



CHANGING JAMIE

DAKOTA CHASE

Changing Jamie
by Dakota Chase

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Chapter One

The world changed the year after I turned seventeen, but no one noticed except me.

I admit that it was subtle. Everything *looked* the same. The sky was still blue, the grass green and all that crap. Telephone poles studded the streets, and pigeons dotted the rooftops like fat, gray and white pimples. Trucks bottomed-out on the dip between Harper and Vine as they always did, tailgates clanking and mufflers scraping the road. Postal workers delivered mail; phones rang, early morning TV still sucked.

My name was still Jamie Waters; I still lived in my mom's house on Midland Avenue. My eyes were still blue, and my hair was that funky color that couldn't quite decide if it wanted to be blond or brown. I was a text-messaging demon with the fastest fingers in town, and I wasn't just a *Guitar Hero*, I was a *Guitar God*, rocking out whenever I got the chance.

Things had changed, though, and after I figured out exactly what those changes were, I knew that my life would never be the same again.

The morning I first noticed that something was out of whack started out like any other—with my alarm clock dancing on my nightstand at the butt crack of dawn, doing that crazy vibrating thing it does when I've got the volume maxed out. I always had it set that way so that I wouldn't sleep straight though it. My mom used to say that I slept like

the dead, even as a baby. Kind of a creepy thing to say to a little kid—used to give me nightmares.

Anyway, the alarm went off, and I woke up—eventually, after beating the crap out the snooze button a half-dozen times—showered, shaved, dressed, and slapped a Pop-Tart into the toaster. My first class was at 8:20, which left me exactly twenty-three minutes to ride the seven blocks to school. That was plenty of time, more so than usual.

Except that I had the weirdest feeling that morning that something just wasn't right. Not *wrong*, exactly. Not like when you realize you've forgotten your wallet and do that funky self-frisk thing, smacking your butt and your hips with your hands like you're hoping it's hiding in there somewhere. You know the feeling. It's the one when your chest gets tight and your heart starts to thump in your throat, and you say things under your breath that would make Grandma eat her knitting needles because how in Hell are you going to pay the waitress for those two double cheeseburgers you just ate if you don't have your wallet?

Not *that* kind of wrong.

Just ... not *right*.

I couldn't put my finger on anything specific, though, couldn't figure out what was off. I felt okay. I didn't have a fever, a sore throat or the sniffles, and I hadn't grown any extra body parts during the night. The house looked fine, no sign that serial killers had broken in; no maniac had scrawled my name in blood on the wall over the sofa.

My mom was in the kitchen, already dressed for work, throwing carrots, potatoes, and beef cubes into the Crock Pot.

It was Thursday, which meant that we'd be having beef sludge for dinner. I never blamed Mom for not being Susie Homemaker. She was a server down at the Curbside Diner; had been for as long as I could remember, and I knew that she worked her ass off serving burgers and whatever else passed for food in that grease pit. Beef sludge was the one of the few meals she could manage on a workday.

I *did* blame her for Doug, though. Still do.

My dad died when I was three—I don't remember much about him, except he was a big man, and a cop. I have two photographs of him framed on my dresser. He's in his uniform in both of them—he's holding me in his arms in one, and he's straddling his police motorcycle in the other. He'd died the winter after mom had snapped that last photo. He'd skidded on a patch of ice and had slid underneath the wheels of a semi. End of story.

Doug is my mom's second husband. She met him at the diner two years ago and married him six months later. He's a construction worker, or so he says. Personally, I've never seen him build anything more complex than a sandwich. Doug spends all of his time bitching about being unemployed and watching repeats of *Orange County Chopper* or *Build It Bigger*. If the show has a hammer, an engine, or a bulldozer in it, he'll watch it. From the moment he moved into the house, he claimed the television as his own personal property. I'm almost surprised he didn't piss on it to mark his territory.

"Darlene!" Doug yelled from his armchair in the living room. He was wearing his standard attire—a white

wifebeater, a pair of blue boxers, and black socks. "Who's been screwing with the DVR? I didn't record this crap! That fag boy's been touching my shit again!"

That fag boy would be me.

Yeah, I'm gay, but I'm not out—not to my mom and Doug, or to anyone else, for that matter, except for my best friend, Billy. I'm not looking forward to having that particular conversation with my mom, and I'm *definitely* not going to do it while Doug is sitting in the living room screaming about fag boys and the latest episode of *Dancing with the Stars* that I'd recorded. I think that he calls me "fag boy" not as a reference to my sexuality, but because he hates me and in his tiny, bigoted mind, it's the worst insult he can possible throw at me. It would *really* piss him off to know that I *am* queer. I almost want to tell him just to see if I can get that vein in the middle of his forehead to explode.

The fact of the matter is that I could have been a football jock, spent all of my free time up to my elbows in car parts, papered my bedroom with the latest Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition and Doug would *still* think that I was scum because I wasn't his biological son. I realized early on that nothing I could do or say would be good enough for him. Knowing that didn't stop me from trying when I was younger, or for hating his fat guts when I failed.

Billy says that it's *Doug's* problem, not *mine*, and he's probably right. He knows all about parents' hang-ups, especially with gay kids. His own parents tried to bury him in ritzy boarding schools since he came out to them three years ago. Did Billy get upset about it? No. He came home and

rubbed their noses in his latest expulsion paperwork like they were a pair of naughty puppies, and went right on being himself.

Sometimes Billy is my hero.

"Don't forget your lunch, Jamie. I'm working a double today, so I won't be home until midnight. The Crock Pot will be done by five," my mother said, ignoring Doug. She has the ability to tune him out the way most people tune out elevator music or the sound of traffic. Unfortunately, that also means that she never says a word to him when he gets on my case or calls me names. Maybe she just doesn't want to get between us or make things worse. More likely, she doesn't want his temper turned back on her.

That's the reason that I still blame her for him being a part of our lives. *She* married him, not me, but *I'm* the one who has to put up with his crap.

"Mom, I've got track after school today. I won't be home until six, maybe seven," I said, just to remind her that I had a life of my own. I didn't, not really, but she didn't need to know that. Going out for track was one of the things that I did to try to get Doug's approval. It didn't work, but surprisingly I found that I was good at running and liked it. Besides, Dylan Anderson was on the track team, and I'd had a crush on him since our first year in junior high, back when I didn't even know it *was* a crush—or wouldn't admit it. Either way works.

The toaster spat up my Pop-Tart, and I snatched it up, tossing it from hand to hand until it cooled enough to stuff into my mouth. I love those pockets of sugar. Instant rush.

I grabbed the paper sack from the fridge, the one I knew without looking would contain two meatloaf sandwiches made from last night's leftovers, and shoved it into my backpack. I took a few quick gulps of milk from the container while I was in there, hidden by the fridge door, before closing it. After getting the obligatory peck on the cheek from Mom, I trotted out the kitchen door.

Outside, everything was where it was supposed to be. My bike was still leaning against the house on the side of the yard where I'd left it the night before. There were a few cars on the street despite the early hour, people driving to work, construction workers on the way to the job. A patrol car cruised by, and a cable repair truck.

No matter how normal everything looked, something still didn't feel right.

I remember shaking the feeling off, telling myself to get a grip, that I didn't live in the middle of some freaking splatter flick, that there weren't pod people growing in the basement, or zombies hiding in the shadows, waiting to eat my brain. There were no aliens, no giant rabid hamsters in the sewers—nothing but ordinary, forgettable people living ordinary, forgettable lives.

Nothing was wrong. Nothing was different.

I remember thinking that maybe if I said it enough, it would be true.

* * * *

Benjamin Jackson Good High School, named after one of the town's illustrious founding fathers and affectionately

called BJ Good by three generations of snickering students, was a squat, two-story, red brick building. It sprawled over a few acres of hilly ground in the center of town. The hills were pretty steep, which made them great for snowboarding in winter, but they sucked ass when spring rains turned them to mud.

Parking at BJ Good was at a premium; the lot was tiny, and the only people allowed to drive their own cars to school were the staff and seniors. Even so, student-parking passes cost a hundred bucks a year, so most of the seniors opted to either take the bus or chip in for one pass and carpool. A hundred dollars is steep when the only jobs in town available to teenagers pay minimum wage, hence the reason I rode a bike to school. Even if I had owned a car, which I didn't, I would never fork over cold, hard cash to the school for the privilege of parking on their precious asphalt. Not gonna happen in this lifetime. I had about a billion other uses for my meager savings.

Sliding the front wheel of my bike into the aluminum bicycle rail and clicking the lock, I was making my way toward the front doors of the school when I heard my name called.

"Hey, Jamie! Wait up!"

I turned and spotted a head of bright red hair bobbing in the sea of students behind me. I flattened myself against the wall to wait for Billy to catch up.

William Prichard-Everest III, born to money, expelled from three of the finest boarding schools in the eastern United States, had become one of my best friends over the past year after he transferred to BJ Good. Billy was a piece of work if

ever there was one. Openly gay, his hair wasn't the only thing about him that was flaming. Billy was as *out* as a guy could get, short of taking out a full-page ad in the school newspaper. He took great pride in the fact that his insistence on wearing his sexuality on his sleeve royally pissed off his straight-laced socialite parents. All three of his expulsions had been for his inability "*to conform*," and for "*scandalous behavior inappropriate for a student*." He'd shown me the letters the schools had sent to his parents to that effect. He'd had them framed.

Today, Billy was dressed almost conservatively, in a rainbow-colored T-shirt and cargo pants. He was smiling broadly, which told me that one of two things had happened—either Billy had finally managed to give his parents simultaneous brain aneurysms, or he'd gotten the date he'd been after with the hot guy who worked in the paint department at Home Depot.

My money was on the date. He didn't look happy enough for it to have been the aneurysms.

"Guess who has a date tomorrow night with Robbie-the-Hunk?" Billy squealed, bouncing up and down on his bright red, Converse sneakers.

"Robbie-the-Hunk *does* know that you're jailbait, right?" I asked, feeling the sudden need to knock Billy down just a peg or two. I was a little jealous because he had yet *another* date, while I was still trying to work up the nerve to hook up with someone—*anyone*—for the first time.

"For God's sake, Jamie, he didn't card me when he asked me to the movies," Billy said, rolling his eyes.

"You're only seventeen, Billy," I reminded him, as if it was going to make a difference. I knew that I sounded like the parental units, but I couldn't stop myself. Something told me that Robbie-the-Hunk, while pretty to look at and no doubt delightful to hold was going to be trouble with a capital "T." Billy was my friend. If he got into trouble again, this time his parents might ship him off to a boarding school somewhere in Siberia.

Besides, I admit it. I was jealous. Robbie the Hunk was six feet of sexy stuffed into a pair of tight Levis.

"Seventeen and a *half*—I've only got six more months until I can Free Willy and have fun whenever I want."

"You have enough fun *now* to qualify as a three-ring circus," I retorted. "How old is he, anyway? He looks like he's pushing thirty."

"Who cares? He's gorgeous!"

"He's ancient."

The first bell rang before we could say anything else, and like the good little drones we were, we turned and hustled to our respective homerooms. Billy and I had the same lunch period, and I made a mental note to continue the conversation in the cafeteria. Maybe this date Billy had with Robbie-the-Hunk was the reason for the unease I'd been feeling all day.

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Chapter Two

Dylan was in the school showers, steamy clouds puffing up, fogging the bathroom mirror. I could smell the strong scent of his soap, and feel the heat of the water in the air. I heard the slick sounds of a wet washcloth and Dylan's voice as he softly hummed along with the music in his head.

Dylan Anderson was the hottest thing on two feet, in my humble opinion. Skimming the six-foot mark, Dylan had impossibly wide shoulders, a narrow waist, legs that went on forever, and the finest butt in town. His hair was thick, black, and wavy; his eyes were blue-green and a shade darker than the turquoise stone in his class ring. He was the starter for the school's track team, owned a blue, '92 Mustang hardtop, and when he made appearances in my daydreams, was usually naked.

I approached the shower stall, stripping out of my T-shirt and jeans as I went. Dylan heard me and turned, blinking water out of his eyes. He wasn't surprised to see me—he'd been hoping that I'd be there, but when he opened his mouth to invite me under the spray, the voice that came out wasn't his usual baritone.

"Mr. Waters, perhaps you would like to explain to the class the theory of *Occam's Razor*? Mr. Waters?"

My head snapped up, eyes front as Mrs. Sero's grating voice cut through my pleasant daydream, shredding it painfully, like a pair of dull, rusty blades through paper. She stood at the head of the classroom with her hands on her

hips, looking like a withered, angry garden gnome. Mrs. Sero wasn't an inch over five-feet tall, possibly ninety-five pounds soaking wet, and the oldest living creature in the universe, but she still managed to cow students twice her size and a third her age with a single, malevolent glare.

Me, included.

A few students snickered around me, but the rest sat staring into space, twirling pencils in their fingers, tapping pens against notebooks, and generally just *existing* until the bell rang. Let's face it—most of us didn't *care* about *Occam's Razor*. We cared about the *Whos*, as in Who was dating Who, Who was available, Who was not, Who might be breaking up with Who in the near future, and whether that Who might be interested in that another particular Who. We cared about Who made the starting line-up for the team, Who was applying for which college, whose parents gave Who a new car for their birthday, and Who just got the newest CD/DVD/video game/fill-in-the-blank. The civic-minded among us cared about Who was doing what about the environment, Who was running for office, and Who was saving the whales or beating baby seals with big sticks.

With all those important distractions, *Occam's Razor* didn't stand a chance.

"Uh, *Occam's Razor* ... yeah ... um ... it's a ... um..." Brilliant answer. Give that boy a gold star.

Mrs. Sero sniffed, wrinkling her nose at me as if I were a hot bowl of ear wax and snot, and thankfully turned her attention to Mary Jo Parker, resident class brainiac. I dimly recall hearing Mary Jo's answer, something along the lines of

Occam's Razor stating that the simplest explanation was usually the correct one.

What do you know? I learned something. Harvard, here I come.

It wasn't that I *wanted* to sit and waste my time, not paying attention. I *wanted* to get decent grades and go to college. I *wanted* to get a car, a job, and out of this crummy town. I *wanted* a life. I just couldn't help myself. Most of my brain cells were constantly involved in creating interesting new fantasies starring Dylan, and I had very few left over for cognitive thinking.

The bell rang and I virtually shot out of my chair, stuffing my books, pens, and whatnot into my backpack, out the door before it had stopped buzzing. My next class was the one I looked forward to each day, the one that dragged my sorry butt to school rain or shine, the reason I'd had perfect attendance that semester. It was the one class I was never late to, never missed, and actually did my homework for—English IV.

Not that I was particularly interested in whether my participles were dangling or in writing a term paper worthy of a Pulitzer. The reason I loved English IV was because it was the one class I shared with Dylan.

He sat directly in front of me, in fact. For forty-five minutes each day I got to stare at his broad shoulders, and the smooth, tanned patch of skin between his inky black hair and the neck of his tight T-shirt. I'd watch the way his muscles moved under the thin fabric as he flipped a page in a book, or zipped a spitball across the room at one of his

buddies. I was so close to him that I could smell his cologne, when he wore some.

For forty-five minutes each day, I was in Heaven.

It was important to me not to look like a total idiot in front of Dylan on the occasions that Mr. Grayle called on me, so I made sure to take time from my normally tight schedule of rocking the house on Guitar Hero to do my homework. Not that I always answered him correctly—I wanted Dylan to think I was smart, but not loser-smart. I didn't want him to think that I didn't have a life, and spent all my free hours with my nose in a book. To that end, I came up with a schedule. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I answered to the best of my ability. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I dumbed it down a little.

It was a formula that seemed to work for me. As a result, English IV was the only class I had where I usually scored A's. Go figure.

At the moment, I was staring at the hairline at the back of Dylan's head. His hair had just reached that need-a-trim stage, and was beginning to curl. I wondered what shampoo he used—his hair looked really soft.

Suddenly, a loud sound startled me, making me glance up. Grayle had slammed a textbook onto the top of his desk. That had to be Number One on the US Educational Department's list of *Things to Do to Scare the Crap Out of Your Students*. Every teacher I've ever had has used it at least once, and it's never failed to work. All across the classroom, heads snapped up like a herd of antelope hearing the roar of a lion.

"SAT's, people!" Grayle shouted from the front of the classroom, "This will be your Last Chance to get into a good college and become productive members of society. Mess up, and you can forget about *ever* owning a Porsche or a house that doesn't sit on wheels."

I almost swear that I could *hear* Grayle capitalize the words, "Last Chance."

Grayle continued listing all the exciting career opportunities that would be available to us should we fail to score at *least* a 1550 on the SATs, including arson and robbing convenience stores, as he strolled up and down the aisles, depositing our latest graded test papers on our desks.

I heard Dylan swear under his breath as he picked up his paper. English was *not* Dylan's strongest subject. I saw the grade marked in red at the top of his paper when Grayle had plopped it on his desk. He'd scored 72 out of a hundred, which equated to a big fat "D."

I was on the track team—I knew that Dylan needed a C average to continue as a starter, and I was willing to bet that his test grade was going to put a serious crimp in his chances at the athletic scholarship I'd overheard him talking about. Add that to Grayle's overly dramatic announcement about the SAT's, and I wasn't at all surprised by Dylan's colorful language.

There were times in life where nothing short of dropping the F-bomb sufficed. For Dylan, that would have been one of them.

Grayle finished distributing the test papers, and returned to his desk at the front of the room. He waited until he had

our attention again or at least as much of it as he was likely to get.

"In light of the coming SAT's, I'm going to set up after school peer-tutoring sessions. Take advantage of it, people. I've posted a list on the board on which I've paired tutors and students. On your way out of class today, find your name. Participation is *not* voluntary. Tutors will be given study packets, and there *will* be a test at the end of each week on the material."

The class moaned as a single, collective unit. It was one of those infrequent moments in high school life when all the barriers melted away and differences ceased to exist—when everyone, male, female, preppies, geeks, beauty queens, jocks, goths, gay, straight, what-have-you, become kindred spirits, united in their singular hatred of being forced to do something that they otherwise wouldn't do without a gun held to their heads.

Then it was gone, and things went back to normal.

Grayle would never assign Dylan to me for tutoring. It was too much to hope for, I told myself. I just wasn't that lucky. No, I'd get stuck tutoring Molly Fredericks, who had yet to develop a working relationship with deodorant and firmly believed that everyone from the school janitor to the President were involved in one conspiracy or another. Or Frank Hughes, who I suspected tortured small animals in the comfort of his basement, and who would no doubt be featured on a future episode of *Cops*.

When the bell rang, I wasted as much time as possible putting my things into my backpack. I wanted everyone—

especially Dylan—gone before I checked the list. I took a deep breath, feeling like I was walking Death Row instead of the few feet to Grayle's desk, and looked up at the paper tacked to the bulletin board on the wall behind it. I ran my finger down the list of names until I found mine, there at the bottom, wedged between the names Vincelli and Young. *Waters, James*, it said under the column marked *Tutors*.

The name next to mine was Dylan Anderson.

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Chapter Three

Billy was waiting for me in the cafeteria at our usual table—the one shoved up against the wall between the tray return window and the boy's bathroom. No one else ever sat there—probably because of the funky smell of tuna fish and urinal cakes that clung to it. That was fine with Billy and me. We could talk without worrying about being overheard, and considering that a conversation with Billy usually included references to cute guys with cuter body parts, that was probably for the best—for me, anyway. I wasn't out to anyone else, and had no intention of coming out of the closet anytime soon.

I felt like I did on the rare occasions that I was sick and running a fever. A little goofy, a little buzzy, and a whole lot unbalanced. I sat down next to Billy, grinning like the freaking Cheshire Cat.

"What's with you?" he asked, fighting with the spout of his milk container. It was one of the rejects, the cartons you suspect they've used super glue to seal. It wouldn't open right, the cardboard separating in the wrong places, until Billy finally had to punch a hole into it with a pencil and pry it open.

"Guess who's a tutor in English and guess who was assigned as said tutor's student?"

Billy's eyes flicked up toward me. "No ... *really*? Dylan Anderson? You're going to tutor Dylan? Girlfriend! You and him?"

I fell from my high with the velocity of a brick dropped from a fifth floor window. First, I hated it when Billy called me "girlfriend," especially in public, even when I knew no one else was listening. It was just one of those things that irritated the Hell out of me. Secondly, hearing another human being say "you and *him*," meaning "me and *Dylan*," made me realize the truth. This wasn't some private fantasy whipped up in my post-pubescent head. It was real. It was going to happen.

Me and Dylan, together, alone.

Oh, *crap*.

"I can't do it. I can't. I'd have to *talk* to him, for God's sake. What would I say to him, Billy?" I asked, feeling the blood drain out of my head and pool in my feet.

"You've talked to him before. What's the big deal?"

"Are you kidding? Yeah, I've talked to him. I've said, 'Great run, Dylan,' and I've said, 'you were robbed, Dylan,' depending on whether or not he won or lost a race. I've said 'thanks' when he's passed back a paper in class. That, Billy, is the entire history of our verbal communication."

"You're panicking over nothing, Jamie. Talk to him like you talk to me."

"He's straight, remember? I doubt if he's going to want to discuss whether Zac Efron or Shia LaBeouf has the better butt."

"We talk about other stuff, too," Billy said, rolling his eyes. "What about movies or video games? What do straight guys like to talk about?"

"Girls."

Billy made a face. "Well, that's out. Yuck."

"You're not helping."

Billy drained the last of his milk, putting the container down and turning toward me, placing his hands on my shoulders. He had a white milk mustache decorating his upper lip, which made it a little difficult to take him seriously.

"You're overreacting about this entire thing, Jamie. This isn't a big deal. This is *not* a date. You are going to *tutor* him, for God's sake. You'll be talking about school stuff. Dylan is straight. Even if he was gay, he'd be way out of your league."

My mouth fell open and I blinked, but Billy continued before I could say anything.

"He's not going to *want* to make casual conversation with you. He's not going to care what you're wearing, or whether you brushed your freaking teeth. He's only going to care about getting through it in time to go boink his girlfriend before curfew. It'll be a piece of cake."

"Wow. Way to let the air out of my tires. Thanks, pal," I said sarcastically, shrugging off his hands. Sometimes, I really hated Billy—especially when he was right. One thing he'd said really bugged me, though. "Out of my league? What's that supposed to mean?"

"No offense, Jamie, but let's face it—Dylan is hot. You're ... well, lukewarm at best. It's nothing personal—I just calls 'em as I sees 'em. Now, let's move on to more important things, shall we? What do you think I should wear on my date with Robbie? The Abercrombie jeans or the Diesel? I was thinking about layering my—"

"First of all, I don't give two craps about *what* you wear. Wear the Abercrombie. Wear the Diesel. Go naked, if you want—you'll end up that way anyway," I said snottily. "You'll go out, blow him, and never see him again."

Billy's jaw dropped and for once, nothing came out.

I was being pretty harsh on Billy, but I couldn't help it. Here I was, presented with the opportunity of a lifetime; time alone with the guy I'd been crushing on for three *years*, and all Billy could think about was himself and his date with Robbie-the-Hunk. Plus, he'd insulted me first.

It was no secret that Billy had experience—lots of it. He dated with a regularity that was amazing, but he seldom dated the same guy more than two or three times. I doubted he could remember the names of everyone he'd gone out with during the past six months.

I knew everything there was to know about Dylan. I could tell you his eye color, weight, height, address, parent's occupations, dog's name, and what kind of flowers were planted in his front yard. I knew that he was right-handed, and had a tiny mole behind his left ear. I could recite his track stats, knew that he was hoping for a sports scholarship to State, and preferred his sandwiches cut on the diagonal.

Billy didn't even know Robbie-the-Hunk's last name.

Besides, what was this crap about me not being in Dylan's league? I knew I wasn't good-looking, not like Dylan. I was shorter and skinnier, my hair never did what I wanted it to do, and I had an occasional breakout, but why did Billy feel the need to rub it in? He was supposed to be my friend! Didn't friends stretch the truth a little when it came to stuff

like that? At the very least, they didn't throw it up in your face.

I shoved my uneaten meatloaf sandwiches into my backpack and stood up, slinging the strap over my shoulder. "Thirdly, I'm sick and tired of everything always having to be about *you*. You're really a butthead sometimes, Billy!"

"What did I do?" Billy asked, spreading his hands. He actually looked wounded, as if he hadn't done anything wrong. "Jamie? Jamie!"

I stomped off in a classic snit, the blood pounding in my ears drowning out anything else Billy might have called out after me.

* * * *

The meatloaf tasted like cardboard as I mechanically chewed and swallowed it. I sat alone on the bottom bleacher at the edge of the track, wondering if eating had been such a good idea after all. My stomach was in knots, bile burning my throat. I stuffed the uneaten half of my sandwich into the paper sack and set it aside.

I just couldn't understand Billy. I couldn't figure him out. We were supposed to be friends, but that hadn't been the first time he'd brushed me off, made me feel unimportant or unattractive. It certainly wasn't the first time he wanted the conversation centered on himself, either. That happened every time we got together.

Billy was high maintenance. That was a fact I'd discovered shortly after meeting him, but he also made me laugh, and understood what it was like to be gay in a school full of

straight kids. There were times when I felt like a square peg in an ocean of round holes, like I didn't fit in anywhere. I couldn't be myself at home, and I couldn't be myself at school, either. I always felt like I had to watch everything I said, the way I walked, the way I dressed ... it was frustrating.

With Billy, I didn't have to pretend to be someone I wasn't—I could always just be *me*. That freedom had been worth the one-sided conversations and preoccupation with Everything Billy.

I'd come out to him about two months after we'd met. It wasn't something I'd planned or rehearsed—it had just happened, a spur-of-the-moment decision. It was a rainy afternoon, and we were in my room playing—what else—Guitar Hero. Well, *I* played. Billy stood on my bed and danced.

I'd looked over my shoulder at him after the song finished. He was still dancing, even though the music had stopped. That was typical Billy—he danced to the music in his head whenever he felt like it, and didn't give a crap who was watching.

I suddenly wanted with all my heart to be like Billy. To not care what anybody thought of me, free to do what I wanted, behave the way I wanted, dress the way I wanted. To like whoever I wanted.

To be me, *Jamie*, and not somebody everyone else on the planet thought I should be. To have someone who understood me, and who wouldn't judge me.

"Hey, Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't think I like girls."

"Yeah, I figured."

"You did? How?"

"Well, let's see. Mindy Flagler just about got down on her knees and begged to have your babies last week and you didn't even bat an eye."

"She did?" I didn't remember her doing any such thing. Mindy had always been nice, waving and smiling at me. She'd brought me a couple of brownies that she'd baked, and usually showed up at my track meets. I realized that she must have been crushing a little, although I hadn't understood it at the time. I was a little ignorant when it came to the behavior patterns of the female of the species. I was twelve when I discovered that I found boys much more interesting, and hadn't really paid attention to girls after that.

"Yeah, I know. You were too busy scoping out Dylan Anderson's ass."

"Oh. Yeah, well, he's got a great butt."

I turned back to the game console, clicked for the next song, and that was it.

Billy just accepted it. He answered a lot of my questions, too. Questions I'd never have had the nerve to ask anyone else, mostly about sex. Billy was a virtual how-to manual, a gay man's step-by-step guide to getting laid. Unfortunately, I'd never had the opportunity to put any of his advice into practical use. He and I had never connected, not in that way. To me, for all that his stories and language sometimes seemed scraped directly from the gutter to his mouth, he was

completely asexual, my own personal little redheaded Ken doll. We were friends, in the purest platonic sense of the word.

Somehow, though, looking back at our relationship, I realized that I'd always felt like Robin to his Batman. Billy had the dates, he had the stories, the information, the experience, and the condoms in his Bat-utility belt. All I had was Billy.

Maybe it time to turn in my sidekick cape.

"Hey, Jamie."

I looked up at the sound of the voice—the familiar voice—that called to me. Dylan stood about a half dozen steps away, looking as gorgeous as usual, but extremely uncomfortable. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, and his eyes were fixed at a point about ten feet above my left shoulder.

"Uh. Hi." *That's the way, Jamie, I thought. Dazzle him with your brilliant conversational skills.*

"Um, I guess we're teamed up for that stupid tutoring thing in English, huh?"

"Yeah. I guess so." *Holy crap! Dylan was actually talking to me. Full sentences, too, not just grunts. Oh God, please don't let me do something stupid like burp or fart or throw up on his Nikes.*

He nodded, eyes flicking everywhere but at me. That was a first—he looked as nervous as I felt. "So, do you have time this afternoon? To study? Or tutor? Or whatever it is we're supposed to be doing?"

"Study. Yeah. Um, after practice?"

"Cool."

Dylan turned and walked away to where a few of his buddies waited. No goodbye, no wave, but that was okay. He'd talked to me, as in actual back-and-forth dialogue, and I hadn't frozen up or keeled over, or had an embarrassing loss of bodily functions. I'd even held up my end of the conversation.

Okay, I hadn't actually said more than three words at a time, but it was a start, right? Suddenly, my appetite came roaring back with a vengeance, and I dug out the rest of my meatloaf sandwich from the paper sack, devouring it in two bites. I was going to need my strength. It was going to be a long afternoon.

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Chapter Four

Billy caught up to me between my last class and track practice, grabbing my arm and hauling me into the nearest bathroom. No one else was in there, which suited me just fine considering that I was certain Billy wouldn't filter whatever he was going to say before he said it.

"I'm sorry, Jamie."

Okay, that wasn't what I'd expected, not from Billy. I'd figured that he was going to pass the blame for our argument on me, tell me that I was being too sensitive, that I had to grow a thicker skin to survive. An apology wasn't something I'd even considered, not from Billy. I was surprised and impressed, but I wasn't about to let him off the hook so easily.

"You were a real jack-off, Billy. It hurt, dude."

"I know. I'm just ... Look, there's a lot going on in my head lately, Jamie, serious stuff that I haven't talked to you about, okay? I'm really sorry about this afternoon. Can't we let it go at that?" He actually looked as though he meant it, too. He hadn't even cracked a smile.

"What kind of stuff?" I was wavering, but still not ready to forgive.

He shook his head. "Nothing you need to be concerned about, not yet, anyway. I'm just not ready to talk about it, okay? It's got to do with Robbie, but that's all I can tell you. Look, just tell me that everything's still okay between us."

I blinked. This wasn't my Billy. *My* Billy didn't have a serious thought in his head. *My* Billy was too concerned with clothes, hot guys, and the latest Who's Who of Hollywood to think about anything of any real importance. Plus, *my* Billy couldn't keep a secret to save his life. He'd always told me everything—at least, I'd always thought he had. "Robbie-the-Hunk? You don't even know his last name."

"I know a lot more about him than you think I do. Please, Jamie, just say we're good, okay?" Jesus, he was practically begging! How could I say no?

"Okay, okay," I said, giving in as I always did, "we're cool."

"Good! I have to go. Call me later, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, Billy." Then he was gone, in a flash of rainbow-colored T-shirt and red Converse sneakers. The door swung shut behind him, leaving me alone in the bathroom with a whole load of questions and no answers.

The feeling I'd had that morning came roaring back, stronger than ever. Something wasn't right, and now I was sure that whatever that something *was*, it had to do with Billy.

* * * *

Track practice went about as usual. We warmed up, stretched, did a few laps. We had a meet coming up the following weekend against South Westfield High, two towns over. I spotted Dylan across the field, working with the other team members who would run the hurdles. I didn't do the hurdles—I didn't have the legs for it. You needed long legs to

make the jumps, legs like Dylan's. Mine might be fast, but they weren't exceptionally long. I wasn't good enough to run relay, either. I would run in the sprints, 100, 200, and 400 meter.

Dylan did everything—sprints, relay, hurdles, javelin, shot put, discus, hammer, and all the jumps, and he was equally good at every event, although he did his best in the hurdles. If anybody deserved an athletic scholarship to State, it was Dylan. Maybe this tutoring thing, if I could get past the fact that it was *Dylan* I was trying to teach, would help his grades.

I made good time during the practice runs. Maybe I pushed myself a little harder than usual, wondering if Dylan were watching me, knowing that we had a date after practice. I know, I know ... it wasn't a *date*, but a guy could dream, right? If fantasizing helped move my butt around the track, then what was the harm?

Coach blew the whistle and the team made for the showers. That was the moment when a new worry hit me, a serious one that I hadn't considered before.

I didn't make a habit of showering with the guys. The gym showers didn't have separate stalls—they didn't even have curtains between them. Getting naked with a bunch of buff guys was just too difficult and uncomfortable for me. I usually grabbed my gear and hightailed it home after practice, showering in the privacy of my own bathroom where it didn't matter if I sprouted a boner. If pressed, for example after an away-game, I'd wait until everyone else had finished, then duck in, lather up, and get the Hell out. Let's face it—I fantasized about Dylan in the shower all the time. Actually

seeing him there in the flesh, wet and soapy, would result in a problem I wouldn't be able to hide.

I'd gotten very good at excuses, too. *Can't shower—athlete's foot. Can't shower—dental appointment. Can't shower—going to be late for doctor/date/grandma's funeral/cousin's wedding.* Honestly, when it came to excuses, I had enough material to write a book on the subject.

This time, I didn't have a choice. I had to meet Dylan afterward for our first tutoring session, and I couldn't show up smelling like the chimp house at the zoo. I didn't want him to have to wait too long for me, either—he'd either want an explanation or give up and go home.

Still, I dragged my feet, trying to wait until most of the guys had finished showering. I undressed slowly in the locker room, in a corner behind a row of lockers where no one could see me and more importantly, where I couldn't see *them*. With a towel wrapped loosely around my waist (draped in the front to hide anything that might suddenly spring up), I grabbed my soap and shampoo, kept my eyes glued to the floor and made my way into the shower room.

It was empty except for one guy showering under the last head at the back of the room.

Of course, the guy would have had to be Dylan.

I didn't stare. I swear it. Only one quick peek to verify that it was him, but believe me, that was more than enough. I squeezed my eyes shut, cranked up the shower and stepped under the spray, careful to keep my back to him.

Unfortunately, I'd forgotten all about my towel. I didn't even notice the wet, heavy terrycloth dragging at my hips. I

was too busy trying to scrub the vision of Dylan naked from my brain via my scalp before parts below my belly button realized it was there.

Dylan, however, noticed.

Before I knew what was happening, a hand yanked my towel off and reached around my shoulders, waving it in my face. "Forget something?" Dylan asked, laughing, shaking the towel. I was frozen, unable to move, unable to breathe. Dylan's arm disappeared, along with the towel.

"Meet you in the library, dude." He snapped my butt with the wet towel and was gone.

The whole incident had taken less than thirty seconds, but in my head it went on and on, repeating over and over again in slow motion, like a sensational play on Monday Night Football.

Not only had Dylan seen me naked, he'd *touched* me. He'd used the painful end of a wet towel to do it, sure, but who was I to split hairs? I allowed myself to savor the feeling for a few brief moments, then filed the entire experience away in my memory to be taken out later that night when I was alone and safe in my bed and could *really* enjoy it.

Then I took a deep, calming breath, and turned the shower knob all the way over to COLD.

After about five minutes under the icy spray, once I deemed myself sufficiently shrunken and pruny, I turned off the water. Having no towel was a problem, but not one I couldn't overcome. I hurried to the doorway, snaking my arm around the corner, fishing for a clean towel from the rack. For

once, luck was with me. I snagged a corner of soft terrycloth and pulled hard.

I succeeded in getting a towel, and wrapped it snugly around my waist before running through the dressing room to my dark little corner. Everyone else had gone already, including Dylan. The only person left in the room was Pete, the equipment manager, who was too busy slinging jockstraps and dirty towels into a laundry bin to notice me.

It didn't take me long to dress, fuss at my hair in the mirror until I realized it wasn't going to behave no matter what I tried short of shaving it off, and splashed on a little cologne. It wasn't expensive stuff, but it was better than the Old Spice my stepfather usually doused himself in. I suddenly wasn't very concerned with how I looked—the guy had just swatted my bare butt in all its hairy glory. I didn't think wrinkles in my shirt or the bleach spot on my jeans was going to make much of a difference in his opinion of me.

I ran all the way from the gym to the library, which was up two flights of stairs on the other side of the building. Since it wouldn't do to burst into the library wheezing and sweating, I leaned against the wall for a few minutes, composing myself. Then, gathering my courage, I opened the door and walked in.

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Chapter Five

When I reached the library, Dylan was sitting at a small table near the back of the room, legs stretched underneath, feet planted on the seat of the chair across from him. He was looking down, picking at his nails, obviously bored out of his mind. There were no books, no pencils, and no paper anywhere in sight.

"Hi," I said, standing awkwardly in front of the table. I wasn't sure where to sit. My first inclination was to sit across from him, but that would mean having to dump his feet off the chair, and I just didn't have the nerve to do that. Should I drag a chair over and sit next to him? I'd never be able to concentrate with him being that close. No, I decided, his feet were going to have to go. I moved to the chair, setting my backpack on the table in front of it, hoping he'd get the hint.

"Hey," Dylan answered. God, he had a great voice. Deep, rumbling, just a little bit gravelly.

"Sorry I'm late," I said. He moved his feet and I sat down. I busied myself digging out Grayle's tutor packet, our English IV textbook, a pad of lined paper, and a pen. I slid the paper and pen toward Dylan. "For notes," I said when he looked at me questioningly.

He picked up the pen and immediately began clicking it, his thumb repeatedly depressing the button at the top of the pen until it sounded like a cricket on a crack. Sheesh. You'd think *he* was nervous or something. I shook the odd thought out of my head and opened the packet. "Okay, it looks like

our first test is going to be on Hamlet. What can you tell me about it?"

"It's a play by that English dude."

Oh, no. Maybe Dylan really *was* all beauty and no brains. I hoped not, or he could kiss his scholarship goodbye right now. "Shakespeare. Not that *English dude*. His name was Shakespeare. What do you know about the play?"

Dylan sighed as if the weight of the world rested on his broad shoulders. "Uh, it's about this guy named Hamlet who lives in Denmark. His father gets wasted, then there's something about a ghost. Oh, yeah, there's a skull in there somewhere, too. Then everybody dies."

"Dylan, you *did* read the play, right? Tell me that you read the play."

"You know what my practice schedule is like, Jamie. You're on the team."

"That doesn't answer my question." Maybe it did in a roundabout way, but I needed to hear him say it. What was I going to do now? A quick glance at the study materials made it obvious that they'd be useless if he hadn't read the damn play!

"I've been really, really busy." His eyes never left the pen and he started clicking it again, even faster than before.

"Besides, you know how it is ... I'm supposed to be a jock. We can barely read, let alone read Shakespeare."

I opened my mouth to tell him that this meeting was going to be a colossal waste of time because I couldn't *possibly* teach him enough in a couple of days to pass the test if he hadn't read the play, when something he'd said stopped me.

Supposed to be a jock? He *was* a jock. He was the best athlete on the team. *We can barely read, let alone read Shakespeare.* It occurred to me that Dylan wasn't stating a fact—he was talking about a stereotype. Considering my own personal history, I knew quite a bit about stereotyping myself.

"*Can't* read Shakespeare, or can't *admit* to reading it?" I asked softly.

For the first time since I'd sat down, his turquoise eyes flicked up to meet mine. He only held my gaze for a few seconds before dropping them again, but I'd seen the truth there. "Look, Dylan, I don't know why you think that you have to go along with the stereotype of the dumb jock, and it's none of my business. I won't tell anyone that you read Hamlet. The only thing that's important is getting a decent grade on the test, and on the SAT's. But you have to level with me so that I know where we stand."

"You hang out with that guy Billy a lot, don't you?"

Okay. Not exactly on the subject, but I'd been expecting the question sooner or later. That didn't stop me from immediately going on the defensive. "Yeah. What about him?"

"He's ... you know..." One shoulder shrugged, the clicking got faster.

"So?" *Please, God, don't let this go where I think its going,* I prayed. *Don't make me have to defend Billy and end up saying things that I'm not ready for anyone else to know. I'll go to church. I'll give up chocolate. I'll delete those pictures I downloaded. Anything, but please don't let Dylan throw down the gay card!*

"...a blabbermouth," Dylan finished.

I bit back a relieved "Yes!" and tried to look compassionate. "I won't tell him, Dylan. I promise."

"Look, I'll be honest with you," he said, finally putting the pen down and leaning in over the table, dropping his voice to a whisper. Those brilliant blue-green eyes locked on mine, earnest and unwavering. I couldn't have looked away if I'd wanted to. "The school, the coach, my dad, everybody wants to see me get that scholarship. I want it, too. But I'm supposed to be practicing every free minute I get. When am I supposed to do my homework? When am I supposed to study? I don't have time to read freaking Shakespeare, but I knew that if I flunked English, I was dead in water. So I ... cut back on my practice time. I read it while I was supposed to be lifting weights in the basement. If my old man finds out about it, he'll flip. There's goes my car, my allowance, my whole freaking life.

"Plus, I have to worry about what the other guys are going to think if they find out that I've been ditching practice to study. If I was slacking off to party, that'd be okay, but to *read*? Who *does* that?"

Thank you, God. "So you *did* read it." I couldn't suppress a grin. "I swear that I won't tell anyone that you've been studying. When Billy asks me, I'll just shake my head and tell him what a huge dumb-ass you are."

Dylan laughed, then he returned to staring at his fingers, and the clicking resumed. "Okay. This is what I know about it. Hamlet was written by Shakespeare somewhere around 1600. It's his longest play, and there are three different versions of

it that we know of, and it's a tragedy. Boo-hoo. Hamlet's father is poisoned by Hamlet's uncle, Claudius. Hamlet's dad comes back as ghost to give Hamlet the low-down on what happened to him. Hamlet swears revenge, and pretends to be Looney Tunes to get the goods on his uncle. Meanwhile Hamlet's girlfriend, Ophelia wigs out, and commits suicide after dissing Hamlet to Claudius. In the end, Laertes kills Hamlet, and manages to skewer himself, too. Hamlet's mom bites it by accidentally drinking poisoned wine, and Hamlet kills Claudius before he kicks it."

I was ... stunned. Not only was it right on the money, it was also the most words I'd ever heard Dylan speak at one time. "Wow. That was quite a synopsis." I couldn't help smiling at him. Who knew there was a brain underneath all those good looks and muscles? I caught myself relaxing, easing my guard down. Something about his confession of being a closet geek made me a lot more comfortable around him. He was only a guy, after all. A guy I'd been crushing on, yes, but still just a guy, like me. Well, maybe not *quite* like me, but close enough.

Dylan's cheeks colored and he gave me a sort of half grin. "Yeah. There's a whole lot more to it, all that Freudian crap about oedipal complexes and stuff, but that's basically it, I guess."

"Did you screw up that last test on purpose, Dylan?" I asked, bluntly. I had a feeling that he had, but I wanted to know.

His half grin grew a little wider. "No, actually I didn't. I was up late the night before, and my head wasn't in the game. It was my own fault."

I didn't want to know what he'd been doing—or who—that had kept him up late. "So, what do we do, now? You really don't need tutoring."

"Yeah, but I really need to *pretend* that I do. Would you mind? I mean, I could pay you for your time. We only need to meet a few hours a week..." If he clicked the pen any faster, it might actually burst into flames.

Pay me? He was offering to pay me to spend time with him? At what point had I drifted into some weird parallel dimension where everything was half-back ass-wards? In the world I was in ten minutes ago, I would have thought for sure that *I'd* need to pay *him* to hang out with me.

"No, that's okay. It's the assignment, after all. We can flip through the packets each week, but unless there's something you want to spend time on, we can just go do ... whatever." I gave a shrug as if it was no big deal, even though my heart was doing cartwheels in my chest cavity. A thought occurred to me. "You don't fool around with Guitar Hero, do you?"

"Sure. I just unlocked *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*, but I haven't beaten it yet." He smiled widely, showing twin dimples in his cheeks. "That's why I was up so late that night and blew the test."

I snorted, a thoroughly unattractive sound, but I couldn't help myself. "Cool. Maybe next time we could meet at my house and play a few riffs. You know," I hastily added, "to pass the time. So it looks like I'm actually tutoring you."

"Yeah, that'd work. I know tomorrow's Saturday, but are you busy?"

Tomorrow? Me? Spending time with Dylan two days in a row? *I swear to God, if I wake up and this all a dream I'm going to be really pissed*, I thought. "Yeah, tomorrow would be good."

"Great. I've got practice until one, but I can come to your place after I'm done."

Being a member of the team, I already knew his practice schedule, but I didn't remind him of that. The field team practiced on Saturdays—javelin, shot put, discus, and hammer. "Okay." I took the pen, wrote my address on a piece of paper and slid it back across the table. "Bring your guitar. I have to warn you—I'm pretty good at it."

"Sure. Thanks, man."

"No problem."

* * * *

I went home Friday night to beef sludge and another drunken lecture from Doug on how I didn't pull my weight, and how I ought to go out and get a job after school instead of wasting my time running in circles around a track, and how he couldn't wait until I was eighteen and he could boot my faggoty ass out of the house.

All and all, it wasn't as bad as I would have thought. He must have started drinking earlier than usual, because by the time I'd plopped a serving of sludge into a bowl, poured a glass of milk and carried them to my room, he'd already run out of steam.

At least I didn't have to worry about Doug being around when Dylan came over the next day. Doug went bowling on Saturday afternoons, then to the bar with his buddies afterward. He wouldn't stumble home until midnight or so. Sometimes, if I was extraordinarily lucky, he wouldn't come home until Sunday morning. I never stopped hoping that the one time would roll around when he wouldn't come back again, ever.

I'd just set my bowl of sludge on my desk and booted up my computer when my phone rang.

"How'd it go with Dylan?" Billy rarely indulged in niceties like hellos or goodbyes. He cut right to the chase and just started talking. Usually, I could count on getting a word or two in when he ran out of air and stopped to take a breath.

"Uh ... it went fine." Truthfully, I was little disoriented because he'd started off with a question about me instead of himself. That wasn't normal for Billy. Maybe he'd learned something from our fight that afternoon.

"Good. Should I wear the Abercrombie or the Diesel? You didn't say one way or the other this afternoon."

That was more like it. I was back on familiar ground. "The Diesel. The Abercrombies are too tight. Robbie-the-Hunk will be able to see your spleen."

"The Abercrombie it is, then. Hair? Blown back, or spiked?"

Yup, Billy was back. "Spiked is good."

"Yeah, but is it hot?"

I rolled my eyes, even though the effect was lost over the phone. "Yes, it's hot. Jeez, Billy, this isn't your first date. Don't you have this down to a science by now?"

"It's my first date with *him*, Jamie. It's important."

"Why? What makes this guy so special? Besides being eligible for Social Security, I mean?"

"Bite me. He's only twenty-five. Stop being my mother for a minute, and help me, okay?"

"Okay, okay." I remembered what he'd said to me that afternoon about secrets that he couldn't talk to me about. Whatever it was, it had him keyed up. I could practically *hear* him climbing the walls. "Abercrombie, spiked, and the white T-shirt under the black button down—the one with the cool dragon on it."

"Good choice! I look great in that shirt. Shoes?"

I sighed. "The crackled leather loafers you bought last summer."

"Cool. I'm meeting him over in Chester tomorrow night at Throb."

I didn't know what threw me more—the fact that Billy had agreed to meet someone somewhere (that totally went against his usual pattern of flaunting the guy in front of his parents), or that he'd agreed to meet Robbie-the-Hunk at Throb. Throb was a club in downtown Chester, about a half-hour drive away, that didn't have the best reputation. I'd never been there, but Billy had told me that it was tiny, dirty, and boring.

"I thought you hated Throb."

"Things change. Okay, I have to go dig out my shoes and make sure my shirt is ironed."

Click.

Something, and I had no idea *what*, was going on with Billy. It just wasn't like him to forgo the pleasure of ticking off his parents and it *certainly* wasn't like him to drive all the way into Chester by himself to meet a guy at a club that he hated.

I had no doubt that he'd get into the club even though Billy was underage. He'd done it before. Money talked, and lots of money screamed. I worried about him going in there, and even more about him coming out and having to drive home.

There wasn't anything I could do, though. I knew that I couldn't talk Billy out of going, and I certainly wasn't going to rat him out to his parents. Doug was useless, and my mom had her hands full at work.

All I could do was keep my fingers crossed for him and hope for the best.

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Chapter Six

I rolled out of bed Saturday morning and swung my legs to the floor, staring bleary eyed at the disaster area more commonly known as my room.

I'd always freely admitted that I wasn't the neatest person on the planet, but I don't think I'd realized exactly how *much* of a pig I was until faced with the formidable task of cleaning my room to make it presentable for Dylan. I didn't want to, but I *had* to clean it. I didn't want Dylan to think I was a neat freak, but I didn't want him to think that I *enjoyed* living up to my elbows in industrial waste, either.

There were dirty clothes strewn all over, a carpet of smelly T-shirts, socks, underwear, and jeans. Some stuff hadn't even made it as far as the floor—there were socks slung over the shade of my table lamp and a pair of underwear hanging from my headboard.

When I stood up, a bag of chips that had been hiding underneath one of my T-shirts crunched under my feet. Empty soda cans dotted the carpet like buoys in an ocean of litter. There were books and CDs piled in tilted stacks, odd scraps of paper sprinkled around like confetti, and a thick layer of dust coating what few bare surfaces remained.

I glanced at my alarm clock. It was almost eleven fifteen, which gave me less than two hours to whip my room into shape. My only other choice was to dress Dylan in a biohazard suit before I let him come inside.

Superman had never, on his best day, moved as fast as I did. Still in my jockeys, I flew around the room snatching up pieces of clothing, piling them on a blanket I'd spread over the bed. Picking up two ends of the blanket and stretching them over the mountain of dirty clothes, I hefted it over my shoulder like Santa's sack and carted it off to the laundry room, dumping it on the floor next to the washer.

Garbage went into a big, black plastic trash bag, to be sorted through later—perhaps sometime next summer—for recyclables, and shoved into my closet along with books, boxes, bags, and everything else that wasn't nailed to the floor or wired to the wall.

As long as Dylan didn't open my closet door, I was safe. If, for whatever reason, he did, I'd still be digging him out from under the avalanche of junk come graduation.

I didn't even *attempt* to clean out whatever was lurking under the bed. I figured that as long as the legs of the bed were still touching the floor, there was no point. Out of sight, out of mind, you know?

By the time I'd vacuumed, dusted, and sprayed the room with half a can of Mountain Fresh air deodorizer, it was a quarter to one in the afternoon. I hadn't eaten anything yet, and I still needed to shower and dress.

On the way to the kitchen to inhale a Pop-Tart and maybe a glass of OJ, I passed my mom and Doug's room. Mom was long gone, having had work at nine. Doug wasn't there either, and neither was his bowling bag, just as I'd hoped.

It was the fastest shower of my life. My skin was still damp when I struggled into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I didn't

take the time to shave, which turned out to be a good thing since I'd just finished zipping up when the doorbell rang. If I'd shaved, I'd have had to answer it looking like a rabid dog with foam dripping from my chin. As it was I didn't have the time to put on socks and shoes. Barefoot, I jogged to the front door, forcing myself to take a minute to run my fingers through my wet hair before answering it.

Dylan looked great, as usual. The fact that he was actually standing at my front door hit me like a baseball bat to the side of the head, temporarily knocking out my ability to speak. All I could do was stare at him in his muscle tee and jeans.

"Hey," he said, through the screen door. We stared at each other for a few seconds, before he said, "Wanna let me in? I've got Mickey D's." He held up a white bag with the familiar golden arches on it, shaking it. In his other hand he held his guitar.

I'm not sure if it was sound of his voice or the smell of the food that brought me around, but I grinned sheepishly as I opened the door for him. "Sorry, yeah, come on in."

I felt absurdly self-conscious leading him through the house to my room, and for some strange reason I heard myself giving him the grand tour as we went. It was probably nerves, but I couldn't seem to stop talking long enough to take a breath between sentences.

"This is the living room there's the kitchen do you want something to drink we have soda milk and OJ there's the bathroom sometimes the handle sticks so you have to jiggle it

and that's my mom's room there's the den that's the door to the basement and here's my room."

Honestly, it was as if I had uncontrollable diarrhea of the mouth.

Dylan didn't seem to notice. He walked into my room, laid his guitar on the bed, sat down next to it, and dug into the bag of fast food. I sat on my desk chair, swiveling around to face him. He tossed me a double cheeseburger and I tore into it, grateful to have something to shove into my mouth to keep it busy for a while.

"I went over the handouts you gave me yesterday," Dylan said, his words a little distorted as they funneled their way out around a mouthful of hamburger. "There was a question about why Hamlet hesitated to kill Claudius. Why *didn't* he off the guy right away?"

"Well, mostly it was because in the days when Shakespeare wrote the play, the hero couldn't just kill a guy because a ghost told him to do it. He had to have proof that Claudius was the murderer. Like on CSI—they can't arrest the killer until the DNA results come in. Arresting a guy without proof positive would annoy the audience and they'd get bad ratings." I finished the cheeseburger and started in on the fries Dylan had handed over to me.

The simple act of eating relaxed me, made me more comfortable with him. I could *almost* forget that he was sitting on my mattress, where I'd done things under the covers the night before that were best left forgotten. I felt a blush coming on and coughed hard to cover it. "Sorry. Fry went down the wrong the pipe."

Dylan ate another burger, obviously waiting for me to continue.

"Personally, I think he hesitated because of his oedipal complex. I think he saw Claudius as the only thing that stood between him and his evil desire to boink Mom. If Hamlet killed Claudius, he'd also destroy the roadblock between him and Mom's bed. He'd end up doing the deed and damning himself."

"Oh, man, that's so *twisted*. Come on! He wanted to kill Claudius so he could do it with his *mother*? The thought alone makes me want to blow chunks."

I laughed, polishing off the fries. I tossed the empty sleeve into the wastepaper basket next to my desk. "Yeah, I know. Me, too. The other reason could be that he just over-thought everything."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he spends a whole lot of time planning stuff, and almost no time actually *doing* anything. He wants to make sure that the murder is perfect, that Claudius goes to Hell, but he spends way too much time on the details. He procrastinates. By the time Hamlet actually gets around to killing Claudius, he's dying himself."

Dylan nodded slowly. "I never thought of that. Makes sense, though. You want this last cheeseburger?"

"Nah, but thanks." I watched Dylan scarf it in two bites, crumpling the wrapper up into a ball and shoving it into the bag.

"So, you think if he'd acted earlier things would have turned out differently for him?"

I nodded. "We'll never know, but I think that's the point. Maybe he would have done the nasty with Mom, but maybe not. Maybe he would have assumed the throne and been a great king. The point is that he dragged his feet for so long, he never got the chance."

Dylan fell silent. He flopped back on my bed, arms tucked under his head, looking just as comfortable as if we'd been friends since birth. For a while I thought he might be getting ready to take a freaking nap.

Time for some Guitar Hero, I thought. I'll be damned if I waste the afternoon watching him sleep. I can do that in English class. I got up and started plugging in the guitars and booting up the game console, switching the output on the television.

"So, do you think people should act on their impulses? I mean, what if somebody takes it the wrong way? What if you made a mistake?"

"It depends. If your impulse is to knock over a bank or bomb a building, then no, I don't think you should. If it's to get up off your butt and rock, then by all means, go for it."

Dylan picked his head up and looked at me. I held up our guitars, one in each hand, smirking at him.

"I take it that's a hint?"

I shrugged. "If you want to play, then yes. If not, we *could* discuss Hamlet as a static character in literature."

Dylan laughed, jumping off the bed and reaching for his guitar. I cranked the sound up, and before I could blink we were wailing to Heart's "*Barracuda*," and scoring star power.

Holy crap—I'd forgotten myself and joked around with him just as I would have with Billy. What was more amazing was that he'd laughed along with me. It was like a miracle. Somehow, while discussing Hamlet's sex life between bites of saturated cow fat, we'd become almost-sort-of-friends. But the most incredible thing was that I stopped noticing how gorgeous he was and letting his looks get to me, and started seeing him as just Dylan.

We played for almost two hours straight, rocking hard, flying through the list, having a blast, until we hit a wall at Tenacious D's *"The Metal."* We tried it twice, screwing up badly both times.

"Dude, I need a break," Dylan said, leaning his guitar against the wall. "My fingers are freaking killing me."

Mine were, too. Hitting the buttons on the guitar at the speed of light for two hours straight would do that, I guess. "What something to drink?"

"Yeah, a soda would be good."

"Cool. Be right back." I trotted out of the bedroom to the kitchen, snagging a couple of Cokes out of the fridge. When I returned, Dylan was sprawled out on the bed again. I tossed him a Coke and sat at my desk.

I'd just cracked mine open and tilted it to my lips when Dylan spoke.

"Can I ask you something? Are you gay?"

I choked, doing my best impersonation of Linda Blair in the *Exorcist*. Soda sprayed in an arc missing Dylan's feet by about an inch.

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to, dude. I'm just asking, that's all."

I could lie. I *should* lie. It was safer that way. Easier. No explanations. No embarrassing questions. No cold shoulders, and people changing their seats to avoid sitting next to me. No name-calling, no hate messages scrawled on my locker. No visits to the school shrink with my mom. No evil looks from the coach and the other members of the team. I opened my mouth to say, "No! Absolutely not! Are you crazy?" but what came out was "Yes."

Oh, God. As soon as the word left my mouth I wanted to snatch it out of the air and shove it back down my throat. It was over. I'd admitted it. Not only would Dylan leave—probably so fast he'd leave skid marks on the carpet—but it would be all over school by Monday. Everyone would know. I'd outed myself.

To my shock and amazement, Dylan didn't move. He didn't even blink.

"Yeah, I thought so. You hang out with Billy all the time. Is he your, you know, boyfriend? Dude, you can do better."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. It was like a bubble of hysteria that had been slowly building up over my entire lifetime had suddenly exploded in my chest, painful and yet funny at the same time. I couldn't stop, either. I laughed until I cried.

Now Dylan knew that, not only was I gay, I was nuts, too.

When my laughter subsided to a few hiccups and snorts, I wiped my eyes and looked at Dylan. He was still lying on my bed, looking as if I'd just told him I was nearsighted, rather than homosexual. It didn't look as though my bombshell had

fazed him at all. "You must think I'm crazy," I said. "Look, its cool if you want to leave."

Dylan shrugged. "It doesn't bother me. My uncle's gay, and he's a great guy. So, are you and Billy together? You didn't answer me."

So he had a family member who was gay. That explained why he was so comfortable with it. "Me and Billy? No. No, we're just friends. I don't really have anybody. Right now. At the moment," I added, not wanting Dylan to think I'd never dated. I hadn't, but he didn't have to know that.

"Ah. Okay. Ready to hit the guitars again?"

"Yeah. Hey, Dylan ... um ... I haven't actually told anybody else yet, besides Billy." I needed for him to understand that because I wasn't ready for the shitstorm that I'd probably find myself in once I came out to the world at large.

"Oh, man. I kind of forced it out of you, huh? Sorry, Jamie. I won't spread it around," he said, actually looking like he meant it. "It's hard, though, isn't it? Not saying anything." His eyes flicked away, and he wouldn't look at me. "I mean, my uncle told me it was hard before he came out. Said it was hard to admit it even to himself. He didn't want to believe it. He tried to be straight."

"Yeah. It ain't easy."

"Have you known for a long time? How did you know?" he asked, reaching over and pulling his guitar over onto to his lap. His fingers tapped the keys, the monotone clacks reminding me of the clicking of the pen the day before.

Might as well be honest, I thought. I didn't have anything else to lose. "I was about twelve, I guess. One day I just

realized that when all the guys were looking at girls, I was looking at *them*."

"Just like that? Didn't you ever wonder if you were ... you know, a freak?"

Ouch. "I don't think I'm a *freak*, Dylan." Control the temper. Bite back the hostility. It was an honest question, and I didn't think he'd meant it to be insulting.

"I didn't mean it that way, Jamie! I just meant feeling different from everyone else. Didn't you ever wonder why? Why you?"

"I am the way I am. I'm not any worse than anyone else, but I'm not any better, either. Just because I happen to like guys doesn't change who I am inside. That's all there is to it," I said, mollified that he'd apologized. "It did take me a while to admit it to myself, and another long while to accept it."

"Does your mom know?"

"No," I said vehemently, shaking my head. "I want to keep it that way, too. My stepdad is a dick. I can do without the extra grief from him."

"I get it. Well, I better be getting home. My dad will stroke if I'm not back by six for dinner." He stood up and unplugged his guitar. I followed him to the front door.

Things had definitely not turned out the way I'd hoped they would. On one hand they'd been a lot better, but on the other, a whole lot worse. I just didn't know what to say to him anymore. Funny, but I knew right then that I was over my crush. From that moment on, he'd be just Dylan to me, a nice guy who knew my innermost secret.

I only hoped he was a man of his word.

Dylan pushed out past the screen door, then stopped and turned toward me. "See you Monday, Jamie. Can we get together after practice again? In the library?"

"Sure. See you Monday." I was kind of surprised that he still wanted to study with me. I guess I'd figured that, even with a gay uncle, he wouldn't want to be spending time with me, now that he knew. Then I realized that he'd trusted me first. I figured that should count for something. I'd keep his secret, and he'd keep mine.

I watched until he'd gotten into his car and pulled away and then slowly closed the door.

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Chapter Seven

It was a little past four in the morning when the front door slammed shut and heavy footsteps stomped down the hallway. I came awake suddenly, startled out of a deep sleep by the noise, popping up in my bed like one of my preferred breakfast foods. Doug was home, and from the sound of things, not in a good mood.

Great! Just what I need! I groaned. I lay back down and rolled over, pulling the pillow over my head. I just didn't want to hear it. Not in the middle of the night and certainly not after the day that I'd had.

After Dylan had left, I'd tried to do some homework but I couldn't seem to wrap my mind around the algebraic equations. Nothing seemed to make sense to me anymore—not the numbers, not my life, nothing. I spent the rest of the day watching movies and trying to figure out why I'd come out to Dylan. Why had I said "yes" when I had every intention of saying "no?"

Did I subconsciously *want* to come out? Or had my nerves over being Dylan's tutor been too much for me to handle? Was that it? Had I gone temporarily insane? I didn't know for sure. I was just grateful that he took it as well as he had. The situation could have gotten ugly fast.

He had flat-out asked me, without bothering to beat around the bush. I hadn't offered the information. He'd said he asked because I hung out with Billy. Was that the only reason? Had Billy said something to someone? I didn't want

to believe that Billy would have outed me when he knew I wasn't ready. He was my best friend, right? Even Billy, as self-absorbed and attention-hungry as he was, wouldn't have done that, right?

The real question, the one I kept coming back to, was *why* had Dylan asked me? If he was as comfortable with it as he said he was, as he seemed to be, then why did he need to know in the first place?

I had a ton of questions and no answers.

Then there was Billy. He'd had his big date with Robbie-the-Hunk that night. If my nerves weren't jangled enough for one day, *he* had to add to it by disappearing off the face of the earth.

I'd stayed up until three-thirty waiting to hear from Billy. The clubs in Chester closed at two, which meant that either Billy had gone home with Robbie-the-Hunk, or he'd wrapped his car around a tree on the Interstate. He hadn't called and he hadn't answered his cell phone when I'd given in and dialed his number.

Even when he'd gone home with a guy to spend the night he'd always called or messaged me. Except for tonight, and it was driving me crazy.

You're being stupid, I told myself. Maybe his cell phone was off. Maybe his battery died. Maybe he forgot to call, went to sleep and didn't hear it ringing. Maybe the moon was made of bleu cheese and underwear models would serve me breakfast in bed tomorrow.

Hey, anything is possible, right?

This is ridiculous. You're not his mother. He doesn't have to call you every time he farts, I thought, punching the pillow, shoving it back under my head and trying to go back to sleep.

Doug was still stomping around, bumping into the walls in the hallway, rattling the pictures Mom had hung there. I heard him go into the bathroom, heard the familiar sounds of him puking his guts up, and hoped he'd pass out with his head in the toilet and drown.

I wasn't that lucky.

I heard him tramp into the bedroom, heard something, probably a shoe, hit the wall.

"Darlene! Wake your lazy ass up! I'm sick!" he bellowed, slurring badly. "Darlene! Do you hear me? Get up!"

That bastard! Mom was exhausted—she deserved to sleep and not have to get up to take care of a forty-five year old deadbeat drunk at four o'clock in the morning.

I lay on the bed as stiff as a board, listening hard, terrified that I would hear a slap, that he would hit her. He hadn't before, not that I knew of, but I was always afraid that he would and I wasn't sure what I would do if he did.

He quieted down. Mom must have gotten up and done whatever it was that she did to get him settled and into bed. After a while, I could hear him snoring.

I don't know why she put up him. It was just another question for which I didn't have an answer. Was she lonely? Was she scared? I felt that way too, most of the time in fact, but you didn't see *me* bringing a loud, obnoxious dickhead home to live with us. I was going to need to have a talk with

Mom soon. It probably wouldn't do any good—I'd tried before—but it couldn't hurt.

* * * *

I never heard from Billy on Sunday, either. By Sunday afternoon, I was ready to climb the walls, worried half out of my head. I'd called his folks, who not only *didn't* know where he was, but didn't seem to *care*, either. Instead, his father sounded as if he were annoyed that I'd interrupted their lunch.

He'd suggested that I call that friend of Billy's, the one with the bad haircut and the waitress mother. Then he'd hung up.

Jerk.

The friend he'd been talking about was *me*. I'd call myself, but I didn't think I'd want to talk to me.

I hung up and decided to give Billy another couple of hours before I called out the Marines to look for him. By "Marines," of course, I meant me.

Doug was hung-over—big surprise. That meant no noise, no Guitar Hero, no breathing too loudly. Mom was supposed to be off from work, but she'd picked up a shift for another waitress and had been gone before I woke up.

I spent part of the day locked in my room, forcing myself to finish my homework. I wasn't a star student, I didn't delude myself into thinking I'd get a scholarship, but I thought if I could at least pull off a three point oh, I could get into the local community college. Take a few classes. Get a job, an apartment. A life.

Later that afternoon, when I still hadn't heard from Billy, I decided I needed to at least *try* to find him. My best bet was to mosey on down to the Home Depot and have a talk with Robbie-the-Hunk. I grabbed my keys and wallet, shoving them both into the pockets of my cargo pants, slipped past Doug and out the front door.

I slammed it behind me as hard as I could, and hoped the noise would make Doug's head explode.

The store was a couple of miles from my house, an easy ride through mostly residential neighborhoods. My mind was spinning like the spokes on my wheels, racing with every possible, horrible fate that might have befallen Billy. He could have been mugged, beaten and left for dead in an alley, or taken by a serial killer. Maybe he'd been drugged and sold into white slavery. Hell, for all I knew, he could have been abducted by aliens.

I wasn't paying attention to where I was going, too absorbed in the grisly fates for Billy that my mind concocted at lightning speed. A horn blared, a car clipped the back fender of my bicycle, and the next thing I knew I was flying through the air. I landed hard, rolling a few times before I stopped and sat up, dazed, scraped to Hell and back, but still basically in one piece. There was a lump already rising on my forehead, but I didn't think it was serious. I hadn't blacked out, and I knew my name and where I was—I figured that was a good sign, at least. I'd be fine, but unfortunately the same couldn't be said for my bike. It was DOA. It lay in pieces, scattered across the road way.

When the car hit the bike, I was thrown free but my trusty steed had been dragged under the car's tires. It lay in a twisted heap of savaged metal twenty five yards away.

The car never even slowed down.

Remember a while back in English class when I commiserated with Dylan and the times in life when nothing short of the F-bomb would suffice? This was one of those times.

Except that I didn't hiss it under my breath like Dylan had. I screamed it, good and loud, as I limped over to where my bike's carcass lay on the asphalt. "Oh, man. This sucks!" I gave the bike a hard kick, as if the hit and run were the bike's fault.

I heard tires crunch on the gravel behind me, and for a moment wondered if the hit-and-run driver had returned to finish the job. When I turned, I was surprised to see Dylan getting out of his Mustang.

"Holy shit, Jamie! What happened?" He asked, trotting over to me. "Are you okay, dude?"

I nodded, too upset to speak. Together we stared down at the wreckage, sharing a mutual moment of silence for the untimely death of my only means of transportation.

"Did the guy take off?" Dylan asked, peering into the distance as if he might spot the bastard who'd left me for dead on the side of the road.

"Yeah. The asshole never even slowed down."

"Oh, man. You're bleeding, Jamie!" Dylan said. Were those beautiful eyes of his filling with worry and sympathy, or had I

hit my head harder than I'd thought in the accident? I chose to believe the former.

"It's nothing," I said, swiping at the blood that trickled down my face from the scraped lump on my forehead. It was true enough. I wasn't bleeding to death or anything, but it was nice to think that he'd been concerned.

"Well, come on. Let's load the bike into my trunk and I'll give you a lift home," Dylan said, toeing the remains of my bike.

"Yeah, okay. Thanks." Maybe it was his sympathy, or just the fact that he was the closest warm body, but I unloaded all over him. "God, this sucks! It wasn't bad enough that my stepdad came home drunk again last night, or that Billy disappeared off the face of the earth, but did that jerk really have to use me as a Crash Dummy?"

"Whoa ... Billy disappeared? Nobody knows where he is?"

"He totally pulled the Invisible Man act. No trace of him anywhere. His parents don't know where he is and don't care; he hasn't called, hasn't messaged—nothing. I was heading down to Home Depot to put the thumbscrews to the guy he went out with yesterday to see if I could track Billy down, but now..." I waved at the bike in frustration. "I just can't catch a freaking break!"

"No problem. I'll run you down there," Dylan said, hefting my bike up and carrying it to the car.

"You don't need to do that. I know how tight your schedule is, man."

Dylan opened his trunk and stuffed the bike in, slamming it shut. "It's cool. Come on, get in," he said, walking around

the car to the driver's seat. He slid in, looking as if he'd been *born* to drive a muscle car. Dylan and the Mustang fit together perfectly.

I opened the passenger door and poked my head into the car. "Are you sure you don't mind? I can walk..."

"Yeah, right, and bleed all over the highway. Maybe we should go the hospital instead, Jamie. That knot on your head doesn't look so good."

"No, no hospital," I said, "but a lift to Home Depot would be great. Thanks." I slid into the bucket seat, closing the door and buckling up. In truth, now that the shock had worn off, I could feel the pain starting. My neck hurt, my head throbbed, my legs ached ... suddenly I felt as though I'd been, well, hit by a car. I kept my mouth shut, though. Finding Billy was more important to me than going to the hospital for a Band-aid.

We made the drive to Home Depot in near silence. I didn't know what I'd do if Robbie-the-Hunk wasn't working. I needed to find Billy. I was convinced that the feeling I'd had in the earlier part of the week, the one where I felt something was terribly wrong, had to do with him.

That feeling had felt nothing like it did now. Then, it had been as if something was just off kilter; now, as we pulled in to a slot in the parking lot and I stared up at the brick face of the building and the clutter of tractors, fencing, and barbeque displays, it changed.

In short, I was scared out of my mind.

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Chapter Eight

"Do you know where this guy works?" Dylan asked as we entered the store. I hadn't expected him to come in with me, but was glad he had. I was hurting, distracted by worry for Billy, and grateful not to be alone.

"Yeah, in the paint department," I answered, leading Dylan in that direction.

We threaded our way past shoppers pushing carts and employees driving fork lifts, my head nearly swiveling on my shoulders like an owl's as I scanned the store for Billy's familiar bright red head.

I didn't see Billy, but as we walked into the paint department, I saw Robbie-the-Hunk behind the counter. He was operating the mixer, watching it shake a can of paint up and down. Dylan and I hung back for a few minutes until he'd finished, and had handed the can off to the waiting customer.

"That him?" Dylan asked, whispering in my ear. I could smell spearmint gum on his breath, and hurting or not, worried or not, wondered what it would taste like to kiss him.

Immediately, I mentally slapped myself. Bad, Jamie! Bad! Dylan was a friend, sort of, and that's all he'd ever be. I really needed to get over this obsession I had with him. I thought I had, but evidently, I'd been fooling myself.

"Yeah. His name's Robbie."

"He looks a lot older than Billy."

"He is."

Dylan gave a soft, derisive snort, his opinion of Billy dating an older man, I guess. He was probably right, too. I certainly hadn't been crazy about the idea, either. I nodded at him then led him over to the counter.

Robbie's back was turned; he was busying himself with something on the other side of the counter.

"Hey, Robbie," I called, trying to get his attention. I could almost swear that he froze for a moment before turning around and leaning back against the counter, arms folded across his chest, a big smirk painted on his face.

"Hey. Can I help you?"

"Remember me? I'm a friend of Billy's. I was wondering if you knew where he was."

"Billy? Billy who?"

Now, that was a response that I hadn't expected. It made me instantly angry, outraged that this a-hole in the cheap jeans and running shoes had the balls to deny that he knew Billy. He'd been out with him just last night!

"You know damn well who Billy is!" I yelled. Several shoppers turned in my direction, but I didn't care.

"Keep your voice down!" Robbie hissed, taking a step toward me.

To my amazement, Dylan stepped between me, the counter, and Robbie's six foot body. Dylan had his game face on—I'd seen it before, every time he toed the starting line in a race. It was the face that said *Get out of my way or I'll run right over your butt*. "Back off, man. He's only asking you a question."

I didn't want to look like a wuss, even though inside I was shaking like one of Robbie's paint cans. I stepped around Dylan, planted my hands on the counter and leaned in. "You'd better remember him, and quick. Store management wouldn't like to hear that you've been dating customers, and the police aren't going to be thrilled that those customers are underage."

"I didn't do anything he didn't want me to do. He knew what he was getting into—Hell, he asked for it!"

Oh, God. Those words were a red flag if ever I'd heard any. "Where is he? He hasn't been home since he left for his date with you at Throb over in Chester. When did you last see him?"

Robbie's lips thinned into a white, angry line. "You tell anybody about this and I'll..."

"You'll *what*?" Dylan asked. He matched Robbie in size, if not age, and I realized that he could be pretty intimidating when he wanted to be. I was suddenly glad that Dylan was on my side.

"The last time I saw him was at the Starlight Motel over on Highway 27."

Well, this just got better and better, didn't it? I turned away, not sparing him another word or glance. He wasn't worth it.

"What did Billy see in that jerk?" Dylan asked, as we left the building and headed for the car.

"I don't know. He was older—Billy always liked older guys. He's built, too. Billy was never very interested in what was

under the skin, you know? Muscles and a nice butt were enough for him."

"Billy needs to grow up." It wasn't a judgment—it was an observation, and I knew Dylan was right.

"I only hope he gets the chance. You don't think that dickhead did something to him, do you?" I asked, wanting with all my heart for the answer to be "no."

"I don't know, dude, but it didn't sound very good."

Mentally, I calculated the miles to the Starlight. It was a dumpy little motel on 27 that rented its rooms by the week, the day, and the hour. Personally, I wouldn't go near it without full body armor and an industrial-sized can of Raid.

It was at least thirteen miles to the motel. Not undoable, but it was getting late and would be full dark soon. Plus, I was still hurting from the accident. I had exactly twenty one dollars in my wallet. That might be enough to buy me a cab out there, but I didn't know if I'd have enough for a return trip, and the buses stopped running at dusk.

Maybe I could walk to the diner and beg Mom for the keys to the car. No, that wouldn't work, either. She refused to let me drive unless she was in the car with me. Besides, one look at me and she'd be dialing 911. Doug was out of the question. He wouldn't lend me his car if the fate of the world depended on it.

"Hurry it up, Jamie," Dylan called from the driver's side of the Mustang. "We need to get over to the Starlight."

My head snapped up. "You can't drive me over there, Dylan! What about your practice? Your dad will kill you."

"Let me worry about my old man. Get in. Let's go!" he said, sliding behind the wheel and starting the engine.

I was too grateful to say much. He was proving to be a real friend, something I'd never expected when I'd seen his name next to mine on the tutoring list. "Thanks, man."

Dylan only shrugged, squealing out of the lot onto the highway. Dylan had a lead foot—we made it the thirteen miles in as many minutes.

"Man, you need to have a serious talk with Billy if he lets his dates bring him *here*," Dylan said, looking with obvious distaste at the motel. I couldn't blame him—I felt the same way. It made my skin crawl just thinking about going into the place to look for Billy.

Set back from the highway across a cracked and pitted parking lot, the Starlight was a collection of tiny cabins, most missing porch lights. The paint was peeling; some of the windows were cracked. One of them was out altogether, yellow "caution" tape spanning the opening in a large "X."

There were a few people standing around in the nearly-empty parking lot, but none gave us more than a cursory look before going back to whatever they were doing—bargaining for drugs or sex was my guess. I didn't care, either. The only thing that I cared about was Billy's car sitting near one of the bungalows. I noticed that Billy's four hundred dollar hubcaps were missing, and I was willing to be his CD player was gone, too. Billy was going to be *pissed* when he found out. He loved those hubcaps like most people loved their kids.

We walked into the dingy front office, where a beefy old man with white chest hair and shiny, bald head sat behind the

desk, reading a newspaper. He looked bored when he glanced up at us.

"Hey. I'm looking for a friend of mine named "Billy." Kinda short, skinny, red hair..." I said. "Have you seen him?"

"Don't know nothing," the old man said, dismissing us. He went back to reading his paper.

"Look, I just want to know if—"

"Kid, folks come here for one thing. Ain't my business who, only that they pay in advance," the old fart said. "If you're not renting a room, get out."

Dylan opened his mouth to speak, probably to tell the guy off, but I shook my head. Pulling out my wallet, I dug my lonesome twenty dollar bill out and slid it across the desk.

The old man looked at the money, then swept it up and tucked it into his pocket. "Room fifteen. He came in last night for a party. I figured he left with the last of the guys. Might still be in there, though—the room's paid through to tonight." He returned his attention to the paper.

"What kind of party?" I asked, pressing. I wanted my money's worth from him.

He shrugged. "If you don't know, you're better off," he said, never taking his eyes off the paper.

That was obviously all the information we were going to get. We left the office, trotting toward Room fifteen. It was the room next to the one with the blown-out window, and the one nearest to where Billy's car was parked. I banged on the door, calling out Billy's name.

"Billy? Are you in there? Open up! It's me, Jamie!"

No one answered.

"He's *got* to be in there," I said to Dylan. "His car's in the lot, and he'd never leave it here."

"Move," Dylan said. He stepped around me and kicked out hard with one foot. It was like being in an episode of *Cops*. The lock broke, the door slamming in. I would have been really impressed if I hadn't spotted Billy lying sprawled on the bed.

The room was a wreck, littered with empty beer and booze bottles, half-eaten sub sandwiches, and broken poppers. I remember Billy telling me about them—small capsules of amyl nitrite, used to enhance sex and loosen up anal muscles. He made them sound great—I looked up them up after he'd left and found out that, not only were they illegal, they could give you rashes, headaches, lower your immune system, and possibly cause fainting, strokes, or heart attacks.

Everything in the room stank of cigarette smoke, body odor, and sex. I had absolutely no doubt about what had gone on in that room. Billy hadn't just gone in there with Robbie. He'd gone in with a group of men, and I could only imagine what they'd done to him.

He was naked, breathing, but unconscious. I shook his shoulder, yelling his name, but he only groaned and stirred a little. "Billy! Billy, wake up!" I screamed.

"Jamie, we need to call an ambulance. Something's wrong with him," Dylan said, putting a warm hand on my shoulder. I turned on him, probably looking like a deranged maniac. I was beyond frightened; I was losing it, and losing it fast.

"He's sleeping, that's all!" I hissed. I knew he wasn't, but I didn't want to admit it. For the second time that day, I was in shock.

"No, he isn't. There's something seriously wrong. I'm calling 911," Dylan said. Later, I'd be grateful that he'd remained so calm. At the moment, all I could think of was that Billy was naked. I didn't want anyone to see him like that. As Dylan dialed the numbers, I tore through the room, looking for Billy's clothes. All I could find was a pair of boxers in the bathroom. I wasn't even sure they were his. I found his wallet, thrown into the bathtub along with his car keys. His wallet had been emptied of everything but his driver's license.

"I can't find his clothes," I said to Dylan. He'd covered Billy to the chest with the bed's stained, torn bedspread. "He can't go home without his clothes."

"Jamie, it's going to be okay. The ambulance is on the way," Dylan said.

I was shaking like a leaf, scared out of my mind that my best friend was going to die. I just kept babbling about his clothes, keys, and wallet. In a dim corner of my mind, I knew I was hysterical. It feels as if your brain shuts down and all you can focus on is one thing. For me, it was Billy's clothes, keys, and wallet.

Suddenly, I found myself wrapped in strong arms, leaning against Dylan's broad chest. How great was this guy? Straight as an arrow, but still willing to hug a friend when he needed it. Somehow that made me even sadder than I already was, and I broke down completely.

We stayed that way, me sniffing like a snotty-nosed baby, him silently holding me, until the sirens wailed in the parking lot. He let me go before the paramedics came through the door.

Things happened pretty quickly after that. The cops arrived with the ambulance, and I had to answer a crap load of questions. Luckily, one of the cops remembered my dad, and they took it easy on me. Their distaste for what had probably gone on in that room was as plain as their badges on their chests, though.

By the time the cops had finished with me, Billy had been loaded on a stretcher and was being wheeled out of the hotel room to the ambulance. I turned to Dylan. "I hate to ask, but can you give me a lift to the hospital? They won't let me ride in the ambulance with him."

"Sure. Come on."

I might still have been a virgin, ignorant of a lot that went on in the world, but as Dylan pulled out of the lot and chased the ambulance down the highway, I felt like

I'd left my innocence behind in that dirty, seedy motel room.

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Chapter Nine

I phoned Mom, first thing. I called the diner and got Hank, the owner on the phone. I explained that it was an emergency, and heard him call for my mom.

"Jamie? Are you okay? What's wrong?" Mom sounded panic-stricken. I *never* called the diner unless it was serious.

I quickly explained what had happened, although I left out certain details like my having been hit by a car and finding Billy naked in a motel room. I only told her that Billy had been rushed to the hospital, that he was unconscious, and that I would probably need a ride home that night. She agreed to swing by the hospital after her shift to pick me up.

The nurses wouldn't let me in to see Billy. I saw his parents come in an hour or so later, dressed in expensive coats and looking like they'd just stepped off the cover of Vogue magazine. They disappeared into Billy's room for about fifteen minutes, before leaving. They never said a word to me, even though I was sitting right there in the waiting room across the hall.

I kept checking at the nurses' desk, but they wouldn't give me any information other than "It's serious. He's in critical condition."

I knew what "critical" meant. It meant that there was a possibility Billy might not make it. What would I do without him? He was my best friend. He knew everything there was to know about me, and even though he could be flaky sometimes, and self-absorbed, and could make me angry, he

was still like a brother to me. I didn't want to lose him. I didn't want him to die.

What had those bastards given him? Drugs? Alcohol? Both? Why had Billy been stupid enough to take them? He was smarter than that. Exactly what kind of a party had it been that he'd ended up naked and unconscious? Had Robbie been there? Had he stayed for the party? The only one who I knew would tell me the answer to those questions was Billy, and he wasn't talking.

Dylan stayed with me until my mom got there. Mom immediately spotted the bruises and scrapes that I'd all but forgotten about in the rush to get Billy to the hospital. We had to undergo the third degree, until she was satisfied that I was okay and had been telling her the truth about the accident.

"I have to go, Jamie," Dylan said quietly, after my mom had settled down. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good. Thanks for everything, Dylan."

"No prob. Call me if you hear anything, okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks again." He left, and even though my mom was sitting with me, I felt alone.

It had been six hours since we'd brought Billy in when one of the nurses finally took pity on me. "Look, one quick peek and then you're going to go home and get some sleep. His condition was downgraded to 'stable.' He's sedated, but he's going to be fine," she said, offering the first smile I'd seen all night.

My mom and I followed her into Billy's room. He looked so tiny, like a little kid lying there, covered with a thin white

blanket and hooked up to an IV and a few other machines. He looked pale, much more so than usual, with dark smudges under his eyes. In the dimmed light of the room, even his bright red hair looked washed out and faded.

Mom put her arm around my shoulders as we looked down at Billy, watching him sleep for a while. At least I'd seen with my own two eyes that he was alive. There was nothing else I could do for him.

Now at least, I knew what the feeling of foreboding I'd been having was all about. Billy had nearly died. It couldn't get worse than that, right?

So why did I still feel like something was wrong?

* * * *

I went to school the next morning under protest.

How could I be expected to concentrate on school work when my best bud was lying in the hospital? Besides, I *had* been in an accident myself the day before. You'd think that would have bought me a Get Out of Jail Free card, but no. Mom fixed me with that spooky look moms get when they know you're pouring it on, angling for a day off. She hadn't said a word, just stared at me, until I finally rolled my eyes and hustled off to shower and dress.

You just can't stand against that look, you know? Not without a crucifix and a bottle of holy water, anyway.

The hours dragged by. I could swear that I could hear each tick of the big wall clock that sat over the door in each classroom. Dylan waved to me at lunchtime, but he was sitting with his friends across the room, and I didn't feel

comfortable going over there. I didn't know them, they didn't know me. Besides, I really just wanted to be alone. I sat at the table I usually shared with Billy, feeling too upset to eat. After a while, I left, and walked around the grounds until it was time for class again.

The afternoon didn't pass any faster than the morning had.

One look at me and my bumps, scrapes, and bruises had the Coach sending me home. "No practice today, not with that limp," he'd said. That was fine—I didn't want to run, anyway. In truth, I'd limped a little more than necessary, just so that the Coach wouldn't let me practice.

I looked for Dylan before I left, but couldn't find him. Maybe he was still in the dressing room. I wanted to tell him that I'd seen Billy before I'd left the hospital night before, and to thank him again for going out of his way to drive me around.

I glanced at my wristwatch. If I hurried, I could catch the four o'clock bus for downtown, which would drop me off only a couple of blocks from the hospital. I hurried around the side of the school through the parking lot, toward the bus stop.

A car pulled up next to me, beeping its horn. It was Dylan.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, surprised to see him. "Why aren't you in practice?"

"I ditched practice. Hop in; I'll drive you to the hospital. That's where you're going, right?" he grinned.

"*You ... ditched practice?* Dylan! You have a scholarship on the line. You'd better get back there and—"

"Shut up and get in," he said, laughing. "One missed practice won't kill me or hurt my stats. Hurry up, before

somebody spots me. I'm supposed to be going straight home with explosive diarrhea."

I laughed, sliding into the seat next to him. "Thanks for the visual, pal. Why are you skipping practice? Billy's stable. I looked for you before to tell you. Maybe you should go back, have a miraculous recovery or something." I didn't want Dylan screwing up his scholarship chances over this. Billy was my friend, but Dylan barely knew him.

"Nah. It's fine. That's good to hear about Billy, though. Did you talk to him? Find out what happened?"

"No. They sedated him. He was still sleeping when I left."

Dylan nodded, shifted, and steered the Mustang into the street.

The going was a lot slower than it had been the night before because of rush hour traffic. It took us nearly a half-hour to get to the hospital parking lot. I had a sense of déjà vu as we walked from the car to the hospital's emergency room entrance, that weird feeling you get that you'd done exactly the same thing before.

We were told by the nurse at the desk that Billy had been transferred to a private room. *Private room. His parents' attempt at caring*, I thought. *Well, I thought, at least they'd done that much for him. They'd only stayed with him for less than an hour last night.* I was bitter and I knew it. I hadn't forgotten his dad's attitude when I'd called him to ask where Billy was.

His room was on the fifth floor, at the end of the hallway. The door was open, so we walked straight in. Just as I'd

figured, his parents weren't there. The room smelled like disinfectant, sharp and almost too clean.

"Hey, Billy," I said softly as we stood next to the bed. He looked a little better than he had the night before—not as pale, although the smudges were still under his eyes. The remains of his lunch sat on a tray next to the bed, untouched.

"What are you doing here?" Billy asked, blinking up at me. "What's *he* doing here?"

"Be nice. Dylan drove my butt all over town yesterday looking for you. What were you *thinking*, Billy? What happened? What did they do to you in that motel? Why didn't you call me? Was it Robbie? Didn't I tell you he was bad news?" Every question I'd been chewing on since Saturday night came flying out of my mouth, almost without my taking a breath in between. I couldn't help it—I was too relieved to hear Billy's voice again.

"Nothing happened. I'm fine," Billy said, his voice sounding a little raspy.

"Bullshit! Billy, you almost died!"

"Look, can we talk about this later? I'm sort of busy being attached to IVs and machines, and having nurses stabbing my butt with needles every five minutes."

"Billy, I deserve to know," I snapped back. I didn't care that the nurses were using his butt as a pin cushion. He'd put me through Hell, and I wanted some answers.

"Not now." He said it to me, but his eyes were on Dylan.

"Look, I'll be out in the hallway if you need me, Jamie," Dylan said. He walked out, and I felt angry and insulted on his behalf.

"Billy, he's been really cool about all of this. He's the one who drove me to the motel to look for you, to the hospital—"

"You were at the motel?"

"We're the ones who found you, you jerk! If it wasn't for Dylan driving me out there, calling 911, you'd be dead!"

"How did you know where to find me?" I should have caught the tightness in Billy's voice, the suspicion, but I didn't. I was too angry.

"Dylan drove me to Home Depot and we had a talk with Robbie."

"You talked to Robbie? Oh, my God! Did he ask about me? Did he say anything? If you pissed him off, Jamie, I swear to God I'll kill you!"

I wasn't worried that Billy would hurt me. In his condition he couldn't kill anything but time, but that wasn't the point. How could he be angry with *me*? I was the one who'd *saved* his sorry ass. Robbie had been the one who'd put it in that mangy motel room to begin with, and had left him there half-dead!

"No, he *didn't* ask about you. As a matter of fact, at first he denied *knowing* you at all! What kind of a guy does that, Billy? What do you see in him?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"Look, I really like him, okay?" Billy said, looking away.
"Okay, okay. I lied to you. I told you that Saturday night was my first date with him, but that wasn't true. I'd gone out with him before then."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I knew you'd find a way to stop me, that's why! After Saturday, I was hoping it would be too late, so I figured I could tell you."

"What the Hell are you talking about? What do you mean, 'too late'? Too late for what?"

"He's positive, Jamie."

"Positive about what?"

Billy sighed, rolling his eyes as if I were dense. "*Positive*, Jamie. He's seropositive."

It took me a moment to understand, to wrap my mind around the word. Then I felt all the blood rush from my head to my feet. For a minute, I thought I was going to either pass out or throw up. "He's got *HIV*?"

Billy swatted at me as if I were an annoying mosquito. "Shut up!" he hissed. "Do you want the whole world to hear you? Yeah, he's positive, and with a little bit of luck, now I'm positive, too."

"Oh, my God! You're nuts! What were you smoking at that party, Billy? Do you even *hear* yourself?"

"I didn't think you'd understand! I love him, Jamie. I want to be with him. I don't want to worry about getting it."

"You're crazy!"

"No, I'm not!" Billy struggled to sit up. His face was screwed up into an angry mask. This wasn't the Billy I knew—this was somebody else wearing Billy's skin. "He'll accept me if I'm positive, too. He'll want to be with me. Look, we're gay. We're going to get it eventually, and it's not a big deal anymore, anyway. There are drugs for it, now. He—"

"I can't listen to this shit anymore," I said, backing up a step. "How did he manage to screw your head up this badly? I may not have the experience you have with guys, but I've done my homework, Billy. Becoming infected with HIV *isn't* inevitable. It's preventable, for God's sake! How could you be so stupid?"

"I *knew* you wouldn't understand! Get out! Leave me alone!"

"Billy, did you tell the doctors—"

"GET OUT!" he roared. His voice was like a slap in the face. I felt stunned, and hurt, and more than anything else, confused. I backed away, refusing to turn my back on him, as if he were rabid dog that might attack me from behind if I did.

This wasn't possible! What he'd said didn't make any sense. HIV was *preventable*! Why the Hell would he *want* to catch something that was going to *kill* him? Maybe the doctors had him drugged up. Yeah, that must be it. He wasn't thinking clearly. He wasn't rational. It was all some crazy dream. I *had* to believe that, because if he was serious about what he was saying, Billy had just admitted to me that he was looking to commit slow suicide.

The thought scared me more than anything else had in my entire life.

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Chapter Ten

I walked out of Billy's room in a daze, wandering down the hallway. I didn't know where I was going, didn't really see anything except the confused images flickered in my head. *HIV*. The letters kept flashing in my mind's eye in blood-red neon letters. I didn't know anyone who was positive. Hell, I hardly knew anyone who was *gay*, except for me and Billy, but I *damn* well knew what AIDS was, and I knew that the HIV virus progressed into it. I'd listened in health class, and I'd read all the pamphlets in the library at school. I knew the HIV virus weakened your immune system, leaving you open to all kinds of medical problems. I knew that AIDS was a horrible, ugly disease. I also knew that it was preventable.

Now I also knew that Billy was purposely trying to become infected, and that Robbie-the-A-hole might well have done the deed. That bastard! Who *intentionally* tries to pass HIV to other guys? What kind of nutcase does that?

The kind that doesn't care, that's who; the kind without a conscience, who deny that they even *know* the guy afterward. *That* kind. I felt such a violent rage sweep over me that I began to tremble. I wanted to go back into Billy's room and shake him until he saw reason. I wanted to go back to Home Depot and do Robbie some serious damage. I wanted to go to Billy's house and beat his parents black and blue for not caring enough about their son.

Most of all, I wanted to cry because I knew I couldn't do any of the things I wanted to do.

"Jamie?" Dylan caught up with me, curbing his stride to accommodate my shorter legs. "What's wrong? What happened in there? I heard you guys yelling from all the way down the hall." He grabbed my arm, pulling me to a stop.

"I need to get out of here, Dylan. Now, right now. Please!"

"Sure, sure. Come on. Let's go," Dylan said. Thankfully, he didn't press me then and there, or I would have totally lost it. I was only hanging on by a thin thread. One false move and I was going to snap.

Even once we were in the car and moving, I still didn't say a word. I couldn't. I just sat there, numb, staring out of the window, watching the scenery rush by. I don't remember anything I saw, just a blur of green and brown.

The next thing I knew, Dylan was pulling into a parking spot in the tiny lot at the neighborhood park. "Come on," he said. "The fresh air will do you good."

I shook my head. I didn't want fresh air. I didn't want to walk, talk, or do anything but sit and simmer in my own misery. Dylan insisted, opening my door, unbuckling my seatbelt and pulling me out by the elbow.

A jogging path wrapped around the lake that sat in the middle of the park. It wasn't big, maybe a half-mile around, but it was smooth and more importantly, deserted. I started to walk, then jog, with Dylan keeping pace next to me.

I ran faster, then faster yet until I was at an all-out run, my feet pounding the ground, arms pumping. Dylan stayed right alongside me, although I knew he was a stronger runner than I was and could have outdistanced me without too much trouble. I barely noticed him. I wasn't running for exercise or

practice. I was running *away*—away from Billy, away from the specters of HIV and AIDS, away from Doug, my mom ... everyone and everything. Most of all, I was trying to run from the pain and confusion that were tearing me up inside.

I felt betrayed. Billy was my friend, my closest friend in fact. Why was he trying to die on me? Didn't he care about me?

It was being selfish, and I knew it. I wasn't thinking as much about what was going on in Billy's head as I was about how what he was doing affected *me*. How it made *me* feel.

Then I felt guilty, which just made everything worse.

After two and half trips around the lake, I ran out of steam. I still kept going, sides aching, gasping for breath, muscles screaming, until finally I couldn't take another step and fell to my knees on the grass. I bent over, my head nearly touching the ground, pain cramping both of my calves and a stitch blazing in my side that made it difficult for me to breathe. I felt nauseated, and would have puked had there been anything in my stomach. I'm surprised I didn't start to dry heave.

"Easy, Jamie," Dylan said. He was kneeling down next to me, breathing hard too. One warm hand rested on my back. "Breathe. Slow and easy."

It took a few minutes, but eventually the cramps disappeared. Dylan helped me up and steered me to a nearby bench. We sat side by side for a while, until my heart stopped hammering against my sternum and my breathing returned to normal.

"Billy is trying to get infected with HIV," I said, staring out at the mirror-like surface of the lake. The only thing that broke the water was a duck, gliding effortlessly toward the far side, barely kicking up a wake.

"What? That's crazy! It has to be a mistake. Maybe you misunderstood—"

"I didn't," I said firmly. "He was crystal clear about it." I felt my muscles tighten all over again, felt the same anger I'd felt before roiling in my gut. "He thinks he loves Robbie. Robbie is positive, and Billy has this nutso idea that if he were positive too, Robbie would want him."

"Jesus!"

"Yeah."

That's when I lost it. I think saying it out loud made it more real somehow. The waterworks started and I couldn't stop them. I pounded my fist against my thigh, keeping my face turned away from Dylan, not wanting him to see me cry, trying hard not to break down into hysterical sobs.

Dylan's hand covered mine, forcing me to stop hitting myself. His hand felt warm and strong, and remained on mine even after I'd brought myself back under control and took a deep, jagged breath. His fingers slipped through mine, and I suddenly realized that he wasn't just keeping me from hurting myself—he was *holding* my hand.

It startled me enough to turn and look at him. He was staring across the lake, eyes fixed on some point in the distance, but he must have known I was looking at him because his cheeks reddened and he bit his lip.

"Dylan?" I managed to croak, my voice sounded brittle.

"Just give me a minute, okay?" he asked, not looking in my direction. We sat that way for a long while, him holding my hand, and me wondering what the heck was going on. It did do one thing for me—it took my mind off Billy for the time being.

"Jamie? I lied to you," he said softly. "Maybe now isn't the greatest time, but I need to come clean. I can't do this anymore."

I was clueless. All I knew was that he was holding my hand, really *holding* it, and I didn't want him to stop. I heard him say he'd lied, but I didn't care about what. *Don't let go, Dylan*, I thought, trying to reach him telepathically, to force his hand to remain in mine through sheer willpower alone.

"You were right. I blew that English test on purpose. Don't get me wrong—English isn't my best subject, but it's not my worst, either. My dad and the coach give me plenty of time to study. I lied about that, too.

"The day before we took the test, I saw Grayle putting together the list of tutors and students. I told him I felt that I needed extra help and asked to be assigned to you. I told Grayle that since we were both on the team, it would be easiest for us to hook up and study. Then I blew the test so that you wouldn't be suspicious. I even sort of waved it at you when I picked it from the desk so that you'd see the grade."

"What? *Why?*" That startled me right out of the funk I'd been in. He'd *arranged* for me to tutor him? What was he trying to tell me?

"This is why," Dylan said softly, lifting our linked hands. "I didn't know how to tell you."

"You're gay?" I gasped, feeling my eyes bug out of my head like a cartoon character. I really didn't know how many more shocks I could take in one day.

"I don't know." I could hear the misery in his voice. He still wouldn't look at me, and now I knew why. Confessions were hard to make and still keep eye contact. "I kept trying to be like the other guys. I dated girls, but I never found one that did it for me, you know? The guys think I'm this big player, but the truth is that I just never found a girl that I wanted to keep seeing. Then I noticed you one day last year in the cafeteria, when you and Billy started hanging out."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. *You* did it for me, Jamie. Man, I couldn't stop *thinking* about you. I wanted to talk to you, but I didn't know what to say. I ignored it, told myself it was nuts, but no matter what I did I couldn't stop watching you. Finally, I realized that it was because I didn't *want* to stop. Look, Jamie, I can't ... I mean, nobody knows..."

"So, you're not out. Me either. You and Billy are the only ones I've told."

"Do you think I'm gay?"

"I don't know. Jeez, do I look like a Magic Eight Ball with all the answers? Only you can decide that, Dylan. Maybe you are, maybe you're not. It's only a word, dude. The only thing that matters is that you be yourself and do what makes you happy." Wow. I actually sounded mature and worldly. In

truth, I was only telling him what I'd found out for myself not too long ago.

"Being with you makes me happy. I've been happier this weekend than I've been in a long, long time," he said. He finally turned and looked at me, his brilliant blue-green eyes serious and a little frightened. "Do you like me, Billy?"

"Truthfully?" I asked, waiting for his nod. Today was a day for confessions, it seemed. I might as well join the parade. "I've had a crush on you for years, since we were freshmen. I just decided this weekend that we could be friends; that I could stop obsessing on you and move on."

"Oh." He sounded so sad, as if I'd just thrown up a hurdle too high for him to jump.

"Dylan, what I'm saying is that before, I just liked the way you looked in your running shorts. I didn't *know* you. Now, I'm starting to know you and I like you a lot. If you were straight, then that would mean that we could be friends, but now ... maybe we could try being more than friends," I said, trying to explain, and hoping I wasn't screwing it up too badly. "If you want to, I mean."

We fell silent, staring out at the water. I needed this, I decided, needed Dylan and to enjoy the feeling of his hand in mine. I wanted to savor the moment, just in case he said no.

He didn't, but when he spoke again it was in a whisper that was almost too low for me to hear.

"I've never kissed a guy before, Jamie."

"Yeah? Me, neither." It was true. We lived in a very small town. The only gay friend I had was Billy and we'd never been attracted to each other like that. Simply put, Billy wasn't my

type. I'd never gone with him to a club because I was too chicken to try to use the fake ID he'd made for me, so my experience was limited to none.

"I really want to kiss you."

How many times in my dreams had Dylan said that to me? In my dreams, I always had the right answer. I was sexy and seductive and sophisticated. In my daydreams, I always knew what I was doing. I'd cup his cheeks with my hands and pull him to me, planting one on him that would curl his toes.

Now that he'd actually *said* it, all I could manage was "Oh. Sure," as if he'd just asked to run a lap with me or discuss Hamlet, instead of fulfilling a fantasy I'd had for years.

Dylan had plenty of experience in the kissing department, even if it had never been with a guy before. He let go of my hand—okay with me, since I knew that what was coming had to be infinitely better than hand-holding—and slipped his arm around my shoulders.

His other hand touched my cheek, gently, lightly, and he looked at me for a long moment before leaning in, his eyes drifting closed.

Mine stayed wide open. I didn't want to miss a *minute* of it. I wanted to memorize the whole thing, experience the entire enchilada just in case he decided he didn't like it and our first kiss ended up being our last.

His lips pressed against mine, soft and warm. I leaned in, my hand touching his cheek, the bristles of his five o'clock shadow feeling rough under my fingers. His breath warmed my face; his other arm encircled my waist, pulling me even closer.

I'd read stories where writers used phrases like "he melted into so-and-so's arms." I always used to snort disdainfully when I read them because I never failed to get a mental image of the Wicked Witch of the West melting after Dorothy threw the bucket of water on her in the Wizard of Oz. *Oh, what a world, what a world ...* Now I knew what those authors were getting at, because I did, indeed, melt.

My bones turned to jelly, my insides liquefying into some sort of nice, gooey mush. It was the sort of the feeling you'd get if you ate a bowl of hot oatmeal right after coming inside on a bitterly cold day. I felt toasty, warmed up from the inside out.

Dylan's lips parted and I tasted his tongue, just for a second, before he pulled away. I suppose he scared himself—I was a little shaken, too. Too much, too fast, I guess.

We smiled at each other, a little embarrassed. My body was doing things I didn't want him to know about, and from the look on his face and the way he shifted around, I'd say he was going through the same thing. Which made me feel sort of conceited, and stretched my smile into a grin. I turned my head so that he wouldn't see it, looking back only when I had both my face and my body under control.

"Y-you okay?" I stammered, praying with all my heart that he wasn't going to say "Yuck!" and decide that kissing me had been a horrible mistake.

He didn't. Instead, he smiled at me and sought my hand again, lacing our fingers together.

Changing Jamie
by Dakota Chase

We sat there until the sun set, watching the sky color with orange and red, slowly deepening into purple. He never let go of my hand.

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Chapter Eleven

I hadn't forgotten about Billy. I was still angry, still hurt, although being with Dylan had helped a lot. At least, no matter what happened, for the time being I wasn't alone.

When Dylan had dropped me off at my house, he'd kissed me again. It was quick that time—I'd pulled away fast, worried that my mom or Doug might be watching through the window blinds. He'd promised to meet me before school the next day to talk more about Billy.

Doug was snoring in the living room when I let myself into the house. Either mom had kicked him out of the bedroom or he'd been too drunk to find his way there in the first place. I snagged a soda from the fridge and tiptoed past him, locking myself in my room. Usually, I'd tap on my mom's bedroom door when I got in late at night, but I didn't want see her. She'd ask me about Billy, and I wasn't sure what to say to her. Besides, I was still feeling warm and woozy after my time with Dylan, and didn't want anything to ruin it.

In my room, I flicked on the light and booted up my computer. I wasn't entirely sure where to start, staring for a while at the blank search bar on the Google screen. Finally, I typed in "purposely infected with HIV" and hit enter.

The first item at the top of the list that the search brought up read, "Bug-chasers." The next five results were the same. *Are they kidding?* I thought. *Stupid Google. Here I am, trying to research a serious topic like HIV, and I get an ad for*

exterminators? I grunted, re-typed the search and hit enter again.

I got the same results. I sighed, clicking on the first result, expecting to get a page about roaches, ants, and mosquitoes.

I didn't.

It was an article that had appeared in *The Advocate*, a GLBT news magazine. I started reading and didn't stop for nearly two hours, finishing with that article and moving on to the next on the Google list.

What I learned scared the crap out of me.

Bug-chasers were guys like Billy, who purposely wanted to get infected with the virus, or "bug." According to what I read, some guys were misinformed, thinking that because of the advances in drugs to treat HIV, it was curable, and could be kept from progressing into full-blown AIDS.

I clicked on another site and kept reading. I think in the back of my mind I was hoping to find something, anything, that would help me understand Billy's decision, something I'd missed or didn't know. Something that would make me feel better about it at least, but I didn't. All I found was site after site that said the same thing. There was no vaccine. No drugs to keep the virus from progressing into full-blown AIDS. The drugs they did have were really expensive, and the side effects could kill you. The virus could mutate, like in a freakin' sci-fi movie, into a strain that the drugs couldn't help. The more I read, the more worried I got about Billy, and the more I *didn't* understand him at all.

Some guys, again like Billy, think that becoming infected is unavoidable for gay men.

Wrong again, I thought. Condoms *do* prevent infection, even I knew that. I mean, there's a reason they call it "safe" sex. All those ads and commercials are *not* just blowing smoke out of their butts. They speak the truth.

Some people think that if their partner is infected, they should be too, or that getting the virus would make them closer to the one who had tested positive.

No, no, no! I thought, reading on. That didn't make any sense to me at all. Two sick people wouldn't make dying any easier on either of them! It would only make things worse. Plus, if a guy really loved you, he wouldn't want to make you sick, right? The more I read, the more confused I felt, and the angrier I got at Billy.

I got up, went to the fridge and swiped another Coke, careful not to wake Doug. Then again, nothing I did would have woke him—he was passed out cold. I probably could've screamed in his ear and he wouldn't have blinked an eye.

The cold soda cooled my throat but not my temper. I was really pissed, mostly because I just couldn't understand how Billy could be so stupid. He was a smart kid. His grades were good, better than mine. I couldn't wrap my head around his reasoning, and it was driving me nuts.

Slamming the Coke down on my desk, I clicked the mouse on yet another site, then another. I read until my eyes burned.

The one thing that all the articles agreed upon was that most bug-chasers had low self-esteem, and were sometimes depressed and self-destructive. That didn't sound like Billy to

me. Billy always seemed so confident, so sure of himself. He never cared about what anyone thought.

Some were into drugs or alcohol. Billy didn't do drugs. He didn't drink. He would have told me if he did, right? Friends told friends stuff like that.

Others just didn't see the danger in what they were doing. In my opinion, they weren't just playing with fire—they were playing with a nuclear bomb that soon or later was going to explode, destroying them. Billy was smarter than that ... at least, that's what I'd always thought. Now, I wasn't so sure.

There were other reasons, too, from being so paranoid about getting HIV that the guy felt it better to just "get it over with," to people who get a cheap thrill out of the danger of the possibility of being infected, to others who are so lonely that they try to become infected in order to be "accepted" by others who already are HIV positive. *It's sad*, I thought. *It's sad, and it's freaking scary*. None of what I read seemed to apply to the Billy I knew.

Worse even than the bug-chasers, in my opinion, were men who were called the "*gift-givers*." These were guys who are HIV-positive, know it, and don't act responsibly when they have sex. I immediately thought of Robbie. Was he one of these guys? Didn't he care at all about Billy? They call the virus "*the gift*," and give it to whoever asks for it. *Some freaking gift*, I thought. Sometimes they do it without telling their partner, which, as I found out in one article, is a criminal offense in the United States and other countries. That was one of the few things I read that made sense to me, since giving someone HIV on purpose was no different than putting

a bullet in their head—it was just a slower bullet that killed over time instead of instantly.

There were other articles, ones that seemed to support the bug-chaser's freedom to choose to have unsafe sex, or to become infected. I couldn't make sense of them. I just couldn't see the difference between that and suicide.

Some gift-givers hooked up with bug-chasers online or in clubs. They actually held parties where a bunch of HIV-positive men would try to infect a bug-chaser! *How F-ed up was that?* I thought, wondering if that was what had happened to Billy. I remembered the hotel manager saying that he was there for the *party*.

I finally shut down my computer, unable to stand to read another word.

Sitting alone in my room, two empty Coke cans at my elbow, I glanced over at my guitar and remembered the hours Billy and I had spent rocking out to *Guitar Hero*. It suddenly seemed like a million years ago.

I thought about Billy. Fun-loving, out-and-proud Billy, who'd hadn't cared what other people had thought of him and who did what he wanted, when he wanted. I'd always thought he was so self-assured, so comfortable in his own skin. I'd wanted to be just like him. Maybe I'd been too close to him to see what he was really doing all along. Maybe I hadn't *wanted* to see it.

Now, I felt like I was on the outside looking in, and the picture I was seeing wasn't the same one at all. Suddenly, Billy looked like a stranger to me, somebody I didn't know at all. He was spoiled, and self-centered. It always had to be

about him, because he was the only one he really cared about. The only one who mattered. I felt like the only reason he hung out with me was for the attention he could get from me, and that made me mad, too.

There was no denying that Billy hadn't been good for me. He had. He'd been there for me, listened to me, had accepted me without blinking. But as I looked back on our friendship and all the times he'd made light of my feelings or steered the conversation back to himself, I realized that he'd always been an attention hog. I'd just chosen not to see it.

I guess I'd been a pretty lonely guy, myself. Maybe if I hadn't been so absorbed in my own life, Billy wouldn't be in the situation he was in. Guilt settled over me like a heavy, suffocating blanket. It wasn't fair. I was a piss-poor friend.

Now I had Dylan, and maybe a chance at the love Billy had wanted so badly.

If Billy had been successful in his hunt for the virus, he had no one except for a deadly little bug that would be with him for the rest of his life.

He was only seventeen years old.

I broke down again, and this time, Dylan wasn't there to comfort me.

* * * *

I'd tossed and turned all night, unable to sleep. Billy's face haunted me; again and again I heard him yell at me to get out of his hospital room. I felt like I didn't even know him anymore, like maybe I'd never really known him at all.

He was a stranger wearing a friend's face.

Outside, the sky was gray and gloomy. Rain was in the forecast for that afternoon, but I wondered if it would hold off that long. It looked as though it was going to pour any minute.

At school, I hesitated to seek out Dylan. What we had together was so new and fragile that I was afraid to talk to him, scared to be seen with him in public. What would I do if he ignored me, or worse, got angry with me? I didn't want to give his friends the "wrong" idea about us. I felt like I was walking on eggshells.

I spotted him leaning against the wall of the school near the basketball court. He looked great in his jeans and gray, open-throated, button down shirt. I could see the tip of his undershirt peeking at the neckline, startlingly white against his tanned skin.

He was laughing at something one of his friends said, deep dimples showing in his cheeks. I remembered touching those cheeks when we'd kissed, his five o'clock shadow prickly against the palm of my hand. Dylan's eyes flicked in my direction and a shadow passed over them. *Great*, I thought, turning away. *He doesn't want to talk to me in public.* I could understand it, but I really needed him, especially after last night. I wanted to share the information I'd found online and talk about it with him, try to make sense of it. I turned away, walking toward the picnic tables outside of the cafeteria.

"Hey, Jamie! Hold up!"

I stopped, looking backward over my shoulder. Dylan was jogging toward me, his heavy backpack dangling by the strap

in one hand. I felt a huge sense of relief as I waited for him to catch up to me.

"You look like crap," he said. His turquoise eyes looked troubled, worried even. He was worried about me? Did that mean he cared? I felt an inexplicable bubble of happiness displace some of the misery I'd been wallowing in.

"I couldn't sleep. Do you have time to talk before class?" I asked. My eyes darted toward the group of his friends so that he would know that the question really was *"Can you talk before class while your buddies are watching?"*

His eyes followed mine. "You worry too much," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "As far as they're concerned, we're talking about English IV. Hamlet, remember?" His easy grin returned, and he winked. "Let's sit down."

I nodded. "Yeah, English. Okay." I followed him, sitting across from him at one of the picnic tables. To complete the illusion, I pulled a notebook and the English IV textbook out of my backpack, opening it to a random page. "I surfed the web last night, Dylan. You won't believe what I found out." For the next five minutes, my gums flapped without stopping, telling him everything I could remember about what I'd read.

By the time I was done, I was near tears again and he looked angry. I could see his muscles bunched under the sleeves of his shirt, and his eyebrows nearly met in a fierce scowl.

"He did this to himself, Jamie. Don't you *dare* make it your fault! You didn't put the idea in his head, did you? You didn't hook him up with Robbie, or drive him to that party."

"I know, I know, but I should have seen that something was wrong, Dylan. I should have known!"

"Bullshit. You were supposed to be his best friend, but he didn't trust you enough to tell you about it. Why?"

"He said that I wouldn't understand. He was right. I don't," I said miserably.

"No. He was afraid that you'd try to stop him, Jamie! That's why he lied to you. That's why he didn't tell you. Because he knew that you'd never let him do it."

"I'm not his father, Dylan. I couldn't have stopped him."

"Maybe not. But you would have *tried*. You would have done the research earlier, and when you found out what you know now, you'd have lectured him, nagged at him, argued with him. You would have at least made the attempt. He didn't want that. He didn't want somebody slapping him in the face with the consequences of what he was doing, wrecking his little fantasy."

"I guess."

"Look, we don't even know if he's positive. Let's go back to the hospital after practice today, okay? We can talk to him again."

I nodded. "Thanks, Dylan."

"Hey, that's what boyfriends are for, right?"

Wow. That was last thing I'd expected him to say, and it floored me. It was weird hearing him say "*boyfriend*." Nice, but weird ... wonderful, but weird. I smiled a goofy kind of grin, feeling my cheeks heat up hot enough to grill burgers.

I officially had a boyfriend.

The day seemed a lot brighter after that.

Changing Jamie
by Dakota Chase

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Chapter Twelve

I still didn't want to hit the showers with the guys, even though Dylan had officially declared himself to be my boyfriend—actually, I didn't want to shower with them more than ever, *because* of Dylan's and my new relationship. I didn't trust my body not to betray me. I just knew that if I saw him naked, I'd pop a boner and it would all be over. Sometimes there just wasn't enough cold water on the planet, you know?

Keeping to my usual routine wasn't easy. I wanted to be with Dylan, but knew it was too dangerous so I dawdled outside, waiting until the team—including Dylan—had finished before showering. Dressing as quickly as I could, I met up with Dylan in the parking lot. By the time I got there, everyone else had gone.

"Where were you?" Dylan asked as I scooted into the passenger seat of the Mustang. "I turned around after practice and you were gone."

"In case you haven't noticed, I don't shower with the guys."

"I *have* noticed, actually. Why not?"

I rolled my eyes at him. "Why do you think? Naked guys equal problems that would get noticed, and I don't want to have that particular conversation with the coach."

Dylan snorted. "Oh. Yeah, I know *exactly* what you're talking about." His eyes darted toward me, and he grinned. "Did you ever look at me in the shower?"

"Please. Be serious—and watch the road! I'd rather *not* spend the afternoon being scooped up from the roadway by Fire/Rescue."

"I looked at *you*."

My cheeks started burning again. I knew he'd seen me naked—he'd whipped my butt with a towel the last time we were in the showers. I'd just never realized that he'd looked at me as more than just one of the guys. I was suddenly extremely curious as to whether he'd liked what he saw—not that I had the nerve to ask him.

I cleared my throat. "Yeah? Well, maybe I peeked at you a few times, too."

"Did you like what you saw?"

"Dylan!"

"Well, did you?"

"Quit fishing for compliments."

"I liked what *I* saw," he said. He was grinning widely, even though his eyes were on the road. Good thing, too, because I had to shift in my seat, having developed a problem that made my jeans uncomfortably tight. "Especially after I ripped off your towel. Why did you decide to shower with a towel on anyway? Seems like kind of an odd thing to do..." He spared me a quick look that told me that he already knew the answer.

"Perv," I said, not quite sure of what else to say. *Thanks? Wanna see it again?*

"Takes one to know one."

"Oh, now you've wounded me." I said sarcastically. "Give a guy some warning before you turn that sharp wit of yours

loose on him. What's next? I know you are, but what am I? I'm rubber, you're glue, bounces off me and sticks to you?"

Dylan laughed. "Maybe."

He sobered after a few minutes, a frown wrinkling the skin between his eyebrows. "I'm not sure if I like hiding, Jamie. I'm not very good at it. I mean, it was one thing when I wasn't sure about myself, but now we're together. I don't like not being with you at school. I hate not being able to talk to you without excuses. I don't like you walking ten paces behind me so that no one will notice we're together."

"What are you saying? You want to come out?" I asked, shaking my head.

"Maybe."

"Do you know the kinds of problems we'd run into? Once you come out you can't go back into the closet, Dylan. Besides, we've only officially been together for less than twenty-four hours. I don't think you've thought this through."

"Believe me, I've done nothing *but* think about it. Want to know what I've been thinking about in particular?"

"What?"

"I've been thinking that the prom's coming up." He glanced at me again, and there was no laughter in his eyes, no smile. He was dead serious.

"You're asking me to the prom?" I gasped, gaping at him. That was the last thing I'd expected him to bring up.

"What? Should I be down on one knee or something?"

I swore, then laughed and leaned my head back against the seat. "I've created a monster," I said to the roof of the car.

"I'm not going if I can't take you. I mean it, Jamie."

"Dylan..."

"I'm serious, Jamie. We only get one prom, and I want to go with you."

I felt that toasty warm oatmeal feeling again, and couldn't help but smile. I wanted to scream "Yes!" and start picking out tuxes and boutonnieres, but *somebody* had to keep a level head. "Look, we have two months until then. Let's get through the SAT's and this crap with Billy, and see where we are then. You may not even *like* being my boyfriend," I said, being truthful even though the words drained the warm fuzzies right out of me. I would *hate* it if Dylan dumped me, but I had to face facts: Dylan was the Super Bowl, while I was strictly Little League. Sooner or later, he was going to find that out for himself. "You may find out that you don't like guys, or find somebody you like better than me."

"I think that's a moot point, Jamie. I already said that I like you, and last night I couldn't sleep because I had such a hard—"

"Please!" I said, putting my fingers in my ears, "Do *not* give me the mental image I think you're about to give me. Have some pity, Dylan."

"Jamie, has anyone ever told you that you're a real downer?"

Yeah. Billy had, all the time. He'd been right, too. "We haven't even been on a date, yet!"

"We went to the park," Dylan countered. "Yeah, you were upset, but the night ended pretty nicely." His grin told me he

was remembering our kiss. My belly warmed thinking about it, and I had to shift in my seat—again.

"I know, but that wasn't a *real* date. Let's just take it one step at a time, okay? Coming out is big decision."

Dylan nodded, but I could tell he wasn't pleased with my lack of enthusiasm. "Here we are," he said, pulling off the road into the hospital's parking lot. "Any idea of what you're going to say to Billy?"

"I don't know. I'll figure it out when we get up there," I said. I really didn't know which end was up at that point. My mind was whirling with Dylan's offer to take me to the prom, and his remarks about coming out. Worrying about what I was going to say to Billy had taken a back seat. Now, when I tried to think about what I'd say to him, I went blank. I only hoped he'd talk to me, and not kick me out again.

* * * *

As it turned out, I hadn't needed a rehearsed speech because Billy wasn't there. He'd been released from the hospital that morning. His bed was filled by an overweight man in his fifties, who looked at us curiously when we poked our heads into the room. The nurses wouldn't give me any information other than to say that someone had come to pick him up. I wondered if that someone were his father or Robbie.

I sincerely hoped it was Billy's dad. I hated the thought that he might have gone home with Robbie. More than anything, I wanted whatever relationship existed between the two of them to be over.

I wanted Billy to be happy. I didn't want him to be dead, and Robbie sure didn't seem to care about him at all. It looked to me like there'd be no hope of a happy ending for Billy if he stayed with Robbie.

"What now?" Dylan asked, as we exited the elevator and walked out through the main doors.

"I don't know. He might be home, but he might not." I fished my cell phone out of my pocket, dialing Billy's number. I didn't expect him to pick up, not after the argument we'd had the day before, and I was right. I got his voicemail, and left him a message to call me.

I doubted he would.

"Well, in that case, now's as good a time as any, I guess," Dylan said, smiling at me. He grabbed my hand, tucking it under his arm as we walked toward the car.

"A good time for what?" I asked. I couldn't see anything good about a wasted trip to the hospital and Billy having gone MIA again.

"Our first date. I'm thinking dinner and a movie."

"No, but thanks," I said, pulling my arm away when we reached the car. "I'm broke."

"I don't know about the guys you've gone out with before, but *my* dates don't pay," Dylan growled, arching an eyebrow at me.

"The only guys I've gone out with are—let me think a minute—oh, yeah! *Billy*, and we didn't *date*. We just hung out together."

"Good. It's settled then. Any place in particular you want to go to eat?"

I didn't remember settling anything, other than the sad fact of my lack of experience, but I was hungry and I didn't want to say goodbye to Dylan so soon. "Wherever you want—you're paying."

"Great! I want Italian. How about Guido's over on Harrison Avenue? They have good linguini."

I stopped dead in my tracks. "Dylan, I thought you meant fast food. We can't go into a restaurant!"

"Why not?"

"Because people will *know*, that's why."

"What are they going to know? We'll just be two guys hanging out, like you and Billy."

I sighed. "Okay. But you don't get to hold my hand, you don't open doors for me, or pull out my chair, you don't order for me, and you definitely don't play footsies with me under the table."

"Play *footsies*? Are you kidding?" Dylan snorted, starting up the engine. "Who *does* that?"

"Never mind," I huffed, blushing. I kind of liked the thought of his foot sliding up along my leg under the table of at an intimate restaurant. Evidently, he didn't share the same fantasy. "Just don't do it."

"Gotcha. No being a gentleman and no foot fetishes." He managed to keep a straight face for all of five seconds before laughing.

"Very funny," I said, chuckling. *Well, if nothing else, it was going to be interesting*, I thought. I was about to go on my very first "official" date with the guy of my dreams. I might not know a whole lot about dating protocol, but I knew *this*

much—dates usually ended with a goodnight kiss, and I found myself wishing the night was over just so we could get to that part of it.

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Chapter Thirteen

Dylan drove us to Guido's, a fairly inexpensive restaurant that specialized in Italian food. The outside of the restaurant wasn't much, just a long green awning and a couple of neat shrubs lining the front walkway. There was a small white fountain set to the left of the entrance that was lit by a blue spotlight.

The inside of the place was dim, the tables lit by wine bottle candles and low, recessed lighting. On the far wall of the restaurant was a mural of what I guessed was Mt. Vesuvius, the Coliseum, and the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The ceiling had been painted to resemble the Sistine Chapel. All other available wall space was crowded with photographs of Italy, plaster cherubs, Frank Sinatra album covers, and plastic grapes. White plastic, life-sized statues guarded the restrooms.

"Feel like you're in Italy?" Dylan whispered as we waited our turn to be seated. I could hear the sarcasm in his voice, and had to swallow a laugh.

"More like I'm in a tacky souvenir shop. Did they *really* have to paint a bra on the Venus de Milo?"

"I'm more impressed with the g-string on the statue of David."

"All it needs is sequins and he could get a job as a stripper," I snickered, giving in to the urge to laugh. I tried to keep it down, since I caught the maitre d' glaring at us a couple of times.

We were shown to a table a short time later, and served menus and breadsticks by our waitress, Maria. Maria was a pretty girl, who wore her long, blonde hair down and an apron printed with colorful illustrations of pizzas, spaghetti, and meatballs.

"You guys want something to drink before you order? I'll need to see some IDs," she said quickly, as if she'd expected us to order the entire bar served up on ice.

"I'll have a Coke," Dylan said, giving her his best dimpled smile. She softened toward us immediately—or at least toward Dylan. *I* had suddenly become a chameleon, blending in seamlessly with the checkered tablecloth and tacky map-of-Italy placemats, no longer noticeable. Her eyes never left his face once, even when she was speaking to me.

"I'll have the same," I said sharply, rolling my eyes. Honestly. All she needed to do next was the hair-flip thing to make the flirting complete.

She did. She tossed her head like a freaking horse, her mane of bottle-dyed hair swinging. I half expected her to neigh.

"Be right back with your drink," she said to Dylan.

"You get that a lot?" I asked as soon as she was out of ear range.

"Get what?"

"Flirted with, you doof. She practically jumped into your pants."

"You're crazy. She was just being nice, that's all," Dylan said, reaching for a breadstick and biting off half of it. He suddenly looked very serious, lowering the other half of the

breadstick, tapping it on the table. I was instantly reminded of the clicking pen and his fingers tapping on the keys of the guitar. I suddenly realized that he tapped things when he got nervous. "Okay, so she flirted. Big deal—I'm here with *you*, Jamie. Not her."

Did he think I was serious? I wasn't ... well, maybe I was, a little. "I'm sorry. I'm just not used to this, you know. I half expect you to run to the men's room and not come back."

"Why would I do that? I've got the best-looking guy at school here with me. Let's face it, Jamie. You're stuck with me."

My lips quirked a smile and I was glad that the lighting was dim so that Dylan couldn't see me blush. I didn't believe a word of it, of course, but it was really nice to hear. "Okay, sorry. Are you going to eat that breadstick or pound it back into flour?" I asked, nodding toward the rapidly tapping breadstick. Dylan smiled and lifted it toward me.

Without thinking, I opened my mouth and took it from his fingers. I'd chewed and swallowed before I realized what I'd done.

My face suddenly felt hot as I scanned the nearby tables to see if anyone had noticed.

"What's wrong?" Dylan asked, cocking his head at me.

I leaned in over the table. "Guys don't feed other guys breadsticks," I hissed. "Did you ever hand-feed one of the other team members? No. I almost gave us away."

"Jamie, nobody's paying attention to us. It's dark in here, and everyone's busy eating or trying to read the menus by

candlelight. Nobody cares," Dylan said, gesturing toward the other diners.

He was right, it seemed. No one was paying us any mind. I felt better, but reminded myself to stay alert. I mentally added hand-feeding to the list of things we absolutely could not do in a public restaurant.

Maria arrived with our Cokes and a fresh basket of breadsticks, which she reached around Dylan to place on the table. I noticed her arm brush across his back, but bit my tongue. Verbally flaying the waitress would definitely draw attention to us.

"Have you decided?" she asked. Funny, but I didn't remember her voice being quite so husky before.

"Yeah. I'll have the ziti and sausage, and a side salad," Dylan said, handing her his menu. He looked at me. "Jamie? What do you want?"

"The same," I said, snapping the menu closed and handing it to Maria. She took it without ever once looking in my direction.

There was a lesson here, I realized. Women liked Dylan, and for all the same reasons I did. He was handsome, tall, broad-shouldered, and nice. I realized that I was going to have to get used to girls flirting with him, if I was going to date him.

If I'd been another female, Maria probably wouldn't have flirted so openly, but I wasn't. I was a guy and therefore not the competition. As far as Maria was concerned, it was the same as if he'd been there alone. It open season on Dylan, and she was bringing out the big guns.

I almost felt badly for her. She didn't have a chance with Dylan. Not if I could help it, anyway. Let her flirt. Let her dream. *I* was the one sitting at the table with him eating breadsticks from his fingers. I smiled, feeling smug.

The ziti and sausage were good, served with thick tomato sauce and a ton a of grated Parmesan cheese. We each had two refills on our Cokes, shared a tiramisu for dessert, and by the time Dylan paid the check, I was feeling stuffed to the gills. I didn't even mind that Maria had written her phone number on Dylan's receipt.

Especially since he purposely tossed it into the trash can on our way out.

"Wait a minute," Dylan said, putting a warm hand on my arm just after we'd left the restaurant. "I need to use the can. I'll be right back, okay?"

I nodded. "I'll meet you at the car." Dylan tossed me the keys.

The car was near the back end of the small lot, within view of the front doors. I'd just reached the Mustang and was fumbling for the key to the door when I felt someone walk up behind me. Thinking it was Dylan, I turned, holding out the keys.

It wasn't him. It was Robbie-the-Asshole.

"I thought it was you in the restaurant. Where's your pretty-boy?" he asked, standing so close to me that he practically had me pinned to the side of the car.

"He'll be right back. What you want?" I growled. Robbie was the last person on the face of the earth that I wanted to

talk to, and the fact that he was crowding my personal space was seriously pissing me off.

"Have you talked to Billy?"

"No," I lied. Whether I had or not was none of his business.

"He said you did. He said you got on his case about me. When I saw you inside, I thought it might be a good time to explain a few things."

"I really don't want to hear anything you've got to say," I countered, trying to sidle away from him. He moved with me, keeping me pinned.

"Listen up, you little jack-off. What Billy and I do is our business. It's his right to decide what to do with his body. He wanted the bug. *Wanted* it. I didn't force it on him."

"H-he's positive?" I felt the world suddenly shift, as if an earthquake had just rippled under my feet.

"If he's lucky, he is."

Then Billy didn't know if he'd tested positive yet, I thought. He still had a chance. "Lucky? Is that what you call it?"

"Yeah. He'll never have to worry about getting infected again. He can just kick back and have fun."

"That's the saddest excuse I've ever heard! A person isn't free to inject himself with the Ebola virus, just because he *wants* to, Robbie. He isn't free to pass it on to other people, either, just because some poor schmuck *thinks* he wants it. Billy only thinks that way because he wants you to like him."

"He's part of the club, now. Or he will be once he's positive. There will be plenty of guys for him."

"He loves *you*!"

Robbie snorted. "He was fun, but we're done. I did what I had to do for him."

"Get away from me, Robbie," I warned. I was sick to death of looking at him.

"What's the matter, baby? Don't you want to be part of the club?" Robbie asked, his voice lowering into a deep rumble. He placed one hand on either side of me, leaning in, trapping me against the car, his face inches from mine. I could smell something strong and alcoholic on his breath, and it made my stomach turn. "It's fun. I'll initiate you, and if it doesn't work, we'll have a party. You'll get the Gift for sure, just like Billy."

"The "Gift" is a lie!" I screamed, pushing hard at him. I caught Robbie off-balance and he staggered, giving me the opportunity to slip by him. I hadn't run two feet before he grabbed my arm and swung me around to face him.

"If you don't want the Gift, that's fine, but you'd better keep your trap shut about what you know. Understand?" he snarled, getting up in my face. His fingers dug into my arm, and it took all of my strength to pull away. Robbie looked over my shoulder for a minute, then turned on his heel and stalked away into the darkness.

By the time Dylan reached me, I was shaking like a leaf—not in fear, but in anger.

"Was that Robbie? What did he want? What did he say? Are you okay?" Dylan asked in quick succession. He took the keys from my hand and put an arm around my shoulder, leading me toward the car door.

"He wanted to give me a warning, I guess. I don't think he wants us talking about what we know—about him trying to infect Billy."

Dylan opened the door for me and I gratefully fell into the seat. He got in but didn't start the car, turning toward me instead. "Why? What's he afraid of?"

I shrugged. "Billy's underage. Even with consent, that could mean problems for Robbie, especially if it's proven that he purposely gave Billy the virus. If Billy or Billy's parents wanted to, they could get Robbie in a whole world of trouble." I leaned my head back, trying to get control of myself. I was so angry that I wanted to hit something. It had been a perfect evening, but Robbie-the-Butthole had ruined it.

"I guess you don't feel like going to a movie, now, huh?" Dylan asked, taking my hand. He held it in his, his thumb smoothing over my skin.

"Not really," I said, shaking my head. "He shook me up pretty badly, Dylan."

"I know. What do you want to do?"

"Go home, I guess. I'm sorry, Dylan."

"Hey, it's not your fault. Maybe we can try this again on Saturday, after we get back from the meet."

Oh, man—I'd almost forgotten about the track meet with South Westfield. I suddenly had a lot more serious things on my mind than running. "Sure. That'd be good," I said.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good."

Dylan looked out the back window, then at me. He lifted his fingers to my face, lightly tracing the contour of my jaw.

"Can I have a goodnight kiss before I drive you home? I know you won't want me to kiss you in front of your house."

I smiled softly and nodded, leaning in toward him.

It wasn't just one kiss this time, or if it was, it was the longest kiss on record. He didn't push for anything more and neither did I. We both knew that we weren't ready for it. Hell, we were confused enough as it was.

He dropped me off with a quick peck, just as he had the night before. The porch light was on, and my mom's car was in the driveway. It was early, which meant she'd be waiting for me.

"Thanks again, Dylan. Talk to you tomorrow at school," I said, climbing out of the car. Dylan waited with the motor idling until I'd safely reached the front door. I guess Robbie's little visit had shook him up, too.

I'd been right. Mom was waiting for me and with a look on her face that told me that she wasn't happy.

"Billy's mother called. Come and sit down. We have to talk."

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Chapter Fourteen

There was no sign of Doug in the house, which I chalked up to pure, dumb luck. Hearing his mouth was the *last* thing I needed that night, and I was grateful that I wouldn't have to deal with him on top of everything else.

Mom led me into the kitchen and pointed to a chair, momspeak for "*sit down, shut up, and listen.*"

I sat. You just didn't argue with my mother when she had that look on her face, the one that told me she meant business. The last time I'd seen that look had been when I'd been in grade school and had gotten caught swiping a comic book from the drugstore. Believe me when I tell you it was the first and last thing I'd *ever* taken that didn't belong to me. Mom was small and delicate looking, even at forty-five, but she was wiry and as tough as a Marine when she wanted to be.

"Mom," I began, not sure how much she knew. Did she know about Billy? About me? Oh, God, did she know about me and Dylan? "I—"

"Exactly when were you going to tell me about Billy?"

"T-tell you what?"

"That he's missing! Where is he, Jamie? You must know—you and Billy are thicker than peanut butter. His mother called because he'd slipped out of the house this morning after being released from the hospital and hasn't come back yet. She thought he might be here."

"He's not at home? Mom, I don't know where he is! I've been trying to call him since this afternoon, but he won't pick up and he hasn't called me back. I didn't even know he'd been released until I got to the hospital today!"

"Billy's mother said that you were the one who brought him into the hospital. You didn't tell me that on Saturday night, Jamie. Start talking, and don't you dare stop until you've told me everything." She sat down at the table, leaned her arms on the surface and stared at me, lips drawn into a tight line. She meant it. I could either spill my guts or sit there all night. When she looked at me like that I knew that she'd get every word out of me, even if she had to pull them out of my mouth with a pair of pliers, one at a time.

I was too tired, too shaken over the incident with Robbie to resist.

"Okay, okay. You're not going to like it, though," I said, sighing heavily.

She sighed, too. "Jamie, what are you worried about? Have I ever turned my back on you when you've told me the truth? You're my son. I love you. Nothing you tell me will ever change that."

I looked up at her and saw the truth of it in her eyes. I knew in that moment that this was the right time. The past few days had been so hard on me, with all the ups and downs. I was scared and confused, and I needed her support, if she'd give it. Making up my mind, I nodded to myself and reached for her hand.

"Mom," I said, deciding to keep it as simple as possible. "I'm gay."

"Oh, I know that, hon," she said, patting the back of my hand with her free one, "now tell me about Billy."

"Wait—you *know*? How could you know?" I gasped, feeling as if I'd been sucker-punched. "Who told you?"

"Nobody, dear. You're my son. I know you better than you think I do. Besides, Jamie," she said, rolling her eyes, "your laundry doesn't put *itself* away, you know."

My *laundry*? I quickly went through the roster of things I kept in my dresser drawers. Batteries, a couple of old comic books, a rubber-banded stack of baseball cards ... oh, no. The magazine I'd borrowed from Billy, the kind a guy didn't buy for the articles. She'd found it.

She'd snooped through my things!

She was a *mom*, I chastised myself. That's what they did best. It was my own fault. I should have known better than to keep stuff like that where she could find it.

It was F-bomb time again, all though I had the good sense to say it silently, inside my head.

"Its okay, Jamie. As long as you're careful and happy, that's all that matters to me," Mom said. "That young man who dropped you off, the one with the Mustang, is he...?"

"Yeah. His name's Dylan, and he's really nice, Mom. You'll like him," I said, just as if we'd had this type of conversation all the time. I think I was in shock. I couldn't believe that coming out to my mother, the moment I'd dreaded for so long, agonized over, lost sleep over, had gone so smoothly. I was almost insulted that she hadn't put up a fuss over it, that she'd figured it out on her own. I almost felt cheated.

"What happened to Billy the night you took him to the hospital, Jamie? Were you doing drugs? You need to tell me." Her voice was stern again, and I realized why she'd been so upset. She thought I was a stoner.

"No! I don't do that stuff, Mom. You know me—I can't even take Tylenol without getting an upset stomach," I said. "Billy had a date that night with an older guy. I didn't want him to go, in fact, we'd argued about it. But then we made up, and he said he'd call me after his date. He didn't, though, and I got worried.

"Dylan drove me to see the guy Billy had gone out with. He..." Here came the hard part, and I tried to figure out how to tell her without using the s-e-x word. "He said he'd left Billy at a motel, over in Chester. We went out to find him, and ... Mom, it wasn't pretty, okay?"

"What do you mean?" she pressed. Obviously, she wasn't going to let me off the hook that easily. I swallowed hard and told her the rest of the story, up to and including my last argument with Billy.

"HIV! Oh, my God, Jamie! Does his mother know?"

"I don't know. They must know that the hospital tested him for it, but I don't know if they've gotten the results, yet."

"I don't understand. Billy *wanted* to become infected? Why? Why would he do something like that? Oh, no ... Jamie, you don't do anything like that do you? You don't go around with strange men—"

"Mom! No! Of course not! I've never even ... Jesus, Mom! Do we have to talk about this now?"

She bit her lip, looking hard at me. "Okay. Just tell me that you don't believe the same way Billy does. Tell me that you're careful. It only takes a condom, hon, and I'll buy them for you if you need me to—"

"I am! Or ... I will be when I finally..." I shook my head, not wanting to finish my sentence. "Mom, please. I can't handle the thought of you buying condoms. I don't even want to hear you say the word, okay? It's freaking me out. But Billy, well, that's why I'm so upset over it! I can't understand it either, and neither can Dylan."

"Is that were you got those scrapes and bruises? At that motel?"

"No," I said, sighing. I told her about the car hitting my bike, and before I knew it I'd told her everything else, too, including my date with Dylan and my meeting Robbie in the parking lot.

That last part made Mom blow a gasket. "He threatened you! We're going to the police and filing a report, Jamie. I mean it. Your father must be spinning in his grave over this!"

I swallowed hard. My dad, the cop—I tried not to think about him, or what my life might have been like if he'd lived. "No, no police, Mom. Please. He didn't do anything to me, and I don't have any witnesses. Besides, I'm not out to anybody else. I don't want the whole town to know, okay?" I was practically begging. I was under enough pressure already.

"Okay, okay. But," she said, jabbing her finger onto the table, emphasizing her words. "If he comes near you again, all bets are off. We'll go straight to the police. Understand?"

"Yeah. I understand."

"Good. I'm going to call Billy's mom back and tell her that you don't know where he is."

"Mom, Billy's folks aren't the best parents on the planet. They don't care—"

"She *sounded* like she cared, Jamie. She was crying on the phone."

I hesitated. It wasn't what I'd expected to hear. "Crying? But when I called to ask where Billy was on Sunday, Billy's dad acted like he couldn't care less!"

"I don't know about his father, Jamie, but his mother was very upset."

Maybe I misunderstood the whole thing. Maybe there was more going on than Billy told me. Was his mother really was concerned about him? Had those been lies Billy had told me, to have me feeling sorry for him? I didn't know anymore.

"Do you have any idea at all of where he might be?" Mom asked, drawing me back to the conversation.

"Not really. I guess I could call Dylan. We could drive around to the usual places—the mall, the school, maybe the arcade. See if he's there," I said.

"Okay, good. I'll call Billy's mom and dad and let them know."

Speaking of dads, I thought, now was as good a time as any. "While we're talking about stuff, mom, I wanted to talk to you about Doug."

"Jamie, what goes on between Doug and me is—"

"Please don't say that it's none of my business!" I said, looking her square in the eye. I tried not to sound angry, but I probably didn't do a very good job of it. "This open dialogue

crap works both ways, Mom. He's a drunk, he's a deadbeat, he treats you like shit, and I don't understand why you let him stay here!"

"Watch your language, young man!" she said. "I'm still your mother and you'll respect me, understand?" She leaned back and looked at the ceiling for a few minutes before speaking again. When she did, her voice was soft and she sounded like a young girl. "He wasn't like this in the beginning. I thought I loved him. He was good to me, good to you."

"He's not."

"I know. He started drinking and lost his job, and then ... I keep putting it off. I keep telling myself that he'll change. That he can be the man he used to be," Mom said. She shook her head, slapping her hands flat on the table. *That* was momspeak for *"this conversation is over."*

"I'll talk to him, Jamie. I promise."

That was all I was going to get from her, and I knew it. It wasn't the answer I wanted, but it was better than nothing.

When I stood up, she hugged me, and suddenly I felt like a five year old who just knew that everything was going to be okay because Mom would take care of it. The feeling dissipated when she let go; it was nice while it lasted.

I dug into my pocket for my cell phone and dialed Dylan. He answered on the first ring. "Hey, it's me."

"Hey. What's up? Everything okay?" God, it was good to hear his voice, even though I'd only left him a short while ago.

"I came out to my mom."

"Oh, God. How'd she take it?" I could hear the worry in his voice; he thought it had gone badly and I was calling to cry on his shoulder. It felt great to have good news for a change. The stuff with Billy could wait a few minutes.

"Actually? A lot better than I'd thought. She already knew, and she was cool with it. At least, that's what she said. She asked about you."

"About *me*? How'd she know about me?"

"She saw you dropping me off. My mom's got eyes like a freaking hawk."

"She's good with it? Me and you, I mean."

"Seems to be. Just told me to be careful and then spent a few minutes making me extremely uncomfortable while she lectured me on safe sex."

I heard Dylan snort over the line. "Been there, done that, with my dad. For girls, I mean, not ... you know."

"I know. She offered to buy condoms for me, Dylan."

That time he laughed out loud. "Oh, man, I so want your mom to be my mom."

"Yeah, she has her moments," I said dryly, wondering if Dylan's opinion would change if he knew she'd married scum like Doug, then was instantly sorry for thinking that way. My mom was good person—she'd just made some lousy choices, that was all. She was human, just like the rest of us. "Listen, are you doing anything now?"

"I was going to crack the books. Why?"

"Billy's gone missing again."

"*Again*? Jesus, Jamie! He's making a habit of that, isn't he?" Dylan said. I could hear the irritation in his voice. No

wonder—he'd already spent the past four days playing the same tired game of Find Billy with me.

"Yeah. I was sort of wondering if you'd mind driving me around to look for him. His mom called my mom and now—"

"I'm on my way."

Just like that. Annoyed or not, he was *still* going to drop whatever he was doing and drive over, and I felt a wave of relief and a spark of excitement over seeing him again. *Yeah, Dylan was definitely a keeper*, I thought. I only hoped he'd want to be kept.

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Chapter Fifteen

I climbed into the Mustang yet again, settling back and buckling up. "Thanks for coming back, Dylan. I'm not on my mom's insurance, and she refuses to let me drive without her in the car. It sucks."

"Not a problem. Is that her?" Dylan asked, craning his neck to see past me toward the house.

"Yeah. She's spying on us."

"Don't look now, but she's coming over here," Dylan said, sounding as though he wasn't sure if he should wait for her or gun it and screech away from the curb before she could reach the car.

I twisted in my seat just in time to see my mother bending down to rap her knuckles on the window. Dylan hit the button, sliding the window down as I slumped back into my seat and groaned, "Mom, what do you want?"

Mom stuck her head into the car, ignoring me. "I wanted to meet your friend."

I groaned again, louder and longer this time. Was there a handbook out there somewhere for mothers that listed the top ten ways to mortally embarrass their kids? If not, my mother really should write one—she's an expert on the subject. "Fine. Mom, this is Dylan. Dylan, *this* is my mother," I said, keeping my eyes glued to the dashboard, not wanting to look at either one of them.

"Hey, Mrs. Waters," Dylan said. I saw him give a little, half-hearted wave out of the corner of my eye.

"You're Dylan?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't keep him out too late, Dylan. You both have school in the morning."

"Yes, ma'am." Dylan said, at the same time I moaned, "Mom!"

"Stay away from that Robbie person. I don't want Jamie anywhere near him. Understand? I'm trusting you with him, Dylan."

"Yes, ma'am," Dylan replied dutifully, as I muttered under my breath.

"My life is over."

"All right, then, play safe, boys," she said, ducking in closer to peck me on the cheek. "Remember, it only takes thirty seconds to avoid a lifetime of trouble."

Oh, *God!* At that moment, I wished that the Mustang had an ejector seat so that I could press a button and escape into orbit. She should've just thrown a handful of condoms at us—it would have had the same effect. I was *mortified*. Everyone knew that there was a line that a mom shouldn't *ever* step over. She'd not only crossed the line, she'd led a freaking parade over it, complete with marching bands and floats.

Then again, I knew that she was thinking about Billy, and probably not a hundred percent convinced that I didn't share his point of view regarding the HIV virus. I was astounded that she'd let me out of the house at all and hadn't chained me to my bed. After all, in one breath I'd told her that I was a homosexual, and in the next that my gay best friend was trying to get himself infected.

Heck, *I* would have chained me to the bed if I'd been her. She trusted me. It was nice to know, even if she did embarrass the Hell out of me from time to time, like tonight.

"Sorry," I said as Dylan pulled away from the curb. I noticed that he was careful to check his mirrors for traffic before pulling out, used his turn signal and kept well below the speed limit. I understood that it was a show of responsibility on his part. He wasn't about to give my mom any reason to go gunning for him, I guess. "She gets a little bit carried away."

"Dude—that was the weirdest five minutes of my life."

"I know. Me, too."

"Where should we start looking for Billy?" Dylan asked. I guessed he wanted to change the subject, and I didn't blame him one bit.

"I don't know. We can try the arcade, the diner, maybe Home Depot. I don't think we'll find him at any of those places. Billy's smart. If he doesn't want to be found, he won't be."

"What about Robbie-the-A-Hole's house? Don't you think Billy would have gone there?"

"I have no idea where he lives. Billy never mentioned the address."

Dylan nodded, heading in the direction of the downtown area. We cruised Market Street, looking for a parking space, and found one in front of Baker's Dozen, the donut shop.

Downtown was a ridiculous name for the single block of stores and offices that lay in the dead center of town between the park and the school, but that's what everyone called it.

We didn't have a movie theater, or a Wal-Mart, or a museum. What we *did* have was a collection of tiny establishments with names like Food Village (supermarket), Clips and Snips (barbershop), Frankie's Fun Stop (arcade), Trash or Treasure (second-hand shop), and the ever-popular Curbside (the diner where my mom worked). In between them were a string of offices like Max's Taxes (accountant) and Pop's Pub (the bar Doug usually got crap-faced in). I seriously think that if your business didn't have a sickeningly cutesy name, the zoning board wouldn't allow you to open up shop.

At one end of Market street was the police station, and I could never pass by without wondering what it would have been like if my dad had lived and was still a cop. Passing it always left me a little sad, even though my dad had died when I'd been almost too young to remember him.

The other end of the street was anchored by the West End Bank and a tiny post office. Dylan and I walked up and down both sides of the street, ducking into the shops that were still open, looking for Billy. We checked each aisle in the supermarket, every booth in the diner, and every machine in the arcade.

We even did a drive-by of Home Depot, although the store had been closed for an hour and the parking lot was practically empty. Billy wasn't there, either.

Dylan drove slowly up and down the residential streets, wasting gas and time, but when he finally dropped me off in front of my house, we'd come up empty handed. There was no sign of Billy anywhere. It was as if he'd disappeared off the face of the planet, again.

* * * *

Billy wasn't at school the next day, either, although I hadn't expected him to be. I was really worried about him, and angry, too. Disappearing without a phone call, without even a text message was getting to be a habit with him. It upset me a lot. I'd have never gone AWOL without letting him know where I was or when I'd be back. What kind of a friend did that?

Not the kind we were, or so I'd thought. Evidently, I'd been wrong.

I decided that when Billy did come back, he and I were through. I was officially resigning from the William Prichard-Everest III Fan Club. Billy could get bent, as far as I was concerned.

The day was made worse by the fact that Dylan wasn't in school either. When I called him, he hadn't sounded like himself. He told me that he was sick, but I didn't believe him. Something else was going on, and I wondered if it had anything to do with me.

I hoped not. Losing Billy was bad enough—losing my first boyfriend at the same time would have made me feel a whole lot worse.

Somehow I managed to drag myself through the day, and track practice afterward. I walked home (I'd put the remains of my bike out with the trash, and was still without wheels of any kind), feeling lost without either Billy or Dylan.

I was distracted, thinking about Billy and Dylan when I walked in through the kitchen door or I would have run right

back out. I was preoccupied; I didn't notice Doug sitting at the kitchen table, staring at me with a particularly venomous look in his eyes or the fact that he'd forgone his usual beer and had a shot glass and an open, half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels at his elbow until it was almost too late.

"Faggot."

The word was uttered with such hate and malice that it shocked me no less than if Doug had thrown an icy cold glass of water in my face. A chill rippled through me, raising gooseflesh along my arms. His voice dripped with a nastiness that went far beyond his usual drunken mean streak. I spun around to face him, my body acting on instinct. Never turn your back on an enemy—I'd learned that much playing video games.

He hated me, pure and simple. The fact hung in the air between us, real and solid, tangible. I felt as if I could reach out and touch it, and if I did that it would feel as cold and reptilian as a snake. There was no denying it, no excuse for it. It wasn't because he was drunk. He hated me because of who I was—another man's gay son. Mom must have told him. For a minute I felt angry and betrayed, until I took another good look at Doug and realized I had much bigger problems.

Then, for the first time in my life, I was really afraid.

I'd often thought about what I would do if Doug took a swing at me or my mom. I'd fight back, of course! I'd hit him with all I had, pound on him, and beat the living crap out of him. In my daydreams I'd always come out on top. The trouble was that in all my years living with Doug I'd never thought that he'd actually try to hit me. He yelled, he

insulted, used me as a verbal punching bag, but I'd never *really* been afraid of him. Had he annoyed me? Yes. Pissed me off? Of course he had—all the time. Disgusted me? Sure, but I hadn't been *afraid* until that very moment when I looked into his bloodshot, muddy brown eyes and saw violence flickering in them.

I'm not a coward, but I'm not a fool either.

Doug outweighed me by at least forty pounds. If he decided to go after me, the only thing I had in my favor was speed. If I could outrun him, I'd be okay. If not, I was toast.

My entire body tensed for flight.

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Chapter Sixteen

I'd walked right past Doug when I came inside, and now he sat between me and the kitchen door. The only other way out was through the front door. That morning I'd left before my mother had, and I knew she would have locked the door behind her. That meant I'd have to sprint through the hall, the dining room and the living room to the front foyer and unlock the door and the deadbolt to get outside before Doug could catch up to me.

He wasn't in shape, and I was fueled by desperation. *I can make it*, I thought. *Piece of cake.*

"You're mother told me all about you. Goddamn little pervert! I always knew there was something wrong with you, boy. Said it, told Darlene that she was too soft on you. Told her to let me beat some sense into your head! I should have belted you good. My dad blistered my butt and I turned out just fine, but Darlene wouldn't listen." He tossed back another shot, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His face was red, getting redder by the minute as he scraped back his chair, lurched to his feet, and fumbled with his belt buckle.

Oh, *Hell* no.

I made it as far as the front door, and would have made it through if I'd thought of ditching my backpack first.

Doug managed to grab it, pulling me backward, throwing me off balance. I went airborne, hitting the ground butt first. I felt a sharp pain in my tailbone but didn't have time to worry about whether or not I'd snapped something—I was too

busy scrambling to get away as his belt buckle came swinging down in an arc. It hit the floor next to my hand, missing me by a hair.

"Get away from me!" I yelled, struggling to my feet. I slipped my backpack off my shoulders and whipped it at him. He caught with a grunt, giving me enough time to slip past him and back toward the kitchen.

He chased me out the door and halfway to the front yard, screaming incoherently at me with every step. I'm not sure what he was saying, but I caught the words "fag" and "bastard" more than once.

I'm sure the rest of the neighborhood did too. Doug didn't exactly have a quiet voice, and when he was drunk and angry, it got a lot louder.

I didn't care. All I cared about was putting as much distance between me and him as I could. My spine hurt, but I ran until I was out of breath and didn't look back once.

All kinds of creative ways to exact revenge went through my head. I'd get a knife and fillet him like a fish. I'd get the chainsaw out of the shed and cut him into manageable pieces before dumping his drunken butt into the lake or down into a manhole. I'd knock him out with his bowling ball, drag him into the yard and have myself a nice big Doug-bonfire.

I knew that it was impossible for me to do any of the things I thought of, but thinking about doing Doug some serious harm took the edge off both my fear and my anger. In the end, after I'd calmed down and caught my breath, I went to the diner looking for my mom.

She was waiting on a table when I got there, so I slid into an empty booth and waited until she'd put the order in and noticed me.

"Jamie?" She said with a smile, hurrying over to the booth where I sat. Noticing the look on my face and lack of enthusiastic greeting, her smile slipped a notch and she slid into the seat opposite me. "What's wrong? What happened? Is it Billy?"

"No," I said tersely, looking out of the window. "It's Doug."

"Doug? What did he do? Is he okay?"

I snapped back to face her, even more irritated that the first questions she'd asked had been about Doug's welfare and not mine. "Oh, yeah, he's just peachy," I said sarcastically. "He's probably on the phone right now with his bowling buddies, telling them all about how he nearly beat the crap out of me with his belt for being gay."

"*What?*" Mom's face blanched, turning a sickly green-white shade. "Are you okay?" She grabbed my arm, turning it this way and that. She was looking for bruises. I couldn't decide whether she was trying to determine if I'd been hurt or to prove that I was lying.

I pulled my arm away. "He missed." I stared out of the window for a minute, trying to get a grip on myself. I didn't want to start yelling in the diner and cause a scene. "You told him! How could you tell him, Mom? That was between you and me!"

"What was between you and me?"

I turned on her, hissing like a snake. "You *know* what! That I'm gay! You know how he is, Mom. You've heard what

he calls me. Do you want to know what happened? I came home from school and Doug was waiting for me, drunk as usual. He took off his belt and chased me through the house with it!"

"Did you mouth off to him, Jamie? What did you say to make him angry? He wouldn't hurt you. You must have—"

I lost it. She was my mother! How *dare* she pick that lowlife bum over me? It hurt worse than any damage Doug's belt buckle might have done. "I didn't say anything!" I screamed, scooting out from behind the table and standing up, too upset now to care about making a scene. "He's a lousy drunk who lives off you, Mom! He's never liked me. Now he has an excuse to hate me, and he tried to hit me!"

"Jamie—"

"I'm out of here," I growled, turning my back on her. "I should have known better than to think you'd side with me."

I heard her calling after me, but I didn't stop. I ran outside to the street, where full dark had settled like a thick shroud, and just ran.

Up one street and down the next, my feet were pounding the pavement, arms pumping. I raced past the stores and the school, past the lake, and into the residential area. I didn't know where I was going until I found myself on the sidewalk in front of Dylan's house, bent over double, gasping for breath.

Dylan's Mustang was in the driveway, parked next his father's Escalade. The sight of the familiar car somehow made me feel better. Until then, the entire evening had felt surreal, almost like it was happening to someone else. The car made

me feel grounded, reminded me that there was more going on in my life besides a drunken, bigoted stepfather and a mother who refused to take sides.

No, I corrected myself. She *had* taken a side—it just hadn't been mine.

I looked over at Dylan's house. It was much bigger than mine, but not nearly as large as Billy's house. I wondered which room was Dylan's, and if he was in it. My cell phone was in my backpack, probably getting stomped into a jumble of circuitry under Doug's feet. I had no doubt that he'd have taken out his aggression on my stuff.

I'd be lucky if I had anything left by the time I got back home—if I went back home.

There was a huge picture window on the left hand side of the house. The living room most likely. I could see lights that might have come from a television set flickering behind the sheer curtains that spanned the window. The other rooms looked dark, except for one on the far right. I could see a pencil-thin beam of light outlining the drawn shade.

Summoning my courage, I followed the brick walkway to the front stoop and climbed the three stairs to the door. Pressing the doorbell, I waited.

I didn't know what I was going to say to Dylan. *"Hi, my stepdad is a psycho. Can I spend the night?"* No, that was way too pathetic, even if it was true.

The door opened and I found myself standing face-to-chest with an older version of Dylan. Taller, broader through the shoulders, the beginnings of gray at his temples, Deacon

Anderson looked every bit like the semi-pro football player he'd been in his youth.

"Hi, um, I'm Jamie Waters, a friend of Dylan's. Is he home?" I squeaked, looking up at an unsmiling face that might have been carved from granite. It took a moment, but he must have remembered my name from the team roster, because he nodded, giving me a half-grin that was identical to his son's.

"Oh, yeah. Waters. I remember you. You ran a good race at the Asbury meet. Come on in. Dylan's in his room."

"Thanks," I said, gratefully stepping past Dylan's dad into the small foyer. Beyond the doorway I could see the living room, and a pretty woman nestled in an overstuffed chair, a brightly colored spill of yarn covering her lap. She smiled and waved at me before returning to her knitting. Mrs. Anderson, I guessed, Dylan's mom. It looked like he'd inherited her eyes—they were that same bright blue-green.

"Last door on the left," Deacon Anderson said, pointing with his chin as he walked back into the living room. "Friend of Dylan's from the team," I heard him explain to Mrs. Anderson.

I followed the hallway, noticing the framed photos that hung on the walls. There was a wedding picture of Deacon and his wife; another of them and an older couple, either Deacon's or his wife's parents. Some were of Dylan and two younger boys, his brothers, at various ages, and all playing sports of some kind. There was Dylan in Little League, and again in Pee Wee Football. The last photo, the one hung at

the end of the hall, was of Dylan toeing the line, ready to run at a track meet.

The photos painted a picture for me, of a normal family doing normal things. For some reason, they made me feel even worse about my own life, reminding me of what Dylan had that I didn't, and I wanted to cry.

I had to mentally slap myself a couple of times. It could be worse, I told myself. You could be Billy. *Doug might be a waste of oxygen, and Mom might choose him over me, but at least my head's screwed on right*, I thought. Billy didn't know which end was ass-up.

My knuckles rapped sharply on the door. I could hear the riffs from Guns N' Roses' *Welcome to the Jungle* blaring loud enough to make the door vibrate under my hand. I knocked harder, unsure of whether or not Dylan had heard me the first time. A second later, the volume inside the room lowered.

"Yeah? It's open!" Dylan called.

I opened the door and popped my head inside the room. "Hey. Want some company?"

"Jamie? What are you doing here?" Dylan gasped, suddenly looking pale. He pulled me inside the room and quickly shut the door. "You should have called me. I could have met you." He was whispering, and he wasn't looking at me—his eyes were focused on the door behind me, as if he were worried that someone might be listening on the other side.

"You weren't in school today. I was worried ... I-I'll go," I stammered. What else could I say? I'd never thought he

wouldn't want me to come over. We were friends ... more than friends, or so I'd thought.

Maybe that was the problem, I realized. "Dylan, if you don't want me here, I'll go."

Dylan took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "No, no, Jamie. It's okay. I'm sorry. I just sort of freaked. I didn't expect you to come and..."

"And you thought ... what? That'd I show up at the door wearing a Pride shirt and asking your father what he thought of gay marriage? Come on, Dylan. Give me some credit!" This was the last thing I needed today. My life was shredding at the seams. Dylan had been the only person on my very short list of people I trusted who hadn't spat in my face within the past week. If he defected to the other side, it would be the end of my sanity. I just knew it.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I was being stupid."

"No, you're not stupid. It's me. I've had a really bad day." I sank onto his bed, letting my head hang low. It *had* been a crappy day—crappy, long, and not over yet. Before I knew it, I'd spilled my guts, telling him everything up to and including my narrow escape from Doug and my mom's betrayal.

"That bastard! Did you go to the police, Jamie? He attacked you! That's abuse, dude!"

I shook my head at him. "No, no cops. No child services. It's his word against mine. I don't even have any bruises," I lied. My spine still hurt and I was willing to bet that an x-ray would show that I'd broken my tailbone—even sitting on Dylan's soft mattress hurt. I don't know why I didn't want to turn Doug in, except that I feared what might happen

between my mom and me if I did. I didn't want to know who she'd choose if push actually came to shove.

"I still think you should go. Write out a report, just in case he does something again."

"Let's just drop it, okay?" I asked wearily. I didn't want to fight about it, and I didn't want to be lectured about it, either.

"Have you heard from Billy?" Dylan asked next. I guess he was trying to find something else to talk to me about, to distract me.

"No." I didn't want to talk about Billy. I didn't want to talk about anything. What I wanted was for him to hold me, but I knew I had about as much chance of that as I did of winning the lottery. He was uncomfortable with me just being in his house, in his room, never mind actually risking physical contact with me. "I think I should go. Coming here was a mistake, Dylan."

"No, it wasn't." He didn't sound very convincing.

"It's okay," I said, standing up. "I have to go home sooner or later, I guess." The thought of going home and seeing Doug again curdled my stomach. Not to mention that I really didn't want to talk to my mother again, either. I could just imagine the lies Doug would tell her. Or maybe he wouldn't lie. Maybe he'd boast about what he did, and try it again.

Would she stop him? Had all her talk about just wanting me to be happy been a lie? Did she believe Doug could "beat it out of me?" Would she let him try?

Dylan's phone rang. "Hold on a second, Jamie. Don't go yet. Please?" He picked up the phone, glancing at the

number. "Wait—it's your number. Someone's calling from your phone, Jamie."

He looked as puzzled as I felt, until I remembered that I'd left my cell phone in my backpack. It could only be one of two people, and I doubted Doug would know who on my call list to phone if he wanted to find me.

Mom would, though. I didn't really want to talk to her—she probably wanted to continue the conversation I'd walked out on at the diner. I reluctantly took the phone from Dylan and answered it. "Hello?"

"Jamie? Oh, thank God. Why did you run off like that? You had me half crazy worrying!"

I wanted to scream at her, but remembered that Dylan's folks were just down the hall. It was a struggle, but I managed to keep it at an almost normal level. "You took his side again, Mom. You always do! He tried to—"

"He's gone, Jamie."

"What you do mean, 'gone?' He's probably at the bar." If she thought I was going to go out and look for him, she was crazy.

"No. He's gone, for good. I threw him out, Jamie. I should have done it a long time ago. Come home, hon. Please? I need to see you." She was crying now, sniffles that threatened to turn into sobs. "I'm so sorry, Jamie! I just didn't want to believe it. Please, just come home, okay?"

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Chapter Seventeen

I pushed the "end" button and stared at the phone in my hand. The day had been spiraling out of control until I was sure I'd crash headfirst and explode, like a jet gone haywire, showering the entire town with flaming pieces of me. I'd almost gotten used to the idea. Mom's call felt like a parachute opening at the last possible second, jerking me away from impact. I might still land hard, might still suffer some serious damage, but I felt like I'd narrowly avoided a catastrophe.

Could it be true, or was she yanking my chain? More importantly, if it *was* true, would it last? Had she really seen the light and kicked his worthless butt to the curb? The only way to find out was to do as she'd begged me and go home.

"Jamie? You okay?" Dylan's voice was full of concern, and I'm sure, a trace of guilt. He hadn't exactly welcomed me into his home with open arms, although I could sort of understand why he'd felt the way he had. He was afraid that his parents would put two and two together and come up with a gay pair.

It still pissed me off.

"Yeah, I'm good. She said that she kicked Doug out."

"Great! It's about time, huh?"

"I guess." I was still feeling the sting of his cool reception. Mom might have taken a step in the right direction, but as far as I was concerned, Dylan had taken two steps backward.

"Jamie, don't be mad, okay? You know how it is with me."

"Yeah, I know. I'm not mad. Well, maybe a little," I said, being honest. "Look, don't sweat it, okay? I understand. I have to go."

Dylan bit his lip, looking like he wanted to say something else. I didn't want to hear it. Not then. For the first time in a long while I was seeing a glimmer of light at the end of the dark tunnel I'd been living in, and I didn't want whatever he had to say to snuff that tiny light out. I couldn't handle one more thing—not one more. Whatever Dylan had to say could wait until the following day.

"Jamie, it's just that I'm not like you. I can't let my folks find out—"

"So all that talk about coming out and the prom was just you blowing smoke out of your butt?"

"That's not fair, Jamie. You were upset. I was trying to make you feel better, you know?"

"Oh. So you lied to me." That hurt me, a lot. I felt like I'd been sucker-punched. Not that I'd ever thought we'd actually go to the prom together, but it had been nice to think he'd wanted to take me.

"No! It wasn't like that, Jamie. I just—"

"Whatever. I need to go, Dylan," I said before he could say anything else, and made my exit. I never looked in his folk's direction as I stalked through the living room and out through the door.

I had the distinct feeling that I'd just broken up with my first boyfriend.

* * * *

There was a large pile of trash at the curb when I got home, and it had "Doug" written all over it.

Bowling trophies, clothes, shoes, and an assortment of smaller odds and ends had been boxed up and put outside. Mom must have been serious. She'd really cleaned house.

I found her in the kitchen, the table spread with cookies, chips, and a nearly empty pint of Ben & Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk. That confirmed it—it was over between her and Doug and she'd been trying to smother the pain with trans fats. Her eyes were red and puffy, mascara tracks marring her cheeks. The left side of her face looked swollen and discolored.

She jumped up when she spotted me, nearly knocking me off my feet as she threw herself at me. "I'm so sorry, Jamie! I was stupid and selfish and blind not to see what he was doing to you! I'm sorry!"

"Mom, its okay," I said, giving her a hug and leading her to her chair. I touched her chin, tipping her face. "He did this, huh?" I asked, feeling anger roiling again, pushing out the last lingering feelings of self-pity and heartache over the way I'd left things with Dylan. "He hit you?"

"It's nothing. He's gone now, Jamie. For good. Forever."

"He hit you. He hit you." I couldn't seem to get past those three words; they repeated themselves over and over in my head. It was much worse than when he'd tried to wallop me with his belt—this was my *mom*. I no longer wanted him gone—I wanted him dead.

"Listen to me, Jamie," Mom said, grasping both my wrists. I was surprised at how strong she was. "It ends tonight. We

forget all about him, about the crap he put us through, and we move on. Understand? I already called a lawyer and started the divorce ball rolling. It's over."

"He. Hit. You."

"I know, and I've already filled out a report with the police. The lawyer asked for a restraining order against him. He won't be able to come within five hundred feet of me or you. Your dad had friends who are still on the force. They won't let him near us. Okay?"

"Mom..."

"Please, Jamie? Please? Promise me that you'll stay away from him. Promise me."

I didn't want to promise, but she looked so bad, so hurt and brittle, that I couldn't say no. I nodded, and hugged her. "I'll get you some ice."

The freezer didn't have an icemaker, so I slid the ice cube trays out and popped a few cubes into Ziploc baggie. I handed it to Mom and watched as she held it gingerly to her cheek. "You're pressing charges, right? You're not going to let him get away with this, are you?"

"I don't know. I want it all over with, Jamie. Done and forgotten. I want to start over, you know? If I press charges, everyone will know. I have to go to work and I don't want people looking at me, knowing that—"

"Mom!"

"We can talk about it the morning, okay? I'm not sure what I want to do right now," She said, looking away from me. "Oh," she said, brightening a little, "Billy called the house

looking for you. He said you weren't answering your cell phone."

"Billy?"

"Yes. He's home, I guess. He sounded like his old self, too. Why don't you go and call him—he's probably left a million messages on your phone." She nodded toward the counter where my cell phone lay. She must have found it in my backpack and used it to call Dylan's house.

If there was one way to distract me from our problems with Doug and my own with Dylan, it would have been it. Billy—I'd almost forgotten about him. I grabbed my phone. "Okay, but we're going to talk more in the morning, right?"

"Sure, hon. In the morning."

I didn't believe her, but I went anyway. There really wasn't anything else I could do. We'd only continue to butt heads if I stayed and tried to talk her into pressing charges against Doug. I didn't want to fight anymore. Not with her, and not with anyone else.

My phone was beeping with that annoying high pitched sound that meant the battery was low. I took it out and plugged it into the charger before checking my messages.

There were fourteen missed calls and nine voicemails—eight messages from Billy and one from Mom. I deleted Mom's since I already knew what she had wanted to tell me, and went on to Billy's messages.'

It was good to hear his voice, even if it was recorded, and even if I was still angry with him.

"Jamie? Dude, where are you? I need to talk to you!"

Click. Beep.

"Jamie, call me!"

Click. Beep.

"Goddamn it, Jamie! Where the Hell are you? Call me!"

Click. Beep.

The remaining five voicemails got progressively more vulgar; the last one was just a string of swear words linked by death threats if I didn't call Billy back immediately.

Regardless of the day I'd had, a smile spread across my face. That was the Billy I remembered—the stubborn, opinionated, self-absorbed potty-mouth. I hit his number on speed dial.

He answered on the first ring.

"Dude! Where the *Hell* have you been? I've been calling you all night!" Billy cried, as if he hadn't been missing for days.

"Me? What about *you*? Do you have any idea of what you've put me through? First that whole thing with Robbie, and the motel, then the hospital, and then what happens? You fall off the face of the earth for two days! Billy, I ought to come over there and wring your freaking neck!"

"I know, I know. I should have called. I was pissed, okay?"

"*You* were pissed?" I began to pace, but the recharging cord kept me from walking very far. It nearly jerked my phone out of my hand. I had to be satisfied with pacing in a very small, tight circle.

"Yeah. You were being a dickhead about everything."

"*Me*? *You* were talking crazy, Billy! I—"

"None of that matters anymore, bro. I got my test results back." I could nearly *hear* him grinning over the phone. He was the same old Billy, able to forget that we'd ever fought,

sometimes while we were still fighting. Thank God. He'd come to his senses, he was negative, and everything was going to go back to normal. He'd help me deal with my mom, and get over Dylan.

"I'm positive, dude! Isn't that great?"

I brought the phone away from my ear, staring at it as if there were something wrong with it. There had to be—it was impossible that Billy had just told me he was HIV positive and had sounded *happy* about it. The phone was broken. It had to be. There was no other rational explanation for what I was hearing.

"Jamie? Jamie did you hear me?" Billy's voice sounded small and far away as I slowly returned the phone to my ear.

"Billy? You're kidding me, right? Tell me you're joking. Tell me this is some sort of weird, twisted practical joke."

"No. It's true! I've spent the last two hours packing up all my stuff. I'm moving in with Robbie."

"Have you told your parents?" I still couldn't wrap my mind around it. Billy. HIV. My God. Maybe he was in shock, or denial. Yeah, that must be it. Hadn't Robbie told me that he and Billy were through? Had they hooked back up, or was Billy refusing to see the truth about that, too?

"Why? So they can ship me off to another boarding school? No, thank you. I'm heading over to Robbie's in a few. I'll leave them a note."

A note? How did anyone write something like that in a note? *Hi, Mom and Dad. I've got a deadly, incurable virus which I contracted on purpose, and I'm moving in with the*

guy who gave it to me. Oh, yeah, and we're out of milk. Love, Billy. Not even Billy could be that cruel, could he?

Did I even know Billy well enough to answer that question? I was forced to admit that I didn't, but I had to try to reach him again.

"Billy, why don't you come over here? We can talk about this, reason it out, okay? What about school? College?" I was babbling and I knew it, but couldn't help myself. I had the feeling that if Billy moved in with Robbie, I'd never see him again. He'd be lost.

"You're not understanding, Jamie. There's nothing to talk about. This is my life, and I made my decision. I love Robbie and he loves me. We're going to be together now. I don't need school, I don't need my folks."

"I guess you don't need me, either, then?"

There was a moment of silence, filled only by the hum of my alarm clock and the faraway sound of music playing in Billy's room. "Maybe not. Look, I have to go. I just wanted to call to tell you the news so that you'd be happy for me."

"*Happy* for you!" I screeched, losing it at last. "How can I be happy that you're going to *die*? Huh, Billy? What's so great about that?"

I was screaming at dead air. Billy had hung up. He was gone.

I threw the phone down in a fit of impotent anger, not caring if broke. In the mood I was in, I didn't want to talk to anyone ever again. Not that I really had anyone left to talk to, anyway. No Billy. No Dylan. Mom was a mess.

I was alone again.

And it sucked.

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Chapter Eighteen

I didn't go back to school, or to the meet against South Westfield. None of it seemed very important any more. Instead, I plugged in my ear buds and turned up the volume on my iPod, shutting the entire world out. Those few days were like gray haze, hours spent staring at the ceiling of my room trying hard not to think about anything. If I didn't think about Billy or Dylan or Doug or my mom, I wouldn't hurt anymore. I wouldn't be so confused. It would all go away.

It didn't.

I remember my mom coming in and out a few times. At one point, she yanked my earphones out of my ears and yelled at me for a few minutes. I don't even remember what she said.

My stomach was so twisted up in knots that I didn't eat. I lived on Coke and a few handfuls of chips when hunger pains forced me to get up and get something from the kitchen, but the meals Mom made for me went untouched. I didn't shower, didn't brush my teeth. I slept a lot.

Finally, on late Tuesday afternoon, there was a knock on my bedroom door. I heard it, even with my tunes blasting in my ears, but ignored it. Mom would come in anyway, even if I told her not to, so why waste my breath?

The door opened but it wasn't my mom. It was Dylan.

"Oh, man. Jamie, you look like crap." He sat down on the edge of my bed, and I rolled over, turning my back to him. I didn't want to see him, or have him see me. Not like this.

"Go away."

"Jamie, talk to me. Your mom called me and said that you were bumming, that you wouldn't talk to her, or eat anything. Come on, Jamie..."

"Go away, Dylan. We don't have anything to talk about." I could barely hear him over the music blasting in my ears, and that was just the way I wanted it.

"Bull! We have plenty to talk about," he growled, yanking my earphones off and tossing my iPod to the foot of the bed. I'd had it on so loud that I could still hear the music floating out of the ear buds. "I came out, Jamie. To my folks."

"Yeah? You want a medal or a chest to wear it on?" I snarled. I didn't care. I wanted to curl back up into my nest of self-pity and be left alone.

"Oh, that was cold, dude, but maybe I deserve it," he said. "No, I stand corrected. I *know* that I deserve it. I acted like a jerk when you came to see me. I should have explained more, talked it out with you, but I was scared. You needed me and I bailed on you. I'm sorry."

"It's over. No big deal," I said, reaching for my iPod again. He ripped it out of my fingers and tossed it across the room onto a pile of laundry. "Hey! Give that back!"

"No! It's *not* over. Listen to me, Jamie!" Dylan said, grabbing both of my hands. He held them firmly, not letting me wriggle away. "I made a mistake. I blew it. I was so afraid of everything—how I felt about you, what my folks would think, my friends ... But you know what? After you left I felt even worse because I knew you weren't coming back. What I said to you the other day was true, Jamie. I didn't like

hiding—not us, and not who I am. That's over. I'm out, I want to be with you, and I don't care who knows it."

"Well, good for you," I said sarcastically, jerking my hands out of his. "What about *me*, huh? Doesn't anybody on this Goddamn planet care about how *I* feel? My mom didn't when she let Doug talk trash to me. Billy didn't when he threw our friendship away and set himself up to die. You didn't, either. You were only concerned with what people would think about you. You didn't care about what I was going through, only about how it would affect you."

"News flash, Jamie. I'm human. I make mistakes like everybody else! All I can do is apologize and try not to make the same ones twice. That's not true, what you said. I do care about you, about us. If I didn't, I wouldn't have come out to my folks, and I wouldn't be here now."

"You came out because of us? *Puh-leeze*." I said irritably, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "If that's true, then you did it for the wrong reason, dude, because there is no '*us*'."

Dylan sighed, closing his eyes for a minute, running his fingers through his hair. "Don't say that, Jamie. Look, no more lies, okay? This is the truth. I felt like I was lying to myself and everyone else for the past year. It was really hard trying to pretend to be someone I wasn't—I had nightmares sometimes. So, I came out because it was the right thing to do for *me*. But *you* were a big part of the reason, too, an important part. I really want there to be an '*us*,' Jamie."

Oh, man ... He knew exactly what to say to get to me. The self-pity I had wallowed in, the anger I'd tried so hard to hold on to, leaked out of me like air from an old, bald tire. "How

did your folks take the news?" I asked, not ready to admit that I still wanted there to be an '*us*,' too.

Dylan shrugged and gave me a sad smile. "Not too well. There was a lot of yelling and crying and stuff. Things are a little chilly at home right now, but they'll come around. At least they didn't throw me out."

"I-I'm glad for you."

"Jamie, please, can we get past this? I really want to be with you." He looked sincere, but I was scared, still hurt, and not sure I could trust him again.

"I don't know. So much has happened in the last week that I just don't know what end is up anymore."

"Maybe we can figure it out together. We'll go slow, just hang out together if that's all you want. Please?"

What do you have to lose? I asked myself. *Things couldn't get any worse, right?* I felt myself nod, and for the first time in days, I smiled.

Dylan reached for my hands again, and this time I let him hold them. A part of me wanted to stay mad at him, but a bigger part of me wanted that warm oatmeal feeling again. When he leaned in to kiss me, I met him halfway.

He leaned his forehead against mine. "Is it always like this? So complicated, I mean?"

"I don't know. It feels that way most of the time."

"Sometimes I feel like everything's jumbled into a big fat knot, like a tangled ball of Christmas lights, and I can't find the beginning or the end no matter how hard I try."

"I know the feeling," I said, nodding. "It makes you want to trash the whole thing and start over from scratch."

"Yeah. Well, at least we're good now, right?"

"Yeah, we're good," I gave him a smile, a real one, and his beautiful turquoise eyes lit up.

"Jamie? Now that we're friends again, I have to tell you something," he said, giving my hand a squeeze.

Oh, God. Now what? "Yeah?" I asked, feeling that familiar knot begin to form in my stomach again.

"You reek. Go grab a shower. You're making my eyes water, dude."

I laughed with relief, and gave him a push that nearly toppled him from the edge of the bed. "You jerk! I do not!"

"You do too. You smell like an open sewer," Dylan said, laughing. "Like something crawled up your butt and died. We're talking a combination of decaying flesh, rotten eggs and compost heap, Jamie."

"Sweet-talker," I grinned, rolling out of bed. I took a whiff under my arms and coughed. The stench singed my nose hairs. "Smells like roses to me."

"Then you have something seriously wrong with your sniffer. Go on and hose off, then we'll go and grab something to eat, okay?"

"You're buying."

"Only if you scrub yourself down and spray yourself with disinfectant."

"Harsh, dude."

"Love hurts. Go."

I laughed all the way into the shower, feeling better than I had in a week. The hot water felt incredibly good, and washed

away the last of the depression I'd wrapped myself in. By the time I was through, I felt almost like my old self again.

* * * *

Things seemed to actually get better after that.

Billy was gone and, while his absence still hurt, Doug's disappearance from my life was terrific. It was peaceful at home now, and I had the television all to myself. Mom seemed to be doing okay. She smiled a lot more, and we spent more time together than we had before. She and Dylan were becoming friends, or at least more comfortable around one another, which was also a good thing considering how much time I was spending with him.

We saw each other constantly, at school, after school, on weekends—as often as his practice schedule would allow. I'd dropped out of track, feeling too awkward now that the team was beginning to suspect that there was more to Dylan's and my relationship than just study buddies. In truth, I hardly missed it. I spent that time boning up for the SAT's, and wondering whether I could get a good enough score to get into State. There were grants available, and a scholarship through the police department that I might be eligible for, if I could make the grade. It would be really cool if I could go to the same college as Dylan.

Neither of us had officially come out at school. We weren't ready for that step, not yet, but we also didn't try to hide behind the cover of studying in order to see one another anymore. Still, people were beginning to talk. We didn't miss

Changing Jamie
by Dakota Chase

the sideways glances and whispering going on around us—we just didn't acknowledge it.

That was all about to change one sunny Tuesday afternoon, just after our English IV class.

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Chapter Nineteen

I'd run to my locker after our English class, wanting to dump some books in there before meeting Dylan in the cafeteria for lunch. We'd spent a few hours in the gym his dad had set up for him in the basement, and I'd gone overboard on the weights, aggravating the injuries I had from when I was struck by the car the week before, and my back from when I'd fell trying to outrun Doug. I didn't feel like carting around an extra twenty-five pounds worth of physics, calculus, and English textbooks all afternoon.

I'd opened the locker and was digging into my backpack for the unneeded books, when I heard my name called. Looking up, I saw two guys staring down at me. They were both big enough to be on the football team, all shoulders and biceps and very little in the way of necks.

They weren't smiling.

As a matter of fact, I got the distinct impression that they were upset about something. Their eyes were small chips of cold ice, staring at me as if I was a big, ugly bug about to be swatted by a couple of very large, very hard fists.

"Is it true, Waters?" one of them asked me. His hair had been buzzed so close to his skull that I could see a birthmark on his scalp just above his left ear. I knew that his name was Peter Green, and that he had the reputation of being a ball-breaker. From the look on his face, he wasn't in a very happy place at the moment.

"Is what true?" I asked, looking from one scowling face to the other.

His friend, another big guy by the name of Tony Petrino, stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Pete and didn't look any friendlier than he did. I was trapped between them and the wall of lockers behind me.

"You *know* what."

A hysterical giggle bubbled up. *Twenty Questions, anybody? Let me see ... is it animal, vegetable, or mineral? Bigger than a breadbox? How about Charades? One word, one syllable, rhymes with "hay," right?*

"Are you *gay*?" Tony growled. It wasn't as much a question as a statement, and the way he spat the word out left no doubt that he rated homosexuals on the same scale as the slimy stuff he might scrape off the bottom of his shoe. "You hang out with that Billy kid, right? We all know he's queer."

"What's it to you?" I managed to say, even as I weighed my options. I could try to run. I could yell out for help. I could hyperventilate, pass out and hope I didn't split my skull open on the metal lockers on my way down to the ground.

Unfortunately, none of them seemed like very viable options. In order to run, I'd have to get around the twin mountains of flesh that blocked my path. If I yelled, there was a good chance that I'd attract a crowd. I admit that might have added a certain amount of entertainment value to the incident—but chances were good that I wouldn't be the one being entertained. That left fainting, but I was already hurting. I didn't really want to add a concussion to my list of injuries.

One thing was for sure—if they wanted a fight, I was going to go out swinging. Dylan wasn't the only one who was tired of hiding. As I stood with the cold metal of the lockers pressing against my back, everything that had happened over the past two weeks came roaring back in a wave of anger, and the two beefy crew cuts in front of me wore the faces of everyone who'd ever wronged me. They became Doug, they became Billy, Robbie, and a host of other, nameless people who'd hurt me over the years.

My teeth ground together painfully, the muscles in my jaw jumping. I could see people beginning to gather behind Tony and Peter. They reminded me of dogs growing nervous just before a big storm hit. Edgy and uncomfortable, unsure of whether to bark or stay quiet, they shuffled from one foot to the other, exchanging apprehensive glances that were tinged with excitement.

If they were looking for a show, they were in luck. I was about to give them one.

My hands balled into tight fists and slammed into the lockers behind me, the noise echoing in the hallway, making several of the people in the crowd yelp in surprise. "Enough!" I screamed, my entire body bristling. "Yes! I'm gay! Did I say it loud enough for you? Should I take out an ad in the school paper? Maybe you'd rather have the word tattooed on my forehead! I'm also nearsighted, broke my right arm learning to ride a bike when I was six, and I had my tonsils taken out when I was four! Is there *anything* else you want to know about me?"

They both topped me by at least six inches, but I was on my tiptoes screaming in their faces. I must have looked like my springs had popped—they actually took a half-step back away from me.

"Leave him alone, Tony!"

It was a girl's voice, from somewhere in the crowd.

"Yeah! Back off, Pete! He's not bothering anybody!"

A guy this time. I thought it might have been Frank Hughes of the imagined near-serial killer status from English IV, but I couldn't be sure.

Suddenly the entire crowd was yelling, heaping insults and warnings alike on the broad shoulders of the two football players. To say I was surprised would be putting it mildly—I'd thought that the crowd was there to watch me get my ass kicked. I'd never once thought that they might support me.

Just goes to show that you never really know what people are going to do until they're put to the test.

Then a warm body sidled up to me. "You two have a problem?" Dylan asked, standing tall beside me. My spine straightened even more than it already was, until I felt as big as Pete and Tony, even if it was only in my mind.

Neither one spoke. There were a couple of minutes of intense posturing, like a pair of gorillas feeling the need to display their strength, but then it was over. Tony and Pete grunted something under their breaths, probably half-formed sentences studded with obscenities, and shouldered their way through the crowd and away.

All in all, coming out at school had gone much, much better than I'd ever thought it would. It hadn't happened in

quite the way I'd imagined it, but the outcome was better than I'd have ever hoped.

I was out, and I was still all in one piece. It was almost a miracle.

"Are you okay?" Dylan asked me. His pretty blue-green eyes were focused on me, ignoring the crowd that was watching us intently. The other kids were figuring it out now. I saw the pieces of the puzzle coming together in their eyes when I cast a quick, sideways glance at them. Not only was *I* out—so was Dylan, and so were *we*, as a couple.

"Yeah, I'm good."

"What happened?"

"I sort of got cornered. Cat's out of the bag, Dylan."

"So I gathered. I heard you yelling at them from downstairs. Remind me never to piss you off. Ready to go to lunch?"

"Yeah, I guess."

The crowd began to break up into smaller fragments, heads close together, whispering among themselves. More than one or two cast looks back at us from over their shoulders. Word would be all over the school before lunch was over.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Dylan asked again as I finished what I'd originally set out to do and placed my unneeded textbooks into my locker, pushing the metal door closed and snapping the combination lock.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It was a little hairy for a while, though. I really thought they were going to tear me into little pieces and stuff me into my locker."

"They're a pair of prizewinning jerk-offs."

"Yeah, but they're big, *tough*, prizewinning jerk-offs."

"It looked to me like *they* were scared of *you*. You were pretty impressive."

"Me? Nah. I'm all bark and no bite, like Mr. Fisher's Great Dane—the one without a tooth in its head. I might have gummed them pretty good, though."

Dylan laughed, and for a minute I forgot that we weren't alone. It was just him and me, and I really, really wanted to kiss him. Luckily, I remembered myself just in time. Losing my cool with Pete and Tony had been one thing—public displays of affection were another. I wasn't ready for that—not by a long shot.

Dylan, evidently, didn't feel the same way.

"Ready for lunch?" I asked instead, after clearing my throat. "I'm starving."

"Yup. Me, too," Dylan said, smiling.

As we walked down the hallway toward the stairwell, past the last of the curious onlookers, Dylan put his arm around my shoulders.

For the second time that day, I was floored when I heard a smattering of applause from the crowd of kids behind us. Even more amazing, I didn't hear a single shout of "faggots!" or "homos!" or any of the other million derogatory taunts I'd imagined would have been hurled at us had we come out at school.

Maybe there was hope for humanity yet.

* * * *

Dylan and I didn't sit alone at lunch that day, or any of the days that followed. Suddenly, we seemed surrounded by people all the time, as if the majority of the senior class had assigned themselves the position of our personal bodyguards. Tony and Pete didn't bother me again—as a matter of fact, they kept their distance, rarely coming within twenty feet of me and not looking in my direction if they did. I wondered if word had gotten back to their coach about what had happened. Nobody wanted a gay bashing on their record this close to graduation.

Word did filter up to the school administration, and I was presented with a pink hall pass in homeroom one day. I had been given an appointment with Ms. Starkey, the school shrink.

I spent the entire morning sweating over it, rehearsing what I would say, imagining her trying to analyze me, trying to get inside my head. By the time one o'clock and my appointment rolled around, I'd worked myself up into a righteous state. There was nothing wrong with me! Being gay wasn't a mental illness! How *dare* they send me to a shrink?

Again, I'd spent a lot of time and energy worrying over nothing. All she'd asked me was whether I knew about HIV prevention, safe sex, and if I was out to my mom. She talked to me for a little while on homophobia, and how to handle uncomfortable situations before they got out of control (read: the incident with Tony and Pete *had* reached her ears), gave me a handful of pamphlets, and the phone number for a GLBT teen group that met once a week at the YMCA in Chester.

I passed Dylan on my way out of the office, and realized that he'd been given an appointment, too. "Don't sweat it," I mouthed to him as I passed by, adding a reassuring smile.

That was basically the end of it. We were out, free to be proud, accepted by most of our peers and ignored by the rest. Things were definitely looking up.

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Chapter Twenty

"Well?"

"Dylan..."

"You *can't* say no, Jamie. I already rented the limo and paid for the tickets."

I stared at the pair of blue and white engraved invitations in my hand that Dylan had handed me. They were prom tickets for Saturday, May 18th, at 8:00 p.m., to be held in the gym in exactly one month's time.

The theme was *Paris in Springtime*, and the prom committee had already begun working on a gigantic chicken wire-and-papier-mâché *Eiffel* tower and a painted cardboard *Arc de Triomphe*. The music would be provided by a local band, *Hardly Working*, the buffet would be catered by the diner, and the town florist was already busily taking orders for boutonnieres and corsages.

"Everyone already knows about us, Jamie," Dylan reminded me. "Remember? People are *expecting* us to show up together."

"I know, I know. Still ... it's the *prom*, Dylan. We'd need tuxedos. Dress shoes. Cummerbunds. Roses for our lapels. Black socks. I don't even *own* a pair of black socks. We'd need to get our freaking photo taken for the yearbook..."

"So what? I happen to think that you'll look like a million bucks in a tux, we photograph really well, and I'll lend you a pair of socks," Dylan said, laughing.

"People will stare at us, Dylan. *Oh, look at the queers dancing.* It would be weird."

Dylan sobered, pulling me into his arms. He held me tight, tucking his chin on my shoulder. I wrapped my arms around his waist, staring at the tickets in my hand. "Listen to me, Jamie. I don't care what other people might say. If they want to watch us, let them. We only get *one* prom in our lives, Jamie, and I don't want to miss it. *One* prom, one prom *date*, and I want mine to be *you*."

"Are you sure you're ready for that? We might make the papers. If the school board finds out beforehand, they might try to rescind our tickets. There could be protestors, trouble—"

"Say yes, Jamie."

"Our families might feel the backlash. My mom, your parents—"

"Say yes, Jamie."

Damn it. He was the most stubborn, pigheaded, obstinate, *wonderful* guy on the planet. That he was all mine was a thought I still couldn't seem to process, even after several months of exclusive dating. After Dylan and I had hooked up, I'd never even *thought* about finding anyone else, and if he were being truthful with me, neither had he. We'd even exchanged high school rings.

I gave him a half smile. "Okay, Okay. If you promise that we'll keep our heads low until prom night, then..."

"Then...?" Dylan prompted, grinning at me.

"Yes."

Dylan let out a whoop and gave me a hug that lifted me off my feet. He ended it with a kiss that curled my toes inside my converse sneakers. "Thank you!" he cried, dancing me around in a circle.

Honestly, he was like a big kid—a big, handsome, sexy kid with whom I might just be falling in love.

Whoa, that was the "L" word. It had never popped up in my mind before, not once in all the time we'd been dating. I liked Dylan, yes, liked him a lot, in fact. But love?

What did I know about love, anyway? Not much. Only that Dylan was the first person I thought about when I woke up in the morning, and he was the last one I thought of before going to sleep. I liked him even though he popped his gum when he chewed, and hogged the popcorn when we went to the movies. I didn't care that he cracked his knuckles, or consistently scored higher than I did at *Guitar Hero*. I didn't mind that he always drove, even though my mom had relented and put me on her insurance. I especially liked the fact that he never failed to give me that warm oatmeal feeling every time he kissed me, and that he wasn't afraid to hold my hand, even in public.

Was I falling in love with him?

Maybe I already had, and the thought scared me.

I didn't have an especially stellar family history when it came to love. In our house, love died with a motorcycle skidding underneath a tractor trailer. It ended in a drunk and abusive second husband, and a mother who had refused to see reality until it had almost been too late. It ended in a best friend turning out to be a stranger.

Dylan pulled away from me and the grin on his face blew away my doubts. I didn't know if I was in love with him, but I did know that I'd do practically anything to make him happy. He was so excited that it was impossible not to feel the same way. I sighed, and returned his smile with one of my own. "Okay. We'd better get over to the Tux Hut in Chester or we'll end up wearing jeans and T-shirts to the prom."

* * * *

I struggled out of Dylan's car with my arms full. We'd picked up our gear for the prom—tuxedos, shoes, cummerbunds, ties, and crisp, white, starched shirts—and I was anxious to get them into the house and hung up in my closet before they wrinkled.

We'd tried the whole enchilada on before leaving the Tux Hut, and Dylan had nearly taken my breath away. He looked so good in his fitted, black tuxedo that I felt sort of short and dumpy standing next to him, although he'd told me that I looked just as hot as he did.

I didn't believe him, but it was really nice to hear anyway.

His engine purred as he pulled away and I struggled along the walkway leading to the kitchen. I was more than halfway there before I noticed someone sitting on the stairs.

"Hey, Jamie," Billy said, looking up at me. "I was wondering when you'd get home. A tux, huh? You're going to the prom? With who?"

"Dylan," I answered, too shocked not to reply. Billy! After all these months, he'd shown up out of the blue, sitting on my side stoop just as if he'd never left. At first glance, he looked

just the same as he always had, dressed in a tight red T-shirt and his ripped Abercrombie jeans. A closer look told a different story. He looked tired and worn out, and his eyes were red and puffy. There was dirt under his fingernails, and his T-shirt was stained. Not all of the rips in his jeans had been put there by the manufacturer, I noticed.

In short, Billy looked like shit warmed over.

"Dylan? The track guy? He's out?"

"We both are. What are you doing here, Billy?" Every emotion, all the hurt and rage and fear that I'd thought I'd buried after he'd left came roaring back so quickly that I felt my skin heat and my heart race with the force of it. "I thought you were living with Robbie." I refrained from adding my usual suffix of "A-hole" to Robbie's name, but only barely.

Billy looked down at his shoes, hands hanging between his bent knees. "Nah. That's over."

"Over? How can it be over? He gave you—"

"I know, I know! Believe me, if I could do it all again, I would do things differently. Being positive *sucks*, Jamie! Nothing is like what I'd thought it would be!"

I realized he was crying, even though he refused to lift his head to look at me. *No*, I told myself, *do not let him suck you back in again. It was all about Billy before, and this is all about Billy now. It'll always be the Billy Show—all Billy, all the time.*

He lifted the bottom of his T-shirt and swiped at his face with it, still not looking up at me. "I left home and went to Robbie's, but he didn't want me. I loved him, Jamie! At least, I thought I did, but that was before I realized that he was

such a dickhead. He let me stay for a couple of weeks, sleeping on the sofa, but then he kicked me out. He said I was getting in the way and that he wasn't into babysitting."

"Did you go home? Why didn't you call me?"

"I couldn't go home. My dad told me when I left that that was the end. I wasn't welcome there anymore. I ... I found a few guys who let me bunk in for while."

I didn't want to hear this, did *not* want to deal with it, but what was I supposed to do? I just didn't have it in me to be a jerk. "Come on in. You can take a shower, and I'll lend you some clean clothes." I stepped around him and opened the door. He followed me inside as meekly as a lamb. I think that shocked me more than anything—Billy had never been *meek* in his entire life.

We went directly into my bedroom, where I hung up my tuxedo and dumped the rest of the stuff into my closet. Billy made a beeline into the bathroom and I heard the shower squeal as he turned it on. I'd gotten a good whiff of him and he smelled like he hadn't had more than a passing acquaintance with soap and water in quite a long while. I wondered who the men were who he'd been living with, and where. From the smell of things and the look of Billy's clothes, I was tempted to believe that their address was a cardboard box in an alley somewhere.

He stayed in the shower for a long time, and I was positive it was only the water turning cold that finally drove him out to face me. I'd tossed a clean pair of underwear, T-shirt, and sweats into the bathroom, draping them over the toilet, and

he was dressed in them when the door cracked open and he walked out.

I didn't say anything, not right away. I didn't trust myself. I wanted to scream at him, to remind him about all the crap he'd shoveled in my direction, but at the last minute I had second thoughts. I remembered that Billy had basically screwed up his entire life and realized that the last thing he needed was a guilt trip. Dumping on him might make me feel better, but it wouldn't change anything except to make Billy feel worse. As much as he'd made me angry before, I just couldn't do it to him.

Billy sat on the edge of the bed, hair dripping, soaking the neckline of the T-shirt I'd lent him. "I suppose I owe you an apology."

Suppose? Hell yes, you owe me an apology, I wanted to yell. Instead, I just nodded.

To my horror, he broke down into sobs, covering his face with his hands, shoulders shaking. "It's all wrong, Jamie! It's not supposed to be this way!"

"What way, Billy?" I asked as kindly as I could. I wasn't able to keep all the bitterness out of my voice, but I tried.

"Being positive sucks! I feel sick all the time, now. Robbie didn't tell me about any of this! I get diarrhea, there are sores in my mouth, and I'm always so tired, Jamie..."

"What about the medication?"

"I can't afford it. I'm broke, and it costs thousands, Jamie. I sold my car, but that cash went fast. After it was gone, Robbie threw me out."

I sighed, feeling so badly for him that it was almost a physical pain. Billy didn't deserve any of this, even though he'd been an idiot with his health. Nobody deserved it. "You need to go home, Billy."

"I told you that I can't! My dad said—"

"I know, I know, but you have to try. They're your parents, Billy, and I don't think they were half as bad as you used to think they were. Your mom was really upset when you disappeared."

Billy shook his head, looking at me through his tears. "You weren't there, Jamie. You didn't hear the horrible things my dad said to me."

"As I recall, he's not the only one who said rotten things." I gave him a look, and he had the good sense to blush. "We all make mistakes. We're human. You weren't exactly Son-of-the-Year material, Billy. Give them a chance to make it right."

"What if they don't change their minds? What am I going to do?"

"I don't know, but I'll help you figure it out. Let's take it one step at a time. Call home, Billy," I said firmly, handing him my phone.

He took it, holding it in shaking hands, staring at it for several long minutes. For a minute I thought he wasn't going to do it, but finally he flipped it open and dialed his parent's number.

"Dad? Yeah, it's me. Daddy, I'm so sorry! I ... Yes, I'm at Jamie's. No, Dad. He's out of the picture. I'm done with him. I know. I'm so sorry! Yes. Yeah, I understand." He snapped the phone closed and started to cry again.

Oh, Lord! Did his dad say no? "Billy? What did he say?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"That's he's coming to get me. I'm going home, Jamie!" Billy hiccupped, crying harder.

This time, I joined him.

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Chapter Twenty One

There's something magical about prom night, or so my mom kept telling me.

Mom had been going on for days about how the prom was special, how it marked the end of high school and the beginnings of the rest of my life. She'd get this corny look in her eyes, like she did when she watched old black-and-white movies on TV. I rolled my eyes at her, but she made me wonder. *Maybe she was right*, I thought.. Maybe it *would* make the papier-mâché decorations look good enough to decorate the set of a Spielberg flick, the glitter shine a little brighter, and music sound a little sweeter than on any other night. Then again, maybe it would *still* look like cheap crepe paper and chicken wire. What made me excited was that I was going to find out for myself.

By the same token, it made me as nervous as a long-haired cat at in a roomful of clipping shears.

I'd had nightmares for a week in which Dylan and I stood together on the stage having blood thrown on us ala Stephen King's *Carrie*, or dodging knives, forks, cleats, and other sharp objects flung at us by the rest of the school.

My nerves were frazzled because I was worried that someone might object to two guys going to the prom together; that our tickets would be refused. I had visions of protesters waving signs, and riots in the streets.

I always was a little on the over-dramatic side.

It was seven-thirty, and Dylan was due to arrive at the house at any minute. He'd rented a limousine for the night so that we'd arrive in style. I would have been happy driving there in his Mustang, but he wouldn't hear of it.

I was dressed, and ready to rock and roll, as the saying goes. Mom was even more nervous than I was, it seemed. She'd already straightened my bow tie a half-dozen times, and kept swatting the shoulders of my tux, trying to rid it of nonexistent dust particles.

"Don't you let anyone give you any lip, Jamie," she said. "But don't let them get you into trouble, either. Just ignore anything anyone might say, and have a good time." Again she tried to strangle me with my tie, and flicked at the invisible dust on my shoulders. "Not *too* good a time, though. No drinking, and no anything else, either. Promise me, Jamie!"

"I promised a hundred times already, Mom," I said, ducking away before she could reach for my tie again. I went to fridge and took out the cold, clear plastic box that had been stored in there since early that morning. Inside was a deep red rose boutonniere, framed against a spray of white, delicate baby's breath. I couldn't wait to pin it to Dylan's lapel. I set it down on the lamp table in the living room to wait for his arrival.

The doorbell rang right on time, and it was race between me and my mother to answer it. Honestly, she was so excited that you'd think *she* was going instead of me.

Dylan stood framed in the doorway, as handsome as ever in his sleek black tux, holding a florist's box in his hand. He smiled at me, his eyes lighting up and sparkling. "Hey, Mrs.

Waters," he said, acknowledging my mother even though his eyes never left me. "You look great, Jamie."

"You too."

"You *both* look so handsome!" Mom squealed, pulling Dylan into the living room. "I need pictures! You two stand together over by the window."

"Mom..."

"Might as well just do it, Jamie," Dylan said, smiling. "I'm under orders from my parents to get copies. If I don't produce photos of us, my mom will freak."

We stood side-by-side, fingers touching, until we were half-blinded by the flashes from Mom's camera. She still wasn't happy with the number of photos she'd taken, but if we'd stood there any longer, we would have been late for the prom.

Dylan and I exchanged boutonnieres—I pinned his to his lapel, and he did the same, as Mom's flash went off like a strobe light. His rose was red, mine was white, but we'd ordered them at the same time. I'd insisted that I pay for the flowers and would be paying for breakfast after the prom, since he'd bought the tickets and had refused to take a dime for the limousine. "*My* dates don't pay," he'd said obstinately.

"I'm not some chick," I'd replied, just as stubbornly. I had my pride, too, after all.

The limo was a long and black, with easily more than enough seating for a half-dozen people. The ride was smooth and seamless, and the driver hadn't even batted an eye at the fact that his two male passengers were holding hands in the back seat.

When we pulled in front of the high school, the doors had already been open for about fifteen minutes and people were streaming up the steps to the gym. Mr. Johnson, the P.E. teacher, and Mrs. Sero were taking tickets at a small table set just outside the doors.

Dylan produced our tickets, but Mr. Johnson didn't take them. "Where are your dates?" he asked. "There are only two tickets here."

"My date is standing right here next to me," Dylan replied. He was going into defensive mode; I could hear it in his voice. I only hoped he wouldn't argue with Johnson. For a minute it seemed that my nightmares had been prophetic. I'd rather have skipped the prom than seen Dylan suspended or expelled so close to graduation for taking a swing at a teacher.

Johnson's eyes widened, his face turning red. "You're kidding, right? This is no time for pranks. You two may think its funny, but—"

"Just take their tickets, Avery." Mrs. Sero said, jabbing one of her bony elbows into Johnson's side. He yelped, shooting her a dirty look.

Dylan and I exchanged a shocked glance. Mrs. Sero? The woman who never passed on an opportunity to give us verbal wedgies in class over the slightest infraction was standing up for us? Who'd have thunk it?

"They're ... *together*, Edna!" Johnson hissed, as if we weren't standing right there in front of him. I wanted to rip the cheap toupee off his head and stomp on it. "They're two *boys*!"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Avery! Step up and join the twenty-first century, will you?" Mrs. Sero said, reaching past him and taking Dylan's tickets. She ripped them in two and handed half back with a smile. I believe it was the first time we'd ever seen her really smile in four years.

She should do it more often, I thought. It makes her look so much younger.

"Enjoy yourselves, boys."

"Thanks, Mrs. Sero." We exchanged another surprised look as we turned to leave, but didn't question whatever made her intervene on our behalf. Evidently, *nobody* argued with Mrs. Sero, not even the other teachers. In any case, we were both grateful that she'd been there because things could have gotten ugly if our tickets had been refused.

"Forget about it," I whispered to Dylan as we hesitated in front of the doors. "Don't let him get to you. It's over and we're in. Let's just have fun." I knew by the way a muscle twitched in his jaw that he was still angry.

"I know, I know." He looked at me and smiled, relaxing. "Ready?"

I nodded. "Ready as I'll ever be."

It was dim beyond the doors, candlelight flickering on the linen-draped tables. Our tickets had us sitting at table eight, seats five and six respectively. We'd be sitting with some of the other members of the track team and their dates, all of whom knew Dylan and I were going together. At least I wouldn't have to worry about any nastiness at the table.

We passed underneath the cardboard cutout of the *Arc de Triomphe*, looking to the left and the right, trying to find our

table. Then Dylan spotted Kenny Silverman waving to us and we headed in that direction.

I could feel eyes on us every step of the way. The music played on, people continued dancing and eating, but I knew they were watching us. Waiting for us to do something "gay" I suppose, although what, I had no idea. Maybe they thought one of us was going to show up in drag, or that we'd start making out in the middle of the gym, or launch into the YMCA dance.

"Hey, you guys look great!" Sheila Robbins, Kenny's date said. I knew that she'd dated Dylan, too, which made me a little uncomfortable. She didn't seem hostile, though, and when she smiled warmly at me, I felt much more at ease.

Soon enough we were seated, eating and chatting just as if Dylan and I had been together all of our lives and weren't the first gay couple to attend a prom together at BJ Good High.

The band struck up something slow and Dylan stood up, gracefully plunking his napkin down on his chair. "Ready?" he asked, holding out his hand. "Come on. I want to trip the light fantastic."

Dance? *Us*? No way! Not a chance!

A hush fell over the room, or at least it did in my mind. I felt as if every eye in the building was zeroed in on us. Then I looked up into Dylan's eyes and he winked at me.

What the hell ... you only live once, I thought, taking his hand and standing up. He pulled me onto the dance floor. The song playing was Melissa Etheridge's *Come To My Window*, a slow and sexy ballad. There was no fumbling over who would

lead—Dylan put his hand my waist, and I didn't argue. My right hand rested lightly on his shoulder, our other hands clasped together, and our feet began to move in time to the music.

We gazed into one another's eyes and forgot that there was a gym full of people watching us. There was only Dylan and me, and for those precious few minutes no one else even existed. I didn't want the song to ever end, but it did and it was then that I realized no one else had stepped out onto the floor—we'd been dancing all alone out there. My heart stopped for a moment, but when people began clapping and whistling, it started beating again, pushing all the blood into my cheeks. I knew that I was blushing furiously, but I was smiling, too.

Then the band launched into something fast and furious. I don't fast-dance. I never could. I'm all elbows and knees on a dance floor—uncoordinated and geeky. My neck tends to disappear, swallowed up by my hunching shoulders until I look like a turtle trying to duck back into its shell. Luckily, Dylan didn't seem to mind that I led him back to our table.

After that, the night seemed to fly by. We danced to the slow numbers, sat out the fast ones. We ate, we laughed, and we toasted each other, the school, and the track team with glasses of syrupy-sweet fruit punch. It was one of the best nights of my life.

I felt a twinge of jealousy when the ballots for King and Queen of the Prom were passed out. I'd had a secret little fantasy of Dylan and I being voted Prince and Prince, like a couple of other guys had been not long ago at another high

school in a different state, but we hadn't been nominated. I got over it quick enough, and Dylan and I voted for Sheila and Kenny.

The night passed far too quickly. Suddenly, it was midnight and everyone was saying goodbye. A bunch of us were going to the diner for breakfast afterward, but it was still kind of sad that the prom was over.

You only get one prom, I remembered Dylan telling me. *One prom, one prom date.*

I was so glad that he was mine, and that we'd braved our fears and had gone together. I don't think I was ever as proud of myself as I was that night, walking out of the prom with a group of people who'd accepted us, with the guy I loved on my arm.

I knew then that I loved Dylan. I'd realized it for sure when he'd led me to the dance floor, wanting to dance with me so badly that he hadn't cared at all what anyone else might think.

Maybe I'd tell him, maybe I wouldn't. It didn't matter. All that did matter was that it had been a perfect night.

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Epilogue

The world changed the year I turned seventeen, but no one noticed except me.

I'd learned some incredibly important lessons that year, things about life and myself that I knew I'd carry with me forever. I'd met a guy I sincerely loved, one who loved me in return. Whether that love would last was anyone's guess, but I cherished each moment I had with Dylan while I had them.

Dylan had won his scholarship to State, but I hadn't been accepted there. I was going back to my initial plans of taking classes at the Community College. I did score a small scholarship, and together with federal grants, it would be enough get me through the two-year program. After that, with an Associates degree in my pocket, I could reapply to State to finish my Bachelor's.

Dylan and I made plans to meet on weekends as often as possible once school started. He had his car, and I had high hopes of buying one soon. I took a job working at the diner with my mom, bussing tables, and saved every spare penny toward that goal. In either case, neither of us was starting school until the fall semester, and we had a long, glorious summer stretching out ahead of us.

I'd learned that good people sometimes make bad choices, and that you can't blame yourself for what other people do. All a good friend can do is to try to change their minds, and then be there to help pick up the pieces when they fall.

Billy's folks took him back in, and they began family counseling. He's on medication and his symptoms have been arrested for the moment. There's always the possibility that the virus will mutate or progress into full-blown AIDS somewhere down the road, and the medication often makes him very ill. His life isn't going to be an easy one, and I cry a little inside each time we meet because it was all so unnecessary.

He'll never be the same, but I'll always be his friend and there for him, and he knows it.

I'd learned that this world is full of people both good and bad, and that sometimes it's difficult to tell the difference until it's too late. My mom and I had learned that lesson from Doug, and Billy had learned it from Robbie.

Robbie moved out of town, and didn't leave a forwarding address. I sure wasn't sorry to hear that he'd gone, but Billy cried. I guess Billy was still holding on to some fragile, misplaced hope that Robbie would have changed his mind about their relationship. Love is blind, as they say, and in Billy's case it was blind, deaf, and mute. I don't think he *still* understands that Robbie had used him. Sometimes I doubt that he ever will.

My mom is set on divorcing Doug, although he's still in town and we see him from time to time. He tried to come back to her once, and I was thrilled and proud when she'd slammed the door in his face and dialed 911. He spent a couple of days in jail for breaking the restraining order, and hasn't been back since.

Mom locks the doors, even during the day when we're both at home. She's afraid Doug will get drunk and come gunning for us. I don't think so, though. He's had a taste of jail and I don't think he liked it very much. Still, it's better to be safe than sorry, I guess.

I realize now that I'd misunderstood all along—the world hadn't really changed the year after I turned seventeen.

It was me who'd changed.

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A Note from the Author:

While advances in medicine are made all the time, the fact remains that HIV and AIDS are incurable, deadly diseases that are *preventable*. For further information on HIV, AIDS, and the prevention of both, visit the Centers for Disease Control website, at www.cdc.gov/hiv, or the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Network at www.glsen.org, which offers information for students, teachers, and parents.

For more information on bug-chasers and gift-givers, I highly recommend the documentary *The Gift* by Louise Hogarth.

Be safe. Be smart. Be happy.

Dakota Chase

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