enough. I can't even remember my first line! What's my first line? What's my first—

Oh God, Mr. Edwards is beckoning; it's time to go on! What if I have a heart attack and fall down dead right on stage? Will they stop the play, or just push me over the edge into the orchestra pit? I don't want to be an actor! Why did I think I could be an actor? Oh God, here goes....

Matthew

Jesus Christ, I need a cigarette. I want to push through the throngs of people surging backstage, blast against the exit doors and escape into the night. I want to yell right out loud. Holy shit!

Acknowledging that Lucas is not the only drama queen in our twosome, I calm myself by sheer will-power, then move with the flow of the audience, down the aisle, through the door and into the backstage area. It's so crowded and hot and noisy, everyone's shouting congratulations. I can't see Lucas anywhere. Knots of people, family and friends, gather around each actor, and the noise level increases as my eyes sweep the crowd, searching.

Then I see him. The crowd parts, and I see Lucas' beaming smile and hear his laugh ring out. He's talking to several people at once, but his head is up and

I see that his eyes are searching the crowd. He spots me, and immediately surges forward, pressing through the throng. I'm surprised and yet not surprised when Lucas catapults himself right into my arms. He throws his arms around my neck and hugs me, and I hug him right back, both of us joyfully laughing.

"You were magnificent!"

It's the truth. Lucas not only carried off his role with perfection, he was so fucking far and above any of the other young actors who shared the stage with him. I want to kiss him, and I see in his eyes that he wants to kiss me too, but we make do with a huge hug and that's enough. Well, that's not enough, but it will have to suffice in the middle of this hetero high school crowd.

Gregory Edwards stands on a chair and yells for everyone to quiet down. Once the din diminishes, he congratulates the students on their performance, and says it's time to wrap up the celebration. He reminds them that the cast party will be held tomorrow night, after the second and final performance of the play. As the crowd begins to disperse, Lucas pulls away and tells me he's going to change his clothes. The actors disappear into the dressing rooms, and the crowd of parents and friends begins to thin out.

I gratefully leave the overheated area, move into the shadows outside the exit, pull on my jacket and reach for a cigarette. Small groups are chatting quietly, waiting for the kids to come out. I'm joined by Gretchen Hicks and her husband Bob, whom I hadn't met before. "The kids did great, don't you think?" she asks, after introductions.

"I can't believe it went so well," I admit. "After the disastrous rehearsal last night!"

"It's always like that," she assures me. "Anything that can go wrong, will, as the saying goes."

"Sarah did a wonderful job as Golde." My praise is honest, the girl was really very good. "She has a beautiful voice."

"She does," Gretchen agrees. "In fact, I wish she'd pursue a singing career, instead of acting. It's so hard to break into the acting field."

"Yes," I agree solemnly.

"Oh," Gretchen hastily reassures me, "for someone like Lucas, it shouldn't be so hard. He's such a natural! He nearly stole the show."

"Phew," I hear myself exclaim. "So it wasn't my imagination, or my own prejudice?"

"Not at all," Bob speaks up. "Even with my own prejudice for Sarah, I could see that Lucas' talent is head and shoulders above all the other kids."

I feel myself bristling with pride and I'm bemused by my reaction to hearing Lucas praised. "His singing voice is not great," I feel obliged to point out.

"No, but it's good enough," Gretchen assures me.

"Well, we pulled off another one." Gregory Edwards joins our little group, smiling broadly. "Thank you so much for your help—there's no way we could do this without the support of parents and friends." He shakes hands with all of us, then Gretchen exclaims, "Oh, there's the Covingtons," and she and Bob move away to speak to Phil's parents.

I turn to Edwards and quietly ask, "Aren't you sorry now that you didn't cast Lucas as Tevye?"

He barks a laugh at my abrupt question, then says, "Yes and no. Lucas was an unknown quantity—he had to prove himself. Tevye was too important a role to give to a newcomer. And Philip Covington is a damned good actor too—and a better singer."

"Yes," I agree, "his singing voice is excellent. But I'll bet Lucas would have brought down the house in that role."

Edwards nods. "You could be right. But frankly, I wasn't sure that Lucas would have the discipline necessary for such a demanding role. I'll admit he has surprised me. And there's always next semester's play. He will have an opportunity to snag a lead role next time around." Then he exclaims, "Oh, there's Mr. Woodhams, the principal, I need to speak to him. Will you excuse me?"

The exit doors are pushed open and the cast, now in street clothes, noisily descends on the crowd of waiting family and friends. Lucas sees me and waves, then he and Sarah and Phil hug each other exuberantly and go their separate ways. Lucas hurries toward me and grasps my arm with both hands and squeezes. "Hey," he greets me happily. "Did you really, really like it?"

"Yes, I really, really did. You were absolutely amazing."

His happy smile lights up his face and makes me yearn to kiss him, hard and long. "Ready to go home?"

"Yes!" Lucas bounds across the lawn like a jack rabbit, with me following at a more dignified pace.

Once in the car, I drive a few blocks, go around a corner, pull over to the curb and switch off the engine. "Now," I say when Lucas turns toward me, surprised that I've stopped the car. "I really, really need to kiss you."

"Oh!" he exclaims happily. "Me, too!" And we lean across the seat for a heart-thumping kiss and embrace. I don't want to let go. I want to hang onto

Lucas and keep him tight in my arms. But for now, I let him go only long enough to start the car again and head swiftly for home.

Time Present: December 25, 1994

Matthew

This is the first Christmas morning I can remember waking up with a smile on my face.

Oh, I've had some pleasant Christmases. The first year with Dean was fun. We went to the Bahamas for a long weekend and had a blast sunning on the beach and playing in the ocean. But even then, in the midst of our enjoyment, I can remember Dean ragging on me, wanting me to talk about Christmases Past. He was going through his Psych rotation about that time. He psychoanalyzed everything and everybody, until finally I remember shouting at him to get the fuck out of my head and stay out.

Considering my wretched childhood, it's no wonder my holiday memories are miserable. Even the early years with my parents had been unhappy, since there was no money for celebration or gift-giving. I'd felt like the proverbial waif with his nose pressed up against a window through which I could see the rest of the world indulging in feasting and merriment.

My grandparents celebrated Christmas, though Grandma's church frowned on commercializing the holidays, so we didn't have a tree or decorations. Still, we had a special dinner on Christmas eve before going to church service, and there was a present for me at breakfast on Christmas morning. If it was always something practical—a new jacket, mittens, some needed item of clothing—well, I was enough of a practical soul by the age of nine to appreciate the good fortune of having warm clothes and not regret (very much) the lack of toys.

But today, I wake up and realize that this Christmas morning, I have good reason for the smile on my face: Lucas is tucked up in bed with me. We're awash in a sea of rumpled sheets and blankets on this enormous king-size bed in our suite at the St. Regis.

New York for Christmas is my gift to Lucas. It's an expensive indulgence, but since I'm scheduled to meet with a client on Tuesday, part of the trip can be written off as a business expense. It's nothing more than a three-day excursion, but we're going to cram in as much sightseeing as possible, and my spe-

cial treat is orchestra seats for a couple of the most critically acclaimed plays on Broadway. Lucas is over the moon, and his happiness makes me happy too.

Rousting him out of bed, I leave him perusing the room-service menu while I pay a needed visit to the hotel's mini-gym to work off last night's gourmet dinner. When I return, Lucas is sitting naked, cross-legged, in the middle of our bed, staring at a telephone book spread open on the rumpled sheets. He lifts his head and gives me a welcoming smile, but there's something going on behind his eyes. Wasting no time on tact, I move to sit on the side of the bed and ask, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong."

"Why are you looking so forlorn then?" I glance at the open phone book. "Who do you know in New York?"

"Nobody. It's just such a big city, I wondered if I'd see any familiar names in the phone book."

It seems like a strange pastime. "What names?"

"Oh," Lucas reaches up to push the hair off his forehead, "nobody." When I say nothing, just keep my eyes on his face, he says, "My mother's family name is kind of unusual: Skarsgaard. I just thought, maybe..."

"That's Scandinavian?" When he nods, I ask, "You want to find your mother's family?"

Lucas doesn't answer for a moment, then looks away. "No. Not really. They never cared about me, why should I care about them?"

I realize that we've never talked about Lucas' mother's family. He said the two families were estranged after his mother died, and I thought no more about it. Now I wonder why they were estranged, and I curse my stupidity for not realizing that Lucas probably was hurt, if his mother's family wanted nothing to do with him his whole life.

"Lu—"

"Let's take a shower," he suggests, flipping closed the phone book and sliding off the foot of the bed. "Then we can have breakfast!"

Following him to the bathroom, I wait till we've stepped into the shower and begin to rub each other with subtly scented bars of hotel soap. Lucas turns around and lets me soap up his beautiful back, I slip an arm around his waist and pull him tight against me. Moving my lips gently over his neck and shoulders, I murmur, "What do you know about these relatives of yours?"

He stiffens for a moment, but when I keep softly mouthing his neck and use my other hand to caress his chest, he relaxes. "I don't really know anything," he admits. "Mrs. Goodwin just told me they were estranged. Dad wouldn't talk

about them at all. The times I tried to ask him, he said, ‘The whole lot of them are worthless idiots, forget them, they forgot you.’ So I stopped asking.”

“Maybe there were circumstances you don’t know about. I wouldn’t say your father’s the best judge of character.”

“I know. But it’s true that nobody ever called me. I know my mother was from New York, so maybe they were all too far away. But,” he concludes, turning in my arms to look at me. “it really doesn’t matter, what do I care?”

“I could make some enquiries, find out more about your mother’s family. Maybe—”

“No!” He pulls back quickly, his feet slipping on the floor of the tub, only my hands on his arms keep him from falling. “Matthew, no! Don’t do that!”

“Okay,” I agree soothingly, kissing his eyelids and pulling him close again. “Whatever you say.” I hesitate, then add, “But you do care, I can tell.” I can see in his eyes that Lucas cares very much.

“No,” he murmurs unconvincingly.

Despite his denials, I can feel Lucas’ yearning for family connection. “I understand,” I tell him.

“No, you don’t.”

Tightening my hold, surprising Lucas but especially surprising myself, I admit, “Yes, Lucas, I do understand. Because I also—lost touch—with my family, a long time ago. I’d give anything to be able talk to my mother.”

As I say it, I’m shocked to realize the utter truth of that statement. Long ago, even before Grandma told me that my parents were dead, I’d given up hope of ever seeing them again. And yet now, years later, I can admit to there being a small angry wound deep inside that won’t be healed. Maybe Lucas has a wound like mine.

“Really?” he breathes. I nod, giving nothing else away, but Lucas takes advantage of this chink in my armor to say, “Matthew, you told me once that your grandparents raised you. Are they still around?”

Now’s the time to put on the brakes, I have no intention of discussing my fucked-up grandparents with Lucas or anyone else. And yet I hear myself telling him, “Gramps died a year and a half ago, of cancer. Grandma’s okay, she’s still living in Spokane.”

I’m breathless with surprise that I’ve shared this much information with Lucas, and he appears breathless too, probably more shocked than I am myself. I’ve never told him much about my past. He’s silent for a few moments, then murmurs, “I’m sorry about your grandfather. Did you ... were you ... close to him?”

"No," I answer baldly, reaching behind Lucas to twist off the shower faucets, then turn my back and step out of the tub, grabbing a big white towel, rubbing my face and hair with it. When I emerge from the folds of the towel, I see that Lucas has joined me. We stand silently side by side on the gray-tiled floor, drying off.

A quick glance at Lucas' face shows that he got my unspoken message: "I don't want to talk about it," and his lips are pressed together to keep him from blurting out a hundred unwelcome questions. My neck and shoulders are tense, and when I use the towel to rub steam off the bathroom mirror, I catch sight of my reflection—my body language is screaming, "Keep away!"

But I don't want to keep away from Lucas. I understand the pain he is feeling, and I want to make it better. If making it better for him means I need to share some of my own pain, then fuck my damned pride, and fuck me for keeping at arm's length this boy that I've come to care so much about.

Tossing my towel on the floor, I turn and pull him against my chest. His arms go around my back, and only the towel wrapped around his hips keep our cocks apart. But this isn't about sex; and instead of kissing Lucas, I press my cheek against his and murmur in his ear, "Gramps was a good man, tough but good-hearted. Grandma—not so much. But they gave me a home, and I'll always be grateful for that."

Lucas is silent, but he holds on tight, and when a moment later I let him go and step back, he smiles up at me and says, "Thanks, Matthew."

"Now," I say bracingly, "why don't you order breakfast from room service while I shave. We're going to need plenty of energy for this full day of sightseeing, and for the play tonight."

"Okay," he agrees eagerly, "then after breakfast, can we go find the Statue of Liberty?"

"I didn't know it was missing."

Giving my shoulder a push, Lucas hurries into the bedroom to peruse the room-service menu again, while I grab my shaving gear and lather up. In the quiet moments I'm alone in the bathroom, my mind wanders back to the summer before I started college.

Time Past: March 1984

"I'm going, and you can't stop me."

I'm facing my grandmother across the kitchen table, site of so many of our battles. I stand at attention, hands clasped behind my back. There's a pause and

I can see, peripherally (not taking my eyes off Grandma's face), that Gramps is silently inching his way across the speckled linoleum toward the cellar door. His usual retreat from ground-zero.

"Bill, come here," Grandma orders, then scrapes back her chair and stands up to face me. She waits till Gramps is by her side, then she raises her chin and fixes me with her ominous stare. "The answer is no," she says flatly. "You're not going to no fancy-pants college, to waste four more years with your nose in a book."

"I'm not asking permission," I point out, keeping my voice calm. I've practiced this speech a dozen times, alone in my room. "Washington State University is giving me almost a full scholarship," I tell Grandma. "I just have to put in some work-study hours to pay for the dorm."

"That school's in Pullman—you planning to live there?"

"Yes." What does she think? It's seventy-five miles away. Even if I had my own car, it's too far to commute from Spokane.

"Matthew Morgan, me and Gramps have took care of you all these years, and we never asked for nothing back, and NOW you expect us to see you through college?" Grandma's voice has risen, she's almost screeching her outrage. Gramps puts a calming hand on her shoulder but she pushes it off.

"No, I just told you. I've got a scholarship to pay for school, I'm not asking for—"

"Huh," she snorts. "You're not asking for nothing, you say. But you're not offering nothing, neither. Not offering to help out me and Gramps, now that we're getting older. You're just going to up and move away, is that it?" When I say nothing, just stare back at her, she demands more loudly, "Is that it, Matthew?"

"I will help, Grandma, gladly, after I graduate. But I need a college degree to get a good job—"

"You got a good job, down at the rail yards, working alongside Gramps. They offered to take you on full time, after high school."

"I know," I acknowledge, "but—"

"Not good enough for you, huh?" she scoffs, again brushing off Gramps' hand from her shoulder. "You're too fancy-pants to work down the railroad, is that it?"

"I want to be an architect. I've dreamed about it for a long time."

"Dreamed! Huh! You hit the nail on the head right there, boy. Your little pea-brain is full of dreams, all right. An architect? That's setting your sights awful high."

"I can do it," I insist. "I've got almost straight-As all through high school, I did really well on my SATs. And my counselor believes in me."

She does too, Mrs. Arnold; she's encouraged me the past three years to go after what I want. She helped me apply for scholarships all over the state, and rejoiced with me when I got the grant from WSU. As long as I keep my grades up, the scholarship continues for four years, so I can earn my degree in architectural studies.

"And what about us?" Grandma asks bitterly, dropping down into her chair. "What about your poor old grandparents? Did you even give us a thought?"

I did, actually. However grudgingly it was done, my grandparents have taken care of me. They took me in as a homeless orphan, they supported me all these years, and they put me through school. I owe them so much. I've helped out with expenses ever since I was fourteen, working part-time after school and weekends, buying my own clothes and books, contributing money for groceries. But I know that's not enough. I will always owe them.

"Of course I've given thought to you and Gramps." I sit down too, and insist, "It's always been my intention to give back, especially once I graduate college and can earn some real money."

"You won't, though," Grandma contradicts bitterly, crossing her arms on her chest. "First you'll leave us all alone when you move away to this la-di-da college. Then, if you don't flunk out, you'll get a job somewhere far away. You'll forget all about your poor old grandparents."

I'm surprised by the almost-pitiful way Grandma is talking. All my life, she has been tough as nails, berating and pushing and putting me down, no matter what my accomplishments. In my heart I know that Grandma won't ever see me as good or smart or successful, but even so, I've always hoped that someday, she might be proud of me. I'd even had a foolish hope that she would be proud of me today, when I told her about earning a college scholarship. I should have known better.

Gramps might be proud of me. When we're alone, he may find a way to tell me that I've done a good job. But he will never say it in front of Grandma. He's never seriously contradicted her orders—he is a man who avoids conflict at all costs. I think I could love Gramps, if only he would take my side.

"I won't forget you," I say earnestly, leaning my elbows on the table and looking Grandma in the eye. "I promise."

"I don't believe you." Staring back at me, she flares her nostrils. "Once you leave school and find a job, we'll never see you again. You'll get married, have a family of your own. You'll forget all about us."

That would be easy enough to answer, if only I had the courage to tell her that I'm gay. Instead, I say, "I'm not getting married, not ever. And you will see me again, I promise. I'll put my hand on your Bible and swear, if you want me to."

"Pretty quick to swear on the Bible, for a boy who hasn't set foot inside church the past three years." Grandma rises and begins to clear the table. "Go off then," she concludes, turning her back and carrying away an armload of dirty dishes. "You're as bad as your mother," she adds, setting plates in the sink. "She just run off and never looked back."

I have to leave the kitchen now, before I'm sucked into another fight about Comfort: What a terrible daughter she was, what a terrible mother she was, for leaving her only child while she went gallivanting around the world doing God-knows-what. It's an old song, and I refuse to listen to Grandma sing it one more time. I always end up defending my mother, and almost always, I end up getting slapped, for talking sassy to Grandma.

I dump my plate in the sink, giving up the last glimmer of ridiculous hope I'd had—hope that for once in my life, my grandparents would be proud of me, might even encourage me to pursue the career I want as an architect. The hope that they might wish me luck, or give me a hug that I've been craving for almost ten years.

"Leave the dishes, I'll wash up before I go to bed," I offer tersely, then hurry out of the kitchen. I throw a last look at Gramps, who just shrugs his shoulders helplessly at me before finally making his escape downstairs to his basement hideaway.

Grabbing my jacket from its hook by the back door, I burst out into the night and walk quickly across the lawn, my feet slipping on the dew-dampened grass. Then I hurry down the street, heading nowhere at all, just as fast as I can. Blinking back moisture trying to leak from my eyes, I hurry on, putting distance between myself and the familiar, bitter taste of disappointment.

CHAPTER 22



Time Present: March 6, 1995

Lucas

Today was an amazing day.

Phil called to say he was staying home sick with flu, and Matthew had already left for work, so I had to ride my bike to school. On the way, I noticed an empty lot where a house burned down last fall, and I could see the tips of little green plants peeking up through the barren ground. That brought a lump to my throat, thinking about the beauty of new life growing up in an abandoned, lonely place. At school we received mid-term progress reports, and I was thrilled that all my teachers said I'm doing A-level work. The smile on my face lasted all day. And finally, after-school rehearsal of *The Seagull* went so well, even though Phil's understudy had to read his part, that Mr. Edwards dismissed us early.

When I get home and eagerly push open the door, I call out a happy greeting to Matthew. He said he was leaving work early today and would have dinner on the table when I got home.

I'm starving and flare my nostrils to seek out food smells as I close the door behind me and eagerly move down the hall toward the kitchen. I don't smell anything, and Matthew is not microwaving or setting out plates. Instead he's seated on a stool at the counter, holding some papers in his hand. When I pause in the open doorway, he swivels around and gives me a look that stops me in my tracks.

"Hey," I say experimentally, staying put. He's frowning, there's white lines around his mouth, and his forehead is wrinkled.

"Hey," he repeats without enthusiasm. I see that he's been sorting through a stack of mail on the counter. He picks up an envelope and holds it out. "This is for you," he says, watching closely to see my reaction.

It's from the office of admissions at the University of California in Los Angeles. "Oh, wow," I breathe.

"Lucas," he inquires, "can you interpret 'Oh, wow' for me? Or," he adds, "shall I interpret it for myself: You applied for admission to UCLA."

"Well ... yeah," I tear my eyes away from the envelope to study Matthew's face. "I guess I didn't tell you." My fingers are snaking under the flap, pulling open the envelope and taking out the letter.

"I guess not," he confirms dryly. When I stand frozen with the paper in my hands, Matthew says, "Read it."

Before I do, I hasten to assure him, "I meant to tell you. Honest! I just sort of forgot. I mean, I didn't think I'd be accepted. We applied way long ago, before ... before Thanksgiving. And everything." Unfolding the paper, I silently read, "Congratulations, you have been accepted into the UCLA class of 1999."

"Good news?" Matthew inquires in a moment, his voice dripping icicles.

"Yes. No. I mean, yes but no."

"Ah," he nods. "Now that that's cleared up—you said 'we applied.' That would be you and who else—Philip?"

"Yeah, but that was before. We did it before."

"Before what?"

He knows before what, and now I'm getting mad, he's torturing me. "Matthew," I close the space between us, move in tight and look into his face, let him see the honesty in my eyes. "Before us. Before there was us. I only didn't tell you because," I repeat, "I didn't think they'd accept me. It didn't seem important."

"You never told me you wanted to go there. UCLA."

"Well, I don't. Not exactly. Or, only a little."

"You're already accepted at UW. I helped you fill out your application. They've given you a four-year scholarship."

"I know. But UCLA has one of the best drama schools in the country. It was my number one first choice."

"Number one," he repeats. "And yet you never even mentioned it to me. I had no idea you were applying there."

"I wasn't going to apply, but Phil insisted. He got an extra application and we filled them out together, he sent it in for me. It was a long time ago, October or something." Then I emphasize, "It was before."

"Well." He stands up. "If it's your number one first choice, you should go."

But I don't want to. Or not exactly. I want to live with Matthew, stay with him and go to school here in Seattle. Truthfully, I want both—I want to stay with Matthew and I want UCLA. I can hear Mrs. Goodwin's snide voice: "You can't have your cake and eat it too." And she's right this time. But I can't help wanting both.

Matthew turns away, pulls open the refrigerator, so I glance back at the letter and read the rest of it. "Oh, I couldn't go anyway." I'm disappointed or relieved, I'm not sure which. "The letter says they'll give me a partial tuition scholarship, but that's all." When he faces me again, I clarify, "I could only go if they gave me a full scholarship. It's hella expensive, especially for out-of-state students."

"I'll help," he says. "As much as I can." The words are kind, but his face looks like a totem pole, wooden and harsh.

"No," I deny quickly. "That's way too much."

Unbending a little, leaning both elbows on the counter, Matthew's face softens. "You knew I'd help pay for UW."

That's different. If I go to the University of Washington, I'll be living here, with him. We'll continue to be lovers. Somehow, him helping me with school is okay, if we're lovers. But if I moved away, if I went to California, why should he help me?

"Go change your clothes. I'll start dinner." He turns away again, and though I stand there staring at his back for a moment, finally I leave the kitchen, move down the hall to my room. I want to call Phil and see if he got a letter too, but this is definitely not the right time.

Matthew

"Go," I tell him, and at last he moves slowly out the door and then he's gone.

He's gone. To his room. But soon he'll be gone to LA. Lucas is going to California with his friend Phil, he's eager to pack his bags and be gone. My little caterpillar-boy is turning into a butterfly, ready to fly away and start a new life somewhere else.

I'm reminded of a poem that Dean framed and hung prominently in the kitchen of the home we shared in San Francisco: "If you love something, let it

go. If it comes back to you, it's yours forever. If it doesn't, then it was never yours in the first place."

After Dean walked out on me, after he'd packed his bags and departed forever, I'd spent an afternoon systematically removing every shred of Dean-ness from the house. I walked from room to room with a large plastic garbage bag, dumping anything that reminded me of him. And I remember ripping that framed bit of moronic pop-psychology off the wall, shoving it deep into the bottom of the bag. What bullshit, I remember thinking bitterly. A better philosophy would be, "If someone you love leaves you, kick their sorry ass to the curb and forget about them."

The key word here is "love." I didn't love Dean and I don't love Lucas, so in the long run, whether they leave or stay isn't that big a deal.

My mistake was letting myself get attached to Lucas. Breaking all my own rules about getting emotionally involved with another person. I should have known better—well, I did know better. And whether he goes now or later doesn't really matter very much.

Then why am I so angry?

Maybe because now I know that Lucas has been lying to me. He told me he wanted to go to UW. We toured the campus together, I helped him fill out his application, and we rejoiced together when he was accepted. Now I discover that he has been keeping a secret from me—the knowledge that he wants to go to UCLA instead.

Lucas secretly applied to the university on his own, without a word to me. Who knows when he would have even told me, if I hadn't seen this letter from the school? And all this time, he and his friend Phil were making plans to move to California. Lucas and his friend Phil, his so-called straight friend Phil, who just happens to like getting sucked off sometimes. At least once that I know of. It only happened once, I remind myself. Or anyway, that's the only time I know about. Maybe there were other times, maybe Lucas has been having sex with Phil all year, without telling me.

Which is okay. It's okay for Lucas to have sex with other guys, that doesn't bother me at all. What bothers me is realizing that, if Lucas has been lying to me about school, maybe he's been lying to me about other things.

Maybe he's been screwing around with other guys some of those nights he said he had late play rehearsals at school. Maybe not, but how do I know? Keeping secrets can be the same as lying—it's the sin of omission. God knows that fact was beaten into me with a wooden spoon many years ago.

Am I now going to use that self-righteous spoon to beat up Lucas?

No, I am not going to do that. With an inward groan, I close the refrigerator. This feeling that Lucas has betrayed me is absurd. He's entitled to have secrets. He's entitled to carry out his life separate from me. I've always known that I'd have to let him go someday, and maybe it's better that he go now instead of later. Before I get any more attached to him.

A sudden thought occurs to me. I wonder if Gramps felt betrayed when I left home to go off to college? I wonder if he was attached to me, even if only in a small way? It's a strange thought to be having at this point in my life.

I'd always known that I was a burden to my grandparents. Grandma left me in no doubt about that. But although Gramps never openly championed me or said a disparaging word against my grandmother, sometimes he was there behind the scenes, to soften her slings and arrows. Even if it was only by giving me a light tap on the sleeve of my shirt, or when I was younger, a quick pat on my head, sometimes long after a punishment had been meted out. (Never, of course, when Grandma could see him.) In retrospect, it may have been those few tentative gestures from Gramps that kept me from losing myself completely in unhappiness and self-pity.

I recognized early on that self-pity was unworthy. I knew I was lucky to have a home, to have family taking care of me, no matter how grudgingly. Maybe if I had never known a mother's hugs and kisses, never heard her encouraging words early in my life, I might not have missed them so much later on, growing up in a house without affection.

Grandma was the epitome of Scots-Irish tight-lipped determination: self-sufficient, getting on with life, facing adversity head-on without flinching. Admirable traits. But she scoffed at hugs, words of praise, encouragement. I respected Grandma, but I didn't love her. And she didn't love me.

Looking back now, I wonder if maybe Gramps loved me a little.

I did not respect my grandfather. I admired his work ethic, and rather bitterly acknowledged his loyalty to Grandma. But I loathed what I thought of as his weakness, the way he never confronted Grandma about anything; the way he always disappeared whenever there was conflict. She wore the pants in the family, and that made him seem less in my eyes.

The one thing Gramps did that went contrary to Grandma's orders was to drive me to college for my first semester.

Time Past: August 1984

My last summer in Spokane has been miserable. I'm working twelve- and fourteen-hour days at the rail yard, six days a week, trying to earn as much money as possible before college starts in the fall. It's grinding, mindless labor—cleaning rail cars, moving tons of equipment from place to place—and I come home drooping with exhaustion, wanting only a hot shower and some warmed-up leftovers from dinner. Grandma alternates daily between harassing me for not accepting a permanent job at the rail yard, or belittling me for thinking I'm smart enough to go to college, prophesizing disgrace and failure in my not-too-distant future.

Mostly I'm able to tune out Grandma's dire predictions, but after nine years, my grandmother has learned which buttons to push to get the reaction she wants. Tonight I'm sitting hunched over the table, half asleep, shoveling spoonfuls of beef stew, and Grandma stands with arms crossed, leaning against the stove. "Who's going to feed you at your fancy school?"

No point in repeating that Washington State is not a "fancy school." It's an average college in an average small town. I'd hoped for a scholarship to a more prestigious university, but I'm grateful that WSU opened its doors to me, and I know I'll work hard to keep that scholarship the four years necessary to earn my degree. "The dorm includes meals," I mumble, tearing a hunk of bread from the loaf on the table.

"Huh," she scoffs. "Guess you'll like that, being waited on hand and foot, just like home."

"I'll miss your good cooking," I answer honestly, glancing at Grandma. It's the truth, but she hates anything that sounds like flattery.

"You'd eat anything put in front of you, tasty or not. You always was a greedy pig."

I look back at the table and spoon another mouthful of stew. It's quiet for a moment, then she demands, "When you leaving? Must be soon, it's getting on to September."

Swallowing a lump of potato but not looking up, I answer briefly, "Two weeks."

"Well." Now she's huffing, picking up steam. "Don't think you can come running home, tail between your legs, when they kick you out of your fancy school."

That brings my head up. "Can I come home for the summer?" I've been counting on working in Spokane during long breaks. "I could maybe work in the rail yards and save money, like I'm doing now."

"You think me and Gramps should keep supporting you, when you're taking off and leaving us like you're doing?"

"I'd still help with groceries and stuff." I've been doing that the past few years, giving Grandma money from my earnings every week towards food, keeping their car's gas tank filled, and I've always helped with chores around the house, doing yard work, putting up screens, anything that I can. Grandma sometimes calls me lazy, but in my heart I know that's far from true.

"Don't count your chickens," is all she says, before grabbing the bread from the table and returning it to its wrapper. After shoving it into the cupboard, she turns around again and demands, "And how you going to get to Pullman, anyway? Planning to lug all your stuff on a Greyhound bus? Or maybe your fancy school's going to send a shiny big limousine to come and pick you up."

The bus seems my only option, so I answer shortly, "I'll manage."

Then Gramps steps forward—I hadn't seen him lingering there in the shadows near the door to his basement sanctuary. "I'll drive Matty to school," he murmurs.

Grandma and I are both speechless. It's not like Gramps to interfere in our battles.

She recovers first. "No, you will not," her voice is crisp, succinct, and the look she gives Gramps makes him blink. "The boy's running away from the only home he's ever known, he's turning his back on us. We sure as the dickens aren't giving him no ride to school."

Gramps blinks again, nodding, and I think that he's agreeing with her. But then he says firmly, "I'm driving Matty. He's put enough gas in that car by now to earn a ride to school."

Then he turns and disappears down the stairs, leaving us to stare at the empty doorway, stunned into momentary silence.

Grandma is the first to act, coming toward the table and reaching for my empty bowl. "You done eating finally?" she demands, not waiting for my answer but grabbing the bowl and setting it in the sink with a clatter.

"I'll wash up," I offer, pushing back my chair.

"Go to bed," she flaps a hand at me. I hesitate only a moment to say, "Thanks for dinner," and then hurry up the stairs to my room. As tired as I am, I lie awake for an hour or so, waiting to hear the fireworks erupt between my grandparents, but there's not a peep.

Life goes on after that as usual, and I don't dare bring up the subject of my transportation to WSU. Two days before I have to leave, I corner Gramps alone in the garage and ask, "Should I get a bus ticket for Pullman?"

"Said I'd take you, didn't I?" he asks. And when I nod, he gives me a little tap on the arm.

Time Present: April 12, 1995

Were Gramps' little taps and pats affection? I could never be sure in those days. Looking back now, I think maybe they were. Probably it was the only way he could express affection, being as much under Grandma's thumb as I was myself. And I realize now that driving me to college was maybe, after all, his gesture of support.

And my offer just now to help Lucas leave home for college in California was sincere. I'll help him leave me. Help him pack his bags, help him with school expenses. If I was willing to help him go to UW, I have to be willing to help him go to UCLA—otherwise that would mean I was doing it for myself, not for Lucas. I want him to know that, whatever he does, he has my support.

Lucas

Dinner was quiet. We talked about general things, nothing important. Neither of us brought up college or California or Phil Covington, and I kept an ear open for the telephone, planning to jump up and run to the phone if it rang during dinner. It didn't, but now that we're finished, now when I'm washing up and Matthew has adjourned to his desk, it's at this moment that the phone rings. My heart sinks when Matthew calls, "Lucas, telephone."

I take the receiver from his hand and hold it tight to my ear. I wish he would leave the room. He often does thoughtful things like that, but tonight he stays put. He keeps staring at his papers, but he's eavesdropping all right.

"Hey, Phil," I say. "Can I call you back? I'm busy."

"But this is important! Did you get a letter from UCLA today? I got mine—they gave me a full scholarship!" He's excited, and I struggle to keep my own voice normal.

"Umm, yeah," I'm nonchalant. "But I need to call you back. Or, you know, I'll see you tomorrow."

Phil is being dense. "Lukey, did you get accepted? Did you get an acceptance letter today, or not?"

"Yes, but ..." and I pause, trying to think of some way to get him off the phone, when Matthew interrupts my thoughts.

"Tell him," he suggests offhandedly, pushing back his chair and standing up. "You can start making plans." He moves through the living room to slide open the door and step out onto the deck.

Quietly I tell Phil, "Yes, I got an acceptance letter. But I can't go."

"What?" he exclaims, almost loud enough to pop my eardrum. "You have to go! You and me, Lukey, it's going to be hell-a amazing! Just think—"

"Listen," I interrupt. "Can you please just listen?" When he stops at last, I explain. "They didn't give me a full scholarship, and I can't afford to go there without one."

"Oh." Phil says. Then he asks tentatively, "Couldn't your guy help?"

"No."

I don't elaborate; this isn't the time for a big discussion about me and Matthew. In fact, never is there time for that. This love thing I share with Matthew can't be discussed with anyone else.

Phil tries again. "You could get a job in LA. We both could. We can get a cheap apartment off campus or something. I could pay for most of it."

"Don't."

Don't tempt me, I want to scream at him. Don't tease me, I can't go!

"Lucas—"

"I have to hang up now. I'm sorry. Really." He has no idea how sorry I am. "I'll see you tomorrow." And I hang up before he can say anything else.

I'm sorry all right, but I'm also feeling guilty. For wanting to go, for even thinking about leaving Matthew, after all he's done for me, after all we mean to each other.

Oh, he never says it. He doesn't use the mushy words, but I know he does love me. And I love him too, maybe even more. So now's the time to prove it. I need to stay in Seattle, go to UW—which is not a hardship, I remind myself. UW has a great drama school, almost as good as UCLA; Mr. Edwards said so. Matthew and I can be together, and I can still get my education.

So Mrs. Goodwin was wrong, after all. I can have my cake and eat it too. I realize that I'm smiling, and I hurry through the living room to join Matthew on the deck.

He's smoking, and he exhales a big white cloud as I close the door behind me. "Hey," he says, looking sharply at my face.

"Hey," I repeat, dropping down onto his lap, wrapping my arms around his neck. I feel his body stay unbending, his muscles are tense. It's cold out here

and I shiver. "Can I have a smoke?" I ask sweetly, already knowing the answer. "I'm a college student now, or almost."

"No, you cannot," he responds predictably. "Not now, not ever."

Obviously Matthew's not going to bring it up, so I snuggle against his neck and say, "Phil got a full scholarship to UCLA."

"I'm sorry you didn't," Matthew says coolly, "but we'll manage the expenses."

"I'm not going."

He's silent for a moment, then gently pushes me off his lap. He tilts back his head and stares into my eyes. "I told you we'll manage. You've worked very hard this year—you deserve to have your dream come true."

"UW is my dream." I let him see the truth in my eyes. "It's a great school. It's not some kind of sacrifice to go there—you have to be a top ten student just to be considered! And besides, it's got something HUGE that UCLA doesn't have!"

"What's that?"

Leaning down and pressing my forehead against his, I whisper, "It has you."

We stare at each other eyeball to eyeball for a moment, then Matthew laughs. "I'm big," he agrees, briefly fondling his cock. "But I wouldn't say HUGE, exactly." Then we kiss.

"Think about it some more," he insists. "You don't have to decide right now."

"I don't need to think anymore."

It's the truth; and besides, if I think anymore about what I'll be missing at UCLA, I might do something silly, like cry.

"I want to stay with you," I insist. "I need to. More than anything."

Matthew finally believes me, or anyway, he stops arguing. He pulls me down onto his lap again, and with his arms tight around me, I'm no longer shivering.

CHAPTER 23



Time Present: April 21, 1995

Matthew

I made myself believe—because I wanted to believe, because Lucas wanted me to believe—that he was perfectly happy about attending UW after all. But lately I’ve started having doubts that, in the long run, Lucas will be content with his decision to stay in Seattle. Regret’s a bitch. Will he someday regret not attending a more prestigious university?

Worry about Lucas takes a back seat when I get a telephone call from Spokane. I’m home early for a Friday; Lucas is still at rehearsal.

“This is Joseph Compton,” the caller identifies himself. I’m drawing a blank until he adds, “I’m minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Spokane. Sharon Morgan is one of my congregation.”

Coughing to clear my throat of a sudden lump, I manage to croak, “Is Grandma—is my grandmother all right? Did something happen to her?”

“She’s in the hospital,” Compton says, then quickly adds, “I believe that she is out of danger, but she has had a rather serious heart attack. You’re apparently her only family? She finally agreed to let me contact you.”

Despite my shock and concern, it does not escape my notice that the minister said Grandma “finally” agreed to contact me. I’m not surprised.

After Gramps died, I offered to move Grandma to Seattle, but she insisted on staying in Spokane, living in the home she’d shared with Gramps. She has his pension, which is small but sufficient to maintain her low-key lifestyle. And

she made it clear that she does not need me, doesn't need anybody. Each time I visit, she tells me to go away and leave her alone.

I can't stay away. I don't love my grandmother, but I feel obligated to look out for her. I return to Spokane every few months, though I tell Lucas that I'm going out of town "on business." He doesn't need to know about these trips.

"I'll get a flight as soon as possible," I tell the minister. "What hospital?"

"The Deaconess," he answers, then asks, "Mr. Morgan, would you please come to see me while you're in Spokane? Perhaps I can help you deal with the repercussions of this crisis."

"Yes, all right," I agree, a bit inattentively; I want to hang up so I can call the airlines. "Give me your number."

By the time Lucas gets home, I've confirmed a reservation for early morning, packed a suitcase, and I tell him I'm off on another business trip. He accepts my story without argument, and promises to be on his best behavior during my absence.

The flight to Spokane is short, just over an hour. I glance down at the Cascade Mountains as the plane soars eastward, wondering why I felt the need to keep the news about my grandmother to myself.

I've had time to regret telling Lucas about my family. I haven't told him much, and though several times he has pushed for details, I've refused to share any more. Mostly because it was all such a long time ago, and has no relevance today. I don't need to compare teen angst experiences. Bottom line is, I don't want to talk about it. About Gramps dying, and about Grandma always hating me. It's boring, and to talk about it feels like an attempt to elicit pity or sympathy. I want neither.

Why should I involve Lucas? It's true that we're having some kind of emotional "thing," though I've struggled against putting a name to whatever it might be. Christmas and Lu's school holiday were like an oasis out of time, we were together a lot. Work slowed down for me, and he was on winter break for two weeks. We were thrown together by circumstances. Naturally, spending so much time together created a kind of intimacy. But this temporary passion will burn itself out, I'm sure of it. It's probably happening already.

With the new semester starting, new classes for Lucas and auditions for the spring play, and several new contracts secured by LaRoche & Lee, almost overnight Lu and I were plunged back into our separate worlds. In a way, that's been a relief for me, returning to a normal routine. Lucas seemed content to return to his circle of friends, his classes. He argued with me about continuing to sleep in his own room, but I was adamant. He's a school boy; the last half of

his senior year is packed with activities and events. He needs the freedom to be himself, a kid among other kids. Not joined at the hip with an older man.

And now I could kick myself, for not encouraging Lucas to go to UCLA. It would have solved the problem of ending this relationship business in a clean, clear-cut way. Living far away from home, Lucas would soon forget his crush on me, and I could regain my sanity.

The pilot announces our arrival at Spokane's airport and I push aside thoughts of Lucas, focus on the crisis at hand. That's what the minister called Grandma's situation—a crisis. I pick up a rental car, stow my bag in the trunk, and I drive first to the hospital. Later I can get a hotel room for the night.

The Deaconess is a large hospital perched on the side of a hill high above the city. It was here that Gramps died, though I can't think about that now. Parking in the visitor lot and making my way to the main entrance, I'm greeted by an excessively cheerful pony-tailed candy-striper. She checks with the main desk for the location of my grandmother, then directs me to Room 303.

I decide to check in with the nursing staff on the third floor, so I can be brought up to date on Grandma's condition before I see her. A mature woman with dark blond hair, whose name badge proclaims her to be Amanda Kramer, Cardiac Unit Supervisor, greets me.

"I'm Sharon Morgan's grandson, Matthew Morgan. Can you please tell me how she's doing?"

Amanda Kramer's professional smile falters slightly. "Oh, yes," she nods. "Your grandmother said you might be coming to visit."

I can easily imagine how Grandma has described me—"the misbegotten cur who killed his grandfather" being a mild guess.

"You'll want to speak to her physician, Dr. LeFevre, who'll be doing rounds later this afternoon. But for now, I can tell you that Mrs. Morgan is doing quite well, considering that she's had a major heart attack. She's weak, and sleeps a great deal. But she's making excellent progress, and I believe she is expected to make a good recovery."

Nurse Kramer offers to take me to my grandmother's room. I'm ridiculously relieved to have someone run interference this first time I see Grandma in such difficult circumstances.

Knocking gently on the door of Room 303, the nurse leads the way across the room. The head of the bed over by the window has been cranked up at an angle. When the woman lying there turns away from the window and focuses her eyes on the nurse, I'm shocked by my grandmother's appearance.

She is elderly, and she's always been thin. She's had gray hair ever since I can remember. But although it's been only a couple months since I last saw her, the change in my grandmother's appearance is shocking. Grandma, who has always been a strong woman positively bristling with energy, lies nearly motionless in the big hospital bed, her hands limp and unmoving on the sheet drawn up to her chest. She looks frail and helpless and weak as a kitten.

Then Grandma becomes recognizable again, when her eyes slip over the shoulder of the nurse and focus instead on my face. Her eyes light up, bright with burning anger. Anger directed, as always, at me.

"About time—you—showed up," she growls in a barely audible whisper. "Guess—I should be—grateful—you—showed up—at all."

"I came as soon as I heard." I'm annoyed by the defensiveness in my voice. "Reverend Compton called last night, I got the first flight this morning."

"Hmpff," Grandma snorts.

Then I move past the nurse and approach the bed, lean down and try to kiss Grandma's cheek. She has strength enough to pull her head away from me, and she hisses in a whisper, "None of that—I'm not—dead yet."

I feel my shoulders droop. Shaking my head at the inevitability of it all, I pull up a chair and sit down near the bed. "Harass me as much as you want," I offer. "We can talk when you've finished."

Nurse Kramer clears her throat and reaches out to poke my shoulder. "Don't stay too long this first time," she admonishes. "Mrs. Morgan needs to rest. Come out to the nurses' station in five minutes, and I'll arrange for you to meet with Dr. LeFevre."

Grandma doesn't take up my offer to harass me; she's silent while the nurse leaves the room. The anger seems to fade from her eyes, leaving her looking once again weak and very fragile.

Gentling my voice, I murmur, "I'm sorry you're ill. I'll do anything I can to help." When she says nothing, I lean forward and ask, "Do you want me to leave you alone to rest for a while, and come back later?" For an answer, she turns her head away and stares out the window. In a moment her eyes close and she's asleep.

Amanda Kramer is waiting for me at the nurses' station. She contacted the doctor, arranged for me to see him at three o'clock.

It's just after noon. I skipped breakfast this morning, and the rumbling in my stomach urges me to visit the hospital cafeteria. I can get a sandwich and a much-needed cup of coffee. Seeing Grandma so helpless has affected me more

strongly than I would have imagined. She was an omnipresent figure in my growing-up years, and I cannot imagine how I will feel when she's gone.

Long ago, I accepted that Grandma will never forgive me for being a burden, but even now, almost two years since Gramps died, I can't forget the way I felt when she blamed me for his death.

Time Past: August 1993

Since graduating from college, it's been my habit to visit Spokane every few months. But the move to Seattle has kept me so busy, settling in to a new job and finding a place to live, that I've put off visiting my grandparents. Still, I've called every couple weeks to check in with them, and lately, each time Grandma has told me that Gramps was too busy to come to the phone—he was in the basement, he'd gone to the store, he was working in the yard.

I've finally managed to get a couple days off work, and I've driven my new Mercedes the three hundred miles to Spokane. It's summer and I drove with the window down almost all the way there, singing along with the radio. It's taken a long time to get over the regret I felt about the way things ended with Dean; but now I feel like I've made a new start in a new job, in a new city. I'm light-hearted for the first time in over a year.

When I pull into the driveway at my grandparents' house and walk up to the front door, I'm surprised to discover that the yard is overgrown. Gramps' beloved rosebushes are withering in the afternoon heat. When I knock on the front door, nobody answers. It's Saturday afternoon, they must be at the store or at some church event; I sit down on the front steps to wait.

It's almost an hour before it occurs to me to check the garage, and I'm stunned when I peer in the window and see the old Chevy parked inside. Grandma hasn't driven for several years, but Gramps still drives them everywhere. My heart jumps in my chest. I'm trying to imagine why the car is there with no one answering the door. I have a house key, but normally I wouldn't dream of using it without permission—Grandma has strict rules about trespassing. Muttering “fuck that” under my breath, I hurry around the house to the front door and pull open the screen.

There's a squeal of brakes, and I glance over my shoulder to see a taxi stop in front of the house. The door opens and Grandma gets out. She sees me and we stare at each other in silence across a distance that seems vast, uncrossable. I wait while she pays the driver, wait while she walks across the yard and comes close to the door.

Finally I can't stand it any longer. "What?" I demand, my voice hoarse in my throat. "What's going on?"

"So you finally show up now, huh?" she mutters, brushing past me up the steps and shoving her key into the lock. "Took you long enough."

"Grandma—"

"Come inside, the neighbors don't need to know our business."

Wordlessly I follow her into the house, watch as she drops her handbag onto the sofa and then sits down beside it. She stares up at me and waits.

"What?" I demand, "Tell me, God damn it!"

"Stop swearing, sit your butt down."

"Tell me!"

"All right. Your grandpa is sick. He's in the hospital."

"Gramps is sick?" I move backward and sit down abruptly on the arm of the chair. Gramps' favorite old brown horsehair chair. "What's wrong with him?"

"Cancer." She closes her lips tight around the word, as if it's the filthiest curse word in the English language. As it is, as maybe it is.

Christ! Christ almighty! "When? What? What kind of cancer? When did—"

"Lung cancer. They found it three months ago."

"Three months! Three fucking months! Why didn't you tell me?" I'm stunned, I'm shocked, I feel sick with anger and disbelief. I cannot believe this woman has kept me in the dark for so long.

"I won't warn you again about swearing," she answers calmly. "As far as me telling you about it, Gramps didn't want you to know. Didn't want you to find out over the phone. He wanted to tell you in person. He didn't know you'd stay away so long."

"My God."

"It didn't surprise me none," she continues, "that you'd ignore us for months."

"Grandma," I try to stay calm. "I called you. I called you every week or two. You told me NOTHING." My voice rises and I leap to my feet, not knowing what to do with my anger. Then it occurs to me to demand, "Did you tell him? Did you tell Gramps that I've been calling?"

"What was the point? Talk is cheap. You couldn't be bothered to come home. You always was a selfish boy."

I have to turn away then, stride across the room and back again. "Where is he? What hospital? I want to see him now!"

"He's at the Deaconess. You can't see him now, it's not visiting hours."

Fuck that. "I'm going to see him." I don't offer to take her with me.

It's a long way cross town. I force myself to drive carefully. I must not smash my car into a telephone pole, though I am shaking with anger and frustration and—fear.

Grandma didn't tell me a room number, so I stop at reception where I'm directed to the fifth floor. Jabbing my finger over and over on the elevator call-button, I lose patience and pull open the door to the stairs, then I run up five flights. I'm overwhelmed with the absolute certainty that Gramps is going to be dead before I reach his side.

When I burst out the door at the top of the stairs, I lean against the wall, gasping for air. A woman in a white coat standing at the fifth floor nurses' station comes forward, and I manage to stammer, "Bill Morgan?"

The nurse—or maybe she's a doctor, she has a stethoscope wrapped around her neck—puts a hand on my arm and leads me to an alcove where she gently urges me down onto a chair. "Sit here, catch your breath," she suggests. "I'll check with the nurse and be right back." I nod and watch her walk away, distracted by the squeaking of one of her white rubber-soled shoes. In a moment she returns and beckons me to come along with her down the hall.

"Mr. Morgan is in Room 512. Are you family?"

"Grandson," I murmur, heart in my throat. "I just—found out. I didn't know he was sick."

We pause outside the door to Room 512. The doctor lowers her voice and tells me, "I'm not Mr. Morgan's physician but I glanced at his chart. You know that he has cancer?"

I nod, my eyes fastened to her face.

"You'll want to speak to Dr. Reynolds. I'll ask the nurse to give you his number. I don't know the details of your grandfather's illness, but ..." She hesitates, then murmurs, "I'm sorry to say that it appears Mr. Morgan is not doing very well."

Before I can stop it, a half-sob escapes my throat and I slap a hand over my mouth to keep any more unwanted sounds from leaping out. I feel my knees wobbling and by sheer willpower I stay upright, nodding at the doctor but unable to speak. She puts a hand on my arm and squeezes.

"Come back to the waiting room, why don't you? I'll see that you get some coffee, and ask the nurse to contact Dr. Reynolds right away."

I want to see Gramps, the need is even more urgent now, but I don't want to burst into his room while I'm so damned upset. I need to pull myself together, so I nod my thanks—still unable to speak—and follow the doctor back down the hall. Then I sit waiting helplessly, trying to keep my mind blank. A few

moments later, I accept a cup of coffee handed to me by someone in a white uniform.

After a few gulps of coffee, I've regained my composure. I need to speak to Dr. Reynolds, but I really can't wait any longer to see Gramps. I walk slowly down the hall, taking deep breaths, reminding myself to be cheerful, to be optimistic, and above all, to say nothing bad about Grandma. Softly I push open the door.

The first bed is unoccupied, so I move across the polished linoleum to the corner. Curtains are pulled around the bed, and when I move them slightly ajar and stick my head inside, prepared to give Gramps a big fake happy smile, I catch my breath, feeling the smile slide off my face like it was painted on.

The man lying on the bed is not Gramps.

Oh, the face looks like his, but it can't be him, it can't be my grandfather. As quiet as he has always been, this silent, grotesquely thin, unmoving figure supine on the hospital bed cannot be my Gramps.

The eyes in his waxy face are closed, and the only sound in the room is the shush of machines. Machines giving him oxygen, machines attached by tubes to both arms, some kind of monitor making an annoying pinging noise. IV bags hang motionless from silver stanchions. I stand there staring at him for a moment, for a few moments, then as quietly as I entered the room, I turn and hurry out again, into the hallway. Standing with my back to the wall, I bend over nearly double, both hands pressed tight against my mouth.

Time Present: Sunday, April 22, 1995

Matthew

Gramps never regained consciousness. If I had not driven to Spokane that day, I wonder if Grandma would have had his funeral, would have buried him in the cemetery on a hillside above the Spokane River, without even letting me know that he'd died? She has always insisted that because of me, because I did not come home to see Gramps, he gave up his battle with cancer and died in the hospital. That, in effect, it was my selfishness that killed him.

That is pure melodrama. I was never really affected by the hateful things Grandma said to me that day, and over and over again during the past two years. Or anyway, not very much. I got over the regret that was nearly unbearable at the time, regret that I didn't get to say goodbye to my grandfather.

It's really for his sake that I've continued to check up on my grandmother. In a way I wish I didn't feel such an obligation to her, but it can't be helped. I do, and I always will.

This afternoon it occurred to me to wonder if Lucas feels some kind of obligation to me, for helping him this past year. That's an ugly and unwanted thought. Christ, what if he felt like he had to stay with me, long after he's tired of our arrangement, out of gratitude and guilt? That's a thought I cannot bear, so I push it right out of my brain.

Instead, I think again about Grandma. Now it's her turn to accept help, and from me, the despised grandson, of all people. I've met with her doctor, who tells me she can no longer live alone. She needs to be in an elder-care facility with round-the-clock assistance. I've consulted Reverend Compton, who has recommended a pleasant facility east of town near the river. I visited it late yesterday. It's a large and very pretty residential home where Grandma can have her own suite of rooms, a bedroom/sitting room area with an adjoining private bath. I'm in for a fight over this, I know that; but at least the doctor and the minister are going to do battle beside me. There is really no alternative.

The hardest part will be convincing Grandma to sell the house she shared with Gramps for so many years. I've arranged to subsidize the cost of the residential home, which she need never know; but it's necessary to get rid of the old house on the north side of town. I won't push for that yet, not until Grandma's feeling better; but I can't afford to maintain an empty house indefinitely.

And now I'm glad that I did not commit to helping Lucas attend UCLA. I could never manage it now, and I'd hate to have disappointed him. I called last night, he said everything's okay at home, but I'm anxious to get my flight back to Seattle tonight. I've arranged to return to Spokane in a few days, to be sure Grandma's doing okay, and to move forward with arrangements for the convalescent facility. I guess I'll be commuting for a while, at least until I get Grandma settled in her new accommodations. Christ, what a fight that's going to be.

Time Present: May 10, 1995

Lucas

Lately Matthew's been gone on business trips every weekend and even a few times during the week, like yesterday and today. But he's promised to be here

for both performances of *The Seagull* this weekend. I've been busy with school and with rehearsals, but I've really missed him. I don't know how I ever considered going to school in L.A.—I couldn't stand to be apart from Matthew for months at a time.

The house is too quiet and empty without him. It's funny how much Matthew's house feels like home to me now, way more than Dad's house ever did. I wish he didn't have to go away so much. Maybe once I'm in college, he'll see how mature I am now, and we can be more like equals. And then after I graduate, I can help pay for things. Maybe I can even help him build the new house he wants to replace this one with in a few years! That would be so cool.

Just when I'm thinking how quiet the house is without Matthew, and how much I miss him, the door is roughly pushed open and he comes storming inside. I've been lying on the sofa staring at my history book, not really seeing it, and when he blasts through the door, I jump a foot.

"You're home!" I greet him happily, leaping up to join him where he's stopped by his desk. He doesn't answer, just drops his suitcase on the floor, grabs the phone and puts the receiver to his ear.

"God damn it," he growls then, dropping the phone back into its cradle. "God damn it, I thought the phone was out of order."

"No, it's okay."

"Lucas," he's exasperated, taking off his jacket and dumping it on the back of his chair. "I've been calling for HOURS. The line's been busy all fucking evening!"

"Oh. Well, I was talking to somebody."

"Phil."

"Well, yeah."

"Lucas, I was trying to get through to you. What if it were an emergency? What if it were life and death?"

"See?" I point out reasonably. "That why I've told you a million times, we need to get call-waiting. The phone beeps when you're on the phone to let you know you have an incoming call. Then—"

"I don't need call-waiting. What I need is for you to limit your phone calls to five minutes. How difficult is that?"

"Five minutes? What can you say in five minutes?"

"You can say, 'HELP, MY HOUSE IS ON FIRE.'"

I try a little laugh. "I don't know if you're joking. Or not."

"Not."

"I'm sorry, but I had to talk to Phil. It was important."

"You are with Phil at school all day," Matthew points out. "You're with him in rehearsals all afternoon. He picks you up in the morning and drives you home in the evening. What on earth do you still have to talk about all night long?"

"Well," I'm trying to be reasonable, "it wasn't all night."

"How long?" he demands.

"Not long."

"How long, Lucas?" His face is turning red. Oh-oh.

"Just an hour. Or," I add carelessly, "maybe two."

With exaggerated patience, Matthew says slowly, "Lucas, the telephone is for fucking COMMUNICATION."

"I was communicating."

"Do the words 'you're grounded' count as communication, Lucas?"

I hate his sarcasm, and now I'm getting mad. "You can't go around grounding emancipated people," I insist. "Stop treating me like a kid."

"Stop acting like a kid."

We stare at each other in silence for a moment.

Taking a deep breath, Matthew says calmly, "Okay. Okay. You're not a kid. And you're not grounded. But I am asking you—asking you, Lucas!—to limit your phone calls to fifteen minutes. From now on. Will you do that?"

I still feel angry but I probably can't win this one, so I nod my head. "Yes."

"Fine."

"Fine." Then I turn and walk in a very slow and dignified manner to my room. I want to slam the door, but I don't. I'm grown up now, and I have to keep proving it to Matthew, till he gets it through his thick head.

A few minutes later, I decide to join him in his room, where he's unpacking his suitcase.

I don't want to say I'm sorry, but I do it anyway. "It seems like I'm always apologizing."

He closes the closet door. "You don't have to apologize about this, Lu," he says. "We had a discussion, and we compromised about using the phone. Right?"

That's not exactly what just happened, but I won't argue. That's probably the grown-up thing to do. Sometimes it sucks being mature.

CHAPTER 24



Time Present: June 5, 1995

Matthew

“But Matthew, this is a great opportunity, I can’t pass it up!”

Another opportunity for Lucas to go behind my back, to make an important decision without consulting me.

“You’ve committed to the firm already—we talked about it, and you agreed.”

Lucas grimaces. “YOU committed me to working at the firm full-time this summer. You asked if I wanted to, and I said ‘probably,’ and we never talked about it again. I was going to tell you about summer stock. I just didn’t know there was any big hurry!”

School’s almost out, and I pushed through the paperwork at LaRoche & Lee so Lucas could be hired full time again this summer. I’d suggested it weeks ago and he agreed. I thought he agreed. Now I discover that he’s made other plans. It’s like UCLA all over again.

“You graduate in what, a week? When did you think would be a good time to discuss it?”

“I honestly didn’t think I had a chance at getting into Everwood’s summer stock program this year—I didn’t think I had enough experience. But Phil said I should try anyway, and ...”

Lucas reads something on my face and his voice trails off.

Phil again! He's been making plans with his little boyfriend again without even consulting me. I head for the door, but Lucas calls "Wait!" so I turn around and lean against the doorframe.

"Well?"

"Matthew, I can still work part-time, can't I? That other student assistant at LaRoche & Lee worked part-time last summer, why can't I?" When I don't answer, Lucas goes on, "Most of the summer stock time will be evenings and weekends. I could still work part-time, couldn't I?"

"So, LaRoche & Lee should just accommodate its needs to fit your schedule, is that it?"

"I didn't say that." Lucas becomes truculent; he's getting angry.

Good. Why should I be the only pissed-off person in the room?

With compressed lips, Lucas goes on, "Is it a major problem for me to work part-time?"

"That's not the point," I complain bitterly, then clarify, "the point is, you went off half-cocked again, making secret plans—plans that affect me as well as you, Lucas! You keep pushing the fucking limits."

"What limits?" He's bewildered now. "I don't get it—what limits, Matthew?"

I just stare back at him for a moment, almost as surprised as Lucas. We've never talked about "limits" before, and I'm only just realizing what a mistake that was.

My relationship with Lucas changed almost overnight from reluctant mentor to ardent lover, and the line between those two roles has never really been defined. I'm not comfortable with ambiguity, never have been, and yet I've allowed this relationship thing with Lucas to formlessly evolve.

"Lu," I say softly, taking his hand in mine. "We need to establish some ground rules."

Quickly he pulls his hand away and backs up. "More rules?" he complains plaintively. "You already have rules for curfew and study time and drinking and smoking, and almost every damned thing I want to do! Now you want more rules?"

"This is different," I insist, trying to maintain my composure in the face of his anger. Probably I should back off and discuss this later, when we've both calmed down. But stubbornly, I can't let it go. I'm disturbed by Lucas' attitude. And I can't write it off as teen angst, he's eighteen now, time for him to grow up.

"It's time for you to grow up and accept some responsibility," I say, marveling at how pompous I sound. I hardly recognize myself.

"That's not fair!" Lucas predictably replies.

Again I tell myself to postpone this discussion, but again I ignore my own warning. "How responsible is it to commit to a job and then toss it aside when something 'more fun,' comes along?"

Even I recognize that I'm over-reacting, and Lucas goes ballistic, picking up a pan from the stove and throwing it across the room, where it bangs against the wall. We're both shocked by this violent act, and we stare at the dent made in the wall by the flying pan. Lucas reacts first.

"I'm sorry." He turns to face me, wide-eyed.

I feel myself softening but I don't want to let it go. In some deep recess in my mind, I realize that this argument is not really about the job. In some way, it has become in my mind another incident of Lucas choosing Phillip over me. Irrational as that may be—and immediately I deny it—still it feels like a knife twisting in my gut.

"Matthew?"

No, I don't want to soften. I don't want to tell him that it's okay, that everything will be all right. Instead, I move quickly away, striding down the hall and out the door.

Lucas

I'm mad at Matthew, and yet I'm mad at myself too. He's right, I should have talked to him about summer stock, but I honestly never thought they would accept me. I only went with Phil to his audition for moral support, and it was at the last minute that he twisted my arm, convinced me I should try out too—just for the experience of auditioning cold, without preparing ahead of time. And just as I'd done when I had to audition for Mr. Edwards before enrolling at West Seattle High, I did a scene from *Cuckoo's Nest*. Afterwards, the theatre director told us, more or less, "Don't call us, we'll call you," but amazingly enough, we both were accepted.

Now we'll get to work with real actors and set designers and participate in three plays being put on this summer. The program director warned that opportunities for speaking parts would be limited. Mostly we'll be helping with set construction, ticket-taking, and other mundane jobs; but we might get small acting parts. At the very least, the experience will be a boost to our careers and look good on our resumes.

Picking up the pan I'd thrown against the wall, I grab a sponge and rub hard to remove the mark it made. There's a dent, but I don't know how to fix it. I'd better just leave it alone or I might make it worse. I was supposed to meet Phil after dinner so we could have a celebratory Coke at TJ's, but I'll call and tell him I can't go out tonight. I don't know where Matthew went, but I'd better be home studying when he gets back.

Something's changed between Matthew and me lately, and I don't know why. I don't know how to fix it. Like the dent in the wall, I've left it alone so I don't make things worse, but maybe that was a mistake. It feels like Matthew has withdrawn from me the past couple months. He's been getting progressively stricter even as I've gotten older and more responsible. I'm eighteen, an adult now, and I'll graduate high school soon. But it seems like he's making more and more rules every day.

Twenty minutes after leaving, Matthew is back. I hear the front door open and shut, then I hear his tread coming down the hall. I'm glad I stayed home instead of going out with Phil. I've left my door ajar and Matthew stops for a perfunctory knock before pushing it open.

"Come here," he says, and a quick glance at his face confirms that he's still angry.

Following down the hall, we enter the kitchen, and I watch as he sets down a paper bag he was holding and then pulls some items from it. "Spackle," he announces, holding up a small can and waving it in the air. "Putty knife," he says, setting down the can and showing me some kind of small tool with a wooden handle.

"What—?"

He pays no attention, just pulls out two more cans. "Primer," he intones, waving the can in his left hand. "Paint," he continues, showing the other can in his right. "Sandpaper," he says, "paintbrush," pulling out the last items from the bag.

When I just stand there, probably with a dopey blank look on my face, Matthew lowers his head and stares hard at me. "Well?" he asks grimly, "do you know how to use this stuff, or not?"

I'm angry that he's making me feel stupid, but the truth is, I have no idea what spackle is, and if I pretend that I do, I'll mess this up and make things worse. Trying for nonchalance, I admit, "Not really."

"Read the can," he says, picking it up and handing it to me. "Use the putty knife to spread spackle over the hole you made in the wall. Tell me when you're done so I can inspect it. Then tomorrow after school, you'll sand it down,

apply primer, and paint that whole wall.” When I just look at the can in my hand, he demands, “Do you understand?”

“Well, duh.” I curl my lip. I can’t help it, he’s pissing me off. “I’m not a moron, I’ve just never done it before.”

“And you’re not a candy-ass rich kid anymore,” Matthew reminds me. “It’s time you learned something about fixing the things that you break.” Then he turns on his heel and marches out of the kitchen and down the hall.

I just stare after his retreating back, shaken more than I want to admit. I don’t understand why Matthew is so mad at me. I didn’t break the wall, I only dented it. Why is he so mad?

Matthew

While Lucas is patching the kitchen wall, I’m sitting on the deck smoking a cigarette, watching the sun set behind the hills surrounding the lake. A calm acceptance gradually settles over my shoulders. I know I overreacted to Lucas’ announcement. It’s true that working summer stock would be good experience for him as he prepares to enter the drama department at UW. It’s also true that Lucas could still work part-time this summer. I have to wonder why I’m being so hard-nosed about the whole thing.

Well, I don’t really have to wonder. If Lucas had discussed it with me before applying to the theatre, I’m sure I’d have been supportive. Instead, it was another instance of Lucas turning to his friend Phil Covington first. Another instance, in fact, of me resenting the friendships Lucas has apart from me. I have to acknowledge that what’s twisting my gut now is nothing less than ugly and unjustified jealousy.

From the moment my involvement with Lucas turned serious, I’ve reminded myself that our relationship would be, by its nature must be, temporary. He is so young, life is just beginning to open up ahead of him. He has the right to explore and experience every nuance of life on his own terms. And to do that, Lucas has to be free.

Free of entanglements, free of commitments. Free of me. I’ve always known that; but what I didn’t know is how difficult it would be to let him go.

I don’t want to let him go. That’s what’s choking me now. The power of my feelings for Lucas is almost frightening. I’ve never felt this way about another person, not ever. I still don’t believe in love, and I never will. But this must be how people feel, who imagine they are in love.

And somehow along the way, I’ve managed to convince myself that Lucas feels the same attachment to me. So every evidence to the contrary, as now in

this fresh instance of Lucas turning to his friend Phil instead of to me, is a fresh wound. Stupid. I'm fucking stupid.

The door is pushed open and Lucas hesitates before coming out on the deck. "Matthew, I'm sorry," he begins, "I—"

"Never mind. We'll talk about this some other time."

"But," he moves toward me and stands with arms crossed over his chest, "I feel bad about damaging your house. And not telling you about summer stock."

I say nothing. I really don't want to talk about this now, but he continues, "I feel worse, Matthew, because I owe you so much. I—"

"No," I growl at him then. "You don't owe me anything." Christ almighty. I don't want Lucas feeling obligated to me. Like the way I feel obligated to Grandma. "Just let it go for now, okay?"

"Okay," he agrees. We look at each other for a moment, then Lucas asks, "Matthew, how come you seem sad?"

"I'm not sad," I lie. "Just tired." I stand up and move into the house. "I'll help you paint the wall tomorrow," I offer, making myself smile at him. Lucas smiles back, and slips his hand into mine.

Time Present: August 9, 1995

Lucas

Phil was a few minutes late picking me up from LaRoche & Lee, we'll have to hustle to get to the theatre on time. "Come in while I change clothes," I tell him as he pulls into the marina parking lot. "We can grab a couple sodas."

"I'll wait here."

"Why?"

Pointing across the lot at the silver Mercedes two rows over, Phil says simply, "He's home."

"Yeah," I agree. "He must've left work early. So?"

Phil leans his head against the seat back, slanting his eyes sideways to meet mine. "He doesn't like me."

"He likes you!" I insist, then ask, "What do you mean?"

"Ever since graduation, he's been giving me the cold shoulder," Phil says. "I'd rather not be around him."

I open my mouth to hotly deny the accusation, then snap it shut when I realize that Phil has a point.

The night of graduation, eight of us drama students had a party at Sarah's house, and because we were planning to drink (we all chipped in for champagne and practically had to sign in blood for Sarah's parents that we wouldn't drink anything else), we decided to make it a sleep-over. We talked all night, sang, did dialog from movies and plays, and generally had a really good time.

Matthew knew about the party ahead of time, and said he was okay with it. But the next morning, when Phil drove me home and I invited him in for coffee, Matthew barely mumbled hello before abruptly moving outside onto the deck. He doesn't seem to like Phil and Sarah coming over to the house.

There's no time to worry about it now, so I move quickly from the car to the house and down the hall. Matthew's just coming out of his room (even though I share his bed sometimes, it's still very much his room) and we say "Hey."

"On your way to the theatre?" he inquires and I agree, unbuttoning my shirt as he asks, "need a ride?"

"No thanks, Phil's waiting in the car. I'm just going to change." I move into my room and pull off the shirt. "How come you're home so early?"

Matthew follows and lounges against the door. "I've got an early morning meeting in Portland, so I'm flying there tonight. You'll have the house all to yourself."

"Oh." I'm careful to fold my slacks over a hanger since he's watching, then step into jeans. "I'll miss you."

"You won't even notice that I'm gone," Matthew says, a strange note in his voice. I jerk my head around to stare at him, and then he laughs. "I'll be home tomorrow afternoon."

I guess he was joking, so I laugh too, though I insist, "Yes, I will. I always miss you when you go away."

"Which play are you working on?"

"*Julius Caesar*. Our first performance is a week from Friday. You'll be here, won't you?"

"Sure," he agrees. "Probably."

I've finished dressing and move close to Matthew, slide my arms around his waist. "Not probably. You have to be here. I've got a speaking part, you have to see me!"

"Hmm."

He's noncommittal, but I know he'll come. He's never missed a performance I've been in, even last month when all I did on stage was play an angry villager without dialog. "You'll like it," I murmur. "I'm a Roman Legionnaire in a pleated mini-skirt."

“Fetching!” Matthew declares before briefly kissing my lips. Then he admonishes, “Better hurry, don’t keep your charioteer waiting.”

The rehearsal goes badly. The actor who plays Brutus is sick and his understudy hasn’t memorized the lines yet. I know the dialogue myself, and it’s all I can do to keep from offering. Finally the director throws up his hands and dismisses us, but Phil and I can’t leave. The wardrobe mistress insists on checking our costumes. Phil is also a Legionnaire, we have two scenes together.

By the time we leave the theatre, it’s almost nine and we haven’t had dinner. I’ve been eating burgers all week, I can’t face fast food again tonight. Instead of wasting time and money at a restaurant, I offer to cook something. I’ve become very good at concocting omelets with mushrooms and veggies, almost anything tastes good with eggs. When Phil learns that Matthew won’t be home, he agrees to come in.

After eating, we move onto the deck so Phil can smoke. It’s windy but warm, the sky’s black dark and full of twinkling stars. Instead of cigarettes, Phil pulls a blunt from his pocket and waves it in my face, crowing, “Dessert!” I grin back at him, though I know that Matthew doesn’t want me to smoke anything, much less weed. But he’ll never know, so I watch Phil light up and then we pass it back and forth. We take a few tokes, then suddenly there’s a banging at the front door!

I motion to Phil to throw the blunt in the water but he refuses, hissing that he doesn’t want to waste it. I wait while he knocks the burning ember off the roach and hides it underneath an overturned ashtray so the wind can’t blow it away. Together we enter the house, and Phil throws himself down on the sofa while I go to the door.

There’s nobody there. When I step outside to look around, a gust of wind blows the shed door open and loudly slams it shut again—that was the banging I heard. I secure the door, thankful that Matthew isn’t home to yell at me for forgetting to lock it.

It’s late and a weeknight, but neither of us is tired, so Phil and I adjourn to my room to watch David Letterman. Sitting side by side on the floor, leaning back against the bed, soon we are giggling. I don’t smoke weed often, but when I do, I get silly. We’re laughing and leaning against each other and then ... oh God, I should have anticipated this, shouldn’t I? We’re two young guys who are probably always horny, and Matthew’s not home, and Phil let me suck him off once, only once, and then he decided to be straight. But now we’re alone, and we’re horny, and just like that, we stop laughing. Phil’s hand is slipping between my legs, rubbing the erection straining against the fabric of my jeans.

I've always known, deep down I've always known, that probably Phil is gay after all. Or anyway, he is when he wants to be, and shouldn't that make me mad? Shouldn't I be mad, that Phil only wants me like this when he's stoned and horny, and nobody will ever know? Phil has a girlfriend, Sally. They've been dating for months. Shouldn't that somehow make me mad enough to push his hand away, to stand up and shove him away, out of my room and out of the house?

So why, instead, do I merely gasp, and moan, and lean heavily against Phil's shoulder? Why am I closing my eyes and pressing my body against his? Why do I join him in an awkward, urgent struggle to remove our clothes as quickly as possible and then, when we're naked and breathing so hard and shaking, both of us shaking and staring into each other's eyes, and then ... and then, I just let it happen. I'm sucking him. He's moaning, I'm moaning, and then he's pushing me gently backwards onto the floor, murmuring, "I want to suck you, Lukey, show me how to suck you."

It doesn't last very long. We're both so hot and so horny and so eager that it doesn't last very long. We both shoot like gangbusters, and then we roll over, lying side by side on the rug, gasping and catching our breath.

Phil is the first to speak. "Lucas," he says without looking at me, "it was because of the dope." When I don't answer, he sits up. His face serious, he insists, "You know that, right? It was only because of the dope."

"Yeah," I nod. "Okay."

"You won't tell Sally, will you?"

I sit up too. "Course not." Then I stand up and reach for my jeans.

"You won't tell him, will you?"

Him? Oh—Matthew. "No. I won't tell him."

"Promise?"

Stepping into my jeans and buttoning them, I reach for my tee shirt and pull it over my head as I move out of the bedroom.

Phil follows me across the hall. "Promise?"

"Promise," I echo, moving into Matthew's bathroom and closing the door. Looking into the mirror, making sure my face shows none of the embarrassment that I feel, I ask myself, why do I feel embarrassed? It was no big deal, only a blow job. So what? It's like when Matthew goes off on his own. He has sex with guys and just walks away. Matthew says it means nothing.

"It's just tricking," I reassure myself, peering closely at the mirror, before rejoining Phil. He's perched on the edge of Matthew's bed.

"Lucas?" he asks tentatively, rubbing one hand on the silky black bedspread. "Is this where you guys have sex—you and Matthew? Does he fuck you in this bed?"

"No," I frown. "We don't have sex, Matthew and me, we make love. We make love—it's way different than fucking." Phil follows me back to my room. "Better go home now, it's late."

"Okay."

When he's dressed, I walk him to the door and pull it open. The wind whips it out of my hand, and the door bangs loudly against the wall. Zipping up his jacket and stepping outside, Phil asks plaintively, "You're not mad, are you?"

"No. Good night. See you tomorrow." And I watch as he leans into the wind on his way to the parking lot.

I'm exhausted, physically and mentally. It's been a really long day: Six hours work at the office, the aborted rehearsal, the costume-fitting, ending with this—whatever this was.

I'm confused about Phil. I like him so much, but my feelings for him are nothing like my feelings for Matthew. I enjoyed having sex with Phil, I'd be a liar if I said I didn't. But I don't like the way I feel afterwards—sort of guilty and sort of angry.

I'd asked Matthew once if someday I'd go tricking like he does. He said maybe, but that I should wait until I'm older. Now I think he's right.

I won't let this happen again with Phil. If he wants to have secret sex with a guy sometimes and not tell his girlfriend, well, I guess that's his business. But that guy is not going to be me, not ever again.

Matthew

The plane from Spokane had mechanical problems, the flight was delayed. I don't arrive in Seattle till three in the afternoon. I'm exhausted from arguing with Grandma, trying to get the old house on the market. I call Kathryn from the airport and tell her I'm not coming in, then locate my car in the parking lot and head home. Stopping only to pick up some take-out from Lucas' favorite deli, I unlock the door and move inside.

Closing the door behind me, I notice a damned fucking hole in the wall behind the door—as if Lucas slammed it against the wall, and the doorknob smacked a hole in the wallboard. Frowning as I drop my briefcase by the desk, I determine to locate that can of spackle I bought recently, and set Lucas to work with it this evening.

In many ways I accept that Lucas is still an irresponsible kid, but I have no patience for carelessness and the damage it causes. If he lives here much longer, I'll have to start buying spackle by the gallon.

If he lives here much longer.

The words echoing in my head startle me. How long, I wonder, is Lucas going to live with me? He is still a kid, but when he's a man, surely he'll want to move out, move on, move away and start his own life.

Lucas doesn't belong to me. I'm only giving him a little help while he gets his life in order. I want him to get his shit together and move on. Right?

In the long run, it doesn't matter what I want. I won't tie him down, I won't hold him back. Maybe I should be encouraging him to be more independent right now. Maybe I should move him into a dorm at UW this fall, or into Angie's rooming house. Probably it would be good for Lucas to experience some autonomy, some independence.

Maybe it would be good for me too. It's getting too comfortable having Lucas around here all the time. It feels almost like a fucking family or something. Maybe I should be letting him go by inches starting now, so that I don't get more—so that he doesn't get more attached to me.

As I stand staring at the hole in the wall, I feel my shoulders slump. Quickly I straighten them again, and head purposely for the kitchen, to put away the take-out containers. When I enter my bedroom, I notice an indentation on the side of my bed, as if someone has been sitting on the edge. Why was Lucas sitting on my bed? Did he go through my personal things? He has always seemed to respect boundaries, and I really have no reason to doubt him now, so I shrug it off and change my clothes.

Then I decide to check the liquor cabinet. I trust Lucas not to sneak drinks when I'm away, but I look anyway. It seems undisturbed, there's no obvious change in the level of alcohol in the bottles of whiskey and vodka. Mentally I chastise myself—I do trust Lucas, so why am I checking up on him?

Feeling slightly ashamed, I move out onto the deck for a smoke. Settling into one of the deck chairs and leaning back, I stare out over the calm surface of the lake as I light up. It's so quiet and peaceful, the pale blue sky beginning to darken, a few puffy white clouds floating way up high. I take a few drags from my cigarette, then reach down to tap ashes into the ashtray.

The ashtray's upside down. When I turn it over, hidden underneath is the butt end of a homemade cigarette. Lifting it to my nose, I sniff, immediately recognizing the smell of marijuana.

What the fuck—Lucas found my stash? I'm really angry now. This is much worse than if he'd helped himself to a shot of whiskey. Locating my hidden stash box and unlocking it, a cursory glance shows the two joints I remember rolling still lying in the baggie with a pinch of grass and seeds. I'm positive it's undisturbed. So where did Lucas get this half-smoked joint? Did he have a party while I was out of town? Why didn't I call last night to check up on him?

I hear Lucas' key in the lock and I force myself to take a deep breath, then another, before sliding open the screen and striding into the living room. I glare at Lucas as he comes in. I am too fucking angry to speak.

"You're home," he says happily, moving toward me, then a glance at my face stops him in his tracks. "Matthew?" he looks shaken, and I wonder just how much of my anger is showing on my face. "Wh-what's wrong?"

Holding up the half-smoked joint, I demand, "What is this?"

"Oh, no," he gulps, his eyes moving from my face to the joint and back again. "Oh-oh. I'm sorry, we forgot to throw it away."

"We?" I hear my voice getting louder. "Who the fuck is 'we'?"

"Um," he hesitates, then says, "Phil and me."

"You and Phil," I repeat. "You and your little friend Phil were smoking dope in my house?"

"Not in the house," he assures me, "outside—"

"Inside, outside, what the fuck's the difference—you were smoking dope in my house." When Lucas says nothing, his eyes anxiously watching my face, I take a step toward him and he takes a step back.

"What else did you and Phil do? When you were high? With the house all to yourselves?"

"Nothing."

"What else, Lucas?"

He just shakes his head and backs up another step.

"Did he stay the night?"

"No."

"Did you have sex with him, Lucas?"

"N-No," he answers, too quickly, a red blush rising quickly up his neck and blossoming in his cheeks.

"Don't lie to me, don't fucking lie." I advance another two steps and now his back's up against the wall. I'm close enough to see him shaking, to see the panic in his eyes.

"You did, didn't you?"

My God, he did. He had sex with Phil. Why am I surprised? Why am I fucking surprised?

“N-No,” Lucas murmurs again, his lips twisting and his eyes wide.

It’s too much, it’s just too much. The dope, the lying, the picture in my head of Phil Covington lying naked with Lucas, fucking him, sucking him, kissing him! In my bed! I can’t stand it, I really cannot stand it. I raise my hand, raise it high over my head. I swing my arm as hard as I can until my fist slams—whack!—against the wall.

I don’t feel a thing as my fist crashes into the wall and makes a dent, another fucking hole in the wall, a fucking hole to match the fucking hole beside the front door.

My eyes are squeezed shut, but a cry from Lucas makes my eyes fly open, to see him crouched on the floor at my feet. He’s badly shaken, he’s hyperventilating. Immediately I’m lucid once again, and I realize I’ve scared the shit out of him.

Dropping to my knees beside the frightened boy, I assure him, “It’s okay. Lucas, it’s okay. I’m not going to hit you, I’d never hit you.”

Which I realize is a ridiculous thing to say considering the hole I’ve just smashed into the wallboard, and the blood oozing up around my grazed knuckles.

Gently I grasp Lucas’ hands that he’s holding tight over his face and pull them away. “Look at me, Lu. Look at me now.” When he obeys, I can see the fear in his eyes. It makes me sick to my stomach. “I lost my temper, Lu, and I’m sorry. But I only hit the wall—I didn’t hit you.”

He blinks a couple times and gasps, “You wanted to. You wanted to hit me. Just like—”

“No,” I deny urgently, “not like your dad. I swear it, Lu, I promise. I lost my temper and I’m sorry, but I swear I’d never hit you.”

Lucas looks unconvinced, but says nothing more. I stand and pull him up beside me. “We each have a hole to spackle tonight,” I say lightly, pointing at the dent I’ve just made, then turning to point at the hole beside the front door. “Looks like maybe you lost your temper, too?”

“Oh,” he says, “I didn’t notice that. But it wasn’t me, it was the wind.”

I just nod, not pushing the issue. Then I take a deep breath and force myself to say, “Lucas, if you want to have sex with Phil—”

“I don’t!” he denies hotly.

“Let me finish.” I let go of his hand and move away, perch on the back of the sofa. “If you want to have sex with—anybody, well, that’s okay. But—”

"I'm never having sex with Phil again!" Lucas insists, clasping his hands together and twisting them round and round. "I promise."

"Don't promise," I insist. "I'm only asking that you don't do it in this house."

I want to add, "Especially not in my bed," but I don't.

"You're an adult now," I make myself go on, keeping my voice unemotional. "And you're going to want to have sex with other guys. And that's okay."

"You mean tricking?" he asks. "Like what you do?"

Is that what I mean? "Not exactly," I hedge. And I wonder if Lucas realizes that I haven't been going to the bars, not really, not very often, for a long time now. Feeling embarrassed, I realize that I've been content to come home to this beautiful, darling boy, and that it's been a struggle not to drag him into bed with me every night of the week.

Standing up again and moving into the kitchen, I tell him I've brought take-out for dinner. He sets the containers on the counter, opens one and says, "Mmm."

I've distracted Lucas, but not completely. As we wait for the microwave to heat our plates, he comes around the counter to stand beside me, and pokes my arm with a fork. "What did you mean," he asks, "about 'not exactly' tricking?"

Taking the fork and setting it on the counter, I pull him into my arms, lean down and rub my forehead on his hair. "I just meant, it's okay for you to have sex—safe sex—with other guys. Just be careful not to get hurt. Don't lose your heart to every asshole who comes along."

"I couldn't." Lucas slides his arms around my waist and leans against my chest. Urgently he adds, his voice muffled against my shirt, "My heart belongs to you, Matthew, and it always will."

That simple statement staggers me for a moment, and involuntarily I feel my arms tighten around Lucas.

Then I remind myself, he's just a kid. He's going to give his heart to any number of undeserving assholes in the next few years. I'm the first, but I won't be the last.

CHAPTER 25



Time Present: August 24, 1995

Matthew

“Grandma, please.”

I’m practically grinding my teeth with frustration, but it will only make matters worse if I yell at the old woman sitting propped up in bed glaring at me. I am nearly at the end of my rope. “Grandma,” I try again, “your minister told me he talked to you a few days ago, and you agreed to the sale of the house. The lawyer has confirmed for you, in writing, that every cent received goes directly into your account at the bank. Why are you still fighting me?”

She frowns. “You think I’m stupid, don’t you?” she demands, her head shaking slightly. She’s getting stronger every day, but she’s still weak and looks impossibly frail. “You can maybe fool Reverend Compton. He don’t know you like I do. I say no, and I’ll keep saying no. It’s my house, it’s not your house. You got no right to sell it.”

My grandmother is defying me with every ounce of strength she has. And she doesn’t have much. If I keep on, maybe she’ll have another heart attack and die, and it will be my fault for harassing her.

“Okay,” I throw up my hands. “I give up.” I turn away and walk over to the window, stare out unseeing at the landscaped lawn of Sunny Pines Retirement Villa. This facility costs about twice what Grandma receives from Gramps’ pension and Social Security, but there’s no way I’ll put her in the kind of facility her income can afford. I visited a couple of them before coming here, and they were miserable, depressing places.

So I will continue to make up the difference in cost. I have no choice. It's a hardship, but I have to do it. I won't turn my back on my grandmother just because she hates me. Anyway, the cost will go down significantly when Grandma no longer needs round-the-clock nursing. She'll move to another wing of the "villa" when she can manage to take care of herself.

"Now you're pouting," she announces triumphantly to my back. "'Cause you can't get your way. You always was a crybaby."

That almost makes me smile. She knows perfectly well that I haven't cried since I was nine years old. Well, I cried when she told me my parents were dead, and I almost cried when Gramps died, but somehow I managed to hold back the tears at his funeral. I didn't want this woman to see me weep. She jumps on weakness with both feet; always has.

So it's no wonder that she's angry now, finding herself weak and very nearly helpless. No wonder she wants to hang onto the old house—it's all she has left of autonomy. She also has delusions that she'll be able to live there again someday. Her doctor has assured me that will never happen, and he told Grandma too, but she's in denial. I don't have the heart to remind her now.

Sympathy for Grandma's plight makes me turn from the window and announce quietly, "I have to go. I've got a flight to catch in a couple hours. Is there anything you need before I leave?"

Grandma just stares at me, so I move to the chair near the bed and pick up my jacket.

"Tell me something," she says. When I move to the foot of her bed, she tilts her head to one side and demands, "Tell me this: How come you never asked me to come live with you?"

"I offered to move you to Seattle when Gramps died."

"Not Seattle," she clarifies, keeping her eyes glued to my face. "You never said, 'Grandma, come live with me in my own house.' And you got a house, don't you? A nice place, I bet, bought with money from your fancy job."

To say I'm shocked is an understatement. "Grandma," I remind her, "your exact words two years ago were, 'Go to hell, Matthew Morgan.' Why would I think you'd change your mind now?"

She goes on as if I haven't spoken. "Bet it wouldn't be convenient for you, would it? To have an old lady living under your nose. Like maybe it wasn't convenient for me and Gramps, to have some little brat foisted on us in our home all those years?"

"You are welcome to come live with me," I tell her now, not flinching from the hard look in her eyes, not betraying by a flicker of emotion how shocked I am at Grandma's abrupt change of attitude.

It would be far from convenient to have this sick and angry old woman living with me. It would be downright unpleasant as fuck, and my heart sinks at the thought. But I am not a hypocrite and I'm not a coward. She's right. She and Gramps made room for me in their home for years, the least I can do is make room for her now in my own life.

When she continues to stare at me without blinking, I lean forward to say earnestly, "I'm living in a houseboat now, which is too small for another person. But I can sell it and buy a bigger place, a place where you can have your own room. And space for a live-in nurse. It will take some time to arrange, but—"

She's shaking her head. "I'm not serious, you dope," she mutters then, dropping her eyes to stare at her hands folded on top of the coverlet.

"What?"

Looking back up at me, Grandma sneers, "I just wanted to see, was you all big talk, or was you willing to put your money where your mouth is."

"Grandma, you are welcome to come live with me. In my house, or in a place like this in Seattle. Do you want to?"

"No, I do not," she says clearly, with more strength than I've seen her display since the heart attack. "I will stay here until I get better, and then I will go back to my own home. And you and no amount of doctors is going to tell me different. And you're not going to sell my house out from under me, neither."

"Okay." We're back to square one. I stand up straight again and button my jacket, but she's not finished.

"Tell me something else." She's staring hard at me again, but I can tell that she's getting tired.

"What?"

"Reverend Compton, he says you're paying some for this place. Is that true?"

I specifically told the minister not to mention that to Grandma. "It doesn't matter," I say now. "I—"

"Is it true?"

"Yes, so what. I can afford it."

"I have never been beholden to nobody in my whole life. I'm not going to start now."

Before I can speak, she insists, "I don't need to stay in this fancy place, Matthew. I'll find something cheaper."

"No," I defy her, "you won't. I've seen the cheaper places, Grandma, and I wouldn't put my dog there, if I had a dog. For now, for a while anyway, you need to stay here. Or," I repeat my offer, "you can move to Seattle. Live with me, or in a place like this. I could see you more often."

"I don't want to see you."

Determined not to let her get under my skin, I turn toward the door.

"Wait."

I stop, but I'm tempted to walk out the door and keep walking.

"Reverend Compton, he had an idea. Something different."

Turning around, I wait for her to go on.

"He said, maybe you could rent out my house. For a while, for a little while, just till I'm well enough to go home. Rent money could pay the difference for this place then, instead of you."

Nodding, I move back to the foot of the bed. "We could try that." I hadn't suggested it, because I'd been sure Grandma would veto the thought of somebody living in her house.

"Then do it."

"Let's talk about it next time I visit," I suggest. "Rest now, and don't worry about anything."

"Somebody's got to worry about things," she mumbles. "You don't have much gumption. Never did."

"Goodbye for now, Grandma, see you soon."

"Hmm." Her eyes are closing. I know she's exhausted.

My step is lighter as I leave Sunny Pines and head for the airport. With any luck, I'll be able to find a tenant for Grandma's house, and then maybe I won't have to worry about losing my own.

Lucas

I think Matthew's coming home tonight. I can't keep track of him, he goes out of town on business all the time lately—almost every weekend, and sometimes during the week too. I never used to mind being in the house alone, but now it's too much. Even though I'm working four or five hours most days, and at the theatre many afternoons and some evenings, I like it best when Matthew's home at night. I asked if I could sleep in his bed when he's gone, but he said no. I don't know why he refused, but he got this constipated look on his face, so I didn't ask.

Phil and I spent the morning at the theatre, helping to paint scenery and getting a final fitting on our costumes. Dress rehearsal will be this Thursday, the first real performance on Friday. We came to the houseboat for lunch. I fixed sandwiches, we talked about the new play and critiqued the last one.

After eating, we goof around in the kitchen for a while. I think we've mutually decided, without ever talking about it, to stay far away from my bedroom. We're laughing and carrying on, battling with improvised swords—me with a spatula and Phil with a long-handled spoon.

He's taken fencing, so he knows what he's doing. I'm faking it, but I'm still able to hold him off, when Phil lunges for me with the spoon. I step aside quickly, and he slips on the linoleum, falling against the kitchen island. He goes down hard, but not before grabbing the counter and knocking off the remains of our lunch dishes and our half-full Coke bottles. The Coke sprays the counter and the floor, but mostly it sprays all over poor Phil.

"Are you okay?" I drop my spatula and rush to kneel beside him. He whacked his head on the counter with a loud smack. I'm afraid he's really hurt!

"Yes, I'm okay." Gingerly, Phil pulls himself up to a sitting position and raises a hand to rub the side of his forehead. There's a red spot and I can see a lump rising already.

"I'll get some ice!" I pull an ice-cube tray from the freezer, wrap a few cubes in a kitchen towel and hand it to him.

Holding the towel against his head, Phil groans. "Ow, it hurts like hell."

"Is it bleeding?"

He pulls away the towel to peer at it. I can see that the swelling is worse. "There's no blood," I'm relieved to report, "but you're going to have an awful bruise."

"My own fault, for screwing around." Phil groans again but gets to his feet.

"You might have concussion. We should go to emergency."

He laughs. "No, Lukey, it's fine. Just sore." Hoisting himself up onto a barstool, he looks at his shirt, which is soaked with Coke, and exclaims, "But God, what a mess! Mom just bought this, she's gonna kill me if it's ruined."

"Take it off, I'll wash it for you." Matthew made sure I learned how to do laundry after that long-ago fiasco when I flooded the kitchen.

"There's no time. I have to pick up Sally. And," he adds, checking his watch, "no time to go home and change!"

"Can you call her?"

"No. She gets off at three, then she was going to shop for a while till I pick her up at the bus stop. Damn."

"You can borrow one of my shirts," I offer tentatively, but he scoffs.

"I'm twice your size, Lukey. If I put on your shirt, I'd rip it apart like *The Incredible Hulk*." He's exaggerating. He's only a few sizes bigger than me, but it's true that nothing of mine would fit him.

"You can borrow something of Matthew's."

"No way! He'd murder me."

"Shut up," I'm annoyed. He always acts like Matthew is the boogeyman. "There's a bunch of old shirts way in the back of his closet—he'll never miss one of those. You can return it tomorrow, I'll wash it and put it back." When Phil still looks doubtful, I repeat, "He'll never miss it. And anyway, what's the big deal about borrowing a shirt?"

"He hates me." I open my mouth to deny it, but Phil hurries on, "You know it's true. That's why I only come over when he's gone."

I do know that it's true, but I say, "Come on, let's get a shirt. You can't go out like that and we're just wasting time. I swear, he'll never know."

I jump up and lead the way down the hall to Matthew's room. Phil follows but waits in the doorway. I push aside clothes in the closet till I find a blue and white striped shirt in the back that I've never seen Matthew wear. I pull it off the hanger and bring it to Phil.

Reluctantly, he takes off his soiled shirt and hands it to me. He goes into the guest bathroom to wash the sticky Coke off his chest, while I quickly clean up the mess in the kitchen. He comes out of the bathroom pulling on the striped shirt and buttoning it up. It's a little big in the shoulders, but that doesn't matter. Besides, straight guys wear baggy clothes all the time. I don't know why, but they do.

"Better hurry, I'm late already," Phil says. "Thanks for the shirt. I'll get it to you tomorrow."

"Okay." We walk through the living room, pause to say "Bye," then he grabs hold of the doorknob and pulls the door open wide.

We both jump about a foot when we see Matthew on the other side of the door! His arm is stretched out grasping the knob, and he's jerked right off his feet by Phil pulling in the other direction. Matthew falls forward, lurching headfirst into the house.

Throwing out his hands to grab the doorframe and brace himself, Matthew drops his suitcase on the porch and exclaims, "Jesus H. Christ!"

"Are you okay?" I ask anxiously, clutching his arm.

"God, I'm so sorry," Phil exclaims, a quick glance shows that his eyes are practically bugging out of his head, he's freaked.

"I'm okay," Matthew assures me, though he glares at Phil as if he did it on purpose. Then his forehead furrows as he demands, "Why were you in such a fucking hurry to get out of here?" He looks at me and back again at Phil, as if he caught us setting fire to the house.

"He's late," I explain. "Phil has to pick up his girlfriend and he's running late."

"Ah," Matthew nods, "the girlfriend."

He says "girlfriend" in a funny way, and I remember that he doesn't believe Phil is straight. Well, I don't believe it either, but that doesn't matter. It's what Phil believes that counts.

"Better hurry," Matthew advises. "Women don't like to be kept wait ..."

There's a pause, then he repeats, "Wait. Wait a minute." He's staring at Phil, then he turns his head to stare at me, and back again to Phil.

"Goodbye, Phil," I say quickly, grabbing his arm and trying to propel him out the door, but he just stands there staring at Matthew. I've heard the phrase, "like a deer caught in the headlights," but I never knew what it meant before. Now I do. Phil looks exactly like he expects to be gunned down any minute.

"Nice shirt," Matthew says quietly. Sort of dangerously. He adds, "As a matter of fact, I have one just like it."

How can he possibly remember all his stupid shirts? He has millions of them.

"Th-thanks," Phil grins sickly, and when I pull on his arm, he finally snaps out of his trance and hurries out the door, throwing over his shoulder, "See you tomorrow, Lukey—Lucas."

"Tomorrow," I repeat, before closing the door, turning my back on Matthew and walking nonchalantly away.

"Lukey—Lucas." Matthew's voice is quiet. It sounds strange and almost scary.

"Hmm?" I keep walking.

Then he grabs hold of my arm and swings me around. His voice is still quiet, but I know in my bones that he's going to start yelling soon. "Was that my shirt?"

I don't dare lie. "I can explain."

"Please do." Matthew crosses his arms over his chest and waits.

"I didn't think you'd mind if, umm ... well, if I sort of had to loan him one of your shirts."

"WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?"

I wasn't ready yet for him to start yelling, it makes me jump. "Phil just borrowed it. Temporarily. He spilled Coke on his shirt, and ..." My voice trails off, then I add reasonably, "He couldn't go out without a shirt." God, Matthew's face is bright red! "Why are you so m-mad?"

"Why am I mad? You can ask that? Every time I turn around, your boyfriend is in my house. Eating all the damned groceries, making messes, smoking dope on the deck. He fucked you, Lucas, in my house, in my bed, and now he's taking clothes out of my fucking closet. And you ask me why I'm mad?"

"What?" I can't have heard him right. "Matthew, wait a minute! He never fucked me! Phil never fucked me!"

"You admitted it, Lucas." His lips are pulled back from his teeth, he looks like some kind of big crazy animal, ready to bite off my head! "You admitted it," he repeats. "Have you forgotten so soon?"

"I never said that! I never did. We only sucked each other off. Phil didn't fuck me, I'd never let him fuck me! Matthew, I'd never let anybody fuck me but you!"

He's shaking his head. "You were in my bed. You and Phil had sex in my bed."

"No, we didn't! It was in my room, only that one time, on the floor of my room." How can I make him believe me? "I swear it's the truth. I swear it!"

Matthew

Staring hard at Lucas' face, I'm torn between wanting to believe him and wondering just how big a fool I can be.

I have not been able to forget what happened once before (only once?) with Lucas' so-called straight friend Phil when I was not home. I can't forget, and apparently I can't forgive him either. I've never been able to rid my brain of the image of Phil fucking Lucas in my bed.

Now I have to turn away abruptly and move into the living room. I don't want to look at him right now. But Lucas is hard on my heels and when I stop abruptly, he almost bumps into me.

Reaching out to touch my sleeve, he says beseechingly, "Matthew, I told you I'd never have sex with Phil again. You said you believed me. It was just a mistake, I thought you understood that? And the one time it happened ... well you know," he insists, "it was really practically just an accident."

"An accident. You slipped on a banana peel and fell face-first into Phil's crotch?"

Lucas tries a laugh, but I'm not in a joking mood.

"And there was another 'accident' this afternoon," I say then, forcing myself to appear relaxed, perching on the back of the sofa.

"It was like this," Lucas explains. "We were pretending to have a sword fight, with spoons in the kitchen. Phil slipped and fell, and he spilled Coke all over his shirt. So I offered to wash it for him, but he was already late, so I then offered to loan him something to wear. But my shirts are all too small. So ..."

"So," I pick up the story, "you guys decided to invade my bedroom and go through my things."

"No," he denies, "it wasn't like that. I got the shirt for him, I picked out what I thought was an old one, from the back."

When I continue to stare at him, Lucas says, "Matthew, I don't know why you're so mad. If you want me to, I'll buy you a new shirt. Okay?"

"That's not the point."

What is the point, I wonder? The point is, I don't trust Lucas. I don't trust Phil. I don't believe they are not fucking around in my house, behind my back, making a fool of me.

"Matthew, do you want me not to be friends with Phil?"

"Don't be silly. I'm not going to tell you who you can and cannot be friends with."

The truth is, I can't stand Phil. As a matter of fact, I hate that fucking kid. I want to pick him up and throw him head-first into the lake.

"He'll be gone soon," Lucas says earnestly. "He's leaving the first week of September. For Los Angeles, remember?"

"You want to go with him."

Christ, where did that come from? I cannot possibly have said that out loud.

"No!" Lucas insists, coming closer, putting his hand on my arm. "No, I don't, Matthew!"

I just stare at him. I have nothing else to say.

Lucas gasps, his hand flies to cover his mouth and he takes a step backward. "You're—Matthew, you're not—jealous? You're not jealous of Phil, are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I curl my lip. "Me, jealous of some silly fucking teenager?"

Standing up abruptly, I push Lucas out of the way and move quickly down the hall to my room.

"My God," he calls after me. "You are! You are, Matthew."

Not deigning to answer him again, I move into my room and shut the door firmly behind me. For the first time since I moved into the houseboat, I flip

closed the lock on my bedroom door. I stand perfectly still, my forehead resting against the door panels, and I see the doorknob turn.

"Please let me in."

I don't answer, just stand there, my head resting against the door. Then I stumble over to the bed, slump down, drop my head into my hands.

What the fuck? What has happened to me? How did I get so ridiculously attached to this damned fucking kid, that I'm behaving like a fool, insanely jealous of his school friends?

"Let me in," Lucas calls again through the resolutely closed and locked door.

I don't speak, but I shake my head, no. No. Letting him in was my first mistake.

I know now what I have to do. It will be painful for Lucas, and it will be fucking painful for me, too. But I am finally going to do the right thing, what I should have done a long time ago. For Lucas' sake. And Christ almighty, for my sake too.

CHAPTER 26



Time Present: September 21, 1995

Lucas

When the bus stops with a loud squeal of brakes and the doors slide open, I stick a finger in my history book to hold my place, jump up and hurry to the rear exit door. Just in time my head comes up. I look out the open door and realize that this is not my stop.

I stand uncertainly in the doorway for a moment till the bus driver growls, “Gettin’ off?” Then I back away from the door, embarrassed. I’m reminded with a sinking heart that I am not going home to Matthew’s houseboat—I’m going home to Angie Carpenter’s rooming house. Resuming my seat, I open my textbook once more, but stare blindly at the page, not really seeing it.

A while later the bus reaches my stop. I shove the book into my backpack and sling it over my shoulder as I go down the steps. The sky is grey and the air chilly. I turn up the collar of my jacket, shove my hands into my pockets, and make my way, head down, staring at the pavement.

As I push open the back door at Angie’s, I see Peter sprawled on the bench of the dinette. His books are scattered over the tabletop, he’s leaning his head on one hand, staring at an open book. He looks up when he hears the door, and nods hello.

Angie turns from the stove, where she’s stirring something in a big pot. She waves a spoon and smiles a welcome. I make myself smile back at her, knowing from experience that if she sees me looking unhappy, she’ll follow me right up the stairs to my room and try to cheer me up. I don’t want to cheer up.

Taking off my jacket and leaving it on the coat rack, I trudge slowly upstairs, reminding myself that I'm lucky to be here at Angie's. Lucky is not the first word that comes to mind, though. Matthew shipped me off here three days before fall quarter started at UW, time for me to adjust to my new surroundings, he said. He meant, time for me to stop fighting the inevitable and accept the fact that he has kicked me out of his home.

Matthew doesn't want me to live with him now. He claims it's for my own good. Yeah, right. He says I need the experience of being around other "kids" my age, of living in a real home instead of on the houseboat. I told him that was bullshit, but he wouldn't listen. He insists he's not mad at me, but all I know is how I feel, and it feels like he's mad, like I must have done something that was the last straw. It can't be just because I loaned one of his shirts to Phil.

"There's fresh chocolate chip cookies," Angie calls after me. "Come have a snack, to tide you over till dinner."

"I'm not hungry," I reply, then add a grudging, "thanks anyway," over my shoulder as I hurry up the rest of the stairs.

I'm not a child who needs after-school treats, and I don't need Angie poking into my business. If I stay in the kitchen, she'll start asking me about school. I don't want to talk about it.

Angie keeps track of Peter and Steve and me. She knows what we're doing in school, and really seems to listen when we talk about things. She's semi-old, in her forties, and she has a business to run and this house to take care of. She has lots of friends, so I don't know why she bothers getting involved with the guys who rent rooms from her. Why should she care about us?

At first it seemed like she was putting on some kind of mom act or something, but now I know she's for real. Even so, I don't want to talk to her. I don't want to talk to anybody. I'm probably going to be alone the whole rest of my life, so I might as well get used to it.

When I come back downstairs and join Peter at the table, spread out my books and begin studying, Angie tries again. She comes over and leans against the table. "How'd you do on your history test?" she asks, as she wipes her hands on a dishtowel.

"The test was hard," I admit, "I'm glad I studied late last night." Angie had shooed me to bed about midnight, coming upstairs and insisting I turn out my light and go to sleep. Mrs. Goodwin used to order me to bed, throw open my door and snap off the light if I was staying up late. Angie isn't cold like that, but I still don't need some old woman telling me when to go to bed.

“Sometimes college is a shock to new students,” Angie says. “Especially if you’re smart, and high school work came easy for you.”

That’s true. High school really was easy, the academics anyway, and Angie’s right, my university classes are much more demanding and difficult. Still, I like it that way. They’re challenging, and the teachers make you think about stuff, not just learn answers by rote. I could tell Angie that I’m pretty sure I aced the test, but instead I hunch my shoulder and lower my head, ignoring her and concentrating on the open book in front of me. As I hoped, she finally gives up and moves away.

Most nights I stay in my room on the third floor. I have my own desk and everything, but somehow it’s more comfortable to study down here in the kitchen. Besides, the whole house smells like chocolate chip cookies, and I won’t be able to resist them much longer. As soon as Angie leaves the kitchen, saying she’s headed to the bakery for the afternoon rush, I grab a handful of cookies and pour a glass of milk.

I can acknowledge to myself that Matthew was right in a way. This is a nice place to live. The other guys are okay, and even Angie’s all right. But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t rather be living with Matthew. As I swallow the last crumb and drain my glass before turning back to my textbook, I wonder once again what I did that was so terrible, to make Matthew decide to get rid of me. I’d been so sure that he loved me, but I was wrong.

Matthew

Home from work early for a change, I’m chagrined to realize that I keep watching the clock, waiting for Lucas to come bursting through the door after school. It’s Friday and he’d be home by now, if he still lived here.

The fact that I miss Lucas so much is just evidence that I let that whole relationship go too far. Now that he’s sort of on his own, Lucas can make friends at school, feel free to date if he wants to, without interference—or fucking jealousy—from me. He’s just eighteen, he needs to enjoy his youth and freedom, not live under the thumb of someone so much older and cynical and fucking jaded, like me.

When the phone rings, right away I know that it’s Lucas. Or maybe I was just hoping that he’d call. I’d like to talk to him every day, but I need to give him more space than that.

“Hey, Matthew.”

It’s an effort to keep my voice from sounding too glad to hear from him. “Hey, how’s it going?”

"Okay." He's unenthusiastic. I can picture his face looking pinched and unhappy, as he was when I dropped him off last Saturday. I'd taken him to dinner and a movie, then drove him back to Angie's, saying no when he asked to come home with me. "For dessert," he'd said, trying to look seductive but looking merely needy. It took all my determination to say no, though I'd have liked nothing more than to bring him back here with me, cover him with kisses and pull him into my bed.

"How's your classes?"

"Okay," he repeats. "How's your work?"

"Okay."

"Well, umm," Lucas comes to the point, "I was wondering, can we maybe get together tomorrow?"

"Can't," I answer quickly, the regret in my voice real. "I've got some business to take care of. Maybe next weekend."

"Business? You're going to work on Saturday?"

"If I can finish what I need to do early enough, I'll call you. But don't count on me, okay?"

"I guess I can't ever count on you."

"Lucas, last week I asked if Angie was taking good care of you and you said yes. You said you like the other guys in the rooming house, and you like your classes. It seemed like you're settling in okay. Is something wrong now?"

"No," he denies quickly. "I just miss you. I need to be with you, Matthew. Why can't I be with you?"

My gut clenches, I close my eyes. He's homesick, that's all. He got attached to me, and now he's having a hard time letting go. But he has to let go, has to move on. We both do.

"You're just homesick. You'll soon make new friends, like you did at West Seattle High. Give yourself time, okay?"

There's no answer, so after a moment I repeat, "Okay, Lucas?"

There's a long pause while I listen to him breathing, then I hear him softly hang up the phone. I sit there with my eyes squeezed shut, grasping the receiver and clenching my teeth. I want nothing more than to call him right back, hurry over to Angie's, grab Lucas up and carry him back home with me.

Not only is that fucking selfish, but it's also self-defeating. I know that Lucas will soon be making new friends, start dating and having sex with other boys. Phil Covington's in California now, but Lucas will meet someone just like him. Another teenager he can relate to, someone with whom he can act his age, be silly and romantic and fall in love. Then he'll forget about me.

September 24, 1995

Lucas

I waited all day Saturday for Matthew to call, but he never did. Now it's Sunday morning and I try him at home, but there's no answer. Surely he didn't go to the office on a Sunday? He used to do that once in a while but not very often, only if there was an extreme deadline coming up. By noon, there's still no answer at the houseboat. Maybe he's just not answering the phone.

I decide to drop in. All he can do is send me away. I have to wait an hour for the bus since they don't run very often on Sundays. When I finally get there, Matthew's not home. I wait around for a while, sitting on the end of the dock; but when there's still no sign of him, I decide to try his office. Again I have to wait ages for a bus, only to find out from the weekend security guard when I get there, that nobody in Matthew's firm is working today. I'm getting more and more upset and I've run out of change for the bus, so I decide to hike out to Capitol Hill. The sun's getting low in the sky, my feet hurt from walking, and I'm starving to death by the time I push open the door at The Cat's Pajamas.

"Hey, chickie!" Patrick greets me, coming out from behind the cash register and pulling me into a rough hug. "Did you come to visit Aunt Patty?" He doesn't wait for an answer, just pulls me toward an empty booth and sits down across from me.

"Actually," I confess, folding my hands on the tabletop, "I've been looking everywhere for Matthew. I hoped maybe he'd be here."

"Something wrong?" Patrick's instantly concerned.

"No," I deny it, leaning back in the seat. "I just wanted to see him this weekend. He said he'd call if he finished his business. I guess he's still busy."

"What do you mean? Did he go out of town or something? Can't you wait for him at home?"

"Home?" I'm surprised, then I realize that Patrick must not know. "Matthew and I—we don't live together now." I can't keep the sadness from my face. I'm sure I look miserable but I don't have enough pride to pretend otherwise.

"You don't live with Matthew?" Patrick's surprised all right.

"He moved me to Angie Carpenter's place, a couple weeks ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Pat's quickly sympathetic. "I remember he talked of doing that once before, I didn't know he went ahead and did it. But honey, I'm sure Matty must've thought it was for your own good, or—"

"That's what he said," I admit. "But it's not good for me, Patrick. But I guess maybe it's good for Matthew."

"I'm sorry," he repeats. "It's none of my business but—did you boys have a falling-out of some kind? You don't have to tell me."

"No. I don't know. He just decided, a couple weeks ago, before school started, to move me there. I thought he—I thought he ..."

Standing up quickly, Pat pulls on my sleeve. "Come on back to my office." He leads the way and gratefully I follow along behind.

Waving me to a chair and perching on the edge of his desk, Pat regards me seriously. "It's not my business to get in the middle of whatever's going on between you boys. But I thought things were kind of settled with you two?"

"So did I," I admit sheepishly. "But he never said anything like that. I just sort of assumed that he maybe loved me. Or something. You know?"

Patrick nods. "Well, I assumed the same thing. I've known Matthew for three years, and he's never gotten involved like this with anyone before. Maybe he panicked, or something."

"Panicked?"

"Oh, never mind." Pat stands up. "Just thinking out loud. Well," he comes to some kind of decision. "Well, chickie, let me take you home now—or do you want to eat something first?" When I say no (I'm so sick with disappointment at not finding Matthew here that I've lost my appetite), Pat grabs his jacket from the back of the door. "I was heading home in a few minutes anyway, I'll give you a ride. Okay?"

"Yeah," I agree half-heartedly, following him out of the Pajamas and getting in his car. We don't talk for a few minutes, then when we arrive at Angie's, Pat advises, "Don't be too despondent, okay? Things might work out yet."

"How?" I want to ask, but don't. Whatever's wrong between Matthew and me can't be fixed by Patrick. I thank him for the ride and move up the path to the door. Angie's not in the kitchen, but I find her in the living room, watching *60 Minutes*.

"Hey," I greet her. "Any calls for me?"

"No. Were you expecting a call?"

"No," I lie, then slowly climb the stairs to my room. I've got a test tomorrow and haven't studied at all, so I make myself settle down at the desk and open my biology book. Even though I'm crushed with disappointment and feel like my heart is breaking in two, I still have to keep up my grades or I'll lose my scholarship.

Matthew

It's nearly nine when I get home from the airport. I just want to have a shower and a bite to eat, watch the news and make an early night of it. But on my way to my room to change clothes, I drop my suitcase by the desk and decide to check the answering machine. There are several hang-ups, a telemarketing call, and finally, a terse message from Patrick, asking me to call him as soon as possible.

Feeling vaguely worried—we don't routinely call just to say hello, so I'm concerned that something's gone wrong in his life—I pick up the phone right away. He's home, and after assuring me that he's all right, he asks if I have time to come over for coffee and a chat.

"A chat?" I'm surprised. "What about?"

"Too complicated for the phone. But it's not urgent," Patrick assures me. "Maybe you can drop by the Pajamas tomorrow?"

"No, I'll come now." I'm intrigued enough that, though I'm beat from my trip, I'm not too tired to drive over to Patrick's.

"What's up?" We're seated in his cozy kitchen with mugs of steaming coffee on the table in front of us.

"Funny, that's what I was going to ask you," Pat responds, taking a sip from his cup and staring at me over the rim. "I had a visit from your young man at the Pajamas earlier this evening."

My young man? "You mean Lucas?"

"If you have other young men, I don't know 'em."

That feels like a jibe, but I ignore it and say, "Lucas came to visit you? That's nice."

"Hmm. He'd been all over town looking for you, at home, at your office, then ended up at the Pajamas."

"Is something wrong?" Immediately my heart begins to race. "Why was he looking for me?"

"Nothing was wrong, except he said that he'd been expecting you to call him this weekend and he hadn't heard from you."

"I had to go out of town. I thought I'd be back this morning, but things took a bit longer to handle."

"Client problems?"

"No." After a moment's hesitation, I explain briefly, "Something to do with my grandmother. It took longer than I expected."

Pat nods. I've never told him much about my grandparents, only that I've been estranged from my family, but he's not one to ask a lot of personal questions. Or anyway, he never used to.

"I see," Pat nods again. "Matthew, I was flabbergasted when Lucas told me that he doesn't live with you now."

"That's right." I take a drink of coffee; it's very strong, and I reach for the sugar bowl, add a spoonful and stir it up in the silence that follows.

After a few moments, when it's clear I'm not going to say anything more, Pat leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Matthew, why? What happened?"

"Nothing happened." I'm annoyed. "I moved Lucas to Angie's place, it's more appropriate for a kid his age." When he just stares at me, I add, "He's a college student now. He needs his freedom."

"And what if he doesn't want his freedom?" Patrick asks quietly. "What if what he wants is to be with you?"

"Maybe what he wants isn't good for him," is my quick reply. "Besides, he's too young to know what he wants. He's just a kid."

"He's a kid who's fallen in love with you. And I'm pretty fuckin' sure that you love him, too, Matthew. Am I right?"

Ignoring the question, I look him in the eye and flatly state, "Lucas will fall in love a dozen times in the next few years."

"Ah," Pat nods. "Are you maybe afraid that Lucas will fall in love with someone else, go away and leave you? Is that why you pushed him out, Matty?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" I slam down the cup and leap to my feet. "This is a stupid conversation."

"But I'd really like to hear your answer."

"I didn't push him out. I'm doing what's best for Lucas. And anyway, this is really none of your business, and—"

Pat stands up too and puts a hand on my arm. "Steady, old pal, I didn't mean to upset you. And it is my business, in a way. You're my friend."

"I am not fucking upset," I insist, pulling away from his hand. "But it's late, I really have to go now. I've got an early morning meeting." I grab my jacket from the back of the chair and head for the door.

"Matty," Patrick's close behind. He puts a hand on the door to keep me from opening it. I stand still, head down, taking deep breaths as he asks insistently, "I know that you believe what you're doing is best for Lucas, but what if you're wrong? What if you're breaking his heart?"

"Hearts don't really break." I curl my lip, glaring at him. "That's sentimental bullshit. Lucas will get over his schoolboy crush, and that's all it is, you must know that."

"No," he denies it, shaking his head and smiling sadly. "No, I don't know that. Lucas is young, but I believe he really loves you. I believe you love him too. And I'd hate to see you throw away happiness, yours as well as his, just because you're afraid it might not last forever."

"Nothing lasts forever!" I growl, then close my eyes, take a deep breath. "Pat," I say quietly, "I appreciate your concern, I really do. But this is my decision, and I know that I am doing the right thing. Please respect that, and stay out of it."

Patrick's face is sorrowful but he makes himself smile. "Sure, Matty, okay. You have to do what you think is right." He opens the door then, but before I can go out, he throws his beefy arms around me for a bone-cracking hug.

"Take care of yourself," he admonishes in a gentle voice that brings a lump to my throat. I just nod without speaking, turn away and step off the porch. I feel Pat standing in the open doorway, watching, as I get in the car and drive away.

CHAPTER 27



Time Present: September 25, 1995

Lucas

I'm lying on the bed with my head in my hands. I've been staring at my open history book for ages. The print blurs, and I start to cry, giving in to the misery crushing my chest. All this time, since Matthew dumped me here at Angie's, I haven't cried, not once. Now it's a relief to give in to the hot tears pressing against the back of my eyes.

"Knock-knock."

My head comes up as my bedroom door is pushed open. Peter is standing there. "Knock-knock. Can I come in?"

Quickly rubbing my sleeve over my wet eyes, I sit up, swing my legs over the side of the bed. "No," I want to say. "Go away," I want to say. I clear my throat but for a moment I cannot speak, I'm still choked with tears.

Peter moves inside, closing the door softly behind him. He moves forward and sits on the edge of the bed. "What's wrong?"

"N-nothing," I sputter.

Peter's a junior at UW, majoring in Sociology. He lived with Angie last year too. He says it's more comfortable than a dorm and cheaper than an apartment. We study together in the kitchen sometimes, but we haven't talked about personal stuff. He works part-time at the campus bookstore, so he's not around much. Besides, he's older, almost twenty-one. He has his own friends.

"If nothing's wrong, why are you crying?"

I just shake my head, I don't want to talk about it.

“Homesick?” he persists. “Missing your family?”

“No,” I croak, “I don’t have any—”

And fuck me, if that doesn’t set me off crying again! I’m so embarrassed.

Peter slides closer on the bed and puts his arm around my shoulders, hugging me against him. I resist for a moment, then give in and lean against his chest. Peter’s tall, nearly as tall as Matthew, and it feels good to be held in his arms, even though I’m mortified to be such a crybaby.

“Shh,” he murmurs, bending his head, his warm breath tickling my ear. “Shh, you’re okay.”

“I know,” I insist, trying to pull away.

“Then tell me what’s wrong?”

It’s a struggle to keep my lips closed tight, then I am horrified to hear myself blurt out, “My dad kicked me out, and Matthew pushed me away, and Phil moved to Los Angeles. There’s nobody in the whole world who loves me.”

“Ah, poor little bro,” Peter pulls me hard against him again and holds on tight. This time I don’t struggle, just lean against him while he rubs my back. It feels nice. Until I realize that his hand has moved down my back, his fingers slipping beneath the waistband of my jeans.

I’m shocked, but for a moment, I can’t move. Peter leans forward and kisses my right eyebrow. He hesitates for a moment, then he kisses my left eyebrow. I just stare at him, unmoving, but when he kisses the corner of my mouth, I try to pull away.

“Lucas,” Peter murmurs, his breath warm on my face. I can’t look at him anymore, I close my eyes, and when he pulls me tight against his chest again, I feel myself start to shake. “Lucas,” he whispers, “let me.”

“Let you what?” I want to ask, but I don’t ask, because I know, don’t I? But do I want him to?

Apparently I do, because I don’t resist as his mouth covers mine and his gentle kisses become harder, more demanding. I don’t resist as he slips a hand up under my shirt and caresses my back, then moves his hand down again, down inside my jeans. When he pulls his mouth away from mine, I hear him gasp, and then I gasp too and murmur, “Don’t. Stop.”

“Don’t stop?”

Peter grasps the hem of my shirt and pulls it over my head, then pulls off his own shirt, tossing them both on the floor. He fumbles with the buttons of my jeans, and I realize that my hands are struggling to help him. In a moment we are both naked, and we drop down onto the coverlet, rolling around wildly, grunting and gasping. We’re shaking the narrow bed, it hits the wall a few

times, and then without warning, we roll right off the edge and onto the floor with a loud thump!

The surprise stops us for a moment, then Peter pushes me down on my back, straddling my hips, and holds both my hands on the floor. "I want to fuck you," he says.

"No."

I've never been fucked by anybody except Matthew, and, hot as I am right now, I don't want to do it with Peter.

He frowns, then slides backwards, keeping his eyes on my face before lowering his head and taking my dick into his mouth. I moan, and Peter pauses long enough to say, "Make it last." I nod, but as usual I cannot make it last the first time. Try as I might, in just minutes I feel myself letting go, and I cry out when my body spasms once, twice. My right arm flies out and hits the bed frame, making me yelp. I'm going to have a bruised elbow tomorrow.

"You okay?" Peter turns to check on me, then without waiting for an answer, he chides, "Too fast." He takes my hand, pulls me to my feet. We clamber back on top of the bed.

"Suck me off now," he says, so I do.

When Peter's finished, we lie side by side, catching our breath. He turns over to face me. "Feeling better now?"

I don't really feel better. It was okay. In fact it was pretty hot, and naturally it feels good to get off. Yet in a way, I feel worse than I did before, because I'm reminded how wonderful sex with Matthew has always been.

But that's not Peter's fault, so I say, "Yeah, that was great."

He sits up, leans down for a quick smacking kiss, and rolls off the bed. Gathering up his strewn clothing, he strides to the door and pulls it open. I hear him exclaim, "Oh, my God!"

"Wha-?" I jerk upright in bed and stare at the open doorway. Angie's standing there!

"You scared me!" Peter clutches his wadded up clothing in front of his nakedness. I grab the edge of the coverlet, pull it over me.

"Well, Peter," Angie scowls. "You know what comes next."

"But nothing happened," he insists. "We were just, uh, we were just—"

"Don't lie," she warns, moving into the room. "Do you think I'm stupid? I could hear you three floors away."

My eyes switch back and forth from Angie's face to Peter's. Angie repeats, "You know what comes next. Second time's the charm. You've got till the end of the week to find a new place to live."

"You're kicking us out?" I'm shocked into speech. "Angie, you're—"

"Not you. Not this time. But you both know the rules—no funny business in my house. Peter's had one warning already."

"I forgot! Angie—I forgot!" I blurt out.

It's the truth. I really did forget that one of Angie's major rules is no fraternizing among the guys. She explained it was because we have to live together peacefully, and that sex messes things up.

"Don't blame Lucas," Peter insists. "It was my fault. I'll go." And he turns to leave the room, his shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Angie," I try desperately, "Don't be mad! Peter was just being nice, honest! I was upset, and he was trying to cheer me up. But we won't do it again, I promise!"

"See that you don't," she's grim. "But it's too late for Peter." We watch him move across the hall into his room and close his door. "That's your first broken rule, Lucas. Two strikes and you're out." She turns away, puts her hand on the door.

"Angie, wait! You won't tell Matthew, will you? You won't tell him about this?"

She doesn't hesitate. "Lucas, no, I won't tell him about you and Peter. But I must tell him that you've broken a rule, and that you've had your first warning. He's responsible for you. He needs to know that you're on probation. If you're kicked out, he'll have to find someplace else for you to live."

Angie stops when she sees what must be the horrified look on my face, and goes on more gently, "Lucas, if you behave from here on out, you'll be okay. Nothing will happen to you this time."

"But he'll want to know what happened! He'll make me tell!"

She's stern once more. "That's between you two."

I'm so upset, I can't think straight. Angie glances at me again and insists, "I'm sure he'll understand, Lucas."

He won't, though. I know Matthew, and I know he won't understand. Oh God, what am I going to do?

Matthew

"Lucas, I have a meeting in five minutes, I'll call you back."

My mind's focused on a presentation my team is making to a potential new client. Kathryn says everyone's ready and waiting in the conference room. I do not have time for this call.

"Can you just answer a question first, Matthew? Just one question."

Suppressing my impatience, I agree. "Okay, but make it quick." I stand up, cradling the phone against my shoulder as I roll up a blue-line and snap on a rubber band.

"Did Angie call you yet?"

"Angie? No, she hasn't called."

"Okay," Lucas whooshes a big sigh. "Talk to you later!"

"Wait a minute." My attention is caught. "Lucas, why would Angie call me?"

"Oh, I don't know," he answers airily. "Talk to you later."

"Wait."

"You'll be late for your meeting."

I hesitate for a moment, then say, "Lucas, tell me."

"Later."

"Now." I drop the drawing onto my desktop and sit down again. "Tell me now."

"It's not something quick, okay? It's something long."

"What the fuck does that mean? Are you in trouble?"

"Jeez," he exclaims, "why do you assume I'm in trouble?"

"Are you?"

There's silence for a moment, then he says, "Yeah, sort of. But it's not a big deal. We can talk about it later."

I feel my blood pressure rising; I loosen my tie and demand, "Just fucking tell me already."

"Maybe I could come see you after work?"

"No." I rub the back of my neck, uptight about this client meeting, and about a meeting scheduled with a rental agent in Spokane. And now Lucas is in trouble. "I'm leaving right after this meeting, I have a flight to catch. I'll be gone until Sunday afternoon."

"You're always going out of town. You're never around."

"I have shit to do, Lucas, and so do you. Are you in trouble with your classes? Did you get in a fight?" I can feel myself losing control of what little patience I have. "Just fucking tell me!" I'm not yelling, but I'm damned close. When still he says nothing, I demand, "Why did you ask if Angie called—what is she going to tell me?"

"If I could just talk to you in person—"

"Well, you can't. So spit it out." I glance up and see Kathryn hovering in my open door, so I cover the phone and hiss, "In a fucking minute!" She makes a face and backs away, pulling the door shut.

“Okay,” Lucas gives in. “It’s just that I sort of broke a rule, a house rule, at Angie’s. She’s going to tell you I’m on probation. That’s all.”

“What rule?”

“It truly doesn’t matter, Matthew, because I’m never going to do it again, okay? She said I don’t have to tell you.”

“Christ, I’m sick of this fucking guessing game. Stop playing around and tell me what rule you broke, and what the fuck ‘probation’ means.”

“I’m not playing around! Probation just means, I can’t ever do it again. And I won’t. And she promised not to tell you what, and I’m not going to tell you what, because guess what, Matthew, it’s none of your business.”

“I’m paying your room and board. You’d better believe what you do there is my business.”

Lucas gasps. “I knew you’d throw that up at me. I knew you’d throw it in my face that I’m a—a fucking burden!”

I stop then, just stop. Nobody knows better than I do how miserable it is to feel beholden for the food you eat, for the bed you sleep in. Taking a deep breath, I say sincerely, “I’m sorry, Lucas. You are not a burden.”

“Yes, I am.”

I can hear that he’s close to tears. Forcing myself to speak softly, I repeat, “You are not a burden. But I am responsible for you. So tell me.”

“No. Can’t you just trust me, that I won’t do it again?”

“Lucas, nothing you did could be worse than the things I’m imagining. Tell me.”

“No, I absolutely won’t.”

Impasse. There’s a knock at my door and Kathryn sticks her head inside again. I glare at her but nod okay before waving her out.

“Now I’m late for my meeting. I can’t change my flight plans for tonight, but I’ll try to come back earlier on Sunday. And then you will tell me whatever the fuck is going on. Or else.”

“Or else what?”

Standing again, I grab the blue-line and prepare to hang up. “Or else,” I say harshly, “there will be consequences. You have two days to think about it.”

“You’re threatening me.”

“Damn right!” I bang my fist against the desk, finally losing my temper. “Jesus Christ! Now tell me—right this minute, Lucas, or I swear I’m coming over there! If I have to miss this meeting or cancel my flight because you’re too stubborn to do as you’re told ...”

“Stop treating me like a child! Go to hell!”

“Don’t hang up,” I growl. “Don’t you dare hang up on me.”

“You’re being a bully and I hate you!” Lucas is in tears now, full out, not even trying to hide it.

I want to calm down. I need to calm down. I take a deep breath and tell myself to give it up for now. I can see Lucas on Sunday, surely this can wait. And then Kathryn sticks her head in the door again, and I go absolutely bat-shit ballistic.

“Just a fucking minute!” I yell at her, realizing I’m being an asshole. And knowing that I’ve stepped over the line. I’m going to have to apologize to her. That makes me even angrier.

“Tell me right this fucking minute what you did, Lucas. I mean it!”

“I’m sick of you bossing me around all the time!” My anger has escalated his descent into childish behavior. “I’m going to run away!” he insists. “I hate you!”

Sanity is slowly returning. I struggle to come down off my high horse. I’m being as ridiculous as Lucas. “Crank the drama princess bullshit down a peg, please?” I’m annoyed at my own pigheadedness. “Stay right there, I will see you on Sunday.”

“I won’t be here Sunday!” Lucas is hysterical now, he’s almost screaming. “I’m going to go away, someplace far away, you’ll never see me again!”

This retort is so silly, so childish, I can hardly stop myself from flying off the handle again. Instead I growl ominously, “Lucas, if you dare run away, I swear that I am NOT coming after you. Do you understand?”

There’s no answer, and in a moment, I demand, “Lucas, do you hear me?”

Lucas

“Lucas, do you hear me?” Matthew shouts again, and still I can’t speak. Instead I nod, which is dumb since he can’t see me. I nod and slowly put the phone back in its cradle, stand there staring at it. When it rings again, I jump. My hand’s still on the receiver, but I don’t pick it up. I can’t listen anymore.

Shuffling up the stairs to my room, I make myself stop crying. It’s useless, silly and childish. I have to stop being a child. I’m an adult. It’s time for me to grow up and be on my own. Dragging my duffel bag from the top of the closet, I start packing.

The phone keeps ringing off and on, echoing through the empty house. I hump my bag down the stairs and march out the door. I keep right on marching, my anger and determination keeping me moving toward the highway

leading south. At the freeway entrance, I take up position: head up, shoulders back, thumb resolutely out, waiting for a lift.

I'll show Matthew. I'll prove that I can take care of myself. And then he'll be sorry.

PART III



CHAPTER 28



Time Present: March 2, 1997

Matthew

“India? You’re going to fucking India?” Patrick’s voice rises when he pronounces “India,” as if I’ve just announced that I booked passage on a shuttle to the moon. “You’ve got some client there who’s paying your way?”

“It’s not work-related. It’s a personal matter.”

“A personal matter?” Patrick repeats, leaning forward and resting his hairy arms on the table. “What kind of personal matter would drag you to ... Oh, my God!” he rears back in the booth. “You’ve found Lucas? Matthew, you’ve finally found him?”

“No.”

God damn it. God damn it.

“No, I have not found Lucas. I am not looking for Lucas. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“Oh, Matt,” Pat leans across the table again, his hand closing over my fingers which are tightly clutching the table edge. “Matty, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you!”

“I’m not upset. I just stopped by to let you know that I’m going out of town for a while, as soon as I get the visa paperwork straightened away. I got an arsenal of shots today, and I’ve booked my outbound flight.”

“So, you won’t tell me why you’re going?” I open my mouth to answer but Pat adds quickly, “Never mind, I don’t mean to pry into your business. Oh!” he exclaims, “Speaking of business, how are you getting the time off work? You

told me the other day that you've been juggling three or four dead-lined projects."

"It's not a good time to leave, certainly. But Paul, the senior partner, suggested that I combine my—vacation—with a client meeting in London. LaRoche & Lee designed a remodel of the Dorchester Hotel there some years ago, and Jasper Hemmings, the director, is considering expansion. He wants to go over the old plans. As luck would have it, my flight goes to London anyway, with a plane change to Delhi. I've arranged to spend a few days in London on the way home."

"How long will you be gone? Do you need your plants watered or anything?"

"The cleaning service will take care of my plants, but thanks anyway." I hesitate, then add, "Pat, it's a family thing. I'm not sure—I'm not sure how it will turn out."

I slide out of the booth and stand up. Pat does the same, and we shake hands. Then he grabs me, gives me a hug. "Be careful," he murmurs, then pulls away and winks. "No hanky-panky, now! I think they frown on that," and he gestures vaguely toward the east, "over there."

"I'll remember. And I'll call you when I get home."

I have no intention of telling Patrick that I'm going on a wild goose-chase. But I feel a twinge of guilt for jumping down his throat at the mention of Lucas. He suffered through months of my black moods after Lucas ran away. And okay, so maybe I did look for the boy for a while. But I stopped that nonsense a long time ago. Lucas wanted out. He left of his own free will. I haven't even given him a thought for a long time.

Liar.

It's not really a lie. I haven't consciously thought about Lucas for a long time. It's not my fault that he haunts my dreams, or that sometimes I think I see him across a crowded street, or ducking into a building, and before I can stop myself, I'm hurrying to catch up. Whenever that happens, I feel like an idiot, and I get angry all over again. Of course, it's never Lucas. On those occasions when I've grabbed someone from the back and whirled him around to face me, it's never Lucas. He left Seattle more than a year ago. I know that for a fact.

What I could tell Patrick, but I won't, is that I did search for Lucas, seriously search for him the first few months after he left, even hiring a detective to seek him out. I didn't want Lucas back, would not have taken him back, not after he

so stupidly ran away. But I wanted to reassure myself that he was okay, that he was safe.

Twice the detective located him.

Lucas showed up in L.A., which was no surprise. I was sure he'd run off to join Phil Covington at UCLA, and the detective indeed discovered that he was staying in the dorm where Phil had a room. As soon as I knew for sure that Lucas was there, I called off the detective and forgot all about it.

Another lie.

All right, so I burned for a while; my old jealousy flamed high again. Later I could be philosophical—realistically, where else could Lucas have gone, except to somebody he knew? By the time my anger died down and I was calm enough to contact Phil, Lucas had disappeared again.

Phil could tell me nothing. I was surprised when he asked what had gone wrong between Lucas and me. I'd expected that Lucas would have cried on his friend's shoulder, but apparently he'd said nothing except that he'd decided to strike out on his own. When the dorm counselors discovered Lucas living there, they'd evicted him—long-term guests being against the rules. He'd assured Phil he had plenty of money, and that he'd be in touch when he settled someplace else. That happened two weeks before I called, but that was the last Phil heard from him.

Sick with worry, I'd called the detective agency again. Horror stories about what happens to beautiful boys forced to live on the streets filled my head. I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. Twice I even flew to Los Angeles myself, to search for him. A fool's errand, and I was a fool all right.

The detective found Lucas once more. He was working as a dishwasher in a greasy-spoon in a rundown neighborhood in L.A. The detective photographed Lucas behind the diner, leaning against a dumpster smoking a cigarette, a dirty white apron tied around his hips.

I'd had that photo enlarged and spent what felt like hours peering at the boy's pale face, anguished at the thought of him alone and unhappy, maybe friendless, maybe hungry. But I'd refused to let the detective make contact. Instead, I waited for Lucas to admit defeat, to come home, to call and ask me to take him back. I should have known he'd never do that.

And then it was Christmas. Nostalgia swept over me. Most of my life, Christmas has been a fairly miserable time, until Lucas came along. I found myself aching for him, hardly able to bear the happy holiday crowds all around me celebrating love and togetherness, while I slept alone and lonely in my bed

every night. I decided it was time to forgive Lucas. It was time for him to come home.

I set the detective to work again, but it was too late. He discovered that Lucas disappeared from his dishwashing job one day, collected his paycheck and walked away. The detective could find no one who knew why Lucas had left or where he had gone. After that, there was no trace of him to be found.

I was plunged into despair, wracked with guilt and regret. Later I was angry. Angry at myself, but mostly angry at Lucas. He walked out on me, he turned his back and ran away, and now he is dead. He must be dead, how else to explain his complete disappearance?

It's a strange thing, but anger at Lucas kept me going. I wanted to be angry, I needed to be angry. Sometimes being angry is all that sustains you.

Pushing aside thoughts of Lucas as I leave the Pajamas and drive home, I try to channel my brain into organizing last-minute details of my trip. But instead, I'm remembering the phone call a few days ago that precipitated this journey. This journey that will doubtless end up being another melodramatic fool's errand.



Though naturally I'd given my work phone number to Mrs. Bearson, director of the Sunny Pines Retirement Villa in Spokane, all required business calls were routinely made to my home. So when Kathryn told me there was a Mrs. Bearson on line two, immediately I recognized the name and braced myself for bad news.

But Grandma hadn't died, though she'd had another heart attack. Mrs. Bearson assured me that my grandmother was expected to recover, though each successive bout of ill health leaves her weaker (and angrier) than ever.

I keep tabs on Grandma through the Sunny Pines administration, but I seldom go in person. In fact, I haven't seen Grandma for nearly a year. I've set up my bank account to make automatic monthly payments to the home to supplement her care, and the director sends me regular reports on her health.

Mrs. Bearson reported that Grandma once again has been moved into the full-service wing of the residence, where she began her stay after her first heart attack. She'll be getting around-the-clock care, and I know the monthly fees will just about double. Expenses had been tight when Grandma first moved into the Villa, especially since I'd also been supporting Lucas, and Grandma had refused to sell her house. But the house is rented now, and I've had numer-

ous raises and bonuses in the past few years. And now I have only myself to support.

Lucky me.

And I know that I owe Grandma big time, and always will, for giving me a home when I was a child. I'll always take care of her, whether she acknowledges me or not. But it's not just the physical and financial arrangements that Mrs. Bearnson wanted to discuss with me this time. "Mr. Morgan," she said, "your grandmother wants you to come and visit her, as soon as possible."

After recovering from the shock, I realized that Grandma's brain must have been affected by the heart attack. "Has she lost her mind?" I asked, without irony.

Mrs. Bearnson must be aware of how much my grandmother dislikes me. The old woman makes no bones about blaming me for every misfortune that's ever befallen her and Gramps since I was dropped on their doorstep when I was nine years old. I'll accept responsibility for fucking up their lives financially, for being a drain on them when I was a homeless little wretch, but I was not responsible for killing Gramps, though Grandma has never stopped blaming me for that, too.

"No, her mental faculties are fine," Mrs. Bearnson assured me. "But naturally she's had quite a scare. As soon as she could speak coherently, she asked that we contact you."

No matter what Mrs. Bearnson said, I was pretty sure that Grandma was not in her right mind. I kept that thought to myself, and promised to get a flight to Spokane first thing next morning.

Sunny Pines is aptly named. It's a sprawling modern white building nestled on a large lawn surrounded by pines and small flower gardens, located on the southeast side of town not far from where the Spokane River meanders slowly on its way from Coeur d'Alene Lake to the Spokane Falls. The Pines is a pretty place, nicely decorated, with lots of amenities. But it's still depressing as hell, since most of the occupants are elderly and frail, many in wheelchairs. When I arrived, a group of them was slowly disembarking from a transit vehicle, returning from some kind of field trip.

At reception, a clerk called the director, and Mrs. Bearnson bustled up to the desk. "Mr. Morgan," she greeted me with a professional smile. "Nice to see you again." We shook hands and she led me into her office, where we sat for a few minutes while she brought me up to date.

“Your grandmother’s doing well,” she assured me. “The heart attack was mild, and while there was some damage to the heart muscle, her physician expects that she’ll make a good recovery.”

I nodded. “And you say her mind is completely normal?” I’m sure my voice sounded disbelieving. Though Mrs. Bearnson nodded, I felt the need to explain. “It’s just that it’s rather—unusual—for her to want to see me. We’ve never had a close relationship.” Understatement of the year.

“I know that you haven’t visited for a while,” she began, when I interrupted.

“At my grandmother’s request.” Why should I care if this large middle-aged woman in the dove-gray suit thought badly of me?

“Yes, I know,” Mrs. Bearnson agreed quickly. No doubt she’s heard Grandma raving on the subject of her snake-in-the-bosom grandchild. “I didn’t mean to sound judgmental. But Mrs. Morgan has asked to see you now, and if you’re ready, I’ll take you to her room.”

I followed her through the quiet tiled halls. All the doors are paneled and painted white; there’s a feeling of being in a large hotel, except that some of the doors are adorned with wreaths or other decorations. Grandma’s door is plain. Mrs. Bearnson rapped a perfunctory knock and then grabbed the knob and pushed the door open. Grandma was lying in a hospital bed, cranked up so that she was in a sitting position. She turned her head to look at the door, and I felt that immediate crackle of recognition and dislike leap from her pale blue, slightly protuberant eyes when she saw me.

“Here’s your grandson,” Mrs. Bearnson announced in a loud and cheerful nurse-like voice. “I’ll leave you now. Call if you need anything.” With a smile for Grandma and a nod to me, the director was gone, closing the door behind her.

“Hello, Grandma.” I moved closer to the bed—but not too close. She’s been known to throw things at me.

“Took your time getting here, didn’t you?” she frowned, sitting up straighter. “If that heart attack had killed me, you’d be three days late.”

“Mrs. Bearnson called me yesterday afternoon, I got the first available flight this morning.” I’m over thirty but I feel like a teenager making excuses for fucking up.

“Hmmp.” Grandma’s frown deepened. “Come closer. I’m getting a crick in my neck.”

I moved to the foot of the bed and before I knew it, I’d taken up my usual errant-grandson position of parade rest, hands grasped together behind my back, awaiting further orders.

"How are you feeling?" I dared to inquire.

"Like hell, but don't pretend you give a damn. I can't abide liars. As you should remember."

"I do," I agreed pleasantly, remembering the sting of Grandma's wooden spoon on my ass whenever she decided I'd been lying.

"Never mind that," she raised a hand and waved it slightly in the air, erasing past punishments. "I needed to see you, to give you something personally. I don't trust the mail or I'd have sent it, and saved myself a lot of trouble."

Since seeing me is likely the "lot of trouble" she means, I could only wish she trusted the mail. Still, I was curious. I couldn't imagine what she wanted to give me personally, and I cocked my head to one side inquiringly.

"It's in the Bible," she informed me, in answer to my unspoken question.

"You're giving me your Bible?"

I flew three hundred miles so Grandma could give me her Bible?

"No, stupid," she curled her lip disdainfully, "You always was slow on the uptake, boy. There's something I need to give you, and I put it in my Bible, before I had this damned heart attack. That's probably what did it, too—it's all your mother's fault."

Now I knew the old woman had gone around the bend. "My mother's dead," I reminded her gently. "My parents died in an earthquake in South America. That was in 1981, I was fifteen." I'll never forget the day that Grandma told me my parents were dead.

Time Past: October 1981

Matthew

I'm going to run away. I don't mean "run away." I'm grown up now. You don't call it running away when you're almost an adult and you decide to leave town.

I don't want to live here anymore. I hate Spokane, hate school, hate my life. If it was just me and Gramps, things might be all right. But Grandma ... every day it seems like we are getting into it. She's on my back constantly. I can't do anything right. I get along with Gramps okay. But he never sticks up for me. Or hardly ever anyway.

We're at the dinner table, and Grandma starts in on me for coming home half an hour late. I already explained that Mr. Whitman, manager of the A&P, asked me to stay and help set up a display for a cereal promotion that starts

tomorrow. But, as usual, it doesn't matter what the reason is for me doing something that bugs her. Sometimes I think she blames me for breathing.

"No excuses," Grandma interrupts when I'm repeating my explanation. "You made me hold dinner back, never mind me and Gramps is hungry and want to eat on time."

I wasn't going to tell her that I'm leaving, or anyway, I wasn't going to tell her yet, but I'm so sick of being yelled at, I can't keep myself from busting out with the news. "You won't have to hold dinner back for me ever again," I say then, gazing triumphantly at her across the table. "I'm going away."

"What?" Her head snaps up and she fixes those flashing blue eyes on my face. "Don't talk nonsense, you're not going nowhere."

"Yes, I am. I'm grown up now, and I don't want to live here anymore, so I'm going away."

"Huh! You think you're a big grown-up man now, do you?" She sneers, tossing her head. "Bill, you tell Mister Big Britches here, he's not going nowhere."

Gramps clears his throat and obediently does as he's told. "Matty," he says, laying down his fork and leaning sideways to nod his head at me. "You've got a ways to go before you're grown up. Best stay here with us a few more years."

I open my mouth, but before I can speak, Grandma continues. "And just where do you think you would go? You got no money, you're not old enough to have a real job, and you don't know a soul anywheres outside Spokane. Me and Gramps is the only family you got, so you're stuck with us. Just like we're stuck with you."

There it is again, the reminder what a burden I am. It seems like Grandma finds some way every single day to remind me. I don't want anybody to be stuck with me. I can make it on my own. I don't need anybody else, not now, not ever.

"I'm going," I insist, "and you can't stop me."

"Going where?" Gramps asks.

"Colorado."

I'm going to hitchhike to Colorado, to try and pick up traces of my parents. Gramps had once let it slip that it was from Boulder that Comfort had called him, before putting me on the bus to Spokane.

There's silence at the table, so I explain, "Now that I'm grown up, now that I'm old enough to work, my parents might want me back again."

"Oh, Matty," Gramps looks sad, but Grandma surprises me. She laughs.

"They dumped you like a sack of rotten potatoes once," she says wryly. "Takes you a while to learn a lesson, don't it?"

"I'm not listening to you anymore," I tell her, starting to get up.

"Sit!" she shouts, and by force of habit, I drop back down into my chair.

I'm mad at myself for obeying the old woman, but before I can say anything, she leans across the table and hisses, "You will listen to me, young man, before you go running off on a fool's errand. You can't find your parents, because they are dead. Your mother is dead. Your father is dead. You won't never see them again."

"What?"

"You heard me."

No! "I don't believe you!" I want to stand up, but my hands reach out and grasp the edge of the table for support, otherwise I might fall out of my chair. "I don't believe you!"

"Tell him, Bill," Grandma turns to stare at Gramps. "Tell him!"

Gramps just stares back at her for a minute, then swings his head around to look at me. "I'm sorry, Matty," he says softly.

"It's not true!" I insist.

"So, you got no reason to take off," Grandma continues.

"How do you know they're dead?" I demand, still not believing.

Grandma says, "The government sent a letter, a while back. Remember that big earthquake in South America? In Brazil or one of those other heathen places down there? A bunch of Americans was killed in that earthquake, and your folks was with them."

"Where's the letter? I want to see the letter." I don't believe it, I don't want to believe it. I've always imagined that Peace and Comfort would come back for me someday. It's too damned painful to give up my fantasy.

"We burnt it," Grandma says. "We was afraid you'd find it laying around and you'd get all upset."

I look to Gramps for confirmation, and he says, "I'm sorry, Matty." His sad eyes finally convince me.

I stand up from the table so fast, my chair's knocked over backward. Throwing my napkin on the table, I turn and run out of the kitchen, run out of the house, run down the street and keep right on running.

I have to get away, far away before I can let the tears come. Half a block away, the pain catches up with me. I stop and bend over, hands on my knees, my body wracked with sobs, threatening to explode my chest and kill me with the force of my anger and despair.

All night I walk, for hours and hours, returning as the sun comes up. It's Saturday, and for once Grandma doesn't hassle me; wordlessly she lets me

climb the stairs to my room and go to bed. Somehow during those long unhappy hours of walking, I convinced myself that I'm glad my parents are dead. They didn't want me, just like Grandma said. They threw me away. Now I won't have to search all over the world to find them again.

Time Present: February 26, 1997

"Are you listening to me?" Grandma's voice brought me back to the present, and I shook my head to clear away the old-memory cobwebs.

"What?"

Grandma tsked. "You never could pay attention," she reminded me sourly. "I said, find me my Bible. It's got to be in one of them boxes where they threw all my stuff. You going to look for it, or do I have to drag myself out of bed and do it myself?"

"I'll find it," I agreed, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from telling the old witch to stuff herself and her Bible into the nearest toilet. Ignoring her cranky jibes, I systematically began hunting through boxes and peering into bags until at last I found the black leather-bound book I remembered from my early years at my grandparents' house, when Grandma dragged me along with her to Sunday service.

"Here," I handed it to her. As she reached out to take it, the Bible fell open and an envelope flew out, fluttering slowly to the floor. As I bent to retrieve it, Grandma said, "That's it. That's what I decided to give you. Go ahead and read it."

I looked at Grandma as I retrieved the envelope from the floor; her face gave nothing away, so I glanced at the handwriting and noticed the foreign stamp. The letter had been sent from India. Fingering open the thin onionskin, I pulled out two sheets of paper covered with spidery black handwriting. For a moment my breath caught in my throat. Something about the handwriting was vaguely familiar, and I turned over the last page of the letter and saw the signature. "Your daughter, Carolyn."

"What the fuck?" I heard myself mutter. "It's—it's from Comfort. Carolyn. My mother. But," I glanced up quickly at Grandma, "she's ... dead?" It came out sounding like a question.

"No, she's not. Or not when she wrote that letter. Read it."

"Wait," I shook my head, returning to the end of the bed to grasp the footboard and stare at her. "Wait a minute. My mother's dead. You—you said so.

You and Gramps.” I looked back down at the letter, not really seeing it, just remembering the agony of that day they told me my parents were dead.

Grandma tsked impatiently. “It was for the best. We told you that, for the best, me and Gramps. You was going to run away, and we had to stop you. Anyway, you was always pining away for your good-for-nothing parents. We decided it was best you give up on them, the way they give up on you.”

I’m not sure what my face looked like as I raised my eyes from the letter and stared at my grandmother, but she recoiled slightly with a hissing intake of breath. “I could have burnt this damned letter,” she reminded me. “Then you’d never of known. So just read it and shut up.”

I turned away then, turned and walked away from the bed, pulled open the door. I halfway expected Grandma to order me to come back, but she said nothing. I moved blindly down the hall, around a corner and down another hallway. Finally I found a door to the outside and I pushed through it, surprised to find myself in a small courtyard with a fountain. Sunshine filtered through the leaves of a tall tree where I fell onto a bench. After taking a couple deep breaths, I unfolded the thin sheets of paper crumpled in my hand, and began to read.

Dear Mother and Father,

I hope this letter finds its way to you and that you are doing well. I’m sorry I’ve never written before, but my husband wouldn’t let me. Now he’s gone and I want to make peace with you before I die.

Thank you for taking Miracle into your home. He must be grown up by now. Every day I think of my son and pray that he’s healthy and is having a good life. He was always such a dear little boy, I hope he has made you happy in your golden years.

Please tell my son that I always loved him, and I’m sorry I was such a bad mother. I pledged my life to my husband and I have followed him all of his days. Now he is gone and I will follow him on this journey also before long, so I feel a need to let you know that I’m sorry I was such a bad daughter and a bad mother, and I hope that maybe someday you can all forgive me.

Your daughter,

Carolyn

I read the letter through twice, and the ache in my heart was almost unbearable. For a long time I sat in the dappled shade, my head in my hands, taking deep shuddering breaths.

Finally ready to stand up, I found my way back to Grandma's room. I entered the door without knocking and took up my stance at the foot of her bed. She'd been sleeping, and she opened her eyes to return my long look.

"So now you know," she said matter-of-factly. "Carolyn is alive, or was anyway when she wrote that letter. Who knows how long it took to get here. Lucky the folks who rent the old house sent the letter on here. I guess you must of told them about this prison you put me in."

Ignoring her words, I quietly demanded, "How could you tell me my parents were dead?" Without waiting for an answer, I continued, "But I don't need to ask—you were always looking for ways to bring me down, to make me miserable."

"We did it for the best," Grandma insisted, but I cut her off with a slice of my hand through the air.

"Of all your cruelties, this is the worst thing you ever did—to tell me my parents were dead. Once I was grown up, why didn't you tell me the truth? Why? Maybe I could have found them! Did you ever think of that?"

"Why would you want to find them?" she scoffed. "They didn't want you. They never wanted you. Good riddance to bad rubbish, that's what I said then, and that's what I say now. And Gramps agreed with me."

Who knows how she convinced Gramps to go along with her lie? I'm really surprised at him, surprised that he let her do this to me.

But it doesn't matter now, it's too late. Gramps is gone, my father's gone, and probably my mother is too—her letter sounded like a death-bed plea for forgiveness. Retrieving the envelope from the floor where it slipped off the end of the bed, I looked again at the date. Christ, it was a month old. Surely my mother is dead by now—gone to follow Peace one last time.

I felt my shoulders slump as I turned for the door and pulled it open. I'll never forgive the mean old woman in the bed behind me, and I almost told her so. But what's the point? Once Grandma had said, "Only the good die young." No wonder she's still breathing, in and out, in and out, trapped in this lonely estrangement of her own making.

Grandma is still alive, the old woman who never loved me. Everyone in my life who ever mattered to me is dead. Everyone who ever loved me has left me. Died, or gone away someplace where I'll never see them again.

I don't mean Lucas. I no longer care where Lucas has gone. I don't even think about him anymore. Hardly ever.

Damn it all to hell, I don't mean Lucas.

CHAPTER 29



Time Present: March 4, 1997

Matthew

I brought my mother's letter home to Seattle and studied the postmark: Puttaparti, India. Checking an atlas, I discovered that Puttaparti is a small town in the south. I considered hiring the services of a local detective agency in the vicinity, assuming there is such a thing, to try and locate my mother if she is still alive, but what's the point? If she's alive, I want to see her. In the interest of time, I'm better off traveling there myself. Once there, I can hire someone on the spot to help me search, if necessary. Puttaparti seems to be very small, perhaps merely a village, so it might not be hard to locate an American woman living there.

Puttaparti is about seventy miles or so from Bangalore, the nearest big city with an airport. There are no direct flights to India from Seattle; the best I can find is a flight to London, with a connecting flight next day to Delhi. From there, I can get a plane to Bangalore, then rent a car for the drive to Puttaparti. I'm giving myself a week for my trek to India, then I'm due back in London for the Dorchester project. If I find out that my mother is ... gone, I'll fly back to London earlier, and indulge in a little R-and-R.

I sampled the London gay scene in the late 80s on my version of a Grand Tour of Europe, and I'm ready for a bit of hedonistic relaxation. I've been working my ass off without much respite this past year and more. But the thought of tricking in London doesn't excite me as much as it should. Maybe

it's the unexpected surge of emotion that's been rocking me since reading Comfort's letter.

My British Airways flight leaves at dinner time, and the food in first class is passable, washed down with a couple glasses of decent French burgundy. I doze for a while, waking up with a start somewhere over Greenland. Peering out the window, I stare down at the ethereal white land mass covered with mounds of powdered-sugar snow. Flying from brief night into lightening day is disconcerting; it gets lighter outside as the time on my watch gets later.

The plane arrives at noon. Since my connecting flight doesn't leave till tomorrow morning, I take a taxi first to my hotel near the airport, then get another into the city. I have only a few hours before exhaustion will push me back to the hotel and my bed for the night, so I decide to stroll along the Thames, stretch my legs. Crossing Westminster Bridge, I walk past the Houses of Parliament, checking my Rolex against the time on Big Ben, pleased that my watch is correct. From there I stroll up Whitehall, past Trafalgar Square, and up Haymarket to Piccadilly.

Perched on the steps around the Eros statue in the middle of Piccadilly Circus, I glance at the garish lights on the surrounding buildings as dusk falls over the city. I'm surrounded by throngs of camera-laden tourists and clusters of local youths, some resplendent in outrageous punk garb. A young man gives me the eye, making me smile—as if I'd fuck a skinny kid with green hair spikes at least a foot tall and a dozen safety pins piercing various exposed parts of his anatomy.

Moving across the street, my eyes scan the area for a taxi. In the crowd on the sidewalk ahead of me, I see a blond head that painfully reminds me of Lucas. The hair's rather long and its owner raises a hand to flick it back. I blink twice and the head is gone.

In the past, I might have chased after that figure, grabbed onto the guy and flipped him around to see his face. I've learned the hard way how much worse I feel, when I see the wrong face staring back at me. I'm not going to start that shit again. Turning in the opposite direction, I see a taxi pull up to the curb; when a passenger climbs out, I take his place in the cab. Leaning back against the seat, I rub a hand over my eyes, which are burning with jet lag. Jet lag and nostalgia, which is a bitch, an indulgence that leads to just the kind of pain I'm feeling in my gut.

And suddenly, I'm questioning this fucking sentimental journey I'm on, this journey halfway around the world to find my long-lost mother. Probably it's a

mistake. Probably I'll be sorry. It would have been better to leave the past buried in the past.

After an unexpectedly restful sleep, I'm ready for the next leg of my trip, feeling less pessimistic than last night. The flight to Delhi is delayed an hour, time spent in a crowded huddle of passengers around the departure gate. Finally we're allowed to board, and the plane arrives in Delhi at midnight local time. After a long wait for luggage, I'm able to snag a taxi to my hotel and settle in for a few hours sleep, before my morning flight to Bangalore.

This flight's delayed too. Once passengers are aboard, stewardesses, wearing gray and silver saris, hand out brightly colored packages of candy and serve cups of fragrant tea. Less than three hours later, we arrive in Bangalore, where I consider renting a car. But the long drive, and the challenge of dealing with traffic that seems to obey no rules of the road, convinces me to let someone else drive. Haggling with several hired-car drivers outside the airport, I find one who'll take me to Puttaparti. Since I purchased a tour book in English and a large-scale map of the region at a news stand in the airport, I'm able to follow along as my driver heads north.

On the map, Puttaparti seemed like a small village, but it's larger than I expected. The guidebook says it's the home of a famous Hindu avatar, Sri Satya Sai Baba, and a shrine has grown up around the village for seekers of enlightenment, who come and worship at the feet of the master. I ask to be driven around the clustered buildings in the center of the village, and the driver points out to me various residence halls for visitors, an enormous hospital that looks like a temple, and several real temples behind tall ornamental gates. There's even a stadium that my guidebook says holds 20,000 people. And all around and about the large buildings are many smaller establishments selling goods, food and souvenirs. Masses of crowds mill around the streets, most in Indian apparel but plenty in western dress. As I peer out at the passing crowd, I rub a handkerchief over my sweaty face. It's about a million degrees and very humid.

What the fuck am I doing here? Trying to find my mother will be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

My hotel is barely two star, my room Spartan, with a window overlooking a shady patio set up with wrought-iron tables and chairs. It's dinner time when I arrive, and I decide to have a meal and a good night's sleep before beginning my search for information. As I eat, I peruse my guidebook, skimming the pages describing Puttaparti and its resident miracle-man, Sri Satya Sai Baba.

Since the 1940s, an entire industry has grown up in this formerly tiny village, catering to thousands of worshippers and seekers of religious enlighten-

ment who throng to Puttaparti every day of the year. Remembering my parents' religious zeal, I'm not surprised that they ended up here. When they left me more than twenty years ago to go to "the mountain," I wonder if this was their intended destination, or if they wandered all over the world before stumbling onto this place?

Adjourning to my room, I slip into bed between cool sheets, stretching my tired muscles. I'm afraid my brain will keep whirling around like the blades on the ceiling fan above my bed, but within minutes I'm asleep.

Morning sun streaks through the curtains I left open last night, waking me early. I feel daunted by the task I've set for myself, but a good night's sleep has energized me for the day ahead. A room-service breakfast of coffee and rolls gives me a further boost. I bypass the hotel's small elevator and move lightly down the polished stone steps to the ground floor.

First I decide to consult the hotel concierge, so I ring a brass bell at the small reception desk. Within moments, an Indian man wearing a turban but dressed in a European suit, comes through a curtain, bowing his head slightly in greeting. When I tell him that I'm seeking an American woman believed to be living in town for some time, he explains that most visitors to Puttaparti stay only a few days or weeks, though many return again and again to seek enlightenment from the master.

I tell him the woman may be gravely ill, and it's his suggestion that I try the new hospital sponsored by Sri Satya Sai Baba, which offers complete medical care to anyone, free of charge. That seems like a good place to start, so I thank the man with a folded rupee note, and he calls a taxi.

The hospital, which resembles Brighton Palace in the English seaside, is huge, two curved wings soaring out from a central domed building. There's a tall flight of marble steps leading to the entrance, and all around the stair landing are piles of shoes and sandals. Reluctantly toeing off my Gucci loafers, I resign myself to the certainty that they'll be gone when I come back out the large entry doors. Inside, I'm directed to the administrative offices, and I'm passed from one clerical-type person to another until finally I end up in the waiting room of the hospital director, Dr. Kuldip Dyal.

Dr. Dyal is tall, with broad shoulders emphasized by his traditional white robes; he wears a large turban and has a magnificent brown beard streaked with white. When I introduce myself, he greets me with a small smile and a tilt of his head, gesturing to a chair in front of his desk. Speaking with a strong British accent, he says, "Please," and we both sit down. Dr. Dyal waits patiently for me to state my business.

I don't waste any time. "I'm looking for an American woman who was living in Puttaparti about six weeks ago," I explain. "She sent a letter postmarked from here. It's possible that she was very sick at the time of writing, and may have died since then. I'd like to find her, or find information about her, if possible."

Dr. Dyal asks solemnly, "Is this woman your wife? Has she left you?"

"No." I'm surprised, though perhaps I should have expected that response. I dislike speaking about my personal business, but I'll probably get nowhere on this search without blunt honesty. "No," I say again, "she is my mother. She and my father came to India many years ago. The family lost contact with them, and the letter we received was the first word we've had in a long time."

"Is your mother a follower of Sri Satya Sai Baba? Many come to Puttaparti to be near him."

"I have no idea. I believe she and my father studied many religions, but I've never heard of this man, this teacher, before now."

"Your father is here too?"

"No. Well," I spread my hands, "in the letter my mother implied that he had died, but I don't know when. Recently, I assume, as it was apparently at his insistence that she'd never written before."

Nodding, Dr. Dyal says, "The state records office may have information about your father's death, if he died in this locality?"

"I don't know. I assume that he did."

Kuldip Dyal considers for a moment. "You say that you suspect your mother has died. Did she speak of illness in her letter? Many who are sick are treated at this facility. Perhaps that's why you have come to the hospital?"

"Yes. Again, I'm assuming that my mother was ill, as she spoke of 'following' my father."

"Following him—into death?"

There's a sudden lump in my throat. I've been speaking academically about my parents, of whom I have few memories, even fewer good memories, and yet now that I'm in this village where they were living, in the hospital where they may have died, I'm feeling unexpected emotion closing my throat and making a tightness behind my eyes. For a moment I can't speak, I merely nod and swallow hard.

Dr. Dyal stands up abruptly and moves behind his desk, then returns with a glass and a pitcher of ice water, fills the glass and says, "Please" before returning to his chair. I'm surprised and embarrassed by my unexpected emotion,

but I pick up the glass and drain it in one long swallow, then relax against the chair back and say, "Thanks."

I'm feeling better, and when Dr. Dyal bows his head slightly in acknowledgment, I find myself bowing my head in imitation. Then I clear my throat and ask, "Would it be possible to check your records, to see if my mother, and maybe my father, were patients here?"

"Yes," Dr. Dyal answers, spreading his hands on the desk top. "However, I am so sorry to ask, but it will be necessary to see some identification, something that proves a relationship with this woman you are seeking."

"Certainly." I pull out my wallet, remove my passport and hand it to him. As he opens it and studies the photo and information inside, I decide to share Comfort's letter with him as well, to prove the connection.

"Ah yes, thank you," he murmurs, reading the letter I've handed him. He writes something on a notepad, apparently copying my name, my mother's name, and returns the documents to me before standing up. "Please wait, Mr. Morgan, while I ask my assistant to check the hospital records. I'm sorry that I don't recognize your mother's name. We treat thousands of patients each year, there are over three hundred beds which are almost always filled to capacity."

"Yes, thank you."

He's gone just a few minutes, and when he returns he says, "Rajinder is checking with our records office. It should be just a few moments. Would you join me in a cup of tea?"

I feel the need for something stronger, but I nod acquiescence, and Dr. Dyal again moves to a table behind his desk, this time, pouring two steaming cups of strong dark tea.

Taking the cup with a hand visibly shaking, I'm surprised and disconcerted by my emotional reaction to being close to possibly discovering the whereabouts, or the fate, of my parents. Now that I'm here in this village where they apparently spent part of their lives, waves of emotion are rolling over me. The connection to my parents was severed so long ago that I'd expect to feel nothing very much, and it makes me wonder if I've been fooling myself all these years.

A few sips of the fragrant tea calm me, and I feel myself relaxing. I'm longing for a cigarette, but see no ashtrays, and won't risk breaking any rules of propriety by lighting up in the doctor's office.

Dr. Dyal is also relaxed in his chair. The strong tea is probably as effective as a couple shots of whiskey.

"This hospital's quite a marvel," I observe. "I'd guess the design is quite traditional, though the building seems new?"

"Yes, the hospital was completed just a few years ago, through the sponsorship of Sri Satya Sai Baba. Through him many new schools and hospitals have come to be in our country."

"I've been reading about him," I admit. "He's called a living avatar, and a miracle man?"

"Indeed," Dr. Dyal agrees. "He's performed many miracles since he was a small child. He's quite revered in India, and millions have come to meet him over the years. Perhaps that is what brought your parents to this country?"

"Perhaps," I agree. There's a knock on the door. On Dr. Dyal's welcome, it's pushed open and a young woman in a pale green sari enters, bows, hands him a manila folder and departs. I feel my heart miss a beat, and I cough to clear my throat.

The director opens the folder and studies it silently for a few moments, during which time I'm not sure I'm breathing. Then he looks up from the paper and the serious look on his face immediately confirms my suspicion that my mother is dead.

"Mr. Morgan," he says, "There is a lady-patient here named C. Morgan, and it's possible that she is your mother. We—"

"God. My god." I choke, sitting forward in the chair. "My god, she's still alive? Can I see her? I want to see her!" I lean forward even further, nearly dislodging the teacup precariously balanced on the edge of Dr. Dyal's desk.

He raises a hand like a stop sign. "One moment, please, one moment. It is not so simple. It will be necessary to speak to this woman, to determine first, if she is related to you, and just as importantly, to determine if she will agree to see you."

I open my mouth to insist that, of course, my mother will want to see me, when reality slaps me in the face. It's quite possible that my mother might not want to see me. She left me once a long time ago. Just because she wrote to Grandma asking forgiveness for abandoning her family, that doesn't mean she ever expected or wanted to see me again. I slide back into the chair and grip both armrests with hands that are once again shaking. "All right," I manage to mumble. "I understand."

"Mr. Morgan," the director's voice has become gentle, "I will personally go to speak with Mrs. Morgan, and if she is the woman you seek, and if she agrees to see you, I promise there will be no further impediment. Unfortunately, I have an appointment in a few minutes, but I will go to see Mrs. Morgan

directly after. Can you return to my office in, say, two hours? Then I hope I will have some answers for you."

"Yes." I clear my throat and repeat, "Yes, thank you." I stand up and turn away, walking almost blindly out the door and through the halls, getting turned around several times before finding the entrance lobby and moving outside the building. Drawing deep breaths of overheated air, I start down the steps before I remember that I'm in my stocking feet. Somewhat surprisingly, I find my own shoes, which I'd been sure would be stolen; slip them on and descend the marble staircase, then wander the grounds of the large hospital, my head spinning, my thoughts jumbled.

I'd been so sure that my mother was dead, the news that she's alive and is a patient in this hospital has literally taken my breath away. I try to calm myself with the possibility that this may be a different C. Morgan—it's a common enough name. And also, as the doctor said, even if she is my mother, it's possible that she won't want to see me. Even though I've traveled halfway around the world to find her.

And if she does see me, what am I going to say to her? I think of all those years when I yearned for the comforting touch of my mother's hand, when I cried, remembering how she'd left me behind on my own to deal with my grandparents, and never sent a letter or a card during all that long lonely time to prove that she thought of me, cared for me, loved me. The old anger and anguish and unhappiness now well up inside, threatening to spill over into ridiculous childish tears. Moving down the walkway and through the entrance gates, I lean shakily against a fence and light a cigarette, drawing acrid smoke deep into my lungs.

Two hours later I'm back in Dr. Dyal's office and he's smiling broadly. "Good news, as you have probably guessed by my demeanor. Sit down, please," and he waves me to a chair.

"She's my mother?"

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Morgan is indeed your mother, and she has agreed to meet you." I stand up quickly but Dr. Dyal waves me down again. "First, she has asked that I explain to you her medical condition."

"Oh." In my excitement, I'd almost forgotten that my mother is ill, perhaps critically ill.

Immediately Dr. Dyal assures me, "She is very ill but not yet, how do you say, 'at the doorway of death?'"

"At death's door."

"Ah, yes." He nods and continues, "Mrs. Morgan has had several strokes in the past year, she cannot walk and has paralysis on her left side. Her brain has not been seriously affected, she's quite clear-headed, but rather weak, and is confined to bed."

"Oh." I'm shaken. Though Mother had said in her letter that she was "joining" my father soon, somehow once I found out she is alive, I hadn't considered that her health was this seriously jeopardized. "You say she's had several strokes?" When the doctor nods, I exclaim, "But my mother is not an old woman. She's only in her late forties."

Dr. Dyal consults the papers in front of him again before explaining, "Mrs. Morgan has a long history of illness. According to these records, she has had rheumatic fever, chronic anemia, and several bouts of malaria. These illnesses can take a hard toll on the body."

"Does she need around-the-clock care? I don't think she has much money. I can help—"

Dr. Dyal grasps the side of his beard with his fingers and pulls it gently. "That will not be necessary. Medical treatment is free for everyone at this hospital, and there are no time limits. Mrs. Morgan can stay here as long as necessary."

"But when she's ready to leave, she may need a place to stay." A glance at the director's face stops me cold.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Morgan, but it is most unlikely that your mother will ever leave the hospital."

We're silent for a moment, until I force myself to ask, "How long does she have?"

"There's no way to tell. She did have another stroke just about a week ago." He consults the chart in his hand and I resist the urge to grab it away from him and read it myself. The thought that I've found my mother barely in time before losing her for good, is almost unbearable.

Dr. Dyal raises his eyes to mine and says gently, "It's unlikely that your mother will survive another stroke. It could be weeks, or months. These things are hard to predict."

We're silent again while I digest the director's words.

"If you're ready now, Rajinder will escort you." Dr. Dyal stands and walks me to the door. We shake hands, and he motions to his assistant to come forward from her desk. "Please escort Mr. Morgan to room twenty-seven, bed eight." Rajinder gestures for me to follow her, and we leave the outer office,

move through several hallways, and up a flight of stairs before halting outside room twenty-seven.

It's a large airy room with two rows of five beds in cubicles along each wall, each cubicle with room dividers providing a modicum of privacy. At first I'm disturbed that my mother doesn't have her own room, but I push that thought aside as Rajinder leads the way to the third cubicle on the right hand side. She leans around the divider and announces, "Good day, Mrs. Morgan. Here is the visitor Dr. Dyal has sent to you."

"Come in," I hear a weak voice call. My heart leaps into my throat. I can't possibly recognize that voice after so many years, but it feels like I do. I move quickly around the divider and stop at the foot of the bed, which is cranked up so that the woman in the white sheets is sitting up. She's small as a bird and very thin, her hair a soft brown cloud around her angular face.

Her face is unfamiliar, pale blue eyes surrounded by unexpected lines and wrinkles, but when she smiles, I see my mother. I move forward, take her right hand in mine. Her left hand is curled uselessly at her side, and I ache with the knowledge of her suffering.

"Mother," I say, choking on the word.

Her smile broadens and she cries, "Oh, Miracle, it's really you. Oh, my dear boy, you're all grown up!"

"I've been grown up for a long time," I answer inanely, but Mother's smile doesn't dim, though her eyes fill with tears that spill over onto her sunken cheeks. She looks terribly frail and fragile, but her fingers tighten on my hand, squeezing back with unexpected strength.

"No one's called me Miracle since I was nine," I tell her. "I'd almost forgotten your nickname for me."

"You go by Matthew?" she asks and I nod. "It's a lovely name. It was your father's name."

"My father?" I'm surprised, wondering if perhaps her mind is more affected by the stroke than the doctor guessed. "My father's name was Robert."

Mother's smile falters. "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I never told you that Peace—Robert—was not your father. But don't stand there my dear. Pull up a chair and sit here next to me."

I drag a chair over beside the bed and almost fall into it. "Peace was not my father?"

"We said that he was, and he did try to be a father to you, but he was not very ... he didn't care much for children. Peace was a difficult man," she adds, certainly an understatement about the man who'd knocked her around,

knocked us both around, when I was a child; who'd been kicked out of one quasi-religious community after another for making trouble. I wonder how she weathered a lifetime living with such a difficult man?

There's almost too much to say, so much lost history to fill in. But first Mother asks, "My son, have you forgiven me for deserting you?" I can't speak but she goes on quickly, "I promise you, I did it for the best, what I believed was best for you. We lived such a hand-to-mouth existence, Peace and I. It was a terrible life for a child."

I'm silent for a moment. I need to be honest with my mother, yet I don't want to hurt her. There's no point in making her feel even more guilty. But I can't help asking, despising myself but whispering, "Did you never think about leaving him? Leaving Peace, and taking me away somewhere?"

I've hurt her, I see it on her face. She looks away from me toward a window at the end of the room. I should say, "Never mind, it's not important." But I need to know. Finally Mother turns her eyes back to mine.

"No, Miracle, I mean Matthew. No, I couldn't leave Peace. I loved him with all my heart. I had to choose, and I chose to go with Peace. I'm sorry that I failed you as a mother. But I couldn't leave Peace."

"So you sent me away."

"I wanted you to have a home like other children, go to school, make friends and be happy. That would never have happened, living with Peace."

I can't speak for a moment. I stand up abruptly and pace the small area around my mother's bed.

How can I forgive my mother? How can I forgive her for sending me to live with her parents, when she knew exactly how difficult, unfair and frankly cruel her own mother could be? Couldn't she have anticipated that I would be subjected to the same treatment that forced her to run away herself, when she was very young?

Mother has no idea how much I suffered when she sent me away, never knowing what happened to her, hoping against hope that someday I'd be rescued. But even if I can somehow forgive her for abandoning me, how can I forgive her for never writing or calling all these years, for never letting me know if she still cared about me? My chest constricts as a wave of anguish from my childhood crashes over my normal forced-calm.

Then I look at this frail woman in the bed before me, and discover that I cannot hang onto the righteous anger I've been feeling all these years. Maybe I need to let go of that anger. Not only for my mother's sake, but also for my own. Finally I return to the chair, looking at Mother's face once again.

"I forgive you," I say, at first not really meaning it, only saying the words to give my mother comfort. But then I realize that I do mean it, and it's as if years of bitterness and anger slough off my shoulders. I smile and repeat, "I do forgive you. And I have a good life now. You have nothing to regret."

Mother smiles too. "Thank you for that, Matthew. You're very generous."

"When did he die? Peace. Was he sick?"

"Oh," a cloud rolls over her face, dimming the brightness of her smile. "No, he was never sick a day in his life. Peace was killed in a train wreck, three months ago. He was on his way home from a job in Delhi, the train derailed. Many lives were lost."

"I'm sorry." I lean forward and rest my clasped hands on the side of the bed. "That must have been a terrible time for you."

"Yes," she says simply. "It was."

We sit without speaking, then Mother throws off the pall of grief. She asks earnestly, "Matthew—were your grandparents good to you?"

"Yes."

Well, they did their best. Most of the time.

"Yes," I repeat, "especially Gramps. Mother, I'm sorry to tell you, but Gramps passed away a few years ago."

"Oh!" Her eyes fill with tears again. "I wish I could have written to them sooner. I should have gone against Peace's wishes, but I didn't."

There's nothing to say about that. "Grandma's okay, she's in an assisted-living home in Spokane. She was—she was happy to get your letter." May as well perjure myself a bit more, for my mother's peace of mind.

"I'm ashamed to say I was never very close to her," my mother says wistfully. "She was so strict with me when I was a girl. I ran away from home when I was sixteen—that's when I met your father, your real father, Matthew. He was—"

Mother laughs. "Believe it or not, he was working with a carnival that came to Spokane that summer. He was tall and beautiful, and I ran away with him. Naturally I got pregnant. He left me in Portland when the carnival moved south that winter."

"Why didn't you go home? Go back to Spokane?"

"Mom would have disowned me," she explains. "Dad too, he never stood up to her. No, I stayed in Portland, and I ended up in a home for unwed mothers. That's what they called those places back then."

Mother's looking toward the window again. "When the time came, it was a difficult delivery. You were born breech, backwards." She looks at me again. "Labor went on for two days, and I nearly died. You nearly died too, you were

tiny and motionless when the doctor finally delivered you. They worked on you for a long time before you started breathing." Mother stops then, closes her eyes. In a moment she opens her eyes again, and goes on.

"I was ready to die, Matthew. And I wanted to die then, my life seemed so pointless and miserable. I was very weak. It would have been easy just to let go, stop struggling. But then they brought you over, and laid you on my chest. I looked at you, at this tiny beautiful creature who'd been growing inside me, and I realized what a miracle you were. I fell in love with you at first sight, and right away decided that I wanted to live, after all."

Mother's crying again, and when I raise a hand to rub my face, I discover tears in my own eyes. We hold hands on top of the coverlet, and in a few moments, I realize that she has fallen asleep. Probably I've kept her talking too long; probably this visit is too much of an ordeal for someone in her precarious health. Gently I disengage my hand and stand up to leave the room, when Mother's eyelids flutter open.

"I'm very tired," she murmurs. "Can you come see me again tomorrow?"

"Yes, Mother. Sleep now. Can I bring you anything, newspapers or magazines, or anything else?"

"Oh," she whispers, "I would dearly love to have a pomegranate, if you can find one. I'm afraid they're out of season."

"I'll try," I promise. Hesitating only a moment, I lean over the bed and kiss my mother's cheek. It's feels soft and dry under my lips, and her hand finds mine on the coverlet and squeezes yet again.

"Goodbye, dear boy. Goodbye, Miracle," she whispers, and then she's asleep once more. My stocking feet make no sound on the smooth marble floor as I leave the cubicle and move to the door, somehow finding my way out of the huge building without a single misstep. Once again I find my shoes on the stair landing by the entrance, and then I'm moving quickly up the street toward a fruit market I'd noticed early this morning.

CHAPTER 30



Time Present: March 9, 1997

Matthew

I'd spent the afternoon wandering the streets of the town, poking my head into a few shops and finally having dinner at a restaurant catering to Europeans. I'd stopped at several produce shops searching for pomegranates, but Mother was right, it's the wrong season. In desperation I'd bought the only pomegranate I could find, a faded reddish-brown fruit, dry and shrunken; but I also bought some juicy purple grapes and two plump oranges, and stuffed them all in my tote bag.

Back at the hospital this morning, Mother and I continue to fill in the gaps of our lives. I was afraid I'd find her looking exhausted after our emotional meeting yesterday, but she looks better; there's a blush of color in her pale cheeks and she's alert and seems happy. I offer to ask for a private room, assuring her I can easily pay for it, but she declines. She says she likes being surrounded by other women and their families who visit. This room is filled with long-term patients who've created a bit of community among themselves.

Mother tells me that she and Peace lived in various parts of India since they came here in 1975. Finally I can ask about "the mountain," which had been their destination all those years ago. She explains that, often in their early years together, Peace had quoted the expression, "Mohammad must go to the mountain," referring to Gandhi. When Peace decided that he could not find enlightenment in the various religious communities they frequented in the states, he decided his only hope was "going to the mountain," going to India.

Mother says they moved from ashram to ashram for several years before coming to Puttaparti and meeting the living saint, Sri Satya Sai Baba.

It seems that upon meeting Sai Baba face to face, Peace immediately found that inner peace which had eluded him all his life. So he and my mother made their home here in this village.

“And it was just a village in those days,” Mother explains. “Dirt roads and tiny old buildings, before Sai Baba’s fame spread throughout the country, and before people began flocking here in the thousands, many donating money for temples and schools and hospitals, like this one. Peace found work in construction, and I worked as a cook and a teacher’s helper. Though I never conceived another child, I enjoyed helping in the local schools from time to time.”

I’d wondered if there were a brother or sister of mine running around India somewhere, and I’m surprised to discover that I’m almost disappointed there is not. Mother’s mind is also on children. “Matthew, are you married? Do you have children of your own now?”

“No, I’m not married,” I answer, then stop and close my lips together tight. Do I want to tell my mother that I’m gay? Will that burden her with information she might find hurtful?

Or maybe I’m afraid she’ll repudiate me. Maybe that’s it. I sit silent for a minute, staring at my folded hands.

Mother picks up on my silence and asks gently, “What is it, dear boy?”

All my adult life, I’ve lived honestly and openly, never hiding my sexual orientation, except from my grandparents. And now I decide that I need to be honest with my mother. She’s been so open with me about the things she’s done in her life, I feel that I owe her the same honesty.

Rising from my chair, I stand straight, both hands on the rail at the foot of her bed. Looking her in the eye, I say clearly, “I’m gay. I’m a homosexual.”

“Oh!” Mother’s eyes blink rapidly. After a moment, she says, “Oh, I see. Well, that’s fine.”

I’m feeling almost let down by her response. I expected—I don’t know what I expected, but I remind myself that Mother has been so completely divorced from me all these years, she probably doesn’t care very much how I live my life. But immediately she dispels my rather gloomy thoughts by saying, “That’s your karma, Matthew, and I can see that you’ve embraced it proudly. Good for you.”

“Thanks,” is all I can think to say.

“And do you have someone special in your life? Someone you love and cherish?”

"No." Full stop. Reluctantly I feel the need to add, "I'm a loner. My life is good. I have career success. I'm perfectly happy by myself. I don't need anyone else."

"Yes," Mother seems to agree. "Not everyone is fated to share their life with another. As long as you have inner happiness and are content with life, that is what matters."

"I am happy," I say. But I realize, or maybe I finally acknowledge to myself, that I'm not really telling the truth.

When I return to my chair, Mother begins to talk about Sai Baba.

"He's a living saint," she extols his virtues. "Ever since he was a small child, he's been performing miracles: healing the sick; even, they say, raising the dead sometimes. Each day there is a gathering, called a Darshan, in his ashram, and he walks among the people who have come to see him. Everyone who sees him or speaks to him is changed in some way. Peace and I have been to many Darshans over the years, and I was so happy that Peace finally found the enlightenment he'd been seeking. He was a changed man after that."

I listen without comment, keeping my cynical thoughts about swamis and gurus and holy men to myself. My mother believes, and it gives her happiness, and apparently Peace found peace through the auspices of this saint. I'm glad for Mother's sake, though I find myself asking, "If Peace changed, because of this man, this Sai Baba, why did he still forbid you to write to ..."

I almost said "to me."

"Why did he forbid you to contact your family?"

Mother's fingers pluck the edge of the pale blue coverlet on the bed. "Peace did find enlightenment, but he had always been jealous of you, of my connection to things outside our relationship. After so much time passing, it seemed best to leave the past in the past. Only after he died did I let my thoughts wander back home to America, to wonder about Mom and Dad, and about you. I hoped you would all forgive me, but other than writing the letter, I left it up to fate. I never dreamed you would come seeking me here! Dear Matthew, my dear Miracle, you've made me so very happy!"

Her eyes fill with tears again and we hold hands and sit silently, perhaps looking back over the years, Mother obviously content and at peace, me still with regret tinged with pain. I've fucked up so many things in my life, fucked over the few people who mattered to me. No doubt Mother would say I've created a lot of bad karma that I'll have to work off in a dozen new lifetimes.

"There's something I'd like you to do for me, Matthew, if you will?" Mother says at last.

“Anything. Or,” I amend, “anything that I can. What is it?”

“It would make me so very happy if you would go to a Darshan, to meet Sai Baba yourself.” My face must show my reluctance because Mother quickly adds, “Only if you want to. I think you will find peace in your own life, if you can meet him yourself.”

With a bowed head, I agree. She tells me how to go about registering for a Darshan and what to expect. “He simply walks among the people,” she says, “sometimes performing miracles, sometimes merely smiling, but everyone who beholds him comes away happier and more at peace with themselves.”

“Okay,” I agree. “I’ll do this for you.”

Mother sinks back against the pillows and closes her eyes. I can tell that she’s very tired, so I take my leave again, promising to register for a Darshan, and promising to visit her again tomorrow afternoon. I’m outside the hospital, halfway to the gate, when I realize that I forgot to give her the fruit I’d brought. I’ll see if the hotel can keep it in their refrigerator, or I’ll buy more fresh fruit later today. There’s no hope for the dried-up old pomegranate.

Time Present: March 10, 1997

Yesterday I was able to register for a Darshan today, but when I returned to the hospital in the afternoon, I was told that my mother was too tired for another visit. I was alarmed, but the nurse allayed my fears. “Mrs. Morgan is fine, just very tired,” she’d explained. “She will see you again tomorrow. Please do not worry. I assure you, she is fine.”

So I cooled my heels the rest of the day. Except for the brief visits with my mother, the slow pace of life in this village bores me.

I arrive at Sai Baba’s ashram early, as Mother advised. We’re segregated by sex into two different Darshan rooms. Assistants guide us into orderly rows. Most of the men squat or sit on the floor. At first I remain standing, then after awhile, I lower myself to the ground, to sit and wait as patiently as possible, not easy for a man as antsy as I am.

I notice that most of the men have brought gifts to offer Sai Baba, fruit and boxes of candy, and others hold what appear to be letters for him. I flip open the tote bag at my feet, searching for something of my own to offer. I don’t want to be the only one empty-handed, so in desperation I grab the wizened pomegranate I’d forgotten to give Mother.

Sai Baba then enters the room and everyone gets to their feet. I don’t know exactly what I’d been expecting, but this small-statured “Miracle Man” in a

simple floor-length orange garment surprises me. His face is lined, he's older than he looks in his photographs, and his wide smile encompasses everyone in the room as he glances around. His face is broad, framed by a head of black hair in a rather unkempt and very large afro. With no fanfare, he begins walking among the crowd, moving slowly down each of the rows of men gathered to revere or worship or just to see him. He speaks to some, accepting letters, touching, apparently at random, some of the objects held out to him. He positively beams at everyone assembled for Darshan, and now I understand the affection for Sai Baba, who appears so serene. Cynical as I am, still I can feel the wellspring of love pouring out of this holy man toward the people gathered to see him.

Sai Baba continues to move through the crowd, pausing here and there to accept a letter, to say a few words to this man or that, to touch at item raised up for his blessing. Slowly he makes his way through the rows until he reaches the back of the large hall where I'm standing. Surprisingly, he pauses right in front of me and his smile widens. He speaks to me, though I can't understand his language. There's an assistant at his elbow who translates.

"What do you seek?" Sai Baba asks me.

"Nothing," I answer quickly.

"Ah," Sai Baba nods wisely, and the assistant translates his next words: "The man who seeks nothing is never disappointed."

Someone standing behind me titters.

"It was my mother's wish that I see you," I explain. "She's a great believer in your teachings."

Sai Baba nods absently, his eyes move past me; already he's losing interest. Or so it seems. He moves a step or two away, then turns back once again, and fixes that penetrating stare on my face. His words are very gentle, and the assistant translates, "Are you perhaps seeking one who is lost?"

"I was," I agree, keeping my face straight. It's a pretty safe shot in the dark, a standard fortune-teller gambit. "But not any longer."

"You are sure?" his next words are translated, Sai Baba's voice sounding enigmatic, then he glances at the shriveled pomegranate I have grasped in my hand. Reaching out his finger, he touches it to the fruit before turning away again. Over his shoulder he murmurs something, and the assistant turns back to tell me, "Sai Baba says, 'Perhaps it is your karma to give up too easily.'" Then he moves on to speak to another man.

I stay with the group, everyone waiting politely until at last Sai Baba leaves the hall, and the hush that had fallen over the room at his entrance is now bro-

ken by many voices in several languages, jabbering with excitement at having beheld the great man with their own eyes. Darshan is over for the day. I grab my bag and shove the rejected fruit inside, then follow the crowd out of the ashram.

It was an interesting experience, and I'm glad my mother's wish was so easily accommodated. I flag a taxi and return to the hospital, to spend the remainder of visiting hours with my mother. She's very happy to hear that I spoke to Sai Baba, and urges me to tell her what he said. I haven't the heart to report that it was meaningless babble. In the end, I tell her exactly what the man said. She's silent for a few moments, considering his words.

"You think that Sai Baba was perhaps referring to me as 'the one you are seeking?'" When I nod, she agrees. "That makes sense, though I'm not sure I understand what he said about your karma. Still," she smiles, "only you can interpret the lesson for yourself, enlightenment lies within the individual." She glances at my face and adds quickly, "It's all right for you to be skeptical, son. At least you went to see him, and that makes me very happy."

Mother stretches out her arm and I put my hand in hers. "Oh!" I exclaim, "I almost forgot again." Picking up my bag from the floor, I pull open the flap. "I found some fruit in the market yesterday, but the only pomegranate I could find is old and very dry." I pull it out and then, as I hand it to her, I do a double-take.

"It's lovely," she murmurs, taking the bright and shiny plump red ball into her hands, raising it to her nose and sniffing. "Mmm."

I stare at the fruit for a disconcerted moment. It looks so much better than I remember.

"Have you made your flight arrangements to return home yet?" she asks.

"Mother ..." I lean forward and hold her hand with both my own. "Mother, please consider coming home with me. I don't want to go away and leave you here on your own."

"But I am home," she gently reminds me. "Puttaparti is my home. This is where I have lived most of my life, and this is where I want to die. Please, Matthew, honor my wishes."

We stare at each other, and finally I realize that I must accept her decision. She's in her right mind, making this decision of her own free will. What right do I have to drag her back with me to America? India's her adopted home, and the decision to remain here is her own to make. "All right," I acquiesce finally. "Okay."

The bell rings announcing the end of visiting hours, and I lean down to kiss Mother's cheek. "It's time to get on with your life," she tells me, her voice strong and sure. "Come see me again in the morning to say goodbye, then go back to London for your client meeting."

"All right." I've told my mother about my career as an architect, and about the client meeting scheduled in London. "Okay, Mother. I'll do as you say."

"Good night, Matthew, good night." We smile and I turn to go. I've been slumping over in the chair, but I feel myself squaring my shoulders and standing up straight. Mother is right. It's time to get on with my life.

Time Present: March 13, 1997

Most of the fatigue I felt on reaching London can be blamed on jet lag from the two days' travel time returning from India. But leaving my mother there, knowing I'll probably never see her again, was much more emotionally wrenching than I could ever have imagined, and I'm sure that contributed to my exhaustion. So it's good that I've had some time to recuperate before my client meeting tomorrow. One perk is that I'm staying gratis at the Dorchester for the duration of my visit.

I slept a lot yesterday, waking up in the early evening and taking time for a brief workout in the hotel's gym. I had a shower and an excellent room service dinner. After that, I went out for a bit to stretch my legs, wandering the night-darkened streets around Hyde Park. On the way back, I noticed a few young men loitering suggestively near the entrance of an underground station. I wondered if they were rent-boys, the British equivalent of hustlers. One in particular caught my eye, a boy with very long dark hair who was wearing artistically ripped and very tight jeans. I'd never pick up street trash, but the stirrings of my cock reminded me that I haven't gotten laid since leaving Seattle. An exceptionally long dry spell for me, and a situation I intend to remedy this evening.

Today is a free day, a day out of time in a sense—no meetings, no deadlines, no responsibilities—and I intend to enjoy it. I'm up early and have breakfast in my room. I wander aimlessly for a while, until I remember that I can get a fabulous suit handmade here in London. A taxi delivers me to Piccadilly, where it's a short walk to Savile Row.

After perusing the windows of half a dozen tailor shops, I choose one and enter. I'm welcomed with typical British aplomb, and quickly shown a variety of fabrics. My measurements are taken by a clerk who is better dressed than most of the executives in Seattle. A fitting is arranged in two days time, and

before noon, I'm once again out on the street. Tracing my steps back to Piccadilly, I stand for a moment deciding where to go next.

Crossing Regent Street, I pause on the crowded sidewalk in front of the Haymarket Theatre to light a cigarette, and wonder briefly if I might get a ticket for a play this evening. My elbow's jostled by a man passing by. He's got his arm around his companion's shoulder, and he turns to wink at me. "Give over, mate," he chirps in a jaunty Cockney accent. "You're blockin' the bloody pavement." There's no hostility in his remark, and the twinkle in his eye is unmistakable—he's giving me a come-on.

He's young, early twenties at a guess, and very attractive. I've no particular destination in mind, so I follow along for a bit. The Cockney glances back again, grinning now. He leans closer to his companion, whispers in his ear. The other man shakes his head, no, and keeps walking. I spare a glance for him, and notice that he's blond, the hair curling long on his neck. Something in the way he moves makes me catch my breath—something in the set of his shoulders, the way his legs encased in tight jeans stride forward.

We've just crossed a street and I stumble on the curb, reach out my arm and grab hold of a utility pole to keep from falling down. I stand still then, staring after the pair, and when the Cockney throws one last look over his shoulder, I see that he's laughing and shrugging apologetically.

I am not going after them. I'm not.

I am not going to rush down the street after another anonymous blond man. I'm not going to grab his arm and pull him around to peer at his unfamiliar face. I put all that nonsense behind me. I gave up that ridiculous, hopeless quest months ago.

"Perhaps it is your karma to give up too easily."

Sai Baba's words swirl around unbidden inside my head. No, I won't listen to that voice. I won't.

And yet ... and yet, my feet are moving me forward, stumbling down the sidewalk in the direction taken by those two young men. But I've lost them, lost them in the crowd. I stop then and hold a hand to my side. I've got a painful stitch from my mad dash to catch up.

Gasping with the effort to catch my breath, I cast my eyes frantically to the right and left, up and down the street, straining for a glimpse of a shaggy blond head, but to no avail. I close my eyes then and groan out loud, cursing myself for a fool. And when I open my eyes again, suddenly I see them.

The Cockney and his companion are just disappearing into the doorway of a building across the street. It's a pub, they've gone into a pub. Forgetting the

pain in my side, I hurriedly cross the street, paying no heed to the traffic. I'm aware of blaring horns and shouted curses, but I ignore them, only hurrying faster in my determination to catch up, before I lose sight of the men again.

Pulling open the door of the pub, straining my eyes to see inside the dim interior, I spot the Cockney first. He's across the room, sprawled in a chair by the back wall. He sees me too, and flashes his cheeky grin. I watch as he leans forward and says something to the blond, who's sitting on a stool with his back to the room. As I move toward them, the blond is shaking his head.

"No, Jeep, I said not today, okay?"

Jesus Christ. I know that voice.

Reaching out my hand, I touch the blond's shoulder. He turns his head and frowns up at me. "Sorry," he says impatiently, "we're not inter—"

"Oh, my God." The breath catches in my throat, I can barely speak. "Oh, my God—Lucas, is it really you?"

Eyes wide in disbelief, Lucas gasps, "Matthew?"

In the silence, unmoving, we stare at each other.

The Cockney is first to break the silence. "Lu?" he asks, "Is this the bloody damn Yank who broke your wee heart?"

CHAPTER 31



Matthew

Lucas gets quickly to his feet, ignoring Jeep. What kind of name is Jeep? As he stands up, I feel the need to sit down; my legs are wobbly. But I forget my momentary weakness when Lucas takes two steps forward, reaches out and grasps my hand.

“Matthew! I can’t believe you’re here!” His smile is wide, genuine.

My fingers are returning the pressure of his grip. Neither of us makes a move to let go. Finally I find my voice. “You look—amazing.” It sounds silly somehow, and then I make it worse by adding, “You’re all grown up.”

Lucas’ smile dims slightly, his face flushes. “I’ve been grown up for a long time.”

“Yes, you have,” I agree, not pointing out that he’s still only twenty. Probably being on his own has made him feel older.

“Hallo.”

Lucas’ forgotten companion has also gotten to his feet. “I’m Jeep,” he introduces himself, sticking out his hand. Reluctantly I let go of Lucas and return the handshake.

“Pleased to meet you,” I say politely, glancing at the other man before returning my eyes to Lucas’ face. Before I can stop myself, I ask, “Your boyfriend?” I’m embarrassed, but I have to know.

“Jeep is my roommate,” Lucas says. “And,” he adds, “my best friend in London.”

“You’re living here now?” I’m astonished “How ... why ... how?”

“Park yourselves,” Jeep urges, “I’ll snaffle us a pint—beer or lager?”

"What?" I turn toward the Cockney again. I can't seem to take in anything except that I'm standing here beside Lucas. I've found Lucas, he's alive and well and more beautiful than ever.

Jeep just laughs and moves away.

"What are you doing here, Matthew?" Lucas returns to his stool and I pull up a chair to sit beside him. "You weren't ... looking for me, or anything? Were you?"

"No," I agree. "Business trip."

"Of course." He glances away.

Lowering my voice, I hasten to add urgently, "I had no idea you'd left the country. When did you do that, and why?"

"Don't get the wrong idea." He's still not looking at me. "It's not that I wanted you to look for me, or anything. I was just, you know, curious."

"I did look for you," I assure him. "For a long time. But you disappeared."

"I was in L.A. For a while."

"I know."

Lucas swings his head around. "You knew?" I open my mouth, but before I can speak, he asks, "Phil told you?"

"Yes," I agree. "But you disappeared right after that. You completely dropped out of sight—I could find no trace of you. I thought ... Lucas, I thought you were dead."

He says nothing, and when I reach out to take his hand in mine, he doesn't pull away but sits staring at our hands. Silence stretches out until finally I murmur, "Why didn't you come home? I kept waiting for you to come home."

He whispers something that I cannot hear. "What?"

Raising his eyes to mine, Lucas says simply, "I didn't have a home."

My heart wrenches inside my chest, and my hand tightens spasmodically on his. "My home was your home."

"No," he looks me in the eye. "No, Matthew. You got rid of me."

"No!" I insist. "That's not true."

Before I can say anything else, Lucas clears his throat and adds casually, "It doesn't really matter now. I'm on my own, and I'm doing fine."

"What are you—"

"Here we are then," Jeep has returned, balancing a plate of what looks like meat pies on top of three large mugs filled to the rim with beer. "Help yourselves." He sets everything on the table and Lucas quickly grabs a glass, lifts it to his mouth and takes a big gulp.

"So, Lu," Jeep says, dropping back down into his chair. "This really is your bloke then?"

Lucas ignores the question, but I see that his fingers are tightly clutching the beer glass. "He's someone I used to know. He's a businessman—he's in London on business."

Jeep glances at me and grins. "Looks like you're fair twitchin' to be alone with the lad." Before I can answer, he adds, "There's no time for that, mate, sorry. We're on our tea break—grab a pie if you want—we've got to scarper in a tick."

"We're due back at work," Lucas translates, then says "Ta" to Jeep, who's handed him a pie.

"You work around here?" I ask Jeep, since Lucas won't look at me.

"Apollo."

"What's that?"

"Apollo Theatre," he explains, grabbing a pie for himself and taking a bite. With his mouth full, he elaborates: "*Popcorn* starts in a fortnight. Been getting bazzin' reviews in Yorkshire."

"*Popcorn* is a play?" Jeep nods as he takes another bite, so I turn back to Lucas. "You've got an acting job?" I lean forward in my chair, adding enthusiastically, "That's fantastic!"

"No," he grimaces, setting down his beer glass. "I'm just part of the stage crew. Not an actor."

"You'll be troddin' the boards afore much longer," Jeep says. "I keep telling you, I'm dead cert your chance'll come soon." He turns to me and asks eagerly, "Have you seen this lad perform? He's the dog's bollocks!"

"Yes, I have," I agree. "And if you mean, he's good, you're damned right he is." Lucas won't look at me. He's nibbling the crust of a meat pie, so I ask, "Are you an actor, Jeep?"

"Aye," he nods enthusiastically, then chuffs a laugh. "Well, I made a cock-up at drama school, got handed me papers. I had a scene in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, though, throwing rice at a church. And I had two call-backs for *Hamlet* last year, though I mucked it up in the end. No speaking parts yet, but I will have." He glances at Lucas who is concentrating on eating his meat pie. "Our lad here, though, he'll be all right. He's brilliant AND he's soddin' scrummy."

"Shut up," Lucas murmurs, throwing an affectionate glance at Jeep.

"What's scrummy?"

Jeep laughs again. "It's what you Yanks call sex on a stick."

“Fuck off,” Lucas mutters before draining his beer glass. “And we need to get back. Are you finished?” He scoots back his stool and stands up.

Rising quickly to my feet, I grab Lucas’ wrist. “Don’t go,” I implore. “I’ve only just found you. Stay and talk to me.”

He throws me a look that I can’t read, he looks almost—angry. Then he says, “You didn’t ‘find’ me, Matthew. It was just a coincidence that we met today. And I don’t have time for this. I’m due back at work.”

“It’s more than a coincidence,” I insist. “Remember how you used to say it was karma that kept bringing us together? Maybe—”

Lucas abruptly pulls his hand free. And it really was anger I saw on his face before, because now his eyes flash with fury. “You don’t believe in karma—remember?”

“I do now,” I insist. “Can’t we—”

But Lucas turns his back and moves quickly through the pub toward the door. I stand staring after him, unbelieving, watching Lucas walk away. He’s walking out of my life all over again and I’m frozen to the spot, unable to move, just watching him go.

Jeep pushes past me to follow, but first he pauses and lightly punches my arm. “He’s just gobsmacked, guv, seeing you after all this time,” he tells me. “Don’t be a wanker, go after him.”

“He doesn’t want—”

“The fuck he doesn’t.”

I’m freed from my paralysis, and I speed forward through the pub, clumsily knocking chairs out of my way, moving quickly for the door. Outside I pause. Already Lucas is lost in the mass of pedestrians crowding the sidewalk in every direction. But I don’t need to worry, Jeep’s at my side. “This way, guv,” he says, and together we move through the crowded streets of Hammersmith toward the Apollo Theatre.

We walk in silence for a few moments, then I have to ask a question that’s driving me mad. “Jeep,” I say, slowing down slightly. “Twice now you’ve referred to me as Lucas’ bloke, ‘the Yank who broke his heart.’ Does that mean he has talked to you about me?”

Matching his pace to my own, Jeep gives me a considering look before answering. “He’s not mentioned you by name. Only that he was in love once and never wants to be again. A blind man can see the lad’s not very happy. Had a rough time of it for a bit.”

“A rough time?” I’m not surprised. I’d made myself sick worrying about Lucas after he ran away. “What happened to him, do you know?”

“Not my story to tell,” Jeep answers enigmatically. In another moment he announces, “Here we are then,” as we round a corner and stop outside the back of a tall building faced with rough gray stone. A sign on a large wooden door announces “Authorised Personnel Only.”

“Here’s where I leave you, guv.” Jeep sticks out his hand and I take it but don’t let go.

“Can I come in with you?”

“Sorry, not allowed. But we finish up about six-ish. If you’re hanging around the door then, well, you never know your luck.” The anxiety I’m feeling must show in my face, because Jeep adds kindly, “I’ll do me best to steer him right out, soon as we’re let go.”

“Thanks. Thank you.”

“Ta-rah,” Jeep replies, before disappearing through the wooden door.

Lucas

I’ve been watching the door, and when Jeep comes in alone, I’m relieved. But I brace myself, expecting him to grill me about Matthew. He doesn’t, though. I should have known he wouldn’t. He’s never pushed me to spill my guts.

Jeep really is my best friend. I met him a year ago. He literally tripped over me late one night in the Aesop Theatre in Lambeth where I had a crew job. I’d only been hired a few days before, and when I discovered that the place was never locked up, I started secretly sleeping there at night.

Time Past: April 1996

“Fuckin’ hell!”

Startled out of a sound sleep, I struggle quickly to my feet. It’s pitch dark, and someone has stumbled over me where I lay huddled on a stack of folded canvas in the cramped space behind the stage.

The unseen man moves quickly away, I hear his rapid footsteps on the boards, and a moment later there’s a sharp snap as overhead lights are turned on. Flinching from the glaring brightness, I blink my eyes and shrink back against the wall, afraid of being attacked by the unknown intruder.

He comes marching quickly toward me, demanding with a menacing growl, “Who the fuck are you, and what the fuck are you doin’ here?”

I’m scared, but I try for bravado. “What are YOU doing here?” I stand up straight and glare back at the stranger. “The theatre’s closed.”

"Plucky bastard, for such a winky little 'un," the man notes, as he reaches my side and sizes me up with a withering glance. I see his shoulders relax when he decides I'm not a physical threat. "I know the theatre's closed. I work here," he says, his voice less abrasive.

"I work here, too," I toss my head, trying to brazen it out, though I know I'm in deep shit trouble for trespassing.

"So you're not a pikey?"

"What's a pikey?"

"Gypso," he explains, and when I'm still confused, he clarifies, "gypsy. Vagrant. You really work here?" When I nod, he demands, "Since when?"

"Since Monday. Jacko hired me."

"Ah," the man nods. "So you're temp crew for that spacker Wilhelm's new play?"

"That's right." He seems to believe me, so maybe he won't call the cops. "I know the play is called *Wonderland*, though I haven't seen a script. Wilhelm's the writer?"

"Nah, he's the producer, guy with a big square head and a mop of gray hair. Seen him around?"

"Yeah, I think so. I haven't really talked to anybody much, I'm just trying to learn the job and stay out of everybody's way."

"Good plan. You're a Yank, eh? Surprised you got hired on—Wilhelm don't like Americans much. By the way," he stretches out his hand. "I'm Jeep."

"Lu."

We shake and then Jeep asks, "So—why are you sleeping rough?"

"No money." Quickly I add, "I haven't stolen anything, or ... anything."

He nods again and seems to come to a decision. "Right. I won't give you away, but soon's you collect a paycheck, you'd best find someplace else to sleep."

"I will."

He hesitates, then adds, "No. No, laddie, it won't do. Staying here's a bit dodgy. Not safe like."

"I can take care of myself."

"Well, no offense, Lu, but that's rubbish." He peers at me more closely and adds, "You're just a lad, and a skinny one, at that. Been missing a few meals, eh?"

"No!" I'm annoyed. "I'm perfectly fine."

"It's no shame to be skint," Jeep says. "Listen," he hesitates, then rushes on, "you can bunk down at my place tonight. Maybe tomorrow we can get you a room on spec."

"I'm fine," I repeat.

"I'd not hurt you," he assures me. "Anyways, it's me should be worried about YOU. Maybe you'd slit me throat whilst I'm kipping."

"Maybe I would," I agree, frowning menacingly.

Jeep just laughs. "Ah, you're all right. There's honor among theatre-folk."

"You're part of the crew, too? I haven't seen you around." I would have noticed him. He's tall and darkly handsome, with a broad chin, a wide mouth and thick eyebrows above eyes that crinkle up in easy laughter.

"Been to Newmarket," he answers. "Me mum was took sick, but she's all right the day. And aye, I'm crew. By rights I'm really an actor, but I haven't done much yet."

"I'm an actor, too," I admit.

"Are you then? All the more reason for you to come along of me, we'd best stick together, eh?" When still I hesitate, Jeep insists, "Grab your kit and let's be off. It's bloody late."

Impulsively I decide to trust this guy; he seems for real. So I gather up my things, shove them into my tote bag, pull on the jacket I've been using as a blanket, and follow Jeep through the back hallway toward the rear entrance of the theatre.

"Just a tick, while I grab me slicker," he halts at the back wall where a pegged rack holds assorted hats and coats. "I was sure I left it—ah yes, here it is." He pulls down a large raincoat and folds it over his arm. "Supposed to come down buckets the morrow," Jeep informs me as he pulls open the back door. He pulls the door solidly shut behind us, but doesn't lock it.

"You don't have a key?"

"Nobody does. That's why the place is never locked. Bloody owner's too cheap to hire a locksmith. It's a dump anyways, this place; nothing worth stealing. Come on," he jerks his head. "Tube stop's this way."

"Where do you live?" I ask a bit breathlessly, moving fast to keep up with his long strides. "Not in Lambeth?"

"Got a small flat in Bayswater. It's not much but it's clean, and there's two beds. Me flat mate moved in with his bird a fortnight ago. I've not yet found another lodger, so there's room for you. For tonight, anyway."

"Thanks, Jeep." I'm belatedly recognizing the generosity of this stranger. I'm not keen on trusting people, for lots of reasons. Even now, I'm reserving judg-

ment till we get to his place. Till I find out if there's a price tag for Jeep's apparent kindness.

My move to London had a price tag, a price I was not willing to pay.

I'd stupidly trusted Sir John Ravensdale, and look where that got me. He's British, an upper-class gentleman and classically trained actor who was teaching at a small acting school in Los Angeles. Classes were not expensive, but on my minimum-wage salary as a café dishwasher, I could only afford to take one class at a time. I enrolled in his monologues class, and he immediately took an interest in me—encouraging me to try out for local community theatres, and commiserating with me each time I was passed over.

Sir John convinced me that I could do much better if I relocated to London, where (he said) there were many opportunities for newcomers, and where he had an in with dozens of theatre owners and casting directors. Since he was returning home shortly, he offered to take me with him, loaning me money for airfare and helping me to apply for a work permit. He said I could pay him back over time from my earnings there. He assured me that British audiences would eat me up with a spoon.

I guess I should have suspected there would be strings attached to Sir John's generosity, but I didn't. I knew that he was gay, but he never put the moves on me, never came on to me. Besides, he's fifty or more. I'm not naïve; I know that some old people still have sex, but I just didn't get that vibe from him.

It was with excitement and high hopes that I accompanied Sir John on the flight from L.A. to London. But as soon as I was settled in his elegant apartment near Kensington Park, Sir John made it clear that he expected repayment of his generosity to begin immediately. "Nothing too tedious," he assured me. "You'll share my bed from time to time, and accompany me to the occasional party as my companion. But most of the time, you'll be free to pursue your career."

I was stupidly surprised, and mad as hell. Sir John smiled patronizingly when I shouted all kinds of ridiculous things, about trust and false pretenses and other silly bullshit. Even more stupidly, before I packed up and walked out, I made the grand gesture of repaying him on the spot for my airfare.

Though I'd managed to save a bit while I was in California, I was left with nothing very much, and more importantly, with no work permit. Foreigners can't get hired legally in England without one. After several days of rejection by potential employers, and several nights of sleeping in movie theatres and train stations, I lucked out, finding a fish-n-chips shop in Elephant-and-Castle

where the owner was willing to pay me cash under the table, for peeling potatoes and washing up.

I worked at the chips shop for two months, eating so much fish that I'll never look a haddock in the eye again. Most nights, I slept in the back of the shop, curled up on a rug. Later I was befriended by a regular customer named Steffie, and sometimes she let me sleep on the floor of her tiny bed-sitter, except on nights when her boyfriend stayed over. Steffie is an actress, or is trying to be, and it was through her that I joined a group of other would-be actors. We meet every week at the home of one of them, Reg Cavett, and it was Reg who recommended me for the crew job at the Aesop Theatre. It's a dumpy little place, used for the fringest of fringe productions; but that's the reason they'd hire somebody without a work permit.

We've been moving quickly through the night-dark streets. Jeep hasn't spoken for a few minutes and I'm too busy trying not to gasp breathlessly as I keep up with his fast pace.

"Here we are," Jeep announces, as we enter North Lambeth tube station.

We have only a moment to wait before a train screeches into the station. The car's nearly empty at this late hour, and we fall into seats near the door. "We switch at Paddington, to Circle Line, and Bayswater's a few stops after that."

I nod, then relax in the seat; lean my head back against the wall, close my eyes.

Before I know it, Jeep is shaking my shoulder. "Rouse yourself, young Lu, here's where we change." Still half-asleep, I get clumsily to my feet and follow him off the train and onto the Circle Line platform. This time I manage to stay awake, and I'm on Jeep's heels as we get off that train and move across the platform to the up escalator. "Not much further," he says kindly, and I nod before answering with fake energy, "Okay." In reality, I'm completely done in. I haven't been sleeping well in the chilly old theatre, and Jeep was right when he guessed I've been missing a few meals, trying to save pennies.

We walk in silence for a couple blocks, then Jeep unlocks the entrance to a four-story building, leads the way across a small lobby and up several flights of stairs. He unlocks the door, flipping a light switch as we enter. The main room is small, crammed with a stove and refrigerator, tiny sink, a table and two wooden chairs. Shelves along one wall hold a collection of books and a small TV.

Jeep moves into the second room, which is even smaller than the first, and which holds a tall wardrobe and two single beds with a narrow table between

them at one end. There's nothing else in the room, except a small clock and a stack of magazines on the table.

"There's a lav on each floor. Water's hot about seven and cold thereafter. It's not much, as I told you, but you're welcome the night. And tomorrow we'll see what we see. Agreed?"

"Yes, thanks." I hesitate in the middle of the room till Jeep points at the bed by the window. It's just a wooden frame with a bare mattress on top.

"That'll be yours," he informs me. "Sorry there's no bedclothes, can you bundle in your coat for tonight?" When I say sure, he asks, "Do you need the toilet?" I shake my head no, still not moving, and he pulls open the wardrobe and takes out a hanger for the raincoat he's been carrying. "Right then," he says as he hangs up the coat. "I'll be back in two ticks, then we'll do lights out."

As Jeep leaves the room and I hear him go out the door into the hall, I walk over to the unmade bed. Even without blankets, this is so much better than my sleeping accommodations the past few weeks that it's almost luxurious. I arrange my tote bag at the head of the bed for a pillow, then glance around the room. The light is dim, only a single bulb in the ceiling. There's a plain shade over the window, and no pictures or photographs on the bare walls. I don't have any feel for the man's personality at all.

While I'm waiting for Jeep to return, I decide to glance at the magazines on his table. On top is an issue of *OK!*, a celebrity magazine. I lift it up and look at the next magazine. For a moment I freeze—it's the latest issue of *Gay Times*.

"I'm queer."

I jump and spin around. Jeep is standing in the doorway; I didn't hear him come back. I just stare at him, at a loss for words.

"Does that bother you?"

"No," I answer quickly. "Not at all."

Jeep laughs then. "Had a feeling you wouldn't mind," he says blandly.

I brace myself for whatever's coming next, but all that comes next is Jeep saying, "Sleep now, laddie. Morning'll come soon enough." He snaps off the light and I move quickly to my bed in the darkness, perch on the edge of the mattress. I hear rustling and, as my eyes adjust to the darkness, I can make out the shape of Jeep snuggled down in his bed, covers drawn over his shoulder, his back turned toward me. Relieved, I lie down, stretching out on my side facing Jeep.

Once Matthew insisted that I'm a bad judge of character, and I remember feeling insulted. But after the fiasco with Sir John Ravensdale, I've had to admit to myself that maybe Matthew was right after all. So now tonight, even though

Jeep seems like a really nice guy, I'm not relaxed enough to turn my back on a stranger.

Time Present: March 13, 1997

Jeep let me stay with him for a few days, and in that time we became friends. I soon learned that I can trust him completely, and we decided to continue as flat-mates while we worked on the Aesop Theatre crew. Jeep has managed to get me hired along with him at several other theatres in the past year, and we've taken some acting classes together. Through a friend of Jeep's, I was finally able to get a work permit, so now I'm in Britain legally. I really enjoy living and working here.

With Jeep and his friends, I've sampled the gay nightlife in London, some bars and a few clubs. Sometimes we party together, Jeep and I, in a threesome or foursome, but that doesn't happen very often, and at no other time do we have sex. We've talked about it, and agree that our friendship, and our flat-mate status, is more important than messing up our relationship with fucking. I've told him bits and pieces of my past, but Jeep has never pressured me to tell-all, and I'd really rather keep my heartbreak over Matthew Morgan to myself. I told Jeep simply that I've been in love before and it hurts way too much. I don't ever want to feel that way again.

CHAPTER 32



Matthew

Barely able to contain my impatience, I return to the theatre at 5:25 and loiter for half an hour outside the back entrance. I was worried that the crew might be dismissed early, and I really could not bear it, if I missed talking to Lucas again today. After saying goodbye to Jeep, I'd wandered aimlessly around the city, pretending to sight-see. But all I could really see was Lucas' face in the pub when he kept looking away from me. And all I could hear was Lucas murmuring that he didn't have a home in Seattle.

And why shouldn't he feel that way? Much as I've tried to excuse myself, claiming I was only doing the right thing by Lucas—that he was too young to know his heart, that he deserved a chance to be a carefree college kid—the truth was something very different. I can admit it now. I've had enough time without him to discover just how much I wanted to be with Lucas. And how wanting another person that much had scared the fucking hell out of me.

Even after Lucas ran away and I knew how much I missed him, even after the detective found Lucas in L.A., I was still too scared of my feelings to go after him. Instead, I took the coward's way out—I waited for Lucas to make the first move, to come back to me of his own accord. It was only after he disappeared completely, and I thought that I had lost him forever, that I was able to admit how empty life had become without him.

Now, as I wait for Lucas to emerge from the theatre, I am as scared as I have ever been in my life. Scared that it's too late. Scared that he doesn't want me anymore. He said that Jeep is not his boyfriend, but that doesn't mean there isn't somebody else. Some other man that Lucas loves now. And it doesn't mean that he has forgiven me, for pushing him away.

At 6:05 the back door swings open, and I catch my breath as two young men come out. But they are strangers, laughing and talking together, and they don't miss a beat as they swerve to avoid me, move past me, their voices growing dim as they walk off down the alley. Five minutes pass, then ten, then fifteen, but the theatre door doesn't open again.

I'm sure Jeep told me the crew would be leaving by this door. At 6:00, he said. Now it's 6:20, and the door stays resolutely shut. I walk closer and press my ear against the wood, listening for voices inside. I can hear nothing except my heart thumping against my ribs, and I suspect that Lucas left the building by some other exit. Maybe Jeep told him I'd be waiting. Maybe Lucas decided he doesn't want to see me.

Another five minutes pass, and I really cannot bear to wait any longer. I grab the handle and pull hard, but the door won't budge. It must be locked. The theatre must be closed. Lucas has avoided me, he's gone, maybe he's run away again. Maybe I'll never get another chance to see him! I can't bear it. I really cannot bear it. I groan out loud, there's a sharp pain in my chest. Before I even think about it, my fist is pounding on the door—bang! bang! bang!

Bang! bang! bang! Bang-bang-

The door is pushed open. It catches my shoulder and throws me sideways, almost knocks me down.

A big beefy man with a red face wearing a tee shirt that says "Manchester United" stands in the open doorway, hands on his hips. He bellows, "Wot'cher fuckin' doin' there, mate?"

"Let me in," I insist, moving quickly forward and pushing my way past him, inside the door, into a hallway or foyer, a small space with two closed doors. I glance around quickly before addressing the stranger again. "Which door goes into the theatre?"

"Never you mind, you're not goin' nowhere."

"The hell I'm not!" I turn away but he grabs hold of my arm, spinning me around. "Look," I force myself to calm down, lower my voice to a reasonable pitch and explain, "I'm a friend of Lucas Denholme. I'm supposed to meet him here."

"First off," the bruiser informs me, "this ain't no public entrance, you can't just walk in like you own the bloody place. And second off, there's nobody here by that name."

"The fuck there isn't!" I'm losing my cool again, and I shout, "He works here! Lucas Denholme! He came in here after lunch today. He was supposed to come out at six o'clock."

“What’s his job then, this Denholme bloke? Never heard of him.”

I pull my arm out of the man’s grip and glance again at the closed doors. “He’s part of the stage crew,” I explain, not very patiently. “If you’ll let me—”

Just then one of the doors opens. Two men and a woman come through into the hall and stop. My tormentor greets one of them. “Hi up there, Jamie,” he says. “You got anybody on crew name of Denholme? This bloke’s lookin’ for him.”

“No,” the one named Jamie says, adding, “What’s this, Tom, a dust-up?”

“Told you,” Tom pushes his face close to mine. “You got the wrong place, and you need to get out.”

“I’m not going anywhere!” I shout. “I saw him come in here with my own eyes, just a few hours ago! I’m going to find him and you can’t fucking stop me!” I try to push past the group in the doorway, but Tom grabs my arm again.

“Jamie, gimme a hand with this plonker, will you?”

Jamie grabs my other arm and I struggle against them. I have to get through that door. I have to look in the theatre myself. I have to know if Lucas is there, I won’t take no for an answer. “Fuck you!” I shout, “Fuck you all! Let me go!”

Tom and Jamie tighten their grip and the third man joins them, they’re pulling and dragging me toward the outside door. The woman moves around us and pushes the door open, while the men wrestle me closer and closer to the exit.

They’re going to throw me out, throw me out into the alley, but God damn it, I have to see Lucas! I have to find him. I can’t leave here without seeing him. I start shouting, shouting at the top of my lungs, “Lucas! Lucas! Lucas!”

“Belt up, you!” one of the men tries to shush me. “Get out, or we’ll call the coppers.”

“I’ll call them now,” the girl offers, circling around us as we’re locked in what feels like mortal combat near the open doorway. “Oh!” I hear her greet a new arrival who’s come into the hall behind us, “Oh, Jeep,” she exclaims, “come give the lads a hand with this wanker!”

“Jeep?” I twist my head around, straining to see past Tom’s shoulder. “Jeep,” I implore him. “Help!”

“You can let go,” Jeep says calmly. “He’s all right.”

“He’s not bloody all right, he’s stark, starin’ mad,” Tom insists.

I try to pull free of the men’s forceful grip on my arms, I twist sideways to see Jeep. I’m panting, I can’t catch my breath. “Where’s Lucas?” I gasp, “Is he here?”

“Aye, he’s here, but you can’t—”

"I have to see him!"

"Who the fuck is this chap he's lookin' for?" Jamie demands.

"It's Lu," Jeep answers briefly. "Lu Skarsgaard."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Tom growls at me, then tells Jeep, "He said Dunham or somethin' like that."

"But it's our Lu he's after," Jeep says.

There's movement in the doorway behind him. Lucas is standing there. "Hey," he says softly, speaking to everyone as he glances around the room.

"Here's your friend, bruv," Jeep's voice is noncommittal. "Come looking for you."

Lucas nods and then, after a brief hesitation, moves forward into the room. "Let him go," he says, and finally my tormentors release their hold.

"Lucas," I murmur. I am so exhausted, I'm afraid my legs will go out from under me. My arms hang heavy at my sides, and I blink several times to clear the fog from my brain. My body sways and I think I'm going to fall down, splat! onto the floor. I'm going to make an embarrassing scene in front of all these people.

As if I haven't done that already.

"We've finished the packing up," Lucas tells Jamie. "Okay if I go now?"

"Sure thing, lad," Jamie agrees, then asks, "you going along of him?" When Lucas nods, he lowers his voice and cautions, "Careful, lad, I think the bloke's fair puggled!"

"He's all right. Good-night, everyone."

The others haven't moved, but each of them murmurs goodbye. Lucas comes forward, slips his arm through mine, and leads me out the door. "Let's go," he says and I nod wordlessly, moving along beside him.

"Americans," I hear Tom mutter behind us. "Bunch of bloody nutjobs."

Lucas

I couldn't believe it when I heard Matthew shout my name. I was in the front of the theatre and immediately recognized his voice. I dropped the box I was carrying, it just slipped right out of my hands and banged onto the floor. It is so not like Matthew to make a scene. I almost couldn't believe it when I hurried backstage and saw him there, struggling with Jamie and the others.

Now I'm hanging onto Matthew's arm, leading him down the alley toward some unknown destination. I can feel him shaking, his body trembling, and he's taking deep gulping breaths. In a moment he stops, turns to look at me, and shakes his head.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Lucas, I'm sorry that I embarrassed you in front of your friends."

"You didn't," I hasten to assure him. "It's okay."

He goes on as if he didn't hear me. "I was—upset. I waited and waited, and couldn't find you. I was afraid you'd gone away and I'd never see you again. I couldn't—Lucas, I couldn't bear it, losing you again."

I don't know what to say.

"Can we go somewhere private, to talk?" he asks. "Your place?"

"No. That's not possible."

"Please," Matthew clasps his hands together and I stare at his fingers twisting over each other. "Please, Lucas," he repeats. "Please don't say no."

"I mean," I clarify, "no, not at my place. I don't live alone."

"Oh! I forgot. You share an apartment with Jeep?"

Apartment is an exaggeration of our two rooms in Bayswater, but I don't elaborate, just nod yes.

"What about my hotel? Would you—could you come there with me now?"

"I don't know." I really don't know what I want to do. "Okay," I decide. "I guess so."

"Thanks." Matthew straightens his shoulders. "Let's get a taxi," he suggests. "Where can we find one? I'm all turned around."

"This way." I lead the way down a couple side streets to Piccadilly Circus. I hail a cab and climb inside, with Matthew right behind me.

"Dorchester Hotel," he tells the driver.

At first, neither of us speaks, then we both speak at once. "Go ahead," I say.

"How long have you been in London? You like it here?"

"A little over a year. I love it."

"Do you ever think about coming home? Coming back to Seattle?"

"No," I answer honestly. "London is my home now."

Matthew says nothing then, and silence stretches out between us. We ride through busy city streets to Hyde Park. The taxi stops at the entrance of the Dorchester, a beautiful old building, the lobby decorated with vases of fresh spring flowers. Matthew leads the way over the plush rose-colored carpeting to a bank of elevators, and we still don't speak as we join some other people in the elevator and ride up to the seventh floor. He opens the door of his room and precedes me inside.

It's really a suite, the tall windows draped with sheer white curtains, the same plush carpeting as the lobby, and a king-size bed spread with a dark red velvet throw that looks like the stage curtain at the Old Vic. On one side of the

suite is a kind of sitting-room area, a love seat and two chairs upholstered in the same velvet fabric. Matthew gestures toward the sofa, and I sit down gingerly on one end.

"Would you like something to drink?"

Maybe a drink will help me relax. "Sure, I'll take a beer."

He opens a mini-bar and pulls out two bottles of Beck's, hands me one, then sits in a chair facing me. "When did you change your name?"

"In L.A."

"No wonder you dropped out of sight. I thought you were dead."

"I was, in a way. I didn't want to be Lucas Denholme any more." I take a sip of beer and add, "Skarsgaard was my mother's name."

Matthew nods. "I don't know how to tell you how sorry I am," he says earnestly. "For the way things happened. For the way I made you feel."

"It really doesn't matter now."

"It matters to me," he insists, setting his bottle on the coffee table. "Lucas, it never stopped mattering to me. You never stopped mattering to me." When I just stare back at him, saying nothing—I can't think of anything to say—Matthew smiles sadly and says, "I was in love with you. Did you know that? I couldn't admit it to myself, but it was true nevertheless."

I have to look away. I can't speak. Instead, I raise the bottle and take another sip of beer.

"You loved me too," he goes on. "At least, I think so." He pauses, then asks, "Didn't you?"

I study the label on the bottle clutched tight in my fist. I don't want to answer him. Besides, he knows the answer.

"Lucas, somewhere along the line, did you stop loving me?"

Still not looking at him, I repeat, "It doesn't matter now."

He stands up, moves around the coffee table and sits next to me. "It matters," he murmurs, "because I still love you. I stopped looking for you, but only because I thought you were dead." His voice trails off, then he clears his throat and asks, "Lucas, do you still love me?"

I set down my bottle on the table. I have to look at him then. I have to answer him. I want to say no. I have to say no. Because I don't want to love him. I don't want to love anybody.

Matthew

Finally Lucas turns his head and looks at me. "I don't want to."

"You don't want to love me?" When he doesn't answer, I ask, "Is there anything I can do to change your mind? Because," I hurry on, "I really want you to love me. I need you to love me, Lucas."

"I'm sorry," he murmurs, "but even if I did ... even if I did, it wouldn't matter. Because, I mean, what difference would it make? I live in London. My life is here now. I'm not going backwards."

"We can go forward, can't we? Can't we do that, Lu?"

"I'm not going back to Seattle," he says quickly. "My life is here. My home is here. It may not seem like much to you," he adds quickly, narrowing his eyes as if defying me to contradict him, "but I have friends here, and I'm making my own way. I'm working on making a career for myself. And I don't need you to rescue me this time."

"I understand." It's the truth; Lucas is a man now and he wants to be independent.

"But," I hesitate only a moment before going on in a rush, "couldn't we, maybe—rescue each other? I love you, Lucas." The aching need in my gut thickens my voice. I have to clear my throat before beseeching him, "If you still love me too—won't you please, give it a chance?"

His brows draw together and I see his jaw working, he swallows once and then again, before mumbling, "Don't ask me."

I lean forward, straining my ears. "What?"

Lucas sits up straight and repeats, "Don't ask me to give up my life here."

"I won't," I assure him. "But if you're willing to take another chance with me, I'll do whatever it takes to get you back."

"Huh," he scoffs, "aren't you listening? I just said I won't leave London."

"That's okay," I assure him, and then, surprising myself, I go on: "I'll move here. I'll move to London, to be near you."

"Bullshit!" Lucas exclaims, his face red and his eyes flashing. "You'd never do that."

"Yes, I would. I will."

"But—your job!"

Lucas is shocked, but he's no more shocked than I am myself. Yet I know I spoke the truth. I will do anything it takes to get him back again.

"Your career!" he insists. "You can't give up your career!"

"I don't need to give up my career," I calmly reassure him. Or maybe I'm reassuring myself. "I'm an architect, and a damned good one. I can get a job in London."

"But you're a partner in your firm," he reminds me. "And what about your house? Your beautiful houseboat! You love that place."

"Yes, I do," I nod agreeably. "But not as much as I love you."

"This is crazy," he insists. "You are crazy! This whole thing is unbelievable."

"It is," I agree solemnly, then unexpectedly I laugh. "Maybe I am crazy."

When Lucas says nothing, I suggest, "Let's talk about the idea. I don't think it's as insane as it sounds." Leaning toward him, I go on eagerly, "People do emigrate to other countries. They do it all the time. You did it yourself. Why shouldn't I?"

"I don't believe you."

"You have no reason to believe me. I know that. But if you'll give it a chance, give us a chance to know each other again, I'll prove it to you. Tomorrow, I'll extend my vacation; I'll stay in London for a while, give us time to get reacquainted. Then, if it works out and if you agree, I'll arrange to move here permanently."

Lucas just stares at me, I can't read his face. At last I have to ask, "Are you willing to give us a chance?"

"No. It's impossible."

"Why? Why, Lucas?"

He stands up abruptly, walks across the room to peer out the window. "You don't believe in love," he reminds me, without turning around. "You always said you don't need anybody, you never will. People don't change, Matthew. Not really. Not that much."

Joining him at the window, I reach for his hand, but he pulls away. "Sometimes people do change," I insist. "A lot of things have happened to change me. When I thought you were dead, I wanted to die, too. I mean, I really did. I was a zombie. Life went on around me, but I wasn't part of it. It's like I was sleepwalking. Do you know what I mean?"

He doesn't answer, so I continue earnestly, "But now that I've seen you again, it's like, suddenly I'm awake. And I want to keep feeling like this. So you see, Lucas? I really do need somebody now. I need you."

At last he turns to face me. "Probably you've just been feeling guilty, for the way things turned out," he says. "But now you can see that I'm doing okay. I'm fine. So you can go back to Seattle, and get on with your life."

"No—"

"You were all right before I came along. You were happy before, you'll be happy again. You just needed to know that I'm all right. And now you know."

"It's more than that," I insist. "Much more! Other things have happened to change me."

"Like what?" He's growing impatient.

"I found my karma."

I can't help a wry smile. In spite of everything that's happened, the word still embarrasses me. "You were right all along, you know—it really was karma that brought us together. In Seattle, and now again here in London."

Lucas is angry. "Don't bullshit me!"

"It's not bullshit." I reach for his hand again, and this time he lets me hold it. "Come and sit down, please? Let me tell you about it."

After staring coolly at me for a moment, Lucas acquiesces. "Okay. Five minutes. I'll listen for five minutes, but then I have to go."

Pulling on his hand, I lead Lucas back to the sofa. "Do you remember," I begin, "when I told you that I was raised by my grandparents?"

We sit side by side on the sofa. I tell Lucas about my mother's letter that led me to India, to find her after all these years. About how I was able to forgive her for deserting me when I was a child. And I tell him about the great holy man, Sai Baba.

"I'm not saying everything's wonderful now," I hasten to add. "My mother is very ill. I may never see her again. All the same, I'm able to move forward now, ready to take on the future."

When I finish, Lucas is smiling. "That's amazing," he says, "and wonderful. I'm really happy for you, Matthew. But ... but really, it has nothing to do with me. I don't believe some old guy in India did a magic trick, to make us meet up again here in London."

"Oh, I know," I agree. "I just meant that, finally I was able to make peace with the past. So now I'm not afraid to give my heart to someone. To you, Lucas." I've been holding his hand all this time, and I squeeze it tight now. "I realize I loved you then. I will always love you."

Lucas stares at me but says nothing. "We're a lot alike," I tell him. "Both of us were deserted by our families, we were hurt by close friends. But you were so much braver than I was. I swore off love, but you didn't." Still he says nothing. "And now—now I can shout it from the rooftops. I love you."

Lucas is studying my face, and I'm daring to feel hopeful, until he frowns. "No," he says at last, pulling his hands away. "It's too much! It's too fast. I can't do this, Matthew. Don't ask me."

"It doesn't have to be fast," I insist. "Can you give it some time, think about it, at least? You don't have to answer right this minute."

Lucas considers. “We’re striking the set tomorrow,” he says slowly. “I’ve got three days off, before we begin prepping for the next show. I was planning to go away for a couple days anyway. Jeep invited me to meet his family in Newmarket. Maybe ...”

“That sounds perfect,” I assure him making my voice as hearty as possible. But I’m not an actor like Lucas, and it’s impossible to hide my disappointment. I’m afraid that, once he’s out of my sight, he’ll decide he doesn’t want to see me again. Maybe he will disappear once more. Maybe I’ll never see him again.

We agree to leave it like that. But all the while I’m accompanying Lucas downstairs and putting him in a taxi, I am absolutely fucking terrified. I scribble the hotel phone number on a paper which he shoves in his pocket, but when I try to hug him goodbye, Lucas grabs my hand and shakes it instead. I smile as he promises to call me very soon, yet my heart is sinking. And inside my façade of seeming calm, I am screaming bloody fucking murder.

Time Present: March 14, 1997

Lucas

Last night I had the taxi drop me near a market in Bayswater, where I bought some dinner for Jeep and myself, but I was relieved to discover that he wasn’t in the flat. I couldn’t eat a bite of the food. My insides were churning, my brain spinning around in circles. Jeep must have gone out with friends. Maybe he thought I’d spend the night with Matthew.

I paced around the flat for a couple hours, but couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t think clearly. Finally I climbed into bed, hoping that by some miracle, I’d wake up this morning knowing exactly what I want.

No such luck. When I open my eyes and sit up, I rub both hands hard over my aching eyes. Then I glance at Jeep’s bed and jump slightly when I see that he’s lying there, staring back at me.

“Morning,” he says. “You’re still here.” When I just nod, he asks offhandedly, “For keepers?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. Then I swing my legs over the side of the bed, pull on jeans, grab a towel and head for the lav down the hall. Maybe a shower will clear my still-foggy brain.

It doesn’t, and I’m grateful to find Jeep sitting at the table with tea ready when I get back. Wordlessly, he hands me a steaming cup. I’ve been in England long enough to consider a hot cuppa the elixir of life. Gratefully taking a burn-

ing sip, I sit in the chair across from him and repeat what I said earlier. "I don't know what I want."

Usually Jeep doesn't pry, but this morning he asks tentatively, "Bloke seems to want you pretty fierce?"

"I guess."

"You still got it bad for him too, eh?" When I just nod unhappily, Jeep adds, "I'll fair miss you, laddie."

"No, you won't." I deny it. "I'm not going anywhere."

"He didn't ask you?"

"Yes." I'm getting annoyed at all these questions. "Yes, he asked."

Jeep spreads his arms wide. "No offense, laddie, but I've been knowing you this year and more, and all that time, you've been pining away for your bloke. Now he shows up on your doorstep. So give over."

I leap to my feet and slam down my cup. "Leave it alone," I tell him. "I don't want—I don't need—oh, fuck it, I'm going to work." I turn on my heel and march into the bedroom, change clothes and head for the door.

Jeep's still at the table sipping his tea. "Ta-ra," he says as I go stomping by. "See you later, Lu."

"Okay," I mumble, before clumping noisily down the stairs. I can't stop feeling angry. Angry and confused, my insides are in utter turmoil. I hate this feeling. I hate not knowing what to do.

Somehow I survive the morning; we're working only half a day. Jeep makes it to the theatre on time. He's cheerful and pleasant and, thankfully, doesn't harass me about Matthew. Jeep and I are catching an evening train to Newmarket, and since he needs to pick up something for his mum, I'm on my own for the tube ride to Bayswater when the crew's dismissed for our three-day weekend. Plenty of time alone, to think. Contrarily, I don't want to think. I'll wait till I'm far away from London; I'll think about it later.

Munching cold sausage from last night, I find my bag and begin packing for the weekend. I've just buckled my tote when I hear the flat door open, so I grab my jacket, and head into the other room. Jeep pauses inside the door, and I stop dead in my tracks when I see who's with him.

"Look who I found waiting outside the theatre," Jeep exclaims. When I say nothing, he goes on, "Now I'll be off for a bit." He's out the door, but throws over his shoulder, "And, laddie. Don't be a prat."

Matthew asks, "May I come in?" He doesn't wait for an answer, but moves into the room and pushes the door closed. He's carrying a suitcase which he drops by the table.

"You're leaving London, then," I say nonchalantly, pressing a hand to sudden sharp pain in my chest. "Heading for the airport?"

"Yes, in a bit," Matthew agrees. "And I'm hoping I can convince you to come along."

"Jesus!" I exclaim, throwing my bag on the floor. "How many times do I have to tell you—I won't go back to Seattle!"

"I'm not going to Seattle." He pulls out a chair and sits down. "I'm going to New York for a couple days. You have this long weekend free, and I'm hoping you'll come with me."

"I asked you for time to think. I haven't decided anything."

"I know you did. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid. Afraid you'll make the wrong decision." Matthew leans forward and says earnestly, "I know I hurt you badly in the past, and now I'm afraid you'll decide it's too big a gamble to try again, to give me another chance."

"Don't—don't pressure me to decide, right this minute." I grab hold of the back of a chair for support, my knees are weak.

"No pressure," he insists. "But remember what I told you about finding my mother? And about finally being able to forgive my parents and get on with my life?"

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Maybe everything. Because there's someone in New York I want you to meet. Someone from YOUR past, Lucas."

"What?" I'm confused. "Who?"

"I don't know her myself, but I've talked to her on the phone, and—"

"Her? Who? Who do you know from my past?"

"Sit down, Lucas, please? And I'll tell you."

I pull out the chair and almost fall onto the seat. I have no idea what Matthew is talking about.

"It's like this," he explains. "When we were in New York, our Christmas together, you were checking the phone book for your mother's maiden name, Skarsgaard, the name you're using now. I'd forgotten about that until last night, forgotten how hurt you were, that your mother's family never contacted you after she died. So early this morning, I started making phone calls to New York, and I found a couple people named Skarsgaard. One of them is your aunt, Freya. Your mother's sister."

I'm shaking my head, more in disbelief than denial. I don't think I want to hear this. "I don't really care, Matthew." He opens his mouth, but I hold up a

hand to stop him. "That woman, she's nothing to me. Dad always said that my mother's family didn't care about me, and I don't care about them either."

"That's just it," he interrupts. "Your father lied. They DID care about you, but he ordered them away. Freya told me that your mother's parents died before she married your father; the only family she had were her two sisters, Freya and Karita. At your mother's funeral, Freya says your father ordered them to go back to New York. He said he would raise you himself, that he'd provide well for you, but that if they interfered, he would disinherit you."

Matthew pauses while I struggle to take in his words. "But why?" I ask finally, "Why wouldn't he let my aunts see me? Why should he care?"

"I can only guess. You know your father better than I do. But he's so domineering, so possessive; maybe he simply didn't want anyone interfering in something he considered to be his business?"

"That sounds like him all right," I agree. My perspective has changed—I'm no longer a child fearful of a cold and distant father. I'm a grown man myself now, and I can see David Denholme for what he is—arrogant, overbearing, selfish. "What an asshole," I conclude, glancing at Matthew, who nods.

"Lucas," he says, "your father is an intimidating man. The sisters were heartbroken, but they were also scared of him. They believed his threats. Freya says they decided it was for your benefit to do as he said. So they went back to New York. Karita married, but Freya did not—otherwise I probably wouldn't have found her, if she had a married name too."

"But later," I ask, "later, why didn't they—"

"They were two young women alone in New York, struggling to make a living. They were poor, they had no other relatives in this country. When I first spoke to Freya, she denied knowing about you—still afraid of what Denholme might do. But when I explained that your dad disowned you a couple years ago, she started crying. She begged me to bring you to New York to meet her, and your aunt Karita too. So," Matthew concludes, "that's what I'm proposing now, Lucas. Come with me to New York, meet your family. Maybe you'll find the kind of peace for yourself that I found in India."

The first thing I think to say is, "I have to be back at work on Tuesday, there's not enough time to go to New York."

Matthew smiles. "Ah," he exclaims, "but I got us tickets on Concorde, it's just a three-hour flight." Reaching across the table to take my hand, his voice softens. "Please," he murmurs, "please say you'll come. You'll be back in time for work. And," he adds, "I won't pressure you to decide about us. This trip is for you—absolutely no strings attached."

I stand up, circle around the table and stop in front of Matthew. I remember all the things he's done for me in the past, all his acts of generosity, with never a thought for himself.

Matthew

There's a long pause as we gaze into each other's eyes. Clearing my throat, I ask, "So, will you come with me to New York tonight?"

"Yes," he murmurs. "I'm nervous about meeting them, my mother's sisters," he confides with a small smile. "But I want to. I do want to!"

"I'm glad."

"As for the rest, though," Lucas quickly adds, "about you and me—I just don't know. Can we take things slowly, for a while? Spend some time together, like you suggested, and see what happens?"

"Yes."

I really want him to throw himself impulsively into my arms, the way he used to do. It will take some getting used to, this grown-up version of Lucas.

"And," he adds, "no promises?"

"No promises. Except ..." My voice trails off, and I feel compelled to admit seriously, "except, I'm not sure I can promise to keep my hands off you."

He laughs then, and suddenly Lucas the boy is back, as his eyes twinkle at me. "Well," he tilts his head to one side and boldly asks, "Who asked you to?"

Leaping to my feet, I gather Lucas into my arms and he comes willingly. We press our bodies together and hold on tight. I close my eyes, delighting in the warmth of his embrace, the remembered sweetness of his soft hair as it brushes my chin.

Lucas is the first to move. He leans his head back, looks into my eyes, and asks, a bit breathlessly, "How long before the plane leaves?"

"Three hours."

He grins, and, encouraged, I dare to bend my head, touch my lips to his mouth. Lucas passionately returns my kiss, and I feel his body tremble.

"Matthew, Matthew," he murmurs, before once again we are lost in hot, sweet kisses. My heart is racing. I can barely contain the joy I feel, holding Lucas tight in my arms once more. He rubs his cheek against mine, his warm breath tickles my ear. And I can't be sure, but I think I hear him whisper, "Don't let me go."