

DUMB JOCK

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Introduction

My entire life it has been a dream of mine to share a story. Although I'm not deluded enough to think that my first written work will be a literary masterpiece, I do hope that in some small way it touches the lives of some of the people who graciously choose to read it. This is completely a tale of fiction, and the characters within are not in any way intended to represent any real life persons. Although the story is set in the very same northern Michigan town where I was raised, the people that I have implanted into this real-life town are not the people I knew as a young boy of fourteen. Many of my own feelings and experiences are included in the story of this fictitious boy, but his family and friends are all fabricated. The central character of the story, Jeff Irwin, is not the author and never really existed. This is not an autobiography.

It is my hope that the residents of Boyne City, Michigan, who read the story will find truth in the descriptions of this beautiful and quaint town and will understand some of the struggles and fears that a shy, inhibited, gay youth may face while growing up here. The setting of the story is early 1980's and is very pointedly pre-AIDS. No mention of AIDS or the HIV retrovirus is included in the story, and this is deliberate.

A fourteen year old boy becomes sexually active in this story when he falls in love with another boy. It is not my intention to promote or condone any particular sexual expression or behavior, but rather to simply relate a story about love, admiration, and genuine friendship. This is a story which deals with same-sex love but also touches upon the love and forgiveness that exists within a family. It is about how a community of people are exposed to a variation of love that they have never been willing to acknowledge. It is about facing our own fears, understanding one another, and most importantly, about finding strength within ourselves to handle things far greater than we would have ever expected ourselves to be able to handle.

Even if this work were to go totally unnoticed, and never read by another soul, I am thankful to have had the opportunity to write it. It has allowed me the privilege of fulfilling my greatest lifetime ambition, and I owe a debt of gratitude to those who have supported me in this endeavor. I sincerely hope that the book itself will be viewed not so much as a coming out or coming of age story, but more a story of growth - learning to find a way to love ourselves for who we are, rather than for what we accomplish or how we are perceived.

Chapter 1

In high school I was such a geek. I was sort of the egghead type, always reading or studying, maintaining a perfect GPA. It really wasn't so much that I was nerdy, per se, but that I had a reputation for being "smart". Really I honestly don't think that I was (or am) all that smarter than my peers; I simply applied myself, always doing exactly what I was "supposed" to do. Perhaps it was simply that my area of success was focused in academia rather than sports, and perhaps that is why I was so attracted to, jealous of, and in total awe of the athletic "jock" types.

One such jock, Brett Willson, was in two of my classes, including freshmen English (even though he himself was a junior). He had not fared well his first two times around and was making a final attempt to get a passing grade. If he did not at least achieve a D-, he would be forced to give up his position as quarterback of the varsity football team. Had the coach and phys ed teacher had his way, Brett would have been automatically granted his passing grade simply to ensure his spot on the team; however, there was a bitter rivalry between the freshman English teacher and the athletic department. The English teacher, Mr. Litzenfowler, had virtually no affinity for sports and no sympathy for the jocks who struggled in his class.

I, on the other hand, was the apple of Litzenfowler's eye. Not only was I acing his class but could have virtually stepped in to take his place teaching it. I wish that I'd fared that well in all of my classes, being that math, English, and science were not the only prerequisites for graduation. I also had to not only pass in phys ed, but to maintain an above-average grade in order to keep my GPA at scholarship level. I knew from the buzz around school that McDonald, the gym teacher and football coach, would give any student who showed up and got dressed for class at least a B grade, so that part was no problem (other than the embarrassment of changing in the locker room in front of the buff jocks). But I really, really wanted to achieve a higher grade than just a B.

I was so intimidated by McDonald to begin with, even though I considered him to be a big oafish moron, but he was so boisterous and so often said humiliating things to me in front of the entire class. He did nothing to discourage the jocks from ridiculing me, in fact it was as if he enjoyed it, so when he called me into his office one day during open gym time, I about crapped myself. We were only into the third week of my freshmen year. For the most part I felt insignificant in his presence. He acted like I did not even exist. The only time he did notice me was when I did some stupid maneuver during an activity in his class, like say try to throw a ball or something.

When I walked into his office I was not sure what to expect. I felt my guts getting all tied up and my knees starting to feel wobbly. He just stared at me and motioned for me to sit down. I gratefully accepted the offer of a chair because I was sure that by this time I was visibly trembling. So I sat there, nervously looking down. I never have been able to look a dominant man in the eye--not unless instructed to, that is.

"You probably are wonderin what I called you in here for" he said. All that I could think of was that you should never end a sentence with a preposition, but I simply answered "Yes, sir."

"Well I want to talk to you about Brett Willson."

I gulped and looked up at him finally. I was thinking Brett must have accused me of something. Maybe it was another practical joke that he and the other jocks were playing on me. Sometimes they would steal my book bag and it would end up on the roof, or they would put signs on my back, but now I suspected it was a more elaborate scheme. I was probably going to be blamed for something that I did not even do.

I just stared at the coach and he continued. "Brett is my star quarterback you know?... Well actually you probably don't know. Do you even know what a quarterback is, son?"

I laughed nervously and responded, "Yes sir. He's the one who calls the shots during the games. Decides which plays to run."

"Well actually I am the one who calls the shots! But you get the idea. Anyways, he is very good in his position. Shit, he is the best quarterback this school has seen in the past fifteen years, and we have a damned good shot at taking the regional championship this year...if we have Brett, that is."

I grinned at him, as I was starting to understand that my fears of being in trouble were probably baseless, and I said to him, "Well sir, then I'm very glad that you do have Brett on the team. I really hope you win the championship."

He stared blankly at me, seeming annoyed that I had interrupted him and continued as if I'd said nothing. "--well, Brett is gonna be the one to take us to victory this year...finally. But if he loses his position on the team that will not be possible. Then we will be left with only Franklin and Williams who are good...but not good enough."

"I'm sorry sir, but if he is so valuable to you, why would you even consider removing him from his position as quarterback?"

"It's not me that would cut Willson from the team, kid. It is that annoying piss ant Litzenfowler in the English department! Willson has crashed and burned in that class twice already. If he doesn't get a passing grade this time, Brett will be removed from athletics altogether."

"Oh," I said, "I'm sorry to hear that sir. But perhaps you could persuade Mr. Litzenfowler to cut him some slack and at least give him a passing grade this time. He is a reasonable man. I'm sure he'd understand."

"PFFFT! Reasonable my ass! I tried that route already. Got me nowhere. Litzenfucker has always hated me and doesn't give two shits about the athletic department. He'd fail

Willson out of pure spite. Brett and I had a heart-to-heart the other day, and he's ready to deck that faggot at any moment. As much as I'd like to see him laid flat, I can't afford to have Brett do that and throw away his chance at a full athletic scholarship, not to mention our championship!"

"Oh geez," I said, again looking down at the ground. "Well this is quite a predicament, sir. But what do I have to do with it? I mean I get along with Mr. Litzenfowler all right but I doubt I could persuade him to adjust Brett's grade. I don't have that much influence."

"Nah, boy, I know you don't have any influence." The coach laughed. " But you are gonna help me with this. And I'm gonna tell you how. And then when it is all said and done and Willson passes his English class and we win the championship, you will get your reward. I will give you an A for your semester in my freshman gym class; which, by the way, you will definitely not deserve. All you gotta do though is get my boy to pass in that class."

My eyes got real wide as I was starting to catch the drift of what he was saying. He somehow wanted me to get Brett Willson, star quarterback yet completely brain-dead jock, a passing grade in his English class, and in exchange he would ace me in my physics class. But this was a nearly impossible endeavor. I had seen Brett in class. He did not know the difference between a conjunction and a verb; how the hell was I going to be able to get him a passing grade?

"I want to help you sir. God I want that A real bad. But I'm not sure what you want me to do. You want me to try to tutor Brett?"

" I don't care what you do kid, so long as my boy stays on the team. Tutor him, do his homework for him, talk to Litzenfucker...whatever! Just so Brett passes the class. And if you don't come through for me I can guarantee that you will regret it boy. Cause I'm in a position to mess up your life just as bad as Litzenfucker is doin to my boy. You understand?!"

My mouth dropped open. "You mean you would fail me if I can't help Brett, sir?"

He then laughed. "Yeah I'd fail you. And not only that, but I'd make sure that the other guys in the class knew it was open season for whatever they wanted to dish out to you. And believe me, they would have a field you. Are you understandin what I'm sayin to you boy?"

I looked down at my sneakers, again gulping and I squeaked out a terrified "Yes sir". He laughed.

"So here's the deal. I'm gonna tell Willson to meet you here after school tomorrow in my office and you two are gonna work out a schedule for his tutoring. You are gonna do it at times that are convenient for my boy where it doesn't interfere with his practices, and you

are gonna talk to your precious 'reasonable' English teacher and try to get him to cut Willson some slack. When you get here tomorrow you will have homework for Brett for his first two weeks' assignments. He has until the end of the week to get them caught up and there is no way he is gonna be able to get them done on his own. But you better make it look believable so that Litzenfucker doesn't catch on to the plan. So make sure you don't give all the right answers. Got it?"

I nodded.

"Now get back to gym class, and be here tomorrow at 3:30 sharp."

"Yes, sir" I said as I headed for the door. My heart was pounding in my chest. I did not know what to do. How could I possibly come up with homework for all of the last two weeks assignments and make it appear that Brett had completed it himself? And how was I going to be able to tutor that dumb jock? Oh god, what a nightmare!

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I used to get out of the shower in the morning and just stare at myself in the mirror. I was amazed actually by what I saw. It seemed impossible that the geeky four-eyed nerd that was staring back at me was actually me. I would look at myself and say, "You are Jeff Irwin," and I'd truly be amazed by it. It did not seem possible that was me! I wondered what it was like for Brett Willson when he looked in the mirror. I'm sure he felt amazement as well, but in a much different sense. It was the total opposite of how I felt. I'm sure he said to himself "I am the shit!". What was it like to see that reflection when you stared yourself down in the mirror? His perfect face, chiseled chin, broad shoulders, dark wavy hair, tight abdomen, lean waist...knowing that he was idolized by so many. He was the star quarterback, had a beautiful girlfriend, drove a nice sports car, and always knew just exactly the right thing to say.

In my pathetic little circle of friends we would call him a "dumb jock". I would label him as being retarded because he couldn't figure out how to diagram a frickin sentence or solve an algebraic equation, yet I would have traded places with him in a millisecond.

And honestly he was not that dumb. I mean he carried on a very intelligent conversation...just not one with me. I obviously wasn't worth his time. Really I doubt he would ever give me a second thought. When we passed in the hallway it was I who was totally aware of his presence, not vice versa. It was I who would go home at night and think about him. I was the one who would look up quickly in the locker room from my secluded place in the corner to try to catch a glimpse of him with his shirt off. I'd think about him when I lay in bed at night-- think about him prancing around the locker room

wearing only his jock. He was so cocky and confident He and I were also in the same gym class together. You could take phys ed all four years if you wanted, and he did.

On the contrary, I was the one who was last in the shower, keeping my thin little puny body covered by a towel until the very last second when I turned on the water. To think that the breadth of my shoulders was half the span of Brett's massive build, his deltoids and biceps constantly flexing, even without trying...it made me feel so small. I felt like a very miniscule person when I saw him. I felt like I was merely a boy and he was a man. Yet he was less than two years older than me.

So this notion of tutoring him in some ways was not so harrowing as I had first thought. The scariest part of it for me actually was going to be figuring out how to talk to him without tripping over my own tongue. How would I be able to be in a room alone with him and look him in the eye? What was it going to be like to sit across a table from him and to finally have his full attention? How would I react when he actually came to a realization that I did exist?

That night I lay there in bed thinking of all of these things, and I started to feel so strangely aroused. My penis started to stiffen as I thought of the intimacy of our future meetings. He would be alone with me, and we would be eye to eye. I thought about what it would be like leaning over his shoulder to help him with a particular sentence. Showing him how to diagram it, and taking in his scent, feeling the heat from his body. I thought about him sitting there in his letter jacket. He would start to get warm and would take off the jacket. He was leaning back, stretching. I could see the muscles in his abdomen tighten as he leaned back in the chair. He spread his legs apart, making himself more comfortable.

I wondered if I would become as aroused when I was with him as I was right then lying in that bed. I reached down under the covers and squeezed myself. Closing my eyes I continued to think of him, of his shoulders, his pectoral muscles on that smooth chest, his six-pack abs, his v-shaped torso. I followed the mental image down further and thought about that bulge, wanting to look inside. I wanted to unwrap that package and just feel it. Touch it!... Taste it?!!

Oh my god!

I was stroking myself now, beating off my puny member that was attached to my tiny nerdy little geek body. The images in my mind moved so quickly. I went from fantasizing about being with him to fantasizing about being him. The fantasies were conjoined. I could not separate them. I was worshipping this godlike jock, knowing I could never be the man that he was already, and I was also dreaming of becoming like him. I was pretending I was him, and I was knowing I could never be even close.

As I envisioned him in my minds eye, I stroked myself faster and harder...not even thinking of the potential mess I might make for myself. As I edged toward climax I clearly saw his face. He was standing over me, looking down. And right as I reached that

incomparable point of no return he hissed at me, "FAGGOT", and I shot all over myself, soaking my bed sheets with my sticky semen.

I was also soaking myself...with my own sweat. So I got up out of bed finally, throwing back the covers and sopped up the icky mess that was on my belly and chest, using one of my own socks. Then I put on some clean underwear and went to the linen closet for new sheets, making sure I was quiet enough not to disturb my parents. I went back to the bedroom to change the sheets, muttering to myself, "Fuckin dumb jock anyways!"

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In the infantile world of grammar school, you hear a constant barrage of name calling and petty, meaningless epithets on a daily basis. "Fag!",

"Geek", "Hoser", "Nerd", "Butthead". They really all mean the same thing:

"You are an outsider. You don't fit in." They are meant to exclude, to denote negativity and disapproval. Yet these kids don't really understand the words that they are using. A fourth grader doesn't know the difference between a queer and a loser.

High school, however, is another story entirely. In high school certain words that were formerly used as generic insults take on specific meanings. When a high-schooler is labeled a "fag" it no longer merely means that he is weird or annoying. It then means that he is a little light on the feet, a little bit less of a man than he should be, a little more effeminate than is acceptable... a cocksucker! Being labeled a faggot is the death knell for a high school student. It is the ultimate put-down, a form of ostracization that compares to none other.

I was terrified of that label. I did not want to grow up to be the type of man that Mr. Litzenfowler was, ridiculed by his colleagues, always put upon by the more masculine men in the world. Mr. McDonald actually called him a fag to my face, without even cringing. He stated it as if it were a matter of fact. I wondered if Mr. Litzenfowler knew that he was referred to in this manner. I wondered if he was aware that other teachers talked about him that way to his students.

I thought it was pathetic that Mr. Litzenfowler was so weak and spineless compared to Mr. McDonald. Even though McDonald was a blithering idiot most of the time, at least nobody doubted his masculinity. Even the other students mimicked and ridiculed Litzenfowler. They did not call him "Litzenfucker" the way McDonald had, instead they called him "Litzenblower".

And the scary thing was that I was this pathetic little clone of his. I was his carbon copy, fifteen years his junior. I wondered if one day I would be the brunt of the jokes for a staff of coworkers or faculty the way that Mr. Litzenfowler was now. I wondered if he felt as ostracized by his peers as I did of my own. And I wondered if there was a big dumb jock that he once worshipped when he was in high school.

But this was the cross I bore. I did not know how to escape the ridicule and labeling that I so frequently endured. Usually I tried to brush it off. I stayed focused on my studies. I had a few friends who were cast-offs in their own right. These were the crowd I hung with. I ate my lunch usually with my friend Joey. He was another one of the egghead types. In a perfect world there really would be no Joey's, I have to admit. For he was emotionally immature. He had like a 160 IQ and was in all of the advanced classes, doing college-level trigonometry in the ninth grade, yet if his mom forgot to put his dessert cup in his lunch bag, he'd be reduced to a fit of tears.

I first became friends with Joey by default. I was sort of the outsider in my class and he was the only other one that was in a similar predicament. This was back in the third grade. In some ways it made me feel good about myself to be around him, too. He was so extremely nerdy that I actually felt mainstream when in his presence.

There were a couple of girls who were good friends of mine as well. They were not the cheerleader type by any means, far from ever winning a beauty or popularity contest. Elaine was on the plump side. Who am I kidding? She was downright enormous! Elaine weighed in around at least 220 pounds and half the time spouted off with a strange pseudo-British accent. Nobody really knew where this came from as she was born and bred full-blooded American. Perhaps it was her alter ego, or more likely, a psychosis of some sort. But oddly she was the one single friend that I most frequently confided in. She was the very first person I ever told of my "feelings" towards other guys.

Carly was my other close female friend. Carly was by anyone's definition a rebel. To the core, she was anti-establishment. Whether she was in her gothic mood, or punk stage, or simply just a good ole fashioned freak, it was always certain that she made no attempt whatsoever to "fit in". Carly was the only person I knew and socialized with that smoked pot on a regular basis. I do not think that she did it so much to get stoned as she did to say "Fuck the world".

It was so bizarre that the four of us were friends with each other, all so vastly different. Yet we shared one common bond...and that was that we were in fact different. There was the nerdy smart childish one, the fat boisterous psychotic one, the shocking rebellious freakish one, and me...the fag. Nobody really knew for sure I was a homo, especially not within our group. I just was shy and quiet and studious. I was preppy but in a geeky sort of way. I was respectful and focused and unassuming. I did not bother anyone or ever speak up. I was just sort of invisible actually. And so somehow the four of us fit together. These other three outsiders were my only real friends in high school. Until Brett.

I did do the things that Coach McDonald instructed. I completed homework assignments for Brett. I went through the exercises in our workbook and wrote out all of the answers neatly on a plain white sheet of typing paper. I would have to have him copy them over in his own handwriting on our first session for I could not think of a way to accurately forge his handwriting. Maybe down the road if this continued I'd be able to pick it up.

And I was at the coach's office at exactly 3:30 that day after school, standing outside the door with my knees trembling, waiting for Brett. At about 3:45 he finally arrived, not even appearing to be aware of his tardiness. He reached in his pocket without speaking to me and pulled out a key. McDonald had entrusted him with a key to his office. He let us in. Then finally he turned to greet me...and when I saw his smile, I started to melt.

I could not even form words in my mouth to respond to him and he repeated himself, again saying hello. Then finally he said to me, "Hey, are you all right?," and I shook off the feeling and nodded to him, finally saying hi back to him. We sat down.

"I know what you must think of me," he started. "You think I'm just a dumb jock who wants a free ride."

I looked at him, wondering how he was able to read my mind, but instead corrected him, "No, not at all. Don't be silly. Every person is good at different things. Yours does not happen to be English grammar. That's cool, cuz I'm not much good at sports." I laughed nervously.

He smiled, buying what I'd said. And he then said to me, "Hey, I hate to ask this but did Coach say anything to you about homework assignments? I mean I don't really want you to do my work for me but there is no way I can get caught up at this point."

"It's cool," I said, "I understand. I have all the assignments completed. But I think you should copy over the answers in your own handwriting so that Litzenfowler buys it. He knows my handwriting very well. And plus that way we can go over the assignments together when you do it, and I will try to help you understand the answers."

"Dude, that's cool. Thanks. How come you are willing to help me like this? I mean, it's not like I've been the nicest to ya, you know?"

"Well," I responded, "Just think of this as a mutually beneficial arrangement. Coach McDonald is going to take care of my grade in his class if I can help you with your grade in English."

"Oh, well that makes sense. But I don't see why you should be worried about your grade in gym. Everyone passes gym...all you gotta do is show up." He laughed.

"Well not everyone," I corrected.

"Okay guy, but I want you to understand this, no matter what Coach says.

After this time I don't want you cheating for me. I want to learn this stuff. I want you to teach me how to do it myself."

I was very shocked by his statement. Maybe what he said about the "free ride" was not bullshit. Maybe he did want to do things the right way. Perhaps it was the coach who was the sinister one. Regardless, I'd seen Brett in class and he was nothing but a goof off. So his performance today as a devoted pupil was going to need to be backed up by more than just flattery. I pulled out the English Grammar Workbook from my backpack.

"Okay, well I guess we should just get started then Brett."

He grinned. "Okay Jeff."

Chapter 2

"Where have you been?" my mom was questioning me as I walked in the door at 5pm.

"Oh, I stayed after school to help a kid with his homework. I'm tutoring him now."

"Oh really? Well why didn't you let me know you were gonna be late? It's not like you to not come home right after school, and I was worried."

"So who is this kid you're helping?"

"Um, oh I don't think you know him. He's Brett Willson. He plays on the football team. My gym teacher Mr. McDonald asked me if I would help him because he's not doing well in English."

She looked at me strangely, "I thought you didn't get along with that coach. Why is he asking you for favors?"

"Oh, well everyone pretty much knows I am a good student, I think, and the coach wants to keep Brett on his team so he thought I would be a good candidate to help him. That's all. And if it works out, then just maybe the coach will start being nicer to me."

She nodded. "Well just don't let them take advantage of you Jeff. Most people who work as tutors get paid for their services. I don't want them bullying you into doing something you don't want to do. But then I guess it's okay...Lord knows it might do you good to make some new friends."

"What do you mean by that, Mom?"

"Oh nothing. It's just that ...well, I want you to be happy. That's all."

"I'm perfectly 'happy' with my friends right now, Mom. Geesh! Why don't you like my friends?"

"I never said I didn't like them. You just need to expose yourself to all kinds of people. The world is a very diverse place, made up of all sorts of interesting people. Have you ever just sat in a public place and watched people walking by? Fat people, skinny people, short, tall, homely, pretty...every single one of these people is a human soul. And all are put on this earth for a purpose. It just is hard to figure out what that purpose is sometimes."

"You're not gonna start this religious stuff again, Mom, are you?"

She smiled at me, in a most loving way. "No Jeff. I'm not gonna get all religious on you...again, but I just want you to be happy. Like I said. That's all."

"So what do you want for dinner?"

"Umm... I don't care. Where is everyone? Are we the only one's home?"

I already knew the answer. My father was where he always was, every night of the week. He was at the "Lodge". He was a trustee at the Fraternal Order of Eagles, Local Aerie 1143. In actuality his membership was a glorified drinking pass. His being an "officer" gave him certain privileges, like free membership, and discount beer. One time I heard my dad bragging to his friend that he had drunk enough beer during the course of his lifetime to "Float two battleships". Now that is an accomplishment for which one can be proud!

My brother Erik , who was four years older than me, came and went as he chose. He graduated from high school last year...barely. He seemed to be following more in the footsteps of my father, and all through high school he hung with the crowd that the rest of us called "burn-outs". Erik was not a mean older brother, in fact we got along all right. He never bullied me or anything like that. Basically he just ignored me. Erik was a very gifted artist. He could draw and paint pictures that were literally astonishing. During his senior year of high school he painted a huge mural for the lobby of our local theatre. It was an outdoor scene, depicting a stream and a sunlit wooded area, typical of springtime in northern Michigan.

But I knew that it troubled my mom to see Erik waste his talent. Instead of going on to art school or college, he just worked odd jobs and hung out with those same burnout friends. He continued to live at home, rent free, yet we never really knew when to expect him home. So for the most part my home life was just my mom and me...and my black Labrador, Reggie.

We first got Reggie as a pup when my dad was in the hospital. He had suffered a rather serious stroke at the age of 47 and was laid up for nearly a year afterwards. During this time the factory where he had worked since before I was born closed due to the Reagan Recession. My mom continued to work as a housekeeper at the hospital and also cleaned houses on the side. Once in awhile she tended bar to get the extra tips. We also went on welfare assistance which was how I ended up with my dorky-assed brown, square-framed glasses. Medicaid only allowed you three choices of frames...ugly, uglier, and fuckin rape prevention birth control!

So when Dad was in the hospital going through detox and learning how to reuse his right arm and leg, my mom went out and got us a puppy. I think the pup was supposed to be her dog, but as he grew, I got more and more attached to him. Eventually he became mine, and everyone knew it. When my dad did get out of the hospital he hated that dog. If he was not so unstable on his feet I'm sure he'd have kicked the shit out of him, but had he tried that in his condition he'd have lost his balance and landed flat on his ass. I think that he thought of that dog as a replacement for him, while he was gone. He may have been right. Well actually, I got more love and devotion from that dog than I'd ever seen

from my dad. Its not really like you can replace something that was never there in the first place.

All of this occurred when I was in the seventh grade, my dad's stroke and rehab, that is. It was really my mother who was responsible for bringing him back to where he could function again. She did so much physical therapy with him. She even bought him one of those huge ugly three wheel bikes (guess it would be called a trike, actually). He used that every single day, as well as going for long walks, holding a small rubber ball in his hand and squeezing it repeatedly. I thought it was ironic because when I was younger my dad used to tease me for throwing a ball like a girl. Now his throw was even worse than mine. Poetic justice, perhaps.

But he did come back. It was astonishing. He worked his physical therapy program every single day, day-in and day-out. Gradually he got to where he no longer needed a cane. Eventually he stopped dragging his right foot when he walked. Instead he simply had a slight limp. He was right-handed at the time of the stroke and learned how to do literally everything left-handed. For a long time his signature was illegible, and whenever he needed to use written correspondence he plunked out the words on typing paper, using an old manual typewriter he had picked up at a garage sale.

For over a year after the stroke he did not touch a drink. He applied for Social Security disability benefits, which were promptly denied, again thanks to Mr. Reagan. But my mom was very diligent, writing letters to our congressman. Eventually with the help of a congressional staffer, my dad got the approval for his benefits and received one big check for all of the back pay he was owed. The check was for around three thousand dollars, which to our family might as well have been a million.

As soon as my dad started getting those checks, he returned to all of his old bad habits. He started pedaling that trike down to the Lodge every day. Sometimes he was so trashed by nightfall that he couldn't get back home and my mom would have to go pick him up. Other times he would get one of his staggering buddies to put the three-wheeler in the back of his truck and drive him home. But often he pedaled it home himself, drunk or not.

I cannot say I was shocked or even saddened to see my father return to the alcoholism. It was the only thing I really knew. And during the time that he was not drinking, he was so hostile. It was like he was pissed off at the world for what had happened to him. Forty-seven was far too young to be stricken with a stroke. But I always wanted to tell him that if he had just taken his blood pressure medicine like he was supposed to, it would have all been avoided. "Fuckin doctors, they don't know shit" was his standard response to any medical advice. See, he had been diagnosed with severe hypertension long before the stroke and was prescribed medication to counter it. However, when he drank alcohol, the medicine would make him violently ill. So he opted to discontinue the medicine rather than to quit drinking.

You would think that after suffering a stroke, he would have learned his lesson. I mean he went through hell when he was "drying out" in the hospital. He had delirium tremors for

nearly six full weeks. And after having gone through that kind of shit, you would think that he'd have never touched another drop for the rest of his life. But my father had his own set of logic. His explanation was quite simple, "I'm not an alcoholic. I can quit drinking any time I want; I did it for over a year already. I only drink because I want to!"

My mother did not argue with him any more. I think all of the years of throwing plates around the kitchen and screaming at the top of her lungs when he staggered in drunk off his ass, had simply worn her out. It did no good to yell at him or threaten him. Life with her alcoholic husband was her own private prison. It's no wonder she had the religious beliefs that she did...they were the only thing that kept her sane. It is like Marx said...opiate for the masses. My mom's faith was her drug of choice. Since life made no fucking sense whatsoever, why deal with it? Simply make up a fantasy world in which to live instead. By telling herself repeatedly that she had a purpose and had lessons in life to learn, she could accept the multiple tragedies that she faced on a daily basis.

Tragedies like losing her first-born child. Before my brother and I were born, my mom had been pregnant with a baby girl. She carried this baby full-term and had a name picked out, baby clothing, nursery, the whole nine yards. But during the delivery there was a complication and the baby ended up strangling on her own umbilical cord. My mom left the hospital empty handed. I don't think she ever really got over that loss, and then to make matters worse, she went on to give birth to two boys. She always deeply desired having a daughter. It was like there was this terrible void within her life that she was never able to fill.

Maybe these things were what led to my father's abusive behaviors...the alcoholism. Maybe the alcohol was his opiate. My dad got drunk every day, my mom was high on faith, and my brother was just plain stoned every waking moment of life. What did I have? I had Reggie...and my books. Plus I had my little circle of freak friends that I hung with at school. And I had all of my own private thoughts of Brett.

Nobody was ever going to find out about these fantasies. No one was ever going to know what churned through my mind every night as I lay in bed. These were my private escapes. I could see literally everything in Brett's life that my life lacked. He had the looks and the popularity. His family had money and he had his own sports car. He had a beautiful girlfriend and was star quarterback for the football team. In literally every single aspect of life he was superior to me. Its no wonder that he thought he was "the shit"...he was!

* * * * *

When I first started the ninth grade I weighed in at a whopping 112 pounds! Of course I had not reached my "growing spurt" yet. By the time I graduated high school I was up to

my standard 128lbs, 5'5". Brett, being a junior, had already reached his full height of 5'11" and weighed in at about 185. Basically I was a little squirt compared to him. Had he been so inclined, he could have pulverized me at any given moment...he and practically every other male who was part of the student body.

After that first tutoring session, Brett decided that it would be better if we met somewhere away from school. I could not blame him really, it was far too risky to have someone spotting us together. After all, he had a reputation to live up to. My friends and I may have tagged him as a "dumb jock", but literally everyone else just thought of him as some sort of god. Why the hell would he be hangin with a geek like me? And honestly I did not want to subject him to any embarrassment. The line of crap I had given him about each of us being good at certain things, well it really was not such crap after all. I mean what difference did it really make if he could remember a geometric axiom or identify the parts of speech? He had everything else in life already.

We agreed to meet in the park which was about two blocks from school. He would pick me up there with his car and then we'd go to his house. He had his own little living quarters in the basement where he had all of the amenities-- a tv, vcr, weight room, pool table, and his own bedroom. There even was a little kitchenette in which he had his own little bar and sink and a miniature refrigerator. When I saw it the first time I was so jealous. It was like living 24/7 in a hotel suite. I wondered if he received room service as well.

I was waiting by a tree in the park when he peeled in with his BMW. He was wearing sunglasses. I leaned over to pick up my backpack and headed for the passenger side of the car. When I reached for the handle I heard a click. He had pressed a button to release the power locks. This car was far different than our family station wagon. My mom drove a Chevrolet Caprice Classic. It was like eight years old and starting to rust out on the sides. I tossed my backpack in the back seat and climbed in to the leather upholstered passenger seat. Brett glanced over to me, "Hey." I smiled back at him and nodded.

When we got down the road a ways I looked over at him. It was almost breathtaking to be riding in his car with him. Never in a million years would I have thought I'd find myself in this position. He sat comfortably in his seat, partially reclined with his legs spread apart. He was one of those "cool" drivers who looked as if he was born to sit behind the wheel. I think this epitomized everything I loved about him. He always seemed to be in control.

"So I turned in those assignments yesterday. Litz was really surprised," he laughed.

"Yeah. I bet he was surprised. But you know what? Coach McDonald wanted me to talk to Litzenfowler to see if he would cut you some slack. I'm sort of afraid to do that though, cause then he will figure out I've been helping you. I don't want him to throw out your assignments because he thinks you are cheating."

"Oh yeah. Good thinking. I think you outta just chill and not even say anything to Litz just yet."

"But then there is something else," I said. "After Mr. Litz grades your assignments he is going to think that you understand all of this stuff. What if he starts calling on you in class? Then what will we do?"

"Hmmm...well I guess we are just gonna need to make sure I know the shit. He don't like me at all anyways, and I don't like him. He would do anything to embarrass me."

"He doesn't like you," I corrected.

"Whatever."

We were approaching his subdivision. I looked around at the houses. A couple of years ago I had mowed lawns during the summer for a family in this same division. It was the only time I'd ever been in this neighborhood. I never realized that Brett Willson lived here on the same block. He pulled the car into his long driveway and pressed the garage remote above his head. The car glided into the garage and he pressed the door release button again. I was amazed by the wealth surrounding me but just kept my mouth shut.

When we walked in the door from the garage we entered a hallway. There was a closet with Venetian doors that was obviously used for coats and boots. I stopped, thinking I'd have to remove my shoes. He stopped me, "Don't worry about that shit. We are just goin right downstairs. Hey, you want a pop or something?"

"Umm, nah...well, okay, if you are gonna have one."

"All right," he said, and stepped into the kitchen. He returned with two Mountain Dews, handing me one. "This way," he pointed. He opened a door in the hallway that led to a staircase. I followed him downstairs. "So tell me something. If a noun is a person, place or thing and a pronoun takes the place of a noun, then when I say I am a 'jock', is 'jock' a pronoun?"

I laughed, and he just stared at me, puzzled. "Ugh, no. 'Jock' is a noun also. Here, I will show you a list of all of the pronouns. They are just like generic words: he, she, it, etcetera." I pulled my grammar textbook from my bag and opened it to the appropriate section.

"So I gotta memorize this shit?" he looked at me questioningly.

"Well no, not really," I said. "I mean I doubt you will ever have to list every pronoun in the English language, but you should be able to identify what they are. Its like this, if I say to you, 'You are a jock', 'you' is the pronoun, but 'jock' is a noun. Do you get it?"

"No not really. How do you tell the difference?"

Man, this was going to be harder than I thought. "Nouns are specific and more descriptive. A pronoun is just generic. The only thing specific about them is that they can be masculine or feminine."

"Feminine pronouns? Ha! Now that is my kinda grammar."

I laughed. "I mean like 'she, her, she's'...those are feminine pronouns. Pronouns just make communication easier. If I am talking about myself, I do not want to keep repeating my full name every time so I say 'I' or 'me'. Do you get it?"

"I just think this is so stupid. Who cares?!" He was aggravated. "Litz is such a fag! Why don't he just pass me and then he will be rid of me finally?! I don't think I'm ever gonna learn this shit good enough to pass his class."

This time I did not correct his poor grammar. "I don't know, Brett. If it were me, I would pass you."

He smiled. "You know you should just tell McDonald to fuck off. He can't force you to tutor me, ya know. Why would a smart guy like you even waste your time trying to teach someone who is too dumb to learn?"

By this comment I was truly taken aback. "Hey, you aren't dumb! Don't you think that it takes a lot of brains to figure out all of the right plays in football? I mean when I watch the games half the time I don't even know what is goin on. And as for me helping you, I like to do it. Plus the coach told me if I did not cooperate he would make it 'open season' for me with all the jocks."

"Well don't worry about that, guy. No one is gonna hurt you as long as you are my friend. If anyone gives you shit, just let me know."

"That's funny," I smiled. "My own private bodyguard."

"Yeah, you help me and I'll help you." He reached over and shoved me. I think it was supposed to be like some sort of macho expression of affection but it took me by surprise and I fell against the counter. He laughed and sat down on the counter top next to me. "So you wanna see the rest of my place?"

I was really starting to like this guy. It was just so unreal to me. I knew it was all wishful thinking, but it was almost like he was actually becoming a friend of mine. I knew that if it were not for the academic stuff, he would not ever have anything to do with me. But it was such a warm feeling to pretend that he really was my friend. And now he wanted to show me his room. There were pictures of supermodels on his walls, and above the bed was a huge poster of Catherine Bach wearing her famous "daisy dukes". The room also was cluttered with sports paraphernalia. He had pictures hanging of the teams he had been on...football and baseball. I looked closely at the baseball team, looking to find him amongst the crowd. I spotted him right away...God, Brett Willson in a baseball uniform!

"So what sports do you like?" Brett asked. "Have you ever played any?"

I laughed right out loud. "You have seen me in gym. Do you actually think I would play on a team?"

He shrugged. "Well not everyone who plays sports is a big jock like me, ya know? I mean there are some little guys who are even on the football team. Kickers usually are not big dudes at all."

"Well I honestly think I would do any team a disservice to even attempt to play." I looked him in the eye.

"Its okay. Stick to what you are good at. Just like you told me. Not everyone is the same, right?"

"Right," I nodded. "Well, you ready to try to tackle adjectives? (No pun intended)"

He looked at me oddly, not understanding what I meant by "pun". "Ugh, okay." So we sat down on the bed together and I reopened the textbook.

"Okay, an adjective is a word that modifies a noun or pronoun." "Modifies?" he asked.

Oh geesh!!! How did I get myself into this?!

Chapter 3

"Mom, can I spend the night at Joey's house on Saturday?" She was in the laundry room and I stood blocking the doorway.

"Ugh, yeah. I don't see why not? So what's goin on at Joey's? He having a party?"

"Yeah, right! Who would come? No, we just are gonna work on our science project together and then we are gonna go see a horror flick. Have you ever heard of the movie Halloween? It came out a couple years ago, and the theatre is replaying it 'cause of it being Halloween next week"

"Yeah, that's the one with Jamie Lee Curtis, right?" I nodded. "You think she is hot looking?"

"Mom! Like I'd discuss that with you."

She laughed. "Oh okay. Do you need me to pick you up Saturday?"

"Actually, no. My friend Brett and I are gonna study together again at his house. Then he can just drive me home. He has his own car and everything."

"Oh well good. Maybe I will go to bingo or something. Better yet, I can get my own house cleaned, and maybe I will repaint the bedroom like I've been wanting to do for so long. I don't have any houses to do this weekend. You just go and have a good time."

"Okay, thanks." I turned to walk away. As an afterthought I added, "You should meet Brett sometime, he's really cool."

"Sure, I'd love to." I went back up to my room.

Oh my god! I was gonna be spending all day Saturday at Brett's house. I told my mom that we were going to be studying, but in reality we were going to watch World Wide Sports together. If anyone else on the entire planet had asked me to come over and watch some dumb sports show with him, I'd have blown it off in a heartbeat. But Brett! I could not even believe that he wanted to spend time with me. No studying, no tutoring. He just asked me over to hang with him.

I could not believe what was transpiring. It was amazing to see that Brett was actually starting to understand the things I was teaching him. And Litz was even surprised himself when he called on Brett in class, and Brett answered his question correctly. But I shouldn't get too excited yet because we had not had a test in that class since I started working with Brett. Everything was going to depend upon how well he did when he was tested. Plus Brett's practice schedule did not help. We were having to meet later in the evening because now they were having practice every day right after school. So we only

ended up having about an hour tops to study each night, and some nights we did not meet at all.

I still had not mentioned anything about Brett to Joey, Elaine, or Carly. They would have freaked if I told them that I was becoming friends with this jock guy. Christ, Carly would probably disown me as her friend entirely. The four of us still ate lunch together every day at school, and Brett and I did not socialize together at all during school hours. If we saw each other in the hall or something, he would just nod towards me, but we never spoke. In English class we were very careful to keep up the facade, not wanting Litz to find out about the tutoring.

I lay down on my bed and reached for my book on the stand. I was reading *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. It was this sort of cheesy story about two groups of high schoolers who were engaged in a bitter rivalry. These two cliques reminded me of the jocks and the burnouts in our school. The central characters in the book would have more closely resembled the burnouts in our school. The book and its sequel, *That Was Then This Is Now*, were eventually made into movies. I was just starting to get into the story when I heard the phone ringing. Then I heard my mom calling for me, saying I had a call. I picked up the phone in my bedroom and waited for her to hang up the other line.

"Hello?"

"Hey Jeff." It was Brett. My heart started pounding. "You know how you are gonna come over on Saturday to watch WWS with me? Well, how 'bout you just come over Friday night after school instead? We can go see a movie or something and then you can spend the night."

I instantly thought about Joey and my plans with him. I had promised him we would complete our science project. Oh my god! What do I do? I hesitated.

"Unless you already have other plans or something-- "

"No!...I mean I don't have any plans. That would be cool. So do you want to just pick me up at the usual place, at the park?"

"Sure...make it at five o'clock. I'll be done with practice then. So I'll see you tomorrow then, sport?"

"Yeah! See you then."

My heart was pounding so fast in my chest I thought it would beat right through my ribcage. I had to call Joey and cancel. What would I tell him? I know! I'll say my mom wouldn't give me permission because she needs my help repainting her bedroom. Then my mom will think I'm with Joey and Joey will think I'm with my mom. Perfect!

"Hey Joey. I'm sorry man, but I can't come over tomorrow night..."

* * * * *

We were only a few weeks into our freshman experience, Joey and I. We had teamed up to do a science project together for our physical science class. The options that we had were to either prepare and present a detailed science project or to turn in a completed term paper at some point during the marking period. Since Joey and I were such good friends, we were the logical choice as each other's partner and opted for the classroom presentation.

We had tossed around some ideas for projects and finally decided to do a presentation on magnetic gravitation. Joey was truly the mastermind behind this project as my talents were more in the area of English and literature; whereas, he was the math/science whiz. It really was no big deal that we get together to work out our project right away as we had four more weeks remaining before the end of the first marking period, but still if Joey found out that I ditched him and then lied to him in order to hang with some dumb jock, the damages would be irreparable.

I also knew that this weekend would be the very last Friday night that Brett would be available to do anything. His first football game was the following Friday and that began the season officially. Frankly I was shocked that he had proposed to spend the evening with me instead of his girlfriend, Amanda Myers. Literally everyone in school knew that Brett and Amanda were the hot couple. They had been going out for well over a year and most likely would be the homecoming king and queen at next weeks opening game.

When I got up that Friday morning I was practically pissing myself as I knew it would be the longest day of school ever! And then when I finally did make it through the day I'd have to wait another two hours to finally be with Brett. But as I got my books and stuff together I packed my clothes and toothbrush in my backpack because I was not coming home after school. I'd just hang for a couple hours at the park and wait for Brett. I could just sit there under my tree and finish *The Outsiders*.

I would have ridden my bike to school but then what would I do with it when Brett came to pick me up? So instead I walked. I lived less than a mile from school, and the weather was still good. We did not get snow in our northern Michigan town until at least November. Sometimes when we faced milder winters, snow did not fall until right before Christmas. When the snow started to fly, however, we got dumped on big time. Some years we had snow banks that were almost as high as the eaves on the houses.

This time of year, Fall, was by far the prettiest season where I lived. In mid-October the leaves start to turn colors, and a drive through the country can be breathtaking. Many years of my childhood we would vacation in the Upper Peninsula where there was nothing but countryside. There are numerous state parks with waterfalls and hiking

trails...it is exhilarating to say the least. On one particular occasion my parents took us to Taquamenon Falls in the U.P. I kept a photo album and remember to this day standing on a bridge that overlooked the falls with my older brother. I was about five and he was eight. My mom snapped our picture which served as an eternal trigger for this memory, even though I remember little else of the entire experience.

My home town was a little overgrown village called Boyne City. At the time that I was growing up there, we had a population of about three thousand. Our high school produced graduating classes of about 80 to 120 students. The town itself was located right on beautiful Lake Charlevoix. This particular lake was a magnet for tourists in the summer as well as ice fishermen in the winter. Once it froze, people would come from all over to place their shanties on the lake. It was like a village on ice. The most prized catch for the fishermen were smelt. In the springtime smelt would "run" up the river in huge masses to the place where they spawned. It was at this time that scads of people would seek out the little creeks and streams that fed into the lake and would lay in wait for the smelt. When they started running en masse, the "dippers" would flood into the stream and net the fish alive. Then they'd stay up all night cleaning the nasty, slimy critters. Wintertime smelting was far different. These fish that had made it to the lake finally grew to be much bigger than those running in the stream at springtime. The smelt caught by the ice fishermen were around six to ten inches long. They were caught individually with a hook and line. Each shanty had a hole in the dead center...and through this hole they would drill into the ice to create an entry for their fishing lines. These villages of shanties (makeshift huts) came to be known as "Smeltania, City on Ice."

Boyne City's other claim to fame was our annual "Mushroom Festival" which took place every spring just prior to Mother's Day. Wild mushrooms grew everywhere in the woods around our town. These mushrooms were morels. Again this was an excuse for tourists to flood into our town as they went on their "hunting" expeditions for the elusive morel. There were contests and a parade, and there was a big carnival in the big park downtown. My parents were both great mushroom seekers, as were most of the locals who knew the woods and country so well.

Skiing was another big draw for tourists. Boyne City sat just four miles west of the biggest ski resort in the Midwest, Boyne USA. When I was a kid we referred to this resort as "the mountain". In fact, my brother worked there for a couple of years in high school, washing dishes and bussing tables in one of their restaurants.

My fondest childhood memories of Boyne were in the summer, though. Along the banks of Lake Charlevoix were several access points for swimmers, boaters, and fishermen. As the years passed much of this property became privatized and sold to developers who put big condominium complexes in place, blocking both the view and access for local residents. There were also several parks and campsites. One such park, Whittings, was a county-maintained campsite that was available free of charge for swimmers and picnickers. There was a small campsite fee for those who wanted to pitch a tent or park a camper. Almost every summer we would go camping at Whittings for several weeks.

Even when we weren't camped at the park, my brother and I practically lived there, swimming from sunrise to sunset.

The days of summer in northern Michigan are very warm and long. Sunrise is around 6:00am and sunset isn't until after 10:00pm. By contrast the winter days were short and cold. In the dead of winter we saw darkness before 5:00pm. As a child I did not notice the shortness of the days, and always looked forward to first snowfall. Perhaps it was because I knew that it meant Santa would be coming soon. After I got older, the short and bleak winter days were depressing and tiresome to me. The snow no longer was appealing at all but was burdensome and annoying.

Yes, Boyne was a vacationer's paradise, offering something for everyone during all four seasons of the year. But there was one particular thing that Boyne never offered: tolerance. During my entire childhood experience I never once met a single gay or lesbian person. Never was it talked about in our schools or newspapers or local television media. Gay people simply did not exist in northern Michigan, at least as far as I could tell.

Even network television did not portray homosexuality during my childhood or teen years. The television shows that I grew up with were The Hardy Boys, Happy Days, Family Ties, and McGuyver. I never thought for a single second that I myself was gay. Even with my pubescent fantasies of Brett and the other high school jocks, I never made that connection. I had crushes on Shaun Cassidy and Michael J. Fox, but considered them to be "admiration" rather than anything sexual. My ultimate hero of the box office was Luke Skywalker! I probably saw Star Wars seventeen times at our local theatre.

I grew up knowing I would eventually meet the right girl, get married, settle down. It scared me sometimes because I did not think I had it within me to be a good husband and father. I swore to myself over and over that I would do everything the exact opposite of how my own father had done. Being fourteen and not yet having a girlfriend was really no concern to anyone who knew me. Everyone knew that I was shy and passive. Plus I surrounded myself with females, including Carly and Elaine.

The only exposure that I had to gay people were the occasional remarks of "faggot" or "queer" that I heard in school. And these remarks were the ultimate put-down that could ever be leveled at someone. Being gay was not an option. It never once occurred to me, not even when my hands and belly were coated with sticky goo after masturbating to mental images of Brett in his speedo. Even as my heart raced with excitement, thinking of the prospects of a weekend alone with him, it did not enter my mind that I wanted to do anything sexual. I just wanted to be near him. I wanted to be noticed by him and to smell him and hear him and touch him? But I did not understand the how's and whys.

So I headed off on foot to school that day knowing that I'd have to sit through a long boring day, seeing Brett in English and gym and not being able to even speak to him. I knew I'd have to lie my way through lunch, continuing to pretend to my three trusted

friends that I was condemned to a weekend of painting and other manual labor. I knew that I would hardly be able to contain myself when that final bell of the day peeled and released us from our daily prison...and that I would then have to wait yet another two hours until my football quarterback, bodyguard hero finally showed up-my prince-- to take me away in his chariot (BMW) for a full day and a half alone together.

Oh my god! How could I wait that long?!

* * * * *

I made it through the day eventually, appeasing Joey by swearing to him that we would meet the following Thursday night to do our science project. At lunch he gave me all of the details about the magnetic levitation, rambling on and on with a whole bunch of scientific crap that I did not even begin to comprehend. Carly kept grossing us out during lunch by filling her mouth up with that pseudo-pizza that the cafeteria served, and then opening her jaw wide to expose us to a bunch of nasty chewed-up mush. Elaine was revolted, saying "That's real mature, love." I just laughed. I couldn't help but laugh. I wanted to laugh and sing and shout... I was so giddy all day long. Even in gym class I did not have my normal knot in the stomach that I generally experienced, fearing I'd be chosen last for a team sport or some other embarrassing twist. Instead, I was actually looking forward to gym! It was during gym that I got to see him. I knew I could not act like I was glad to see him. I knew I could not even say a single word to him, but just being there in his presence was enough.

I wondered if Brett was going to want me to come to his first football game. It really did not matter if he invited me or not because practically the entire town showed up for homecoming. Every year at homecoming they made this big float and had a parade. The float depicted an effigy of the opposing team, and it was taken to a big open field where they torched it and everyone cheered, acting like a bunch of complete morons.

But today it was I who was being the moron. I couldn't help it; I was on cloud nine. And when my sixth hour geography class started I knew it was going to be the longest, most boring 45 minutes of my life. Mr. Phaegan stood up there in front of the class and droned on and on about the economy, topography, and ethnicity of some South American country for what seemed like decades. I think the country was Brazil but it could have been Timbuktu for all I knew. For once I was not attentive in class. My mind was elsewhere.

Finally that bell rang and I was free. I made it for the hall. Just as I rounded the corner of the first corridor, I ran smack-dab, face-to-face with him: Brett. We collided. He really was unfazed, being of a much greater stature than I, but I landed flat on my butt. He

stopped and looked down at me... "Oh, I'm sorry, Sport! Are you all right?" He reached his hand down to me to help me up.

I was fine. I was more than fine... I was wonderful. He just called me our private name in public! I looked him in the eye. "Umm...no, it's my fault. I'm sorry!"

He leaned in towards me and whispered, "See you in a couple hours, okay guy?" I nodded and rushed off, almost again colliding with another student as I turned to catch a final glimpse of him. He was smiling broadly, laughing.

When I got to the park it was about 50 degrees and I was glad I was wearing my parka. In Michigan it is like you have to have three entirely different sets of clothing for the seasons. In the fall and spring you need light jackets and long-sleeved shirts; summer is shorts and tanks, and winter is wool underwear and a freakin snowsuit! I sat under my big oak tree, leaning against it and reached for my backpack, removing my novel. I was swept away by the story of the greasers and the soc's. The soc's were the jocks...they called them soc's because they were the wealthier kids...socialites. It made me think of Brett and me. He was wealthy, and I was a welfare case... one more reason I could not even believe he gave me the time of day.

But I did not get too far into my story when my eyes became heavy and I put the book down. I leaned my head back against the trunk of the tree and closed my eyes, removing my glasses. I did not intend to doze off, but just to relax. I think I had not slept well the previous night because I was too excited. But doze off I did though, drifting into a dream world.

Surrounding me were confusing images, Litzenfowler was leaning over me, rambling on and on about participles, infinitives, and gerunds. He was saying, "Do you understand?" It was so hazy, but I saw a figure behind him, getting closer. It was a man, very large, towering over Mr. Litzenfowler, laughing. McDonald. He was mimicking my English teacher, mocking him. Every sentence that Litz said, the coach would repeat in a demeaning, overly effeminate, falsetto voice.

"What a fuckin fruit! You goddamned faggot!" Coach McDonald was degrading him right in front of me. "You pansy-assed stuffed shirt, why don't you go find some cock to suck?!" I heard other voices. They were laughing. Others were around us, gathered around in a circle pointing and laughing. Mr. Litzenfowler was there no longer. They were pointing and laughing at me, and Coach McDonald was venting his rage and fiery insults at me. I lay there cowering, unable to respond.

I fought to find my voice. I was trying to respond, to deny the accusations. The crowd kept laughing. I saw so many familiar faces amongst the people. My father was there. Joey. My other teachers. Overwhelming fear and panic engulfed me as I started to cry, covering my face...finally I screamed.

"--Hey Jeff!! Wake up!!...it's all right. You're havin a nightmare."

I was startled into consciousness and opened my eyes to see Brett, staring me in the face. He was crouched down in front of me with his hands on my shoulders. "Are you all right? What were you dreaming about? You were really screaming."

"Oh...um, yeah I'm okay. I don't remember. It's confusing. Sorry bout that."

"It's all right sport. Do you always dream like that?"

"Nah. I don't know why. It's okay though. So how long you been here?"

"Aw I jus' got here. You ready to cruise?" He looked over towards his parked car.

I smiled. "Yeah, sure." I got to my feet and grabbed my bag. We headed for the Beamer.

"So how was practice?"

"Oh dude, I'm so psyched about our first game next week. We're gonna kick some Charlevoix ass, I know it. Are you comin to the game next Friday?"

"Wild horses couldn't keep me away!"

"Huh?" Apparently he'd never heard the expression.

"I mean yeah. Sure, I'll be there. So what are we gonna do tonight...I mean other than the movie?"

"Oh sport, I wanna take you for a little ride? You cool with it? I have somewhere I want to show you."

"I'm cool with just about anything" so long as it involved being with my idol and hero...YOU

He started the car and the radio blasted. He was playing a cassette of REO Speedwagon. I leaned back in the seat and he peeled out of the park. Fuck! How can this be happening? Am I really here in this sports car with Brett Wilson? Maybe I should pinch myself.

How can I show you

I take back what I told you.

'Cause something happens when I hold you,

And that makes everything all right.

And oh... oh... I need you tonight.

I just need you tonight.

I wrote all I can write.

I just need you tonight.

Secrets I keep here. Buried so very deep here. If only somehow you could sleep here, you'd make everything all right.

Brett had the music cranked and we were cruising down 131, headed south. I didn't know where he was taking me and honestly did not care. All I cared about was that we were together. I felt so awkward though, sitting in his car next to him. I did not know what to say. I listened to the words of the songs. 'Cause something happens when I hold you...and that makes everything all right. Could it be possible that Brett had played this tape because he had these feelings about me. No! No it was not possible at all. How could a super-popular, athletic, attractive, talented star quarterback even give two shits about a geek like me? And it made me wonder, why are we here together now? Why on this last Friday night that he has free would he elect to spend it with me instead of Amanda Myers or some of his buds?

So I asked him. "Hey Brett," I had to raise my voice to be heard over the stereo. He glanced over at me while driving. "How come you are not with Amanda tonight? I mean, she is your girlfriend, right?" It was odd that we had been tutoring together for almost two weeks and her name had never been mentioned.

"Oh, Amanda. No, she's not my girlfriend." He laughed. "I know most people think that, and it's cool. We have gone out a few times, but I ain't never asked her to go with me or nothing."

"Wow," I responded, "like everyone thinks that you two are a couple. A serious couple. Even I thought that. How come you are not serious about her? She is so pretty."

He laughed again, this time more heartily. "Well obviously you don't know Mandy that good. She is a total space case. I'm serious. Have you ever tried to have a conversation with her?"

This really did surprise me. I would have never thought that a jock like Brett would give a rat's ass about how intellectual a potential girlfriend might be. I thought it would be more like a sexual conquest to him. As long as she laid herself flat and spread those legs for him, why would he give a shit what was between her ears? If we were being totally honest about the whole situation, Brett could have laid just about any chick in that school. He was a god to most people. That was probably the reality with Amanda, come to think of it. He never asked her to be his girlfriend, but just wanted her to be available to get his rocks off.

"Have you fucked her?" I was shocked now by my own audacity at verbalizing my question. Instantly I wanted to take it back.

He laughed again really loud. "Seems funny to hear you using words like that, sport." I looked down at my lap, embarrassed by my own bluntness. "But to answer your question, yeah we did it a couple times. And you wanna know something that I have never told another soul? You gotta promise not to repeat this to anyone, okay?"

I nodded, "I promise, sure Brett".

"She is the only girl I ever fucked."

My mouth dropped open. "No way."

He nodded. "Yup. Why? Did you think I was some kinda slut or something?"

"Well no," I corrected, "not at all. I just thought you could get like any girl on the planet that you would want, and with that being the case, why wouldn't you just go for it?"

He was beaming now. "I think you are blowin smoke up my ass, sport. I know that I'm not all that. But hey, what about you? Do you have a girlfriend? Is that one chick you eat lunch with every day--that one with the punked hair--is she your girlfriend?"

He was referring to Carly. It was now my turn to laugh. "Oh my god! NO!! Carly and I have been friends for like...well, forever. She and I have hung together since fourth grade. I don't have a girlfriend."

"Well who do you like? Who do you think is really hot? There must be someone."

My face was getting red. I could feel it. I also knew he was looking over at me but I could not look up at him. "There might be," I said.

"Come on!" he gently slugged my puny arm with his jock fist. "Give it up. Who is she? I told you my secret about Mandy. Now you tell me who you like."

I could not respond. I just gulped, my face feeling like it was about to ignite from the intense heat in my cheeks.

He just laughed. "Oh all right. I won't force you to tell me. But I'll get it outta you eventually."

We had driven for about twenty minutes by this time and he was turning off the highway. I knew where it was that we were headed, for I'd been here a few times already. We were halfway between the tiny village of Boyne Falls and the even tinier village of Alba. We were at the scenic turnout known as

"Dead Man's Hill".

Dead Man's Hill was a beautiful scenic overlook where you could see an entire valley of trees. At one time in northern Michigan, the biggest industry in existence was logging. Loggers were the first to nickname this valley "Dead Man's Hill" because of the treachery involved in getting the timber up the steep slopes of the hills in the valley. There was an accident in 1910 in which a logger was killed. He was referred to as "Big Sam", and every since, everyone called the valley "Dead Man's Hill". It was a nickname that just stuck.

"Have you ever been here, sport?"

"Oh yeah, it is so pretty here. Especially this time of year."

"Yeah, this is like one of my favorite spots in this area. I love how you can see all of the colors this time of year. Look at it. It just seems to go on forever. Let's get out."

We exited the car and casually walked down towards the entryway of the trails. A wooden placard was posted which introduced tourists to the outlook and offered a brief history of the park. There was also a map which showed the various trails leading down into the valley.

"You wanna walk one of the trails for a bit?" Brett asked.

"Sure," I nodded.

We headed down the trail together, I following behind Brett. He was wearing straight leg Levi jeans and a polo shirt. He had a windbreaker sports jacket over his polo and was sporting low-rise sneaks. No matter what he wore he always looked so ... masculine, preppy. But I was looking at him from behind, noticing his broad shoulders and narrow waist. I studied his masculine and confident stride. Even the way he walked exuded confidence.

As we descended the hill we walked through a patch of thick trees and then eventually came to a clearing. There were big rocks in the clearing off the trail about twenty feet. Brett headed for one of the rocks, and I followed. He leaned back and in one smooth movement positioned himself so he was sitting on top of the huge boulder. I approached him and he slid over. Then I climbed up, not as easily, to sit next to him.

"Brett, can I ask you a question?"

He looked over at me, and all I could see was warmth in his eyes. "Sure, you can ask me anything. No, wait...anything but questions about who I've fucked." He laughed.

I smiled at him and then got more serious. "Why do you even want to be my friend? I mean what is it that would compel you to spend this evening with me and bring me here

to this park when you could be out partying with your football buds or banging some cheerleader chick? I don't understand. I've never had any jock who was willing to be my friend like you."

He looked at me seriously, as if he was absorbing what I'd just said. " Well, I hope you don't think I'm so shallow that I only want 'jocks' and 'cheerleaders' as my friends. But even more than that, I really do like you. Honestly. I can't believe how much you have helped me in just these past two weeks. For all of these years I have tried to learn this stuff and have thought I was so fuckin stupid for just not getting it, and then finally you come along and teach it to me in a matter of days.

"And I don't wanna sound weird to you or anything when I say this, but there is something else too. You just make me happy when I'm around you. You are so funny. I laugh all the time, even when you are gone and I'm rememberin what you said. I laugh. You are cute."

I gulped. Actually, I think I almost choked.

"I don't mean that in a faggy way. Don't get me wrong."

"Umm...ohh...no, I know." How could I respond to this? "So basically you are saying that you like me?"

"Yeah, sport. I like you. Is that so hard to believe?"

"Well, actually it is," I laughed, "But I like you too, Brett. And you know what? For all these years we have known each other, all I ever thought is that you were this big dumb jock. But you are so cool. You are so cool!" I smiled at him broadly.

He reached around me and pulled me into him with his arm, and I rested against his body. I felt the strength of his grip as he squeezed my tiny body. "We're buds," he said.

I looked over at his face and smiled. "Yeah...buds."

We sat there together and watched the sunset over the trees before walking back to the car.

Chapter 4

I get so scared at horror movies. Oh my god, its embarrassing. Yet it is so odd, even though they frighten the b'jesus out of me, I love going to them. The movie Halloween was really groundbreaking in its genre. I had seen the silly Godzilla movies and Night of the Living Dead, even the Exorcist. But Halloween was the first "slasher" movie to make it big. Of course thereafter we saw the making of Friday the Thirteenth, Nightmare On Elm Street, and a host of other similar copy-cats.

So when Brett and I walked into that dark theatre I was prepared for a terrifying experience. Though it honestly would not have mattered if we had been going to Mary Poppins as far as I was concerned. All that mattered is that we were hanging together. We had loaded up on JuJuBees, Goobers, popcorn, and pop; plus Brett had gulped down a hotdog, as he was famished after football practice and then no supper. He said we could get a pizza after the flick.

Brett paid for everything, which made me feel like such a schmuck. He said to consider it a payback for the tutoring I'd given him. I reminded him about my part of the bargain--the "A" in gym--and he brushed it off. He also informed me that he had a "surprise" for me this weekend, which would be the real payback. I just looked at him, shocked, and shook my head.

Our town is very small, as I stated previously, and there were plenty of familiar faces when we walked in. I started to get worried that someone might recognize me and say something to Joey about seeing me. Then he would be so pissed at me for lying to him and blowing him off, but I quickly dismissed my fears remembering that literally nobody ever talked to Joey.

I was also pleasantly surprised that Brett was unconcerned about being seen with me. Our friendship was so secret and guarded in school that I wondered why he was so nonchalant in a public place like this. Maybe all of this time that I had been worried about him being embarrassed by me was a misinterpretation on my part entirely. Perhaps he was just trying not to blow our cover about the tutoring so that Litz didn't find out.

We did sit way in the back, however. Actually both Brett and I preferred the back of the theatre over sitting right up close to the screen. I liked it because I could get a full view of the screen and the sound seemed to be better. I think perhaps Brett was used to taking girls to the back row for other reasons.

I crouched in my seat once the movie started, stuffing my mouth with popcorn. I had removed my parka, and Brett was kickin back with his feet propped on the seat in front of him. As we got into the film and Michael Myers started slashing people, coming back to life, and slashing more people, I kept covering my eyes right at the critical blood-gushing moments. It was during one of these such displays that Brett happened to glance over at me and burst into laughter. He leaned in and whispered to me, "Is this too scary?" I shook my head.

"No, I just don't like the gore."

I felt his arm around me, pulling me into him again. It was like before, when we were sitting on the rock. I just lay there, melting into him, smelling his cologne. I could feel the strength of his arm around me and I realized that never before had I felt so protected and safe. We watched the rest of the movie that way.

When it was over and the credits started rolling, the lights gradually came back up as the eerie music flooded the theatre. I quickly grabbed my parka and placed it over my lap, pulling out of Brett's arm. I did not want him to see that my dick was feeling a little more towards him than just brotherly love. I kept myself covered until we made it outside and the feelings had subsided.

I chattered incessantly once in the car about the movie, reliving each chilling episode of terror. Brett laughed at my recounting, seeming unfazed, as usual. He said it was cool and we drove out to his house. I was shivering when we first got in the car because the temperature had dramatically dropped. He blasted me with heat from his car's heater. I wished the good ole Caprice heated up that quickly.

"So have you started driver's training yet, sport?" I wondered if he was again reading my mind, being that I was thinking of his car.

"No, next year. I don't get to take driver's ed until I'm fifteen. I might be able to take it next semester after my birthday though"

"Oh, well that's cool. You gonna get a car?"

I laughed. "Yeah right. My parents own an eight year old station wagon. I am gonna try to get a job though to start saving money."

"Why don't you start tutoring for money?" he offered.

"Maybe," I responded. "But my tutoring with you has not seemed like a job. It actually has been fun. If only I could get you to understand verbals." We both laughed.

"You mean verbs? I know what verbs are...you taught me, remember? Action words."

"Action or being words," I corrected, "and, no, a verbal is not the same thing. It is a word that looks like a verb but is used as a different part of speech. Like 'running,' for example. If I say, 'Running is one of Brett's favorite sports,' I am using running as a noun, not a verb."

"Oh, well don't confuse me," he was grinning. "What about 'fucking'?"

I laughed. "Yeah, same thing applies. It is usually a verb but when you use it a certain way, as the subject of the sentence, it becomes a noun."

"Let's not talk about this English crap, okay? My brain can only take so much. What do you like on your pizza? We will order two larges when we get to the house."

"Everything but mushrooms." He made a face indicating that he concurred with my opinion. No mushrooms...yuck!

When we pulled into the garage, I became aware that Brett's parents were home. This would be the very first time that they were actually at the house while I was. We got out of the car, and as I grabbed my backpack from the backseat, I was a little bit nervous. What are they going to think of me? Brett was reaching for his own duffel bag and looked over at me, "Something wrong, sport?"

"Umm, oh no. Why?"

"You just look funny, like you are worried." I could hardly believe how he seemed to have this ability to read my feelings and thoughts like that. But I brushed it off, shrugging. We went inside and hung up our coats in the hall. "Come in here and I will introduce you to my parents," he said. "Mom...Dad, you in there?" He leaned into the living room.

I followed him in and his mother was sitting on the far edge of a large white sofa, one of those sectionals. A handsome, middle aged man--Brett's dad, I presumed-- sat in the corner of the room in a big comfortable recliner. They were watching 20/20 with Barbara Walters. Both looked up at us, the woman smiling. "Oh hi guys! You must be Jeff?" she said to me.

I smiled nervously and nodded to her. Brett's dad got up from his chair and walked towards me, extending his hand. "Nice to meet you, Jeff. I understand you have been helping Brett with his English. That is so nice of you; we appreciate it." His handshake was very firm. It made me feel like such a weakling.

"Oh... you're welcome, sir. It has been my pleasure, so far, and Brett is doing very well."

"Great! So what are you guys up to tonight? Did you go to your movie?"

Brett chimed in, "Yeah, we saw this horror flick, Halloween. I think it scared the crap out of Jeff." Brett laughed and I started to get red again. "Hopefully he doesn't have nightmares."

"You probably will be the one who has nightmares," I retorted, then realizing that I sounded like a complete idiot. He punched my arm again.

"Well we are gonna go downstairs. Is there pop in my fridge down there, Mom?"

"Yes, you guys should be all set. If you need anything, just holler." "All right. We are gonna order pizza. Can you let us know when it gets here?"

His mom responded affirmatively, and we headed down the stairs. I was surprised at how well my introduction to his parents had gone, and wondered what impression they actually got of me. There were such glaring contrasts of his parents' lifestyle to my own parents. They were sitting together in the evening watching television, being civil towards one another. Both of them were sober. They were affluent people, living in a home that seemed like a mansion to me. It was just part of their everyday life to them, however. And they both seemed so warm and welcoming. I doubted that if the situation were reversed and it was I who was introducing my father to Brett, there would be an introductory handshake or even a gesture of acknowledgement.

What was it like to be raised in this sort of environment? Brett never had to worry about money. He never had to go without anything he wanted. He had not just a car to drive, but a forty thousand dollar sports car. He had his own apartment, television, vcr, refrigerator, pool table--all of the best clothes. He was what I would have characterized as a "spoiled little rich boy", though he seemed anything but little to me. He seemed larger than life.

I followed him, unsure of what I should do next, how to make myself appear comfortable. He went into his bedroom and I just sort of lingered behind him, standing in the door. His back was to me and he called for me to come in. He was pulling his shirt over his head. I looked at the ground, for some silly reason feeling I should not be looking at him while he got undressed.

"Why don't you get comfortable?" he asked. He went over to the phone by his bed and picked up the receiver. He dialed the numbers on the rotary and then swung around, sitting on the edge of the bed, kicking his shoes off. I walked towards him and sat down on the far end of the bed. I felt so tiny compared to him. I looked over at him and then back to my lap. I saw my legs dangling off the bed, my toes not even connecting with the ground. He sat there with his legs sprawled in front of him, feet on the floor. I was a little boy compared to him! He was this big, powerful jock and I was a pathetic little wimp. I saw our reflection in the mirror on his dresser, and looked into his face. He was looking back at me in that reflection, even though we sat only four feet apart. He was looking at the same comparison, and I wondered if his assessment was at all like my own. I wondered if he saw what a man he was and what a boy I was compared to him.

He spoke into the receiver, ordering the pizza, but kept staring at my reflection. I looked down at my feet again, then back up into his eyes. He did not look away. I experienced that same awkward feeling that I had the day that Coach McDonald first spoke to me in his office. I felt unworthy to be looking into Brett's eyes. I felt so submissive.

When Brett finished the call, he stood up, now wearing only his jeans and socks. He walked confidently in front of me, over to his dresser. He pulled open a drawer and removed some sweats and a tank top. "Did you bring any comfortable clothes, sport?" I shook my head, remembering that I had opted not to pack pajamas. I did not want to look like a total loser to my jock hero. All I had in my backpack were my clothes for tomorrow and my textbooks. Brett pulled out a jersey from the opened drawer and threw

it to me. "This will work...but it might be a little big," he laughed, "I have another old pair of sweats I can get for you too. They were from a few years ago when I was a 'small'." I wondered just how many was a "few"; they probably were from when he was in the fifth grade.

He went out into the hall and got into a closet, finding the sweats in a box on the floor. I assumed it was a box of stuff he eventually planned to throw out or to give away to a resale shop. I thanked him but just continued to sit there. "Well aren't you gonna change?" he asked. He was already pulling off his jeans, balancing on one foot as he pulled the pants off from his opposite leg. He now stood there in front of me wearing only his boxers and socks, and he expected me to stand up and get naked! Yeah right!

He pulled his sweats on, seeming unconcerned or unaware of my trepidation. I looked up him, seeing his shoulders and bare chest. There was not a single hair on his defined pectorals, surprisingly. With his dark complexion, I'd have thought him to be extremely hairy. He grinned at me, probably wondering why I was staring at his chest, but he just stood there, not saying anything. He stepped closer to me, maintaining eye contact. Just seconds before I had been unable to look him in the eye, but now it was as if I could not free myself from his gaze. We looked at each other, saying nothing.

"Take your shirt off." It sounded less like an invitation this time and more like an order. I did not even hesitate to comply. I had to. I pulled the long sleeved polo over my head, exposing my small, undefined body. I too was smooth-chested, though I did not possess the definition like Brett. There was no clear line separating my pecs. Really I had no pecs. My chest was completely flat except for the two little brown nubs, my nips. My abdomen was not rippled with a six pack of muscles like Brett either. Mine was just completely flat, with a small indentation for my "innie" belly button.

Brett seemed to tower over me as I sat there on the edge of the bed, looking up at him. It felt as if our roles as teacher and student had reversed; he was now the one with the upper hand. I was frozen, a moment seeming an eternity, as we continued to see one another, understanding that the connection we felt was both significant and insignificant. Two teenage boys changing their clothes together, no big deal. Or was it something else? Was it one small boy obeying the hero that he worshipped, sitting there in his shadow, knowing he was far less than the man who stood before him? I did not move, but finally he did.

Brett grabbed his tank top off the dresser and pulled it over his head, breaking the connection of our stare. Then in kind, I pulled his over-sized jersey onto my small frame and stood up. The jersey hung down almost to my knees and I removed my trousers. I felt like I was wearing a dress, but I was glad that my briefs were covered. I quickly pulled on the cotton sweats. The moment was gone, and as instantly as it had occurred, it also vanished. Brett acted as if all was normal, smiling at me again, inviting me to come out into the main room of his living quarters.

Brett walked to the stereo and put on an album. It was Bruce Springsteen. The stereo was one of those where you could put a stack of albums on at one time. The one that was playing dropped down onto the turntable and the remaining albums balanced on a metal bar, impaled through the center, with another arm resting on top of the stack, holding them in place. I guess it was a primitive precursor to the cd changer. Brett sat on the floor, resting his back against the futon sofa. I walked over and sat next to him, silently. He had a photo album in his lap, and I scooted over to be right by his side. He opened the album in his lap and I looked over.

"These are all pictures of me growing up," he stated the obvious. I remembered him from when we were younger, seeing him then only as an acquaintance. He was so cute in the second and third grade, hamming it up for the camera. I looked carefully at each picture, many of Brett with his family. He had an older sister who was now away at college. There were photos of Disney World, the Grand Canyon, Washington, D.C., all places I had never been. He described each picture to me and we laughed together at the different expressions on his face. Some pictures required the telling of a story, and he would hurry through his descriptions, fearing that he was boring me. I was anything but bored though, mesmerized by his every word. I felt so warm inside sitting there with him, being exposed to his life in pictures.

Our pizza arrived, and Mrs. Willson brought it down to us. She commented on the photo album and leaned over Brett's shoulders to take in a picture of Brett in the eighth grade going down a waterslide at Busch Gardens. She laughed, seeing him screaming with his hands held high over his head as he rocketed down at apparent breakneck speed. She placed the pizza on the counter and left us alone, informing us that she was headed for bed.

"Who is that guy?" I asked, pointing to a picture of Brett with his arm around another kid who appeared to be about his age. They looked like they were about thirteen or fourteen years old. The other boy was no one that I recognized from our school.

"That is Terry. He is a friend of mine that I know from camp. Every year since sixth grade we have visited one another during the summer. He lives in Maine. Last year I went out there for a couple of weeks. God, it was so much fun. We always have a blast. He's my bud." I felt a surge of envy, not fully understanding why I felt threatened. Brett had a plethora of friends. He was the most popular guy in school, so why should I be surprised that he had a "bud" from camp? Nonetheless, I stared at the picture and at the way they had their arms around each others shoulders, Brett of course being the taller of the two, and they looked like more to me than just buds. Perhaps it was merely a transference of my own longings, a vicarious form of wishful thinking. I projected my admiration and hero-worship into the scene, thinking that this Terry was like me.

He moved on, not noticing my reaction. As he turned the page, he thrust the album into my lap and stood up, leaning over the back of the futon to grab the pizzas. There was a stack of paper plates on top and he tossed me one. He placed the pizza boxes behind us on the futon, opening both lids and we turned and each grabbed a slice of our own. I

moved the photo album to the other side of me on the floor and stretched my legs out in front of me. Brett was back in his position on the floor next to me, sitting crossed-legged.

Though I nibbled on my pizza triangle, Brett devoured his. He was on his third piece by the time my first was half gone. He laughed as he watched the way I ate. "God, it's no wonder you are so skinny. You eat like a frickin bird!" I just looked up at him, wide-eyed, grinning. He was done with his pizza already, so he just sat there, watching me. His gaze made me uneasy; I felt awkward eating after he had finished.

The Springsteen album had finished playing and now we were listening to REO. It was a different album than he'd played in the car earlier:

I can't fight this feeling any longer And yet I'm still afraid to let it flow
What started out as friendship, has grown stronger I only wish I had the strength to let it show

I tell myself that I can't hold out forever I said there is no reason for my fear
Cause I feel so secure when we're together You give my life direction You make everything so clear

The sound of the music seemed to sweep over me as I stared into Brett's eyes again. We were listening to the words and not hearing them, both at the same time. It was a feeling of total isolation unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. Brett and I were the only two people that then existed on the planet, and now staring into his eyes all that I saw or thought about was the security of being in his presence. I felt his hand on my thigh but continued to look at his face.

And even as I wander I'm keeping you in sight You're a candle in the window
On a cold, dark winter's night And I'm getting closer than I ever thought I might

He closed his eyes, and I closed mine. I felt his hand gently against my leg, moving slowly back and forth. I opened my eyes tentatively, feeling myself being drawn closer to him, moving my face toward his, he was leaning in to me. It felt like a magnet that was pulling me towards him, my lips almost connecting with his, but unable to go all of the way. His arm was around me now, clutching my shoulder and he was looking again in my eyes.

And I can't fight this feeling anymore I've forgotten what I started fighting for
It's time to bring this ship into the shore And throw away the oars, forever

Cause I can't fight this feeling anymore

His lips then pressed against my own, and I pressed my small hands against his chest, feeling myself being pulled into him. My eyes closed as I tasted him for the first time, feeling his embrace and being swept away by the music. He shifted me in his arms so that the arm with which he held me was resting against the back of the futon, as he touched my cheek gently with his free hand. He pulled his face away from mine slightly and

removed my glasses, placing them on the cushion behind us, then brushed his hand against the softness of my blonde hair. We kissed again.

My fantasies of Brett had aroused me for some time now, and I was all too familiar with the tightness I was feeling in my briefs, but this was so much more intense than any fantasy I'd had thus far. I was literally shaking as he pulled his lips from mine a second time. He gazed into my eyes, gripping me firmly around my shoulder, "Why are you trembling? Are you afraid?"

I nodded tentatively, then whispered "No", contradicting myself. It was hard to find my voice. "I have not done this. I mean...ummm... I don't know that I can do this."

He did not release me, nor did he kiss me again. He continued to look into my eyes. "Tell me you have not been feeling this too. Tell me you do not want me, and I will let you go." Tears were forming in my eyes. I felt one escape, trickling down my cheek. "I know what you are afraid of. I understand. But why does it matter what anyone thinks or what anyone calls you? You are the one who told me that the differences do not matter. Shouldn't it just be about how we feel about each other?"

"Are you--?" I tried to ask the question.

"A fag?" he finished for me. I nodded. "What do you think? Do I seem faggy to you?" I shook my head.

"Am I one?" I asked. "I don't know. Are you?"

I nodded. "I think so." He smiled so lovingly to me, again brushing my hair with his fingertips. The tears flowed in earnest then as I lay there in his arms. I cried and cried, acknowledging for the first time aloud how I felt about myself. I had made my confession to the one single person I'd have been most afraid to tell. Now he held me, touched me, comforted me.

We slept together, fully clothed, lying in each others arms. He kissed me many more times that night and always so gently. I awoke buried in the clutches of his embrace, sleeping curled inside of him, like two spoons that are placed together. I guess we were more than friends.

Chapter 5

I awoke that Saturday morning in Brett's arms, and was unsure if this were real or a dream. Had this person I had so often dreamt and fantasized about actually kissed me, not once but repeatedly? Had I confessed to this one, the object of my affection, my deepest secrets and greatest fears about who I actually was? Had he really cradled me in his arms and held me, caressing me ever so gently, and had I felt both his strength and tenderness simultaneously?

It was a mixture of terror and the sweetest bliss I'd ever known, lying there in the arms of this one I loved so deeply. I did not know where this was going to take me, what-- if anything-- would change at school, how Brett was going to now treat me, how my friends would react if they were to learn of my newly uncovered secret. And I wondered about my parents. Really, I did not give two shits about what my father thought of me. I already knew he'd all but disowned me long ago. Once he figured out that I had no interest in killing wild animals with guns, participating in team sports, or shooting pool at the lodge, he gave up on me. I was nothing but an embarrassment to him.

It was my mother that concerned me. She had endured such a difficult life already, having remained in a loveless marriage for so many years with my alcoholic father. Then she lost her firstborn child, from which she never fully recovered. She struggled coping with my older brother and his apathy, wanting so much for him yet seeing him accomplish so very little. There was also the devastating reality of my father's health problems, his tragic stroke and long, embittered recovery period, only to then have him return to his demon of alcoholism. And now I was going to thrust yet another painful blow to her that would fly right into the face of her religious convictions? How would she ever be able to handle it? How would she ever reconcile what she felt in her heart about the Word of God with the knowledge that her most beloved son was a raging homosexual?

I can't tell her! There is no way she can ever know that I am ... gay. I must spare my mother from this painful reality, and I must do so at any cost.

I lay there in Brett's arms thinking these thoughts and he began to stir. I felt his breath on my neck and I squirmed in his embrace, rolling onto my back. Looking over at his face, I saw his bedhead for the first time. I giggled.

He moaned. "Ugggh...what's so funny, sport?"

"You," I said. "You look like something the cat dragged in." I was quoting my grandma. It was a saying that she used to use all of the time. Brett moved his fingers down my body and dug them into the tender sides of my torso. At this I instantly bolted and let out a small fit of giggles.

"I'll give you something to laugh about!" he threatened. I continued to writhe under him while he kept on with his series of mini-tortures. His eyes had opened and he was now

leaning over me, smiling. He kissed me, as his tickling turned into caressing. I melted under him and reached around his shoulders to run my fingers through his locks of slate black hair.

Eventually Brett released me and rolled onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. I turned on my side and looked at him. The bed sheet was pulled up to his waist, and he lay there in his tank top. I placed my hand on his chest, feeling the firmness of his pecs. I was amazed as I just continued to look at his face, moving my gaze down his chin to my own small hand, then down further, watching him inhale and exhale, his diaphragm expanding and contracting. I slid my hand over his chest and onto his shoulder, moving down further so that I ran my fingertips across his exposed bicep. I looked at it, comparing the size to my own toothpick arm. How can this be? How can he even want me?

"You really think I'm cute?" I was not so much fishing for a compliment as I was trying to confirm the unbelievable statement he'd made to me the night before.

"You're adorable, Sport." He looked over at me and winked. "In some ways you remind me of my friend Terry. You know, the one I showed you last night in the picture. He is so smart-- like you. And he is little too. Terry always made me feel so...I don't even know how to say it...so worshipped?

It was like he sort of idolized me or something. And in a lot of ways I felt that way about him too."

"Did you kiss him? I mean, did you kiss him the way you kissed me last night ... and just now?"

"Yeah. He is the first boy I ever kissed. You are the second. But with him it was so different. When we did it the first time, I was so freaked. We had been at camp together for almost two full weeks, and before we had to leave to go back home, we wanted to just hang together. We took a walk down by the beach, just the two of us. Everything was cool and we were talking like we always did but then it was like all of a sudden time just seemed to stop and we were standing there looking into each others eyes. I felt all woozy and stuff, different than I'd ever felt with a girl. And I did not plan it or anything, but I just bent over and kissed him."

"Oh my god. What did he do?"

"He kissed me back," Brett laughed half-heartedly. "But it was then that I pulled away from him. I just got these thoughts in my head. What the fuck am I doing? I'm not some kinda faggot or something! And I turned around and ran back to our barracks. The next morning I left without even saying goodbye."

I was looking at Brett intently, listening to his recounting. He continued to lay there staring up at the ceiling as the images of his past swept through his memory. "And then what happened? Did you talk to him again after that?"

"Oh yeah. That was like four years ago when I kissed him for the first time. He wrote me a letter about a week after I got home. He begged me not to freak, not to be mad. He said it did not mean anything and that my friendship was more important to him than some kiss. He knew I was no faggot, so just don't worry about it.

"So our friendship continued, just like nothing had happened. I talked to him a couple of times that year on the phone, and I sent him some postcards. I don't do real good writing letters, you know." I smiled. "But then we both went back to camp together that next summer. This time we did more than just kiss though."

"You did? Like what?" my heart was racing, excited yet a little freaked myself by the thought of the physical intimacy being more than just a few passionate kisses. He looked over at me and slid his hand down between my legs.

"Like this," he said, squeezing me gently. I was instantly aroused.

I was also frightened. I froze. Brett moved his hand away. "Don't worry Sport. I am not gonna rape you or anything, geez. You know I would never hurt you, don't you?"

I nodded. "I'm sorry. I just have never done anything before. I mean I never have even kissed anyone. Not even a girl." He laughed at me and got the most amazingly loving look in his eyes.

"It doesn't matter. I just like to be with you. That's all I know. You make me happy; isn't that enough? Can't we just be happy with each other instead of worrying about doing what we are supposed to do?" I responded by gently kissing his bicep, laying my head down on the pillow next to his arm. "I suppose we should get up and get some breakfast, and then I get to give you the surprise I told you about."

"Oh, I thought the kisses were my surprise," I said sincerely.

"No, those were my surprise. They just happened, actually. Let's get up!" He hopped up out of bed and grabbed both of my wrists, pulling me off the mattress. "Want to take a shower now or after we eat?"

"Whichever," I shrugged. He scooped me into his arms and carried me into the bathroom.

My arms were clutching him around his neck as he turned sideways to get me through the bathroom door. He apologized about the "small, half-bath" that we had to put up with. "There is a big garden tub in the bathroom upstairs, but I think we better pass on that while my folks are home." I smiled, agreeing with him, and thought about what he would probably think if he saw the one small bathroom that our entire family shared in our house. He lowered my legs so that my feet were standing on the edge of the tub. I held onto his shoulders, the first time ever that I was taller than him. He looked up at me, grinning, and cupped my butt in his hands. He moved his lips towards mine, kissing me again for the ten thousandth time since the first the night before. I felt his fingers find the

waistband of my sweats. "Let's get these off of you, Sport." I was again trembling. "You always get so nervous, little guy. Don't worry. I will never hurt you."

I struggled to find my voice. "It's not that. It is just new, and plus, I don't want you to see me naked."

He cracked up laughing. "So do you want me to keep my eyes closed while we shower?" I laughed along with him, shaking my head. He pulled the sweats down my thighs. I balanced against his shoulders as I lifted each leg one at a time, and he removed the sweats along with my socks. "You look so cute in my jersey." He beamed at me. Our school colors were navy blue and red, and Brett's number was 24. The jersey really did make the most perfect nightshirt for me.

He grasped the bottom of the jersey, pulling it up over my face. I raised my arms, like a small child who was getting undressed by his mother. I felt like a small child right then, standing in front my mentor. It was ironic. We had first come together less than a month prior, with me being the one in charge. I had had all of the answers; I was the teacher and he the student. Now our roles had reversed and he was leading me into territory before which I had never gone. I stood there, naked but for my briefs, totally exposed to him.

He held onto my waist, steadying me as I still stood on my pedestal before him, and he moved his lips down my chin into the crook of my neck. I squirmed but was unable to go anywhere, held firmly in his grip. He continued downward and found my small brown nipples. He licked each one, biting them gently. I half-laughed, half-screamed with pain and pleasure.

My body had responded with goose pimples. His touch was electrifying. And my briefs had a bulge to prove it. He slid his fingers inside of their waistband and removed my last article of clothing. Then he peeled off all of his own.

We stepped into the shower as Brett adjusted the water. I stood there taking him in with my eyes, every beautiful inch of him. He handed me a bar of soap, which I promptly used to lather his chest. We kissed as I rubbed the soapy bar back and forth against his perfect masculinity. He turned me around, facing the wall now, and took the soap from me, lathering my back. His big hands rubbed my shoulders, down further to the small of my back. With soap in hand he then reached around me and lathered my chest. He pulled me into him, reaching down further on my body, plugging my belly button with his index finger. I wiggled a little within his grip, and he held tight. He went down further.

When he first touched me, I closed my eyes. His soapy hand cupped me under my private parts. He grabbed hold of me, sliding his hand slowly and gently up and down. I moaned, not believing what I was experiencing. He kissed my neck as he continued to touch me so intimately. I became so excited. Thoughts and images flashed in my mind as I kept my eyes tightly closed. I screamed one tiny yelp and erupted, so quickly. It happened within seconds. He laughed.

He continued to hold me and I turned around, now facing him. His own member stood fully erect between us. I wanted to please him. I wanted to be everything to him that Terry had been, and so much more. I wanted him so badly. I knelt.

* * * * *

When we got upstairs, Brett's mom had made a big breakfast. "I heard the shower running so I knew you guys were up," she told us. We were UP alright, I thought. I looked over at Brett and he winked at me. Mrs. Willson set down a plate in front of each of us-- ham and cheese omelets. She had made toast and bacon. There were danish and muffins, a veritable feast. "When Mr. Willson and I heard that you were helping Brett at school, we were so pleased. He had such a difficult time these past two years in that one single class. I told Brett he should do something nice for you to show you his appreciation."

"Oh he has Mrs. Willson. I mean the movie and pizza and everything last night. Thank you very much."

She smiled and handed me a long white box. "Brett and I got you a little something to show our appreciation. Actually Brett picked it out. Go ahead, it's for you." I looked at her surprised, then over to Brett who was beaming.

"Open it up, Sport." I popped open the lid and unfolded the tissue paper inside, exposing some articles of clothing. I removed the first, a baseball cap with the word "Sport" embroidered across the front. It could have been a monogram made just for me, but I knew that was simply the name brand. There was also a shirt and a pair of athletic pants, all bearing the same logo.

I smiled broadly. "Thanks! These are so cool. 'Sport' is the nickname that

Brett calls me," I said to Mrs. Willson. "I think it may be sarcasm 'cause

I am far from athletic." They laughed. "It is so nice! A perfect gift." I wanted to kiss Brett right then. We just looked at each other. I leaned into him and whispered, "Was that my surprise?" He nodded. His mom was back in the kitchen. "I can't decide which I like better, this surprise or the one you gave me a few minutes ago."

"There should be no comparison," Brett laughed.

After breakfast I ran downstairs and immediately changed into my new duds. God, I wanted so badly to talk to Elaine right now. She totally would not believe any of this. I knew, however, that I could not tell anyone. I knew that Brett was not going to be able to

be open about his feelings for me. It wasn't safe for me either. We would have to keep the whole thing our own secret.

I wonder what Brett's mom thought about us. It was not exactly normal for a seventeen year old high school jock to go around calling his fourteen year old tutor "Sport". She probably thought that I was a cute kid, a child prodigy or something. She certainly could have no clue that Brett and I were anything more than tutor and student, or at the very most "friends".

Brett and I did watch Wild World of Sports that afternoon. His parents had gone out and we lay in the basement, again in front of the futon. He also asked me to help him work out and I "spotted" for him. I thought it was peculiar that he would entrust me with this responsibility, being that if he were to lose control and drop the weights on himself, it's not like I'd be strong enough to get them off from him. I think he just enjoyed seeing me stare at him while he demonstrated his prowess.

I was so sad as six o'clock approached and I knew I'd have to be leaving him soon. I sat on the bed next to him and looked up at the pictures on his wall. We were in his bedroom. "I love that school picture of yours there. Is that from last year?" He nodded.

"You want it?"

"Really? Well yeah, of course I want it, but you can't just take it off your wall and give it to me."

"Sure I can. I didn't want that picture hanging in my room anyways. Who hangs pictures of themselves in their own bedroom?" he laughed. "It is an extra. My mom has that same picture upstairs as an 11 x 14. She is a picture freak. You know; you've seen the photo albums."

I walked over and removed the picture from the wall, leaving the nail in the drywall. I clutched it to my chest, and he smiled at me. "Com'ere!" I moved over to him again and he pulled me into him.

"Brett, I don't want today to end. Please don't let it end! I think I'm gonna wake up tomorrow morning and realize this was all an incredibly wonderful dream. Then I will be so sad that it didn't really happen."

"It's not a dream, Sport. But speaking of tomorrow, what are you going to do? I mean, what are we going to do? It is not like we can go back to school Monday and act like nothing happened. It has been hard enough these past few weeks to pass you in the hall every day and never speak. Now it will be impossible!"

"Well, you can't just go up to McDonald and the rest of the football team and tell them you did it with another guy in the shower Saturday morning. Can you imagine what will

happen if anyone finds out? We have to keep this between us. We have to keep it as our secret...at least for now."

"I know. You're totally right, Jeff. It will ruin both of our lives if anyone finds out. I don't want all of Boyne City High thinking their star quarterback is a faggot."

I shook my head. That would be unthinkable.

Brett got me home about eight o'clock that night, and my mom was sitting at the dining room table when I walked in. She was sitting there with her Bible open in front of her, an ashtray to the left of the Good Book and a cigarette in hand. I always found it extremely ironic that she polluted her lungs with toxic carcinogens while feeding her spiritual soul. She actually had tried so many times to kick the habit, always returning to the monkey that wouldn't get off her back. The church people pissed me off so badly, always condemning her and telling her to quit smoking, yet sitting down the pew from her was huge Mrs. Fulton, weighing in at over 350 pounds. Did anyone scold her for her compulsive eating?

"Hi Mom," I greeted her as I headed for the stairwell.

"Jeff, come here. I want to talk to you." There was something in her voice that gave me pause, and I stopped in my tracks, walking over to the table and sitting opposite her.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"You were not at Joey Potter's house last night like you told me. I saw his mother in the grocery store this morning."

I looked down at my lap, ashamed for having been caught in a lie. I had never been able to lie to my mother. This time it had been a lie of omission. When I told her about the science project and my sleepover at Joey's, I had honestly thought I would do exactly that. It's just that after my plans changed I could not find a way to tell her I'd ditched Joey for Brett.

"So where were you last night?"

"I was at Brett's house," I told her truthfully. "He and I went to the movies and then I stayed at his house. That's all, honest."

"So why did you lie to me? Honey, this doesn't make any sense. Why would I care if you stayed at Joey's or Brett's. It makes no difference to me. What matters is that you didn't tell me the truth about what you were doing. That makes me wonder what you were really doing."

"Honest Mom, I wasn't doing anything wrong. I just went to the movies with Brett. That's all. See he asked me after I had made plans with Joey. I did not want to get Joey mad at

me by ditching our plans so I told him I could not come after all. I told him I was helping you paint instead."

"I know. Mrs. Potter told me the same thing. She asked if we had gotten our painting done. I did not tell her that you didn't stay home to help me." I heaved a sigh of relief. At least I did not have to deal with Joey going off on me. "But I don't think it was very nice of you to blow off Joey like that and then lie to him. He has been your friend a long time. Friends don't treat friends like that, Jeff."

Again I looked down at the table. "I'm sorry, Mom. But look, Brett gave me these new clothes!"

"Wow. Why did he do that?"

"His mom got them for me actually because they said they appreciated that I was helping Brett with the tutoring. Isn't that nice of them?"

She nodded. "Yes, very. So tell me about this Brett. It seems like you two must be becoming pretty good friends. You spent the weekend together. He is buying you gifts. Why haven't you ever had him over here?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "He has a big house and stuff. It is a good place to study. This is the first time we spent a night together. I'm sure he will come over some time. Why? Do you want to meet him?"

"Sure. I'd love to. You know I love to meet new people. But just promise me something, Jeff, okay?" I nodded. "Promise to always be honest with me. You always have been so far. It is not like you to lie. And you know, you can tell me anything, don't you? Anything."

I again nodded. "I know Mom. I promise."

"Okay. Glad you had fun." I was so lucky to have her for my mom. She was such a wonderful and loving person. I really could not tell her anything though. There were some things she would never know about me.

Chapter 6

I crinkled my face when my mom woke me Sunday morning to ask if I wanted to go to church with her. "Do I have to, Mom. I don't really feel like going today."

"No, you don't have to, but it might do you good." I think she was trying to make me feel contrite for lying to her. I rolled over and got out of bed.

"Oh, all right. What time is it now?"

"It is nine-thirty. So get a move on." I yawned and nodded, rubbing my hair. I reached for my glasses and grabbed my robe.

"I'm gonna take a shower. I'll be down in a few minutes." She closed my bedroom door and headed downstairs. It wouldn't be so bad, really. Elaine went to our church also, and I might get a chance to talk to her. I wonder if she would suspect anything with Brett and me. She was so perceptive about my feelings sometimes.

When Elaine and I were in grade school we used to play together all the time. We always played "girl" games. While the other boys were out doing their rough and tumble, I was with Elaine playing "house" and "grocery store". She had one of those big-headed Barbie's that had lots of long hair. It was like a mannequin head, and little girls got them to play "hair stylist". Elaine and I would do that together. She also liked to hang with me because I was the only boy she knew who did not try to scare her with frogs and snakes, and who never made fun of her for being fat.

Elaine's parents had created an entire room in her house that was simply a big playroom. There was a play piano, an Easy-Bake Oven, a Hoppity Horse and the other hoppity thing that was just a big huge ball with a ring on it. She also had every Barbie doll ever created I think. We played Barbie's sometimes; I always got to use the Ken or the GI Jo doll. I was always the love interest of whatever Barbie she fancied for that day. Basically we just grew up together as the best of friends. She used to say to me that I was her "bestest" friend, and truly I was.

I knew that I could trust Elaine to keep a secret, but it was too dangerous to confide in her about Brett. I so did not want to do anything to jeopardize Brett in any way. I did not want to arm Elaine with anything too juicy that she would just have to tell someone, though in reality I knew that it was I whom she always told those kinds of things. Just last week she had called me to let me know that Jennifer Lewis was dropping out of school to attend the "pregnant school". There was an alternative program that was started in our town to keep pregnant teens in school. They held their classes at the Catholic church, and after they had given birth, they could bring their babies right to class with them. Apparently Jennifer had told her boyfriend Alex Granger that she was on the pill and so he did not use a rubber. She later said she had "forgotten to take it" that one day only. Elaine knew all of the details of course, right down to the length and thickness of Alex's "you-know-what". I always just sat there listening to her recount this gossip, certain she

had embellished at least somewhat with each retelling. When she really got into a good piece of gossip, her British persona would take over and she would be calling me "love" between every other sentence.

I got out of the shower and wrapped a towel around my waist, heading back to the bedroom where I got my suit out of the closet, laying it flat on the bed. I looked over to my dresser and saw the picture Brett had given me. In his school picture for last year, he was wearing his letter jacket. His eyes looked so dark, and he maintained a very serious-looking half-smile on his lips, showing no teeth. His eyes seemed to pierce me as I stared into the picture. I was melting in front of him again...no! not in front of him, in front of his picture.

I removed my towel and saw I was quite aroused. I looked at the clock. Not enough time to clean up another mess, I thought. So I pulled a clean pair of briefs and dress socks from my dresser drawer and began getting dressed. I stepped down the stairs at five minutes of ten, and saw my mom in the kitchen snubbing out a cigarette in the ashtray. It would be her last puff until we returned in about two hours. She opened her purse and pulled out a bottle of Chantilly, spraying it in front of her and then waving her wrists gracefully as she walked into the mist.

I found Elaine in the next-to-the-last pew in church and slid beside her. My mom sat up closer to the front with some of the other church ladies. "You get your painting done, love?" Elaine whispered. I shook my head.

"I didn't have to paint after all. But don't tell Joey, please."

"Oh, you should have called. We could have gone out for a bit." I rolled my eyes at the British accent and she slipped back to American. "So what did you do then?"

"Not much," I lied.

"Don't lie to me, Jeffrey. You're in the House of the Lord, you know." She was like my mother in that regard, always knowing when I was not telling the truth, or not telling the whole truth.

"I will talk to you about it after church. We can have dinner together if you want."

"Fuck that!" She whispered sternly. "There is something you are not telling me, and I wanna know now!" She grabbed my wrist and stood up, motioning for the aisle. "Let's go!" I made a mock protest but quickly exited the pew and headed out the back door with her in tow. Hopefully my mom would not turn around to see me during the service. She usually was pretty intent upon the message.

We walked down the church driveway and across the street to a picnic area in a park that was there. This was a different park than the one where Brett and I always met. We found a table that was somewhat secluded by trees, and Elaine opened her purse, removing a

pack of Virginia Slims. She lit one as she straddled the picnic table bench. I sat down on the opposite side.

"So give it up. What did you do Friday night? You get stoned or something?"

I shook my head. "Elaine, I can trust you, right?" She nodded fervently, with the most sincere expression on her face I'd ever seen. It was the expression to say Oh honey, of course you can trust me! You can tell me anything! "Well, I want to tell you something, but you have to promise not to breathe a word of it to another living soul!"

This time she said the words out loud, "Oh honey, of course you can trust me. You can tell me anything! I won't breathe a word, I swear.... Now what is it?"

I clasped my hands in front of me, I was looking down at my thumbs and twiddling them. I was finding it so difficult to look up and make eye contact with her. "Well, I want to tell you a secret...about me." She nodded, continuing to stare as I looked at her face. This time her expression was saying Duh! "I have not told this to anyone, Elaine...ever! But I want to tell you now 'cause you know you are my best friend. And I have to tell someone."

She was now literally squirming, knowing she was about to get the juiciest of gossip ever! She leaned in towards me, waiting with baited breath. "Elaine," I said, "I am ... "

"You are ...what? Pregnant?" she asked sarcastically, annoyed by the suspense.

"I'm being serious here Elaine." She rolled her eyes and then re-established eye contact. "Elaine, I'm gay."

Now she again verbalized her last expression, "Duh! So where is the gossip?" I just stared at her.

"I am revealing to you my biggest and most profound secret of my entire life and you hit me with sarcasm?" I sneered.

"Honey, I have known you are gay for years. Big fuckin deal. Well I guess it is about time you figured it out." She smiled sincerely at me. "So how did you come to this realization, love?"

"Well, love," I was jokingly mocking her, "I think I am in love."

She raised her eyebrows. I think she was sniffing out some real gossip now. It was as if her ears perked up. "Oh really... who is he? Anyone I know?" I shook my head. "I can't say."

"You little fuckin shit! Yes you can. Now you tell me; you cannot leave me hanging like this. Who does Jeffy have the hots for?"

"No, it's not like that. It is not that I have the 'hots' for anyone. It is more than that. Much more. And we have done stuff together. I mean like stuff."

"No way! Jeff you have got to tell me. Who is it? I promise I won't tell anyone. You know you can trust me."

"Brett Willson."

"You fuckin liar. Now be serious."

"I am being serious Elaine. I spent Friday night and all day yesterday with him. We went to the movies and he took me to Dead Man's Hill where we watched the sunset. We stayed in his room all night and he showed me pictures for hours out of his family photo album, we had breakfast, I helped him work out... and we took a shower together."

"You little fuck, you're not lying. Oh my god! Brett Willson is a queer?!"

"Brett is not a queer!" I retorted. "Don't ever say that!"

"Just chill, Jeff. I'm sorry. He is gay then, whatever. He had sex with you and now you think you're in love with him. Let's just say he's not heterosexual." Elaine looked at me imploringly.

"Elaine, why do you have to always go around labeling people? Why does it matter if he is gay or not?"

"It doesn't, shithead. At least not to me. But you seem to be all concerned about it. I think you are a bit mental, to be honest. You say you are in love with this guy but then get all mad at the idea of him being queer. It is like you want him so bad but you don't want him to be gay. How can you have it both ways?"

"I don't know!" I screamed. "You just don't understand. I just don't understand. You are right. I don't want him to be gay. 'Cause if he is gay, then it makes him a fag. And I love him because he is not a fag."

"Now you are the one who is labeling, kiddo. 'Fag' is just a derogatory term. It doesn't mean anything. He is not a fag unless he says he is...or unless someone else does. Whatever. But he is gay. If he is having sex with other guys, he's fuckin gay."

"People think of gays as being freaks. Limp-wrested sissy boys. Brett is not like that. He's totally the opposite of that. He is just a regular guy-- masculine, funny, athletic. He is not some sort of pansy or something."

"Well lets just settle on this: Brett is gay but we won't call him a

'fag'. How's that?"

"Maybe he is bi," I offered, "He has had sex with women too, you know."

"And maybe he has sex with chicks just as a cover. You know," she snapped back.

"I don't know, Elaine. But you have to keep this a secret. I mean it. If you blab to anyone it will ruin both of our lives. Please... PLEASE. I'm trusting you. But I wanted to tell you because I just had to. I had to share this with someone, and you are my best friend, other than Joey. And I wouldn't tell Joey anything."

She shook her head, agreeing with the last statement. "Jeff, I swear I won't tell anyone, but I want you to be so careful. These people in this town are so redneck. Even in this church," she motioned across the street, "they would not accept you. I just do not want you to get hurt. I care about you too much."

"Thanks, Elaine."

"So how did this happen? How did you find out about each other? Did you meet in a gay bar or something?"

I cracked up. "Elaine, I'm fourteen, remember? And plus I wouldn't know a gay bar if there was one right across the street. We met while I was tutoring him. Coach McDonald asked me to help him with his English grammar class, and I agreed. We have been working together for about three weeks now."

"Why the hell would McDonald ask you for anything?" She was puzzled.

"Um, well actually he forced me to tutor Brett. He said if I didn't he would fail me in gym." Elaine's jaw dropped open. "At first I was really pissed about it, but it turned out to be the most wonderful thing in my life. I'm just so excited, Elaine! Oh my god!! You know what he did? He bought me a whole set of clothes. He has this pet name for me. He calls me 'sport'. Well he bought me a set of Sport athletic wear. Pants, shirt, cap. Plus he gave me an 8 x 10 picture of himself. It is so gorgeous. He's wearing his letter jacket."

"Oh gag me! You are pathetic. Next thing you know, you will be buying issues of Tiger Beat magazine!" I laughed, but she was not far from the truth. I had sneaked a look at those magazines a number of times in the grocery store. "Just don't let him hurt you, Jeff. Don't let him use you. Please."

"I won't, Elaine. Don't even worry about that. I am happy for like the first time ever in my life! What will hurt me is if something or someone hurts Brett. So please keep my secret. Please don't tell a soul."

She made a motion to cross her heart. "Give me hugs! I'm so happy for you kiddo, and I'm glad you finally came out of the closet. At least to yourself, anyways."

I smiled at her before we headed back to church. "So how hung is he?"

Chapter 7

The four of us were together again. It was lunchtime, my first day back after the big weekend. Brett had spoken to me twice that day, once in English and once in the hall. We were just casual to one another but friendly. Had anyone been particularly observant they would have known this was atypical. Prior to our tutoring sessions, Brett and I had never given one another the time of day. I'd been too frightened to talk to him, and he was uninterested.

"God Jeff, you have been in a good mood lately," Carly was her usual blunt self. "If I didn't know better I'd think you were getting laid. 'Course you really ought 'a learn how to jack off first before you try the real thing."

Joey laughed. "No, Jeff hasn't been getting laid. He's been painting. We had to cancel our science project because he was helping his mother repaint the house." Elaine raised an eyebrow at me. "So when can we actually prepare the project?" he continued.

"I told you Joey, Thursday. But what are you guys doing Wednesday? It's Halloween, you know."

"I don't know," said Carly, "but I have a good idea what I will be doing tomorrow night. Devil's Night!" She laughed evilly.

"I am not teepeeing anyone's house again this year!" snapped Elaine. "Just leave me out."

"Well what about you Joey? ... Jeff?" she looked to us hoping we'd take Elaine's place as cohorts. She already knew that we never did things like that. I was not daring enough to participate in any form of vandalism, no matter how minor. "Elaine, you bitch!" Carly snapped at her.

We were all laughing when I happened to look up and see Brett walking towards our table. I froze, my eyes getting wide. The other three stared at me, not understanding, except for perhaps Elaine.

"Hey Sport, how ya doin?" Joey and Carly looked puzzled and Elaine smiled. "I need to talk to you about something." I immediately stood up. "No, it's okay. Sit down. He sat down across the table from me. He was right next to Carly who was looking him up one side and down the other. "This Friday is our first big game and we have late practices every night. I wondered when you would be available to meet for studying? Can you do it at all after seven?"

I nodded, unable to speak. Finding my voice I replied, "Sure any time." I was trying to sound casual.

"Okay then. I'll call you tonight and we can set something up for tomorrow, all right?"

"Sure." He beamed at me as he turned and went back to his table. I smiled at Elaine. She must have been thinking something like "so he was telling the truth".

"Since when did you start studying with a dumb jock like that?" Joey questioned.

"Hey! Don't call him that. He is not dumb!" Joey literally moved away from me, leaning back on the bench.

"Well, you always call him that yourself. And why are you two friends now, and why did he call you 'Sport'?" he was chuckling as he asked the last question.

"Well maybe it is beyond your comprehension to be friends with someone who happens to be different from you, but I personally think it is worth the effort to make all types of friends. What would you know about that though, Mr. Popularity?!"

"Fuck you! All I did was ask a question. You don't have to go all ape shit on me."

The table got quiet. "I'm just helping him with his English grammar class.

That's all."

Carly looked over at me, "Be careful. He's a user. Big time. Trust me Jeff. All those jocks are just alike. He is just using you to get a better grade. When the semester is over, I bet he never speaks to you again."

I glared back at her. "You are always so cynical, Carly. Can't you ever see the good in anybody?"

She shrugged. "Suit yourself. If you wanna be shit on, its your choice, not mine." She stood up and picked up her tray. Joey followed in tow, throwing me an disapproving glare.

I looked over at Elaine. "Well I was going to invite the three of you over Halloween night so we can pass out candy. Guess that's not going to fly."

"Don't worry, kiddo. I'll be there. What are you gonna dress as? I have an idea...Snow White. Brett can come as Prince Charming!" She busted up laughing and I rolled my eyes. Well I still had another full day to work on the other two and to try smoothing things over.

Later that night Brett did call me, as promised. He prattled on and on about his upcoming game. He was telling me about the plays and the strategy, none of which I understood, but I loved hearing him say it. I just lay there on my bed listening to his voice. We decided that he would pick me up at my house the next night at seven. I asked if he wanted to meet my mom and he said sure. It was a date.

"Mom, my friend Brett is coming over tonight at seven to pick me up to study. Is that okay?" I had just gotten home from school and she was starting to fix dinner in the kitchen. It looked like she was making tacos.

"Sure. Is he going to come in so I can meet him finally?" She was dicing onions, trying to keep her eyes from tearing up.

"Are you crying Mom?" She shook her head and pointed with the knife at the onions. I understood and nodded. "Yeah, he is going to come in and meet you. Then we are going to his house. I won't be gone too long. He just has to study later because he has late practices now. This Friday is Homecoming, you know."

"Oh yeah. That's right. I usually like to go to the Homecoming game. Are you going to go with me this year?"

"I'd like to go, sure. Why not?" I again was trying to sound casual. "Do you want me to help you cut stuff up?"

"Sure. That would be great. We need tomatoes, green olives, lettuce, shredded cheese...it's all in the fridge. Please use the cutting board from under the sink." She scraped the diced onions off from her cutting board into the simmering ground beef. "I'm so glad that you are starting to come out of your shell a little more, Jeff. You are making new friends, going to sporting events. Sometimes I get so worried about you."

"You worry too much, Mom. You have enough other stuff to worry about already. Everything is okay with me. What are we going to pass out tomorrow night for trick or treats?"

She sighed. "I still have to go get some candy. Your Dad's check doesn't come until Thursday, but I should get paid for a cleaning job tomorrow. I'll have to pick some up on my way home tomorrow. You gonna have your friends over again this year?"

"Just Elaine. She probably will bring some candy too. She usually does."

"So how does it feel to be a high schooler now?" She smiled at me. "You've been a freshman now for almost two months. Your classes going all right?"

"Yeah, most of them are sort of boring actually. You have to take the boring classes in ninth grade and then you get to take more electives when you get to be a junior and senior. That is why Brett is in my gym class. He has taken phys ed as one of his electives."

She popped an olive into her mouth. "Is that a picture of Brett that you have on your dresser?"

I blushed. "Yeah, he gave it to me. It was just an extra one he had."

"He had an 'extra' framed 8x10 picture of himself sitting around? That seems a bit peculiar, don't you think?" I shrugged, trying to think of something to change the subject. Just then the door opened and my dad walked in. I was surprised. He usually was not around until late in the evening.

"Hi Dad," I offered as he stepped to the kitchen doorway.

"Howdy," he replied, placing his hand on my shoulder. I smelled the alcohol but it was not too bad this time actually. "I'm glad you are both here because I need to talk to you about something." My mom looked up from the stove, somewhat surprised by the remark. He continued, "Jeff, your mother and I have been discussing something that we need to talk over with you."

"Ray, do we have to do this now?" He looked at her sternly and nodded, resolute to continue.

"Things have not been going too well between the two of us, your mother and me. I think you and your brother probably both know that we have had our share of problems. Lot of fighting, lot of screamin and hollerin. Well things just have not gotten better over the years, and sometimes you just have to accept the reality that two people cannot continue to stay together when it just isn't working any more."

I looked away from my father and then over to my mother. There were tears running down her cheeks, and I don't think it was from the onions this time. "What are you saying?" I asked. "Are you going to get divorced?"

This time my mother spoke. "We want you to know it has nothing to do with you, Honey. This is between your father and me; you have not done anything wrong."

"For chrissakes Candy, he's not a four year old. He knows that. Yes, Jeff, we are going to be getting a divorce. I just got back from Rusty's house. He is going to rent me a cabin which will be available at the first of the month. I will be moving out then."

"Ray! That is in two days. I did not think this was going to happen so soon. How will we pay the rent?"

"Well, I have to take this cabin now when it's available. You should be able to work something out with the landlord. Go to social services again or something. I don't know. But I am going to be gone by Friday."

I looked up at him in utter disbelief. "So you are just going to leave us like that? No warning, nothing? You just are walking out and you don't even care if Mom can pay the rent or not? You don't care if we have money for food or the other bills? You just are -- " "Don't ever talk to me that way, son! You will show me respect. I don't have to justify my actions to you now or ever. Maybe this will give you the opportunity for once in your life to start being a man. If your mother lets you, that is!" He turned from us and walked back

towards the door. "Rusty is waiting for me in the truck. We are going down to the Lodge." he slammed the door behind him and left the two of us standing there, staring at each other.

My mom cried now in earnest, and the crying turned to sobs. I did not know what to do or how to comfort her. How could he do this to her? After she took care of him and nursed him back to health, brought him through the grueling ordeal of his rehabilitation therapy, he was just going to walk out on her and leave her high and dry. I knew my mom depended upon that social security check to cover the rent every month. The rest of the bills she paid from her own earnings. Now what were we going to do?

"I can get a job, Mom. Don't worry. One of the kids in school, Kyle Edwards, got a job down at the grocery store and he makes \$3.35 an hour. I can work after school and on weekends. We will get by. And Erik can help too. We just have to tell him to start paying his way."

She grabbed hold of me and held me. I felt the sobs wracking her body, and I wanted more than anything to just make all of the worry and pain go away. I just did not know what to do. I did not know how to help her.

"Oh honey, don't you be silly." She was wiping her tears. "You are a kid in school. You are not working to support this family. That's not your job. Your job is to study and do well in your classes. I will work it all out and everything will be just fine. And you pay no attention to the mean things your father said. It is the alcohol talking. That is all."

I nodded, again clutching her to myself, but I knew she was not entirely correct. It was more than alcohol that was talking when my dad said what he had. It was time that I started to be more of a man, not the wimpy and spineless faggot that I'd always been. In many ways, I had only myself to blame for the embarrassment he felt for me. And all of the times he had ridiculed me by either his hurtful words or his hateful actions, were understandable in light of the fact that the one single thing he always feared that I would become, I now was. I was a queer. No wonder he hated me.

* * * * *

After dinner my mom and I cleaned up together. She told me to go ahead and still study with Brett. She was going to watch Jeopardy and then go over to my grandma's house for a couple of hours. We did not talk much more about my father, both of us in sort of a state of shock.

I went upstairs and lay on my bed, waiting for Brett to arrive. I had almost finished *The Outsiders*. Reggie jumped up on the bed and curled up next to me. I wrapped my arms

around him, nuzzling my face against his. Today had not been a great day, so far. First I got Joey and Carly pissed at me, and then my dad dropped his bombshell on us. It totally sucked that I had met this wonderful person who I was nuts over, but could not share it with anyone. I wanted to tell my mom how happy Brett made me and how much I loved him, but sadly I knew it would not be a happiness in which she could share. It would only add to her pain.

I was on the last chapter of the book when I heard the door. I knew it must be Brett, so I shot up out of bed and raced down the stairs. He stood there outside the door and I peered at him through the glass. He was laughing at me. "What are you laughing at?" I asked as I opened the door for him.

"You," he spat, "You're just so damned cute." He reached out to pet Reggie who was standing beside me, wagging his tail.

"Hi there! You must be Brett." My mom was behind me. God, I hope she hadn't heard what he said to me. "Come on in." She extended her hand to him and smiled most graciously.

"It's nice to meet you Mrs. Irwin."

"The pleasure is mine. Why don't you come in a minute. Can I get you something to drink?"

Brett smiled. "Sure, water would be great. I just got done with football practice."

"So it's a big game this Friday, huh?" she asked as we headed in to the dining room. "Brett and I are planning to come see to it."

"Yeah, I'm pretty psyched about it." My mom grinned at him, not sure exactly what 'psyched' meant. "I think the team is gonna do really good this year. We could win division and regional championships."

"How many games do you play in a season?" I asked.

"Nine regular games. More if we go on to the championships. If we make it that far, you can come cheer us on." he winked at me. I wondered if my mom caught it.

She handed him his water. "So you guys are studying tonight. Must be hard to keep up your grades with all of your practices and games."

"It's usually not too bad, actually. Jeff has helped me so much too. It's too bad I hadn't had him around two years ago. This is my third time taking freshman English, and I need the credit to graduate, plus I have to take one more English class, not to mention that if I don't pass I will be cut from sports altogether." I was surprised he was so candid about the situation, especially to an adult. "I think your son is a genius."

She laughed and I blushed. "He is pretty smart, I admit. Wish I could say he got it from me. I never could get that diagramming sentences stuff...that or algebra."

"Me neither," he countered. "Thanks for letting Jeff stay over this weekend. It was cool. We had a lot of fun."

"Oh, you're welcome. Glad you had a good time. That was so nice of you to buy him those gifts. We will have to have you over for dinner some night."

"I'd like that." He looked over at me.

"Well, do you think we should get going?" I asked. "I mean you are going to Grandma's, right Mom?"

She nodded. "Yeah I guess I'd better get going myself. You guys don't study too hard, okay?" We got up and I grabbed my jacket. Brett and my mom said goodbye to each other and we headed out the door. It was such a beautiful night. It was warm, and I knew if the weather was like this tomorrow, we'd have a lot of trick-or-treaters.

In the car I asked, "So do you think you are going to be ready for the test on Thursday?"

"Oh shit. That is Thursday?" he winced. "I don't know. What do you think? You think I'm ready?"

"Yeah. You are going to do fine. We can do our homework together tonight and then afterwards review all of the parts of speech to prepare for the test. It won't be hard, from what I hear." We were two blocks from my house and he was pulling the car over to the side of the road. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"I've been wanting to do this all day," he said as he reached over and kissed me. "Mmm, you taste like tacos."

I giggled. "You taste like toothpaste. And you smell so good too." He slowly pulled away from me and turned back to the road. He drove the rest of the way to his house with his hand on my knee, my hand on top of his. When we walked into his house and descended the stairs, I put my book bag on the counter and he dragged me to the futon. "Aren't we here to study?" I asked.

"Well I want you to study me for a little while," he teased. He sat down on the futon and I was standing in front of him. I was between his legs and he was relaxed, feet spread out on each side of me. He placed his hands on my hips, looking me in the eyes. "Kneel down."

It was like before, when he told me to take my shirt off. It felt like a command, not a request, so I obeyed. I knelt between his legs, staring up at him. He ran his fingers through my hair. "Take your jacket off, Sport." Again, I did as he said. He still was

wearing his letter jacket. "Did you like what we did together Saturday, in the shower, I mean?"

I nodded.

"Want to do it again?"

My heart was racing. I nodded again.

"Unzip my pants." He was now leaning back on the futon with his arms stretched out to each side of him on the cushions. I stared up at him, and he looked like a god to me, unbelievably perfect in every way. I thought about how he'd told me the he felt so worshipped by Terry. I was experiencing a feeling that I did not really understand just then. I loved his tenderness and his gestures of kindness so very much; the way that he kissed me made my heart just totally melt, but now it was a far different feeling. Instead of basking in his protective strength, feeling safe and secure as I always had with him, now I was feeling the power of his dominance. It felt so very right to kneel there in front of him as he reclined, giving me instructions. It felt like he was superior and I was inferior. I felt like a boy compared to a man, a servant to a king, a slave to his master.

He continued to instruct me verbally, step-by-step, as I knelt there to please him. He commanded and I obeyed. When it was through, there was no reciprocation offered. He merely zipped up. "You did a good job, Sport. You were a good boy." I looked up at him and smiled, realizing I'd been given the greatest reward imaginable, his approval.

Afterwards we did study and we resumed our activities as if nothing unusual had occurred. I wondered if he was thinking similar thoughts while he was being serviced, about how right it felt. I wondered if his need to be obeyed was as strong as my need to obey, but I dared not ask him. All I knew was that the only thing that mattered to me at the time it took place was that he was pleased; I wondered if that was all that mattered to him as well.

In the car, on the way back home, I confided in Brett about my parents' divorce. I tried sounding casual about it, as if it did not affect me. He held my hand within his, "I'm very sorry, Sport." He knew my heart was breaking. Oh God, I did not want to leave him that night. I just wanted to curl up with him like we had that weekend, two spoons -- one inside of the other. With his arms around me, there were no problems, no concerns, no fears. I did not have to try to be a man when I was with Brett; it was enough to be the small boy that I felt like.

*I will be your father figure Put your tiny hand in mine I will be your preacher teacher
Anything you have in mind I will be your father figure I have had enough of crime I will
be the one who loves you Until the end of time*

That's all I wanted

But sometimes love can be mistaken

For a crime

That's all I wanted

Just to see my baby's

Blue eyed shine

This time I think that my lover

Understands me

If we have faith in each other

Then we can be

Strong by **George Michael**

Chapter 8

Joey and I sat next to one another in our second hour science class. Wednesday morning I apologized to him for how I'd spoken to him on Monday. He had refused to sit with me at lunch on Tuesday and he ignored me in class that day. Whenever someone was angry with me like that, I would get this huge knot in my stomach. It just would grow and grow in intensity until I was in the bathroom heaving my guts up. It really was not worth it to me to make myself sick over a silly argument. Of course Joey thought that Brett was a jerk. After all, Brett was a jock, and most jocks were major pricks, especially to guys like Joey (and me). I told Joey that my friendship with him was more important than some "dumb jock", figuring that this not only would appease him but would quell any possible notions that Joey might have that there was anything going on between Brett and me other than just the tutoring.

I did feel a twang of guilt when I said that to Joey, sort of as if I was betraying Brett, but then on the other hand it was not like Brett was showing me off to his friends. In gym class he still sided with the other jock guys and acted like I did not even exist. He had to do it, I knew, so that he would not blow his cover. Plus the talk of the school that day was the homecoming election. The entire student body voted in sixth hour, selecting a king and queen. The buzz was that Brett and Mandy were a shoe-in. I had already made up my mind how I was going to vote, definitely for my hero and lover, Brett Willson, but there was no way in hell I would vote for Mandy. Just the thought of her now made me fume inside. Whenever I saw her in school, giggling with her girlfriends, flitting her hair back away from her face, I just wanted to run up and rip out those long blond strands right from the roots. She was such a snotty bitch, too. To her, little geeks like me were like insects. We were annoying and insignificant. I wonder what she would have thought if she only knew that one such pest, namely me, was blowing her boyfriend on a regular basis. Does twice constitute a "regular basis"?

Joey decided at lunch to come over to my place that night for the trick-or-treaters. Carly passed, opting instead to go get stoned with some burnout friends and then find vulnerable little kids to bully out of their candy. "Why don't you just buy candy instead of pot?" I asked. She just scowled at me. Today's lunch was good ole tuna bake. We always called it "tuna barf", and rightly so. It was like a cross between a pot pie and a tuna casserole, but I considered it to more closely resemble vomit, which is precisely what I'd have done had I even attempted to eat it. So I ate a dinner roll instead, and drank some white milk.

I saw Brett walk by our table. Elaine looked over at me, watching my eyes follow him. Joey had begun yet another diatribe about his magnetic levitation project, and I sat there staring at Brett's shoulders, half listening to him. "So do you think it will work, Jeff?" He was nudging me with his elbow to get my attention.

"Huh? ... Oh, well you are the one who ought to know, Joey. If you say it will work, I'm sure it will."

"You probably don't even know what I was talking about, do you? You were daydreaming again. What is with you lately."

"Maybe he has a bug," Elaine offered sarcastically. She leaned into my ear and whispered, "a love bug, perhaps?"

"No, I don't have a bug," I said, ignoring the last part of her comment. "But my dad is leaving. He is divorcing my mom; he told us last night. I just am preoccupied, that's all."

Carly offered her two cents, "Well he's an asshole anyways, right? You should be glad that he is gone."

"Don't call his dad an asshole!" Elaine retorted.

"Well he is. He is just a drunk, just like my ole man. Big deal."

"It isn't that I care about him leaving or anything like that," I explained. "I just think it is so unfair to my mom. She was the one who took care of him and stuff after he had his stroke. Now that he is better and is getting his government checks every month, he is just going to dump her."

"Well, love, I'm so sorry about that, but you know what? I have known a lot of kids whose parents got divorced. It usually is better for them to be separated if all they ever do is fight in the first place. Maybe this way your mom can move on and find someone else who will make her really happy."

"I hope so," I said. I took the last bite of my dry, unbuttered roll. "I've got to go to the bathroom." I got up quickly and bolted for the bathroom at the end of the cafeteria. I made it to the stall just in the nick of time before I doubled over and started vomiting. After the milky roll was expunged from my gut, it was just dry heaves. I gagged for a good four or five minutes, trying to suck in breaths between each spasm. My eyes were watering and red as I knelt there on the floor, my head in the toilet, my glasses had fallen off on the floor next to me.

I saw a hand reach down next to me to pick up the glasses, I tried to stop crying, fearing who it might be. Another hand was on my shoulder. "Are you all right, Sport." I grabbed some toilet paper, wiping off my mouth, and another for my eyes. I was embarrassed now. Brett squatted down behind me, wrapping his arms around me. "You better get to the nurse, little guy. You need to go home. You're sick."

"No!" I panicked. "No, I don't need to go to the nurse. I'm not really sick, honest. I just get like this sometimes, that's all. Please Brett, don't tell anyone. My mom would be so worried about me if I came home early."

"All right, calm down," his tone was so loving. "What are you so upset about anyway?"

Tears started rolling down my cheeks again, I was looking up at him. "Just everything. My mom, she is being abandoned by my dad. And I love you so much Brett." My eyes got wide, concerned that there might be someone else in the bathroom with us. His smile assured me it was okay. "-- I love you so much Brett. I just always want to be with you."

"I want to be with you too, Sport. Just chill out. Everything is cool between us. We just had a great weekend together; you're my boy, right?" I nodded, half-smiling. "Okay then, so stop worrying." He grabbed a fresh piece of tissue and gently dried my eyes. Then he kissed me on the forehead. He pulled me up. "Let's get your face washed, okay?" Brett put my glasses back on my face as I looked up into his eyes. He really was my hero. He was my knight in shining armor. How did I deserve his attention, his affection, his compassion? He let me leave the bathroom first and waited before exiting, so we did not walk out together. I went back to my table as if nothing had happened, just in time for the bell.

I was a wizard. That was my Halloween costume. We always dressed up for Halloween when we passed out the candy. It was sort of like a little party that we had every year. Elaine and my mom would always scream bloody murder when a little kid walked up to the door with a scary costume, as if they had been terrified by the sheer horror. I always told my mom that she should do screams for movies. She was so good at it.

Some years, when things were not so lean, my mom would go all out, making home-made popcorn balls and caramel apples. She'd bake a big pan of double fudge brownies with chocolate frosting. Oh god, they were sooo yummy! My mother was such a good cook. She knew how to make home-made bread and would bake a dozen loaves at a time. Sometimes she would give loaves away to people like her friends or the pastor of the church. Sometimes she gave her bread to a food pantry. She made killer lasagna, tacos, pizza, all the good stuff that kids like, plus she was excellent when it came to preparing huge meals like on Sundays and on the holidays.

We had lots of candy ready to pass out, as my grandma gave my mother money the night before. Elaine showed up as a circus clown and Joey just came as himself. He did not participate in things like that, but I knew in my heart that he liked to watch. He always seemed to just live his life vicariously, by watching others have all the fun.

I had to put Reggie up in my bedroom before trick or treaters arrived, as he got way too excited. It would break my heart to lock him up for any reason; he had the biggest brown eyes that looked so sad. But the one thing about Reggie was that he was always so loyal. He never held a grudge. I knew as soon as I opened the door he'd bolt right out, tail wagging as if nothing had happened. I think that if it were me who had to be locked up during the fun, I'd sulk a little when I finally was released.

We did have fun that year. Even I did, in spite of the circumstances with my parents. It was a warm night, so lots of kids were out. We had about 250 kids come to our door. The three of us sat on the porch, drinking pop and stuffing our faces. It was odd though, as I just knew this would be last year to enjoy the occasion. Halloween is, by all rights, a

child's holiday. We were entering a new phase in our life. Perhaps this was the core of my anxiety, knowing I was so close to adulthood and yet not fully graduated from childhood. I knew that I was a freshman in high school, which is a rather put-upon classification, in-and-of itself. The freshmen were ridiculed and to a certain degree hazed by upper classmen. But it was only a stone's throw away from full-fledged adulthood. In three more years I'd be walking down the aisle to receive my diploma.

When I was in the fourth grade I used to lay in bed at night fully awake, terrified of nuclear war. I'd worry that my parents were going to die. How would I ever be able to handle it when my grandma passed away? Were there really such places as Heaven and Hell? What if I go to Hell? What if my mom or dad does? One of my huge fears when I was in the ninth grade was that I was maintaining a perfect GPA, and if I were to continue as such and become valedictorian, how would I ever be able to get up in front of all those people to give a speech?!

Psychology, in its infinite wisdom, eventually went on to diagnose such constant and unreasonable fears as being symptomatic of anxiety disorder. My mother, however, offered much more simplistic explanations. "Honey, you are such a worry wart!" or "You wear your feelings on your shirt sleeve," or the all-time, most popular, "You're just overly sensitive." My father offered still a different perspective. He just considered me to be a sissy. Unlike Carly, I did not consider my dad to be an asshole. It made perfect sense to me that he wanted his sons to be masculine. He considered it to be a primary responsibility of his to do whatever was necessary to ensure that both of his boys became "real men".

He demonstrated this attitude early on in my childhood, and my earliest memories are of him trying to teach me to be tough. My mom ran constant interference with my father, trying to get him to change his perspective. She considered me to be her "good boy" and she considered my brother Erik to be her "overgrown baby". I think that she labeled Erik as such because he never learned responsibility. I, on the other hand, was obsessed with being responsible. My father taught both my brother and I how to play baseball. He also taught us pool. Dad was an outstanding pool player himself, and could clear the table practically every time without even passing his turn. He did this even when he was falling down drunk. I should clarify that my father attempted to teach me these things. I always failed to master the dexterity to handle a cue stick properly or to throw a ball the right way. I never was sure if he was concerned that I would be labeled a sissy by my peers, or if he was actually just afraid of the embarrassment that he would suffer.

In every area where I failed to please my father, Erik seemed to excel. Erik was a catcher and then a pitcher on the little league baseball team. He learned to shoot pool almost as well as my father, was an avid hunter and fisherman, just like my dad. Erik was quite obviously my father's protege. After my dad suffered his stroke, though, things changed for Erik. Dad could not do the things with Erik that he had always done. There were no fishing or hunting trips for a long time. My father quit drinking for over a year, so there was no pool. My dad's bitterness towards the world was often directed towards my brother, possibly because he represented to my father the freedom which he himself

lacked. Erik thus became apathetic. It was then that he turned to the burnout crowd that carried him through high school.

My mother directed a lot of her time and efforts towards Erik during these years. Like I stated, she considered me to be her "good boy". She did not have to worry about me for I would always do the right thing. My focus upon academics and my unfailing commitment to being "the best little boy in the world" were godsend to my mother. I was the one person in her family she did not have to worry about.

My grandmother was also a big influence in our family life. She was three-times widowed, her life a story in and of itself. She lived nearby and was always around to pick up the pieces for my mom when things seemed to fall apart. She was despised bitterly by my father, who viewed her as being interfering. During the years that my father bonded so closely with my brother, my mother spent a great deal of her time working. She had always had at least two jobs from the age of my earliest memories. So it was often my grandma who bonded with me. She was my babysitter during my early years of life, and became more of a guardian angel for me as I got older.

It was ten o'clock when Joey's mom came to pick him up. Elaine lived within walking distance and I walked her home. She asked me how things were going with Brett, and I told her that I had studied with him the night before. I didn't mention the episode in the restroom. I wanted so badly to tell her about the way we were intimate that previous night. I wanted to talk to someone about the feelings I had of inferiority, the way it felt so appropriate to me to be kneeling before him. I wanted to tell her how I thought of myself as being Brett's boy, his property. But I told her none of these things, for I doubted she would understand. I doubted anyone would ever understand how good it made me feel about myself to be so deeply valued by the man I loved. I felt so protected by him, so safe. I was proud to be his. Probably Elaine, as well as just about everyone else I knew, would think that this unequal relationship was imbalanced and unfair. For me, however, it was salvation.

Chapter 9

"The basic idea of this new type of levitation is remarkably simple or -with the benefit of hindsight - even trivial," Joey was stating to our physical science class. "Let us take the magnet in a weightless but unstable situation and place it between two diamagnetic plates. A magnet and a diamagnet always repel each other. Therefore, if the floating magnet attempts to fall down, the bottom graphite plate pushes it up slightly and prevents it from the fall without touching it. If the magnet attempts to jump up towards the top magnet, the top plate prevents it from doing so, too. In effect, the diamagnetic plates work as self-adjusting stabilizers."

Joey and I were in the middle of our science presentation. Actually, I should say Joey was in the middle of our science presentation. I was more like an assistant of his. What we had done was demonstrate that two magnets can be suspended in mid air so that neither touches one another, yet neither falls. This is accomplished by using two diamagnetic plates. Diamagnets are the opposite of magnets.

This very simple science experiment was enough to resolutely impress our teacher as well as the entire class. It also impressed me, demonstrating the trap in which I felt I'd found myself. I felt as if Brett and I were the magnets that were being held in limbo by forces that were so very opposite us. McDonald and the establishment were on one end of the spectrum. His stereotypes and demands for results epitomized machismo. He wanted certain things to be accomplished, and he never took "no" for an answer. These things had better also happen in the normal masculine way. Our families were the opposite force, pulling at us to be what we had always been, good ole fashioned red-blooded American heterosexuals. They wanted for us what every parent wants for their child. We were expected to grow up, become educated and get a decent job, and to then start raising a family. Brett's family expected no different from him. He was a star athlete, the embodiment of the American dream.

I feared that as with the magnets, we would be pulled apart. We would try frantically to come together but would be unable to actually connect. The frustration is indescribable to be so close and yet unable to join with one another.

It was an analogy. That is all. For we did find many ways to come together. We sought each other out, against all odds. It was as my grandmother had said to me once, "Love will always go where it is sent." There was no stopping that. But what about the future? How could there be anything significant for us in terms of a future, when we each had to go our separate ways after high school? With heterosexual couples it is entirely possible to find a way to make it work. The entire establishment is supportive. Families welcome newfound heterosexual partners into their circle with open arms. But what about when a boy loves a boy or a girl loves a girl? Where is the support then?

This whirlwind had started only one week previously, and my thoughts were already raging full-steam ahead. He had first kissed me on Friday, we spent Saturday together, we got together the following Tuesday, and it was now Friday again. Our sixth hour class

was pre-empted that day by a Homecoming pep rally. It was at this rally that the results of our election would be disclosed, revealing only who would sit on the Homecoming Court. The final results and crowning of king and queen would take place during half-time of the game later that night. After the pep rally, we would have the Homecoming Parade.

This actually would be my first pep rally ever, being a freshman. Most likely I'd have been unimpressed by the entire hoopla, had it not been for Brett. As we filed into the auditorium it was loud, students talking amongst themselves while the band played toe-tapping music. I looked around, trying to spot Elaine. Most likely Carly would have skipped out on the rally and made a beeline for the exit as soon as the fifth hour bell sounded. Joey was sure to be there, though, because he rode the bus to school every day and would have had no way home had he left school early. I spotted neither Joey nor Elaine so I climbed up into the bleachers and found an unoccupied seat. I was in the fifth row up from the gymnasium floor, near the edge of the railing. I leaned against the guard rail and watched the rest of the students as they entered.

When the auditorium filled up, the school principal, Mr. Phillips, stood in front of the bleachers behind a large podium and leaned into the snake-like microphone that was attached to the top of the podium. "Boyne City Senior High, welcome to our Homecoming pep rally!" The crowd erupted as the band again kicked in. "I proudly present to you tonight's victors, the Boyne City Ramblers!" Everyone was on their feet as the football team ran into the auditorium, entering through the locker room doors. They circled the gym, as if running laps, eventually lining up behind the podium alongside of Mr. Phillips.

The crowd continued in their ovation, remaining standing and cheering; the cheerleaders were on the floor in front of the bleachers giving high kicks and jumping in the air with their arms extended. Some had big red and blue pompoms, and all maintained broad plastic smiles. They reminded me of the Miss America Pageant contestants, the way they smiled like that. One of the cheerleaders was Mandy Myers, her long blonde hair pulled to each side of her head in unbraided pigtails.

My eyes quickly focused upon Brett, who was standing center stage. He too was beaming. He was, of course, wearing his football uniform and just seeing him with the shoulder pads was enough to practically make me cream myself. I cheered right along with the crowd, not for the Ramblers though, but for my hero Brett. The Boyne uniform was a navy and red jersey with white stripes; the pants were white with a blue stripe running up the side of each leg. He was drop-dead, unbelievably hot looking as stood up there on that stage, one of the tallest on the team. His locks of black hair and perfectly pearly white teeth contrasted one another. A lock of hair from his bangs fell onto his face, and he occasionally swept it back with a masculine flick of his fingers.

The principal proceeded to introduce each member of the team, stating their position and their stats. The crowd responded enthusiastically with each introduction, and many students blew into the noise-making party favors that had been distributed throughout the

crowd. He finally got to Brett. "Our next Rambler victor, which I am proud to introduce to you today, is sure to go all state! Lets hear it for number twenty-four, a junior, and our starting quarterback, Mr. Brett Willson!" Everyone went totally nuts. I stood up on the seat of the bleachers so that I could clearly see Brett. He beamed as Mr. Phillips held one of Brett's arms in the air, in a pose that was similar to political candidates that are posing for cameras the night before the big election.

God, I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs, "I love you Brett Willson!"

I wanted to just start telling everyone around me, "We belong to each other. He is mine. That football stud at the podium, he made love to me this weekend. We are going to be together forever and make passionate love every waking day of our lives. He calls me 'sport'; he buys me gifts; he dries my eyes when I am sad and crying. He kisses me in his BMW sports car, and we take showers together!!!" But I said none of these things to anyone. I just stood there, like a grain of sand amongst a million others on a beach. I stood there applauding and cheering, staring down at the man of my dreams. I looked into his eyes, praying he would look up in the cheering crowd and spot me.

For that moment, time stood still for me. It seemed to me that he did look up at me. I thought for a brief second that he spotted me, and fixed his eyes upon me, upon my Sport cap I had especially worn in his honor, upon my misty eyes as I applauded him, the embodiment of my ultimate fantasy. Perhaps he had.

The rally moved forward and the remaining players were introduced, followed by an introduction of Coach McDonald. McDonald took the podium and gave some feeble attempt of a speech. I almost was embarrassed for him, the pompous windbag. The football team then stepped back, still remaining on the floor of the gymnasium, as the Homecoming court was announced.

"I will read the list of the top five names selected by our student body for Homecoming Court. Of these five, four will serve as runners up and one will be crowned Queen this evening at half time. The names are as follows: Kathy Britton, Jessica Moran, Karen Ellison, Tanya Sutton, and Amanda Myers." Each name was interrupted by applause, as the winning girls came forward to the podium.

For Homecoming King there was not a court elected. The top-vote getter was simply crowned King. But Mr. Phillips announced the five who received the most votes, I suppose for congruity as well as suspense. "Chad Hansen, Tim Williams, Brett Willson, Kerry Johnson, and Kyle Vaughn." Each of the five male students moved behind the podium alongside of the Homecoming Court. Four of the five males were on the football team. The one single candidate who was not on the team was Kerry Johnson who ran down from the bleachers. Kerry was not a football player, but a jock nonetheless. His sport was basketball.

Brett had moved alongside of Mandy Myers, who stood there beaming with that same plastic smile. She leaned over and kissed Brett on the cheek, and he placed his arm

around her. I wanted to vomit again. I stopped applauding, just staring down at them, disgusted by the hypocrisy.

When the rally ended, the student body was really psyched, there were catcalls and cheers from students everywhere, even as we were exiting the auditorium. I tried frantically to make my way through the crowd. I was trying to get down to the floor, the area where Brett was. There were so many people in front of me, even though I'd only been in the fifth row. They had descended the bleachers en masse. I continued to push my way through, occasionally saying "excuse me," or "I'm sorry", standing on my tiptoes, trying to see.

Finally I reached the area where Brett was. There were people all around him, many giving high-fives, handshakes, and slaps on the back. I squeezed my way through, until I was right in front of Brett. He looked down as I made eye contact with me. His look was a bit puzzled, but I beamed at him, "Brett, good luck tonight!" He smiled the same plastic smile as Mandy and said to me in a rather flippant way, "Thanks". He quickly looked away and was high-fiving with another teammate.

My heart sank. I turned and pushed back through the crowd, leaving him and all the others behind me. I struggled to find freedom from all the people, and when I finally made it to a clearing, my eyes were tearing over. I then ran as fast as I could towards the door and finally outside. I continued to run all the way home, crestfallen by his casual dismissal of me.

When I got home, I ran to my room and locked myself in with Reggie. We lay together on the bed and I cried, wondering how he could be so insensitive to me. I sobbed to Reggie, saying, "It's okay Reg. You know what, if he were all sensitive and sissified like me, then he would not be who he is, right? He was just busy, that's all, and we were in public. I already know that is how it has to be." But I kept crying, nonetheless. I didn't see the parade, but I did pull myself together before the game.

Mom and I went down to the Dairy Queen for burgers, which was a rare treat. Very seldom did we get to eat out, but Mom had gotten her payroll check and also the check for her cleaning job. My grandma was helping her with this month's rent, until she started getting help from the Department of Social Services. The DQ was the closest thing that Boyne had to fast food, and that was only opened for about nine months of the year. Just before Christmas it closed for three months, due to the fact that not many people craved ice cream in subzero weather, and it was actually the ice cream that was the DQ trademark.

"So how was school today?" my mom asked as I was stuffing fries into my mouth. We were sitting in the big park down by the lake; it was another warm day, about sixty degrees, so we decide to make a picnic out of it. The park by the lake was called "Memorial Park" and there was a big cannon prominently displayed there, a memorial for the servicemen who had died in the war. A couple blocks from Memorial Park was a smaller, quaint little park called "Veterans Park" in which there was another memorial,

listing all of the servicemen who were in the wars. Memorial Park was also the home of a gigantic band shell. Basically it was a concrete stage with a big curved aluminum shell that came up from the back, providing shelter for the entertainers. I assumed it also served as a conductor for sound. We were sitting about fifty feet from the band shell under a large pavilion.

"Good," I mumbled, barely understandable due to my mouth being full. "We had a pep rally?"

"Oh yeah? For the homecoming game? Did you come downtown to see the parade afterwards?"

I shook my head. "No, I could not find Elaine or Joey, so I just came home."

"Hmmm, well you should have gone with your other friend, Brett."

I looked at her as if she were from outer space. "Mom, Brett is the star quarterback on the football team. He was in the parade."

"Oh, well all the more reason for you to have gone to it. He is your friend, right?"

I nodded. "Well I didn't really feel like it. I see Dad got all moved," I said, changing the subject, but then immediately regretting it, being that the new topic was not much better than the one I just averted.

"Uh huh... so how did your science project go with Joey?" I guess I'd learned my topic-changing skills from my mom.

"Oh, it was killer. We totally wowed them. Well, actually Joey did. See we got these diamagnetic plates from the science lab and used them to suspend two magnets in mid-air between them. It looked totally unreal, but actually it was a really simple project. And the cool thing was that the two magnets did not ever touch each other. They were suspended and yet also held apart."

"Well that does sound interesting. You trapped the magnets," she laughed. "How did your English test go?"

"Aced it," I said confidently. "It was easy, but I don't know yet how Brett did. That is what I'm most anxious about. We probably will get our tests back on Monday, though. I'm really worried though, 'cause this first test was all just basics, like the parts of speech and stuff. We are going to move onto the more complicated stuff now, like verb tenses, infinitives, gerunds, participles - stuff like that, and if Brett doesn't totally understand the basics, he will never learn that."

"Well you study together enough, he should be learning something."

He's learning something, all right! Like how to kiss me. "Yeah, he's learning. He is a good student." And you should see some of the things he is teaching me!

"Honey, are you gonna be all right with this situation with your dad and me? I want to make sure you understand it all has nothing to do with you."

"Mom, I'm a teenager, not a baby. Of course I'm all right. All kinds of people get divorces all the time. I don't see why you should think it would be so devastating to me. It's not like Dad has ever cared about me to begin with, so why should I care if he leaves or not?"

"Jeff, don't speak of your father like that."

"I'm sorry. It's not just me though, Mom. He never treated you right either."

"Still, we took our vows, 'for better or for worse'." Her eyes were tearing up.

"Don't cry mom, please... What are you supposed to do though, when your husband comes home drunk every night? That is beyond 'worse', and plus he's the one that left you, not the other way around."

"Look at those swans!" my mother shifted topics again. "I can't believe they are still here." Most of the river fowl flew south for the winter. We always had a few ducks who hung around year round, but after September, you hardly ever saw a swan, robin, or blue jay. "Do you know that swans mate for life? If one of the pair dies, the other lives out his or her life alone, and does not find a new partner. Isn't that amazing?"

"It's called monogamy, Mom," I laughed.

"Well, maybe that is what you will do. I believe you are going to meet the right girl someday, kiddo, who is gonna just totally sweep you off your feet. When that happens you are gonna have it bad for her, I know. You feel things so intensely. Then you can give me lots of grandbabies." She was smiling through her tears, as she had not completely gotten past her earlier display of emotion.

"Maybe someday," I said, looking down at my half-eaten sandwich, grabbing another handful of fries. "Just don't rush me."

She reached over and tousled my hair. "Never, kiddo. I wouldn't dream of it. You have gotta decide who, when, and how all on your own."

It was the "who" part that bothered me the most.

At the game, we sat right behind the cheerleaders. Elaine had found and joined us, and we three were bundled together under a blanket. The temperature had dropped

considerably. I just wanted to vomit every time I looked down to see that plastic Mandy Myers doing her stupid high kicks and screaming in her high-pitched and annoying voice.

It was so exciting to see Brett on the field. He was awesome. Even though I neither knew nor cared very much about football, I could have watched him all night. Sometimes I was so scared though that he was going to be injured. When he'd get tackled, I would jump up out of my seat, afraid he might not get back up, but he always did. Actually we were way ahead at half-time.

As expected, Mandy Myers was presented with the Homecoming Queen title and crown. Brett was her king. During the presentation, I focused all of my attention on Brett, standing up there in his filthy football uniform in front of all of those people, still looking like a god. Boyne went on to win the game easily, with a score of 36-12. The town was pretty pumped up about it, fans driving around blowing horns and acting like morons. I did my share of cheering, though not really so much for the team as for the quarterback.

Elaine commented throughout the game into my ear, always saying some smart ass comment or question like, "Do his knees get that dirty when he's studying with you?" or "I wonder what it is like to be tackled by someone like Brett?"

I was sort of sad when the night was over, because I knew that Brett would be going to the dance with Mandy, and I would be going home alone. It sickened me to think of them on the dance floor together in front of all those people. I was glad, though, that we had won. Brett would be so psyched about it.

When my mom and I got back home, she made us hot chocolate. I thought about how sad she must be feeling, being that her husband of twenty years had just left her today. I wanted to grab hold of her and hold her in my arms; I wanted to make her feel as safe and secure as I felt while in the arms of Brett. I just did not know how to comfort her.

We sat at the dining room table drinking our hot chocolate. She was smoking, savoring each inhalation and audibly exhaling with each puff. I knew she was thinking of something, but I could not find words to communicate with her. We just sat there in silence. Finally she announced she was calling it a night, and stubbed out her cigarette. She then stood up and stepped towards me, as I sat there in my chair. She leaned down and kissed my forehead, wrapping her arms around me. "I love you so much, honey. Everything is going to be just fine."

"I know it is, Mom. I love you too."

* * * * *

I lay in bed that night curled up with Reggie. It was around 2 a.m. when I heard a noise that sounded very strange. Was it hailing outside? I got up and walked to the window, peeling back the curtains. Clear as a bell, full moon even. Then as I peered out the window I was somewhat frightened as I saw something smack into the window pane. I looked down towards the ground. It was Brett! He was throwing pebbles against my window.

I threw the window open and yelled down to him in a hushed voice, "Brett, what are you doing?"

"I've got to see you!" he yelled up at me.

"Shhh! Stay right there!" I commanded. Oh Christ! What if my mom hears? I slammed the window shut and raced around to the other side of my bed, pulling on my pants. Reggie had stirred, and barked a single yelp which I quickly scolded him for, telling him to be quiet. I pulled on a shirt and grabbed my shoes and parka, and tiptoed out into the hall and down the stairs. Reggie was locked in my room, surely to fall back asleep.

When I got outside I motioned for Brett to head for the back yard, where I met him. "What are you doing here Brett?" I repeated my unanswered question which I'd just posed from my window.

"I had to see you, Sport. I was at that dance all night. God, I thought it was not gonna ever get over."

"Have you been drinking?"

He nodded. "Just a little." Then he laughed. I suspected it may have been more than just a little.

"How did you get here? Did you walk from the school?"

Brett nodded, moving closer to me and grabbing my shoulders. "My car is at the school still." He leaned in and kissed me and I tasted the alcohol on his breath.

"You are drunk!" I accused.

"So?" he retorted. Then he grabbed me and bent me over backwards, kissing me very deeply as I rested in the crook of his arm. "Let's go somewhere together, Sport. Let's go back to my place."

"What about my mom?! She is gonna be way freaked if I am not home when she wakes up."

"So we will have you home when she wakes up. No big deal."

I looked at him seriously. "But you can't drive when you are like this."

He shrugged. "I'm fine. Don't worry, I am just fine. If you want, you can drive."

"Brett, I don't have a driver's license! I don't know how to drive," I reminded him.

He again shrugged his shoulders, "So".

Oh god, I had to be with him! "Okay, let's go!" He kissed me again before we took off together, running towards the school. We were holding hands as we ran in the dark, he dragging me behind him.

That was my first driving lesson, self-taught, I might add. Brett was not in a condition to be teaching me anything. I even managed to park the car neatly in his garage without doing any damage. We did not have to worry about sneaking into the house because Brett's parents were not home. I thought it was odd that they would be away for the weekend when it was their son's big game.

Brett seemed to have sobered when we finally were alone together in his bedroom. After the game he had showered and changed, now wearing a sweater and khakis. He sat down on the bed and I sat next to him.

"God, I missed you, Sport," he said as he looked down at me. "Tim had a bottle of Seagram's tonight that we were sharin. We kept sneakin off to the john, until finally it was gone," he laughed. "Soon as I started catchin a buzz, I started to think about you. I had to see you."

"I thought about you too, Brett. So much!"

"Don't be mad about earlier. I'm sorry." He was referring to the pep rally. I just shook my head, looking lovingly in his eyes.

"You know what I think about when I think of you, Sport?" I looked into his eyes, waiting for him to continue. "I think about how you are with your dog. How that dog is so loyal to you and loves you so much. You could do anything to him and he would still obey you and love you. Dogs are loyal. They live to please their masters. Well that is what I think about you. You are like my pup, so loyal."

I smiled at him. "Your pup," I repeated.

"My pup," he said, leaning in to kiss me. He pushed me backwards on the bed, so gently with his arm cradled around my shoulder. He pinned me underneath him on the bed and kissed me so passionately. "I want to make love to you pup. Will you let me make love to you?"

I nodded to him. "Yes," I whispered. "But I am afraid."

"Don't be afraid... please don't be afraid. I could never hurt you." He proceeded to kiss and caress away my fears, moving down my body so gently, undressing me. Eventually we were naked together as he leaned over me. I was on my back, looking up into his eyes when he entered me for the first time, introducing me to the blissful ecstasy of the pleasure-pain experience, ultimately taking me to the brink of delirium.

We lay in each others arms afterwards, my small body cradled in his strong embrace. We slept so peacefully, lying there together as if we were the only souls on the planet. Nothing else mattered, only that I was there with him.

Daylight!! Oh fuck!! It's daylight! I woke up suddenly, realizing where I was. "Brett, wake up! It's daylight." He moaned. "I have to get home before my mom wakes up!"

His eyes opened and he jumped out of bed. "Oh fuck! Get dressed." We raced around pulling ourselves into our clothes. Within the frenzy and panic, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I had my shirt on inside-out. I laughed in spite of the situation, and tore it off, then redressing myself.

Surprisingly, the house was quiet when I sneaked in. I crept up the stairs and into my bedroom, crawling back in with Reggie who barely stirred. I thought about what had happened, what he had said to me and had done to me. It was so surreal. This cannot be happening. Yet it was happening. I was so in love with this boy - this man - whatever he was. He was my hero, my ultimate fantasy made flesh. I fell back asleep in my own bed, remembering him inside me.

Chapter 10

The high school football team had played and won its first game. They had nine games total to play in the season. The remaining eight games would be played over the next four weeks, on Tuesdays and Fridays. During the actual season, practices were long and often. The team even practiced on weekends. In order to meet with Brett at all during this time, we had to be very resourceful. Sometimes I'd meet him at the gym, hiding out under the bleachers, and he'd hang around in the locker room until all of the rest of the team had dispersed. Then he'd call for me and I'd sneak in to be with him. One of these times we even used Coach McDonald's office.

We only studied together once or twice a week, and it was usually in the later evening after practice was over. Twice Brett called me after a game and had me wait for him outside until he drove over to pick me up. He was so pumped about winning the game that he wanted to be with me. At these times, he got so into me worshipping him, already on a high from the win. My submissiveness fed his ego even more.

Brett was doing surprisingly well in his English class. He had gotten a B on that first test. When Mr. Litzenfowler passed back the tests, I turned to look at him, and he was beaming. He looked directly at me and flipped his test around so that I saw the big "B" in red ink on the front. Litz had eased up on Brett in class also, perhaps finally seeing that he had potential and was actually trying to apply himself. During our tutoring sessions, we took each morsel of new material one bite at a time. I made sure that Brett understood each new piece of information very well before proceeding.

It was ironic that in the beginning I thought that the entire experience of tutoring Brett was going to be a matter of endurance for me. I felt bullied into helping Brett in the first place, which is precisely what Mr. McDonald's intentions had been.

Brett and I were getting braver in school in terms of our communication with one another. Sometimes we ate lunch together in the cafeteria. He would also stop by my locker between classes sometimes to talk to me. I would leave him notes in his locker, which I slid through one of the vents on the front. I always wondered what in the hell those vents were actually for. Was it that the designers had realized that some poor wimp may end up getting stuffed into one of those lockers by some schoolyard bully? Perhaps they were intended to be emergency air holes.

Brett's very favorite beverage was Mountain Dew. He drank it like it was water; he was a Dew freak. Sometimes I'd buy him one from the cafeteria and sneak it into his gym bag during open gym, when nobody really paid attention to who was going in and out of the locker room. I'd attach a note that said, "Your pup luvs you," or some other corny, sentimental line. I'd cut out pictures of cute puppies and make him cards, in which I stated how much he meant to me, how proud I was to be his.

It was almost exactly a month from the time we first became intimate to the final game of the football season. It was the Tuesday before

Thanksgiving. We were on Thanksgiving break from Wednesday through Sunday, so everyone was pretty excited about that, and the whole school was ecstatic that our football team had an 8-0 record. They had won literally every game of the season and were hell bent upon ending the year with a perfect season. We already knew that the team was going on to the divisional championships. If they won, it would then be regionals, and then the state championship.

With all of the time that I devoted to finding ways to be with Brett, it put a major crimp on my other friendships. I still made an honest effort to maintain my friendship with Elaine. We actually called one another almost every night. But as for Joey, the only time I saw him was during science class, and sometimes at lunch. Whereas I was spending many of my lunches with Brett, Joey had developed a new friendship of his own with a kid named Shane Meadows. Shane had been in our class for most of our school years, but after his parents divorced, he moved away with his mom to Indiana. She finally moved back to her home town and reenrolled Shane in Boyne City High during his freshman year.

I did not dislike Shane at all, but I never really bonded with him as a friend. He was rather flamboyant in his demeanor and loved to grandstand for attention. He always cut up in his classes, doing anything for a laugh. Shane also was a very gifted dancer and singer. He found out about four weeks into the school year that he had been accepted into a group of young performers called American Teen. This group did stage shows and actually toured throughout the Midwest during summer break. Their performances were pretty much local during the school year.

It really shocked me when Elaine and I bundled up again in the front row of the bleachers for that final football game and looked down at the cheerleaders in front of us. There were all of the regulars that we had grown used to seeing at the games, but also a newcomer, Shane Meadows. "Oh my god, Elaine. Is that Shane Meadows?" She nodded and smiled. "He's not a cheerleader, is he?" It was a dumb question because he was standing right there in front of us in a cheerleader uniform. It was a male uniform, of course, but with precisely all of the same colors and design as the female uniforms, just no skirt or tits.

She laughed. "Didn't you hear about that whole controversy?" I stated that I had not. "Well Shane has been trying to get on the cheerleading squad since he started school, but there has never been a male cheerleader in Boyne City. The paper actually ran an article about it, didn't you see it?"

"No, and I can't believe I never heard anyone talk about it either." Usually my mom read that paper, and I was surprised that she hadn't mentioned it. Mom and I had not seen too much of each other over the past couple of weeks though. After my dad split, my mom started to pick up extra cleaning jobs and worked more nights at the bar, in addition to her 9-5 job at the hospital. I was concerned about her, but it didn't bother me too badly. It actually gave me more freedom to see Brett when I wanted. She trusted me implicitly and never questioned what I was doing or with whom I was doing it.

My grandma had been making it a point to make more frequent visits to our home. Some nights she'd come over to fix dinner for the two of us when my mom was working. If Erik happened to be home, he'd join us. I loved spending this time with my grandma, it was sort of a rekindling of the close relationship that the two of us had previously had.

When I was a young child my grandma used to take me for a week every summer to go with her on vacation. She always went to the same place - Manistee, Michigan - to visit her sister. My Aunt Dotty owned a big house in the country that had a small cabin out back, sort of nestled in the woods. This cabin was where my grandma and I bunked during our vacations. Manistee was located on Lake Michigan, and we would spend a lot of time on the beach. My Aunt Dotty had several grandchildren, my second cousins, and we saw a lot of them. The one that I hung out with most of the time during these visits was Melissa, who was one hundred percent tomboy, without question.

After I grew up, I came to learn that Melissa was a lesbian. This was tragic news for my Aunt Dotty and her entire family. My Uncle Lukas, Dotty's husband, actually disowned Melissa when her sexual orientation was finally disclosed. I think that it is so curious that Melissa and I were so very close during our childhood years, perhaps each suspecting something 'special' about the other, though not being able to fully understand it. I'd often wanted to get with her to compare notes to see if any of her experiences as a teen were at all similar to my own, particularly relating to first love.

"Well, anyways, everyone thinks he's a fag," Elaine was saying. "Far be it from this town to ever understand the possibility that a guy could get into anything other than playing sports or hunting," she added sarcastically.

I snickered, demonstrating my agreement with her statement. "Well do you think maybe he is gay?" I asked.

"Why, aren't things go well for you and your star quarterback? You on the make for a new boyfriend?"

"No!" I shot back, "Things are going just fine for Brett and me. And keep your voice down." I lowered my voice to a whisper. "We are gonna try to get together this weekend. The divisional championship game is Saturday in Traverse City, and I'm going to try to talk my mom into letting me ride down with Brett in his car."

"Really? Doesn't he have to ride on the bus?"

"No, almost all of the parents are going so they are letting the team choose whether to go on the bus or with their parents. Brett is just going to take his own car. His parents are getting him his own hotel room and everything. The guys that choose to ride the bus have to come back that night."

"Well that doesn't make sense," she informed me. "If we win, the whole team is coming back here for a big celebration aren't they? I mean I remember a few years ago when the

basketball team came back from some championship and they drove the bus all around town, all these cars behind them blowing horns and shit. It was a big parade."

"Yeah, they will probably do that, but Brett would rather be with me than to be in a big celebration and parade." I smiled broadly. "We already discussed it.

"You little shit. You two are gonna fuck each others brains out, aren't you?"

"Don't ask questions that you don't really wanna know the answers to, love." We then both laughed.

"So what does Joey think about Shane being a cheerleader?" I asked.

"Oh you know Joey, he is so weird. He thinks it is just some sort of political statement that Shane is making. He says Shane's a good dancer and performer and so he's using his talents to speak out against prejudice."

"I've never thought of Joey as being a civil rights activist. It surprises me that he even wants to have anything to do with this Shane. I mean look at how he has practically washed his hands of my friendship after all these years, just because I am hanging with a 'dumb jock'."

"Well, you are doing a little more than hanging with him, Jeff," Elaine smiled. "Do you literally hang with him, I mean like from chandeliers and shit?"

"Shut up! You are such a nosy bitch, you know!" I mockingly scolded her.

"But you love me!" She put her arm around me and I hugged her back, as we prepared to watch my hero Brett lead our team into victory, a perfect 9-0 season. He did exactly that.

* * * * *

"Did you know that there is a bar in Traverse City?" Brett asked.

"Uh yeah, there are probably lots of them," I laughed. We were in the Beamer, on the way to the hotel. It was Friday afternoon, the day after Thanksgiving, and Brett's parents had reserved the room over the phone with their credit card. We were going down to spend the night together the night before the game, and then Saturday morning Brett would meet the team at the high school at eleven o'clock. The game was at 5pm, so I was not sure what I'd be doing during that interim period. I had a couple of good books with me, including Robert McCammon's Boys Life, one of my all-time favorite fictional books.

"No, I mean a bar for all guys. Guys like us," Brett explained to me. "A gay bar, you mean."

"Whatever. But don't you think it would be cool to go to a bar like that where we could dance and stuff together, and not have to hide how we feel?"

"Yeah, that would be cool. But there is no way I'd ever be able to get into a bar. I'm not even fifteen."

"I know, Sport. But still it would be cool. So how did you talk your mom into letting you come down here with me?"

"She was cool with it after she talked to your mom. She thinks it's just 'cause we're friends and because I want to see the game. I told her about there being a pool and stuff, and I think she is glad I can go. We never get to do stuff like that, our family I mean."

"Cool. Then I'm glad you get to do it with me." He reached over and flicked the lid of my Sport cap affectionately. "I can't wait to use the hot tub. You ever been in a hot tub, Pup?" I shook my head. "You're gonna love it. It is just like a huge bath but with really warm water spraying all over your body. You won't believe how good it feels."

"So you like the feel of warm and wet things on your body?" I asked.

"Ummm, certain warm, wet things," he grinned at me evilly.

When we got to the hotel we took our things up to our room and immediately changed into our suits, heading for the pool. Of course the first thing we did was to completely ignore the "No jumping or diving" sign and cannon-balled into the center of the pool. We had a blast in that pool. I discovered that people are weightless in water. I could swim under Brett and pick him right up under the water. He just relaxed and let me have my fun. He lay back in my arms and I carried him around the pool, just my head and shoulders sticking up out of the water. Finally we decided we were hungry, so we headed back towards our room.

I had a towel wrapped around my neck and Brett was wearing his draped over his shoulder when we walked around the corner of the corridor to turn down the hallway where our room was when I literally bumped into a man coming from the opposite direction. I looked up to excuse myself and found myself staring right in the face of Mr. Litzenfowler. I think that he was just about as shocked to see me in that hallway as I was to see him, but I think I might have been a tad more concerned being that Brett and I were together.

"Hey guys, what are you doing here?" he asked.

Brett and I glanced at one another and then back to him. Brett spoke, "We are down here for the game. It is the division championship tomorrow."

"Oh, that's right. Are you guys here together?"

Brett nodded. "Yeah, our families have been friends for a long time."

"Wow, I didn't even realize that," Litz laughed. "I honestly didn't think you two ever even spoke to one another. You never do in class."

We both shrugged, almost simultaneously. Suddenly the door that we were in front of opened and out walked a thirty-ish looking man. He stood there right next to Mr. Litz, smiling. "Boys this is my friend Tom, er, Mr. Britton." He turned to his friend and said, "Tom, these two boys are students of mine in Boyne. They both are in my English grammar class. Brett Willson and Jeff Irwin."

Mr. Britton extended his hand to greet us. He was a very attractive man, about Brett's height, also dark complected. "Nice to meet you. I hear your team has a big game tomorrow. Are you here for that?"

"Yes sir," I offered, "Brett is the team's quarterback."

"Well good for you," Mr. Britton said. "Good luck to you tomorrow." He smiled and then turned to Mr. Litzenfowler. "Guess we better get going, we have reservations and are going to be late."

"Nice again to see you, guys," said Mr. Litz, and the two of them headed down the hall together.

"Whoah!" said Brett to me when they were out of earshot. "Are you thinkin what I'm thinkin?" I nodded.

"Oh my god! Maybe when Mr. McDonald called Litz a fag, he was right. Do you think that they were just friends? They are sharing a hotel room together and leaving together for dinner reservations." I felt a big smile come across my face.

"He's a fag," Brett said, as if it were a statement of fact. "Hey I've got an idea, why don't we follow them?"

"In our bathing suits?!" I laughed. "Be serious."

"Come on! What if they are going to the gay bar? We will know for sure they are that way."

I stared at him for a brief moment and added, "Lets at least get some clothes." We ran down the hall to our room and grabbed our shoes and a handful of clothes and headed right back out the door. We raced to the elevator, and started dressing once inside. "Take your suit off before you put on your pants, or you'll be soakin wet," Brett told me. So we stood there in the elevator buck naked, before redressing ourselves. When the doors

opened into the lobby, we saw the two of them just leaving through the main entrance. We acted casual and headed for the door ourselves. We watched which direction they left out of the parking lot, and then dashed for the BMW. We peeled out behind them.

They were in a tan Buick LaSabre. This was so ridiculous; we were on a covert spy mission, in pursuit of our high school English teacher, following him to a restaurant. "Why are we following him again?" I asked Brett. "What's it going to prove? They are just going to a restaurant."

He glanced over to me, briefly taking his eyes off The Buick. "I want to see if they are really going out to eat, or if they are going to that bar." Even though I knew how silly this was, I was getting excited. It was like we were in a movie or something, spying on these men. Maybe they were criminals of some sort, running an illegal operation right in my own home town. Perhaps Litz was a Russian spy, or maybe they laundered stolen pieces of valuable art or something. My imagination was taking me all over the place.

Actually, though, we were just two kids following our English teacher and his friend, probably to a restaurant. Traverse City seemed like a huge city to me, even though it was merely another small northern Michigan town. It was sixty miles southwest of Boyne City, and was the only town north of Grand Rapids that had a shopping mall. In relative terms, it was a big city, compared to tiny Boyne.

My excitement waned a bit when we saw them turn into the lot of Reflections By The Bay, which actually was an upscale restaurant. Nonetheless, Brett pulled into the lot after them and parked the car. "So you were wrong. They actually did have dinner reservations."

He shrugged. "Still, I bet that after they eat, they're gonna go out somewhere. Let's go get something to eat and then come back in like an hour. We can follow them to wherever they go." I was beginning to wonder if it was even worth it. Why did we really care where they went? But I honestly was just enjoying the time together with Brett and would have agreed to anything he said. Brett backed out of the parking space and we headed downtown, to the main business district. We found a Subway restaurant and he parked the car. We had to walk about a block to get from the car to the restaurant. I was checking out the shops that we passed, peering through the display windows.

Today was the biggest shopping day of the year, being the day after Thanksgiving. All of the stores were decorated for Christmas. Even though it was eight o'clock at night, the streets were still full of people, and most of the shops open. I wondered what Christmas would be like at our house this year with my father gone. My mom did not have much money to pay the bills as it was, so how would she ever afford Christmas gifts.

I had brought some of my own money with me, for my weekend with Brett. During the summers I mowed lawns, almost always saving every penny. Many times when my mom needed cash I'd try giving her some of my own, but she always refused. I still planned on trying to get a job at the grocery store, and then I would make her take the money.

"If we have time, I want to go into that shop there. I mean after we eat,"

I told Brett.

"Okay sure," he said. I wanted to see if I could find a gift for my mom. She loved knick knacks of all kinds and was especially fond of butterflies. I always thought that my mother's name, Candice, was so appropriate for her. People called her "Candy" and she literally was one of the sweetest people I knew. Sometimes it was frustrating though, like when we went grocery shopping or anywhere in public really. She knew so many people and she loved to socialize so much, that a simple fifteen minute shopping trip would last for hours.

We loaded up our sandwiches with almost everything available when we got inside Subway. That was what I liked about that restaurant, you could create your own masterpiece. Mine was so enormous that I hardly could get my mouth around it. After eating half, I offered the rest to Brett, who had already devoured his entire sub. "You are so cute when you eat," Brett laughed. I grinned back at him.

"Why do you say that?"

He shrugged his shoulders, "Dunno, you just are. You take little bites, I guess."

"Oh, well one time at this picnic we were having in our backyard, my cousin Larry said that I ate like a fag. He did not like that I picked the meat off my chicken with a fork instead of picking it up with my hands and biting into it. You know what pissed me off about it though? My dad and everyone just laughed when he said it."

"Well since you are a fag, so what if they think you eat like one, and just how is it that a fag eats as opposed to how everyone else eats?" he asked.

"I guess if you don't act like an cannibal when you devour a piece of meat, you are a faggot," I said.

"Whatever."

When we finished eating we went back over to the little shop next door. I found the perfect gift for my mom. It was a small crystal plaque, in the shape of a plate with a bronzed inscription that read: "Mom, For taking the time to care ... for caring enough to love ... for loving enough to understand me ... I Love You." Next to the inscription was a beautiful butterfly. "She is gonna really love it, I bet," Brett told me.

Chapter 11

We were sitting in Brett's car, a half a block away from Reflections, listening to Bryan Adams. We knew that Litz had not left the restaurant because his car was still in the same parking spot, so we just kept our eye on the main entrance.

I laughed. "It's like we are on a stakeout." Just as I said that, we saw them coming out the door. "There they are," I said. Brett started the car. He waited for them to pull out of the lot and get down the street about half of a block and then he pulled the Beamer out onto the road behind them. We stayed behind them for a considerable distance, but always kept sight of them. It looked like they were going back to the hotel, but then they turned.

We got up to the intersection where they had turned and could see their car nowhere. Brett gunned it and sped down the side street. Eventually we came to another intersection. I looked ahead, beyond the stop light and saw that they had pulled into another parking lot and were getting out of the car. I pointed them out to Brett. We waited at the red light and by the time it had changed, our assailants had walked away from the car. Brett pulled into the lot and parked his car right next to theirs.

I looked across the street and saw the "Night Club" sign, in pink neon. "Well, they definitely are at a bar," I surmised. "But is it a gay bar? How do we know?" The name of the club was "The Tangerine".

"I'd definitely say this was a fag bar," Brett stated. "Who else would name their club The Tangerine?" We both laughed.

"Okay, so now we know, so lets go back to the hotel and use the hot tub."

"No," Brett said, "I wanna check this place out."

"Are you crazy? First of all, there is no way we would get in there, and secondly, even if we did, Litz would see us for sure. How would we explain that?"

"I bet he'd be a lot more worried about us seeing him than the other way around, Sport. I just want to check it out. What is the worst thing that can happen? They might throw us out. If so, big deal. We don't know anyone down here anyways. Trust me. C'mon." He opened his door and stepped out of the car. Tentatively, I followed. Oh Christ, we are gonna get in so much trouble.

The man at the door just stared at us. He was probably around 25, very effeminate and wearing tons of jewelry. "Boys, you do realize that you have to be 21 to get in, right?" He looked right at me. "I don't think you were even out of diapers when I first got this job, kid. No way are you gettin in."

Brett spoke up. "C'mon man, can't you stamp our hand or something? We aren't here to drink." The door attendant looked at Brett, shaking his head.

"Honey, you sure are pretty and I'd love to accommodate you, but rules are rules. It ain't worth losin my job over. Sorry. Go see a movie or something." Just as he said that the front door which he was guarding, opened from the inside and a blast of loud music flooded the entryway. I leaned over and looked into the bar as one of the patrons exited. He was a middle aged man, and he stopped briefly to check out Brett, smiled, and then walked past us to the front door. The doorman continued to stare at us, now his tone changing considerably, "Take a hike boys, or I will have to have you removed."

Just as he said that, the inside door opened again and out stepped Mr. Litz. Fuck! He stood there frozen and asked us the same exact question he had two hours earlier at the hotel, only this time with a look of stunned fear on his face, "What are you guys doing here?" Apparently he must have forgotten something from his car, for he was not wearing his jacket. It looked like he was just stepping out to get something.

Brett answered, "No, Mr. Litzenfowler, what are you doing here?"

Mr. Litz looked over to the doorman, "Matt, are you gonna let these boys in?"

He laughed. "Fuck no, get serious."

Litz stared at him intently. "Tell you what, will you let them in if I promise to keep an eye on them? They are with me. They will sit at my table and only drink pop, I swear." He reached in his pants pocket and pulled out a twenty, handing it to Matt.

Matt hesitated, but only briefly and nodded towards the door. We followed Mr. Litz into the bar. He led us to a table near the back of the room to join his friend, Tom Britton. Tom seemed unfazed by our entrance, smiling again at us. "Hi again guys." He laughed.

"Sit down," Litz told us. "So why are you here? Did you follow us?"

"Follow you?" Brett said, "This is a public place. We wanted to check it out; we didn't follow anyone." I looked at Brett, amazed by how convincingly he could lie.

Litz just stared back at him, while Tom interrupted to ask if we wanted a pop. He left the table and went up to the bar to get the beverages and Mr. Litz continued. "Well, I have got to admit, I'm not very comfortable with you being here. I am not very open about who I am up in Boyne, if you know what I mean. I don't want anyone at school to know that I come here."

"So why do you come here?" Brett asked. I just sat there through this conversation, taking it in yet saying nothing. "Are you gay?"

Mr. Litzenfowler nodded. "Yes, but I'm not out, so please don't tell anyone about this." I was not at all familiar with the term "out" but I assumed he meant that he did not tell anyone about his being homosexual. "So why are you guys really here? Is it just curiosity?"

Brett leaned in, resting his elbows on the table. "We wanted to see what it was like, that's all. Never been to a place like this before, where guys hit on guys and shit." It seemed weird to hear Brett using this language while talking to one of our teachers.

Litz nodded, raising his eyebrows. "So are you two just friends or what?" I looked into Brett's face, anxious to hear his answer.

"We are very close friends," he said. "That is all you or anyone else needs to know."

Mr. Litzenfowler chuckled. "Hey, don't get defensive. I'm the one who just admitted to you that I'm gay, and both of you are students of mine. It is not like you have anything to lose by confiding in me. I am the one in the hot seat."

I looked around the room. It was not at all crowded but there were a couple dozen people there. They all looked so normal to me, nobody dressed in women's clothes or sported wild hairdos or anything. In fact, most of the men did not even seem to be effeminate. It looked just like a normal bar to me. Tom returned with our soda pop and sat back down.

"Mr. Litzenfowler," I finally spoke up, "don't worry, we won't tell anyone about you, I swear. Nobody knows about us either, and we want to keep it that way." I reached over and put my hand on Brett's thigh.

Brett, being braver than I, then posed a question for our teacher, "So why have you been busting my balls for the past two years like you have? Why wouldn't you ever cut me any slack?"

"I don't believe in that Brett," Mr. Litz said sincerely. "I don't believe I'd be doing you any favors by passing you when you hadn't learned the material. For some reason this semester, though, you are suddenly doing remarkably well." He looked directly at me.

"I have been tutoring Brett," I explained. "We are not cheating or anything though," I quickly added.

"I know you're not cheating" he smiled, "but I knew Brett must be getting some help from somewhere. Another thing is that I really thought you were not even trying to do well in my class, Brett. I thought that you were so focused upon athletics that you really didn't care about your academic achievement."

"Well I do care. I care a lot. I don't want people to think I'm just some dumb jock." I leaned into him, running my hand across his leg under the table. "We really need to get going though. I have a big game tomorrow and I want to get back to the hotel. Don't worry, your secret is safe with us."

We stood up and Tom rose, again extending his hand. "Good luck to you tomorrow, Brett. We will be there at the game." That gave me an idea.

"Hey, would you mind if I went to the game with you, Mr. Litzenfowler? We still had not figured out how I was going to get from the hotel to the school. Otherwise I'll probably have to wait for like six hours at the school until the game starts."

They looked at each other and then back to me. "Sure, we can ride together," Tom said. "Meet us in the lobby of the hotel around four o'clock." Brett and I said goodbye to them and then we left.

"I just all of a sudden felt like I had to get out of there," Brett said, "but I think everything is cool. I knew that guy was a fag though, I just totally knew it."

I nodded. "Just like me," I told Brett.

He looked down at me and smiled. "Yeah, you are my fag though." Then he kissed me.

Brett was perfectly right about the hot tub; it was incredible. We lay back opposite one another in the tub, and I felt like I was in heaven. I looked over at him as he lay there with his eyes closed, the bubbles of water splashing against his chest. He was too good to be true. "Brett, what are we going to do?"

Not opening his eyes, he responded unenthusiastically, "about what, Sport?"

"About everything. About us. I just want to be with you all the time, but pretty soon people are going to start to figure it out. People already wonder why you are even my friend to begin with."

"So?" he said. He opened his eyes and looked at me. "I have the right to be friends with anyone that I want. It's nobody's business, just like it's no one's business who Mr. Litzenfowler is friends with."

"Coach McDonald hates Litzenfowler, you know. He called him a faggot that day that he talked to me. He called him 'Litzenfucker'. I wonder if he actually knows that Litz is gay, and maybe that is why he hates him."

"Maybe, but I think it is more likely that he hates him because he's so smart."

"You think that he is jealous of how smart Litz is?" I asked.

"Yeah," Brett nodded. "It is sort of the way that I feel sometimes. I get so mad when people label me, tag me as a dumb jock. Yes, I'm a jock, but does that mean that automatically I am stupid?"

"It's a stereotype. It's like what they say about blonde people. Obviously all blondes are not dumb. In fact, what does hair color have to do with intelligence? Probably about as much as athletic ability has to do with it. When we first met I thought you were dumb. I really did, but after I got to know you I found out just how wrong I had been."

"Do you know that Shane Meadows kid, the one who is the cheerleader?"

Brett grinned. "Yeah, I know who he is. Why?"

"People think that he is a fag just because he's a cheerleader. Maybe it isn't the case at all. Maybe the fact that he likes to perform in front of people has virtually nothing to do with his sexual orientation, just like the fact that your intelligence has nothing to do with your athletic ability."

"Maybe," Brett said, "but you gotta admit it is strange for a high school dude to want to be a cheerleader."

I shrugged. "But isn't it the same exact thing as what we are talking about? I actually think he is good at it, to be honest. He has a good body too, he's very strong."

"Why are you checking out other guys' bodies, Sport. Isn't mine enough for you?"

I grinned broadly at him. "I'll be checking yours out tomorrow, big time."

"I'm so pumped about tomorrow, man. God! Can you believe we made it to Division Championships with a perfect season? It's just totally unreal. It feels like I'm in a dream."

"It's surreal," I told him, "that feeling when something doesn't seem real. It is either so good or so bad that it doesn't seem possible that it can actually be happening to you. That's how I feel when I'm with you, Brett. You are my dream come true."

"Last week I got a letter from my friend Terry." I felt a sudden pang of jealousy as he said it. "He is in college now in Boston. He has a new friend. You know I actually sat down and wrote him back. I told him about you."

"You did?" I was surprised. "What did you say about me?"

He smiled at me so affectionately then, I just wanted to kiss him all over. "I told him how incredibly cute you are." I laughed. "And I told him you are very smart, and that I love being with you. I told him how you helped me ace my English class, without even cheating ... and I told him about doing it in the locker room."

"You didn't?!" I guffawed. "I hope he doesn't show the letter to anyone!"

"Like I care if people in Boston know about us. Anyways, I'm happy for him that he has someone he can be with all the time, and I'm happy that I have you."

"You're not half as happy as I am, Brett. I love you so much."

"Come here," he said, pulling me into his arms and kissing me. "You're my pup. You belong to me."

"Can we go back to our room, so I can show you how a star quarterback deserves to be worshipped the night before his big game?"

"What are we waiting for?" We stood up, instantly feeling the crisp air around us. "Brrr!" We grabbed our towels and ran down the hall.

Waking up in his arms was the most wonderful feeling. I felt so warm and so safe and so very loved. His protective strength surrounded me, and I lay there absorbing the heat from his body. It felt as if we were one with one another, that there was no other place on earth that I could feel this contentment and security. I felt small when I was with him, not only because I actually was much smaller, but also because he seemed larger than life to me. He encompassed me, consumed me, owned me.

Was it wrong for me to feel this way about him? Not only was there the issue that this was a relationship between two members of the same gender, but also there was the issue of it being a relationship that was so very unequal. I did not consider myself to be his equal at all. He was more of a man than I was, more athletic, more popular, better looking, sure to accomplish more with his life. I existed in his shadow, drawing from his strength. I looked to him for approval and guidance, as well as protection. My greatest fear was to displease him.

Maybe all this was simply due to the fact that I was weak. I was immature. But I sensed that it was something much deeper than this. I sensed that there was something inside of me that would only feel fulfilled when I was in this secure and protective state.

I carefully pulled his arm off of me and crawled out of bed, then quietly dashed to the bathroom. When I returned Brett was waking up, probably having heard me stir. "What time is it?" he asked.

God, he was so funny in the mornings. I loved seeing him with the sleep still on him, about the only time ever that he seemed vulnerable himself: confused, disoriented. "It's about a quarter after eight," I answered him. "And you know what that means?"

"Huh?" he was so groggy.

"It means it is tickle time!" I shouted and jumped up onto the bed, straddling him. I pulled his wrists together up over his head and dug my finger into his pits. He was not ticklish, which is why he had allowed me to this, but he laughed anyways. He was laughing at me, not at my tickling. I leaned over him, using each of my hands to pin down his wrists against the pillow, "You are trapped now! My prisoner."

"Oh no. What am I going to do. I can't move," Brett droned in a monotone. "Please don't hurt me."

I grinned at him, "You had better start begging for mercy."

"Or what? What are you going to do to me?" He was nearly laughing as he looked up at me. Then suddenly he shifted himself, easily pulling his arms out of my grip and rolling me over onto the bed, reversing our positions. It was now he who was on top of me. "It's tickle time, huh?" he asked. "Well okay!" and then he proceeded to grab each of my sides with his big hands, burying his fingers into my flesh, as I started to squirm underneath him, laughing hysterically.

"You win! You win! Stop!" I was laughing so hard. He smiled down at me as he ceased tickling me and just gazed into my eyes.

"See what happens when you forget who is boss?" he asked. Then he pressed his mouth to mine and kissed me so softly. He cupped my head in his hands, gently pressing his palms against the sides of my face. "I'm so glad you are in my life, Sport. I'm so glad."

* * * * *

When we pulled into the football field, I could see that the spectator buses from Boyne had just arrived. I wondered if Elaine had decided to come. I told Mr. Litzenfowler I was going to go see if I could find her. She was carrying a duffel bag, as she disembarked the bus steps. "Elaine!" I called and she spun around to spot me.

"Hey!" she smiled. "How was your night out?" I just smiled at her and shrugged.

"What's in the big bag?" I asked.

"Oh just stuff. A blanket, some snacks and stuff." She handed it to me, obviously expecting me to carry it for her. I was the man, after all. "Gawd what a bus ride. We sang fight songs the entire way," she laughed. "Let's go get a seat."

We headed for the bleachers, and Elaine suddenly stopped in her tracks. "Did you hear about Shane Meadows?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. I hadn't heard anything.

"He is dead."

"What?! What do you mean he's dead?"

"He killed himself Thursday, on Thanksgiving."

I stared at her, shocked. "How do you know about it? It's probably a rumor."

"No, it isn't. People were talking about it on the bus. He hung himself in his own bedroom. His family was all downstairs watching football when it happened. One of the paramedics was Denise Parson's brother. She sat next to me on the bus."

"Oh my god!" I said, "Do they know why he did it? Did he leave a note?"

"I guess he did, but I don't know what it said. At the hospital they tried for almost an hour to revive him, but even if they had been able to, he had broken his neck." I winced, not wanting to think about those details.

"I wonder if Joey knows. Oh god, he is gonna be so crushed."

"I know. Poor Joey Can you imagine what it would be like to have a member of your family off themselves on Thanksgiving? I feel so sorry for that family." Elaine was right. That would be horrible.

We continued our trek towards the bleachers, and as I looked around me I thought it was amazing that this tragic news had not seemed to affect any of the fans. Everyone was cheerful and happy, going on with life as if nothing had happened. It really did not seem right, actually. Suddenly the football game seemed like only a game to me after all. It seemed ironic that it was of more importance to most people than the fact that one of our students had just done himself in.

What could have been so horrible to Shane that he would not want to go on any more? How could he just end his life like that, when he had not even really started to live it in the first place? I would have never thought that an outgoing guy like that, who seemed to like life so very much, would suddenly decide not to go on any longer. I wondered if it was due at all to the fact that so many people thought he was a fag.

"Guess who was staying at our hotel last night," I said, changing the subject because I couldn't really think of anything else to say about it. "Mr. Litzenfowler."

"No way!" Elaine said. "Did he see you and Brett together?"

I nodded. "Yeah, but it's cool. We actually talked to him and everything. He's the one who brought me over to the game."

"Wow," she said. "I wonder if he has any clue about what is going on with you and Brett."

I shrugged again. "Probably not. He thinks we are just friends."

"Even though you were staying in a hotel room together?"

"We told him that our families had been close friends for years. He bought it."

"Well that's cool," she said. "I wonder if Litz heard about Shane yet."

"No, I'm sure he hadn't because he didn't say anything about it. I think he would have told me on the ride over here."

"It's just so sad."

The game itself was much more exciting than any I'd seen at all that year. I was starting to really understand football, in spite of myself. At half time the score was tied, and my heart was racing so fast. I wanted Brett to win so badly. During the last quarter, things got really exciting when Brett went to pass the ball but could find no open receiver, so he ran with it. He ran almost thirty yards and was finally tackled in the end zone, scoring the final touchdown. There were only seconds remaining on the clock.

I knew that Brett was going to be so excited; he was the hero of the team. When the horn blew at the end of the game, the entire team rushed the field. They picked Brett up, carrying him on their shoulders, running laps around the field. Then there, right on the field in front of the entire crowd of cheering fans, was Mandy Myers. Brett finally was released from his friendly team captors, and went right to the arms of the gorgeous, beaming cheerleader. He swooped her up, swinging her around and kissed her right on the lips. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and responded passionately, locking her lips with his as they clung together right there in front of God and everyone, including me.

Elaine's mouth dropped open. She looked at me, placing her hand on my arm. She was speechless, for once. Finally she found words after staring at the stunned look on my face, "What a fucking asshole!"

I looked back at her intently, starting to shake my head, "No, it doesn't mean anything. It is just for show."

"Honey, that was not for show. He frenched her!"

"Elaine, just shut the fuck up for once, would you?!" I snapped. Then I turned from her, pushing my way through the crowd and ran as fast as I could. She was screaming after me, her voice being drowned out by the cheering crowd. By the time I got back to Mr. Litzenfowler's car, I was crying. My body was soaking with sweat. I leaned against the car, doubling over from the pain in my side. I'm not gonna puke! I told myself, taking deep breaths, trying to calm myself. I rested against the car, waiting for Litz and Tom to make their way back to join me. It was dark now, and those who passed by were too excited to notice me anyways.

I sat silently in the car on the way back to the hotel, Mr. Litz and Tom trying to engage me in conversation. He told me he thought I'd have been more excited, and I feigned exhaustion, telling him I was happy, just too tired. I asked him if he'd heard about Shane

Meadows, which he had not. He was very shocked, though he did not know Shane personally. He had not had Shane in any of his classes.

Once back at the hotel, I made my way up to our room and locked myself in. I headed right for the bathroom, this time actually vomiting. Afterwards, I jumped in the shower, trying to wash away the embarrassment and frustration of seeing the one I loved with someone else. I told myself over and over that it was just like before, at the pep rally. He was not doing it to hurt me. It was all just for appearances. He could not let the entire school as well as our whole town think that he was a fag. He had to do it.

But it still hurt, and I still cried.

I got out my book and lay on the bed, waiting for him to return. I knew that once he got back, everything would be fine. We would be intimate, make love. He would let me worship him as the jock hero he was, and all of this stupid crap would be forgotten. I waited an hour. Then two. Then three. Finally at 1:00 am, the phone rang. By this time I had nearly finished Boys Life.

"Hey pup, are you all right?" He did not wait for my answer. "Listen, I will be back in the morning to pick you up. Can you pack up my stuff and have it ready? We have to be checked out by eleven."

"Where are you?" I asked. "I thought we were going to celebrate to-- "

"Listen, I've got to go," I could hear voices in the background. "I'll pick you up around 10:30." Click.

How could all of this be happening? How could this morning have started out so wonderful, with everything so perfect, and then have it all turn to shit? First I found out about Shane Meadows. I could not believe it, and I was so worried about Joey and what he must be feeling right now. Then my lover humiliates me in front of hundreds of people, and I insult my best friend, who probably would never speak to me again. Now here I was alone in this hotel room, after having waited for hours for the one person that I truly love to return to me, only to be stood up by him. I buried my head in the pillow and cried myself to sleep.

I woke up at about nine that morning, and did exactly as Brett had told me. I packed up our things and sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for him. Finally at about 10:45, he strolled in, acting as if nothing had happened. He was wearing sunglasses, not that it mattered to me, for I just looked at the ground, not wanting to make eye contact with him anyways. We really did not speak, and he offered no explanations. We just went to the lobby and checked out. I stared out the window on the drive home, and when he dropped me off at my house I said "Thanks" as he pulled away. I went inside and curled up next to Reggie.

Chapter 12

Sunday afternoon I went over to Joey's house. His mom answered the door. "I'm sorry, Jeff, but I don't think Joey is up for company right now." She looked at me with the sincerest expression on her face.

"I know, Mrs. Potter. It's just that I heard about Shane Meadows. I know that he was a close friend of Joey's, and I'm worried. I wanted to see if there is anything I can do."

"Why don't you come in, and I will go talk to Joey. I'll see if he wants to see you. Maybe it will make him feel better actually." I stepped in and took a seat on the edge of their living room sofa. I looked around the room, as I waited for Mrs. Potter to return. There were photos of the Potter family, many of Joey himself. I remembered him from every stage of life, our early grammar school years we had spent together, inseparable. I wondered what had happened to our friendship. How had we gotten so distanced from one another?

When Mrs. Potter returned she said, "He's in his room. You may go up."

"Thank you," I said, and I headed up the stairs. When I got to the door it was slightly ajar and I tapped on it gently. He did not respond, so I pushed the door open. He was sitting at his desk, his back to me. "Hey Joey," I said. "Um, I wanted to see how you are doing."

"Did you hear about Shane?" he asked.

I nodded as he turned to look at me. "Man, I'm so sorry about that." I looked down at my feet. I did not know what to say to comfort Joey.

"Close the door, okay?" I complied with his request and then sat on the bed. "Here," he said, handing me a letter. "Shane left me this letter. Please don't tell anyone about it though." I unfolded the paper and started to read the large block print:

Dear Joey

I am so sorry about what happened last night. I did not mean to make you feel uncomfortable. Your coming into my life was the best thing that ever happened to me, and I would never do anything on purpose to hurt you or to make you mad. I had to tell you how I felt. I had to share my deepest secret with you because you are the one single person in my life that I thought would understand.

Please do not blame yourself for what I am going to do. It really is not about you. It is about me. It is about the pain that I feel inside of me all of the time. It is about the embarrassment that I have to face day in and day out at school. It is about my family, and how much I have hurt them by being what I am.

You were right when you said I was sick. I am nothing but a perverted faggot. Everyone at school thinks that I am a total freak, and they are right. I know that in the end it will be better for everyone -even you- once I am gone.

Thank you for spending the time with me that you did, Joey. I never, ever thought I'd meet a true friend like you. I do not blame you for anything that you said. You were only speaking the truth.

Please be true to yourself always.

Love

Your friend, Shane.

I sat there in stunned silence, not knowing at all how to respond. All of the accusations that everyone had made about Shane being a fag, I guess they were true. It must have been so hard for him every single day at school, to be ridiculed and picked on, especially when he knew that the things they were saying about him were not lies. It was true that he was queer.

It was so sad. It could have been me who faced this constant barrage of name calling and humiliation. Actually, I had endured my fair share, but it had to have been far worse for Shane. He was so outgoing, and so noticed by everyone around him. I had a way of just blending in, making myself invisible. Shane's personality had not allowed him to do that.

It was at that moment that I wanted to open up to Joey, like I never had before. I wanted to tell him that I understood Shane's feelings. I wanted to tell Joey that I too was gay, but I could not then do it. I could not add any more issues with which he would have to cope.

"Joey, I'm sorry. I'm sorry this happened. It doesn't matter to me that Shane was gay. That doesn't mean anything."

Tears were streaming down his cheeks. "It mattered to me, and that is why he killed himself," Joey said. "When he told me, I could not handle it. I just thought he was trying to hit on me or something. I'm not a fag! That was all I could think of, and I did not want people to start thinking I was just cause I was friends with Shane. I ditched him as my friend, and so then he hung himself!"

"Joey, please... It's not your fault! It was not you. It was everyone else. Anyone would have reacted the way you did. It is a big shock to find out your best friend is a ... well, homosexual."

"I should not have said what I did to him though. I should not have told him he was sick. I told him he was a fucking pervert. I told him to get the fuck away from me, so he did exactly that. He went away from me forever."

I was so saddened by this situation, yet also so very angry. Why did it matter to anyone if Shane Meadows was gay or not? Why did it bother people that he was a cheerleader? Was it so bad for someone to be different, that you had to assault and punish them for it every day of their life? And what could I say to Joey, in light of what he had just told me? Maybe he was partially responsible for Shane's death. Still it was so painful to see him suffering like this.

"When is the funeral? Do you know?"

He nodded, through his tears. "It is tomorrow. I'm going to go to it, so I won't be in school. Do you want to go with me?"

"Yes, Joey. Of course." I thought the school should just close for the day. I wondered if they would even say anything to us about Shane at all. I wondered if anyone at that place really even cared. They had gotten rid of one of the faggots. Good riddance.

"Joey," I said, "I don't think you should blame yourself for this. I mean Shane did not blame you himself. He said so in the letter. In fact he begged you not to blame yourself. He understood your feelings, and it's okay. Does your mom know about this letter?"

He shook his head. "No, he brought it to me on Thanksgiving. He put it inside of my book bag which I'd left at his house. He brought the bag over and gave it to my mom. She did not know that the letter was inside. I didn't know either, until Friday morning. He was already dead by then."

"I wonder if Shane's parents know why he did it," I said. He shook his head. Nobody knows but me... and now you.

* * * * *

Nobody even asked me why I was wearing a suit in school the next day. My mom had given me permission to leave after second hour to go to the funeral. I had called Elaine Sunday night and apologized to her for Saturday. We did not really talk any more about Brett. I think she was afraid of hurting my feelings again. Elaine decided to go to the funeral too, and so we waited together out front of the school for Mrs. Potter to come pick us up. Joey was in the front seat with his mom, as we rode silently to the funeral home.

Everyone at school seemed to be excited about the football victory, so much so that they did not really even care about Shane. Even Shane's locker had been emptied before school resumed on Monday morning. He was gone without a trace.

During the eulogy, the pastor never once mentioned that there was a suicide. He referred to Shane's death as a terrible untimely tragedy. Shane's body did not even look dead to me; it looked only like he was sleeping peacefully. I thought, "Now maybe you are finally at peace with yourself. No one can ever hurt you again." Joey kept his head bowed for most of the service, looking down at his lap, crying silently. I wanted so much to comfort him and to take away the terrible pain. There were no appropriate words. There was nothing to be done other than to endure the unbelievable reality.

I wondered if Brett knew about Shane. I had not seen him at all since he dropped me off on Sunday, as I had left school before third hour. It surprised me that Brett had not attempted to contact me at all Sunday night. I did not return to school after the funeral service. I wanted to stay with Joey. We went back to his house for a couple of hours until he said he was tired and wanted to take a nap. Elaine had already gone home, so I headed back to my own house on foot. It was a hike, but I was actually thankful for the time alone, and for the fresh air.

The regional championship game was scheduled for Friday, and it was in central Michigan, in Mount Pleasant. There was no way that I was going to go to the game. I could not endure seeing Brett with Mandy again. I knew that we were supposed to be studying together Tuesday night, and I wondered how that would go. I was afraid of what I'd even say to him, and even worse, what he would say to me.

Yet I could not stop thinking about him. I could not stop forgiving him. Maybe it was true what he had said to me about being his pup. It was within me to be loyal, to keep coming back to him no matter what he did.

Maybe my love for him was stronger than any of the other bullshit, like some air headed cheerleader named Mandy Myers. He already had made it so clear to me how he felt about her. She was nothing to him.

Then I wondered, if he tells me that she is nothing to him, what does he tell other people about me? Am I also nothing to him when I am not around? How could he have said the things to me that he had, about being so glad that I was in his life, about the letter he had written to Terry about us? How could these things be true when he then had turned around and dissed me the way he had?

I should have known that Brett would not have returned to the hotel room after the game. I knew how psyched he got about winning. I knew he would want to celebrate with his teammates. Perhaps some of them had decided not to go back to Boyne that night. Maybe they wanted to celebrate together, and that was totally cool. But then why didn't he just tell me that on the phone? Was it so unthinkable that maybe he could have invited me to the party with him?

I knew the answer to that last question. Of course it was unthinkable.

Although he maintained that he did not care what other people thought of our friendship, when it came to his jock buds, he did very much care. He was not only a jock, he was a Super Jock. He was the hero among heroes. He was the God of the gods. Why would he have his geeky tutor hanging with him when he was out with the guys? Of course, he had to ditch me that night. There was no other way.

I guess I would just wait to hear from him. If he still wanted to study on Tuesday, I knew that he'd be calling me. He probably would call tonight. I should just act like nothing happened. I should just accept that this was the way things had to be. These were the rules, and if I really wanted him, I had to obey them. The only alternative was to risk losing him forever, which I was not about to do.

* * * * *

Brett did not call me Monday night as I had hoped, and I started re-reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. I started to worry about Tuesday, seeing him in school in Litz's class. I wondered how Mr. Litzenfowler was going to treat us now that he knew everything. I wondered how Brett was going to behave in his class.

For the past two years, Brett had never gotten along with Litz. I think that Brett had been a thorn in our teacher's side. Now Brett possessed some knowledge of the teacher that could prove to be very harmful to him if it ever got out. Would this make a difference in how Mr. Litzenfowler treated

Brett?

When I first saw Brett that morning it was in the hall. He was by his locker and was talking to Mandy Myers. She had a strand of her hair wrapped around her index finger as she shifted from one leg to the other, sort of bobbing back and forth as she leaned against him. I watched from a distance as he interacted with her, leaning in, pressing his cheek against hers as he spoke into her ear. I turned away and headed for my science class.

I was already seated for third hour English when Brett strolled in. He walked up to my desk and stopped. "Hey, are we still on for studying tonight?" he asked me. I looked up at him, making eye contact, and then nodded.

"Sure, can you pick me up at my house as usual?"

"Not a problem, Sport," he said, and then headed for his seat. This was the only conversation he had with me that day.

My mom was working at the bar that night so I fixed myself a sandwich for supper. I was watching Jeopardy when I heard Brett's horn. Reggie yelped his usual warning, and I got up to grab my coat and backpack. I shot out the door and ran to the Beamer, getting in.

"Oh guy, it is so good to see you," Brett said. "I've been missing my pup so bad!"

Suddenly my entire world of anxiety disappeared. Just by that one sentence he made everything bad go away. "I missed you too Brett. I'm so sorry about everything."

He looked at me puzzled, "What do you mean? You have nothing to be sorry for." Apparently his mind-reading skills had not been working that well as of late, for had he known all of the questions and fears I had been experiencing, he would know that indeed I did have a lot to be sorry for. I was sorry for doubting him, for thinking only of myself and my feelings. I was sorry for being angry with him and for expecting the impossible from him.

"Okay, then I'm not sorry," I laughed. He reached over and flicked the lid of my baseball cap.

"You're silly sometimes, Pup." We drove to his house and proceeded to study verb tenses. Then I knelt and served him with my mouth, as I did after every study session now. Then he kissed me and drove me home. Things were back to normal.

Chapter 13

Sadly, the Boyne City Ramblers did not win the Regional Class C Championships that year. I had gone and watched literally every game that they played except for the one single post-season game that they lost in Mount Pleasant. Although disappointed that they had not gone on to make it to State Championships, I was relieved to know that the football season was over, and also to no longer have Brett's practice schedule to contend with.

The loss was a major blow to the egos of the football jocks, yet they still had bragging rights for the division trophy they had taken the week prior. In the aftermath of the loss, Brett started to spend some more time with me again. He did not mention Mandy Myers to me, and I was not about to ask about her. The easiest way for me to deal with the situation was to simply pretend that Mandy did not exist.

Then about two weeks after the final football game, a week before Christmas, I saw Brett and Mandy together. I was outside walking Reggie, and had decided to extend our walk beyond the normal two block radius that we usually stuck to. We walked down to the park where the big cannon was, and Reggie was sniffing around like dogs do. There was just a dusting of snow on the ground, but the temperature was near freezing. I looked up and saw that a BMW was parked over by the pavilion, the same one where my mom and I had dined Homecoming night.

I pulled against Reggie's leash and headed briskly towards the car, which is when I first noticed that he was not alone. Someone was with him, and that someone was female. I knew it was Mandy. He had his arm around the back of her seat, and was leaning in to kiss her.

This was unbelievable to me. How could it actually be happening? I had rationalized with myself so many times that the public displays of affection that Brett demonstrated with Mandy were exactly that - public displays. But this was definitely not public, this was a private display of affection. It was crushing, more than I could stand to see.

I hurried my pace and headed back towards home. I was running by the time I rounded the corner which led down our block, and Reggie trotted alongside me, tongue and tail both wagging. I got inside the door and removed my coat and hat, and then dashed upstairs. I lay down on the bed, burying my head in my pillow, starting to cry. After about ten minutes of venting my outrage and despair into the pillow, I pulled myself off the bed and went back downstairs. I knew my mom was where she usually was, working, and I knew that Erik had not been seen for days.

I went to the refrigerator, and when I opened it, the first thing that caught my eye was a tall bottle that had been sitting there for almost a month. It was a bottle of my dad's wine which he had left behind. Had Erik been around more often, it would have surely disappeared a long time ago. But since the opportunity was there and since I felt so very miserable as it was, I reached for the bottle and pulled it out, clutching it to my chest. I

then grabbed a glass from the counter and headed back upstairs. It was by no one's standards a fine wine, as no cork screw was needed to remove the twist off top. You could not have proven this by me, however, being that I had never before even tasted alcohol.

When we were younger my dad would allow my brother to take sips out of his bottle of beer. I think my dad and his friends got sort of a charge out of watching it, and Erik loved it. When the same offer was presented to me, I had always passed. I think even at an early age I had decided to do everything the opposite of my father, especially his alcohol consumption.

At this point, however, I was not thinking of my father or of any other thing except the horrible empty ache that was in my gut. I felt so betrayed by Brett...again. I truly did not understand the cycle that kept reoccurring in this relationship. He would hurt me and I'd rationalize his actions, then forgive him, all the while he acted as if nothing had happened. Then I'd feel guilty for doubting him, and would go back to his arms where I felt secure and protected, only to start the cycle again. The part of it that was most frustrating to me was the fact that he did not even seem to notice my pain.

I poured a glass of the dark red wine into my glass and took a huge gulp. "Yuck!" I spat, but immediately followed the first gulp with a second. It took less than a full glass of the wine for me to start feeling the effects of the alcohol, being that I was so small and also so inexperienced at drinking. I had virtually no tolerance for liquor of any kind, but it did not stop me from continuing, drinking the entire bottle.

As I sat there alone in my room drinking my wine, I turned on my record player, and listened to Elton John. I kept getting up after the song I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues had finished, only to restart the same song. I was feeling dizzy and even sadder than I had felt when I started this drunken endeavor, when I finally heard a pounding on the front door. I had just started the song for about the sixth time, when the pounding started and I stumbled down the stairwell to get to the door. I peered through the glass, and there stood Brett.

I opened the door. "Pup, I saw you at the park," he said.

"Yeah, I saw you too," I said. My voice was cracking and he looked at me in disbelief.

"You are drinking!" he accused. "And why are you crying?" "I saw who was with you Brett, and I saw you kissing her."

He just stared at me, as I looked up at him, tears now streaming down my cheeks. "I thought she meant nothing to you, Brett. I thought she was only for show."

It was now his voice that began to crack, as he grabbed my shoulders. He looked at me earnestly, "I swear, she does mean nothing to me, Sport. Why do you think I ditched her and came over here?"

"Why were you with her in the first place, and why were you kissing her?!" Never before had I spoken to him like this. Never before had I used any tone other than respect towards him. "Do you love her Brett?"

"No!" he screamed, "I don't love her! I love--" He stopped himself briefly and then calmed his voice. "I love you."

I was bawling now, and feeling so woozy from the wine. "Then why were you parked with her in your car, kissing her. Why her and not me?"

"I have to do that, Jeff. You know what it's like. I have to have a 'girlfriend' or else you know what the people in this town will think. Imagine what my parents and Coach McDonald, and just everyone is going to think if they ever find out about... about us!"

"Well imagine what I think!" I shot back. "I can't go on like this any more. It hurts me too bad! We have to end this."

"No, I won't end this because of this. I will change, I promise. I swear to you...please. I do love you. I won't see her any more. I don't care what people think. I care about you."

"Do you mean it?" I sobbed.

He then grabbed hold of me and pulled me into him. "Yes, I mean it Sport. I promise. I can't lose you. Not now."

"I won't go through school every day pretending like I barely know you any more either. I can't do it. I can't pretend like that. I don't care who knows."

"Shhh," he said, calming me as he held my head against his chest. "Come with me. Let's go away from here. Let's go be alone together." He grabbed my coat for me, pulling the sleeves up my arms and zipping it up, as if dressing a small child. "I am not going to let you be hurt any more, Pup. I promise." He then kissed me on the forehead and wiped under my eyes. "Come on, let's go."

We were at Dead Man's Hill again, looking down at all the beautiful trees, now bare of leaves, but instead glistening with a coating of white snow. The snow on the trees was almost as pretty as the leaves had been, and we sat again on our rock, the same place where Brett had first touched me.

"Do you know why Shane Meadows killed himself?" I asked Brett. He shook his head. "He killed himself because he could not take it any more. He could not stand being called all of those names at school." "Is that what your friend Joey told you?" Brett asked. "Yeah, and Shane had written Joey a letter before he did it. I read the letter."

"Oh really? What did he say in the letter?"

"He said it was true what everyone said, he was nothing but a sick, perverted faggot."

"Oh my god!" Brett said, "That is so sad. Did Joey already know that Shane was gay before he got that letter?"

I nodded. "He had found out the day before, and had freaked. Now Joey blames himself for Shane's death. I keep telling him it was not his fault, but it has done no good. He thinks that if he had been more accepting, Shane would not have done it."

"That's too bad. This kind of shit makes me so mad! Why do people act like it is such a big deal to be gay? Why does it matter to everyone else who someone loves?"

I had somewhat sobered, and was clinging to Brett's arm. We were sitting on a blanket that Brett had gotten out of his trunk. He had draped it over the rock so that we did not soak ourselves from the snow. "I can't believe that you said you love me." I said.

He pulled me into him, just like he had done that first night. "I have to tell you something though, Sport," he said seriously. I looked up at him, suddenly concerned. "There are consequences for getting lippy with me. When you do that, you are not being a very good pup." He reached behind me, scooping a mound of snow in his hand and I quickly jumped off the rock. He grabbed the back of my pants with one hand and shoved the snow down my underwear.

"You fucker!" I said. He was laughing hard. I bent to pick up snow, quickly trying to form a snowball. Before I could accomplish my goal, he nailed me right in the neck with one of his own. Then another. He was pelting me, so much so that I gave up on my attempt to retaliate and booked it for the car. He was on me fast, tackling me before I made it even half way. We both were laughing as he pinned me to the snowy ground, both of us now covered with white stuff.

"Okay, I'm sorry! I learned my lesson. I'm sorry!" He looked down at me.

"Shut up and kiss me," he ordered. I had no problem complying with his demands.

* * * * *

Brett stayed at my house that night, for the first time ever. We cuddled together in my room on my single bed. My mom would not be home until at least 3:00am, and I would just lock my door so she could not peek in on me. She would see his car parked out front, but I'd just tell her that I slept on the floor and Brett used my bed.

It was just that I really could not leave him that night, nor he me. I was still tipsy from the wine and he was concerned about me, plus I never wanted to be away from him again. Brett ordered pizza for us and we sat Indian style on my bed, watching my black and white television. It was Saturday night, and we watched The Love Boat and Fantasy Island. I laughed hysterically at Tattoo yelling "Da Plane! Da Plane!" probably because I was still sort of drunk from the wine.

"I wonder what you would be like high," Brett laughed.

Finally at 10:00 o'clock when the shows had ended, we decided to take a bath. Our bathroom was small but featured a big, old-fashioned claw bathtub. I started to draw the bathwater, adding lots of bubbles, and Brett stood behind me stripping off his clothes. When I turned around, he was naked, and I slid up next to his body. Brett pulled my shirt over my head and then proceeded to kiss me. He had his hands on my waistband, trying to unbutton my pants. Not taking his mouth away from mine, he picked me up in his arms and held me, moving over in front of the toilet. He set me down, so that I was sitting on top of the toilet tank. He then finished unbuttoning and then unzipping my pants. I thrust my hips forward a bit, using the toilet seat to rest my feet against. He pulled down my pants, and then jerked them off of my legs. I sat there in my underwear while he continued to touch me all over.

He then had me stand up, on top of the toilet lid. He pulled down my underwear and removed them, then scooped me back into his arms and placed me in the steamy bathwater. He climbed in behind me and I settled back to rest in his arms. I reached over and turned off the faucet, then sinking back into my lover's embrace. I felt his face against mine, his hair brushing the side of my cheek. Oh god, please don't let this end. Please don't ever let this end.

Chapter 14

"Brett, I love you so much. I love you more than anything in the whole world." I was whispering these words into his ear as he slept. It was Sunday morning and I snuggled next to him, not wanting our time together to end. Quietly, I pulled away from him and crawled out of bed, pulling on some sweats and a robe. I needed to check to see that my mom was home all right, I knew she'd be getting up and ready for church, even after having worked until almost three in the morning.

I carefully closed the bedroom door behind me and crept downstairs to my mom's bedroom. I looked in and she was still in bed. I thought it was odd, because she normally would be up by now, but I went out to the kitchen and started making a pot of coffee for her. Sometimes I did this, just to make things easier for her when she got up.

I walked back to her bedroom and quietly approached her bed. In a gentle voice, so as not to startle her I said, "Mom, are you going to church this morning?"

Her eyes flickered, as if she was trying to open them. She finally did and I smiled down at her. I repeated my question. "Jeff, honey," she said, her voice sounding slurred, "something is wrong."

"What's wrong mom?" I asked leaning into her.

"I can't move. I can't move at all." Her eyes closed again, but she did not move. I panicked, reaching over her to touch her face. I felt her neck, finding that she had a pulse.

"Can you hear me mom?" I was starting to get very scared. She nodded slightly.

"Get help." Oh my God!! Something is so wrong!

"It's okay mom. I will get help. I will help you, don't worry." I turned and ran out of the room starting to scream for Brett. "Brett, Help me!" He came bolting down the stairs within a couple of seconds, wearing only his boxers. "It's my mom, she can't move."

"Call an ambulance, Jeff. Call 911. I'm grabbing my clothes." I did as he said, picking up the phone and calling them immediately. I went back to her room right away after hanging the phone up.

"Can you feel me when I touch you, Mom. Please, talk to me! Stay awake, oh God." I was terrified that she was dying, that she would go to sleep and not wake up.

"I can feel your hand, Honey. I just can't move." The left side of her face was drooping; it was as if the corner of her mouth was sagging. I knew that when my father had his stroke, this had happened to him. He had not been able to move his left side. I was very afraid she was having a stroke too.

Brett was beside me. "Don't worry, Sport. They are on their way. Help is on the way. Can you hear us all right Mrs. Irwin."

"Yes I can hear you. I can't move though. I can't move at all."

I looked over at Brett and he reached down to put his hand on my shoulder. Then he squatted, kneeling on the floor next to me. We waited there for the ambulance to arrive. Boyne did not have full time rescue services, only a volunteer fire and EMS team. It took about twenty minutes before we actually heard the sirens and knew they were pulling into the drive. Brett ran out to let them in the front door.

Of course, my mother knew all three of the rescue workers by name. They were good at keeping her calm, and immediately asked us to step out of the way. I was crying, but I did not want my mom to see. I went into the kitchen to call my grandma. I told her to meet us at the hospital. Brett drove me there behind the ambulance.

Brett waited with me in the waiting room until my grandma arrived, then the three of us sat together. Finally a nurse came for my grandma, and let her in to the examining room to be with my mom. Brett assured me he was not leaving me. "Do you think I should pray?" I asked Brett. He nodded.

"If you want to pray, Sport, I think you should." He put his hand over mine, completely unconcerned about the other people in the waiting room. I sat there leaning against him, trying to find the right words to say to

God. Trying to think of a way to bargain with Him to spare my mom's life.

"You know, Brett. This is so unfair. I just know she has had a stroke. It was just like this with my dad. She is such a good person. She works so hard, and loves everybody. She has had such a hard life."

"I know," he said, " but lets not jump to any conclusions until we hear from the doctor, okay. Probably she is gonna be just fine."

"I do not know where to find my brother. I do not even know where he is. I wonder if I should call my dad, too."

"Why don't we wait, see what the doctor says, okay?" I nodded. We just sat there together, sometimes staring up at the big TV set. There was some sports show on, and I was glad for that, as it gave Brett a distraction. It was almost two hours before my grandma came back out into the waiting room.

"Jeff, Honey the doctor is here to talk to us. I told him that you should hear what he has to say." I immediately stood up, then looked over at

Brett.

"Go ahead," he assured me, "I will wait here for you. I promise I won't leave."

My grandma and I walked down a hallway and into a small sterile room. It was some sort of a doctor/patient conference room. There was only a small table in the center of the room with four chairs, two on each side. My grandma and I sat down, and almost immediately Dr. Baker stepped in behind us. I knew him well for he had been our family doctor my entire life.

"Mrs. Carlson, Jeff," he greeted us, "I'm sorry we have to be together under such sad circumstances. Please have a seat." He looked directly at me. "I have some very unpleasant information to give you, Jeff, and I'm so sorry. Your grandma insisted that you be here though." She nodded, placing her hand on mine. "We just completed some tests on your mother. He then looked over at my grandma; I sensed the sorrow in his voice and saw it in his eyes. I felt my body being overwhelmed with incredible fear.

"We discovered that Candy has a condition called 'heart arrhythmia'" he stated. "It is a condition in which the heart develops an unusual beat. It can actually even stop beating for a few seconds at a time. Usually this condition is not dangerous, not in and of itself, for the length of time that the heart stops is not enough to make any difference in blood flow.

"However," he continued, "the danger comes in due to the fact that when the heart stops for short periods like that, the blood sometimes pools and coagulates at the top of the heart. This is called clotting. When the clotting occurs, it is very dangerous, because one of these clots can then be shot out into the bloodstream and can travel to the vital organs of the body. Are you understanding what I'm saying?"

We both nodded, and he continued. "Well, when we know about this condition, it can be treated. We can thin the blood so that it does not clot. Although we usually cannot correct the arrhythmia without a pacemaker, we can prevent any critical damage from occurring due to the blood clots. Unfortunately, we did not know about the condition.

"Apparently several of these clots formed around Candy's heart this morning and were shot out into her blood stream. Well, when this happened she had what we call a 'stroke', or cerebral vascular accident. Actually, she had at least two strokes." He was looking down at his hands, now no longer making eye contact, and I could not believe the words I was hearing.

"You see, a stroke is when a blood clot enters the brain. When this happens, it stops. It has no where to go, and the vessel it has traveled to erupts. These vessels that are in the brain are what carry the oxygen to the brain to keep it functioning. When their blood supply is interrupted, that part of the brain ceases to operate. This is why people who have had strokes are paralyzed. The part of the brain which controls movement has been affected. Do you understand me still?"

Again I nodded. "Well when I treated Ray, your father, he had suffered one of these strokes. It affected only the right side of his body. But in your mother's case, she has suffered much different consequences. She has had at least two strokes, affecting both sides of her body. She has no movement from the neck down, and she has only sensation on her right side. She can feel touch in her right arm and leg, but she cannot move at all."

Tears were streaming down my face. He slid the box of tissues to me, and I took one. My grandma continued to hold my hand. "We have known for some time that your mother has had only one functioning kidney. This is not a dangerous thing, for you need only one kidney to live. However, when these strokes occurred, another clot was also shot to the one kidney that was still functioning. Now her kidneys have stopped working entirely.

"We are faced with some very difficult choices here, none good." He sighed heavily. "There is one single way that we can prolong her life, that is, keep her alive, and that is kidney dialysis. This is a process in which the patient is hooked up to a machine which filters their blood. The machine works as an artificial kidney. This procedure would have to be done within the next twenty four hours and it would have to be done at least three times a week for the rest of Candy's life. It is a very grueling procedure, and it takes about five hours every time it is done.

"Just a few minutes ago I spoke with the neurologist who performed the CAT scan test. Her name is Dr. Waynewright, and she is one of the best specialist in this field I've ever worked with. Dr. Waynewright and I are in agreement that it would not be humane to begin kidney dialysis at this stage. Were we to do so, we would be condemning this patient, your mother and daughter, to an existence in a vegetative state."

My grandma gasped, holding her hand over her mouth. She was crying now, without restraint, and I too was crying. "I am so sorry," Dr. Baker said. He sat there with us, not saying anything for a few moments. Finally he continued, "Of course the ultimate decision as to whether or not we are to begin dialysis should be made by the patient herself. She, however, has had merely brief moments of consciousness since she arrived here, and I am not sure that I can have a coherent conversation with her. She has listed both of you as decision-makers in her living will."

Of this fact I was extremely surprised, thinking that it would have been logical for her to name my father as the ultimate decision maker. I think, however, that when he had his stroke she was not sure if he would be around to make these critical decisions, and his own condition was not good either. She also had his alcoholism to consider. I think that she listed me because of my grandmother's age, and she did not actually expect to die before her own mother. She thought, I'm sure, that if the time ever came for such a grave decision to be made, I would be of age and mature enough to handle it. She had not expected that it would happen so soon, even before my fifteenth birthday.

"You can see her now. We are going to move her out of the emergency room and into a private room. The room is in the oncology floor and it is fully equipped with a kitchenette and a living room area, where your entire family can be together. I am not pressing you

for a decision about the dialysis as of yet, but we will need to come together by tomorrow morning, otherwise it will be too late."

Dr. Baker was a relatively young man, in his early forties. My mother used to tease him about how good looking he was, more just to be friendly than to actually flirt with him. His face looked much older to me when he was talking than what I'd previously remembered. I noticed every line in his forehead, and the crease lines around his jaw. It must have been an excruciatingly difficult job at times like these, delivering such tragic news to a family you had cared for over the past fifteen years.

"If we do not do this...the dialysis, I mean ... how long will it be?" I asked in an almost inaudible voice.

He remained professional in his answer, yet was very compassionate in his tone, "It varies. What will happen, is that the body will fill with toxins that are normally filtered out by the kidneys. Eventually her lungs will fill with fluid, and her heart will become overtaxed. It will finally just poop out. This can take anywhere from three days to two weeks. It is not always the same." I was shocked that he had used the expression "poop out" to describe the event that was to take my mother's life. I said nothing, looking now to my grandmother.

"Can we go to be with her now?" The doctor wrote down the room number.

"It will be about an hour or so before we get her set up in the room. The nurses are working on that now. Why don't you go and get something to eat? Go talk to your family. You can come back to the hospital at any time tonight."

My grandma nodded, and reached over again to grab hold of my hand. "Thank you, Dr. Baker. I know how hard this been for you too." He nodded and moved his lips in a way that resembled a serious half-smile. I knew what it was, an acknowledgement of my grandmother's kind words, but it just seemed so wrong to be smiling at all during a time like this.

* * * * *

I cried in his arms for what seemed like hours. Brett held me , openly and lovingly, as we sat together in the waiting room. Finally he took my hand and led me to his car. He then drove me home, where I showered and got some things together to take back to the hospital with me. I left an urgent note for my brother on the refrigerator, telling him to come to the hospital or to at least call. I gave him the room number. My grandma was going to take care of contacting the other relatives. I was not sure what to do about my father, whether or not he should be contacted. I thought it over and realized that my

mother would have wanted him to know, so I asked Brett to take me over to the Lodge before we went back to the hospital.

I absolutely hated that place; even the smell of it was nauseating. I stood at the door, having to first ring a buzzer and then wait to be let in. The bartender had a button behind the counter which she pressed which released the front door. This way it could be observed who was entering, ensuring that entry was permitted for members only. When the door lock was released for me, I pushed open the door, and all of the patrons in the bar turned to see who was entering. My father was among them. He looked over at me and then turned back to the bar at which he was sitting, as if he did not even know me.

I headed straight for him. "Dad, I have to talk to you."

"Well hello. You want a pop?" he asked, not even looking at me.

"No, it's about mom," I said. I was telling myself not to cry. I was not going to let him see me cry ever again. "She is in the hospital."

Finally he turned to me. "What for?"

"She is very bad, Dad. She has had two strokes. Her kidneys have failed, and she is not expected to make it." In spite of myself, tears formed in my eyes and started to trickle down my cheeks. Other than telling Brett, my dad was the first person to whom I'd had to verbalize this unbelievably painful reality. "She cannot move, and is not completely conscious," I added through a cracked, high-pitched voice.

He looked at me with what I believed to be compassion, though he did not know what to say or do. He put his hand on my shoulder. "Are you going up to the hospital?" he asked.

I nodded. "Well, I just thought I should let you know."

He nodded once again, and then he asked, "Do they know how long it will be?" I found it odd the way people deliberately avoided stating things that were painfully obvious. Instead of asking, "How long before she dies?" he had said, "how long it will be". It was a euphemism, a soft-pedaling of something that was horribly difficult to verbalize.

"It could be as short as three day." I was choking on my words, having to swallow very hard to keep from bursting into sobs. "-- or it could be longer, as much as two weeks."

"Is someone going to be with you at the hospital?"

This time I nodded. "Grandma."

"Okay ... kiddo, I'm sorry. Please, let me know if there is anything I can do." He squeezed my shoulder with the hand he already had resting upon it.

Yeah, you could start being a fucking husband instead of a goddamned drunk! You could take responsibility for your family, for once. You could start acting like you even fucking care instead of sitting in this hell whole day in and day out for all of your damned life!

"I will. Thanks Dad. I have to go, though. My friend is waiting for me outside, and I do not want Grandma to be alone at the hospital. Or Mom."

He did not say anything else, only nodded again. It seemed to be the safest method of communication with me. Perhaps it was because he too either did not have the courage to verbalize his true feelings, or that he did not know how to put words to them. In any event, I was glad I had told him about Mom, and I headed for the door. By the time I reached the car, I was crying again very hard. I wiped my eyes and climbed in, wanting to appear stronger in front of Brett.

"You can cry in front of me Sport. You know that I would be crying if it were me, right?" He had placed his hand on my knee. "It makes me want to cry for you." I looked at his face through my tears, wondering how I'd ever been so lucky to find him. "How did it go? Talking to your father, I mean."

"He didn't really say anything. He just asked how long it would be. Why should he even care about her anyways? Less than two months ago he walked out on her. He did not care if she lived or died then, why should he start caring now?"

"Pup, listen to me. I understand how you feel about him, or at least I think I do. It's not like my father is like that, so I can't say for sure I know exactly how you feel, but I do think that it is understandable for you to be angry with him. But maybe this is a time that you should try to come together with one another. Maybe you two could settle some of your differences and become closer. I bet your mom would like it if that happened." He was right. My mom would very much like it if that happened, but it was because of the things he had done to her, that I was so bitter towards him in the first place.

I had recently explained surrealism to Brett, and now I was experiencing it beyond anything I could put into words. This situation was truly a living nightmare. I kept praying that it would soon end, that I'd wake up and realize it had all been a horrible dream. This morning when I woke up my life could not have been any better. The one person that I loved more than life itself had spent the night with me, made love to me, told me he loved me. I was sure that I was embarking on a wonderful journey, as we had decided that our love for one another was more important than anyone else's prejudices.

Now my whole world had come to an end. How could my mother be dying? How could it possibly be real? I agonized over the reality that it had to be decided if she should be kept alive and forced to live as a vegetable, or be allowed to simply die. How was it fair for humans to ever be faced with such choices? How was it fair to my mother? Why couldn't she have simply died in her sleep, if it were her time to go? Why were the people who loved her so much saddled with the burden of such a painful and agonizing decision?

But I could not allow her to be put through more pain. I could not condemn her to a life of quadriplegia and dialysis. I couldn't bear to think of her losing the one thing that she had always clung to in spite of all that life had dished out to her - her dignity. Every fiber of my being wanted to cling to her and never let go. I wanted to use any means necessary to keep her alive and here with me for as long as possible, but I also knew it was not about what I wanted, but about what she would want.

I was so torn up inside, battling with my mixed feelings. I was at odds with my own self, wanting on the one hand to keep her alive and then on the other hand to simply let her go. Part of me earnestly wished that she would wake up, so that I could communicate with her and tell her how much I loved her; but then another side of me hoped she would remain unconscious for I was concerned she would be terrified. I wanted her to feel no fear and to have no knowledge of her impending mortality.

Maybe it was all a big mistake. Maybe the tests were critically wrong. Maybe we should seek out another doctor, someone who specializes in these cases. Perhaps there was some shred of hope that had gone overlooked so far. How could we just take the word of this one doctor and allow my mother to die because we were unwilling to question him? Maybe there is some groundbreaking technology that is currently being researched. There may be a surgeon who knows of a procedure to save her, to reverse the effects of these strokes.

It was no mistake though. I knew Doctor Baker and I knew from all of the years of being his patient that he was straight about everything. He had consulted with a leading neurologist before ever presenting this shattering news to us. He had already researched the possibilities, and still concluded that life was not an option - at least not a good one.

"I know my mom would want me to be closer to my dad, Brett. You are right, but I can't think about that right now. I need to think about my mom and about being with her. That is all that matters."

"And you matter, Sport. You matter very, very much." I held his hand in silence for the remainder of the drive to the hospital. Brett was going to stay with me for a couple of hours once we got there, and then return home. We had only two days of school scheduled that week, and then Christmas break began. I would not be going to school at all, of course, but he would finish out his two days.

Chapter 15

She did not even look like my mother. When I walked into the room, the first thing that I noticed was how bloated her face looked. Her breathing was very heavy, and it was sort of frightening to me. "Honey, it is just the fluid that is in her throat and lungs." My grandma was describing to me the cause of the rattling sound from her breathing. I knew what it was, though; I knew it was a 'death rattle'. "Step out in the hall with me, baby," she said. I motioned for Brett to come with me, not wanting him to be left uncomfortably alone in the room.

"She regained consciousness briefly when they moved her. She asked for water." I nodded. "She was alert for awhile when I came in; and she cried." My grandma was on the verge of tears herself. "But she knows what is going on. She knows that she is dying."

"Oh no," I gasped. "I did not want her to know. I did not want her to be afraid."

"Honey, she is not afraid. Just sad. She is sad to be leaving us, that's all." She had her hand on my face. "She does not want the dialysis." Tears streamed down my face as my grandma pulled me into her, holding me tight and caressing the back of my head. "Listen to me though, Sweetie, this is very important. We have to be strong for your mom. We cannot fall to pieces."

"I know, Grandma. I will be strong." I wished that I'd had half the strength that she did. She had lived through the deaths of her husbands, her parents, and her eldest son; and now she was losing her only daughter. I remembered when my uncle had passed away. He was only thirty-six, and died of a massive heart attack. My grandma, who had always handled tragedy with such stoic grace, reacted to the news of her son's passing with an outburst of mournful sobs. I had never heard such anguish pour out of a human soul. She later told me that losing a child was like losing a piece of yourself; it was not right for parents to outlive their own children.

Brett stood beside us, saying nothing, yet watching me as I clung to my grandmother. I pulled away from her slowly, turning to Brett. "I owe you so much for being here with me, for going through this with me, Brett."

He shook his head. "You owe me nothing." My grandma then reached out and took his hand.

"We do owe you. Thank you for everything. I am just so sorry that this all has happened. You both are so young. You should be out having fun, not in a hospital waiting like this."

"Grandma, Brett cannot stay for much longer. He is going to go back home because he has to go to school in the morning, but I am staying here with you."

"What about Erik? Did you get a hold of him?"

I shook my head. "No, but I did talk to my dad. I told him about everything, and I left Erik a note to come to the hospital."

"Is your father coming to see her?" she asked.

"He didn't say."

I wondered what my grandma actually thought about my relationship with Brett. She never gave me any indication that she suspected there was anything more between us than just friendship. My grandma had always seemed to possess this uncanny ability to know things about me before I even knew them myself. What would she think of me, though, if she actually found out that I'd been intimate with Brett? I remembered her talking about a friend that she used to work with who was lesbian. Her attitude was that it did not matter to her, though she herself was in no way interested in "getting into that." I did not ask her to specify what "that" was.

At this point the only thing that really mattered was being together for my mom and for each other. Brett's presence was comforting to me and felt appropriate, though I wondered if it would have been the same if the situation were reversed and it were one of his parents who was dying. I thought that I probably would have felt more like an intruder than a bastion of support. Maybe it was due to the fact that he represented unwavering strength to me. His mere presence made me feel secure, less lonely, and stronger.

The three of us went back into the hospital room together, and I approached my mother's bedside for the first time. Brett was by my side, though allowing me the space I needed to approach her at my own pace. I absorbed the details of her appearance, creating a mental image that would remain burned in my memory for eternity. I do not think that movies and books can ever accurately portray the dying process. It is not as peaceful and serene as is most often depicted. The entire body fights the process vehemently, trying to conserve resources and do whatever is necessary to survive. The hands and feet lose circulation and turn blue, so that the blood flow is conserved for the vital organs. Breathing changes dramatically, and the dying person appears to be a fish out of water, taking smaller, quicker breaths, as the lungs become less able to inhale. The dying person stops taking food or water; it is no longer necessary. Their color changes drastically, as they become weaker and weaker. As they approach the final stages of death, their body begins posturing, returning to the fetal position in which they were first introduced into life. They curl up like a baby in a womb, pulling their knees closer to their chest.

I knew none of these things when I first walked into that room. I did not know anything about the final stages of life or the process of dying. I only knew that this was my mother, the most important human being in the entire world to me, and that she was soon to be taken from me forever. I feared seeing her in her state of helplessness, knowing I could do nothing to change this reality. I was terrified that she would experience pain, that she would be afraid. I was not ready to let go of her, and doubted that I ever truly would be

able to do so. Worse than any of this, I knew I would never have the strength to go on after she had gone. How could I ever learn to live without her?

Even though I was beginning to think I had no tears left in my body to shed, they were again there, as I looked down on her beautiful, angelic face. It was a face wracked with exhaustion, showing every line of worry, every wrinkle of tragedy she had ever experienced; yet to me it looked remarkably perfect. I did not see in that face the person of my mother, instead I saw the vulnerable human soul - the child. I saw for the first time in my life a person rather than a role. She was beautiful.

"Mama," I whispered, my voice sounding childlike even to myself, "I don't know if you can hear me now. I want you to know I am here." I moved even closer to her, daring to touch her hand with my fingers. I slid my tiny hand within hers, gently squeezing it. Though she could not return the gesture, I knew she still felt the sensation of my touch. "I love you so much..." my voice was starting to crack, and I struggled with myself to maintain my composure. "... I love you so very, very much."

Brett had his hand on my shoulder, moving close to me. I felt the warmth of his body behind me, and I felt oh so very small. How can this possibly be happening? This cannot be real. I dropped to my knees beside her bed and lay my cheek against the back of her hand. "Thank you for being my mom. Thank you for always loving me no matter what. Thank you for all you endured for me, things I never, ever deserved. You have made my life bearable. You are my soul." I was speaking so quietly that I'm not even sure that Brett could understand me, though he was right next to me. I felt in my heart, though, that my mother understood. I knelt there and cried within myself. Every part of my being ached with a pain unlike any I had ever experienced. I felt so hollow.

Brett pulled a chair up next to me, encouraging me to use it, and I moved into the expected position, still holding onto my mother's hand. This time it was Brett who knelt, holding onto my free hand and saying nothing. "I won't leave you," I assured my mother. "I am right here for you and will not go away." Brett squeezed my hand lovingly as I sat so perfectly still, like a statue.

At some point my grandmother had moved to the opposite side of the room and was seated in a chair there. I looked over to her, and saw that she was crocheting. She looked so very much alone. How could I even begin to understand the scope of her losses? It seemed so pointless to me to be crocheting. It seemed ridiculous to be putting all of that effort into a project when life was so temporary. It is odd the way our perspective becomes so distorted when contemplating mortality. All of the things that had mattered so very much only days prior, now meant absolutely nothing. Paying the rent, buying groceries, having a nice car - these all seemed so trivial. Why had we wasted so much precious time worrying about these things?

Why had I never told my mother about Brett, about what he really meant to me? Why had I never been honest with her? I remembered my reasoning, but it now seemed so very wrong. I had not wanted her to know, for I did not want to add to her worries. I did not

want her to ever be embarrassed of me the way my father always was. I did not want her to suffer any pain because of me. By shielding her from the truth about myself, though, I had also kept her out of my real life. I had denied her knowledge of me that was an essential part of my existence. I had presented to her a lie about myself, and now had no way of ever presenting her with the truth.

That day when we sat together at the dining room table, when she told me I could tell her anything about myself, was she somehow aware of the dark secret I kept from her? Had she sensed the struggle that raged within myself between following my heart and complying with the expectations of the entire world around me? Perhaps I had underestimated the empathic abilities of a mother. Maybe it was true that a mother just knows.

The three of us sat there in silence for nearly an hour, and finally I acknowledged to Brett that I knew he needed to go. He asked me to walk him out, and I looked to my grandmother who then moved to take my place beside the bed. Brett and I grabbed our coats and I touched my grandmother's arm tenderly, as I promised her I would be right back.

"I don't want to leave you," Brett said as we approached his car. "I can stay if you want. It won't hurt for me to miss school tomorrow."

I shook my head. "No, it is okay. I don't want you to go either, but you need to. It will be all right, though, my grandma is here. You need to go ace your English test tomorrow." He laughed, for the first time in what seemed to have been centuries.

"I will ace it for you, Sport."

"Tell Mr. Litz about what is going on, okay?" He nodded. Then he grabbed me so tightly, literally lifting me off the ground. "Oh god, I don't want you to hurt like this, Sport. I want to make it all better for you!" I felt the firmness of his grip, as if he were trying to shelter me from all of the cruelties around us. He was my knight in shining armor, my last shield of defense, my hero and savior.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you too."

When I returned to the room, I removed some things from my duffel bag, including my tooth brush and toiletries, a change of clothes, and some books to read. I put the clothes in the top drawer of a built-in cabinet and the personal items in the bathroom. I then got out a neatly wrapped package which I had brought with me, my mother's Christmas gift. I placed it on the stand next to my mother's bed, and my grandma smiled affectionately at me. "That Brett seems like such a nice boy. He stayed with you all day," she stated.

"Do you know how we became friends?" I asked, and she shook her head. "I was tutoring him. Actually, I was at first being forced to tutor him," I clarified, "but then we ended up becoming such close friends. It's funny, isn't it? I mean, I would never have thought that we would be friends at all. We are so different."

"Sometimes things happen that way," she told me. "They say that opposites attract, and I guess that is true even with friendships." I wanted to explain to her that our relationship was far more than friendship, but it was not the right time or place.

"Grandma, what am I going to do when ... when this is over? I mean where am I going to live? I can't go live with my dad in that cabin."

"Don't worry, honey. Your mom talked to me about that earlier, when she was awake for those few moments. I told her that I would come live with you at the house. I will move out of the apartment."

A nurse came into the room, introducing herself to us. She was a heavy set woman, middle-aged. Her name was Betty, and she had the kindest eyes I'd ever seen. "Please let me know if you need anything," Betty said to us as she wiped my mother's forehead. She was checking my mom's vitals - her pulse, blood pressure, and temperature. I thought it was strange and unnecessary. Why did they do this? She was dying; they should just leave her alone and let her sleep. As if reading my mind Betty explained, "I'm just checking her vitals to see how she is progressing. I know this is hard. At this point we want to do everything we can to make her comfortable. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help either her or you. Her breathing is going to get much worse. I'm sorry." She was now looking into my mother's face, so compassionately. "This is normal," she continued. "We can suction out some of the mucus that will be in her mouth and throat, and it will decrease some of the 'rattling' sound that you hear. I'm not sure it will make much difference to her comfort level, however."

"Please use the sofa beds. There are blankets in the closet. I would encourage you to try to sleep yourselves. Down the hallway on the right there is a kitchen area where there are beverages and food items -sandwiches, crackers, soup- things like that. Please help yourselves; these items are there for you. I am here for the entire night, and I will be in about once an hour unless you need anything in between. Please let me know of any changes you notice. What are your names, by the way?"

My grandmother introduced us, thanking Betty for all she had told us. I wondered what it would be like to have a job like Betty's, to work on a floor where all of your patients were dying. It must be so difficult. I expected that one would have to be either very detached or care very much, there was no middle ground.

After Betty left, my grandma encouraged me to lie down and try to get some rest. She assured me that she would sit with my mom. I did lie down on the sofa and began to read my new book, Interview With A Vampire, by Anne Rice. It seemed an appropriate

distraction to be reading of immortal creatures while being surrounded by the reality of death.

I hadn't even realized that I'd dozed off until I awoke suddenly, startled, so see my brother Erik leaning over me. I jolted up, looking immediately over to see my mother, her condition not appearing to have changed much, although her breathing was more labored. Grandma was asleep in the chair next to her.

"Jeff, what is going on?" I wiped my eyes, trying to make myself wake up. At this point Grandma had stirred. She placed her yarn and crochet hooks on the floor beside her chair and came over to my brother and me.

"Erik, let's go for a walk," she said. "I need to get out of here for a few minutes anyways. I will explain the situation to you." I was so relieved to not have to be the one to tell Erik. I think my grandma sensed this, and also she did not want to break the news to him in the same room with our mother. I grabbed my glasses from the stand beside me. My grandmother had obviously placed them there, removing them from my face after I had fallen asleep. I looked at the clock; it was now morning, a little after 7:00am.

A flood of emotions swept over me as I began to re-enter reality. I had not remembered dreaming of anything, and yet I knew I must have. It was that feeling you have when you first wake up, where you are not fully acclimated to your surroundings. In this instance, the realization of the situation brought tears to my eyes, as I again experienced that indescribable surrealism. I stepped into the bathroom, washing my face with cold water, trying to wipe away my sleep.

I returned to my mother's bedside and again clasped her hand. I stared into her face, and wished I could make this all go away. I wished that it was indeed a bad dream. Her eyes flickered, and I leaned into her. Her breathing changed, slowing, and she opened her eyelids very slightly. They were only slits, but I knew she was looking at me. She gasped for air, continuing to look at me, and then almost inaudibly, she spoke. "Water," she said. I grabbed her styrofoam water cup from the bedside stand and held the straw to her mouth as she took a tiny sip.

"Mama, I am glad you are awake," I said. "I wanted to tell you how much I love you." My eyes were wet with tears.

"I love you too, honey," she said in the quietest voice I'd ever heard.

"Grandma and Erik are here too," I assured her. "They just went for a walk. My friend Brett was here with us last night, too."

"Brett?" she asked. "Oh, yes. Tell me about him."

"Mama, you know about Brett already," I reminded her, thinking she was confused. "He is my friend from school, the one I am tutoring."

"I know, honey. Tell me about him, about how you feel."

Tears were now running down my cheeks freely. "Well, I don't know what to say. He is wonderful. I love him."

Her lips curled into the slightest smile as she looked into my eyes.

"Good," she said, "does he love you?" I nodded. "Everybody needs somebody to love, and to love them back."

"Mama, I did not want you to know about Brett. I did not want to hurt you."

Her attempt to converse with me was very belabored; I felt the need to quiet her, tell her to sleep, yet she persisted. "Love does not hurt people. Fear does." She paused for the longest time, and I was not sure if it was to formulate her thoughts or to muster the energy to continue. "Be true to yourself, Baby, and be happy." Her eyes closed again, and her breathing returned to its previous rhythmic drone.

I knew she was again sleeping but I whispered to her, "Thank you Mama. Thank you for understanding. Thank you for teaching me about love. Thank you for everything." I sat there silently, holding onto her hand and weeping. Finally my grandma and Erik returned and I moved back to the sofa bed. My grandma came and sat beside me, and I said nothing to her of my mother's brief moments of consciousness. She held me and we cried quietly together. Taking my hand in hers my grandma told Erik we would step out while he sat with my mother. She said we would go get something to eat, and for him to join us when he was ready.

That day many people came in and out of the room to see my mother. Her one living brother was there, her minister, several friends. She did not regain consciousness. Erik had not stayed, his visit with our mother was for only a few moments, and then he left. My father never made an appearance.

I had unwrapped my mother's Christmas gift and placed it next to her on the stand. I regretted not having thought to open it for her when she was awake for those few seconds. Her breathing was now much worse, and it was the second night of our vigil. My grandmother was resting on the sofa bed this time as I sat in the chair next to my mom. I was using a small light on the stand to see as I read my book. Betty was back on duty, and she had sadly informed us that she did not feel it would be much longer. I thought it was odd that none of us had heard from or seen Dr. Baker since our painful conversation two days prior.

I was debating trying to nap myself, as it was nearly two in the morning, and I placed my book down on the stand. I looked over to my mother and her eyelids began to twitch. I saw the muscles in her arms stiffen, as she began to tremble, and then her eyelids shot wide open. Immediately I yanked on the nurse's call cord, and yelled for my grandma. I dropped to my knees beside the bed, grabbing my mother's hand as she looked me directly

in the eyes. Her mouth was moving in a perfectly shaped 'O', and I could see she was trying to gasp for air. She could not breathe at all!

"Mama, it is okay. Everything is all right, I'm here with you. Grandma is here too." At this point my grandma was standing beside me. Betty entered the room, rushing to the opposite side of the bed. She gently grabbed my mother's shoulder and shifted her completely on her side, so she was directly facing me as I knelt beside her.

"She is posturing," Betty stated. She had a syringe in her hand and she reached inside of my mother's hospital gown from behind, moving the syringe around in front of my mom. She positioned it just below her ribcage, and injected her right into the area where her heart was.

"Can she hear me?!" I yelled. "Can she see?"

Betty nodded. "Keep talking to her. Tell her it is okay to let go."

I stared at Betty for a brief moment and then returned my gaze to my mother's tormented face. There was blood running out of the corner of her mouth, and her eyelids were violently twitching. She seemed to be staring a hole through me, and she continued to try making her lungs work, to no avail.

I began to sing.

When peace like a river attendeth my way
When sorrow like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say
It is well. It is well with my soul.

It is well With my soul
It is well It is well With my soul.

As I sang the other three stanzas of the hymn, my mother continued to look at me and I could not tell if she was trying to speak or to breathe or both. "Mama, it is okay. Everything is okay. I am going to be fine and so is Grandma. I will take care of her, I promise. Please let go. Please .

"Oh Lord my God

When I in awesome wonder

Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made,

I see the stars

I hear the rolling thunder

Thy power throughout the universe displayed,

Then sings my soul, my Savior, God, to Thee How great Thou art How great Thou art

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee How great Thou art

How great Thou art.

When Christ shall come

With shouts of acclamation

To take me home

What joy shall fill my heart

Then I shall bow

In humble adoration

And there proclaim

My God! How great Thou art!"

I sang these words quietly into her ear, as I continued to hold her hand. I do not know where I found within me the strength to hold myself together as I saw her dying there right in front of me. She was having a massive heart attack now and could not even breathe. All I could do was be with her and try to calm her.

It was a reversal of roles, my kneeling beside my mother's bedside, singing to her. She had many times done exactly the same to me, singing me to sleep as a small child. Her beautiful angelic voice would calm all my worries and carry me into peaceful slumber.

"Just as I am without one plea But that Thy blood Was shed for me

And that Thou bidst me come to Thee Oh Lamb of God I come, I come.

Just as I am and waiting not

To rid my soul of one dark blot

To Thee Whose blood can cleanse each spot

Oh Lamb of God I come, I come."

As I finished the last verse of the hymn, my mothers eyes stopped twitching and she looked at me so peacefully. Finally the fight was over and she looked so very calm. I then

felt her paralyzed hand within my. She squeezed my hand and closed her eyes. My grandma reached for her, feeling for a pulse on her neck.

"She is gone. It's over," she said.

I had known before she said the words, for the departure of her soul had left merely an empty shell in her bed. She was no longer there. As I stood up, tears now finally streaming down my cheeks, I clung to my grandmother and we simply held one another, saying nothing.

Chapter 16

My mother passed away only three days before Christmas. Needless to say, that was not the best Christmas of my life. I spent most of the holiday itself preparing for her memorial service, sorting through all of our family pictures to make a huge collage. It was then displayed at the front of the church. My mother had a penchant for the color purple, particularly lavender, and her favorite flowers were lilacs. It was no small task to come up with lilac bouquets in northern Michigan in the dead of winter.

I was surrounded by family, and my friends were there for me as well. Brett did not leave my side, sitting by me during the service. We gave no thought to what others may have thought of his being with me. If anyone had thought his presence peculiar, I was not of the mindset to even care at that point. Even Brett's parents were supportive, sending the most massive arrangement of flowers I had ever seen. Somehow they had known of my mother's love for purple, and the bouquet reflected that.

The eulogy which was delivered by my mother's minister, Pastor Walden, was very touching, though it seemed to focus more upon the love of Christ than the love of my mother. This sort of pissed me off, and I remembered thinking that if Christ loved her so very much, why did He allow her to die? My emotions vacillated between intense grief and ferocious anger.

During the days that followed, we busied ourselves with the task of moving my grandmother into our house. It was comforting to have her near, as she was a bastion of strength and loving support to me in spite of her own obvious pain. She pressed me to move forward with life as we went on with our day-to-day tasks. She questioned me about my upcoming classes in school and my driver's training which was to soon begin. At times I felt that it was so futile, life seemed just too temporary and purposeless, when we all were just going to die anyways. Grandma taught me how to answer my own question which I had cried at my mother's bedside, How will I go on without her?! The answer was very simple: one day at a time.

I dove into the task of going through my mother's personal things. Many of these items I kept for myself, and some I gave to family members and friends who were dear to her. I donated most of her clothing to the Salvation Army. Lovingly, I prepared a small felt-lined chest, the sort that brides-to-be often use as a hope chest, to store some of my mother's more personal belongings. This memory chest contained her eyeglasses, her bible, some of her jewelry, and the small keepsake I had gotten her for her Christmas present that year.

As I sat on her bed, opening the drawers of her bedside table, I came across some literature which she had been reading. In one of the drawers, she had filed some pamphlets and brochures from an organization called PFLAG, Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays. So she had known. I wondered why she had never just come right and spoken to me about my sexual orientation. Perhaps she was waiting for me to open

up to her when I was ready. That explained why she had made it so very clear to me that I could tell her anything about myself.

Elaine and Joey were present during the service and afterwards. Even Carly surprised me by showing up at our home with a huge tray of food. She took me aside, telling me that if I felt the need to get high she had just the ticket. I grinned at her, saying that I would settle for the comfort food which she had just given me.

The two-and-a-half week hiatus of Christmas break was a godsend to me, allowing me some time to transition into a new life, one without my mother. As he had promised, Brett was less inhibited when we did return to school, acknowledging me and spending time with me between classes. He was no longer seeing Mandy Myers, and there was a buzz amongst students as to why they had "broken up", speculation that there may have been another girl. I wanted to point out to many of these gossipers that I was in fact that "girl".

On my first day back, I made a point to seek out Mr. Litzenfowler. I thanked him for the flowers which he had sent for my mother's memorial, and I asked him about Brett's progress in his class. Brett had in fact aced his final test before Christmas break, and Litz assured me that he was not only passing the class but was in fact excelling. My teacher then asked me in a rather nonchalant manner how things were going between Brett and me. I told him that everything was great, and conveyed to him how supportive and loving Brett had been for me. He was glad.

We were soon approaching the end of our first semester of school. We were to have only two weeks of classes after Christmas break before finals, and then we began our second semester with all new classes. It gave me some concern, knowing that at that point I would no longer have Brett in any of my classes. I would have finally completed my high school phys ed requirement, and he would be done with his English grammar. Second semester freshman English was an American literature class which Brett had successfully completed when he was in the ninth grade.

At lunch on my first day back to school, I rejoined my same gang of friends. Conversation was rather somber in the beginning, I think perhaps because the others feared saying the wrong thing to me. As we relaxed, however, things started to get back to normal, and we were laughing and joking as usual. Right after my mom had died I found it so difficult to laugh. When I did laugh for the first time, my laughter actually turned to tears. I do not remember what it had initially been that was said which I had found humorous, but as I began to laugh I felt overwhelming guilt - a sense of betrayal. What gave me the right to be laughing at a time like this? But by the time I returned to school I was beyond this stage and was actually starting to look for things about which to be happy.

I saw Brett between almost every class, he would come to my locker or I to his. On some mornings he would pick me up and we'd ride to school together. This was not a permanent arrangement, we did it more spur of the moment. If he was to pick me up, he'd

call my house before leaving for school. Otherwise I would just head out on foot. People were starting to see the two of us together. I do not know what the consensus was amongst the other students, but Brett and I did not at that stage allow ourselves to be worried by it.

It was not until the end of my second week back to school, that Joey even said anything to me about my mother's death. We had just taken our science final and were headed to the cafeteria when he said to me, "Jeff, I'm sorry that your mom died."

"Thanks, Joey," I said. That was it. After that nothing else was ever said.

I was so happy to have finally approached the end of the semester for one reason in particular. Today would be my last day of gym. I would then have done my time, never to look back. I prayed only that we would simply have an open gym session rather than a structured activity. When we had open gym it was easy to just slink away into a corner somewhere and toss a ball against the wall. I could rather effectively disappear and go unnoticed by most of the others; they would leave me alone for the most part. But when it was an activity such as a team sport that we played, this became impossible to do. All I could then hope for was that I did not become the center of attention by say having the ball thrown to me or something.

Brett was very popular in our school and had many friends. Of course he knew all of the other jocks, though I never really regarded any one of them to be what you might call a "best friend". Had I been pressed to single out one person in particular who was his closest bud, though, I'd have to have selected Tim Williams. I myself did not much care for this boisterous athlete, for in our younger years he had seemed to enjoy picking on me. He was one of the guys who had played pranks on me and who had stolen my book bag, things like that. I was not really bothered by the fact that he and Brett were friends. In many ways I was thankful that Brett had jock friends. I certainly was not interested in sitting around watching sports or shooting hoops. Brett, in turn, never interfered with my friendships. In this regard we each respected one another's individuality.

Much to my dismay, as I entered the gymnasium for my last day of torture, I soon learned that we were not having an open gym session that day. Coach McDonald had presented the class with the option of open gym or an activity of our choosing. The jocks spoke up, shouting that they wanted a game of dodge ball. Now dodge ball is generally not what you would consider a high school sport. When I played it in elementary school I have to admit that I actually thought it was fun, but as a high school activity, I feared it may become rather brutal. This was exactly the reason the game had been selected.

The way that the game is played is that the entire class first divides into two teams. Then each team is given a certain number of balls to start with. What you do is throw the ball at members of the opposing team. Each team is required to stay on opposite sides of the gym, the center line being the boundary. If you threw a ball and it hits one of your opponents, then he is eliminated. If you throw a ball and it is caught by an opponent, then you are eliminated. If you step out of bounds, you are also eliminated. The fact that

several balls are in play at the same time allows each team to strategize. They can collectively identify a target on the opposing team and simultaneously nail him. This makes it impossible for the victim to avoid being blasted, as he cannot catch and dodge all of the balls that are being pummeled at him.

Unfortunately I did not end up making it on the same team as Brett. Curiously, most of the jocks were on the same team together, including Tim Williams. The team that I was on was what you might call the "leftovers". As the play began, it soon became apparent what the activity was actually all about. The jocks were using this as an opportunity to vent some of their frustrations and to bully the other guys in class. They were systematically selecting the kids that they were in some way annoyed with or just for whatever reason did not like. They would call out to them, identifying them by name, and would inform them it was their turn to die. Then they let the balls fly, and would cheer and high five one another as their victim was helplessly plastered.

As the game progressed, I started to become concerned. Initially I had thought it would not be much of a problem. I was sure to get hit early on in the game and be eliminated. Then it would all be over. The other team, however, did not even seem to notice me. I think that in the beginning I was not viewed as any real threat, so nobody even paid attention to me. I even tried stepping out of bounds, to no avail, because there was nobody watching to call me out. Finally I made eye contact with Brett and looked at him imploringly. He misinterpreted my gaze as a plea for mercy. He apparently thought I was asking to be spared, and so he continued to avoid me altogether.

It finally got down to where there were only four members left on our team. The jock team had three times as many and at this point kept possession of all eight balls that were in play. I had a plan! I knew what I would do. The next time that they single out a person on my team and blast him, I will grab one of the balls. Then I can throw it at a member of the opposite team who will catch it, and I will be out. I waited for my opportunity as Tim Williams stood pointing at my teammate Steve Cassick. "All right Stevie boy, it's time to die!" When he gave the word, eight balls came rocketing across the gym, smashing into poor Steve's body, one hitting him right alongside the head. I ran quickly, grabbing one of the balls. I looked for Brett and there he was, just over the other side of the center line. I rushed towards him, extending my arms outward and releasing the ball. I threw it directly at him. It was so simple, all he had to do was catch it.

He quickly stepped aside, somehow thinking he was doing me a favor by not getting me out. Oh my god! The jocks on the other team were all watching me, laughing at me and the pathetic spectacle that I was. They thought that Brett had deliberately stepped aside so that he would in turn then be allowed to exact his revenge upon me for even daring to target him. I looked up, panicked, as I realized that they had already regained possession of most of the balls which had bounced off our wall and rolled back to them. I quickly turned and ran for the boundary line, knowing that now with everyone watching me, they'd have to disqualify me if I stepped out. Just as my foot was about to make it to freedom, though, Steve Cassick grabbed my shoulders and spun me around, throwing me

back into the center of the gym floor. "Go face your medicine, wimp!" He said. "You aren't gonna bail now."

As my body hurtled forward, I tripped and landed flat on my face, right there in front of everyone. This in and of itself was embarrassing enough, as I pushed myself up on my knees. I looked over to the other team and saw five jocks standing there. They were just on the other side of the center line, not more than ten feet from me. In the center was Tim Williams, holding a ball under each arm. "You fuckin faggot! You are so pathetic!" he sneered at me. It did not occur to me to ask at this point for intervention from Coach McDonald, though he probably was in his office by now with his feet up on the desk, letting the boys be boys. "Come here Brett, this fag is yours! Cream his ass!" He tossed Brett a ball as he approached, standing next to Tim.

As I knelt there helpless, Brett stood a few feet from me, towering over me with his five jock buddies in tow. He looked at me with trepidation, unsure of what to do. He suddenly had found himself in a position which would have been described by my grandmother as being "between a rock and a hard place". There was no way he could protect me at this point. I suppose that he could have called Tim down for calling me a faggot, though in that case he may as well have gone directly to the local paper and taken out an ad declaring himself to be a fruit as well. Brett then looked me directly in the eye, and as he pulled his arm back for the throw he clearly mouthed to me, "I'm sorry." He released the ball and I ducked my head, covering my face with my hands. His, the first ball, was the least painful as he had in fact shown mercy on me with his throw. The other five balls then came rocketing towards me, two of them nailing me in the head, and the other three hitting my torso. The force of the blows literally knocked me right over and the jocks on the other side were laughing hysterically and cheering as I slunk off to sit on the bleachers.

It did not take long before the two remaining members of my team were eliminated, though I was not watching. I sat on the bleachers there alone, still keeping my face covered. It was not so much the pain of the assault or even the humiliation that overtook me, it was I think just the intensity of emotion that brought to surface all of the other sorrow I was harboring. I had first gone through the divorce of my parents and then, right before Christmas, had witnessed my own mother die. I sat there then and began to weep.

When Tim Williams finally noticed me, sitting there alone crying, he of course interpreted my tears as major weakness. He thought I was crying because of what he had just done to me, and he made sure that the rest of the class was aware of it as well. "Look, the faggot is over there bawling!" This drew shouts and laughter from some of his buds. As my humiliation continued, I just continued to keep my face covered, being unable to stop crying. Then suddenly I felt a familiar touch. It was Brett.

He had walked over to me and sat with me on the bleachers, placing his arm around me. He pulled me into himself and held me as I lay my head on his chest sobbing. He did this in front of all of the others, as they stood there watching. I just cried and cried as he rocked me in his arms like a baby, soothing me with his voice and saying it was all right.

"I'm so sorry, Pup. I'm here for you now," he whispered into my ear. It was not until the others all disappeared that we finally walked out together.

* * * * *

I think that Tim Williams was unaware of the nature of my relationship with Brett due to possibly two glaring reasons. One possibility was that he was just plain dense. It was beyond his scope of comprehension that anything could possibly be going on between us. His view of life was quite simple: boy meets girl, boy sticks penis in girl's vagina, boy is happy, boy hangs out with buds until next girl comes along. The second possible explanation for his separation from reality was that he just was in denial. It was not possible for his jock friend Brett to be intimate with another guy. If that were the case, that would make Brett some sort of a fag or something. He knew better than that.

Brett and I did then start to spending more and more time together. We would hang out after school, and even though I had been so concerned that after our study time together was no longer necessary, we may not see as much of one another, this did not end up being the case at all. We would go to movies, hang out at each other's house watching television, shoot pool together, or just cruise in his car. He really liked it when I'd come over to his place and watch him work out, though I doubt he enjoyed it half as much as I did. At these times, I would find myself reaching down to pinch my arm, making sure that I actually was awake and that this was not all some sort of a dream. I was so thankful that we had gotten out of the cycle of a whirlwind fantasy romance, followed by major conflict, and then a resolution, only to have it repeated over and over again. It was so wonderful to just enjoy one another and to not worry about who found out about us.

One of the things that Brett and I started doing together was attending a youth group called Campus Life. This organization was sort of a religious group, though they were not particularly preachy. They just got together each week and did something fun. Sometimes it was sledding, or maybe roller skating or bowling. We had pizza parties and board game nights sometimes also. At some point during the activity we would congregate and the group leader would deliver some sort of devotional message, which generally was intended to spark conversation. Mostly we discussed issues pertinent to teens - peer pressure, substance abuse, premarital sex, getting along with your parents. It was all very wholesome.

I began to develop a very special friendship with one of the group leaders, a young woman named Kay. She was in her late twenties and was one of the most caring people I had ever met. She seemed to be very devoted to working with the youth that attended her group. She was the sort of person that lends money to everyone, constantly looks for ways to help people, and seems to never expect anything in return. She was a good person for the job of group leader, for in my estimation she was practically a saint. Kay

and I related well to one another, for she also had an alcoholic father. Her parents too had divorced when she was in her teens, and she was extremely close to her mom. I got to meet Kay's mom on several occasions. Her name was Thelma but she instead went by her nickname, Fritzie. I thought it was so funny every time I heard this nickname because it always caused me to draw a mental picture of Walter Mondale.

Kay also was one of the most ambitious people I had ever met. She had a full time job at a local factory, but in her spare time she had purchased and renovated this huge three story home which was located only a few blocks from where I lived. She converted each floor of the house into a separate apartment, and then on the very top of the building, using what used to be an attic, she built herself a loft. The loft was absolutely beautiful, and it was here where she lived. It was sort of a bitch in the winter to keep the snow shoveled off the four flights of steps, and I remember the first time I ascended the steep incline I became very much aware of my fear of heights. She stood behind me though, wrapping her arms around my waist and we walked up the stairs together. After some time, I got used to the ascent and descent and used the stairs unaided.

I started to suspect that perhaps Kay and I shared another bond, other than just the commonality of our situation with our fathers. One of the Campus Life attendees was a younger girl named Carrie. Carrie was her early twenties and had recently moved to Michigan from some southern state, Texas, I believe. She spoke with a very thick southern drawl, and I thought it curious the way that Carrie always seemed to act so mannish. She dressed in what I considered to be men's clothes, though not the type of men that I particularly admired. She wore jeans and flannel shirts and carried a wallet in her back pocket. She also chewed tobacco, though never during Campus Life, for it was not allowed.

Kay and Carrie were very close to one another and spent a great deal of time together. It sort of reminded me of the way that Brett and I were together. No one ever verbalized any assumptions that they may have had about the two of them, but I was really starting to wonder if maybe Kay was a lesbian. I wanted for the longest time to bring up this topic with her but was far too intimidated to broach the subject. If Kay were not a lesbian she would be terribly hurt and possibly angry at me for even suggesting as much, and even if she were gay, she may not be comfortable discussing it. So I decided to simply enjoy her friendship and if the topic ever did come up, I'd just roll with the flow.

Well, finally it did become a conversation between us, initiated by her. It was late February and we were having an oddly warm day. I think that maybe it was our January thaw coming a month late. Generally we get snow well into March, but then by mid April it has magically disappeared. We were sitting outside on her porch, the one that was at the top of her steep flight of steps leading to the loft. She had built this huge platform porch with high railings around it. Against each railing was a bench, which completely encircled the entirety of the porch. We sat there together on those benches and Kay posed a question to me, "So do you go to church anywhere?"

"Yeah, sometimes I go to my mom's church, Faith Community. Where do you go."

"Well actually that is where I used to go myself," she answered, "but right now I'm looking for a new church to attend."

"Why is that? Don't you like that one any more?"

"Well it isn't really that," she laughed, "it's more that they don't like me. They have asked me to leave."

I was shocked. "You mean like you were excommunicated?"

"Something like that," she nodded.

"Well why? What did you do? I thought you were like some sort of a saint or something."

This time she grinned broadly, tousling my hair. "Well I'm no saint, believe me." She sighed. "Jeff, I'm a lesbian," she blurted out.

I continued to look at her, not batting an eye. "So? What does that have to do with anything."

"Well it has a lot to do with everything as far as the church is concerned. It's not like I want to be gay or anything. In fact, I went to the pastor to get counseling about this. He showed me verses from the Bible about homosexuality. It is very clear, you know. It says right in Romans that it is unnatural. Being gay is a sin."

"Just because some minister interprets a Bible verse to mean something a certain way, does not automatically mean he is right, Kay. If it is such a sin to be gay, then why did God make you that way to begin with?"

She shrugged. "I don't know the answer to that question. I wish I did. Maybe it is to make me stronger or something."

"I doubt it, Kay. Think about it. What kind of god would condemn someone for just being the way that they are? It would be like saying that a person is sinful because he is black. How can someone help what their skin color is?"

"Believe me, it's not like I haven't thought of all these things you are saying. The bottom line though is that even though I am a lesbian inside, I still have a choice about what I do with my own body. The reason that I was kicked out of church is because I am in love with someone, and I cannot give her up."

"Carrie?" I asked. She nodded.

"In order for me to keep going to that church, Pastor Walden told me that I have to break all ties with her. He also wants her to come in for counseling herself, which of course she

would never agree to do. I do believe in the Bible and I do love God and want to do what He says, but I can't just stop loving Carrie."

"I don't think you should stop loving Carrie, Kay. I don't think God would want you to either. If God loves you and He also loves Carrie, why would He care if the two of you loved each other?"

She laughed at my logic. "Well God loves us, but does not have sex with us, silly."

I shrugged. "My point is not about sex. That is just an expression of your romantic feelings towards one another. You and Carrie are both human beings, and humans are sexual. It is a part of who we are. Your feelings for Carrie, though, are not just about sex. They are about how it makes you feel when you are around each other. They are about wanting to be together all of the time, wanting to spend your life together. Your attraction to Carrie is as natural to you as the feelings of any straight woman, when she meets the man of her dreams, are to her. I do not believe for one single second that God thinks we are unnatural or sinful because we love people of our same gender."

Had I just said "we"? She smiled, catching the look of concern on my face as I'd realized what I'd just said. "I know," she said. "I have known from the beginning about you."

I tilted my head slightly and then shrugged my shoulders. "So does this mean that you are no longer in Campus Life?"

"No," she said, "Campus Life is not affiliated with any one church."

"Well I think that we should just start looking for another church, then. Faith Community is prejudiced against gay people. Why would we want to even go to a church like that anyways?"

"You're right, " she said, "but it is just going to be so hard for me.

This is what I have always believed. I don't want to abandon my faith just because I happen to be gay."

"You don't have to. It is ridiculous to even think that. Your love for God has nothing to do with who you are physically and emotionally attracted to. I think you should just stop listening to Jerry Fallwell and Pastor

Walden, and start following your heart."

"You are a good kid, you know that?" She tousled my hair again. What the hell was it about my hair that made everyone want to tousle it. Geesh!

Chapter 17

We finally got our report cards for the first semester in late February. It took the school about a week or so to "process" them, or something like that. I found mine in the mailbox when I returned home one afternoon from school. It was addressed: "To the parents of Jeffrey Irwin." I raced inside, calling for my grandma, who was in the kitchen. "Gram, we got our report cards today."

"Bring it in here, Honey," she replied. "I'm fixing supper." She was brilliant in the kitchen, so much so that I was surprised I had not gained fifty pounds by now. I set down my backpack by the door, reaching down to greet my four-legged friend. Reggie was wagging his tail, glad to see me as usual.

After hanging up my coat and depositing the rest of the mail on the dining room table, I joined my grandma in the kitchen. She looked over at me, concerned, as she saw a look of shock on my face. "What's the matter, Sweetie?"

"Oh, there has been a mistake," I said. "I did not get the right grade in gym class."

She took the report card from my hand, looking it over. "Jeff, this is a very impressive report card," she stated. "All A's and one C."

"Thanks Gram, but I was supposed to be getting an A in gym too. I had already discussed it with coach McDonald. I need to keep a high GPA in order to get a scholarship for college."

"Well don't you worry about that. Your mom had some insurance money which has been set aside for your college. You have nothing to be concerned about there any more."

"That's not the point, Grandma. Coach McDonald lied to me. He told me I was getting an A but then only gave me a C."

"Like you said, it's probably just a mistake. I will call him tomorrow and we can get it all straightened out."

"No, Gram, please don't call him. I will just talk to him tomorrow in school. I think I want to handle this one on my own."

"Okay, but don't fret about it until then. It will all work out."

"So what's for supper?"

"I'm making Swiss steak," she smiled at me.

"Yum!"

"Hey, I'm gonna go upstairs and read for a little while, okay? Just 'til dinner is ready, unless you need help with anything."

"No, you go ahead. I'll call you down when it's ready."

I dashed up the stairs, grabbing my book bag on the way and pulled out a copy of Salem's Lot. It was the first Stephen King book I had ever read, and I was rather enjoying it. I looked over at my dresser as I curled up on the bed, seeing Brett's picture. I nestled next to Reggie and started to dive into the vampire story, thinking of McDonald and how he deserved to have his throat ripped open.

"Just because someone believes in capitalism, that does not make them a neo-fascist!" Joey was having a heated discussion with Carly at our lunch table.

"Yes it does, you bonehead. They are the same things," Carly shot back.

"Dears, lets change the subject, 'kay?" interjected Elaine. She was in her full British accent mode again.

"Did you guys get your report cards yesterday?" I asked. Carly looked over at me and started laughing. "What's so funny?" I said.

"You are, Jeffy. You just want to compare your grades with ours to rub it in how much smarter you are."

"Not at all," I said seriously. "Besides, I bet Joey's report card is better than mine this time. I actually got a C in one of my classes -gym."

"You what?" asked Elaine. "I thought you had that whole situation 'handled'."

"I did too, but when I talked to McDonald this morning he told me that I had not kept my end of the bargain. The team did not win regionals, so I was not getting the A."

"What are you talking about?" asked Carly.

"Yeah," said Joey, "What does the team's not winning have to do with your grade in physics?"

"Well, you remember when I first started to tutor Brett Willson? See, I had this deal with McDonald. He asked me if I would help Brett in his English class so that he could stay on the team. He was flunking out and was going to lose athletic privileges. McDonald said if I did that, he would take care of my grade in gym."

"That's bribery!" snapped Joey.

"No, that's blackmail," corrected Elaine. "He also threatened Jeff. He said he would flunk him if he did not do it, and that he'd make his life a living hell."

"Elaine!" I said sternly, staring directly at her to let her know she was divulging too much information. "Well it really doesn't matter at this point. If McDonald had not forced me into this situation, then I never would have become friends with Brett. Thanks to the coach, I now have this wonderful person in my life. It all worked out fine. I don't really even need the A any more, anyways. I now have money for college from my mom's insurance."

"That is such a load of bullshit!" said Carly. "You are telling us that you were blackmailed into helping this dude with his homework and shit, lied to about it, and then finally only given a C in the class, which you probably would have gotten at least a B in anyways, and you are perfectly fine with that - all just cuz you get to be friends with some dumb jock?"

"I told you before, Carly, don't call him that!" I was instantly pissed.

"You know a few months ago you were calling him that yourself Jeff. Just why in the hell are you always so defensive of this guy anyways? He is nothing but a spoiled little rich kid who has always gotten whatever the fuck he wants. He was just using you to get a grade, that's all."

"You don't even know what you're talking about, Carly," I countered. "You don't know Brett at all. He is not like that. He is the one single person who stood by me throughout my mom's death. He sat with me in the hospital for hours, drove me everywhere I needed to go. He was even with me when we called the ambulance that morning."

"Why was he in your house at eight o'clock in the morning on a Sunday, Jeff?" she asked snidely.

"Maybe he was spending the night. Is that so unusual for two guys who are friends to spend the night at each others house, not that it is any of your business in the first place!"

Finally Elaine jumped in, "Carly, why don't you just cut him a little slack? His mother just died, you know. Plus he can have whatever friends he wants."

"Well maybe your true friends would have been there for you when it happened if that stupid fuckin jock was not hanging around. He even sat with you at-- " She cut herself off, suddenly realizing that she may have gone too far.

"At my mom's funeral," I finished for her. "Yeah, he did sit with me then, so why can't you see that he is not like you say? He is my friend, Carly."

"I want to know just what the fuck is going on with you two anyways. Is he fucking you or what?" She just stared at me as I looked back at her, saying nothing. "You know this is

not about who you are fucking. I could give a shit less whether or not you are a homo. It is about the fact that you are nothing but a sell-out. We are the ones who have been your friends for all of these years and then you just forget about us and ditch us for some fuckin jock prick!"

Well I guess it was all on the table now. They all apparently knew. I suspected that Joey had known about Brett and me for some time, probably since he lost Shane. I had already confided everything to Elaine, so it was no big deal that she was hearing any of this.

Joey finally spoke up, "Carly you are the most selfish bitch that I have ever met. For God's sake, he just lost his mother, and all you can think about is your poor wounded friend routine. Get off it. All that Jeff did was find someone to love and to love him in return. Isn't that what we all have always wanted? Why can't you just support him and be his friend? If you can't think of anything nice to say, then maybe you should just keep your fuckin mouth shut!" After he finished his diatribe, he looked back down at his lunch and continued eating as if nothing had even been said.

Elaine looked over at me and grinned, staring wide-eyed, but saying nothing. Carly stood up abruptly and looked down at Joey. She sneered, "Fuck you, Joey!" and then stormed out of the cafeteria, leaving her tray sitting on the table.

Suddenly I became aware that we were not alone in the cafeteria. I wondered how many people had overheard our volley of insults. I looked around me and it appeared that no one seemed to have even noticed. I looked back to Joey, placing my hand on his shoulder. "Thanks Joey."

He turned to me and smiled, "Don't mention it ... fag."

We all laughed and continued our lunch together.

Brett was pissed when he heard about my gym grade. "I'm gonna have a talk with McDonald on Monday. He can't do this bullshit to you." We were talking on the phone.

"No, Brett, please. It doesn't matter. I'm just glad I did my time in that class and now it is over. If you go talk to him, it is just going to be a big mess."

"It's not gonna be a mess, Pup. I'm just gonna tell him he has to keep his end of the bargain. He made a deal with you, right?"

"Yes, but I don't want you to get into an argument with him. What if it just ends up making everything worse?"

"It's not gonna make anything worse. He is not going to risk losing me, I'm his star quarterback, remember?" He was smug.

"Well I don't know if he really cares about that any more, Brett. I heard he may be leaving Boyne next year anyways. I think that was why he wanted to win regionals so badly this year. If you get him pissed off, then there is really no telling what he is gonna do."

"Don't worry about it, Sport. God! You always worry so much about everything. Listen, I'm gonna jump in the shower real quick and then come over and pick you up, okay?"

I was surprised, "Really? Okay. Where are we going?"

"Oh we can just come back here. My parents are gone for the whole weekend. Place to ourselves!"

"Okay, see you in a few minutes... I love you." "Love you too, pup." Click.

When we pulled into Brett's driveway, he did not park the car in the garage. I thought that it was strange for him to leave it outside in the dead of winter, especially since his parents were gone and he had the garage to himself. He told me his dad had some stuff in the garage, and to come with him through the front entrance. I brushed it off, buying his explanation.

When I entered the house I immediately removed my shoes, and he laughed. "Let's go downstairs," he said, "I'll grab us some pop for my fridge. Go ahead and I'll be right down." I did as he said, and headed for the stairwell. Reaching to find the light switch, I realized that it was not working.

"Hey Brett, your light bulb is burned out, I think."

"Oh yeah, I know. Just hold onto the rail. There's another light at the bottom of the steps."

I descended the steps in the dark, holding onto the railing, and when I reached the last step I felt along the wall for the light switch. Finally I found it and flipped the switch. I was jolted suddenly with a shock as I heard screaming.

"SURPRISE!"

I looked around the room to see several of my friends, all beaming at me. They were throwing me a surprise birthday party. I would be turning fifteen on Sunday. I started laughing, and suddenly felt Brett's arms around me. As I scanned the room I saw that Joey and Elaine were there, and so was Kay and Carrie. Two other people that I did not know were also there, both male. It seemed like I recognized one of them - the blonde one - but I could not remember from where.

Elaine reached out to hug me, "Happy birthday, love." I squeezed her back, still laughing.

"Oh my god, I can't believe this! No one has ever had a birthday party for me. How long have you planned this?"

"About a week or so," she answered. "Brett and I worked it out together." I turned around to look at his face, smiling up at him.

As I looked around the room I realized that all of the people here knew that I was gay, except for maybe the two guys in the corner that I had not met. They probably knew too, though, or Brett would not have invited them. I stretched on my tiptoes, wrapping my arms around Brett's neck and kissed him right on the lips, right in front of everyone. He grabbed my waist and picked me right off the ground, holding tightly to me. He returned my kiss with a vice-like liplock, and we stood there together kissing in front of everyone. Elaine was laughing behind me and intermittently applauding.

When he set me down, I turned to see that Joey had moved away, over to the opposite corner of the room. Perhaps it was a bit too much exposure for him so soon. Oops!

"Sport, I want you to meet someone," Brett said. "This is my friend Terry, the one I told you about before."

"Oh yeah! You are the guy from camp," I remembered.

Terry was the blonde, and he stuck out his hand to greet me. As he was shaking mine, he introduced his friend. "This is Paul, my boyfriend." I smiled at them both and expressed how glad I was to meet them.

"So why are you here?" I asked. "I just mean, you are a long ways from home."

"We had a long weekend off from school. Winter break. So we decided to come visit Brett. He told us about your party."

"That is so cool. So are you here all weekend?"

"Yeah, we probably will leave Monday morning," Terry answered.

Someone started the music, and I looked around the room seeing that there was a table full of food and a huge cake that said, "Happy Birthday, Pup". It had a little beagle on it, and I laughed. I instructed Elaine to get lots of pictures, especially of the cake. The party ended up being a blast. Kay had brought a game of Twister, the one where you put this plastic mat on the floor with multi-colored polka dots. You then spin this color wheel and have to find the corresponding color on the mat, placing one of your body parts against it. When you get three or four people playing together, you end up getting all tangled up. We laughed so hard at the compromising positions we found ourselves in. Joey was by far the most agile with the game, mainly because he was so wiry.

I received several gifts, including Anne Rice's Vampire Chronicles (It was then just a trilogy) from Elaine. I got an algebraic calculator from Joey, appropriately so. And from Kay and Carrie, I received a really awesome sweater. My favorite gift was from Brett, though. He handed me a small rectangular package. When I opened it to see the gold necklace inside, I almost cried. The necklace was like a choker, having wide gold links. It reminded me of one of those choke chains you would put on a large dog, though it was much more expensive. The significance of the gift was not lost on me, knowing full well that I was Brett's pup. He turned me around and put the necklace around my neck. "You're my pup," he whispered in my ear.

About two hours after the party began, people started clearing out. I discovered that the reason we parked outside was because Terry and Kay had their vehicles in the garage. Brett had not wanted me to spot them. Joey and Elaine had been dropped off. I hugged everyone as they left, thanking them profusely, and it was finally down to just the four of us. We sat in the center of the room on the floor in front of the futon, and Brett moved up onto the futon itself. I slid over between his legs and leaned my back against the side of the couch. The four of us talked for several hours, Terry relating stories of camp, and all the funny things that he and Brett used to do. Paul told us of how he and Terry had met, and they kissed as they expressed their devotion to one another. Terry seemed a lot like an older version of myself. Like Brett, Paul was the athletic type.

After cleaning up, Terry and Paul decided to retire. Brett had put them in a spare room upstairs. This left us with the entire lower level to ourselves. Brett and I got undressed then, and lay together in his bed. I felt so secure again, cradled in his arm. "Brett, I love you so much."

"I love you too, Pup."

"Nothing is ever gonna take you away from me." "Nothing," he promised.

Monday morning I saw Brett only once in school. He nodded and winked at me as we passed in the hall. I looked for him at lunch, but he was not in the cafeteria. Surely he would call me after school, so I was not concerned. When I got home from school I completed my homework and lay down on my bed with Reggie, reading a book and waiting for Brett, but he did not call. Finally at about 9:00pm, I dialed his number.

Oddly, Brett's mother answered. I thought this was strange, because Brett's had his own private phone line which rang into his living quarters downstairs. Brett's mom informed me he was not available but that she would inform him that I had called.

At about eleven o'clock that night, after I had gone to bed, the phone rang. I picked it up quickly, hoping it had not woken my grandma. It was Brett. "Hey Sport, I have to talk to you about something." I was alarmed by his tone, but before I could say anything, he continued. "I talked to McDonald today. I told him how I felt about your grade."

"Oh really?" I sighed, sensing the conversation had not gone well.

"Yeah, well he was a total asshole about the whole thing. I ended up arguing with him about it."

"Oh no!" I said, now genuinely concerned.

"Don't worry, sport. I handled it. But I did end up saying something to him

"Saying something? What do you mean?!" I asked. "Well I ended up calling him an asshole and a prick."

"Oh shit, you didn't?"

"Yeah, I did," he admitted, "but I'm not sorry about it. He is an asshole and a prick. But anyways I ended up getting kicked out of school for the rest of the week."

"Oh no! Fuck!"

"Calm down, Pup," Brett's voice was quiet. Perhaps he was speaking softly so as not to be overheard. "It's no big deal. I get a week off, so what?"

"What do you mean, 'big deal'? It's a huge deal!"

"No, that's not a big deal. What is a big deal to me is that my dad was pissed. He took the car away from me for the next month."

"Oh my god!" I said. "What are you going to do?"

"Walk, I guess," he laughed. "I mean it's not the end of the world or anything. So now I'll be like ninety percent of the other kids in school. So what, right?"

"Yeah, but how are we going to see each other?"

"Well, that is the other thing. Coach McDonald ended up calling my dad. He told my dad that you are a 'blatant homosexual' or some shit like that. My dad is all freaked now."

"I thought your dad liked me," I stated. "He met me before and he was so nice."

"Yeah, well my dad is just like that. He is all about appearances. That's why he is so worried about me hanging out with you. Since he thinks you are a fag he doesn't know if it is 'prudent' for me to be around you so much."

"Oh no, Brett!"

"Don't worry, Sport. He's not gonna keep me away from you. We just have to lay low for a little bit. We are not gonna be able to come back here any more. My dad found out about the party Friday night too. He bitched about that for awhile too. I guess I just am on

the shit list for awhile, but it will be okay. Once this blows over and I get my car back, we can be together again."

"So I can't see you for a whole month?" I was almost crying.

"No, he probably will cave in before the month is up. Plus we can see each other at school. I will call you too. Just don't try to call here any more cuz they are watching me like a hawk."

"This is terrible, Brett!"

"Just chill, okay? It will be fine. I better get off the phone for now though. I will try to call you in a couple days. Don't worry!"

"I love you Brett!"

"Love you too." Click.

Chapter 18

A couple days came and went, and I did not hear from Brett. I related the entire situation to Elaine and confided to her how worried I was. We were taking a class together that semester called Commercial Foods. It basically was a cooking class, a replacement for what used to be called "Home Economics". The class was not now gender specific; it consisted of a mixture of male and female students. Elaine and I usually paired up in this class, as each student generally worked with a partner. It was a relaxed environment, and we could do a lot of gossiping while "working" on a project.

I tried not to worry about the fact that I had not heard from nor seen Brett since that Monday night. As the week progressed, I kept waiting for his call, to no avail. The following Monday I waited by Brett's locker before school, hoping to talk to him before first hour. When he arrived, he meekly smiled at me, but said very little. I tried to engage him, but he brushed me off, saying he was going to be late for class. He said not to worry, though, he'd catch up with me later in the day.

At lunch I planned to sit with him, surely he would want to be with me after all of this time. When he entered the cafeteria, though, he was with his friend Tim. He had to have seen me, but he did not approach. Instead they found their own table, completely ignoring me. Elaine, who was with me at the time tried to downplay the situation, saying that I was not the only one of Brett's friends he had not seen for an entire week. I couldn't eat anything that day, my guts feeling as if they were tied in knots.

I wondered if Tim had ever mentioned anything to Brett about how he comforted me in gym that day that I was so humiliated. I honestly doubted that Tim would have said a word, for that would require coming out from behind his mask of denial. It was easier to simply pretend that the incident had never happened.

It was not until the next day, Tuesday morning, that I finally cornered Brett and insisted that he talk to me. "Brett, I can't go on like this any more. I miss you too badly. Please have lunch with me." I was begging him.

Brett told me to meet him after school that day, that we would talk then. We agreed to meet in the park, and I heaved a big sigh of relief, knowing that now everything would be back to normal. We would work things out and all of this past horrible week would be forgotten. I reached to my neck, running my fingers across the necklace that Brett had bought me. I wore it all the time, even when I slept. Generally it was on under my clothes and nobody saw it unless I wanted to show them.

When I arrived in my Commercial Foods class that day, Elaine was waiting for me, obviously in possession of a juicy piece of gossip that she just had to share. She quickly pulled me aside and said, "Jeff, did you hear about Mr. Litzenfowler?"

I stared back at her. How is it that she always knew everything before me? "No, what happened to him?"

"He was fired."

"What?! No way. Why?" I was totally shocked.

"Nobody is saying, but I know it has something to do with a closed door meeting that the school board had last night. I guess they made a decision to give him the axe, and he got it this morning. They are having a public meeting tonight probably will make a statement about it. Mr. Litz was clearing his desk out when I walked by a couple minutes ago."

Immediately I dropped my backpack on the counter of our kitchen, and booked it out the door. Elaine was calling after me, telling me the bell was about to ring, but I ignored her. I ran down the corridor, which was now nearly empty and turned into Mr. Litz's classroom. He was standing there with a box in his hand, obviously containing the contents of his desk. He had turned off the light and was about to exit the room."

"Mr. Litz!" I blurted out. "It's not true is it? Did they really fire you?"

He smiled at me, in the most affectionate manner I'd ever seen. "You know, you probably will be the only one who even misses me."

"But why? How can they do this to you, right in the middle of the school year? What happened?"

He paused for a moment, setting the box down on one of the desks while still holding onto it one-handed. "They know I'm gay, Jeff. They found out."

"Why does that matter?" I cried. "They can't fire you for that, can they?"

"They can and have," he said. It appeared to me then that his eyes were getting misty. "You know, when I took this job three years ago, I did not really think I would like it. I know what this town is like, what the attitudes are around here. But I really am going to miss the students, you know. I grew to love it here because of you - the students. You know the ironic thing about the situation is that the school board is firing me because of the students. They say that my lifestyle is harmful to them, a bad example. They don't want a homosexual influencing their kids."

"What if the kids are homosexual?" I asked. "What then?"

"Hmm, maybe the kids are gay because the teacher recruited them," he said sarcastically. By this point tears were visible on his cheeks. "Hey, at least we know one thing - we made a difference in someone's life. Look at how we helped your friend Brett. He went from failing miserably to passing with the fourth-highest grade in the class. That was because of you, and I am thrilled to have been a part of it."

"Mr. Litz," I said, directing the conversation back to the real issue, "you can't let them do this to you. You have to fight them!"

"No, Jeff," he looked at me seriously. "I have no fight left in me. I have been fighting my whole life. Fifteen years ago I was a student in this very school. I was fighting the system then. Of course back in the Sixties nobody knew what it even meant to be gay. Those of us who were, just thought that we were perverted or something, but I knew inside that I was no pervert. I just wanted to love someone, that's all. I've got to move on now. I am never going to find acceptance in this town."

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Litz." I was crying now.

"You know what? I have a feeling things are going to be different for you, Jeff. You are just beginning your life at a time when things are changing. Just please be so careful. Don't let them hurt you, and be true to yourself, okay?"

I nodded, rushing over to him and wrapping my arms around him. He slowly put his hands on my shoulders, and then pushed me back, leaning down to look me in the eye. "It's going to be okay. You are a strong kid and you don't need me. I want you to look me up sometime when you are older though. I wanna keep in touch with you."

I nodded through my tears, and he pulled away from me, picking up his box of personal things, and he walked out the door.

I was waiting for Brett in the park at three o'clock, leaning against the same tree where I was the first time he had met me there. When his car pulled in I hoisted my book bag and headed for the passenger door, relieved to finally be with him again. He must have been right about his father caving in early. He had already gotten the car back. "I have missed you so much, Brett!"

"I have to talk to you about something, Jeff," he said, staring straight ahead out the windshield, not turning to match my gaze. "We have got to end this," he blurted out.

"What do you mean? End what?" I asked, knowing what he meant but unwilling to admit that I understood.

"Us. We have got to end 'us'. Did you hear about Mr. Litzenfowler?" he asked. I nodded, my eyes starting to tear up. "Well my dad is on the school board. He is one of the people who voted to fire him. Now he thinks that you are a fag too, and he doesn't want me to hang around you any more."

"You told me that did not matter! You told me he could not keep you from seeing me," I sobbed.

"Jeff, listen to me. It is over. If I don't do what my father says, he will end up cutting me off. I will have no college, no future. Do you understand what I'm saying?" I nodded. "I still have another year of high school to get through, and people don't understand. They don't know why a normal, all-American jock like me does not have a girlfriend. All I want is a normal life, that's all. If we stay together, that will never happen. My parents

will never understand. School will never understand. It will just be like Mr. Litz, we will go through our whole lives as outcasts. I don't want that."

"But Brett, I thought you loved me."

"That's not enough. This whole thing just isn't right. It never was right to begin with. You know it as well as I do. It's not normal for two guys to be in love with each other. It is no wonder people don't understand, because it is just sick."

I could not believe what I was hearing him say. "You think it is sick that I love you?" I spat.

"Dammit! It's not just about love! Can't you see? What are we going to do five years from now, or ten? How are we ever going to have a normal life? What if I wanted to get married, or what if you did? What kind of jobs would we be able to have? I'm not a fuckin hairdresser, you know!"

In spite of my excruciating pain, his sarcasm struck me as humorous, in a dark sort of way. I laughed aloud, through my tears. "Brett, why are you willing to let the stereotypes and the hatred control your life? You have been my hero all this time. Can't you see? Nobody has the right to tell us what is right for our lives or whom we should love. There is no reason we could not have a happy life together, if that is what we decided that we wanted. We are still in high school; how can we even be thinking about that right now?"

"Well maybe you are expecting too much from me, Jeff. Maybe everyone is." He now had turned to look at me and there were tears in his eyes as well. "I don't want to be a hero to anyone. I am just a dumb jock, and that is all. If you want to be gay, that is your decision. I'm sure you will find someone else who is better at it than I am. I just want to be normal!"

I had my hand on the door handle, preparing to bolt from the car, when he reached over and grabbed my other wrist. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all you have been through, losing your mom and everything. I'm sorry I am not strong enough to be what you need me to be."

I pulled my wrist away from him and reached for the back of my neck. Using both hands, I unclasped the necklace he gave me. "Keep it, please!" he implored me. I shook my head, dropping it between us in the seat.

"Good bye." I jumped out of the car, slamming the door behind me and ran as fast as I could for as long as I could. I ran and ran, crying uncontrollably.

Chapter 19

The weeks and months that passed after Brett ended our relationship were horrible for me. It was worse than the aftermath of my mother's death actually, as now I had multiple people for which to grieve. First my father had left us, then my mother died, followed by Mr. Litz being fired, and finally Brett had dumped me. I pulled more into myself, unwilling to allow anything else to hurt me. Most of the time I did not eat; my grandmother grew extremely worried about me. After school I would come home and lock myself away in the bedroom with Reggie. There I would lie on my bed, looking at Brett's picture and reading. My books were my escape, my only lifeline.

Elaine made many attempts to brighten my spirits. We still had our lunches together, and we loved being partners in commercial foods class. Elaine had helped me study for driver's training, and finally in April I began my actual driving time in the school's Ford station wagon with the huge yellow sign on the roof - "Student Driver". I used to think that instead of the student driver sign, they should have posted a "Caution" sign, Get the hell off the road if you value your life!

Our foods teacher, Mrs. McCoy, was a short jovial lady who worked as a chef for many years in one of the local resorts. She taught a couple of classes at school during the school year as well, and was truly one of my favorite teachers. She announced to us one day in class that our final exam was coming up in another month, and that we needed to start preparing. She said we were going to be catering the annual sports banquet in the high school auditorium. This was to be our final, so we began the daunting tasks of preparing the menu and assigning duties. Elaine and I were going to be doing prep work in the kitchen and also serving. I was a little bit concerned, because I knew that in all likelihood this would mean I'd have to see Brett again.

During my day-to-day routine at school, I did everything imaginable to avoid seeing Brett. Occasionally I would run into him, but would quickly turn away. I had heard that he was seeing Mandy Myers again. Carly had made a point to share this information with me. Carly had long ago made up with the other three of us, and was now back in her place at our lunch table as before.

It is odd how the period between the beginning of ninth grade and the end of the freshmen year is such a time of incredible change. It is during this window of time that boys start to evolve into men, and you see major growth spurts. Often the acne starts to clear up somewhat during this stage, and voices are getting deeper. Joey was clearly going through all of these changes himself. He also had matured so much emotionally this year. I think that his high school experience as a whole had matured him, but particularly his loss of Shane Meadows had greatly impacted him.

Carly and Joey, who had always fought bitterly with one another seemed to be discovering a new sort of connection with one another. I think that Joey's maturity and his coming out of the geekiness that had always defined him, sort of drew her to him. He was still an outcast and always would be. He just was way too damned smart for his own

good. I think, though, that Carly was starting to like the fact that he was so "unacceptable". She too had somewhat changed. She did not rub it in to me that she was right about how Brett would dump me. She was actually compassionate when she shared the news about Mandy, as well. I sensed that maybe Carly and Joey were becoming more than just friends.

Elaine and I became closer than ever, for at this stage she was truly my only really close friend. She was making a valiant attempt at weight loss, though she still sneaked cigarettes at every possible opportunity. Often we would go outside after lunch and sneak off campus to the park, where she would chain smoke about three cigs before our next class. She always kept a bottle of that air freshener spray in her purse which she used very liberally.

On one such occasion in May we were headed for the park, glancing behind us as I bragged to Elaine how well I had done on my driver's training road test, when I turned back around to see none other than Brett Willson and Tim Williams coming up the walkway in front of us. Quickly, I looked down, trying to avoid eye contact with either of them. I wondered what they had been doing in the park, probably the same thing we were about to do, though I knew Brett had never smoked as long as I'd known him.

"Hey, Jeff," he said. I quickly glanced towards Elaine and then back at him, nodding in his direction. "How have you been doing?" He had stopped, and Tim stood beside him, waiting for him to continue up to school with him.

"Okay," I said quietly. "You?"

"Not bad." It was as if he had something on his mind to say but did not know how to get it out. "We are having our big sports banquet tomorrow night," he said.

"Yeah, we know," said Elaine. "It is our foods class that is catering it. We will be there."

"Oh cool. Too bad you have to work through it, though," he countered.

Finally I spoke up, "Well, I have never been much of a sports fan anyways. I'm sure it will just be a bunch of the jocks patting each other on the back."

I think at this point Tim was about to speak up, but Brett held his hand out to silence him. "Yeah, I know you don't like sports much.... I remember. Well, it was good to see you again. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Whatever," I said, trying to sound as bitter as I possibly could. When Elaine and I got to the park, I cried in her arms, having just relived so many of the feelings I'd been suppressing for so long.

* * * * *

"I hate having to wear this tuxedo," I complained to Elaine. "I see now why they call them penguin suits."

"Shut up," she countered, "at least you don't have to wear a fuckin dress." We had just finished preparing the salads for the dinner and were standing in the kitchen. We had all of the tables set and the napkins folded. There were four other students who would be serving with us. The main course entree was either prime rib or broasted chicken. As we served the salads and rolls, we were to ask each guest which entree they preferred and then of course later serve it to them.

Elaine had already ensured me that she would see to it that I not have to serve Brett's or Coach McDonald's tables. As I peeked into the auditorium I realized that they were both sitting at the same table up towards the front. Brett's parents were also there at their table with them. Apparently Mr. Willson was a good friend of Coach McDonald, which was probably why he'd been so quick to dismiss Litzenfowler a few weeks ago.

While we were serving I was very careful to remain at the back of the auditorium, waiting on only the tables in the rear. I did not even look up to see if Brett was aware of my presence, though he was the one single thing that was on mind the whole time. It was about forty five minutes before we finally had all of the entrees served, and it was then already time to start clearing. After we cleared, we basically had to just mingle through the crowd refilling waters and coffees while the awards presentation was in progress.

My sarcastic remark to Brett about the awards ceremony being merely an opportunity for the jocks to pat themselves on the back proved to be very much true, actually. Honestly it was quite sickening, as Coach McDonald and the athletic director called each recipient forward, droning on and on about how remarkable their performance had been. Brett received recognition several times actually. He had won an all season passing record, had made it all state in football as well as sophomore baseball. He also was recognized when they called the entire football team forward to receive their awards for winning the Division Championship.

We were now two hours into the evening and had almost all of the tables cleared, when finally Coach McDonald stood at the podium to announce that it was his honor to now present the final award of the evening. I audibly released a sigh of relief, thanking God it would soon be over. "Every year the athletic department of Boyne City High takes the time to painstakingly review the performance of all its participants in virtually every sporting event category..." I wondered how long it had taken that buffoon to memorize those polysyllabic words. "... and we single out one particular athlete to recognize for outstanding performance. This years recipient is a young man whom I have had the privilege of working with since he was in middle school. He has been our star quarterback for our championship football team, has gone all state in both football and

baseball, and has held all major passing records within our football division. Although he and I have had our 'situations' this past year where we did not always see eye-to-eye, I am pleased to see not only the fine athlete that he has become but also the outstanding young man that he is as well. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in congratulating our athlete of the year, Boyne's very own hero, Brett Willson!"

The room suddenly burst into enthusiastic applause as it suddenly became clear to me why Brett had made it such a point to tell us about the sports banquet. He probably suspected that he would be up for this award and wanted to show off in front of me. What a fuckin ass. It was almost more than I could take, as I picked up a carafe of water and headed back towards the kitchen. I stopped in my tracks though when I heard his voice.

"Thank you. Thank you very much." His voice did not sound confident and cocky as I expected it would. I almost laughed, realizing he had a case of stage fright. I turned back around, suddenly wanting to witness the spectacle. "I am honored to be recognized with this award," he continued. "I know that in most cases this award is presented to seniors, and I am only a junior. Believe me, I am very much aware of the fact that I have competed with some very outstanding athletes here at Boyne, and it is really an honor to be chosen from such a pool of candidates."

Oh Christ, this was obviously a rehearsed speech. Brett did not talk like that. I turned back around and headed again towards the kitchen doors.

"Wait!" he said. The entire audience looked at him puzzled, many turning to look in my direction, trying to figure out to whom he was addressing his command. "Please wait!" he repeated, almost imploringly. I stopped and turned to look at him, as he stood behind the podium, now trembling.

"I want to say something," he then said, "that is not a part of what I had planned on saying.... Oh god!" He sighed heavily into the microphone. "I don't deserve this award, and I am not going to accept it." Coach McDonald stepped towards him, making a move toward interrupting him, perhaps thinking it was simply undue modesty on Brett's part. Brett held his hand up to him, motioning for him to keep his distance.

"Coach McDonald just introduced me as being a 'hero'. Well, I have to tell you honestly, this is not true. I am no hero. I may be a pretty good athlete, but there is nothing heroic about it." Tears now streaked his cheeks as he continued. "Two and a half months ago a teacher in this school was fired. I am sure that many of you know about the situation; the teacher was Alan Litzenfowler, an English teacher who had graduated from Boyne and had come back to teach for the past three years. I bet that a lot of people here think that I must have been pretty happy to see him go. He really busted my chops in his class; I actually failed freshman grammar twice under him. But you are wrong if you think that I wanted him fired. Mr. Litzenfowler was fired not because he was a bad teacher, but because he was different.

"Last fall one of our fellow students died suddenly and tragically. I'm sure that in this size town, most of you know the details. This student killed himself. He did so because he was different. Every single day of his life he was ridiculed, made fun of, picked on - by jocks like me ... and you." He looked out into the audience.

"I'm not a hero." He repeated. "I stood by while these things happened and did nothing. I saw one of our Campus Life group leaders expelled from her church because she was different too. Even then I said nothing. Then finally I gave up the one single person in my life that I love with all of my heart, just because I was afraid that all of you would think that I am different as well.

"I am different!" I stared up at Brett, my mouth agape, and began taking small steps up the center aisle to get closer to him at the podium. I had set down the carafe and was holding my hands up to my chin, on the verge of trembling myself.

"I am gay." The entire audience was stunned, Brett's parents staring up at him in shocked disbelief. Tim Williams sat at an adjacent table with his date and stared, his mouth open even wider than my own. Poor Mandy Myers, Brett's date for the evening, was now crouching in her seat.

"For so long we have tried to pretend that gay people do not exist in our community. We have lived our lives in a way that it is easiest to simply pretend that we do not know anyone who is 'that way'. Well, I want to tell you something: there are plenty of us who are that way, myself included.

"I am standing here tonight asking for forgiveness. I am sorry for all of the lies, for all of the times I have crawled off in the corner and hidden instead of standing up for what I know is right. I am sorry most of all for abandoning the one person who actually made it possible for me to even continue playing sports in the first place.

"It is with great honor that I humbly turn over this trophy to the person who really does deserve it, my hero: Jeff Irwin." He picked up the trophy and held it out in front of him, as if handing it to me. He looked at me then, directly in the eye, mouthing these words, I love you, Sport.

From the very back of the room I heard Elaine as she started to applaud, and a few others in the crowd joined her, some standing on their feet. Most of the audience remained seated there in stunned silence as Brett descended the stage and walked towards me, handing me the statue he was holding. I looked up at him through my tears as he reached in his tuxedo pocket, removing the gold necklace. He gently reached around my neck and clasped the chain, as I stood there staring up into his beautiful face.

Not even looking, I held the trophy to my side and let it fall to the floor, wrapping my arms around his neck as he grabbed me around my waist and kissed me, right there in front of God and everyone.

Epilogue

Dr. Alan,

Wanted to drop you a congratulatory line on your recent promotion. Brett and I heard through the grapevine that you are now chief of staff at the university. We are very happy for you and Tom both. Please let us know how Tom is enjoying his position at the network. I see him on television occasionally when Brett is watching one of his football games.

We just shared a wonderful weekend with our friends Terry and Paul. Terry is an old friend of Brett's whom we have known for many years. He and his partner Paul met when they attended college at the very university where you are now teaching.

Brett and I love it here in Florida, though we are thinking of selling our place. It is getting just too small for us, especially with the two kids. Adam is now seven and Lisa is ten; adopting them was the most wonderful thing that we ever did. Brett's consulting business is doing remarkably well and I am enjoying my job at the high school. It is as you told me, rewarding because of the students.

Brett's parents are supposed to be down for a visit next month and they are taking the kids over to Busch Gardens. I might be able to con his mom into skipping out with me and going shopping instead. They always go way overboard with the kids, spoiling them like there is no tomorrow. The joys of grand-parenting, huh?

We look forward to hearing from you soon and hope you can come down some time this winter. I know Boston sometimes gets pretty nasty around that time of year.

Be true to yourself.

Love

Jeff and Brett

The End.