

Foley-Mashburn Saga #7

Summer Fun

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Chapter 01

(Kyle's Perspective)

Putting Tim on that plane was hard. He and I both cried a little, and I felt like a total dumbass for doing it right there in public. I kept telling myself it was only for a week and then I'd see him again. I think I might have been acting that way as much out of fear of what it would be like if something happened and he never made it back, as I was over missing him. I kept thinking about Jeff and what he must have gone through when Clay died. I mean, I knew Jeff had a rough time of it, but I didn't realize how rough until I started thinking about Tim being gone from my life.

We hadn't gone to church Saturday night, like we usually did, because of the party. We went on Sunday night, instead. I had talked to Jerry a little bit at the party about wanting to talk to him about becoming a Catholic, and we made an appointment for after Mass that night. We always went out to the Pelican's Post to eat after Mass, and a lot of the time he came with us. That night, though, it would only be him and me, so we could talk.

We shook hands when he came to the table. I got there about five minutes before he did, and I had already ordered a glass of iced tea. I didn't know what he wanted, otherwise I would have ordered for him.

"That was a great party yesterday and last night," he said when he sat down. "Justin is a fine young man, just like all the rest of you guys."

"Thanks, Jerry. He's my best friend, you know. I love that boy almost as much as I love Tim," I said.

"It shows, Kyle."

I chuckled.

The waiter brought us menus, but Jerry and I had eaten there so often we already knew what we wanted. We didn't bother to read the menu. We just ordered.

"How long have you been thinking about becoming a Catholic," he asked.

"About a year, I guess, give or take a month or two. Tim's Catholic, and so are Kevin, Rick, Brian, and Jeff. It just seems right to do it," I said.

"Don't do it for them, though. Do it for yourself. Do it for Kyle," he said.

"Oh, I know. If I didn't know all of them, and you and Pat and Doc and Sonya and all the New Orleans people, I probably never would have thought about wanting to do it. But I do know all of y'all, and that makes it easier for me," I said.

"Do you know what you'd have to do," he asked.

"Not really."

"You'll have to go through a program called the RCIA. That stands for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. It takes about eight months. There will be a class starting right after Labor Day, and it will end when you're accepted into the Church at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. That's the day before Easter. There are classes or some other kind of activity once a week, more or less. You'll have to have a sponsor, someone in the parish who is a practicing Catholic and who is willing to help you grow in faith and love during the RCIA process," he said.

"Could Tim do that?"

"Has Tim been confirmed," he asked.

"I think so," I said.

"Then legally Tim could do it, Kyle, but I'm going to recommend somebody else. Not because I don't love Tim to death and think he's a great young man, but I'd like to see you work with somebody older and wiser," he said.

"Who were you thinking about?"

"George Murphy. Tim's dad," he said.

"Oh, wow, Jerry. He'd cream his jeans, if I asked him to do that," I said.

Jerry laughed so loud when I said that that people at a couple of tables near us stared our way.

"Kyle, you do have a way with words," Jerry said, still laughing.

I hadn't meant for it to really be funny, but I guess there was a little irony in what I had said, under the circumstances.

"And I think you're right. George would cream his jeans, at least figuratively," he said.

"So, should I ask him, or will you do that," I asked.

"You need to do it. I brought some pamphlets with me that explain the whole thing. They're out in my car, and we can get them before we leave. How do your parents feel about this?"

"They love Doc," I said. "He's my dad's best friend."

"I know." He was laughing a little bit. "I didn't mean how they feel about George. I meant, how do they feel about you becoming a Catholic."

"Oh. I see what you mean. Oh, they're totally supportive. Jerry, I know I joke and laugh a lot to have fun, but there's a serious side of me, too. They know I've thought it through and that it's a serious decision on my part. They're cool with it," I said.

They brought our food just then, and we started eating.

"Kyle, I want to talk to you about the Catholic Church's position on homosexuality. I think it's important that you understand that as fully as you can up front, okay? Do you know anything about it?"

"Not really," I said. "I know a little bit about the sex scandal with the priests. A lot of that is gay-related, isn't it?"

"Yeah, some of it is," he said, "and the media have tended to focus on that a lot more than is warranted, I think. That's not really what I had in mind, though, although it's related.

"There are some passages in the Bible that some people say condemn homosexuality. Now days, scripture scholars--people who study the Bible for a living--believe that those passages have been misinterpreted. Some say the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because they committed the serious sin of refusing hospitality to strangers, which was a very big no-no in the Bible. Others say homosexual sex was forbidden because it was part of a cult of the worship of idols. Anyway, I can give you some good references to read on that subject, if you're interested.

"Jesus didn't say anything about homosexuality, and, in the Old Testament, it's only male homosexuality, not female, that is condemned. The point is, it's not nearly as clear cut as some people would have you believe. What is clear cut, though, is Jesus' command to love, to forgive, and to not judge. Straight men and women express their love for one another through sex with one another. For us, you and me and other gay men, it's through sex with another man.

"Anyway, the Church has held on to that teaching. For a long time they said just being homosexual was evil. Now they say that you can't help being homosexual, but you just can't engage in homosexual acts of love. Their reasoning is that all sex outside of marriage is wrong. Because homosexuals can't marry one another, they can't ever have sex."

"Kevin and Rick are married," I said.

"Yeah, but not officially in the eyes of the Church, even though a priest performed the ceremony," he said.

"That's a little confusing," I said.

"It's a lot confusing," he said. "Anyway, I wanted to make the point that a great many Catholics, and not just gay and lesbian Catholics, either, don't buy the Church's teaching on the subject. They feel the way I do. Namely, that God created us gay, and we have the right, the fundamental human right, to love another person of the same sex and to express that love physically."

"I'm on your side on that one," I said.

"I figured you were," he said, chuckling. "There are about 45,000 Catholic priests in the United States, and the most commonly quoted estimate is that about 25% of them are gay. That's over 11,000 gay priests. But the priesthood and religious life have always attracted large numbers of homosexuals of both genders. In the olden days, you had two choices: marriage or the Church. A lot of people who were appalled by the idea of being forced to get married entered the priesthood or religious life. Even today, say a guy knows he's gay. He hears what the Church says about no sex unless you're married, and he buys into that. Priesthood might look pretty good. You can't get married, so you have a socially acceptable reason for not dating. It's a pretty comfortable life, and, until recently, you had a lot of status. You also help people."

"Did that influence you," I asked.

"Quite frankly, it did. It wouldn't today because of what I've learned in the meantime, but yeah, it did. That wasn't the only reason, but it was definitely a factor," he said.

"Would you become a priest now, knowing what you know now?"

"Fair question, and the answer is a definite 'yes.' When I see guys like Kevin and Rick, it's harder to say that, but I definitely would," he said.

"Cool," I said.

We had long since been finished with dinner, and he and I were having coffee.

"One more point I want to make, and then I'm going to have to be going," he said. "I think most Catholics are pretty tolerant people. Many aren't, but the majority are, in my experience. Even the hierarchy, the bishops and such. What pisses me off is the way they fight homosexuality-related issues, like same-sex marriage. That's why Kevin and Rick can't adopt kids in this state. It's not because they're gay, per se; it's because they aren't a legally-married couple. And the Church vigorously opposes same-sex marriage. They proved that in Canada, recently. Now that hurts."

Jerry was so busy talking, he didn't see me slip the waiter the money for both of us. I was hoping he wouldn't notice because I didn't want to argue with him about it.

"We need to get our checks," he said.

"Nope. All taken care of," I said.

"Kyle! You weren't supposed to do that," he said.

"You've never bought a good friend a meal," I asked.

He grinned.

"Well, thanks, Kyle. You guys don't really have to feed me every day, though, you know?"

"Why not, if we want to?"

* * *

I had decided I was going to spend the week at Kevin and Rick's house. I loved my parents to death, but I thought I would stand a much better chance of not getting too lonesome for Tim at their house instead of my parents' house.

I stopped at the grocery store on my way home and got peanuts, M & M's, and raisins to make us a treat. I had made that once before, and they seemed to really like it. I bought microwave popcorn, although I thought we might have some of that already, and an eight-pack of Snickers to cut up into little pieces in the popcorn. I also bought some candy corn, those little triangle-shaped candies that are white on the tip and orange at the bottom. I wanted to try mixing those with salty peanuts to see how they'd be. I had heard of that but had never tried it.

It was still pretty early when I got home, and they were all in the den watching a movie on TV. I went in the back door and straight into the kitchen. Trixie wasn't in her bed, of course. She was good about sleeping in there but not until all her people were in bed.

I mixed up two bowls of the peanut-M & M-raisin treat and one of the candy corn and peanuts. I popped two bags of popcorn and chopped up four Snickers to put in it. I put all four bowls on a tray and took it all out to the den.

They all told me hi. It was Kevin and Rick, of course, and Justin and Brian, Seth and Cody, Alex, and Chip. Jeff and Tyler must have been on a date or at his house. I set the tray on the coffee table, and Trixie was the first one up to investigate. She knew damn good and well not to mess with that stuff. I had had to scold her a few times about that.

"Oh, Jesus! What have you done," Rick said.

"I made some treats," I said.

"I knew there was some reason we kept you around here, Bubba," Jus said. "Damn. Look at this stuff."

They didn't waste any time digging in.

"Kyle, this is good stuff," Chip said. "Man, this is really good stuff. What's it called?"

"I don't know what the names are for it," I said.

"Let's give 'em names," Bri said. "I think the stuff with the raisins should be called Tick Supreme." Everybody laughed.

"That's what raisins remind me of," I said. "They remind me of ticks. I love that name, Bri."

"How about Popcorn Candy for the popcorn one," Chip said.

"Yeah, I like that," I said. "What are we going to call the candy corn and peanuts?"

"We always called that candy Chicken Corn when I was a kid," Kevin said.

"I think we should call it Chicken Nuts," Justin said.

Everybody laughed.

"Oh, I love that, Bubba," I said. "Kind of reminds me of you, Jus."

"That was in the old days, Kyle," Justin said, grinning.

"I know," I said. "But I still love the name."

The movie was over by the time everybody had dug into the treats. I felt kind of bad about disrupting their watching of it, but they sure didn't seem to mind. We were all kind of quiet as we munched on the stuff. Then Rick said,

"Jus, Kevin and I forgot to give you one of your gifts last night."

"Damn! More presents?"

"Yeah. We had this ready, too, but we forgot to give it to you," Kevin said.

Rick got up and went into the study. He came back with an envelope and handed it to Justin.

Jus looked back and forth between them. Then he looked at me like I knew something about it, but I just shrugged.

He opened the envelope and pulled out a check.

"What's this for," he asked.

"Read the amount, dumbass. That's what it's for," Rick said. He and Kevin were grinning their faces off.

"It says \$6,600.00. I don't get it," Jus said.

"That's the money the state gave us for being your foster parents," Kevin said.

"That's your money, Kev. You and Rick earned it," Jus said.

"Jus, when you first came here, we were both making decent salaries, but that money from the state really helped out. But then we got our current jobs, and we make way more money than we need. In the meantime, we sort of fell in love with you, dude. We wanted to support you because we loved you, not because the state paid us to. You really are our son, Justin. People don't get paid to raise their son," Kevin said.

What he said really got to ole Jus. There were huge tears of happiness in his eyes, and, truth be known, in mine, too. Kevin and Rick were both on the verge as well. Jus couldn't keep it together, and he let 'em loose. When he did, we all did, at least those of us who knew everything. The new boys--Seth, Cody, Alex, and Chip--didn't have a clue about what was going on. Kevin, Rick, Brian, and I knew, though, and we all bawled. If Jeff had been there, he would have done the same thing.

Brian and I scooted over to Jus to hug him. Where the hell is Tim, I thought. Then I remembered. He was missing this, and that tugged at my heart.

"You're missing your boy, aren't you," Jus said, after we had calmed down and he and I had gone to take Trixie outside.

"Oh, yeah. And he's missing this, man. This was important for you, wasn't it?"

"Kyle, when he said, 'People don't get paid to raise their son,' that was the happiest moment of my life," Justin said. "I knew that was the way they felt for a long time, but Kevin said it, man. He fucking said it."

"I know," I said. "And he meant it."

"I know. That's why it was so good."

* * *

That was a rough day for me, emotionally. I mean, seeing everybody off took its toll on me. First it was Grandma and Grandpa Foley, and Craig and Cherie. Then Tim and Doc. Then Grandma and Grandpa Jacobs. Wow! That was a lot of crying. Then, that night, that whole business with Justin. That Justin boy was so happy. But you still need support from your brothers and friends when you're happy, you know? When Kevin told him they took care of him all that time because they loved him and not because they were getting paid to, I knew full well what that family was all about. And Justin knew where he fit in to that. He had heard that before in one form or other, and I knew it. But you need to hear more than once that people love you for it to really sink in.

Anyway, I figured I'd be out like a light when I went to bed. No way! That was the first night I had slept by myself in over a year, and I needed my boy. I was so pitiful. Why would I feel that way? What was wrong with me? I flailed around in that bed looking for him. There was a scent on his pillow that reminded me of him, and I sniffed that scent for all I was worth. I wasn't craving sex, although that would have been nice. I was craving my boy, my Tim. I couldn't sleep, so finally I got up and went downstairs.

I poked around in the kitchen for something to eat. I had bought double of everything I served that night, so I could have made me some more of that. Instead, I got me a banana out of the fruit bowl, and I ate that.

In a little while, I heard somebody coming down the back stairs. I was butt naked, and I hoped he wouldn't mind. I mean, I couldn't imagine who would mind that, but you never knew. It was Justin, naked as the day he was born.

"Hey," he said. "You couldn't sleep, either, I guess."

"No. I thought I was pretty tired, too, but I guess I wasn't," I said.

"You're not used to sleeping by yourself, are you?"

"No, I'm not," I said. "It just feels good having him next to me in bed, you know?"

"Of course I know," he said. "Did you get into any of this?" He moved his hand like he was jerking off.

"Naw. I almost never do that anymore. At least not by myself," I said.

"I don't, either. That's kind of ironic, isn't it? You and me both gay, and neither one of us jerks off."

"Not really. I'm well taken care of."

"I know," he said, grinning.

I didn't know what he wanted, if anything, but it felt really good to be there with him. I knew that Justin and I were as close as any two friends could be, and we trusted each other completely.

"Let's walk out to the dock," he said.

"Okay."

We went outside, and the night air was warm and damp. That's pretty much the way it always was in Emerald Beach in the summer time, and it felt good to be outside naked like we were. We walked down to the dock and stood there looking at the water. There was a tiny light that we kept on all night on the dock. I wasn't exactly sure why, but I was glad it was there that night.

Jus and I sat down next to one another and let our legs hang down over the water. Neither one of us said anything for a long time. Eventually, though, he started talking.

"What's going to happen, Kyle?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've been thinking a lot about the future these last couple of days. College and all. I'm really scared about that," he said.

"Do you not want to go," I asked.

"No, I do want to go. I think I need to, don't you?"

"If you're talking about for a job, the answer is no. You'll always have a job, as long as you want one. And you'll get promoted, too."

"I know that. I really wasn't thinking about for a job. I was thinking about so I can be like everybody else."

"Not everybody goes to college, Bubba," I said.

"I know that, too, but all of y'all will, or already have. I'm talking about the family. I don't want to be the only one who didn't go to college."

I started feeling kind of bad just then.

"Jus, I tease a lot about you and me being the dumb ones, but we aren't, you know," I said.

He chuckled a little.

"I know that, Kyle. I know you and I aren't dumb. I don't have much education, though. I know I can learn, and I can even be refined when I want to be. And so can you. I'm also not a lazy person."

"I won't tease anymore about us being dumb," I said. "Have I ever hurt your feelings by teasing?"

He put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me to him a little bit.

"Kyle, the only thing, and I mean the only thing, you have ever done to me is to help me. To make me feel good about myself. I love you, and I know you love me. If you ever said anything to hurt my feelings, I know it wouldn't be on purpose, Bubba. You're not that kind of person. I'm not very religious, you know? But I do believe in God, and I believe God sent me here to save me. And a big part of that has been you, Kyle."

I didn't say anything because I didn't know what to say.

"I don't know what to say, Jus. I think God sent me here, too. I get scared sometimes that the happiness in my life isn't going to last. I don't know if I could stand that, you know?"

"Same here," he said.

"Let's go back to bed, okay? Thank you for coming downstairs. I needed you right at that moment. I think I can get to sleep now. I guess we're all in this adventure together."

"Adventure," Jus asked.

"Yeah. Life."

(Tim's Perspective)

The trip to Boston wasn't too bad. There weren't too many people traveling, I thought, until we got off the plane in Atlanta. The fact was, there just weren't too many people on our flight. The Atlanta airport was busy, though, just like always.

"We probably ought to get something to eat," Dad said. "They won't feed us on the plane."

We went to one of the little restaurants that are all over the place and got some lunch.

"Are you excited," Dad asked.

I sort of shrugged.

"You're sad about leaving Kyle behind, aren't you?"

I nodded.

"Well, he'll be in Boston next Saturday. That's not so long, is it?"

"Oh, no. I wish he were here, but I can handle that. I'm just a little nervous about meeting all those people in Maine," I said.

"They're all your relatives, Tim. They'll love you," he said.

"Do they know I'm gay, Dad," I asked. That had been in the back of my mind since I had found out about the trip.

"I don't see how they would. I doubt seriously that your grandparents have told any of them. Are you scared about that? About them finding out?"

"I don't care if they know. I'm not ashamed of that, at least not anymore. I just don't know how they'll take it, you know?"

"I do know, son."

"Tell me again who's going to be there."

"My two first cousins, Charlotte and Virginia, their husbands, and their kids. It was just the three of us growing up, and Charlotte and Virginia and I were very close. Our mothers were sisters. They're sisters, and Charlotte is a year older than I, and Ginger is a year younger. They each have four children, and I'm sure all of them will be there."

"How old are the kids?"

"I've sort of lost track of exactly how old they are, but three or four of them are teenagers. One graduated from high school this year, so he must be seventeen or eighteen. Each of my cousins has two boys and two girls. The older ones are boys, if I'm not mistaken," Dad said.

"I hope they like me," I said. "They all know one another, and I'm the new kid."

"They'll like you, son. Trust me, okay?"

"Okay, Dad," I said. Sure, I thought. Everybody loves the queer cousin they've never met.

* * *

We landed at Logan Airport in Boston and rented a car to go to Cape Porpoise, Maine. It was pretty cool driving through the Massachusetts and Maine countrysides, and some of the scenery was

beautiful. I thought about the fun Kyle would have had with his cameras, taking pictures of the covered bridges and the views of the ocean.

It took a while to get where we were going, and I did some of the driving. Cape Porpoise was where Kennebunkport was, and there were some really neat little towns around there. Some of the houses were very large, too. You could tell there were a lot of people who had money, and I saw some nice cars on the streets.

The place where we would be staying was a sort of compound. There were two big houses and one smaller house, all sort of grouped around a central garden sort of thing. A front yard, really. We were pretty close to the ocean, and the air smelled a lot like it does in Emerald Beach. Dad and I would have the smaller house to ourselves except for two cousins, who were already set up in the second bedroom. Dad and I were going to share a bedroom, too. Ours had a double bed and a twin bed, and the other room just had a double bed.

They all came outside to meet us when we got there. Dad introduced me to the adults, and then the adults introduced me to their kids. There were a lot of people and a lot of names to keep straight. Charlotte's husband was Mike Ryan, and their kids were Patrick, who they called Paddy, and he was 18. Next was Tony, 16, and the girls, Anne, 14, and Margaret, 12. The other family were the Cooks, and Ginger and Charlie were the parents. Their kids were Steve, 16, Billy, 15, Laurie, 13, and Madison, 11. Paddy and Tony were sharing the small house with me and Dad.

None of the kids were real talkative, and I could tell they were all busy checking me out. Kyle's always telling me how cute and beautiful I am, but I think a lot of that is just Kyle's bullshit. I know I'm not bad looking, though. Neither were those other kids. I was actually physically the largest one of the bunch. I had pretty much finished growing, and I was right at five ten. Paddy, the eighteen-year-old, was the biggest one of them, and I had a good two inches on him. They were all built pretty lean, skinny even, and I was glad at that moment for all the iron Kyle had made me pump since Christmas.

It was getting close to meal time. They told us to put our stuff away and to come over to the Ryans' house for drinks and dinner. It didn't take Dad and me long to do that.

"Nice looking kids, don't you think," Dad asked as we were unpacking.

"I guess," I said, non-committally.

I changed out of my travel clothes and put on shorts, a tank top, my deck shoes, and a baseball cap. The cap I had was actually one of Kyle's. He had wanted me to take it and wear it.

"Come here," Dad said. He grabbed me up in a big hug. "They might be nice looking kids, but none of them is as good looking as you are, just remember that. And none of them has a fine man like Kyle coming up to see them next week. I'm so proud of you, son."

That made me relax. I knew my dad loved me, no matter what, and I knew he loved Kyle, his other son, just as much.

"Are you okay," he asked.

"Yes, sir," I said. "I'll be fine. I'll just be myself."

"If you do that, Tim, you'll steal the show, that's for sure," he said.

"You're not just a little prejudiced, are you?"

"Not a little prejudiced. A lot prejudiced," he said.

We both laughed, and I felt good.

I was so glad I wore that tank top. Those other boys looked at me with respect on their faces.

"You must work out, huh," Tony said.

"A little," I said, understating my ass off. "What about you?"

"Naw, not really," he said.

"And it shows," Paddy said to his brother.

"Like you do," Tony answered with a sneer.

"You guys cut it out, huh," Steve said. "None of us is worth a shit at sports, and we all know it. Do you play sports, Tim?"

"I used to play baseball in middle school, but nothing anymore. Just work out, water ski, backyard basketball . . . stuff like that," I said. "Oh, and I swim a good bit."

"Are you dating anybody," Tony asked.

"I've been dating somebody for about a year and a half," I said. And you'd love him! I thought.

"Why is that always your first question," Paddy asked. "You've never had a date in your life."

"Just checking out if he's a homo like you, that's why," Tony said.

I could tell those two brothers weren't best friends, that's for sure.

"Do you ever shoot pool? We were talking about walking into town and shooting some pool tonight, if you want to," Billy, the youngest of the boys, said.

"What kind of pool can you play with five people," Tony asked defiantly.

"Continuous pool," I said. "Sometimes it's called fourteen-one pool. Me and my friends play it all the time when there's an odd number."

"So what are you, some kind of pool shark," Tony said. I wondered if that guy knew how to smile.

"Not really, although we won a bunch of money off some hustlers in New York last March. We were there for Spring Break," I said.

Tony, I thought, if I was a shark in a pool, the first thing I'd do is bite your nuts off.

"Who were you with, Tim," Paddy asked.

"Three of my friends. The same three guys who are coming up to Boston next week. Y'all will have to meet 'em," I said.

"Y'all? How Southern," Tony said.

That boy had a major attitude problem, and I couldn't wait for my big brother Justin to meet his ass. He and Kyle will verbally rip that boy a new asshole, and Tony won't even know it happened.

"Come and eat, guys," Charlotte said.

It was a buffet, although it didn't hold a candle to the spreads Kyle put out for us. It was grilled hamburgers and hotdogs, some baked beans (they were Bostonians, after all), and some coleslaw. Mike Ryan, Charlotte's husband and the father of Paddy and Tony, began the usual Catholic blessing before we started in the line, and everybody recited the blessing together. I knew that was the way most Catholics did it, but not at our house. Our blessings meant something.

The adults sat at the only picnic table that was available, and the kids all sat on the ground. It was like three clumps of people: adults at the table, boys in one spot on the lawn, and girls in another spot on the lawn.

"Have you got a summer job," Paddy asked.

"Yeah, I do," I said. "I work in a gift shop on the beach where I live."

"Cool," Paddy said.

"Shit. Another fag," Tony said, and he got up to go sit by himself.

"Tim, I'm sorry, man," Paddy said, obviously embarrassed by the way his brother was acting.

"Is he always like that," I asked.

"Yeah, pretty much," Steve said. "He's a real pain in the ass. Nobody likes him. He thinks everybody he meets is gay, and he hates gays."

Phew! My stomach was in a huge knot, and I didn't want it to stay that way all week. I decided the three of them who were still there were decent guys, and they were, after all, the only cousins I had.

Them and their sisters. I decided to go for it. Hell, I thought, if they don't want me hanging around them, I'll find ways to entertain myself during the week I was going to be there. Fuck the closet.

"In my case, he's right," I said.

Nobody moved when I said that. Billy had a hotdog halfway to his mouth, and I noticed he put it back on his plate. In my mind's ear I heard Jus saying, "Scratch Billy off our team's roster," and I almost laughed out loud.

"That's not a problem with us," Steve said.

"I'm gay, too," Paddy said, barely above a whisper.

At that moment I wished gay people had some kind of secret handshake or something so Paddy and I could have used it.

"Does he know about you," I asked.

"Oh, yes. He knows. And he gives me no peace about it. My parents have restricted him, talked to him, prayed for him, grounded him, sent him to counseling for it, and done just about everything in the world to make him leave me alone, but he won't. I hate my brother, and he hates me," Paddy said.

"And you guys are okay with us being gay," I asked Steve and Billy.

"Tim, everybody in this family is okay with Paddy being gay, and they'll be okay with you being gay, too. Everybody but Tony," Steve said.

I thought for a few moments before I responded.

"Do you think Tony might be . . ."

"That has crossed my mind many, many times, Tim," Paddy said. "He says he's straight. Actually, he says he's 'normal.'"

"Oh, one of those," I said.

They all laughed.

"So, how do we handle him to keep him from not letting us have a good time," I asked.

"Just ignore him, Tim. That's what we do most of the time," Billy said. "He won't stay away from us, though, as much as we'd like him to. He'll want to go with us to shoot pool later, if that's what we do."

"God, I wish Kyle was here," I said.

"Who's Kyle," Paddy asked.

"He's my boyfriend. My partner. It's beyond boyfriend with us, guys. He'd love you guys, and y'all would love him," I said. I decided I was going to say "y'all" as often as I remembered to say it. "He's unbelievable."

"He's coming next week, right? Do you think we could all hang out or something," Paddy asked.

"Yeah, he's coming to Boston. He and another couple, actually. Justin and Brian. It was the four of us in New York over Spring Break. And we sorta kinda live together, too. You'll all love these guys. Justin and Kyle are best friends, and Brian and I are best friends. And, of course, there are the two relationships. The four of us are a pretty awesome group," I said.

We had all finished eating a while before. It was close to 7:30, but the daylight didn't look like it was going to end for a long time.

"I really wouldn't mind shooting some pool," I said, "if y'all are up for it."

"Let's go," Paddy said.

We took our trash up to a garbage can they had set out on the lawn. We told the parents where we were going, and they told us to have a good time.

"Everything's cool, Dad," I said, "except with Tony."

"I figured it would be, Tim. If you guys have a drink, be careful," Dad said.

"Hell, George, they're walking," Mike said.

"Still, I want them to be careful," Dad said.

"Yes, sir, we will be," I said. "Tony, do you want to come with us? We're going to shoot pool."

"Yeah, I guess," he said.

Don't be so enthusiastic, man, I thought.

"Well, come on," I said.

"Thanks, Tim," Mike, Tony's dad, said.

Mike winked at me, and I grinned back at him.

The five of us took off walking to town. We had a perfectly good mini-van I could have taken, but I guessed the tradition was we walked into town. We weren't around a curve in the road more than ten seconds when Paddy and Steve pulled out packs of cigarettes. Paddy offered one to me, but I said no thanks. Steve gave one to his brother, and they all lit up.

"I want one," Tony said.

I figured they'd tell him to fuck off, but Steve gave him one of his.

"The fag doesn't want a fag," Tony said to me.

"Hold up," I said. I put my hands up in the air to signal for us to stop. "Tony, man, I am gay. You were right. I'm queer. I'm a cocksucker. I'm a fudge packer. I'm queer as a three-dollar bill. But you know what? I'm proud of being gay."

"I knew I was right. I have excellent gaydar," Tony said.

"Yeah, most gay guys do," I said. "Back in Florida, we have a Labrador Retriever puppy by the name of Trixie. We've been training her, me and my gay brothers, not to be obnoxious. Do you know how we train Trixie?"

"No, how?"

"Every time she does something obnoxious, like lick us on the face or something, we give her a little reminder. Like this."

I punched him right in his gut, and he doubled over. He puked right there in the road. When he was back up, he looked like he was about to rear back to get my ass. What I had already done to him was so unlike me that I knew the guys back in Emerald Beach wouldn't have believe it. But goddamn it, Kyle was right. I wasn't going to take that shit and have a great week with those other three boys ruined by that prick. I was ready for him.

"You want some of me, buddy? Well, come on. This fag is ready for you," I said.

"Fuck you, cocksucker," he screamed.

I popped him another one.

"What did you say?"

"Faggot! Motherfucking faggot," he screamed.

I popped him again.

"I can keep this up all night, Bubba," I said. "Please don't make me do it, Tony."

"Fuck you," he said, with more venom than I had ever heard from another human being.

"Get your ass back to the house, man. You're my cousin, Tony. I came here with absolutely nothing against you, man. I wanted to be your friend, but I won't take your bullshit. And I mean it. Go on home. You're not welcome with us right now. Think about it, man. Your brother and I are gay. So fucking what? He's always going to be your brother, and I'm always going to be your cousin, no matter what. You can't change that, and your mean talk won't change us. Go home."

"You're going to be sorry, Murphy," he said.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Tony, if you ever want to talk, I'm here for you, Bubba. And I mean that."

"Fuck you," he said. He turned to go back home.

"I think he'd like to do just that," Steve said.

"Ewwww," Billy said.

We all laughed.

We shot pool that night and had a great time. Paddy bought beers for all four of us, and I drank mine right down with them. He asked who was ready for another round, but one was enough for me. I knew Kyle and Jus would have had three or four, just like those guys did, but drinking and smoking were just not big on my list of things to do. I didn't care if they did that, any more than I cared if Kevin, Kyle, and Jus did. I just wasn't interested.

We didn't put any money on the pool games we played, and I was glad we didn't. We played queer-straight teams, and Paddy and I would have raked in the money from those two. All three of them were really nice guys, and I liked them a lot. I was glad they were my cousins.

Chapter 02

(Tim's Perspective, continued)

The girls were all in bed or in their rooms when we got home that first night. The adults were all in the living room of Charlotte and Mike Ryan's house. They had been visiting and sipping wine and just having a reunion, I guess.

"Hi. Did you guys have a good time? Where's Tony," Mike Ryan asked.

"Tony left with us, but he didn't stay with us, Dad," Paddy said.

"Where'd he go," Mike asked.

"Tim sent him home."

"I'm sorry, Mike, but I'm not putting up with his crap," I said.

I looked at my dad for his reaction to that, and he didn't react at all.

"Look, everybody. You're my family, and I know that. These guys know it already. I'm gay, and I'm not putting up with Tony's harassment. That's the way I feel, and that's the way I live my life," I said.

None of the adults said anything, so I decided not to say any more, either.

"Tim, we don't blame you," Mike said, "but you have to know that Tony is very troubled right now. He won't tell us anything, but Charlotte and I believe he might have been molested at some point."

Oh, shit! I thought. Jesus Christ!

"Tim, Charlotte and I don't really know what else to do. Paddy is gay, and we're fine with that, but it seems to rub Tony wrong in the worst possible way. We've tried everything we know to do for Tony. We love him, Tim. I know he was probably obnoxious as hell to you tonight, but we love our son. We just don't know what to do next."

I felt like a total shit at that moment because I had hit him so many times, and so hard.

"I didn't know about that, Mike. I hit him two or three times when he called me names," I said.

"Dad, Tim did it, though. He made him shut up with the name-calling, at least until he left us. Tim said that was the way they trained their puppy, and that might be how we have to train Tony. I've wanted to clean his clock so many times, but I haven't done it because I was afraid of him. Tim is bigger and stronger than all of us. He can do it, Dad," Paddy said.

Paddy was nervous, and I knew he didn't like saying that about his brother.

"I think the boys need to work out a separate peace among themselves, Mike," my dad said. "You didn't like doing that, did you, son?"

"I didn't like doing it, but I did like it, at the same time. I mean, he deserved it. He was so offensive, Dad. Kyle and Jus would have hurt him bad," I said.

"Kyle and Justin taught you to be that aggressive," Dad asked.

"Yes, sir, but only when it's right," I said.

"We still don't know where Tony is, do we," Dad said.

"Let's check his bed before we call 9-1-1," I said.

We checked it, and he was sound asleep. I knew he was going to be hurting tomorrow where I had hit him. Part of me cared about that, and part of me didn't.

We stayed up about another hour, talking, laughing, and having fun. When it was time for bed, my dad said,

"Paddy, you and Tim take the double bed in our room. I'll take the twin."

Paddy was delighted he didn't have to sleep with his asshole brother, and I didn't mind him sleeping with me.

"Tim," Paddy whispered after we were in bed a few minutes.

"What," I whispered back.

"Thanks for tonight," he said. "He's deserved that for a long time."

"He's getting it tomorrow, too. Any time he calls you or me or anybody a fag or any of that shit. I mean it, Paddy. This is completely unlike me, man, usually, but I'm not putting up with it. I like the rest of you guys too good for him to spoil it," I said.

"Thanks, man," he said.

"Good night," I said. And he said the same.

* * *

When Paddy and I woke up Monday morning, my dad was already gone from our room. It was about eight o'clock, and I was pretty sure most of the rest of them were already up for the day. Paddy and I had snuggled together against the chill of the morning air, and both of us had typical morning erections.

"Good morning," I said to him.

"Morning," he replied.

It was then that he realized the position he was in, spooned up against my back. I could feel his dick, but I didn't give it a second thought.

"Sorry," he said.

"You don't have to move," I said, "and there's nothing to be sorry about."

"I was having impure thoughts about you. I need to get up."

He started to get up, but I grabbed his arm and kept him in bed with me.

"What do you mean, 'impure thoughts,'" I asked.

"Tim, don't do this, please," he said.

"Were you thinking about having sex with me? Is that what you mean by 'impure thoughts'?"

He was silent for a few seconds, and then he said, "Yes."

"There's nothing bad about that, man," I said. "It's totally normal."

"How can it be normal, Tim?"

I turned over to face him.

"How can it not be normal? You're gay, right? I'm gay. I'm not going to do anything with you, but thinking about it and wanting to do it is the most natural and normal thing in the world, man."

He blushed deeply.

"Do you have a boyfriend," I asked.

"No."

"Have you ever had one?"

"No," he said again.

"Some day you will, man. If you're as lucky as I am, he'll love you, and you'll love him. The sex part will be perfectly natural and normal for you guys. I can't wait for you to meet Kyle. You'll see what I mean."

"That seems so difficult," he said.

"It's not. Believe me. When you care for somebody, all the little details about how to express your love work themselves out. At least they did for us," I said.

"I hope so," he said.

We lay in bed a few more minutes, each of us caught up in our own thoughts, and then we got up.

"I want to take a shower," I said.

"Okay," he said. "I'll be right behind you."

I showered, but I didn't shave that morning. I could get by for a couple of days without shaving, and I really didn't like doing it, anyway. If Kyle didn't shave every day, you could really see it on his face. My beard was light brown, not black like his, and my stubble wasn't nearly as obvious right away, like his was.

I waited for Paddy to get finished in the bathroom, and then he and I went over to the house his parents were in. I had on shorts, tee shirt, deck shoes, and Kyle's cap, and Paddy was dressed the same way, minus the cap. Steve and Billy were already there, as were the girls. Laurie flirted with me a little bit, and she was cute. Anne laughed at her, but I could tell they were good friends. Tony wasn't around.

Paddy kissed his mom good morning.

"Where's Tony," he asked.

"He and Dad went into town," Charlotte said.

"Oh," Paddy said.

"Tim, please don't hate Tony for what he did last night. He can be a very sweet boy, when he wants to. He's just not himself these days."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

I didn't know what else to say, and she didn't know what to say, either. I was determined that I was going to have fun with Paddy, Steve, and Billy, and Tony could drop dead, as far as I was concerned.

"Was he being a butthole again last night," Margaret asked.

"Yeah," Paddy said, "only not just to me. To Tim, too."

"I don't want him to be our brother anymore," Anne said.

"Well, that's not going to change, sweetie," Charlotte said. "Are you praying for Tony, like I asked you to?"

They all said they were. I wasn't, and I didn't intend to.

After we finished breakfast, Paddy suggested we take the boat out. It was too chilly to go swimming, but he said it was pretty cool to sail around in the harbor. I didn't know anything about sailing, but they did, apparently.

Just as we were leaving the house, Mike and Tony drove up. Tony jumped out of the car and slammed the door. He looked like he was crying, and he flew past us without saying a word. He ran to the small house and went inside, slamming that door, too. Paddy, Steve, and Billy looked pretty sad when they saw that, but I didn't know what to think.

"Let's go," Steve said, and we did.

Nobody said anything for a while, but pretty soon they all perked up. Paddy was the master sailor of the crew, and he showed me how to do it. It was pretty simple, once you figured it out. The one thing that seemed strange to me was the lack of noise. On our boat, you didn't move without the motor going,

and that made noise. Sailing was quiet, though, and that was a real difference.

Tony showed up at the table for lunch. Everybody was there, and we told them all about our sailing adventures. Tony didn't say anything, and he seemed to be concentrating totally on his food. After lunch, my dad, Mike, Charlie, and Ginger went off to play golf. The house the Cooks were staying in had a large front porch with lots of comfortable chairs and a huge hammock. Madison and I got in the hammock, and all of the kids read the books we had been assigned to read over the summer by our respective schools. After about ten pages, I went to sleep.

Everybody was gone when I woke up around three, everybody, that is, except Tony.

"Hi, Tim," he said.

I had a hard-on, like I always get when I sleep, and I knew he saw it. I didn't do anything to try to hide it, though, because I didn't know what I could have done.

"Hi, Tony," I said.

I suddenly remembered what he had said the night before about me being sorry, and I realized I was in a very vulnerable position on that hammock. I sat up, and then I got off of it. He was already standing up, and he backed up a little bit when he saw me walking toward him.

"Are we going to be friends," I asked.

"I don't see how we can be," he said.

"I'm willing to forgive and forget, if you are," I said.

"You said last night you'd talk to me. Did you really mean that," he asked.

"Yes, I meant it, but no name-calling, okay?"

"Okay. I'm sorry I did that," he said.

He bent his head down, and I could see he was getting pretty emotional. I knew he was ashamed of himself, and even though I didn't trust him one bit, I also felt bad for him.

"Let's sit down," I said.

"Okay. Are you really gay," he asked.

"Yes, I really am, Tony. It's not something I chose to be, but that's the way I am. I can't do anything about that," I said.

"I have a good friend who is gay," he said.

Hell, you have a brother who's gay, I thought.

"You mean Paddy," I asked.

"Not him. He doesn't like me. None of them do," he said.

"Tell me about your friend," I said.

"He's a man. He's in jail right now," he said. "Or at least he was. I think he might be out by now."

"For what?"

"For some stuff he did with some kids," he said. "He's a priest."

"Are you worried about him," I asked.

"Yeah. I know the two guys who are accusing him, and they wanted him to do whatever he did, I'm pretty sure," he said.

"What are they saying he did," I asked.

"They said he gave them blowjobs," Tony said.

Huge tears came into his eyes when he said that, and he started shaking a little. I wanted to put my arm around his shoulders, but I was afraid he might think I was coming on to him or something. I didn't know what to do. He settled down in a minute, though.

"But you think they wanted him to do that," I asked.

"Yes."

"What makes you think that," I asked.

"They were always talking about wanting blowjobs, that's why," he said. "I think they like them." I could understand how that could be true.

"Are they gay," I asked.

"I don't know. They have girlfriends, but they said their girlfriends wouldn't do that to them," he said.

They'll wise up, I thought.

"Do you think Father did it to them," I asked.

"I'm afraid he might have," he said.

"What makes you think that," I asked.

"Because he did it to me, too," he said. "And now I'm queer, too."

That's when the tears really started. He was crying so hard he was gasping for breath. The hell with it, I thought, and I put my arm around him. Instead of bolting away, like I thought he might, he leaned into me. I desperately wanted to do or say something to make it better for him, but I didn't know what.

I let him cry for what seemed like a long time. Finally, though, he was all cried out.

"Getting a blowjob from another guy doesn't make you queer, Tony," I said as gently as I knew how to say it. "And giving one doesn't make you queer. Only God can make you queer, man, and He did that the minute you were born. Or He didn't."

"But I liked it, Tim. I liked getting a blowjob. I let him do it more than once because I liked it so much," he said.

"Tony, a couple of things," I said. "First, if you really are gay, it's not the worst thing in the world, man. I'm gay and I'm happy. If I had had a choice, I wouldn't have chosen to be gay. But now I wouldn't change the way I am, even if I could. When you meet Kyle you'll know why. Second, blowjobs feel good. Everybody likes them, gay, straight, bi, everybody. Have you ever talked to your dad about that?"

He got a horrified look on his face, like I had asked him if his dad gave him blowjobs. I guess every dad wasn't like mine when he comes to talking to their kids about sex.

"My dad's not queer," he said.

"I know he's not queer, Tony. Married couples have oral sex sometimes, man," I said. "It's not just a gay thing, you know."

It looked like that came as a big surprise to him.

"When those two guys were talking about their girlfriends not giving them blowjobs, did you think no girl would ever do that," I asked.

"I guess," he said.

"Well, they do, Tony. I guess some like doing it more than others, but they do it, man. It's a way of expressing love for someone. It makes the guy getting it feel good. That was the point I was trying to make before. Just because you liked it doesn't mean you're gay, man."

"So, how do you know if you really are gay," he asked.

"For me, it's a matter of attraction. The idea of having sex with a girl doesn't appeal to me at all, but having sex with a guy does," I said.

It was incredibly more complicated than that, but I figured he could understand that much, at least.

"Do you want to have sex with every guy you see," he asked.

"Hell, no. I don't want to have sex with you, for example," I said.

He laughed a little for the first time since I had met him.

"How about with Paddy," he asked. "He's gay."

"I know he's gay, but I don't want to have sex with him, either. The only person I want to have sex

with is my boyfriend," I said. "I'm in love with him, and I want to have sex with him."

"Not with any other guy," he asked.

"Nope. Nobody but Kyle," I said. That was probably a little bit of an exaggeration, but it was true in theory, at least.

"That makes me feel better. Is that true of every gay guy?"

"I doubt it," I said. "Just like some guys screw every girl they can get in bed, some guys screw every guy. But for me, it's just Kyle."

"I've never done anything with a girl, but I like the idea of it," he said.

"Then you're probably straight," I said. "What do you think about when you masturbate?"

"I pretend I'm screwing a girl," he said. "I don't rub up and down. I keep my hand still and shove my dick in and out, like I was fucking. I like to get a lot of lotion or soap or something on my hand, and then . . ."

"Whoa! Too much information, okay?"

He laughed for real on that one. I was starting to like my cousin.

"I had you going, didn't I," he said.

"If you mean you were making me get hard, then, yeah, you were," I said. I decided to try something that was really close to being out of bounds. "Does the idea of me being aroused make you aroused?"

"No. I saw you had a hard-on when you woke up. It didn't bother me, though," he said.

"Tony, man, I'm not an expert, but I'd say there isn't much chance that you're gay, even if you do like blowjobs," I said. "Which you ain't gettin' from me."

That delighted him and really made him laugh.

"Tim, hearing you say that makes me feel better," he said. "I've been wanting to talk to somebody who is gay for a long time about this, and you're the first person I've had a chance to talk to."

"You can't talk to Paddy about it," I asked.

"I'm afraid Paddy doesn't know shit about being gay. He says he is, but he's never even touched a boy, that I know of. Or a girl, either," he said.

"Why did it have to be a gay person? Why couldn't you have talked to your dad or somebody else about it?"

"First of all, there's no way in hell I could ever talk to my dad about something like that. No way. Second, how would he know how you know if you're gay? No. It had to be you."

"Did you do what you did last night because you hate gay people, or . . ."

"No, I did it to find out if you were. I really didn't think you were, by the way. You don't act gay in any way. It came as a pretty big surprise, actually," he said.

"I don't get you, man. You said that stuff to hurt my feelings just to see if it really would?"

"That sounds pretty stupid when you say it that way, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. It does sound stupid. Please don't do that any more, man. And lay off your brother. You guys could be best friends. You're just turning him into an enemy for life, the way you're going. If he says he's gay, then he is. People don't say that about themselves if it isn't true," I said.

"I know."

"And so what if he is? He's a hell of a nice guy. Steve and Billy like him. They're not gay, are they? You don't have to be gay to like a gay person, you know."

"I know. I like you, even though I'm probably not gay," he said.

"Don't say 'probably.' You're definitely not gay. We wouldn't have you on our team," I said.

He laughed.

Charlotte came up just then.

"Wow. I haven't heard that sound in a long time," she said, referring to his laughter, I guess.

"I think you're going to be hearing it all the time now, Charlotte," I said. "Isn't that right, buddy?"

"Yep," he said.

* * *

Tony must have apologized to Paddy because the two of them got along great the rest of the week. I talked to Kyle for about an hour Monday night, and I told him everything that had happened. I didn't give any details about the conversation I had had with Tony earlier that day. I figured he'd want that kept confidential, and, besides, I knew Kyle didn't care about it. I told him about hitting Tony Sunday night, though, and I said we had had a long talk to clear up some misunderstandings he had had.

"All right, Bubba! You whipped some Yankee ass! Way to go!"

I was laughing hard when he said that.

"You would have done it, too," I said.

"No doubt. Did he get any puke on you?"

"Kyle! I knew you would ask me that," I said.

I was on the phone in the kitchen, and I knew they could probably hear me laughing outside where they were all sitting. I didn't care, though. I was on the phone with my boy, and I was happy.

We did some neat stuff that week, mostly involving the sailboat. We did a little touring around, too, though. They have a really cool lighthouse on Cape Porpoise. There were a bunch of shops and art galleries and such. We went to some of those, too. Kyle had gotten me interested in photography, and some of the photos I saw were spectacular. The prices were pretty spectacular, too. Dad bought a photograph to take back to Sonya, but I couldn't afford one for Kyle. I bought everybody replicas of the lighthouse, and I bought Kyle a baseball cap that said Kennebunkport, Maine, too.

One night we went to a movie in town, but most nights we shot pool. The dads went with us a few times, and my dad seemed rather amazed at how good I was. It's pretty difficult to play as much pool as we did in Emerald Beach and not get pretty good at it, especially when you're trying desperately to hold on to your underwear in a game of strip pool.

By the end of the week, I knew my cousins very well, and I knew we'd all be friends for life. Once Tony overcame his problem, he turned out to be my favorite. He was very smart, and he had a great sense of humor. Paddy didn't trust his brother, even after they reconciled their differences, so he ended up sleeping in the twin bed in the room with my dad. I slept with Tony in the double bed in the other room. We usually talked after we went to bed.

"Did you ever think you'd be okay with sleeping in the same bed as a queer," I teased him.

"I don't believe you really are queer," he said.

"Believe it," I said.

"You haven't said anything to anybody about our talk, have you?"

"No, and I'm not going to."

"Even to Kyle?"

"Even to him. I told him you had some misunderstandings, and you were fine after we cleared those up. That's basically what it was, wasn't it? He was mostly disappointed that you didn't puke on me when I hit you in the gut Sunday night."

He laughed a little, but he got serious again right away.

"True. Some very basic misunderstandings. Do you think I should rat out Father John?"

"What he did is a crime, you know? Of course, you gave your consent, but it was still a crime," I said.

"I know. There's been so much about that stuff in the newspapers and on TV, I'd have to be deaf and blind not to know that. I don't know how the other guys involved with him could tell that about themselves, though. I mean, I took a huge risk telling you, but I was desperate. And I also knew you wouldn't be grossed out or think what I did was so terrible. You didn't, did you?"

"We've been through this, Tony. I don't judge you, man. Like I said the other day, everybody likes a blowjob. The thing is, what are the chances of Father John getting off? I mean, I would hate to think your not coming forward let him go right back to the parish and do it to some other kids."

"That used to be a problem, evidently, but they don't do that any more," he said. "I actually thought of that. If I honestly thought he'd get off, I would come forward with my story. He's not getting off, though," Tony said.

"Your secret's safe with me," I said.

We were both quiet after that, and I was getting very close to sleep.

"Tim?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," I said.

"Do you and Kyle have sex?"

"Yeah, we do. I thought you knew that."

"I figured you did, but you never said. Do you guys, like, er, do you, um, . . ."

"Do we have anal sex?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Yes, we do," I said. "And I'll bet you want to know what it's like, don't you?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Just a hunch. I've never fucked a girl, but I've heard that it's a lot like that for the top. The guy putting his dick into the other guy. It's a little different because a vagina expands when she's aroused and an ass doesn't. Also, a vagina has secretions and an ass doesn't, other than the obvious one," I said.

He laughed.

"What about for the other guy?"

"The other guy is called the bottom. First off, it doesn't hurt. At least, it doesn't hurt when Kyle makes love to me that way. It can and does hurt for some guys, but he always gets me real relaxed and ready for him first."

"I figured it didn't hurt, or at least not too bad, otherwise people wouldn't do it," he said.

"Good point. Do you know about the prostate gland?"

"Just what I learned about it in school in biology," he said.

"Well, it feels really good when you rub it. The top pokes and nudges and rubs the bottom's prostate, and it feels great," I said. "Have you ever stuck your finger or anything into your ass while you jerked off?"

"Yeah," he said. Then there was a pause. "I'm so embarrassed."

"Why? Straight couples do that, too, Tony. Kevin's brother told us that his wife does that to him when they make love. There really isn't that much difference between gay sex and straight sex, you know? If it feels good to a gay guy, it'll feel good to a straight guy, too. Straight people usually use toys, since the girl doesn't have a dick, but it's basically the same thing," I said.

"I wonder if my parents do that kind of thing," he said.

"I wouldn't be asking them, if I were you."

He laughed louder than he usually did, and I heard my dad move around in bed. Shit, I thought.

He's going to be pissed if we woke him up. He didn't say anything, though.

"Not so loud, man," I said.

"Tim, do you have an erection right now," he asked, after he had gotten serious again.

"Yes," I said.

"I do, too. What would you do if I put my hand on your dick?"

"I'd ask you to move your hand," I said.

"Would you get pissed off at me?"

"No, because I know you'd be doing it to make me feel good. But that belongs to Kyle. It doesn't belong to me anymore," I said.

"I can't wait to meet him," he said.

"You'll love all three of them, man," I said.

That was Thursday night, and they were getting there Saturday afternoon around five. We were leaving the next morning so I could spend some time with my grandparents, but we'd have six full days to see Boston. My dad was going to let me keep the mini-van, and he'd drive my grandparents' car. I was so excited I shivered.

"What just happened? Did you come?"

Then it was my turn to laugh.

"No, I didn't come," I said. "I just had a little nervous shiver because I was thinking about how much fun we're going to have this coming week. I'll let you know if I come, though."

"Thanks," he said sarcastically. "Have you ever done that without making it happen? Like in school or something?"

"I've done it at Mass," I said.

"Gross," he said, but he was laughing.

"Where have you done it," I asked.

"School a couple of times. Also, just in my room at home. At home wasn't so bad, but in school it was a total mess," he said.

"Try church, if you want a mess," I said.

"Don't take what I'm going to say the wrong way, okay?"

"Okay," I said, hoping I wouldn't.

"I love you, Tim. I haven't gone gay on you, man, so don't worry about that. You're just so incredibly nice," he said.

"You know what? I love you, too, and I won't even let you touch my dick," I said. "And I'm gay!"

He thought that was pretty funny, and we both laughed.

"I was hoping you would say that," he said. "I want to be your friend for life, okay? You and Kyle?"

"No question about it in my mind, dude," I said. "I wish we lived closer together."

"I know, but you'll be coming to Boston, won't you," he asked. "To see your grandparents and all?"

"I think after my great-grandmother dies they're going to move to Florida where we live," I said.

"But there's no reason we can't come see you guys, is there? Or you come see us? The planes fly both ways, you know?"

He laughed.

"Can I ask you a question," he said.

"Don't say that, man. Just ask it."

"Can I hug you right now?"

"Absolutely, dude," I said.

We hugged, and I felt really close to him. We were both careful to avoid a sword fight with our

dicks, but we hugged each other hard. He sniffled a little, like maybe he was crying, and tears came to my eyes, too.

We must have broken the hug at some point, but I think we both went to sleep in each other's arms.

(Justin's Perspective)

Do you ever wake up all rested and relaxed, ready for a great day, and then you remember you have to do something that day that scares you to death? It's like the bottom falls out, and you don't have the strength it takes to haul your ass out of bed. One minute you're laying there with your boyfriend's hard dick in the crack of your ass, wondering if you'll have time to do something with it, thinking about your own hard-on and how you need to piss so you can take maximum advantage of the situation. Then you remember, and all of a sudden your dick goes as limp as cooked spaghetti. That's what happened to me the Tuesday morning after my birthday.

"Brian, wake up, Little Buddy," I said.

"Nooooo," he said, cute as all.

"Yeah. We have to get up so you can go to work. I'm taking you, remember? Come on."

He was so much like a real cute little boy when he was sleepy. That dark hair of his was in his face, and he rubbed his eyes with the back of his fists so cute. I wanted to eat him up. How could anybody not be in love with something like that?

"Come on, Buddy. Let's go."

I started running the tips of my fingers up and down his chest, circling his little nipples. He got a big smile on his face. I took my hand away.

"Don't stop," he said.

"I've got to today. Today's the day I go to the college, remember? Come on and take a shower with me," I said.

He sat up in bed. He looked over at my crotch, and I could tell he was surprised I wasn't hard like I always am.

"Robbed by fear," I said.

He started laughing.

"You big goof," he said. "Gimme a kiss."

I kissed him good morning.

"I'm serious now. We gotta hustle. I've got to be there at 8:30, and the traffic on the bridge is going to be a bitch this morning," I said.

"Okay," he said.

We took a shower together, but we didn't fool around, for lack of time. I shaved in the shower, and it reminded me of those Braille signs we have all around the hotel. Brian shaved, too, and it was kind of fun watching how slow and careful he did it. Of course, he got all of his. I had to feel my face and go back to spots I had missed.

Kevin, Rick, Kyle, Jeff, Seth, Alex, Brian, and I all got around the breakfast table. It felt weird as hell having Kyle there without Tim.

"What did Tim say last night," Rick asked Kyle.

"He got into a fight, and he made the guy puke," Kyle said. "He didn't get any on him, though."

"Well, that's a relief, at the breakfast table," Kevin said.

We all laughed.

"At least we're not eating oatmeal, with raisins in it," Kyle said.

"Change the subject, please," Rick said.

"How did sweet little Tim get into a fight," Kevin asked. "That's not like him at all."

"He ain't that little, you know," I said. "He's as big as me and Kyle."

"I know, but he's gentle. He's not a ruffian like you two," Kevin said.

"That's all an act. He's mean as a damn snake," I said.

I expected Kyle to say something to defend him, but he just grinned at me.

"His cousin was dissing him. Calling him fag and homo and that shit. And the cousin didn't even know Tim really is," Kyle said. "Tim said he told him we're training a puppy and have to remind her sometimes not to do stuff. He reminded the cousin not to say that by punching him in the gut. That's when he puked. Then Tim hit him a couple more times as a reminder. Apparently the boy wouldn't shut up. And the guy's own brother is gay."

"That doesn't sound like our Tim," Rick said.

"You'd be surprised if you knew the terror that boy puts in us," I said.

They all laughed.

I put my knife and fork on my plate to show that I was finished eating, like they taught me to do.

"You didn't eat very much," Rick said.

"I ate enough, though, and every bit of it is right here." I put my hand just below my Adam's apple. "It could come up at any second, and Tim wouldn't even have to punch me in the belly."

"Are you sick, Bubba," Rick asked.

"No, I'm not sick, but I'm scared shitless, Rick," I said. "I have to go to the college today. Kyle and Cody, too."

I got big tears in my eyes, and I quick rubbed 'em out. My baby put his hand on my shoulder to let me know he was there for me, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. I took a deep breath and let it out slow.

"I'm scared shitless, too, Bubba," Kyle said.

I smiled at him.

"No, you're not, but thanks for saying that," I said.

"I was wondering why you guys weren't in your uniforms," Jeff said. "Trust me, guys, it's not going to hurt. You'll do fine on the placement tests, too. There aren't many people smarter than you two."

"I'll drink orange juice to that," Kev said.

Rick raised his glass, too, and the rest of them did, also. They wanted to support us--me, really--every way they could, and I knew it and appreciated it. That didn't make me less nervous, though.

"Brian, are you about ready," I asked. He was finished eating.

"Let me go get something. I'll be right back," Brian said.

"Okay, but hurry," I said.

He came back with a paper in his hand, and he gave it to me. It was a report card he had made on the computer, and it had my name on it. In the column marked "subjects" it had stuff like "Sweet," "Cute," "Funny," "Handsome," and stuff like that. Next to each subject there was an A+. That's when I lost it. All the fear and terror in me at that moment came out of my eyes in the form of tears. They burned like hell, too. I grabbed that boy up in a big hug, and I laid a kiss on him that was definitely not for public consumption.

"Make sure you get your dads to sign it," he said.

"You wait and see what I'm going to sign on you tonight," I said.

Kevin started to say something, and I knew he was going to tell me to cool it. Rick shushed him, though, and I kissed Brian again.

"Let's go before I get carried away," I said.

They all laughed, and Brian and I left hearing them say "Good luck" and stuff like that.

(Rick's Perspective)

"Did you see his face when he read that report card," I asked Kevin.

The guys were all gone off to work, and Kev and I were getting dressed for the day.

"Yeah. Of all the kids, Brian continues to surprise me the most. That was really a clever idea, wasn't it? And the presentation was so good," Kevin said.

"I used to have my doubts about those two, Babe, but I don't think I do anymore," I said.

"I know what you mean. How did that ever happen? Justin and Brian?"

"Well, when you think about it, they sort of come from the same kinds of backgrounds. Brian's situation probably wasn't as bad as Justin's, but they both come from nothing. Nothing but poverty and abuse. I mean, Kyle and Tim have had lives of privilege, you know?"

"Sort of like me," Kevin said.

"Yeah, and me, too, to a lesser extent. You've always been very much like Kyle and Tim. You told me about your trust fund, and all, and I know you have money, but you never mention that. You work, just like I do, and you work hard. That's the way Kyle and Tim are, too," I said.

"The money I inherited is ours, not mine," Kev said.

"Oh, I know that. Anyway, though, Justin and Brian are two of the best, don't you think?"

"No question about that," he said.

Chapter 03

(Kevin's Perspective)

I didn't have a set time that I had to be at work, but I usually got there pretty close to eight o'clock. That was the official starting time for the people in the corporate office, and I could easily live with that. I belonged to several groups that had breakfast meetings, so some days I didn't get there until 8:30 or nine, but I was usually there by eight.

The first thing I did every morning was walk around greeting our employees. We had about 150 people in the Goodson Building, and about half of them worked for me. The other half worked for Rick. By and large, I had been impressed at how dedicated those people were. We paid them well, but I really didn't think you could buy dedication. You had to earn it, and my morning stroll around the building was important in doing that, I thought.

I knew all 150 people by name, as did Rick, but I tended to spend my time talking to the people who worked for my division. I would say hello to everybody, but I'd also spend two or three minutes with several of my people every day. It wasn't always the same ones, but in the course of a week I pretty much spent time with everybody. It wasn't really business related, either. We'd talk about their kids, their grandchildren, their dogs, their boats, their vacation trips, their home improvement projects, their illnesses, their family members' illnesses, their churches, their new hair-dos, whatever was on their minds. They all knew Rick and I were a couple and that we had a house full of boys, and we talked about them, some, too. That was probably the best part of the day for me, and I hoped it was good for them, too. Rick did the same thing, only around three in the afternoon, when everybody was getting bored and tired. Between the two of us, we knew those people very well.

The second thing I did every morning was look at my phone messages. Mary Ann was wonderful at screening my calls, and if she handed me a piece of paper with a phone message, I knew it was one I

had to see about. That particular morning there was one from Tyrone Williams.

I called Rick.

"Tyrone Williams wants to see us," I said.

"Are you surprised? Justin went off the roll on Saturday, so a new one comes on."

I laughed.

"I hadn't thought of it that way," I said. "How does ten o'clock sound to you?"

"I've got a 9:30, but I think I can get him out of here pretty fast. Let's do it at ten."

Tyrone was there promptly at ten. Mary Ann, as always, had produced coffee, juice, and water, along with a platter of Danish. She was incredible, and the day she quit was the day I quit. Not really, but it would be tempting.

Rick was a few minutes late, but he got there.

After the amenities, Rick said, "We'll take him."

"I'm going to hold you to that, Rick, but that's not what this is about. It's about Brian Mathews."

Rick and I looked at one another in total confusion. How could it be about Brian? Who besides us, and the forty or so people that were our circle of friends, gave a shit about Brian? We said as much to Tyrone.

"His mother," he said. "She left his step-father, and she wants him back."

Rick and I looked at each other, and we both had huge tears in our eyes.

"Sorry. She can't have him," Rick said. "He belongs to Justin, and he belongs to us."

Rick told Tyrone the story of the report card from that very morning.

"Guys, that story is very touching, but the law is the law. She got rid of the husband, and there's no way we can keep her from her son. She says she wants him back," Tyrone said.

Rick and I looked at each other in despair. Brian was so happy with us. He and Justin had made so much progress in their relationship. Rick and I knew intuitively that what Tyrone was saying was all wrong.

"When," Rick asked.

"As soon as possible," Tyrone said. "This week."

"Tyrone, don't do that, man. They're going to Boston on Saturday. They're counting on it. Please don't break the hearts of four kids, man," I said.

"I'll see what I can do. Give me a date certain," he said.

"They're coming home July 18th," I said.

"He'll need a day to pack. Let's make the date certain July 20th. That's a Monday, I think."

I glanced at the calendar on my desk.

"Yeah, it's a Monday," I said.

"Guys, I want you to know. I would never do this, if I didn't have to. I know the depth and quality of love in your house, and I know you have probably worked miracles with this kid. But it truly is out of my hands," Tyrone said.

"We know that, Ty, just like we know cancer kills people," Rick said. "But we still mourn them, don't we?"

"Yeah, we do," Tyrone said.

* * *

"We can't say a word to them about this until after their trip," I said to Rick, after Tyrone had left.

"I know. Don't you just want to go out into that parking lot out there and scream?"

"Yeah, I want to do that, but I also want to go somewhere and hit the person responsible hard in the stomach and make them puke," I said.

"That's funny, Babe, but I can't laugh right now," Rick said.

"I didn't mean it to be funny. I meant it literally," I said.

Rick grabbed me up in a big hug.

"We're losing our baby, man," he said.

"I know," I said.

We hugged each other for a long, long time, crying our eyes out. I knew Mary Ann could hear all of that through the door. When we finally did settle down and Rick was leaving my office, Mary Ann was gone from her desk. There was a note, though.

"10:10 AM. I have a lot of shopping to do, and I doubt that you'll need me. Don't expect me back until after lunch. Much love, Mary Ann."

"God, she's wonderful," Rick said.

"You don't know the half of it," I said.

"Let's go have lunch with the kids," he said.

"I'd love to, but they're not in school right now, remember? It's summer vacation."

"Shit," he said. "I'm getting old, man, and so are you."

"I know, Mister Birthday Boy," I said. "Today's the seventh. Yours is the eleventh. That's Saturday, Babe."

"Isn't that the day they leave for Boston?"

"Yeah, it is, so I guess your party will have to be Friday night, the tenth," Kevin said.

"I don't feel much in a party mood right now," I said.

"I know. I don't either, but we can't let on to them, right?"

"Right," I said. "Shit. God Almighty. Why did this have to happen to us right now?"

"It's the law," I said, "and the law is always just and true."

He and I both laughed bitterly at that one.

* * *

Kyle and Justin got home from the college around the same time Rick and I got home from work. Jeff had gone to get Brian at the gift shop, so they were home, too. Only Seth and Alex were still gone. God, we missed Tim.

"How'd it go, guys," I asked Kyle and Justin.

"I thought it went pretty good. The people were really nice. Extremely nice, in fact," Kyle said. "A bunch of them knew my dad, and one guy called the president. He came down to meet me. They have something called the Emerald Coast Community College Foundation, and my dad has been on the board of that for a long time, evidently. President of that board a few times, I guess. The president of the college told me there are thirty Goodson endowed scholarships through that foundation, and we had to go to the Goodson Fine Arts Center for a meeting. Did you guys know about that?"

"Not the details, Kyle, but we knew the Goodson Family Foundation supported the college heavily," I said.

"What's the Goodson Family Foundation," Kyle asked.

"It's the charitable arm of your family, Kyle," Rick said.

"Why didn't they tell me about that stuff," Kyle asked.

"You've really never heard of that," I asked.

"Really, Kevin. Never," he said.

"It's not your family, Kyle. It's the other rich Goodsons in town," Brian said.

"Oh," Kyle said.

That broke everybody up in laughter.

"Did you pass your tests? That's the big question," Rick said.

"I passed mine," Jus said.

"Me, too," Kyle said. "But it was just the English test for me. I sweated out the math test at the beginning of my junior year. I passed that sucker, too."

"I passed it today," Jus said.

"I know. That's so good," Kyle said. "You already said that, though."

"Well, it happens to mean a lot to me, Kyle," Justin said.

"I know, Bubba. It means a lot to me, too," Kyle said.

"How did Cody do," Seth asked.

"He passed them, too, Seth. He did really good on both of them," Kyle said.

"Did you guys get registered for courses," Jeff asked.

"Yeah. Me and Kyle and Cody are going to have English on Monday and Wednesday from 5:30 to seven in the evening, and me and Cody have history from eight to 8:50 in the morning on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday," Justin said.

"Oh, my God," Jeff said. "I hate eight o'clock classes worse than anything. When do you start?"

"August 24th," Jus said. "Bright and early on a Monday morning."

"Good luck," Jeff said. There was more than a touch of irony in his voice.

"You're not taking math," Rick asked Justin.

"No, sir, not this time. The lady, my counselor, said she thought I should start easy. She also suggested I take a remedial math course, even though I passed the test. There are three of them, and I need the last one. I didn't pass the test by much," Jus said.

"Well, she's the professional, Jus. It's a good idea to listen to what she says," Rick said.

"Yeah," Jus said.

"Has Alex decided what he wants to do," Rick asked.

"He wants to go to college," Kyle said. "His appointment is tomorrow. When I talked to him, he wasn't sure if y'all wanted him to stay here. You need to get him straightened out about that."

"We'll talk to him," I said.

* * *

The next morning Rick was in my office after I had made my rounds.

"I'm just absolutely sick over this thing with Brian," Rick said. "I mean, it's like I want to kidnap him and take him to another state or something. I didn't sleep well at all last night."

"I know," I said. "Babe, I can count on one hand the number of times you've kept me awake, but when you can't sleep, I can't sleep either."

"I'm sorry," he said.

There was a tap on the door, and Mary Ann poked her head in.

"Kevin, I know you and Rick need time alone, but I thought you'd want to take this call. It's Tyrone Williams with Children and Family Services," she said.

I looked at Rick and took a deep breath. Surely Tyrone wouldn't be calling to get us to take another kid after what happened yesterday, I thought.

"I'll take it," I said.

"Kevin, I'll get right to the point," Tyrone said, after we had greeted each other. "The deal with Brian Mathews is off."

"What?"

"You heard me. He's staying with you all."

"Rick's in here with me. Let me put you on speaker so he can hear it for himself," I said.

"Rick, you there?"

"I'm here," he said.

"Brian is going to stay with you guys," he said.

Rick and I burst into the biggest grins we'd ever had.

"What happened," I asked.

"The mother called me first thing this morning and said her husband's back at home, and they don't want the kid. You'd be surprised at how often this kind of thing happens. Had you said anything to Brian about it?"

"No, thank God," I said. "Tyrone, is this kind of thing going to keep going on? We need to be prepared, if it is."

"Not with Brian, it won't," he said. "The mother told me she's willing to terminate parental rights, so he'll be a permanent ward of the state. That means he'll stay with you guys until he's grown."

"Yes!" Rick shouted.

"You couldn't have given us any better news, Ty," I said.

"I figured you'd be happy about it. Er, it looks like I might have to ask you to take another one before the summer is over. It's a kid from Pensacola this time, and it's another case of a father not wanting a gay son. He's with his grandfather in Kentucky right now, but the grandfather is pretty bad off health-wise. He can't keep him."

"What's his name," I asked.

"Shane Webster, and he's fifteen," Tyrone said. "He's a real outgoing kid. He should fit in well with you guys."

"When will we get him," Rick asked.

"I can leave that up to you. School starts August 24th, and we'd like him to be settled by then. Otherwise, though, there's no rush. You pick a date."

"We're supposed to go out to Montana to see Chris Uhle for two weeks starting August 2nd, and we'll be back on the fifteenth," I said.

"Is that the kid with cerebral palsy," Tyrone asked. "Is that who you're going to see?"

"Yeah. You remember him, don't you?"

"Yes. You guys saved my life for sure on that one," he said. "Well, I'll be damned."

"Let us talk to the boys, and we'll get back to you. We've got a couple of unofficial foster sons now that you don't know about. One is really just a house guest, and the other one is eighteen. But they're still kids, and they still take up time," I said.

"Amazing. Is Justin Davis going to continue living with you all. He turned eighteen, didn't he?"

"Yes to both questions," I said.

"How many do you have altogether?"

"Counting Tim and Kyle, who actually officially live with their parents but who are at our house most of the time, and counting the boy visiting from New Orleans, and counting Jeff Martin, who's almost twenty-one, we have seven. And assorted boyfriends, of course."

"How do you even remember all their names, for heaven's sake," Tyrone asked.

"We don't. We call everybody 'Bubba,'" Rick said.

"You do?"

"That's a family joke, Ty," I said.

"Well, let me let you guys get back to work. I'm really sorry I had to put you through what I did yesterday, but there really was nothing I could do about it," Tyrone said. "Good bye, fellows. And thanks." We told him bye.

"We can't tell Brian about this," Rick said.

"I know. I'm so emotionally rung out right now, I won't be able to get a thing done today," I said.

"Me, either. Let's go home," Rick said.

I picked up the phone and called Mary Ann.

"I don't have anything big on my calendar today, do I?"

"No. As a matter of fact, it's clear, for once," she said.

"Good. Rick and I are going home for the rest of the day. How about telling Cheryl about that, would you?"

"Sure. Have fun, Kev. I don't know what's been going on the last couple of days, but I know it hasn't been good."

"Well, it had a happy ending, Mary Ann. Very happy," I said.

"Good. Enjoy the day with Rick, Kev. I'll see you tomorrow."

Rick and I spent the day on Kyle's boat. We put together a picnic lunch, rounded up Trixie, and went to the island for the day. We lounged and walked and napped and played with Trixie, and we came home restored. And maybe just a little red from the sun.

(Brian's Perspective)

Justin seemed to like the report card I made for him. I was glad I had thought to do that. I really admired him for wanting to go to college. Tim and I had talked about the fact that Justin would probably always have a good job with Goodson Enterprises, whether or not he made it through college. Jus knew that, too, and that's sort of what made it more remarkable that he would even try to do it. I can't imagine not going to high school, but that's what he had done.

Kevin and Rick had acted sort of funny Tuesday night. It wasn't one particular thing they did or said. It was more like what you might call the tone of the evening. We did some laughing, but it wasn't as much as we sometimes did. I hoped everything was all right.

"We've got to plan Rick's party," Kyle said while we were sitting around in the den.

"Nothing fancy," Rick said. "Just us and our friends."

He looked at Kevin when he said that, and neither one of them smiled.

"Since we have so much going on with your trip and all, why don't we postpone it a while," Kevin said.

"That's a good idea," Rick said immediately.

"We can't do that," Kyle said. "Everybody gets a party for his birthday. That's my motto."

"You and your damn mottos. You've got more mottos than Trixie's got fleas," Justin said.

"I'll give you a motto you won't ever forget, Bubba," Kyle said.

They were playing.

"Yeah? I'd like to see you try," Jus said.

"Guys, can you knock it off, please," Rick said. "Kevin and I had a very rough day, and I'm not really in the mood for all the 'got you last' shit tonight."

That shut everybody up fast.

"Is it okay if I just put together a little something for Friday night, Rick," Kyle asked. "Just us and our best friends."

"Kyle, I know you want to please me, son, and I appreciate that. I'm just not in a very good mood tonight," Rick said. "Just a few people, okay? And no whole cooked animals."

"Okay," Kyle said. He laughed a little at the "no whole cooked animals" line.

Rick was sitting on one of the sofas, and Kevin got behind him. He started giving Rick a neck

message.

"Let's go shoot some pool," Kyle said.

"Good idea," Jus said.

We all went out to the clubhouse.

"What the fuck was that all about," Justin asked as soon as we had gotten out there.

"They had a very bad day. That's what they said," Kyle said.

"It scares me," I said. "I've never seen them like that before. Did they seem a little sad to you all?"

"Yes," Jeff said.

We didn't shoot pool. We sat in the conversation area, some on the sofas, some on the floor. Nobody really had much to say, though.

"Let's make a guest list," Kyle finally said. "We're getting to be such a big group, it's hard to not have a crowd for this thing."

"Let's have chicken," Jus said. "You've never served that at a party, have you?"

"That's a good idea. But who are we going to invite?"

"Kyle, you were right. It's almost not possible for us to have a small party anymore without hurting somebody's feelings by not inviting them. Maybe it should just be us. The immediate family and boyfriends," Jeff said.

"No boyfriends," Kyle said.

"What?!"

Everybody was all over Kyle in an instant.

"Just kidding. Jesus Christ!" Kyle said.

"You're missing your boyfriend, aren't you," I said.

"Yes, I am, Bri. Very much, in fact," Kyle said.

"I'll be your boyfriend, Kyle," Alex said.

Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you, I thought. I knew he was joking, but, just like most of the rest of us, he'd go for Kyle in a split second.

"Come here," Justin said.

He had one arm around me, and he made Kyle sit next to him on the other side. He put his arm around Kyle, too.

"Are you going to call him tonight," Jus asked.

"I want to, but I forgot to write down the damn number where he is. His cell phone is out of area, way up there," Kyle said.

"Isn't the number in the memory," Jeff asked.

Kyle took his phone out of his pocket.

"I forgot about that," he said. He checked the phone. "Yeah, here it is. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Bout an hour, more like it. You need a rubber," Jus asked.

"Very funny," Kyle said, but he was grinning hard.

"Don't give him a rubber. You don't want to run out, do you," I said.

They all laughed.

Kyle went outside to make his call. Seth got a call from Cody about then, and Jeff got a call from Tyler. They all went off in different directions to talk. It was just me, Jus, and Alex left.

Justin took out his phone.

"Who wants me to call them," he said.

That made us laugh.

Trixie was on the floor right under me. I was sitting with Jus on the sofa. I noticed that she seemed to stick with me more than the others, and I figured it was because I had taken up so much time with her.

"Have you taught her any new tricks, Bri," Jus asked.

She heard him say the word "tricks," and she thought he had said Trix. She stood up, looked at me, and cocked her head to the side. I thought that was about the cutest she ever looked. She was very smart, and she even looked intelligent. I pretty much knew she was smarter than about half the people in my first period class last year, and much more alert.

"Arnie and I worked with her a good bit when he was here," I said. "She's got some new ones, but they're not all perfect yet. Let's see what she'll do."

I made her sit on command, shake hands with me, roll over, speak (bark) when I told her to, sing (howl), pray, and dance. When she danced, she got up on her hind legs and moved the right one back and forth, forward and back. It kind of did look like dancing.

"Damn, that's good," Jus said. "You're a natural dog trainer, Buddy."

"I trained you, didn't I?"

"You trained me to tickle, is what you did," he said.

"Nooooooo," I said. We were all laughing and having a good time.

Justin pounced on me, and Trixie didn't like that one bit. She growled at him.

"Whoa!" he said, and he turned me loose immediately.

"Trixie! This is Justin, girl," I said. "Don't growl at my boyfriend. He wasn't going to hurt me."

She started wagging her tail when I said that.

"Pet her, Buddy," I said.

"I'll pull back a nub," he said.

"No, you won't. She was just a little confused," I said.

He petted her, and she started wagging her tail and squirming around to love on Jus.

"Now tickle me again," I said.

Once again, I said "noooooooo," like he was getting me.

She growled again.

"NO!!!" I said to her. She cowed down.

"Do it again, Buddy," I said.

We did that three or four more times, and by the end, Trixie was in there trying to tickle me with her nose, just like Justin was doing with his fingers.

"She likes me doing it, now," he said.

"That's right. That's how you train her," I said. "You do the same thing over and over and over. The next time you tickle me, she'll probably growl at you again. But it will only take a couple of times for her to be trying to help you out."

"The first time, I thought she was going to eat me up. I'm glad about that, though. I don't want these fools around here thinking they can get a piece of you anytime they want to. You got a protector, besides me, and that's good," he said.

"Jus, I hate to tell you this, but nobody around here is trying to get a piece of me," I said.

"I know, and that worries me, too," he said.

When he said that, Alex burst out laughing.

"Did you guys have to take a humor test or something to join this family," Alex asked.

"Nope, just a simple sperm count," Jus said.

That made Alex laugh even harder.

"Speaking of which, where's Peanut tonight?"

"Chip," Alex asked.

"Yeah," Jus said.

"He doesn't live here, you know," I said.

"Since when," Jus asked.

"I like Chip," I said.

"Who said I didn't," Jus said.

"Why do you call him Peanut, then," I asked.

"Cause his dick looks like a peanut, that's why," he said. "Don't tell me I've got a gay boyfriend who hasn't noticed another boy's dick."

Alex and I laughed hard.

"I've noticed," I said. I was struggling to breathe because I was laughing so hard, and I was afraid I was going to get the hick-ups.

"Do y'all want to go get something to eat? I don't know where the lover-boys are, but I could use me a couple of hamburgers," Jus said.

We went and got food. Jus kept me and Alex in stitches the whole time. He ate three very large hamburgers and two orders of fries.

"Don't look at me. I haven't eaten all day, except that candy-ass watermelon Kyle fixed tonight. He ate a big breakfast and a big lunch, but I was too nervous to eat," he said.

How could anybody not love Justin, I thought.

(Kyle's Perspective)

I'm sorry. I didn't get it. Something was damn sure up.

Monday night? Everything's fine. Tuesday night? "Knock it off with the 'got you last' bullshit. And Kyle? No fucking birthday party for me." Wednesday night? Let's party. "Kyle, make us some of your treats. Who wants a drink?" I just did not get it. Kevin and Rick had never acted like that before. Hell, Wednesday morning, I fully expected the IRS man to be at the front door when we got up for breakfast. Wednesday night, I thought the Good Humor man was making a special delivery.

"What the fuck is going on," I asked Jus Wednesday night.

"You tell me, and we'll both know," he said.

"I know," I said. "I think they've flipped out, Jus. I think they're kidnapping us and taking us to a monastery in the Austrian Alps."

He about doubled over laughing.

"Damn, and me without a passport," he said.

That made me about double over.

"I do look good in black, though," he said.

Anyway, we got through Wednesday and Thursday nights, and Friday night was Rick's party, such as it was. After work, I went back to that vegetable stand to see my buddy Curtis. He fixed me up with some really good corn, some excellent tomatoes, some great yellow squash which I smothered in onions and bacon, and some little, tender okra. Oh, and he had some very nice figs. I stopped at Publix and picked up the cake I had ordered. I knew we had at least parts of about six gallons of ice cream at the house, so I didn't buy any of that at first. Then I got to worrying, and I went back to the frozen food aisle and got two gallons of French vanilla.

The people at the party were going to be Kevin and Rick, me, Justin and Brian, Jeff and Tyler, Seth and Cody, Alex, and Chip. I invited their best friends, Monte and Terry, too, and then I couldn't leave out Sam and Fred, and Chad and Gage. I told those last six guys that mum was the word about

that party, and they understood. I ordered a dozen rotisserie chickens from Publix, and they were packed and ready for me when I got there. That was a damn good grocery store, and they knew how to treat people. No wonder they were cornering the market in Florida.

The party itself was nice. We did the stuff we always did: swim, shoot pool, play ping pong, shoot baskets, play cards, dance a little. Kevin gave Rick a new surfboard, which was about an \$800 item, but the rest of us gave him shirts and ties and books and stuff like that.

Tim called during the party, and he talked to Rick for about a half hour. He was at his grandparents' house by then, and he and I talked for about thirty minutes. He filled me in on how bored he was at the grandparents', and we said how much we loved one another and missed one another. I got so excited talking to him and about seeing him the next day that I got an erection. Nobody but Justin saw it, though.

"What's this all about, like I can't guess," he said.

"Leave it alone, man. What are you? Some kind of horn dog?"

He laughed, and I laughed, too.

"Tomorrow night, Bubba," he said. He thrust his hips a couple of times.

"I know," I said, and we laughed some more.

Rick pulled me aside when it was almost over.

"Kyle, thank you for doing this for me, man. I'm sorry I was such a asshole about it," he said.

"Rick, what was going on, man? Y'all scared us to death," I said.

"I know, and I'm sorry. Please don't say this to anybody, but we thought we were going to lose Brian," he said.

"WHAT??!!!" I screamed that out.

"Don't worry. We're not, okay? But Tuesday night we thought he was leaving."

"He can't leave. He belongs to us," I said. I was already streaming tears.

"I know. He's not. He's not ever leaving, but we didn't find that out until Wednesday morning," he said.

"Tell me the details, and I'll get my people on it in the morning," I said.

He laughed.

"You don't have any people," he said.

"Trixie's my people," I said.

He laughed hard again.

"Well, without going into details, Brian is going to be with us for as long as he wants to be," Rick said.

"Y'all are going to be old farts and still have all of us around you," I said.

"And you know what, Kyle? That would make me very, very happy."

Chapter 04

(Justin's Perspective)

I set our alarm clock Friday night before our trip on Saturday to make sure Brian and I wouldn't miss the plane, but it turned out we didn't need that. I woke up at 5:30, bright-eyed and ready to go. I slipped out of bed to pee, and I decided to go ahead and take my shower, too. I had left the bathroom door open into our room so it wouldn't get too steamy in there, which was something I always did. Most of the time, Brian slept right through me taking a shower like that, but that morning it woke him up.

I saw him come into the bathroom through the glass door of the shower. He sat down on the toilet

to pee, and he leaned way forward so he could get his dick in a place where he could piss into the toilet, and not all over the floor. When he finished, he flushed it.

Whoa! Bad move! The shower water turned red hot. We were going to have to have a talk about flushing toilets when somebody was in the shower.

He got in with me, like I figured he would, and he grabbed me around the waist. He leaned against me.

"Hey," I said over the water.

He didn't say anything, but he kissed me on the back of my neck, and I felt him start to go from half-hard to fully hard. I knew what he wanted, and I wanted it, too. So that's what we did.

"Are you excited," he asked me when we were done with our shower.

"I'm always excited about a trip," I said. "You know that."

"I know. Me, too. Did you ever think you would go on so many trips?"

"No. I thought last summer my next trip was going to be to the morgue," I said.

I thought he was going to laugh, but he didn't.

"Please don't say stuff like that."

"I'm sorry, Little Buddy," I said, and I took him into my arms. "It could have been, though, you know?"

"I know, but let's don't talk about it, okay? It didn't happen, and it's not going to happen," he said.

"Okay." I gave him a quick kiss.

We finished getting dressed, made our bed, and went downstairs, bumping our luggage on every step. Luggage? Hell, all I ever had before I came there was a paper sack from a grocery store. And even that wasn't full.

The first thing I saw when I got to the breakfast room was a multitude of teeth shining out of Kyle's face. He was all scrubbed up, smiling and happy. I went to ruffle his hair, but he dodged me.

"Don't touch it," he said. "I spent a good bit of time styling my hair this morning."

I laughed while I got me and Brian some coffee.

"A good bit of time? Like what? Ten seconds?"

"Twelve," he said. "This is a special occasion."

Brian and I both laughed at him.

He wore his hair like the rest of us did, "moussed and messed." Plus, I knew he was going to wear a baseball cap all day, so what difference did it make?

"There's breakfast on the stove," he said.

"What the hell time did you get up," I asked.

"A little before five," he said. "I just woke up."

"You're excited about seeing Tim, aren't you?"

"Well, what . . . I mean, wouldn't . . ."

"You're fucking speechless," I said.

He just grinned.

* * *

Our plane to Atlanta was right on time, and we had about an hour's layover in Atlanta. We got something to eat.

"Do you want to go smoke, Kyle," I asked, when we had finished eating.

"No, thank you," he said, grinning. "I don't smoke. But feel free, if you want to."

"No, thank you. I don't smoke, either," I said.

Brian was laughing at us.

"Let's go smoke," Kyle said.
Brian laughed even harder.

* * *

The flight to Boston was good, and Kyle went to sleep after we were in the air for about ten minutes. He was on the aisle, Brian was in the middle, and I was on the window.

"Let's see if we can make him drool," Brian said.

"What," I asked.

"Watch this," he said.

He gently rubbed Kyle under his jaw, and, sure enough, there it came.

"I'm rubbing his salivary glands," he said.

"That's gross, man," I said.

"I know, but isn't it neat?"

He daubed up the spit that was leaking down Kyle's face, and then he and I settled down. There were some TV's hanging from the ceiling of the plane, and they were showing music videos. I watched some, but then I went to sleep.

The next thing I knew, there was a guy shaking my arm. I looked over, and he was doing the same thing to Kyle and Brian.

"You're in Boston, guys," he was saying. "Wake up."

It was a flight attendant. It was a good thing none of us was the kind that came up swinging. If we had been, we would have taken him out. The rest of the airplane was empty, so we just strolled right off.

Walking off that plane, Kyle was about to jump out of his skin, he was so excited. He spotted Tim and Doc as soon as we got out of the gate area, and that was a sight out of a movie. They ran to each other and grabbed a-hold of one another like they were both drowning or something. If two people could grin bigger and harder than those two were doing, I didn't want to see it. We were all grinning, too, of course, at how cute they were.

"Did you have a good trip, guys," Doc asked.

"Yes, sir," we all said, more or less at the same time.

"Well, let's get your luggage. We're going to drop by my parents' house for a minute so you can meet them. My dad has to have surgery Monday morning, so we won't really get to spend much time with them," he said.

"What's wrong with him, Doc," Brian asked.

"He has a hernia, Brian. He's on some new medication for his arthritis, and he's able to walk again. The hernia has been really uncomfortable, though," he said.

I made a mental note to ask Tim what a hernia was when it was just the four of us.

We got our stuff and took off, Doc driving.

Once we were on the expressway, or whatever it was, Tim and Kyle kissed each other hello. I always got hard when I kissed Brian, but I didn't know watching them would get me that way, too. It damn sure did, though. I checked out Brian, and it did it to him, too. They didn't get into a big make-out session or anything, but they definitely knew they had been kissed.

(Kyle's Perspective)

Seeing Tim in that airport was the best sight I had ever seen. He was smiling so happy and all, and we hugged so hard I thought we'd squeeze each other breathless. I wanted to plant the biggest kiss on his lips that you could imagine, but I sure didn't want to embarrass anybody by doing it right there. I did in the car, though.

"I can't believe how good it feels to be here," I said.

"Did you miss your boy, Kyle," Doc asked.

"Yes, sir. Every second," I said.

"You want to know a secret," Doc asked.

"Yes, sir."

"He missed you every second, too," he said.

"Were you gone somewhere, Tim," Jus asked.

That made everybody laugh.

"He missed you just as much as we all did, Bubba," Brian said to Tim. "I think even Trixie missed you."

"How was the party last night," Tim asked.

"It was okay," I said.

"The food was good, but it wasn't the same without you. Rick cried when you called, Tim," Brian said.

I could tell that made Timmy feel good.

Tim's grandparents lived in a real big old house, but it was divided into apartments. They had a lot of old furniture, like antiques and stuff. I remembered my manners for once and told them how nice it all was. I got the feeling they would have let me have whatever I wanted out of there, too. They were that nice.

We didn't stay there very long, and Doc didn't come with us when we left, like I figured he would. He had rented a mini-van, and he was going to let us have that for the week. His parents had a car that he would use. I didn't know how serious the operation was, but it couldn't have been too bad because old Mr. Murphy was only supposed to be in the hospital one night. He'd have to take it easy at home, though.

We were staying at a place called the Swissôtel on Avenue de Lafayette. I had never heard of it, but that didn't mean much. It was only one block from Boston Common, and there were a lot of big office buildings around it. It was something else, inside, too. We didn't have anything like it in Emerald Beach, and I felt like I was someplace in Europe when we walked in. I figured that place was going to turn us all into tipping machines, and I wasn't wrong.

We had two rooms, each with a king size. In New York we had stayed at one of the brands we had, and it wasn't even half as nice as that place.

"How'd you like to get you one of these," Justin asked me. He knew I was mentally drooling over it.

"Maybe I will someday," I said. "Tim's going to have to do a whole lot of doctoring for us to afford something like this, though. Y'all give us about an hour to freshen up. We'll meet you in the lobby at seven o'clock."

"Freshen up, my ass," Justin said, grinning.

"It could use it, Buddy," Brian said.

"He should know," I said. "He just got your ass last, after all."

We all laughed.

Any sixteen or seventeen year old boy who's ever gone a week without any sex at all, even jerking off, knows what we were feeling right then. When God created sex, He must have had times like that in mind, and He damn sure knew what He was doing.

The first time was pretty quick, but it was intense. That was to be expected. After that, though, we took our time, and we made some awesome love.

"I don't ever want us to be separated again," Tim said, as I was holding him in bed.

"Me, either. This kind of made up for it, though, didn't it?"

He laughed.

"Kyle, I don't even know how to say how much I love you," he said.

"You don't have to say it. You show it every time you look at me, every time you touch me, every time you talk to me," I said.

"And you do the same thing," he said.

I didn't really think either one of us had planned on a shower, but after that, we needed one. We fooled around in there, too, and that was fun.

We ate in the restaurant in the hotel that night, and it was really good. Expensive, but good. Then we walked over to Boston Common to take in the sights. It was still not quite dark, and there were people everywhere. We hit up on a quartet of string musicians, and we listened a while. You see street musicians in places like New Orleans and New York all the time, but it's usually one guy with a guitar or a sax or something. Leave it to Boston to have a string quartet on the sidewalk.

It had been sort of hot during the day when the sun was out, but it cooled down pretty good at night. We walked around and found a little coffee place. I noticed a gay rainbow flag decal on the front window, but they had a lot of decals. I figured it was just there for no particular reason, but there were only guys in the place.

"I think there are homosexuals in here," Justin said in a very serious tone of voice.

"Does that make you uncomfortable," Brian asked.

"Yes. I don't want them looking at me," he said. "They're undressing me with their eyes, Brian. I'm being visually raped. They should all be sent to some island somewhere so they can do that to each other and leave me the hell alone."

The three of us were laughing our asses off, but he was still acting serious.

"I want something fruity," Tim said, looking at the menu.

"Me, too, with lots of cream. Thick, delicious cream," Brian said.

That's what it finally took to get Justin laughing.

"That cream sounds real good, but I want to suck on the nozzle of that big, round can the cream comes out of," Jus said.

We could barely talk, we were laughing so hard.

"Have you ever had fruitcake with hard sauce," I asked. "Hard sauce is a kind of cream."

"I have," Tim said. "It tasted so good I thought it had been made by fairies."

We were laughing loud, and people were looking at us. There was a couple at the table next to us, probably late twenties, and they were listening to everything we said. They were laughing their asses off, too.

"I like fruitcake pretty good, but my favorite is banana cream pie," Jus said.

One of the boys at the next table was taking a sip of his coffee when Justin said that, and he sucked that coffee down into his windpipe. He was choking and laughing at the same time.

"You need a little help there, buddy," Justin asked him. "I do real good mouth-to-mouth."

They both laughed some more, and I was starting to get a little bit worried about the boy who was coughing so hard. I mean, fun is fun, but you don't want to laugh somebody to death. His face was as red as a strawberry.

He held up his hands like it was a hold-up or something, but he kept on coughing.

"He'll be okay. He does this all the time," the other one said.

The boy who was coughing finally calmed down.

"Where are you guys from," the non-cougher asked.

"All over the damn place," I said, "but we live in Florida. We're just here on a trip."

"Do you mind if we join you," he asked.

"Hell, no. Come on over," I said.

They pulled their table and chairs over to ours. It was only a couple of feet, anyway. We all introduced ourselves, but just with first names. They were Jim (cougher) and Bart.

We made us some friends that night of those two guys. They were twenty-eight, and they had met when they were freshmen in college, right there in Boston. They had been together for ten years, and that in itself was pretty inspiring to us. We spent about two hours with them, just shooting the shit and laughing. They gave us a list of must-sees, but Tim already knew about most of them.

We had a great time with those guys that night. It was like when you lost your first tooth as a little kid. You stick your hand under the pillow, and there's a surprise. We walked into that place for a snack, and we met two great guys. Surprise! They gave us their business cards, and we all wrote our names and emails on a napkin. Nobody ever expected to keep up with each other, but we had us two gay brothers in Boston, if we needed 'em.

(Tim's Perspective)

We had a really good time Saturday night. We spent a couple of hours in a little coffee shop off Boston Common. It turned out to be sort of a gay hangout, which we didn't even know when we went in. We met a couple of guys who were incredibly nice and very funny.

Kyle and I had some more catching up to do that night. We got in bed naked and just rubbed each other. I know that doesn't sound all that hot, but, believe me, it was. It was like we were desperate for each other's bodies, to feel them and hold them and touch them.

We didn't ask for a wake-up call or anything. The next morning, we made love, and then, after a shower, we met up with Jus and Brian in one of the little eateries in the hotel. We didn't like the menu all that much, and the prices were pretty high. We had enough money on us, but twenty bucks for breakfast seemed like too much.

"Let's go find a coffee shop like last night," Kyle suggested.

We all were in favor of that.

I felt like they were all looking to me to know what to do, and I did have a pretty good idea. I had been to Boston a bunch of times to visit my grandparents, and the thing I wanted to do to get us started was to take a Duck Tour. Ducks are half truck, half boat, and they used them in World War II to get men and supplies to land from ships. Some company had gotten a bunch of those things, painted them bright pink, and now they gave tours.

We walked up to the Prudential Center where the Duck Tours were, and we bought tickets. They cost \$20, and I knew Kyle would want us each to tip the tour guide five dollars.

"What the hell is this thing," Jus said, when we got on board. "I feel like I'm in some kind of monster machine."

"It's gonna eat you up, Bubba. You better be careful," Kyle said.

"Y'all don't leave me by myself, you hear," Jus said.

"We're not going to leave you," Kyle said.

"Excuse me. Where are you boys from, if you don't mind my asking," a lady sitting across from us said.

"We're from Florida," I said.

"You don't talk like them," she said.

"No, ma'am. He doesn't either," I said, meaning Brian. "It's just those two."

"You're a fine-looking group of young men. I hope you enjoy our city," she said.

"Do you live here," I asked. "My dad is from here. I guess I am, too, technically. I was born here."

"Yes, I live here. My grandsons are visiting."

She pointed to two boys that I had noticed on the way in. They were about our age, and they were gorgeous. I smiled politely. Then she started talking to a man in the seat with her, her husband, I guessed.

The tour guide welcomed us and told us about the "craft" we were on. It was a renovated amphibious vehicle from World War II, just like I already knew. They had about seventeen of them in Boston, and they all were used to give tours. He told us he would be telling us about the historical sites along the tour and that we could ask him questions to "test" his knowledge of history.

"I reckon I need to pay good attention to what he says," Justin said. "Maybe I can use some of this in my history class at college."

"I'll bet you can, Buddy," Brian said. "I thought you were taking European history, though."

"No. That was full up. I'm taking American history," Jus said. "And I don't know shit about it."

The tour was great. It only lasted about an hour and a half, but the guide was funny, and he told some great stories about history and the "real" story behind the history. We passed by just about every major thing in Boston. We didn't get off anywhere, like we had on the bus tour in New York, but that was okay. People all over waved at us. It was almost like we were celebrities or something because we were on that tour.

Justin and Kyle were both pretty quiet on the tour, although Kyle was taking pictures right and left. I could tell they were both listening intently to what the guy was saying. I was going to be taking AP American History next year, so I paid pretty good attention, too.

We passed something that had to do with Benjamin Franklin, who grew up in Boston.

"I know who Benjamin Franklin is," Jus said. "He's the guy that busted the Liberty Bell, right? Where is that thing, anyway? I'd like to see it."

"It ain't here. It's in Philadelphia. I've seen it, and it wasn't all that much to see," Kyle said. "It's just a big bell."

"Why'd they give it to Philadelphia," Jus asked.

"I don't know, but that's where it is. Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love, and there are some real bell busters there," Kyle said.

The lady I had talked to earlier heard what he said, and she started laughing.

"They don't know too much history," I said to her.

"Maybe not, but they're precious. All of you are," she said.

I'm sure I blushed.

"You guys shut up so I can hear what he's saying," Brian said.

Justin squeezed his thigh pretty hard, and Brian got a painful look on his face. Then they both laughed.

When we got to the Charles River on the Cambridge side, the Duck went into the water.

"Shit!" Justin said pretty loud. "Are we going down?"

The people around us laughed.

"This is part of the tour, dumbass. Why did you think it was amphibious," Kyle asked. He was laughing at Justin, though.

"I didn't know what that word meant," Jus said.

"It means this thing goes on land and water," Kyle said. "It ain't going to sink. Shut up and enjoy it."

"Kyle, I'm going to whip your ass tonight right there on the Boston Commons," Jus said.

"It's Common, Jus, not Commons," I said.

"Whatever they call it, it's going to be a field of blood tonight," he said.

"Boys, violence won't solve anything," the nice lady said. "Please don't do that." She was really serious because she didn't know those two.

Kyle and Justin both laughed.

"Ma'am, this is my brother and my best friend," Jus said. "I would never hurt him. Besides, he could hurt me as much as I could hurt him. I'm sorry I scared you."

She grinned when he said that.

"You hear so many stories about how violent people are in the South. I was just concerned," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am, for feeling that way, but he and I love each other. We'd never hurt one another," Kyle said.

"I'm sorry I butted in, but . . ."

"But you're a grandma, and that's your job, right," Kyle said.

"Right," she said, smiling at us.

When the tour was over, everybody applauded.

"Don't forget the tip," Kyle said, as we were leaving.

"Our boys probably don't know about a tip," the nice lady said to her husband.

She squeezed her way up to them and told them. She also gave each of them some money. Then she came back to where we were.

"You fellows have made this tour a lot more interesting for me," she said. "Welcome to Boston."

When we got off the Duck, the lady's two grandsons joined their grandparents. The younger one looked at me long and hard. My gaydar went off very big time.

* * *

We did all the tourist stuff you can think of. We walked the Freedom Trail, we toured around in Quincy Market for about a half a day, we went to Concord and Lexington and Salem, and we saw all that stuff. We went to the Kennedy Library and the Mapparium at the Christian Science church. We spent time in the North End and Chinatown. We went to Cambridge and saw Harvard and MIT. We kept busy, and we did a lot. We went to Walden Pond and swam a little there. I think our best day, though, was with my cousins.

We went out to the islands that make up Boston harbor, and we played.

I introduced my three brothers to my four cousins. It was only the boys, not the girl cousins.

"You guys must be really smart," Justin said to them.

"Why do you say that," Paddy asked.

"All this history shit is blowing my mind," Jus said.

"Yeah, but we don't know it any better than you do," Tony said.

"Really," Jus asked.

"Just because you live in a place doesn't mean you know everything about it," Steve said. "We should, I guess, but we don't."

"Well, I know a good bit, by now," Jus said.

"We've never toured like you have," Paddy said. "Steve's right. We don't know the history of Boston very well."

The harbor islands weren't nearly as pretty as Dune Island back home, but they were nice. Only one island had public swimming, and we swam there. The water was pretty cold, too, compared to what I

was used to.

That night all eight of us went to a Red Sox game, and that was something I had wanted to do for a long time. They were playing the Yankees that night, so we got a chance to see two great teams play at one time.

My cousins and my guys got along really well. I knew Kyle, Justin, and Brian would like my cousins just because I wanted them to, but my cousins liked my guys, too.

"Is Tony the one you walloped," Kyle asked me privately.

"Yeah, but we're friends now," I said. "He's a really nice guy."

"And Paddy's the one that's gay, right?"

"Yeah."

"He's really cute, Tim. I want to get to know him much, much better," Kyle said.

"You shitass," I said, and we both laughed.

When we got on the plane to go home, I felt like we had seen and done just about all there was to see and do in Boston. We went to a couple of comedy clubs at night. We went out dancing one night. We went to a couple of gay clubs one night. We had a very good time.

"This place was unbelievable," Justin said.

"Not more than New York," Kyle said.

"Not more than New Orleans, either. But the three are so different," Bri said.

"Travel is wicked good," I said.

"You picked that up, didn't you," Kyle said.

He was referring to my use of the word "wicked," something my cousins said all the time.

"Yeah, along with a six-pack of tonic," I said.

He laughed.

"How'd they ever come up with 'tonic' for a soft drink," he asked.

"How'd you come up with 'soft drink' for a soda," Brian asked.

"Yeah, when everybody really knows that stuff is called 'pop,'" Justin said.

"You want a pop?"

"No, Kyle. Don't hit me, don't touch me, don't even look at me," Jus said.

We all laughed.

Kyle went to sleep during the flight to Atlanta, of course, and the rest of us were quiet. I thought about the three greatest guys in the world: Kyle, Justin, and Brian. Dear God, I prayed, I don't know how or why you put the four of us together, but thank you for doing it. These boys inspire me to be faithful and true, to accept other people for who they are, and to love without restraint. I know that some people think the way we live is wrong, and that we're all going to hell for what we do, but I don't buy that. Thank you for making us who we are, and help us be faithful to what you want us to be.

(Kevin's Perspective)

The house was way too quiet with the guys gone to Boston. Saturday night, Jeff and Seth both went out with their boyfriends, and Alex was there all alone with us. All of them went to Mass with us, but it was just Alex with us when we went out to eat after church.

"I'm glad we're having a chance to spend some time with just you, Alex," I said.

"Thanks," he said softly. "I miss Tim and Kyle, and Justin and Brian," he said. "They are always so nice to me."

"Yeah, they're nice kids, aren't they," Rick said.

All three of us studied the menu and ordered. Then nobody said anything. It wasn't a comfortable

silence, either. Alex had been with us three weeks by then, and Rick and I really didn't know him very well at all. We would have had no trouble starting conversation with the others. In fact, we would have had to struggle to get a word in, most of the time. With Alex, though, it was different.

"Are you all squared away for college," I asked.

"Yeah. I have the same three classes that Cody does, and two of those are with Justin, too. Kyle is also in the English class I'm taking. It'll be fun being in class with them," he said.

"Were you going to go to community college in New York," I asked.

"No. Actually, I had been accepted at Pace University, and I was going to go there. I guess I should contact them and let them know I'm not coming," he said.

"That's probably a good idea," Rick said. "You can write them a letter or an email, or something."

"I will," he said.

"We need to start giving some thought to some transportation for you, Alex," I said. "You're going to need a car, living where we do."

He smiled.

"Justin bought his truck himself, but we co-signed a loan for him. Or at least Rick did," I said. "I'll co-sign for you, if you want me to."

"That would be really cool," he said. "I already feel like I'm freeloading, though."

"Don't think of it that way, man," Rick said. "Kevin and I want to help you get on your feet. What you did was a pretty brave thing, and we admire that. Maybe some day you can pay us back by doing the same thing for some kid who needs help."

That seemed to satisfy him.

"I've thought a lot about what I did, and it was probably pretty dumb, in a lot of ways," he said.

"What do you mean," I asked.

"Well, I didn't have a plan at all. I mean, if Kyle and Tim hadn't happened to be grocery shopping that Sunday afternoon, who knows what would have happened to me. I'm too old for foster care, and I probably would have ended up in a homeless shelter. That's what I was, after all. Homeless."

"Sometimes a man reaches his level of endurance, though," Rick said. "You reached yours. You took action. You were lucky your brothers found you, though."

"Have you made any friends here yet," I asked.

He looked at me very strangely, like I had asked if he had won the Nobel Prize yet. Then it dawned on me.

"Besides us, I mean. You know, like at work."

"I had friends before, but never this many," he said. "I'll make friends with people outside the family, though. Eventually."

"Alex, you told us you're bi," Rick said. "I don't know how much Kevin and I can relate to that."

"I'm sort of confused about that myself," he said. "I mean, I don't have any experience at all, one way or the other, to base it on. I guess I'd really like to have a boyfriend, though. That's really where I'm headed, I think."

"Now that we understand," Rick said.

"But I want a boyfriend who's real boyish, like your guys are. Does that make me a bad person," he asked.

"Why would that make you a bad person," I asked.

"I know the more feminine guys are just as good and just as nice as the more masculine guys, but they just don't appeal to me. I mean, I really like Chad and Gage, for example, but I wouldn't want a boyfriend like that," he said.

"Lex, I think it's a matter of taste, you know," Rick said. "Some people like blonds, others like brunettes, others like redheads. If you were talking about women, would a preference for blondes make you a bad person?"

"No, I don't think so," he said.

"Being mean to brunettes and redheads because you prefer blondes would make you a bad person, for sure. Just like being mean to effeminate guys would make you a bad person. Preferring one over the other, especially for something like a relationship, isn't bad at all," Rick said.

"Alex, a lot of it has to do with getting past the superficial and discovering the person underneath. Our boys had a problem accepting Chad at first, especially Justin. We basically said, 'He's our friend, goddamn it, so shut up about it.' And to his credit, Jus did. Now, Chad and Gage don't have a better or more loyal friend in the world than Justin Davis," I said.

"Justin is really something, isn't he," Alex said.

Rick and I couldn't even think of Justin without at least grinning, if not laughing out loud.

"Alex, if you knew how far that boy has come, you would be totally amazed," I said. "I think Rick and I will always think of Tim and Kyle as our first-born sons, but Justin is a very, very close second. Rick and I think of the day that Tim's dad left for a hospital ship in the Indian Ocean as the start of our family, and that very day Tim and Kyle became boyfriends in our garage, after a Super Bowl party of our friends. That was a year ago last January, and that's how far back the history of our family goes. We got Justin a year ago in June, so, compared to the others, he's been here a long time. He was our first foster child, and, yeah, we love him."

"Don't let that country bullshit of his fool you, either, Alex," Rick said. "That sucker is smart as hell. He lacks a certain polish in some areas, but I'll put him up against any of you guys in intelligence and character and heart. Which is totally amazing, when you consider his background."

"Kevin and Rick," Alex said, looking at us with real puppy-dog eyes, "I don't know where I'm going or what the future is going to hold for me. I've never had more fun than I've had in your home, and I've never felt truly loved and accepted like I do with you guys. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything you've done for me. Rick, what you said about paying you back by helping kids in the future makes sense to me. I won't ever be as stable and productive as you guys are, but I'll do what I can, just as soon as I can."

"You'll be stable and productive, Alex. I just know it," Rick said. "And if you aren't, we'll still love you. You'll still be our son."

Chapter 05

(Kevin's Perspective)

The Boston boys got home in mid-afternoon on Saturday, July 18th. Just like for the New York trip, Kyle had left his car in the airport parking lot. Sonya was there to meet the plane, and George rode home with her. The four boys rode home with Kyle.

The Goodsons were away for the weekend, so Kyle came to our house. Tim dropped his luggage at home, but he said that he thought his dad and Sonya deserved some privacy. He came down to our house, too.

Trixie was all over the travelers when they came in. I don't think you can beat a good dog like she was for showing pure joy and love in a situation like that. It was pretty clear that Brian was her favorite, but she loved all of them. They petted her and roughhoused with her a little, and she was content that her people were home safe.

Seth and Cody, Jeff and Tyler, and Alex were all there when they came home. They were almost as joyful at their return as Trixie was. Rick made a pot of coffee, and we all huddled in the den to hear about the trip.

They had souvenirs for everybody, but they had gone in together and bought a single gift for each of us that was probably nicer than they would have bought individually. Everybody got a Red Sox cap, and then there were individual gifts for us. They talked all about the adventures they had had in Boston.

"Brian had the biggest adventure," Kyle said.

"What happened, Bri," I asked.

"I got lost," he said. "We were at Quincy Market, this really old place that is all shops and restaurants and coffeehouses and galleries and stuff like that. Actually, I didn't really get lost. I just got separated from the other three. I knew I could get back to the hotel if I couldn't find them, but we had planned to go to a comedy club that night without going back to the hotel first. And I had no idea where the club was."

"How did you get separated," Rick asked.

"That's what we never did figure out," Brian said. "We were in a really crowded shop, and I was looking at books. I thought they were all still in there, but they left."

"We thought he was right with us, too," Justin said. "All of a sudden, I missed him."

"We went back in the shop, but he was gone," Tim said. "He had gone out looking for us."

"I figured they were around there somewhere," Bri said. "I started to get a little panicky, though. I mean, like I said, I knew where the hotel was, but I was beginning to feel lost."

"We found him, though," Justin said. "One thing we learned was, if you get separated, stay the hell where you are. Don't go looking for the others. They will eventually come back to where they last saw you."

We talked for a good two hours about their trip, and it sounded like they had had a wonderful time.

"Who wants to go swimming," Kyle eventually said. "I need some pizza, too."

I looked at my watch, and it was, indeed, time to eat. The ones who had flown in that day probably hadn't had much to eat, since Delta had substituted a real meal with a bag of miniature pretzels. I'm sure the boys were hungry. I ordered a bunch of large pizzas to go around and a ton of salad. We had ice cream for dessert, if they wanted that.

After we ate, we all went out to the pool. We all got naked to swim, and we had a wonderful time. It had been two full weeks since all of them had been there, and, frankly, Rick and I missed having our sons home with us.

I heard a telephone ring, but I didn't pay any attention to it. There were seven of us officially living there that summer, nine if you included Tim and Kyle, and everybody had a cell phone. They rang all the time. I was quite comical to watch the boys try to figure out whose cell was ringing at, say, breakfast. That particular one sounded more like the house phone than a cell, but I didn't bother with it.

"Rick, it's for you," Kyle called out. "It's your Mom."

Shit, I thought. What does she want?

That wasn't a hostile thought toward Sarah, Rick's mom. It was more like, Oh, shit, is something wrong?

Rick got out of the pool to take the call. After about five minutes, he didn't re-emerge from the house. I went in to see what was going on.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be there as soon as I can," I heard him say, as I was walking into the room. He told his mother he loved her, and then he hung up.

"What's going on," I asked.

"It's my grandfather. He's dying," Rick said. He got huge tears in his eyes.

I grabbed him up in a big hug, and he clung to me like a vine.

"What happened," I asked.

"He had a stroke, Babe. A really bad one. He's just hanging on by a thread."

"Do you want me to get my dad down there," I asked.

"I don't think there's any use in that, Kevin. I think this is the big one for him," he said.

Rick and I were holding on to one another, crying our eyes out. His grandfather was his father's dad, and he had really raised Rick. I knew my guy was hurting in the worst way.

"Do we fly or drive," I asked.

"Drive, I think, but you don't have to come," he said.

I grabbed him by both shoulders.

"You don't want me there," I asked.

"Of course I want you there," he said. His tears were streaming, and I knew those were sad tears.

"That's what I thought, Babe. At a time like this? There's no question that I'll be there with you. You should know that."

"I did know that," he said, "but what about the boys?"

"They can take care of themselves," I said. "Kyle's in charge. You know that, and they do, too. They're fine with that."

"I think we need to leave as soon as we can," he said.

I went back outside and told the boys what was going on. They all became very somber. Some of them had met Mr. Mashburn briefly at Christmas, and they had all really liked him. They were sincerely sorry to get the news about his imminent death.

Rick and I drove hard in my car, and we got to Sarasota around midnight. We went to his mom's house, and Arnie was up waiting for us.

"It doesn't look good at all, guys," Arnie said, after greeting us.

"How's my grandmother doing," Rick asked.

"She's hanging in there, strong as an ox," he said. "Listen, I suggest you guys freshen up and get on over to the hospital. They aren't sure he'll even last the night."

We did just that.

Rick burst into tears when he saw his mother and grandmother in the Intensive Care waiting room.

"I'm so sorry, Grandma," Rick said.

"Thank you, son, but it's his time," she said. "The priest was here a little while ago, so now he's ready. Oh, my God, how he loved you, Rick!"

"I know. And I love him, too, Grandma," he said. "Can I see him?"

"We can go in in about ten minutes," Sarah said. "He's unconscious, of course, but I know you want to see him anyway."

"I need to wash my face, I think," Rick said.

He stepped into the men's room, and I went in with him. He bent over the sink to splash water on his face, and I stood right behind my man. I hugged him when he stood up, and he smiled weakly at me.

"I know he's old and all," he said. "Eighty-five is a good age to die, I think."

"At least he didn't have to put up with a painful illness," I said, trying to find some consolation somewhere.

"True," he said. "He was healthy right up to the end."

We all went in to see Grandpa Mashburn, probably to say goodbye. Rick kissed him on the forehead.

"I love you, Grandpa," he whispered.

As though responding, Grandpa said something like, "ahwww."

At that instant the machines that were connected to him went off. Buzzers, beepers, small sirens sounded. Nurses ran in from everywhere, it seemed. They went to work on him like an army engaging the enemy. Nothing seemed to work, though.

"Stop it!" Grandma Mashburn shouted. "He's been hanging on, waiting for Rick to get here. It's his time."

The nurses backed off.

Grandma went over to him and kissed him, no doubt like they had done millions of times. She turned to us and said,

"Thank you for sending my precious boy home, sons. He was such a fine boy when I met him. We were both eighteen. We married when we were twenty, and in two months we would have celebrated our sixty-fifth wedding anniversary. He's happy and at peace with the Lord now, boys. That's the gift you gave him, Rick. He loved you so. And he loved you, too, Kevin, because you love Rick."

Rick totally lost it, and so did his mom. Arnie and I had tears streaming down our faces, too.

"Hush. You mustn't cry. He had a wonderful life, and now it's run its course. Andy and John are on their way here right now, and I'm just sorry Andy wasn't here for the end," she said. "Drew loved Andy so, but I'm not sure Andy ever really knew that."

"Andy knew it, Sophie," Rick's mom said. "And he loved Drew that much, too."

That's when she teared up for the first time since we had been there.

"Thank you, Sarah. That means so much to me," Grandma said. "Rick, will you and Kevin take care of the arrangements for Grandpa," she asked.

"Oh, yes, ma'am," Rick said, and I echoed him.

A doctor came in just then to officially pronounce him dead. He offered some condolences to Sophie, and she accepted them graciously.

"He had a long, happy, and productive life, Doctor," she said. "He's earned his rest."

(Rick's Perspective)

You always know it's going to happen, sooner or later, but you really aren't ever prepared for it. I mean, I knew my grandpa was in his eighties, and people just don't live too much longer than that. In fact, he lived a lot longer than three of Kevin's grandparents, and that was a blessing. The thing that gave me some comfort, though, was what Kevin said about him not suffering. He was fine right up until the very end. He didn't die in his sleep after making spectacular love to my grandmother, but it was the next best thing.

My grandmother's attitude made it easier for me, I think. She had lost her Drew, after all, but she was willing to let him go because he had earned his rest. What a woman!

Kevin and I slept at my grandparents' house that night, in what had been "my" room. I knew I didn't need to be there for my grandmother. She was fine and could take care of herself. I needed to be there for me, though. The room had what was referred to as a three-quarter bed: not a twin, but not quite a double, either. Kev and I were on top of each other in that bed, but that was good, too.

My father and his partner were there the next morning when we got up. We had been up very late the night before, but Kevin and I were up by nine. My father and John slept later. They had the time-zone factor against them, and I was sure they would be up as soon as they were able to be. They had come in after we were asleep, and my father and John had taken his room.

Kevin called the boys to let them know what was going on. I was on the extension.

"Grandpa Mashburn passed away last night, Kyle," Kevin said.

"I'm sorry. How's Rick doing?"

"He's holding up. Everyone is," Kev said. "It was his time, Kyle. He had a full, rich life."

Kyle sobbed.

"It wasn't Clay's fucking time, Kevin," he said.

"It was Clay's time, Bubba. We never know when our time is," Kevin said. He was being so gentle with Kyle that it almost made me cry.

"When is the funeral," Kyle asked.

"We don't know yet, but probably Tuesday or Wednesday," Kevin said.

"We're all coming for it," he said.

"Have you talked with the other guys about this, Kyle?"

"Nope."

"How do you know they'll come," Kevin asked.

"Because I know they will. And not just our boys. I'm talking about everybody."

"Rick, say something," Kevin said.

"Kyle, don't make them do that, man. That's a hell of a long distance," I said.

"Hi, Rick. I thought I heard something funny-sounding on this phone, but I figured Kevin was on his cell. It might be a hell of a long distance, Rick, but a lot of people also have a hell of a lot of love for you. Your brothers will be there, Rick."

The boys drove in on Monday. Every one of them, including boyfriends. Gene and Rita, and George and Sonya drove in, too. Beth and Ed, and Craig and Cherie flew in from New Orleans. Our friends Monte and Terry came, as did Sam and Fred, and Chad and Gage. Jerry Taylor came, as did Pat Taylor and Mike Lawley. I was truly overwhelmed. I never expected anything like that.

Father Vince Vickers, from the parish, and Jerry concelebrated the Mass of Resurrection for Grandpa. It was an unbelievably beautiful ceremony. There were four retired people there who provided the music and the singing. At Communion, they sang "I Am the Bread of Life," and I bawled. The Emerald Beach crowd knew that song well, and, led by Kyle, they sang it out big. They sang them all big. At the end, the recessional, as we took my grandfather out of the church to his grave, they sang "Be Not Afraid." I heard Kyle's deep voice laying the foundation for the rest of them. I wanted to sing, but I couldn't until the very end.

"Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come, follow me, and I will give you rest."

The old men who were pallbearers had trouble with the casket on the eight or ten steps down from the church, and Kyle actually whistled the boys into action on that one. Those boys took that casket from those older gentlemen and got it in the hearse without so much as a dip. The old men, my grandfather's life-long friends, passed him to his great-grandsons, and they smiled. They knew.

(Andy's Perspective)

Sarah called to say my dad was on his last leg, and I knew we had to get there. It's not easy to get from San Diego to Sarasota, but John and I eventually made it.

My dad and I had a somewhat rocky relationship. In the more recent years, he tolerated me and John, and in the most recent years he even seemed to like us. When I was in high school, though, it was like he knew I was gay and definitely didn't approve. John would come over to spend the night, and it seemed that his attitude was one of total disgust with us. He didn't officially know we were gay, but apparently he had some major gaydar working.

John stayed in Sarasota for community college, and I went to Tallahassee to FSU. That's where I

met Sarah. She was so kind and so accepting that I thought I could, with her help and support, overcome being gay. We dated for several months, and finally we had sex. I thought it was what was expected of me, and I was curious about what it was like. I should really say "made love," because I really did love her. Not in a life-partner kind of way for me, but I really did love her, and still do. Anyway, she was on the pill or some kind of contraceptive, but it didn't work. Lo and behold, she turned up pregnant.

When I called my parents to give them that news, my dad was elated. I guess he figured I wasn't gay, after all. My mother was more restrained, but she was happy, too. They were going to be grandparents. They were in their late thirties when I was born, and they were already in their late fifties when Rick was born.

I married Sarah when she got pregnant, but that didn't last long. I was still seeing John, for heaven sake, and she knew it. I loved her as much as a gay man could ever love a woman, but I was fully gay, and I knew that.

Her parents were very cool toward the whole thing. They lived in some little nothing town in the Panhandle of Florida, and the thought of their daughter getting pregnant was abhorrent to them. They were Methodists and we were Catholic, and I think there was some suspicion there, too. I was from central Florida, and they were from north Florida, and that added to the suspicion. It was just not a good situation.

Sarah and I managed to hold it together for a few months after Rick was born, but we decided to split up, eventually. It was an amicable divorce, and I agreed not to interfere with his raising. John and I wanted to move to California, anyway, so I would be out of the picture.

My parents loved Rick from the instant of his conception, I think. Sarah somehow made it through FSU and became a teacher. I was making child support payments, but I was still in college myself. My parents subsidized the meager amount I could afford until I graduated and got a good job. I was a mechanical engineer, and, while it paid well, I found the work deadly boring. After a few years of agonizing work, John and I bought an appliance store. It was a sort of rent-to-own affair, although we did sell directly, also. It did well, and it certainly kept us busy. In time, we expanded to more stores, and now we have five.

During those years, I made it back to Sarasota a few times to visit. I never did officially "come out" to my parents, but, of course, they knew. We never discussed the fact that John and I were gay and that we were lovers. We had been best friends since the eighth grade, and officially we were roommates. His parents lived in Sarasota, too, and he stayed at their house and I stayed at mine on those trips. Weird, but at least it preserved the charade that we were just roommates back in California.

I saw my son Rick on those visits, of course, but we never really spent enough time with one another to develop anything like a relationship. I began to regret that as he got older and turned into a stunning young man. He was a marvelous athlete, something I could never begin to aspire to, and he looked a great deal like me. Having said that, it might sound a bit self-serving to say he was incredibly good looking, but he was. Not that I was, but my rough edges were all polished and smoothed in his appearance.

"How's it going, son," I asked him on one trip when he was fourteen.

He was obviously well into puberty, and he was already as tall as he would become. He still looked like a kid, but he was already shaving.

"It's going okay," he said.

We talked about sports and surfing and the things he liked to do. He was a Boy Scout, and he took great pride in that. Eventually, we got around to his social life.

"Do you have a special girl," I asked.

He averted his face.

"No," he said softly. "What would you say if I said I think I might be gay?"

Whoa! That threw me for a loop. Why it did that, I had no idea. Surely I understood what he was feeling, including the confusion of not knowing for sure about himself.

"I would say that's perfectly all right," I said.

"I thought you would. You're gay, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am, son," I said. "John and I are lovers, and we have been since high school."

"I know. Mom told me," he said.

"Is that a problem for you?"

"No, sir," he said.

After that conversation, John and I alternated between his house and mine. Altogether, we only visited Sarasota a half-dozen times in the years Rick was growing up, but the next visit, the summer after he graduated from high school, John and I didn't hide from my parents.

When John and I went to Sarasota for my father's funeral, we met Rick's partner for the first time. We knew Kevin existed, of course, both from my parents and from Sarah, with whom I had maintained a strong friendship through the years. We hadn't even seen Kevin's picture, though, and I wasn't quite prepared for him when we met. The great irony was my father seemed to have no problem with the fact that his grandson was gay.

"Andy, I want you to meet the love of my life, Kevin Foley," Rick said the morning after Dad died.

We exchanged pleasantries, shook hands, and the like, and I introduced John to Kevin.

Kevin was almost identical in height and size to Rick. Where Rick was blond, Kevin was dark.

They both had spectacular tans, and both boys could easily have gotten contracts as models, I thought.

We made small talk with them for a while. It was a Sunday morning, and my mother wanted to go to Mass. I hadn't been to church in years, but John and I, along with Rick and Kevin, and Sarah and her new husband, went with her. After church we went out to have lunch. Surprisingly, my mom was bright and cheerful during that outing. I wasn't sure if the fact of Dad's death hadn't quite hit her yet. I mentioned that to Sarah later in the afternoon, and she told me she thought Mom was at peace with what had happened.

Rick and Kevin went to the funeral home that afternoon to make the arrangements. Under other circumstances, that would have been my job, but my father had been much closer to Rick than he had been to me. I was glad my mother had asked my son to do that.

Mom and John and I talked about Dad, of course, and she recounted some of the stories of my youth. John knew them all, and he had been involved in many of them. His parents came over in the late afternoon to pay their respects, as did several other of their friends. Most brought food. By and large, Sarasota was a place filled with northerners, but the old people, the ones like my parents who had grown up there or lived there for many decades, preserved such southern customs.

The last of the people left by eight o'clock. I wanted to do something with Rick and Kevin, but I knew our place was in that house with my mother. She went to bed around nine, and the rest of us, tired from traveling and from the emotional events that had occurred, were right behind her.

John and I spent time with his parents Monday, and we didn't get back to my house until nearly five. Our plan was to take everyone out to dinner and then have a quiet evening at home. The driveway was full of cars when we pulled up.

"I thought all the old friends who are still alive had come around yesterday," John said.

"Me, too."

When we went inside, the house was filled, not with oldsters of my parents' generation, but with

young men, teenagers mostly.

"Andy, come and meet your grandsons," Mother said, with a smile. I could tell she was elated. I, on the other hand, was suddenly weak. Grandsons, I thought. My God!

"These are our boys, Andy," Rick said. "Many of them, at least."

He introduced them in turn. Evidently, all of them were gay because he introduced them as couples. Two of his "sons" had non-family boyfriends with them, Jeff and Seth, I think their names were. One, Alex, was by himself. Then he introduced their friends, including a Catholic priest. John and I couldn't turn out that many people at our house for a party where we were giving away a refrigerator, much less for a funeral eight hours away from home.

"Grandma, I'm going to get some food out for everybody, okay," one of the kids said.

He was a black-haired beauty, the same size as Rick and Kevin.

"Thank you, Kyle. Our friends have brought a lot," Mom said. "Rick, I'm sure some of your friends would appreciate a drink. The liquor's where it's always been."

"Yes, ma'am," Rick said.

"Come on, Stud. You and Brian give us a hand," Kyle said.

A big, handsome dirty-blond stood up, along with a smaller brunette who looked like an angel. There was definitely a party atmosphere in the room, and my mother, the new widow, seemed to be enjoying it all. In about thirty minutes, after the drinks were served, Sarah and Arnie, her new husband, came in with two couples, one older, one young.

The boys and the friends all knew those people, and they turned out to be Kevin's parents, and brother and sister-in-law from New Orleans. They had just flown in. My mother had never met them, but she evidently knew who they were. After they were introduced to her, they were introduced to John and me.

"This is blowing your mind, isn't it," Rick said to me.

"My God! Yes," I said.

He grinned at me.

"These people are my family, and they're here for me," he said.

His voice was strained and huge tears came into his eyes. I wanted to hug him at that moment, but I wasn't sure how he would react. So I didn't.

Those kids laid out a meal for us that was spectacular in its presentation. I hadn't really paid attention to what the people had brought the day before, but I was almost sure there was more on that table than they had given us. Somebody must have gone to a deli or supermarket or something. There was a mountain of hot fried chicken, four or five vegetable casseroles, smoked sausages, a huge platter of ribs, coleslaw, macaroni and cheese, baked beans, potato salad, green salad, and six pies for dessert.

"You done good," I heard Rick say to Kyle.

Kyle grinned. "You knew we would, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I figured," Rick said. "I love you, you little shithead."

Kyle laughed.

"I'm starting to like you a little bit, too," he said.

Rick knocked the bill of Kyle's baseball cap, and Kyle bowed up in jest. Rick knocked it again, and Kyle took it off, grinning broadly at my son. There was obviously a closeness between them, and for a moment I envied Kyle. I wondered if Rick and I could have ever have that. John was at my side, watching the whole thing.

"Any regrets," John asked.

"Don't start, please," I said. He gave me a quick hug.

It was time to form the buffet line, and, quite naturally, my mother asked the priest to say grace. "Mrs. Mashburn, I'd like to defer to Rick, if that's all right," the priest said. "Well, certainly," my mother said.

Rick began:

"Heavenly Father, this meal is all about fatherhood. We're here to celebrate my grandfather, who was like a father to me in my youth. My real father is here, too, to celebrate the life of his father. And my sons are at my side. Give us the grace to reflect your paternal care and concern. Grant my grandfather, Andrew Mashburn, eternal rest, and grant my grandmother a share of his peace. Bless us and these your gifts which we are about to receive through your bounty, in Grandpa's honor, through Christ, our Lord."

"Amen," they thundered out.

Everyone was stunned after that. Finally, Kyle said,

"Good blessing. Let's eat."

Mother was first in line, of course, followed by the other ladies and then the men. No sooner had everybody settled down in the living room, most on the floor, when the doorbell rang. Rick got up to answer it. Two more couples came in. They turned out to be Gene and Rita Goodson. They were Kyle's parents, and he was Rick and Kevin's boss. The other two were George Murphy and Sonya Jenkins. He was Tim's father, and she was George's girlfriend.

That night in bed John asked me, "How many people were here tonight?"

"I honestly don't know," I said. "I think I counted twenty-five, but I could be wrong."

"I think I counted thirty," he said.

"Probably, because I didn't count us or Rick and Kevin or my mother," I said.

"Amazing," he said.

"I know. He must really be something," I said.

"Isn't it self-evident that he is," John asked. "I want to get to know him better. I want to get to know all of them better, Babe."

"Kevin invited us to their house in Emerald Beach before we go home," I said. "Would you like to do that?"

"I would love to do that," John said.

"Me, too. Let's do it," I said.

* * *

My father's funeral was, well, magnificent. I had been to a couple of Catholic funerals of parents of friends in California, and they were vapid, at best. My father's funeral was inspiring, though. It was the Mass of the Resurrection, and that, in itself, was sort of inspiring. What really inspired me, though, was the singing. It was very clear to me that those boys from Emerald Beach knew how to sing, and they knew those songs. They sang loudly, and they sang well. I teared up a bit at the line, "I am the resurrection, I am the life; you who believe in me, even if you die, you shall live forever," at the Communion song. "And I will raise you up. And I will raise you up, on the last day." Wow!

My mother was unbelievable after the funeral. I expected her to be somber and sad, but she was happy and joyful. It was very clear that she considered those boys to be her great-grandsons, and it was also very clear that they considered her their great-grandmother. They radiated love for her, and she felt it.

Kyle and his minions put together another great buffet for us after the funeral. I don't know where

the food came from or when they had had time to buy it, if, in fact, they had. Who knew.

After we ate, I said,

"Rick, we need to talk."

"Okay. Right now?"

"Yeah," I said. "You grab Kevin, and I'm going to grab John."

"Okay," he said.

"Rick, what have you done," I asked.

"What do you mean," he asked.

"These kids, and all these friends," I said. "What's going on?"

"Kevin and I are living our lives," Rick said. "What's wrong with that?"

There was a slight edge to his voice, like he thought I was criticizing him or something. Nothing could have been farther from my mind.

"What's wrong with that? Nothing is wrong with that. Everything is right with that," I said.

"We're a happy family, you know?"

"I can see that," I said. "And I'm happy for you."

"We've made a commitment to our kids and to one another."

That stung a little, but I ignored it. I didn't think he had meant that as implied criticism of me.

"You know, Andy, I don't really know you. I don't resent that or feel angry about it. Really. I actually like you, and I like John. But we don't know one another."

"I know," I said.

It saddened me, all of a sudden, but he was right. Although I was making an effort, I really didn't even know the names of all the boys yet.

"Can we be friends," I asked.

"Of course we can be," he said. "We want to be your friend."

Friend, but not father, I thought. How could it be any other way?

"We're thinking we'll spend a couple of days in Emerald Beach, if that's all right," John said.

Bless his heart. He was trying to help out with what had turned into a difficult conversation.

"That would be great. Kevin told me he thought y'all would do that," Rick said.

The enthusiasm in his voice seemed genuine.

"You can drive home with us and change your plane ticket when you get there," he said. "Or are you going to spend some time here first?"

"I think we'll stay here until the weekend. We can rent a car and drive to Emerald Beach," I said.

"How about if we get there on Saturday? Would that work for you guys?"

"That'll be great, Andy," Kevin said. "We have pretty much an open-house all weekend long, and you'll be able to meet some more of our friends."

More, I thought. My God!

(Kevin's Perspective)

Once Andy and John got there, Rick and I moved to the more comfortable accommodations of his house. There was a new queen size bed in his old room, a fact we hadn't discovered on the last trip because we had stayed at the hotel with the kids.

The night of the funeral day, Rick and I lay in bed holding one another, talking.

"Are you really okay with Andy and John paying us a visit," I said.

"Sure," he said. "Why? Do I not seem like I am?"

"No, you seem fine with it, but I know you too well, Babe," I said.

He chuckled.

"You said you don't resent not knowing him, but you really do, don't you?"

He shrugged.

"It's okay to feel that way, Babe," I said.

"I feel guilty for feeling resentment," he said.

He hadn't had to tell me that because I already knew that's what was going on.

"You didn't do anything to cause it, you know?"

"I know, but I still feel like I ought to love him, and I don't," he said.

"How could you love him? I mean, do you think he loves you?"

"Good point. I hadn't really thought about that, but he's probably feeling guilty about that, too. He can't possibly love me the way my grandfather did," he said.

"Have you talked to your mother about this," I asked.

"A little, but it's been a long time. Even when I was a kid, though, I was afraid to ask her if he loved me," he said.

"You suspected it then," I asked.

"Well, yeah. I mean, he said he loved me, and I suppose on some level he really does. Just like I love him on some level, too. But I don't even begin to feel toward him the way I feel toward Mom and my grandparents," he said.

"Well, let's give him a chance," I said. "And, of course, you're forgetting the 'kid factor.'"

"What do you mean," he asked.

"Remember at Christmas? With Arnie and the kids?"

He chuckled.

"How could I not remember that," he said.

"Let's let Kyle and Justin have a go at him and see what happens," I said.

We kissed and went to sleep.

Chapter 06

(Kyle's Perspective)

The trip to Sarasota was rushed, but I knew, just as soon as Kevin called to tell us Rick's grandpa had died, that we all had to go. I expected a little opposition out of some of them since they would have to miss work to go, but nobody objected. My dad told me to put everybody's expenses on the GE credit card, so I did. He said to get every couple a room of their own, but I didn't really know if that meant Alex, too. My dad didn't know Alex, so I decided to get one double room with two beds. I'm sure it would have been all right to get him a room for himself, but what fun would that have been? He could sleep in the second bed in the room with me and Tim.

After we went to Rick's grandparents' house, we went to the hotel. We had already checked in, and we had all showered before we went over there. I hadn't done much driving on the trip down. In fact, I had slept a good bit, so I wasn't really tired.

"Are you guys ready for bed," Alex asked.

"Not really," I said, as I got undressed.

I thought about leaving my briefs on, but then I went ahead and took them off, too. It wasn't like Alex hadn't seen us naked a bunch of times. Tim got undressed, too. He pulled the spread and top sheet down on the bed, and he and I got in.

"Do you guys want some privacy," Alex asked. "I can hang out in the lobby, if you want me to."

Tim and I had made love that morning because we figured we wouldn't have much privacy, and I thought it would be pretty rude to ask the guy to leave just so we could fuck again. I mean, it would have been good, and all, but we could wait.

"Naw. Stay in here and talk to us," I said.

"Are you sure," he asked.

"Of course we're sure, Alex," Tim said.

"Do you guys have sex every day," he asked.

"We call it 'making love,' and we usually do," Tim said.

He smiled a little.

"For you it really is making love, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Do you mind talking about this," he asked.

"No. Not at all," Tim said. "What Kevin and Rick mean when they say we're not to talk in public about what we do in private is we're just not supposed to talk about it in front of them, or other grown-ups. We can talk to you about anything we want to."

"I missed you guys when you were gone," he said.

"We missed you, too, Bubba," I said.

I didn't remember even thinking about him more than once or twice the whole trip, but you can't tell somebody that. I try my best to be a man of honor and not to lie, but sometimes not lying is worse.

Just then there was a knock on the door.

"Who is it," I asked.

"It's us. Open up."

It was Justin and Brian.

I got up and opened the door, and they came in.

"Oh, I see we're already down to the nit-eye grit-eye," Justin said.

Justin took my dick in his hand.

"Now, what's this thing for again?"

We all laughed.

"If yours was big enough to see, you'd know," I said.

"That was lame, Kyle. I gave you credit for a better come-back than that," Jus said.

"Very funny. Why are you holding my penis," I asked.

"Is this really a penis?"

"We're trying too hard. It's not working," I said.

"I heard you say that to Tim the other night."

That really did make us laugh.

"Okay, you got me last. Now give me my dick back," I said.

He threw his arm around my neck and hugged me hard. He was laughing.

"Did you bring along any liquid refreshment," Jus asked.

"Maybe I did," I said.

"Well, get it out, Stud. I've got road dust in my throat."

"Go get some ice. And get a few cokes, too, while you're at it," I said.

"I'm on it, Bubba. Come with me, Brian," Jus said.

"Get some snacks, too," Tim said. "Have you got enough ones?"

Justin pulled out his wallet to check his money.

"I've got three ones," he said.

"Here are five more," Tim said. "Kyle, you got any ones?"

"Look in my wallet. I don't know," I said.

Tim pulled five more ones out of my wallet and gave them to Jus.

"I've got three," Alex said, handing Jus the money.

"I've got a couple," Brian said, and he gave Justin his money, too.

"I'm leaving town," Jus said, and we laughed.

Then he and Brian went after provisions.

"Kyle, how could you let him touch you like that," Alex asked.

"We were just playing, Lex. He didn't mean anything by that," I said.

"Oh, I know that. But, I mean, if another guy touched my dick like that, I'd probably come in his hand."

Tim and I laughed.

"It's not funny. It's the truth," Alex said.

Tim and I laughed some more.

"We know," Tim said. "Sometimes it does that to us, too."

"Just thinking about that is getting me going," Alex said.

"That's okay. That just means you ain't dead yet," I said.

He laughed.

"Kyle, considering why we're here, man, . . .," Tim said.

"Oh, Babe. You know I didn't mean anything by that." I felt like shit.

"I don't know, Kyle. Sometimes you say stuff . . ."

"Like what," I asked. I was getting a little upset that he thought I was that insensitive.

He didn't say anything.

"Come on, Timmy. Like what? Tell me, Babe."

"Like 'got you last.'"

I laughed big, and so did Alex.

"You fucker! I ought to bite your dick off," I said.

I jumped on Tim and pinned him to the bed, with his arms above his head. He was laughing too hard to put up much resistance, and I went down like I was really going to get him. That only made him laugh harder. I came back up and got some of the hair under his arm in my mouth, and I pulled it.

"Owww," he said, still laughing hard.

"Open up," Jus said from the hall.

Alex got up to open the door.

"Y'all are making too damn much noise in here," Justin said. "I could hear you halfway down the hall."

"He needed his dick bit off," I said.

"Don't you hate it when you have to do that?"

We all laughed.

"Yeah, like either one of you two could live for a week if Tim and I got our dicks bitten off," Brian said.

"Did you hear what you just said? Don't cross that line, Brian. I'm warning you. You're mighty close right now," Jus said.

Brian and Tim busted up laughing.

"You guys are something else," Alex said. "Am I ever going to have somebody I can be as free with as you four guys are?"

Nobody said anything 'cause we didn't know.

I dug around in my suitcase for The Bottle. It was the same one we had taken on our camping trip to the island at the beginning of the summer and the same one we had taken to Boston. It was still about two thirds full.

"Who wants a drink," I asked.

I knew Justin and I did, and I knew Tim and Brian didn't. Alex was a wild card. Turned out, though, he wanted one, too. I poured a healthy slug in three glasses, and then I added some coke.

"Damn! That's strong, Kyle," Jus said, after he had tasted his.

"You always say that, but I never yet saw you not drink one down," I said.

"I didn't say it was bad. I said it was strong."

We laughed.

"Let's call the bell desk and see if that hot-looking bellhop wants a drink," Brian said.

"We can tell him we need some ashes hauled or some woodies chopped," I said.

They laughed. We broke out the snacks. It hadn't been two hours since we ate, but we all went after those snacks.

After a little while, Justin and Brian got naked, too. Alex still had his clothes on, but he joined in, too. Then Justin lit up a smoke.

"Gimme one," I said.

He tossed me his pack and his lighter.

"Can I have one," Alex asked.

I handed them to him. I hadn't seen him smoking, but he probably hadn't seen me smoking, either.

We were all quiet for a few moments.

"Do you guys think the bellhop's gay," Brian asked.

"How would I know," Justin said. "What's the matter with you? You getting roaming eyes or something?"

"I was just thinking we might be able to fix Alex up with him," Bri said.

"He's a cute guy, all right," Justin said.

(Alex's Perspective)

Justin and Brian got in bed with me, and the three of us covered up. We were propped up on pillows watching some lame movie on HBO. It was just a standard-size bed, and Justin, who was in the middle, had his leg and the side of his body touching me. I tried to move over so we wouldn't touch, but I was afraid I would fall out if I moved too far.

The natural heat of Justin's body started getting to me in just a few minutes. His legs weren't very hairy, but he did have some hair. I thought I could feel every strand of it grazing my skin. In no time, I developed a serious erection, and, as usual, I started oozing pre-cum. Jus was obviously watching the movie, and he and Kyle made numerous wisecracks about the actors. That was in no way a sexual situation for any of them, but it was for me.

I was in a quandary. I couldn't get up to put on my clothes and sit in a chair because I didn't want them to see that I was aroused. I certainly couldn't ask Jus and Bri to get out of my bed without appearing foolish. I honestly didn't know what to do.

"Who wants another drink," Kyle asked.

He got up to make himself one, and he made a second one for Justin and me. When he turned to deliver the drinks to Justin and me, I saw that Kyle had a full erection.

I fully expected Justin or Brian to say something about it, but neither of them said a word. Maybe

they won't rag me, either, I thought. I decided to take a chance.

I sat on the side of the bed and pulled up my briefs and shorts, in one continuous motion. I walked over to the bathroom, closed the door, and put on the light and the fan. I splashed cold water on my face. The ice bucket was in there on the counter next to the sink, and put a small piece in each of my armpits. In a few seconds, that had the desired effect, and it calmed me down below the belt.

Phew! I thought.

I went back into the bedroom and sat in the one chair that was next to the desk. I moved the chair a little so I could see the TV set better, and I relaxed.

Kyle lit a cigarette, and he tossed the pack to me. I took one and tossed it to Justin.

"I'll buy you a pack tomorrow," I said to Jus.

"That's all right," he said. "Kyle keeps me supplied."

"Are you going to be needing them," Kyle asked, as he handed me my drink. "I honestly didn't know you smoked, Lex."

"Well, I had quit," I said. "Every now and then I get a craving for one, though. But, yeah, get me some."

They all laughed at me.

"Kyle, I haven't seen you smoke two cigarettes in the same day in forever," Tim said.

"I know," he replied.

We finished watching the movie, and Kyle got up again to make a third drink for each of us. His penis was completely flaccid, and I knew he hadn't jerked off or anything.

"Are you in the market for a boyfriend," Brian asked.

"Well, sure," I said. Then I giggled and blushed.

"What you blushing for," Jus asked.

"I've never admitted that before," I said.

"Every gay man wants a boyfriend, or at least a fuck-buddy," Jus said. "Don't blush about that, Bubba."

"He's not gay, Jus. He's bi. Aren't you, Lex?"

"You know, Tim, that's what I thought at first, but I'm pretty sure now I'm gay," I said.

"Well, it hardly matters," Jus said.

"Do you guys think about being gay very much," I asked.

"Not really," Jus said. "Do you, Little Buddy?"

"Not very often," Brian said.

"I don't either," Kyle said. "Just when I get horny."

We laughed.

"How about you, Tim," I asked.

He shook his head "no."

"Let me clarify that," Kyle said. "Being gay has pretty much shaped the way I lead my life, but I don't really dwell on it. I mean, when I think about sex, I think about me and Tim, and I think about sex a good bit."

We laughed.

"Do you think about Tim every single time you jerk off," I asked.

"I pretty much don't jerk off by myself anymore," Kyle said.

"Really?!" That surprised the hell out of me. I thought everybody jerked off.

"Really."

"Me, either," the rest of them said, more or less together.

"Tim, would you consider Kyle being unfaithful to you if he jerked off? I'm not trying to pry. I really just want information," I said.

All four of them said "no" simultaneously.

"If he did it a lot, like every day, or something, that would bother me very much," Tim said, "but not because I would think he was being unfaithful. It would bother me that I wasn't giving him what he needs."

"That's the way I feel, too," Justin said. "I won't lie and say I never do it, but it's pretty rare. For instance, I don't remember the last specific time I did it."

"Kyle, did you do it when Tim was in Maine and you were still at home," I asked.

"I can answer that," Justin said. "He didn't, that's why he was so damn eager to get the two of them into that hotel room in Boston when we first got there."

We all laughed.

"You really didn't, Babe," Tim asked.

"No, I really didn't. Did you?"

"No," Tim said.

"See? If you didn't, why would you think I did," Kyle asked.

"That makes me proud of you, Babe," Tim said.

Kyle smiled his sweet smile at Tim.

"Guys, I'm about ready for some sleep," Kyle said.

"Damn, it's after midnight already," Jus said. "Come on. Let's go," he said to Brian.

They slipped on their shorts, but they carried the rest of their clothes. They told us good night and left.

"Kyle and Tim," I said, after we were all in bed and the lights were off. "I really want to thank you for tonight. I feel like I'm a grown-up or something."

"You're welcome, Lex. Kyle's already asleep, but I know he would say the same thing," Tim said.

"He went to sleep that fast?"

"Yep. Every night," Tim said. "Once the room lights go out, his lights go out, too."

"That's pretty amazing. Is our talking going to wake him up?"

"I doubt it. He's a very heavy sleeper," Tim said.

"Well, good night, Bubba," I said, and he told me good night, too.

(Seth's Perspective)

Like all the others, I was really sorry that Rick's grandfather passed away. He was old, though, and nobody lives forever. Still, I felt bad for Rick.

Cody went with us to the funeral, which I thought was pretty damn nice of him. It's one thing to miss work for a fun trip, but it's something else again to miss it for a funeral. Don't get me wrong, we had a pretty good time, but it definitely wasn't a vacation. Kyle had wanted to organize a fishing trip like they had gone on at Christmas, but we couldn't get a reservation on a boat. Plus, I wasn't sure that was a good thing to do on that trip.

Cody and I had a room to ourselves. I had wondered how the sleeping arrangements would work out, and I was glad when Kyle told us what the arrangements were.

"Kiss me," he said, when I got into bed. He was only about two seconds ahead of me.

We kissed. Cody was a very gentle person, and that was how he made love, too. Not that I had anything to compare him with, but he seemed gentle in bed. It took very little for us to arouse each other, and that first kiss usually did it. It did that night, too.

After we made love, we held each other. He gently rubbed my skin, and that was nice.

"Tell me again when you have to leave," he said.

He had asked me that a dozen times or more. I hoped it was because he didn't want me to go, and I think that was the reason.

"August 1st," I said. "That's not going to change."

"When does school start for you?" More old ground.

"August 24th. Same as you," I said.

"God, I wish you could stay until then," he said.

"That's sweet of you, Cody, but you know I can't. They're leaving for Montana August 2nd, and that's also the day my parents are coming home from England."

"I know. It's just that this has been the best summer of my life because of you, and I don't want it to end," he said.

That was sweet, and very typical of Cody. I was a little nervous about the next thing I said, though. It was something I had wanted to bring up many times before, but I couldn't force myself to do it.

"What's going to happen to us when I leave," I asked.

"Nothing. Why would something happen to us?"

"I mean our relationship," I said.

"What about it?"

"Cody, Baby, please try to help me out here," I said.

He chuckled.

"You want some more of this," he asked, touching my penis.

"Maybe later. Right now I want to talk," I said.

"We are talking," he said.

"Be serious," I said.

"Okay. It's just that I don't want to think about what you're talking about," he said.

"I know, Baby, but we have to. Here's what I think, okay? I think that this summer has also been the best one of my life by such a degree that the other summers didn't even exist compared to this one. Getting to know you has been the best thing that ever happened to me, and I'll never forget you," I said.

"But you want us to break up, don't you?"

"Don't say it like that, okay? No, I don't want us to break up. But you know, we'll be three states apart. If we see each other at all next year, it'll only be once or twice, and then for short times," I said. "I want you to be free to meet people and to date."

"We're not in love, are we," he said, like maybe he just realized that for the first time.

"No, we're not. I love you with all my heart, and I think you love me, too, but we're not really in love, like, say, Kyle and Tim are. You'll be in college, and you'll be meeting new people there and at work. It wouldn't be fair for you to think I was the only person you could kiss or have sex with," I said.

"You're my only sex partner ever," he said.

"Stop changing the subject. I know that, just like you know that you're my only one. But it's not about sex, really. It's about relationships."

"I think you and I have a great relationship," he said.

I was frustrated, but I knew why he was acting like that. As a matter of fact, I loved it that he was acting like that. I mean, it was the best compliment he could give me.

"I'm sorry. I'm acting like a kid, and it's time for an adult discussion. I know that what you're saying is right, and I just don't want to face it. I'll behave," he said.

"Baby, the way you've been acting is about the best thing you could give me, and don't think I

don't appreciate it. But I know I'm right. I'll be back to visit, so we'll stay friends. But that's what it's going to have to be. Friends. Not boyfriends."

"I know, but that's two weeks from now."

He leaned in to kiss me, and I wished it were possible to delete everything we had just talked about.

"Let me make love to you. This is for you, my gift to you for being so wonderful."

The second time was truly the charm that night. He did things to me that made my body feel better than it had ever felt before. I had no way to know how Cody compared as a lover, say to Kyle or Justin or one of them, but if they were better than Cody was that night, I don't think I could have stood it. Not only did he make my very skin sing for joy, but he also got so aroused doing it that he had a spontaneous orgasm without even touching himself. It was amazing.

(Kevin's Perspective)

I was nervous about entertaining my father-in-law and his partner. I mean I knew I had the best hospitality crew in north Florida, and I knew the boys would go out of their way to make them feel welcome. But it was still a big deal.

"What time do you think they'll get here," Kyle asked Rick the Saturday morning of their arrival.

"I don't know for sure," Rick had said. "Not until this afternoon, though."

"Dinner's a wrap," Kyle said.

Rick grinned at him.

"Are we having something good," Rick asked.

"No. We're having shit. It's going to be awful," Kyle said.

"If you hadn't said that, I would have sent your ass home," Rick said.

"I know," Kyle said.

The two of them laughed delightedly at their psychic communion with one another.

"I need to do some shopping," Kyle said.

"Well, of course you do," Jeff said. "Kyle, I've never known, or even known of, another seventeen-year-old boy who knew the grocery store as well as he knew his own bedroom."

"Oh, yeah? I don't see you turning up your nose at what I cook," he said.

"Come here," Jeff said.

"No. What are you going to do to me?"

"Come here and find out."

Kyle was on the floor, and he scooted over to Jeff. Just as I suspected, Jeff hugged him. Jeff and Kyle were more like real brothers than anybody else in the family.

The phone rang, and Rick answered it.

"Where are you," he asked, after the greeting.

Pause.

"It's about eight hours, but it sounds like y'all have been on the road a while."

That could only be Andy.

Pause.

"That means you should probably get here around four. Don't forget, we're in Central Time here, not Eastern."

Pause.

"I know. Everybody always assumes that all of Florida is in Eastern, but this part is really in Central."

Pause.

"Well, we'll be ready for you, and we're all really looking forward to seeing you guys."

Pause.

"Bye. See you soon."

"Guess who that was," Rick asked, after he had hung up.

"Santa Claus," Justin asked.

We all laughed.

"Don't make me have to put you over my knee and spank you. You might be a legal adult, but you're still my son, you know."

I expected Justin to have some kind of funny come-back, but he didn't say anything. Instead he got big tears in his eyes.

"Don't ever stop saying that, you hear," Jus said.

"Saying what," Rick asked.

"That I'm still your son," he said.

Everybody was still.

"Come here, Stud," Rick said. "Get in here with us."

I moved down and Justin squeezed in between Rick and me.

"You'll always be our son, Bubba," Rick said.

Rick and I each put an arm around Jus, and we hugged him.

Nobody was prepared for that much emotion that early on a Saturday morning. Phew! Those kids had enormous needs, and they surfaced sometimes when we least expected them to.

"Who wants to go shopping," Kyle asked.

Trixie heard the word "go" and barked.

"Okay. You can go. Anybody else barking?"

We laughed.

"I'll go with you, Bubba," Justin said. "Let me go get dressed."

"I'm going like I am," Kyle said.

"Kyle!" Tim said in mock shock.

Kyle laughed, then he and Jus went upstairs to get dressed.

"What's up with Justin," Jeff asked.

"He felt a little insecure when he turned eighteen," Bri said. "For a little while, he thought you all might send him packing."

"Kyle told me that," I said. "In fact, Kyle said he thought the same thing. Then he realized it would never happen and convinced Jus of that."

"I knew that. That's why I said what I did," Rick said. "We see you big ole boys, and we think you're men. But you're not really, are you? You still need your daddies. That doesn't necessarily apply to you, Jeff."

"Oh, yes it does. Every bit as much as it applies to them," Jeff said.

Tyler smiled at Jeff, and I got the feeling that boy was very much in love with Mister Jeffrey Martin.

Kyle and Justin and Trixie left, and they were back in a couple of hours. The meal was going to be one of our classic poolside cookouts: steaks, stuffed baked potatoes, green salad, and corn on the cob that had been picked that morning. Kyle had bought two cakes and three pies for dessert. Hors d'oeuvres would be buffalo wings, a cheese tray with crackers, and raw vegetables with dip. He was also going to set out a couple of bowls of mixed nuts, some ripe Greek olives, and a bowl of pickled okra for Justin. As far as I knew, he was the only one who ever ate those nasty things.

Kyle was amazing in lots of ways, but, when it came to entertaining, he was a downright prodigy. Jeff had joked that morning about him knowing the grocery store better than he knew his own bedroom, and that wasn't very far from the truth.

* * *

The friends started rolling in around 1:30. We were expecting thirty for dinner, but I knew Kyle had bought for forty. He always did, and we were always glad he did. He had also bought lunch for that many, and that was a good thing, too.

We had all pitched in to set up tables in the clubhouse, arrange the tables on the patio, shuck the corn, set up the karaoke machine, get music CD's organized, post new scoring tablets for pool and ping pong, and otherwise do what had to be done. Kyle was busy in the kitchen for a little while, but, apart from cooking the steaks and corn, and heating up the potatoes that night, there wasn't really a lot to do. That was going to be a big party, and it was all organized and under control by noon.

"Thank you for doing all of this, Kyle," I said. He and I were in the kitchen, and he was getting the salad greens ready for later.

"It's no trouble, Kev. You know I love doing this kind of thing," he said.

"Yeah, I know, and you're very good at it."

He blushed a little. I actually made Kyle blush.

"I think it's in my blood or something. The rest helped out a lot, too."

"I know, but it's really you," I said.

"I know. Say it, Kevin."

"Say what," I asked. I really didn't know what he was talking about.

"Say, 'you'll always be our son,'" he said.

"You'll always be our son."

"Thanks, but I already knew that," he said, smiling like the devil he was just then.

I laughed.

"You're making fun of your brother, aren't you?"

"No, sir, I'm not," he said. "I knew it, but I also wanted to hear it. We all want to hear it, Kevin. We all know it, just like Justin knew it this morning, but it's so good to hear. For all the boys."

"Kyle, I think you're wise beyond your years, Bubba," I said.

"I ain't smart, Kevin. You know that."

I grabbed him by his chin, and I made him look me in the eyes.

"Look me in the eye and say that on your honor."

He pulled away from me and laughed.

"You know I can't say that on my honor," he said.

"So why say it at all," I asked.

"It's the culture, Kevin. If you asked my dad if he's smart, he'd say he's the dumbest son of a bitch on the beach. And I don't think I've ever met a smarter man than my daddy. Including you. No offense."

"You'll get no argument from me on that," I said.

"That boy who ran against me for SGA president. He's smart, and he knows it. And he makes sure everybody else knows it, too. There I was. Queer as a three dollar bill and everybody knew it. I was talking about tolerance for minorities, including queers. And surfers, of course. I got the overwhelming majority of votes. I billed myself as totally average, totally dumb. And that's what they wanted. And I knew that's what they wanted."

"Kyle, where is this life going to take you, son?"

"I don't know, but I do know that Tim and you and Rick are going to be right there with me."

"I think that's a pretty damn safe assumption," I said.
We both laughed.

Chapter 07

(Rick's Perspective)

I knew Kevin was worried about Andy and John visiting us. I wasn't worried in the least. I knew my boys would take care of them. I knew I had a family, and they didn't, and I knew my family was impressive.

I had made up my mind I was going to look upon Andy and John as a couple who were potential friends of ours. I wasn't going to let myself feel guilty for not loving Andy. If a friendship developed, so be it. If one didn't develop, so be that, too.

We had a yard full of boys and men when Andy and John got there. I expected them around four, so I started keeping an eye out for them when it got close to that time. I had skied earlier, and I still had my bathing suit on. I put on a tee shirt for when they got there. Kevin waited out front with me.

"Hi," I said, when they pulled up.

"Hi, Rick. Hi, Kevin," they both said. We shook hands.

"You'll be able to park closer to the house once all the company leaves," I said. "Let me get your luggage."

They popped the trunk. They each had one suitcase and they were sharing a bag for hang-up clothes. I took one suitcase and the other bag, and Kevin got the second suitcase.

"You don't have to take those, boys," Andy said.

"That's okay," I said. "Y'all are going to be on the third floor. I hope that's okay."

"That'll be fine," Andy said.

We took them in through the front door.

"Guys, this place is beautiful," Andy said.

"Yes, indeed," John agreed. "How long have you been here?"

"Since last fall, I guess," I said. "Do you remember the month, Babe?"

"November," Kevin said. "Don't you remember? We had Thanksgiving here."

"Right," I said.

"Is it big enough for everybody," Andy asked.

"Yeah. In fact, we bought it to fill it up. There are seven bedrooms and six bathrooms," I said. "And a couple of powder rooms, too. The two rooms on the third floor are still empty, though. That's because most of the boys double up with their boyfriends."

"Amazing," John said.

We got them settled in the guest room, and then we took them out to the patio and pool area. We started introducing everyone.

"If you're like me, you probably won't remember half the names," I said.

"I think this might be a case of you being like me in that regard," Andy said.

I chuckled.

"True."

It suddenly occurred to me that half of me was from him. I knew my mom probably knew the name of every kid in her school, and I couldn't remember names for shit. That was kind of a shock for me. That man really was my father, and even I knew I looked just like him. That he and I would have personality traits in common was a mind-blower.

They were pretty impressed with the clubhouse and all the facilities. While we were in there, Kyle came up to say hello.

"Hi, Grandpa," he said.

Andy's face looked like he had been stricken. I was enjoying watching the encounter.

"Hi, Kyle. It is Kyle, right?"

"Yes, sir. It's Kyle. Did I say the wrong thing when I called you grandpa?"

"Oh, no. That's fine. It's just that nobody has ever called me that before," Andy said. "You can call me Andy, too, though."

"He actually prefers to be called gramps," John said.

"You devil," Andy said to John.

They both laughed. It was pretty obvious to me at that moment that they were as much in love with one another as Kevin and I were.

"Would either of you like to water ski," Kyle asked. "We have a boat."

"I haven't water skied in years," Andy said.

"Neither have I," John affirmed. "Let's do it."

"Okay," Andy said.

"You have to wear a bathing suit to ski," Kyle said.

There hadn't been any naked guys around the pool when we passed through that area, so they probably didn't get the full significance of why Kyle had said that.

"Shucks," Andy said.

"It would probably be okay if they skied naked, don't you think, Rick," Kyle asked.

"Yeah, I guess so," I said. Kyle and I both knew what was going on.

"God in heaven! That's the last thing anybody wants to see! The two of us skiing naked," John said.

"It's not bad. I've done it," Kyle said.

"Yeah, and you look like you just stepped out of a Bowflex commercial, too. I think a suit will be just fine," Andy said.

"We all do usually swim naked," I said. "We were just pulling your leg about skiing naked, though. Although we do have some video on the family Web site of this guy and his brother skiing nude."

"You have a family Web site," John asked.

"Yeah. We'll make sure you're set up as users before you leave," I said. "That's a project that Jeff and Kyle have been working on. It's a lot of fun."

"It's a great way for all of our friends to keep up with us," Kyle said. "And it's really not hard to do."

"I'll bet," Andy said. "I can't wait to see it."

* * *

Kyle and Justin, unasked, made Andy and John their personal project. Every time I looked at them, one or other or both of the older guys were laughing. They convinced Andy and John to strip down to get in the pool after they skied, and I had to admit they both looked pretty good. Andy was twenty when I was born, which meant he was probably 46 or 47. I had a vague recollection that his birthday was in September, so he was probably still 46. They were both trim, and it appeared that they were fairly well toned.

"That's what you're going to look like in twenty years," Kevin said.

"That wouldn't be too bad, would it," I asked.

"No, not at all. They're both in decent shape, it seems. They could use a tan, though," he said.

"Yeah, I know."

"I see where this thing came from, too," he said, pulling on my dick.

I grinned.

"The old fellow's got him one, doesn't he?"

"Ask him if it still works. Tell him I want to know because I have a vested interest in the family genes," Kevin said.

"Okay. I'll get Kyle or Justin to ask him."

"Knowing them, they'd probably do it, too," he said.

"Oh, I feel sure they would," I replied.

We both laughed.

* * *

The pool party broke up fairly early, and everything was picked up and we were all in the den by ten o'clock. That's when the family party began. The kids were still outside getting everything squared away, and it was just Andy, John, Kevin, and I inside.

"Andy and John, what's going to happen now is what we call 'Family Time.' All the friends are gone, and it's just the immediate family, plus boyfriends. Family Time is some of the very best time for us," I said.

"Rick and Kevin, your boys are incredible," Andy said. "I've never really been around teenagers and young adults since I was a kid myself, and I was always sort of afraid of them, I think. Tonight was a real eye-opener for me."

"Me, too," John said. "You read all this stuff about gay teens, and teens in general, being all screwed up, but these boys are just so . . . What's the word I'm looking for, Babe?"

"Normal?"

"Exactly. They're just so normal and easy to be around," he said.

"Well, they all have their stories, that's for sure," Kevin said. "But you're right, John. They are pretty normal and reasonably well-adjusted kids."

"That Kyle kid is incredible," Andy said. "There will be no stopping him in the future."

"I know. His father is Gene Goodson. You met him in Sarasota. Gene is our boss, and he owns what we think of as the Goodson Empire. Kyle will inherit every bit of that. His brother passed away last October, and he's the only one left. He's totally down to earth, though, isn't he," I said.

"I'll say," Andy said.

The boys poured into the back door just then, and they came into the den. It was Tim, Justin, Brian, Jeff, Tyler, Seth, Cody, and Alex.

"Where's Kyle," I asked.

"He's making treats," Tim said. "He'll be here in a minute."

In a couple of minutes, Kyle stuck his head into the den and whistled. He made a hand signal that meant "come on," and Tim, Justin, and Brian got up to go see what he wanted. They came back in a minute or two loaded down. There was a tray with the treats: Tick Supreme, Popcorn Candy, and Chicken Nuts. There was a small cooler of beer, encased in ice. There was a second small cooler of soft drinks, also in ice. And there was a tray with glasses and various bottles of liquor and liqueurs. Kyle was showing off, and I loved him for doing it.

"Wow! This is impressive," Andy said.

"Thanks," Kyle said.

The boys made their own drinks, but Kyle took care of the four grown-ups. Then he finally sat down.

"Damn, Kyle, you tire me out just watching you," Justin said.

"Don't look, then," Kyle said. "I don't like the way you look at me, anyway. You visually rape me."

Tim and Brian laughed out loud.

"What's that about," Kevin asked.

"We were in a gay coffee shop in Boston, and Jus said he thought there were homosexuals in there and they were visually raping him," Tim said.

"Don't look at me like that, Kevin," Justin said, threateningly.

"You shit," Kevin said. He threw a handful of Tick Supreme at Justin, and Trixie got more of it than Justin did.

Everybody laughed.

We talked about a million things that night, and the boys were as funny as they had ever been. Andy and John laughed their asses off, and the rest of us did, too.

They had had a long, hard day, driving from Sarasota and then the party and all. They were the first to say good night and go to bed.

"If there was ever any doubt, I think it all got cleared up tonight," I said.

"Doubt about what," Tim asked.

"About whether Kevin and I have the best kids in the world," I said.

"Oh, that," Jeff said.

We all laughed.

(Andy's Perspective)

"You're thinking about those kids, aren't you," John said.

We had been in bed for more than five minutes, and neither of us had said a word at that point. He knew me better than I knew myself, sometimes, and he was right on target.

"They're pretty incredible, aren't they. I get the feeling that Tim, Kyle, Justin, Brian, and Jeff are the main ones. The first echelon, so to speak. Seth is really just a houseguest for the summer, and Alex is a relative newcomer."

"Very good," John said. "You got them all right. Do you know the boyfriends, too?"

"I think it's Jeff and Tyler, and Seth and Cody," I said.

"There are more than that," he said.

"Well, of course. Tim and Kyle, and Justin and Brian."

"Very good. For you," he said.

We both chuckled. That was an old line, and we used it on one another endlessly.

"That Kyle and that Justin are really hot, too, don't you think?"

"Stop it! Those are my grandsons you're talking about," I said.

"Oh, so you're willing to be an old grandpa now, are you?"

I laughed.

"They didn't get this thing just a little wet and sticky," he asked, touching my penis.

"No, and they didn't get yours wet and sticky, either, now did they," I said.

Then it was his turn to laugh.

"You know me too well, Andy."

"They're beautiful boys, though, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are. When I think of those queens at Bourbon Street back home, it's like they're working from two different definitions of what being gay means," he said.

"Don't make fun of the San Diego boys. I'm sure there are gay boys like these there, too. We just don't happen to know any," I said.

"I'm sure you're right," he said. "Somehow, I just can't picture Kyle or Justin in eye shadow."
I laughed hard.

"Rick, yes, but not them."

I gave him a swift elbow to his side, and he grabbed me hard. We were both laughing at our antics.

"Shut up so we can go to sleep," I said.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too. Good night."

(Kyle's Perspective)

I was up early Sunday morning. I didn't know what it was, but I think I needed less sleep than a lot of people. If there was something to get done, I had to get up and do it. Andy and John were in the house, and I wanted to make sure that Sunday breakfast was big and good.

We were going to have scrambled eggs, of course, and they were going to be whole eggs, not that watered-down egg-white crap that Rick always wanted. I counted up thirteen in the house for that morning, so I was going to use four dozen eggs.

I had found some frozen biscuits. I'm not talking about frozen biscuits in a can. I'm talking real biscuits that somebody had rolled out and cut out. I baked up one of those bad boys to see what they were going to be like, and it was just as light and fluffy and golden brown as any biscuit I had ever seen. I was excited about them. There would have to be some sausage gravy with those.

There would also have to be some red-eye gravy, to go on the ham and the grits. I knew Justin would love that. I had found some really nice country ham to use to make the red-eye gravy, so the meal was shaping up. I had bought a nice tray of melon and other fresh fruit to add to the mix. I got some real thick bacon, too, that I cooked in the microwave and would warm up on the stove when it was close to time to eat.

I was satisfied I had a good menu. Three meats, two gravies, eggs, grits, fruit, and biscuits. I had a couple of frozen coffee cakes that needed to be baked, too, and that was going to be breakfast. We'd have juice, milk, water, and coffee, too. That was about right, I thought.

I had everything squared away in the kitchen, and I looked at my watch. It was still only 6:30. I had already been up an hour and a half, and I had been busy the whole time. Trixie woke up about then, and I let her out.

I decided to go ahead and set the table. That was pretty easy, except that the dining room table was really meant for twelve, not thirteen. They only had twelve chairs. I had to improvise, so I got a folding chair from the clubhouse and wedged it in. I'd use that one. I wished I had some fresh flowers, but I hadn't thought to get any. I did the horse statue thing again, like we had done for Tim's party. When I was finished, I was satisfied the table looked good.

I finally sat down in the den with a cup of coffee at seven o'clock. I wasn't there long enough to even get sleepy when Rick came in.

"Hey. What are you doing up so early," he asked me.

"Sitting here jerking off," I said.

"I guess the others made all that breakfast shit that's out there," he said.

"No, Trixie did."

He laughed.

"You know you don't have to do all that you do, don't you, Bubba?"

"I can't have fun in this house? Is that what you're saying?"

He laughed.

"Kyle, promise me one thing, okay?"

"What?"

"Promise me you'll never take a job in a restaurant," he said.

"Why not? Don't we have restaurants," I asked.

"Yeah, but you're in the hotel business, Bubba. You're going to love that even more. I'm just afraid that if you get hung up on restaurants you won't ever want to discover how much fun hotel work is," he said.

"Do you miss the hotel business," I asked.

It had just occurred to me that my dad had more or less railroaded Kevin into the hotel side of the business and Rick into the gift shop side.

"No. I really love the gift shop business. Really," he said. "Besides, I did the golf courses, remember? I've never actually worked in a hotel."

Tim came stumbling in just about then. He kissed me good morning.

"Get me some coffee," he said.

"Okay," I said.

"You are so whipped, Kyle," Rick said. He grinned at me.

I got coffee for Tim, and the three of us sat there drinking it. In about two minutes Kevin came in, kissed Rick, and said,

"Get me some coffee."

Rick was out of his seat like a shot. I started laughing.

"Shut the fuck up, Kyle," Rick said, and he and I laughed hard.

* * *

That was a slow morning, like it always is after a party. The family was all in just their briefs, but Andy and John were dressed for the day. I guess nobody had told them the family tradition. I got coffee for both of them. I had picked up a few little doughnuts and sweet rolls, so I brought those out. They thought that was breakfast.

"You guys are feeding us too well," John said.

"This ain't breakfast. This is just a snack," I said. "We're going to eat breakfast--brunch, really--at 11:30. Jeff and Tyler should be down by then."

"You're kidding, right," Andy said.

"No, sir, I'm not," I said.

That's about when Jeff and Tyler drifted down.

We had a typical Sunday morning. Brian showed off the tricks he had taught Trixie, and they were pretty awesome. She could do a back flip, and that was something pretty spectacular for a dog her size. Some read the two newspapers we got on Sunday, the local one and the New York Times.

Seth was a crossword puzzle nut, but he did it all out loud so everybody could participate. We tried to make every word in the puzzle as dirty as we could, whether they fit the spaces or not. The big stumper that day was a nine-letter word for urination, starting with an M.

"Masturbate," Justin said.

"Do you know what 'urination' means," Brian asked.

"Pissin', right?"

"He masturbates as much as everybody else pisses," I said. "At least he got the body part right."

"Fuck you," he said.

"You keep promising, but . . . "

He threw a pillow at my head, and I let it bounce off me.

Andy and John were laughing their asses off, but I noticed they didn't know the right word, either.

"Matriculate," Jeff said.

Andy and John thought that was the funniest damn thing they had ever heard.

"Mac-you-ate," Brian said.

"Mackuate? That don't make sense, Little Buddy," Justin said.

"Sure it does. You eat a Big Mac, drink a super-sized coke. You gotta piss," Brian said.

Everybody laughed.

"How about 'mygodrelief,'" Andy said.

"I've been there a few times," Rick said, and we laughed.

"We've all been there," Kevin said.

"Look up the answer, Seth," Jeff said. He and Tyler had gotten down earlier than usual.

Seth flipped to the page with the answers.

"The answer is 'micturate,'" Seth said.

"I've never heard that word before," Justin said.

"Neither have I," Kevin said.

I figured if Kevin hadn't heard it, nobody had.

"Look it up, Kev," Rick said.

Kevin got the dictionary from the bookcase in the room. He looked the word up.

"One definition, and one definition only: urinate," he said.

"I knew that," I said.

"You dumb shit. You didn't know that," Rick said.

"But you knew I was going to say it, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Rick said.

"Andy and John, welcome to the Psychic Friends Network," Jeff said. "These are the two psychic friends."

About a quarter to eleven, I got up to go into the kitchen. The breakfast was about 75% made, but I still had some things to do. I was in there a few minutes when Rick came in.

"You need any help," he asked.

The stove was a commercial one, and there were eight burners and two regular ovens. There was also a big griddle area. That's where I was going to heat up the bacon. I had a pan of sausage going and a pan of ham. The grits were in the oven, along with the biscuits.

"Put the fruit out, please, and some jelly and butter, too," I said. "Make sure there's salt and pepper on the table, and we're going to need cream and sugar, too."

"What did you do? Memorize a list?"

I laughed.

"If you do what you're told, I'll teach you how to make red-eye," I said.

I had everything ready and on the table by the stroke of 11:30. We had all put on shorts and tee shirts to eat, although we didn't usually do that.

Rick said the blessing:

"Dear God, you gathered us at this table from all around the country, each one different, yet each one fundamentally the same; each one gay, yet each one made in your image and likeness. Bless our unity among diversity, and bless these gifts which we are about to receive from your bounty, through Christ, our Lord . . ."

"Amen," the group said together.

"Before we eat, I'd like to say our official welcome to Andy and John. You are welcome at our table and in our family," Rick said.

We all clapped, and Andy got a little misty-eyed, it seemed.

Everybody enjoyed the breakfast, or seemed to. Justin ate four biscuits with sausage gravy and a ton of grits with red-eye gravy. The California visitors tasted both, but I could tell they weren't used to eating stuff like that. I was satisfied that everybody got a good meal.

* * *

It didn't take people long to get to the house that afternoon, and we pretty much did what we always did. My dad and Doc came by to say hello to Andy and John. They ended up getting into a bridge game that lasted a good three hours.

I ran the ski boat for most of the afternoon. At one point, while we were taking a break from skiing, that family of dolphins that had been coming to the lagoon off and on all summer paid us a visit. I was in the clubhouse trying to cool off a little when Brian came in with the news.

"The dolphins are here," he said.

"I'd like to see that," Andy said. "We have sea lions in San Diego. People actually get into the water with them."

"We swim with our dolphins," Bri said. "Do you want to?"

"Is it safe," Doc asked.

"We've been doing it all summer, Dad," Tim said.

"It's safe," Rick said. "Just don't jump on them and try to ride them. They have tender skin, and that can hurt them."

We all went down to the dock. I got a boatload of people ready to go, and Jus, Jeff, Tyler, and I paddled out to where they were.

"The most fun is to swim with them naked," I said. "That's what we do."

Trixie was the first one in, and one of the kid dolphins came up to tell her hello. They sniffed at each other, but it really looked like they were kissing.

"Get a picture," Bri said.

I had already snapped several, but I got some more. He was sure crazy about that dog. I mean, we all loved her, but she and Brian were special friends.

We played with the dolphins for about an hour, which was all the time they ever hung around us, and then we went back inside. I was tired, so I went up to our room to take a little nap. Before I laid down, though, I checked my email. I had written one to Chris, and I thought maybe he'd have one back to me. He didn't, but I had one from Chip.

"Dear Kyle,

"Man, I miss you and all the other guys in Emerald Beach. I've been here at boys' church camp for two weeks, and I hate it. This is supposed to be a Christian group, but some of these guys here are some mean sons of bitches, let me tell you.

"We have to take showers in a gang shower. Well, you know I don't have a problem with that with you guys, but I hate having to do it here. You know I'm a slow developer, and I can't do anything about that. Nobody at your house has ever said a word to me about that, and I know everybody has seen it. Well, they started making fun of me the very first day, and they've kept it up. I'm the type who gets pretty emotional when I get mad, and I cried one day when this big prick (not that kind of prick; the obnoxious kind) was picking on me. He said he didn't believe I could get hard, so this other asshole grabbed me from behind

and his friend started rubbing me. Well, guess what? I got hard. That's happened to me a few times at your pool, and everybody just ignored it. Not here. They started calling me fag and homo, and said they knew I wanted it up my butt. That made me really mad, and that's when I started crying.

"I told them I was going to tell the camp director what they had done, and they said they'd fuck me in the ass that night, if I did. They said they knew I wanted it.

"Kyle, I was so embarrassed and ashamed I didn't know what to do. That's not the worst part, though. Nobody would sit at the table with me that night to eat. We happened to have hotdogs for dinner, and about half the guys in the place came by and dropped a hotdog on my plate. I don't know where the damn counselor was, but the one who usually eats with us must have been in the counselors' dining room with the others. Everybody in the place started chanting "Ho-mo! Ho-mo!" Two guys picked me up and started parading around with me above their heads, and everybody was still chanting "Ho-mo! Ho-mo!" I wanted to die.

"They still won't sit at my table, and everybody leaves the shower room when I come in. They don't talk to me except to call me names, and everybody gets off the path when I pass by, like I had some bad disease, or something. I hate it here, and I want to go home. I tried to call my parents twice earlier today, but they didn't answer. I left a message, but it's very hard for them to call me because of the way the camp is set up.

"I know you can't do anything about it, but I just feel better telling somebody what's been going on. Say hello to everybody for me. I don't care if you let them read this because I want my friends to know.

*"Your friend,
"Chip"*

Oh, yes, there is something I can do about it, I thought.

I printed that letter right away. I was so mad I couldn't have taken a nap if they had given me a drug to make me sleep, and I didn't want that cute little kid to have to spend another minute in that fucking hell hole. I didn't know where the camp was; otherwise, I'd have gotten Tim, Justin, and Brian to go with me to get him. What I decided to do instead was to show the letter to Kevin and Rick.

Rick and Kevin were sitting on the patio talking to Andy and John when I went outside.

"I need to talk to you right now," I said when I walked up.

I must have had worry on my face or something.

"What's wrong," Kevin asked.

I could tell he and Rick knew something was up. I don't frown very often, but, when I do, they know to take it serious.

"I want to show you something," I said.

"We'll give you guys some privacy," Andy said, and he and John moved away from us. I appreciated that.

"Read this. I just got it," I said.

Kevin read the letter, and he got a pained look on his face. Then he gave it to Rick to read, and I could tell he was getting madder by the minute.

Kevin picked up his cell from the table right in front of him and punched a speed button. He listened for a while, but there must not have been an answer.

"They're still not home," he said.

"Who? Jack? Try the hotel. He might be MOD today. He does that on weekends sometimes," Rick said.

Kevin hit another speed button.

"Hello, this is Kevin Foley. Is Mr. Rooney there, by chance?"

Pause.

"Let me speak to him."

Pause.

"Jack, this is Kevin Foley. I need you to come over to our house. Can you drop everything and get right over here?"

Pause.

"Nobody's hurt, but I think it's something you'll want to know about right away."

Pause.

"Okay. See you in ten."

"Jack's coming over," Kev said. "I have a feeling Chip won't spend another night among the Christians."

Rick and I both laughed a little.

"I can't believe that shit," Rick said. "I mean, I definitely can believe it. I just hate it."

"I'm going with Mr. Rooney," I said.

"No, you're not, unless he asks you to go," Rick said. "You did the right thing by showing that to us, but you don't need to be butting in to their business, Bubba."

"I'm going to find out where that fucking camp is and . . ."

"And what, Kyle? Burn it down? Punish the pricks by being the biggest prick of them all? I know Chip is your friend, Kyle. He's a friend of all of us, but you've already done the best thing you could have done, Son. Let Mr. Rooney handle it," Rick said.

I didn't say anything. I had seen Tim watching what was going on, and he came over to me. He put his arm around me.

"Is everything okay, Babe," he asked gently.

"No. Read this," I said, handing him the letter.

Tim read the letter and just looked at the three of us. He had big tears in his eyes.

"I know," I said.

Mr. Rooney got there just then.

"Jack, Kyle got this email from Chip this afternoon. We thought you should see it," Kevin said.

Mr. Rooney read the letter, and tears started rolling down his cheeks.

"I've got to go get him," he said. "I'm MOD right now, though."

"We'll cover that for you," Kevin said. "Bring him back here where his friends are and where people love him, Jack."

"I will. It's only about an hour away. I know he'll want to see you guys tonight, if that's all right," Mr. Rooney said. "My wife's in Memphis visiting her sister."

"He can spend the night, Mr. Rooney. In fact, you can both spend the night," I said.

"I'm sure he'll want to, but not for me, thanks, Kyle. Well, let me go."

"Do you want some company," I asked. Rick looked daggers through me when I said that.

"I think Chip and I need time to talk, Kyle, but thanks for the offer," Mr. Rooney said.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and there was a really nice sea breeze blowing. The sun was still way high in the sky, but the breeze cooled things off. Mr. Rooney had taken the letter, so I went upstairs and printed another copy so the others could see it.

"Get your brothers rounded up in the den," Kevin told me and Tim when I came back out.

"Kevin and Rick want us in the den right now," I told Justin and Brian.

"For what?"

"You'll see, Jus," I said.

Tim and I rounded them all up, and Rick asked Andy and John to come in with us, too, probably since they were staying there.

"Kyle got an email from Chip a little while ago, and it's pretty bad," Kevin said. "Mr. Rooney just left to get him from camp, and he's coming over here. Kyle, would you read it to us, please."

I read the letter out loud, and I got so fucking mad that Tim had to take over for me.

"Poor guy," Andy said when Tim had finished.

"Andy, this kid is as cute as they come. He's almost fifteen . . . "

"His birthday was last week," Brian said. "He was gone, and we were, too."

"Okay, he's fifteen. He has delayed puberty, and he's no bigger than a minute. We met him when he saved Rick's surfboard for him, but it turned out he's the son of the manager of the hotel where the guys work. He latched on to us, and he's fit right into the family," Kevin said.

"Is he gay," John asked.

"We don't really know, do we, guys," Rick said.

We all said "no."

"So what are we going to do when he gets here, guys," Kevin asked.

"I say we make him get naked, pick his ass up, and parade him around saying, 'He-ro! He-ro!'," Justin said.

"That's it! That's fucking it," I said, and he and I knocked fists.

"I feel kind of bad, though," Justin said.

"You should," Brian said.

"I know."

"What the hell did you do," I demanded.

"I called him Peanut 'cause his dick's no bigger than a peanut," Jus said.

"You called him that to his face," I said, almost yelling.

"Back off, Kyle. Not to his face. Gimme some credit, man. I said it to Brian and Alex. I'm sorry I said it, okay?"

"Kyle, the thing is, if we started calling him Peanut because his dick's no bigger than a peanut, he wouldn't mind because it was us doing it," Jeff said. "Do you remember the first afternoon we met Chris? We were all in the pool, just getting to know him, and Jus said he had never been around a disabled person before. Jus said he wanted Chris to know he might slip and say something offensive without realizing it. Chris said he could tell mean from not mean, and he already knew we would never be mean. I think it's the same thing with Chip. We can all start calling him Peanut, and even tell him why, and he won't care one damn bit. He knows we're his friends."

"I think maybe we should all have vegetable nicknames. I'm going to start calling Kyle Zucchini," Justin said.

"Oh, yeah, Cucumber," I asked.

We all laughed.

"You got to call me and Kevin Banana, 'cause we've got to be peeled," Tim said.

That made us laugh even more.

"Guys, I think we're getting a little carried away here," Rick said.

"Why is that, Peanut," Justin asked.

That was all it took. Andy and John weren't used to us yet, and they were laughing so hard I thought they would need oxygen. We kept it up a while longer, and we had a good time playing around with nicknames. Nobody said anything about Seth and Cody, who really did have little dicks, at least soft, not that they would have minded by that point in the summer.

By the time we got back outside, a good many people were gone. Monte and Terry were still there, as were Sam and Fred, and Chad and Gage. Philip and Ryan left a note to say they had a good time but that they had to go. Morgan, Blake, and Riley were gone, too, but I knew they had to go to another church service that night. My dad and Doc were gone. Jerry had to say the six o'clock Mass, so he, Pat, and Mike Lawley were gone, too. It was just us and our real good friends.

I knew everybody was getting hungry, so I stoked up the grills. I had thawed out some ground beef (chuck roast) the night before and had made hamburger patties that morning. They were good and thick, and my stomach growled when I saw them. I was going to serve hotdogs, too.

"You can't serve those tonight," Rick said, right after I had put the first hotdog on the grill.

"Shit, you're right," I said.

I snatched that thing up off the grill in a heartbeat. I flung it over my shoulder into the pool. Trixie barked once, and in she went. She got that thing and came up to us. She flung her head back and forth a few times to kill that snake for us. Little pieces of hotdog went everywhere.

"Eat," Brian said.

She cocked her head at him so cute, like she was waiting for a clarification.

"Eat it, girl," Brian said again.

She started wagging like crazy, and she was all over eating that hotdog. It was like the two-second weenie.

The food was ready when Mr. Rooney and Chip got there. Chip ran across the patio and jumped up on me, grabbing me around the neck with his arms and around the waist with his legs. He was crying hard, but I knew they were happy tears.

"Come on. Let's go," I shouted.

Justin and I got him on our shoulders, and then we lifted him up even higher. He didn't weigh more than a feather. He was laughing and giggling his ass off, even though he was crying at the same time. He knew he was home with his boys.

"He-ro! He-ro! He-ro!," we chanted.

Then Justin started up.

"Pea-nut! Pea-nut! Pea-nut!" we all said.

We finished it all off by throwing him in the pool and jumping in with him. Even Kevin and Rick, and Andy and John. Mr. Rooney was standing on the side, grinning. Justin went after him to throw him in, and they squared off, grinning at each other.

We calmed down, and we took off our wet clothes. We were all just as naked as the day we were born, and Chip was grinning so hard he could hardly make his mouth work to eat.

"Why'd you call me Peanut," Chip asked, after we were eating.

"Cause of this," Jus said. He grabbed Chip's dick. "This here's a peanut."

"I know," Chip said, "but here I don't care."

Chapter 08

(Andy's Perspective)

Sunday night my son and his sons and husband totally blew my mind. I had never been part of a

family like that, a community like that, really, and I guess I had never even imagined such a thing. Rick wasn't just a part of it. He and Kevin had created it, and they were its central focus. San Diego had a thriving gay community, and they were all about economic prosperity and civil rights. From what I saw that weekend, Emerald Beach also had a thriving gay community, but they were all about wholesome fun, acceptance, and love. John reminded me that my experience with the "gay community" was exclusively in the clubs and discos and places where gay men came together to party anonymously, and that just as he and I had created a secure and mutually supportive environment, many of our gay brothers in San Diego had as well.

Monday was a work day for the boys, and they all presented themselves at the breakfast table in uniform. All seven of them. Tyler and Cody were gone that morning, and it was just the core.

"I've got to interview some teachers this afternoon after work, so y'all don't wait for me to work out," Kyle said.

"Okay," Rick said.

"Jus and Brian are going to take me to look at cars after work," Alex said.

"Try to find something you can buy out right," Kyle said. "Financing a car sucks."

"He might want to get something that's going to last him, Kyle," Justin said. "It'll be more expensive."

"True. How much you got, Alex?"

"About six thousand," Alex said.

"That's a real good down payment, if nothing else," Kyle said. "In fact, you could get a real nice lease car. My car is a lease, and so is Jeff's. That's the only way my daddy gets cars."

"That's not a bad idea," Kevin said.

They kept up talk like that for the rest of breakfast. Rick and Kevin were in polo shirts and nice shorts, so I figured they were ready for the day. The kids left, and John and I showered and got dressed. Rick and Kevin were going to show us around Emerald Beach.

Our first stop was the Goodson Building where their offices were located. It was a six-story building right on the beach, and the view from their fifth-floor offices was absolutely spectacular. They introduced us as their "friends" from California, and I noticed several double-takes when people looked first at Rick and then at me.

After that happened a couple of times, Rick switched to introducing me as his father. I liked the sound of that a great deal, especially since I knew his status both at work and among his friends, but I could tell he wasn't totally comfortable with it.

They took us around to several of the larger hotels, and we saw all the boys, or most of them, at least, at one called the Laguna Hotel. It was quite nice, in the public areas, at least. I assumed the rooms were nice, too.

"How many are there," I asked.

"Four hotels and seven motels," Kevin said. "We won't go to all of them, but I just wanted you to get an idea of how big this business is. There are sixteen gift shops, too."

We drove up and down the beach, and it was quite heavily developed. You could see glimpses of the water between the high rise buildings, but there was very little open sand in the commercial area. Toward the western end we came to five or six stretches of "dedicated beach," meaning the ocean side couldn't be developed at all. In those spots, some of which went on for quite a way, you couldn't see the water either because the natural dunes were so high.

We went into "town," and it was quite a nice city. There were some beautiful old neighborhoods where the houses were built on large, nicely-landscaped lots. The ones near the water were the finest, of

course, but there were many nice ones on the streets north of the bay. Like any coastal town, there were bayous and inlets everywhere, so it was rather rare to find a straight street.

Downtown was quaint and quite busy, and it was evident there had been a downtown redevelopment project a few years before. We passed several beautiful parks, and, while they were obviously being used by the citizens, there was an air of peace and quiet about them. All things considered, Emerald Beach was a place where I thought I could be happy.

They took us to the airport so we could take care of our departure arrangements. They had a flight the next morning at ten that was perfect for us, and we booked seats on it.

That night I expected another big feed, not that John and I needed one. But that wasn't the case, at all.

"We more or less just snack at night," Rick said. "Of course, when you see the size of the snacks some of them eat, you'll wonder at the terminology."

It was a very relaxed, and relaxing, evening. We all had our snacks together in the den. Some of the boys ate bowls of cereal and a couple of pieces of fruit. A couple of them made themselves hotdogs and chili in the microwave. Kyle dug out some leftover hamburgers from the night before for whoever wanted them, and Rick and Kevin each had a salad.

"You want me to make you and John a salad," Kyle asked.

"That would be very nice, Kyle," I said.

"I'll put some crabmeat in it, if you want me to. I catch 'em, and sometimes we sit around picking them out while we watch TV. I've got about twenty pounds in the freezer."

My God! I thought. I had grown up in a coastal town, so I knew crabs were plentiful, especially if you had a boat and some traps, but twenty pounds of lump blue crab meat in San Diego would have been worth a king's ransom.

"That sounds really good," I said.

"I made up a really nice vinaigrette that's light and just perfect with crab," he said. "Would you like to try that?"

"Yeah, that sounds great," I said. I almost said, "Yeah, that sounds great, Julia," but I was afraid he wouldn't get the reference to Julia Child, the French Chef, and would be offended.

He gave us a beautiful salad, full of crab, with crackers and a wedge of Stilton cheese. He poured us each a glass of the coldest, driest Chardonnay I had ever tasted, and that "snack" would have cost forty bucks each in any number of places back home.

"God, that cheese smells nasty, Kyle. Where the hell did you get it? From between your toes," Justin asked.

"No, Bubba. Tim and Kevin make it for me," Kyle said with an absolutely straight face.

John and I looked at one another and almost cried, we laughed so hard.

"Okay, guys. That's enough with the gross cheese jokes. People are trying to eat," Kevin said.

Kevin looked at us with a big grin on his face, knowing we were delighted with the word play.

"They never let up," he said, and John and I laughed some more.

We adjourned to the clubhouse after our snack. Tyler and Cody came over, and the two boys from next door drifted in. Chip showed up on his bicycle.

"Did you guys work out today," Chip asked.

"Yeah, they worked out, but I didn't because I was at school. Where the hell were you," Kyle asked.

"I was reading in bed, and I fell asleep. I didn't wake up till my dad got home," he said.

"You little Chip," Kyle said.

"Don't call me Chip. The name's Peanut, and damn proud of it," he said.

Kyle grabbed him into a huge hug and picked him up off his feet.

"Let's dance," Kyle said.

"Put me down before I kick your balls off," Chip said.

Kyle dropped him to the floor and then pounced on him while he was down. They were both laughing the pure, innocent laughter of boys having fun, just being boys.

There were sixteen boys and men at that house that night. Some were watching an Atlanta Braves baseball game on TV, some were shooting pool, some were playing ping pong, and some were throwing darts. Outside, a couple of guys were shooting baskets, and a couple were in the pool.

"This is our family, Andy," Rick said. "This is our life."

"And it's the most remarkable thing I've ever seen, Rick," I said.

"Thanks," he said. "Would you guys like a drink?"

Kevin, John, and I said we would, and Rick got up to make them for us.

"He's going to leave the bottle out on purpose. Watch the boys sniff around," Kevin said.

"They wouldn't be healthy, red-blooded boys if they didn't sniff around," John said. "Didn't you do that?"

"Of course, I did. If we went to a wedding or something like that, my brother and I would go from table to table taking swigs out of glasses the people had left on the table while they were dancing," Kevin said. "Then we'd go out into the parking lot and smoke cigarettes. We were awful."

"No, you weren't, Kevin. You were just kids," I said.

Rick brought our drinks to the table we were sitting at. I watched the bar. Kyle was the first one there. He snatched up the bottle and went into the kitchen. He came back a minute later with four plastic cups, two in each hand, and the bottle of booze under his left arm. He set the bottle back on the bar, and he gave one cup each to Justin, Jeff, and Tyler.

"Are you watching this," Kevin asked.

"What," Rick asked.

"Kyle and them sneaking drinks," Kevin said.

"I left it out on purpose," Rick said.

Kevin, John, and I laughed.

Seth, Cody, and Alex were the next ones up. They did the same thing.

We all laughed some more.

"You don't drink at all, Rick," John asked.

"I drink a little wine, if it's part of a meal," Rick said. "But that's it."

"He tastes a little wine that's part of a meal," Kevin said.

"And no smoking, either, Rick," I asked.

"No. Not anymore. I was just a little bit embarrassed when the first and only thing I wanted after finishing a marathon was a cigarette," he said.

We all laughed, but John laughed so hard I thought he would need help. John and I were both smokers.

"Rick, I know seeing me hasn't been easy for you," I said.

"No, it's been easy, Andy. The kids won you over, didn't they?"

"Rick, I felt guilty as hell for all these years about you. I knew I couldn't openly be your father and a gay man in Sarasota at the same time. I didn't want you to be embarrassed by having a gay dad, and everyone would have known."

"The old friends knew, Dad," Rick said.

My heart melted. That was the first time he had ever called me Dad. Ever.

"I'm sure. Your friends never knew, though, did they?"

"No, sir."

"Rick, the kids won me over, totally. What they did was tell me that when I participated in your creation, I did a wonderful and noble thing. Rick, John and I have made a lot of money in our business. We have absolutely everything we want, materially. I think now we have a human dimension that we were lacking."

"You have a family here, Dad," Rick said. "A pretty big one, too."

"I know. What happened last night with Chip was unbelievable to me. They don't know if he's gay, bi, or straight, and they don't care!"

"Nope. It doesn't matter," Rick said.

"That's the way it's supposed to be," I said.

* * *

Rick and Kevin went with us to the airport the next morning. We had a rental car to turn in; otherwise, we would have all driven in together.

"You've had quite a week," John said, as we were following Rick and Kevin to the airport.

"I know. These last few days have sort of rejuvenated me, though," I said.

"I wish I had a picture from last night when he called you 'Dad,'" John said.

I chuckled.

"I'm sure you could have driven a truck into my mouth," I said.

"What do you think of the idea of foster kids," John asked.

"Those kids? I think they're wonderful," I said.

"Yeah, they are, but that's not what I meant. I meant for us."

I was totally and completely surprised by that question. I had never even entertained the possibility that John and I could be foster parents, but, after seeing the Florida boys, it was definitely something I wanted to think about.

"Would you be willing," I asked.

"Yeah."

"Why haven't you brought it up before?"

"Because I didn't think it was possible before this trip," he said.

"Am I that selfish," I asked.

"I won't even grace that with a response. You know perfectly well you're not," he said.

"Let's think about that, and talk about it some more," I said. "Foster kids aren't all golden, like those boys."

"Yeah, but many of them are. We've just had proof of that."

We continued the drive in silence, each one no doubt thinking about the possibilities.

We turned in the car in record time, one of the blessings of a small airport. Rick and Kevin accompanied us as far as airport security would let them, and they waited until our plane took off. Why people do that is beyond me, but they do.

John and I usually slept on airplanes, but that day I don't think either of us closed our eyes. The death of my father had brought about the birth of my relationship with my son and my grandsons, and I knew my life--our lives, really--would never be the same.

(Kyle's Perspective)

Andy and John left on a Tuesday, July 28th, and we were leaving the following Sunday for

Montana. That was a trip I was really looking forward to, so I could see my little boy again. But we had another boy we had to worry about, and that was Seth. He was leaving on Saturday, the first of August. I had to think fast.

We had to have a big send-off party Friday night. Nobody ever thought about shit like that but me. Why was that? I mean, I loved giving a party better than anything, but part of giving a party is knowing you have one to give. We couldn't let that boy go home without doing something special.

"Kevin and Rick, we need to have a serious talk," I said to them.

"What's the matter, Stud? Is somebody pregnant," Rick asked.

"Yeah. Trixie."

"Kyle, you are so fucking gross, man," Rick said. All the time he was laughing.

"Seth is leaving Saturday. We have to have a send-off party, or something. Don't you think?"

"Seth has really grown up this summer, hasn't he," Kevin said.

"Yeah, he has, and we need to celebrate that, don't you think," I said. They were sometimes hard to get focused.

"Yeah. What are you thinking," Rick asked.

"Well, we could do the pool-party thing, but that's getting kind of old hat, don't you think," I asked.

"Everybody loves those, Kyle," Kevin said.

"I know, but you can run it in the ground, you know?"

"What if we ask Mont to take us to the island on his boat," Kevin asked.

"Now, that would be pretty awesome," I said. "I don't think Seth has been on his boat, or out to the island."

Kevin dialed up Mont and asked him if we could do it. Kev said we would pay for the gas. Mont said he thought it was a damn good idea. He thought we should camp out on the island on Friday night and go home Saturday morning.

That trip to the island was about the best thing we had done that summer as a whole family. I mean, Mont's boat was big enough to get us all out there at one time. There were probably twenty guys, altogether, and one big, black dog.

We took skim boards, and I showed people how to do that. We took volleyball stuff, and we played that. We took Frisbees, and everybody, including Trixie, tossed those around. We body-surfed, and that was fun. We were there maybe fifteen hours altogether, but we had a great time.

"Kyle, this has been the best month and a half of my life, man," Seth said. "When I think about how far I've come because of you . . ."

"Yeah. You've put on some muscle here," I said, feeling up his bicep. I knew what he was really talking about, but I didn't want to go there.

"Yeah, that, too," he said.

"You're going to be a regular here throughout the year, right?"

"I'm going to get over here as often as I can, but, you know . . ."

"Yeah, I know. And we're going to get over there to see you as often as we can, too, buddy," I said.

"Kyle, I love you," he said.

"Stop it! What is this shit?"

"No, there's no stopping it, Kyle. You gave me a life, dude. And I love you for it," he said.

"This is embarrassing, man," I said.

"Well, embarrassing or not, it's true. And I love you for it," he said.

"How much have you had to drink tonight," I asked.

"I've had a couple, but this isn't liquor talking, man. This is me. You don't really know what you do to people, Kyle. How you lift them up and make them whole. You did that to me. You and Tim, and Justin and Brian, too. You accepted me at Mardi Gras, sight unseen. You accepted me into your home this summer. You fixed me up with Cody, and that's been unbelievable for me. Let me just love you, okay?"

"I love you, too, Seth."

"I was hoping you felt that way," he said.

"You better go over there and see about Cody," I said.

"I will. But I wanted to say it. Thank you, Kyle, for everything."

That boy was going to go on in life to be a really big something. Maybe a hospitality lawyer. If that's what he was going to be, I would definitely be one of his regular clients.

"What's going to happen with you and Cody," I asked.

"We're going to be friends the rest of our lives," he said.

He said it in a way that made me know that was it. Friends. Not boyfriends.

"Are you guys busting up," I asked.

"Yeah, sort of, but not really breaking up, in the usual sense," Seth said.

"That sounds like lawyer talk, dude," I said.

He laughed.

"You don't cut me any slack, do you," he asked, laughing a little.

I laughed, too.

"Not with that kind of bullshit. He's either your boyfriend or he isn't," I said. "That's like just coming a little bit. Or just being a little bit pregnant."

He was laughing hard.

"We're not going to be boyfriends after tonight," he said. "I need to explain that to you, Kyle."

"No, you don't. At our age, we don't need a boyfriend who's five hours away. We need him to be where we are, right?"

"That's exactly right. Cody and I have never been in love," he said.

"I know that."

"You do?"

"Well, I didn't really know it, but I guessed it," I said. "But I know you like him a lot, and you guys love one another like friends do. Like you and I love one another. Am I right?"

"You are absolutely right. All summer, I've worried I was using him for sex, you know? And for, like, status, and whatnot. I mean, I've liked him a lot from the first day I met him, and he's liked me, too. The physical stuff just seemed right, you know? Even though we weren't in love," he said.

"I'm fixing to become a Catholic, you know," I said.

"Cool. No, I didn't know that. Er, Kyle, how is that related to what we've been talking about? Help me out here," he said.

I liked that big ole boy so much, and I was having fun with him.

"I'm going to be a Catholic, with all the benefits, but without all the fucking guilt," I said.

He laughed his ass off.

"You know about that," he asked.

"God, Almighty! I've watched 'em close for a year and a half, Seth. Yeah, I know about it. It's like this legendary thing. Jews and Catholics. Two of a kind," I said.

"Yeah, I re . . . guess," he said.

"You were going to say 'reckon,' weren't you? Our language is rubbing off on you, Bubba, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I reckon," he said, and we both laughed.

"Do you know what a fuck-buddy is? Or a jerk off-buddy?"

"No, but I think you're fixing to tell me," he said.

I grinned hard and big when he said that. That boy was learning. We were going to make a Southerner out of that New Orleans Yankee yet.

"A fuck-buddy or a jerk off-buddy or a suck-buddy is a good friend that you really love, but only as a friend. When you get together, you have sex. Notice I didn't say 'make love,' 'cause that ain't what it is. The sex is good 'cause you care about one another, but it ain't the same as with somebody you're really in love with," I said.

"How do you know about this," he asked.

"Fair question. I read a good bit, that's how," I said.

He and I both laughed to beat the band.

"I've got to go tell Cody about this new development," he said.

"Now your little Catholic ass won't feel quite as guilty, will it," I said.

He laughed even more, and then he grabbed me in a hug.

"I love you, you little shit," he said.

"I love you, too, Bubba. Friends for life?"

"Friends for life and for eternity in heaven," he said.

"Heaven or hell, one," I said.

He laughed some more, and then he went off to find Cody.

* * *

All that talk with Seth about becoming a Catholic reminded me I hadn't yet spoken to Doc about being my sponsor. George had come with us to celebrate Seth because Doc was a good guy. That was the only reason. I knew he would much rather be at home with Sonya in his air conditioned house. He also wanted to spend time with Tim and me, though, and he knew we'd be gone for two weeks.

"Doc, would you go for a walk down the beach with me, please," I asked him when I went over to where he was.

"Certainly, Kyle. Is something the matter, son?"

"No, sir, but I have something important to talk to you about," I said.

"Let's go," he said.

We walked a little ways without talking.

"Kyle, are you and Tim having trouble," he asked.

I started laughing, and he got a big grin.

"No, sir. Not at all. This is private, but it's not that kind of stuff," I said.

"You scared me, son," he said.

"I'm sorry, Doc. No, I wanted to talk to you in private because I want to become a Catholic," I said.

It was like a jolt of electricity went through him. He lit up.

I was smiling big, too.

"Yeah, I do," I said. "I've talked to Jerry about it, and he explained what I'm going to have to do. I have to go through something called the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. It takes about eight months, and I'll officially be a Catholic at Easter."

"I know about that," he said. "It's the RCIA. They started that about thirty years ago."

"Well, I don't know that much about it, but Jerry said I need a sponsor. I would like for you to be my sponsor, if you'll do it," I said.

He didn't do or say anything for about five seconds. Then he grabbed me in a humongous hug. He had on shorts, but I was butt naked. That didn't matter a bit. I felt real love coming through that hug, and I

knew he would do it.

"Kyle, this is such an honor for me, son," he said.

"I guess that's a 'yes,' right?"

"Absolutely, Kyle. That's a double 'yes.' A quadruple 'yes.'"

"Thanks, Doc," I said.

"No. Thank you, Kyle. Thank you so much."

That man took his religion serious.

"Jerry gave me some pamphlets for you and me. They're at home. I'll give them to you," I said.

"I'd like to see those, but I pretty much already know what's involved," he said. "Kyle, I can't tell you what an honor you have given me, son. You and I will be the best Catholics in the parish."

I laughed.

"I don't think I want to be the best. I just want to be an ordinary one," I said.

He laughed, and I did, too.

"I don't really think I do, either," he said.

* * *

That party on the island was great. Every bit of the food was catered, but it was delicious. Seth went home the next day, and that was kind of like the end of the summer for us.

Every damn one of us cried when Seth left. We went in from the island pretty early, and I made us a nice going-away breakfast. He had his stuff all packed, and he and Cody stowed it in his car trunk. They were out there for a good long time by themselves, and I figured they were saying goodbye. Then we all went out. We shook hands with him, but everybody ended up hugging him, too. Hugged and bawled. He backed out of the driveway, headed to New Orleans.

"This has been quite a summer for him," Kevin said. "Thank all of you for making it a great one."

* * *

We still had three more weeks before school started, but we were going to be in Montana for two of those weeks. That third week in August was going to be hell week for me. I had no idea when I ran for SGA president that I would have to spend so much time at school that summer, but spend time I did. I spent a lot of time in the darkroom, but that was my doings. I had to spend a lot of time doing SGA stuff, though, and that was the big surprise to me.

Miss Sally and I got to be really good friends that summer. Hell, we spent a lot of time together. We might as well be friends. She had a vision of what Beachside High School could become, and she made sure I knew it and bought into it. She wanted that place to be an academic haven where the kids excelled. I kept telling her they didn't call us "Beach Rats" for nothing.

"Kyle, don't say that ever again, please. Your father and I, just like you, are 'Beach Rats,' and I don't think it really fits," she said to me one day.

"Yes, ma'am, I won't. I didn't know you were a Beach Rat."

She laughed. "You little sh . . ."

"You were going to say I was a little shit, weren't you?"

I was laughing hard.

"Yes, you little shit," she said.

I laughed my ass off, and she laughed, too.

"We can make this the best high school in the state, can't we, Miss Sally," I said.

"I think we can, Kyle. Do you know about school grades?"

"You mean grading the school?"

"Yeah. We've been a grade B for three years, and this is our year to become a grade A," she said.

"There are only like twelve grade A high schools in the state, and we can be one. All the rest of the high schools in the district have been grade C every year."

"I'm all over that, Miss Sally. How do we do it?"

"Well, it's based on test scores. Only the freshmen and sophomores, though. Not the upperclassmen. That's fundamentally wrong, I think, but that's what we have to live with."

"Do you want me to get some boys together to bust some ass," I asked.

She howled with laughter.

"No, Kyle. No ass busting."

"Fear inspires achievement," I said. "I mean, everybody studies because they fear failing. It can work school wide, you know?"

"I'm thinking, Kyle. You just got me thinking," she said.

"How about a buddy system. Match every freshman and sophomore up with a junior or senior. The upperclassmen make the underclassmen study and do good on the test," I said.

"Like a mentor," she said. "Yeah, I like that idea."

"If they don't do good on the test, then they bust ass," I said.

She laughed hard again.

She called in the two assistant principals and the four administrative assistants, which they also called Deans, or something like that. She had me explain what I had told her, and they liked the idea. By the time that meeting was over, we had us a plan. I felt kind of responsible for that, but all those grown-ups liked it. I guess it was okay. She put one of the assistant principals in charge of it, and the SGA was going to support it full out.

* * *

I more or less felt responsible for the trip to Montana, and Kevin and Rick had told me to plan it. I didn't know shit about Montana, so I had to log me some time on the w-w-w to find out about it. The headquarters for us was a town called Missoula, which is in the western part of the state, high in the Rocky Mountains.

I did a Google Web search, of course, and I got a whole bunch of Web sites for Missoula. The University of Montana was there, which was the school Chris's dad, Dr. Uhle, taught at, so there were a lot of links to that. There were links to national parks, the Lewis and Clark Trail, museums, national wilderness areas, and that sort of thing. Those were some good links, and I knew we'd go to most, if not all, of those places. One link that caught my eye and my fancy, though, was to the Testicle Festival at the Rock Creek Lodge in Clinton, Montana, about 22 miles from Missoula.

"I've been doing my homework for the trip," I said to all of them that night in the den. Actually, it was just Kevin, Rick, Justin, Brian, Tim, and me. I didn't know where Alex was, and I figured Jeff and Tyler were off screwing somewhere.

"Tell us what you found out," Kevin said.

"This is going to be an unbelievable trip," I said. "First of all, Missoula, where they live, is in the Rocky Mountains. Did y'all know that?"

"I didn't know that, but I'm sure that doesn't come as a big surprise to anybody," Jus said.

We laughed.

"I didn't know it, either," I said. "But it is. I saw some pictures, and the scenery is beautiful."

"Will there be skiing," Tim asked.

Sometimes he said stuff that was just so off the wall I had to roll my eyes, but I didn't that time. Hell, there might be skiing somewhere around there in August. I didn't know.

"I didn't see anything about skiing this time of year, but they definitely have skiing in the winter," I

said. "There are two really big national parks near there, though. Glacier and Yellowstone. Each one's about three hours away. And hiking and camping all over the damn place. I think it's sort of like an outdoorsman's paradise."

"Cool," they all more or less said.

"The one thing I'm disappointed about, though, is we're going to be there about a month too early for the big festival," I said.

"What festival is that," Kevin asked.

"The Testicle Festival," I said.

They all laughed.

"I hear it's a ball," I said.

They laughed some more.

"Are you serious," Rick asked.

"Yes, sir, I'm dead serious. It's in the third week of September in a place called Clinton. Sort of fits, doesn't it?"

They screamed with laughter.

"People go to that festival and go nuts," I said. "They go nuts and have a ball."

"Kyle, you're making this all up," Kevin said.

"No, sir. On my honor, I'm not. The Web site is testyfesty dot com. Look it up, if you don't believe me. It's all about bull nuts, which they call Rocky Mountain oysters."

I couldn't help myself. I laughed.

"People go there and get naked on the stage. Men and women. After I read about that, I typed 'testicle festival' into Google, and it gave me a ton of Web sites about other testicle festivals. They have them all over the place in the West. Canada, too. They have turkey testicle festivals all over the country, too. The one in Clinton is at the Rock Creek Lodge, and I think that must have been the first one of it's kind. It's been going on for like twenty years."

"My God," Kevin said.

"What? We have a Possum Festival just up the road from us, and there's the peanut festival and the watermelon festival," I said.

"We have the Emerald Coast Seafood Festival every year," Rick said. "It draws a huge crowd."

"Exactly," I said. "When we get back, I'm organizing the First Annual Emerald Beach Testicle Festival. It's going to be right here in this back yard, but we ain't serving bull nuts, that's for sure."

Everybody laughed.

"They actually eat bull nuts," Tim asked.

"Evidently. They fry 'em or something. They marinate them in beer and then I guess they bread 'em. Deep-fried bull nuts. They say they taste a lot like chicken, only meatier. They serve 'em in restaurants in the West. If we go to a restaurant where they have 'em, I'm gonna eat me one, that's for damn sure. They say they improve sex," I said. "Makes you last longer or something. I don't know."

"Just have a little taste of one, okay," Tim said.

Everybody laughed their asses off when he said that.

"On one Web site, they said the children in the Australian Outback go out every morning looking for sheep testicles to have for breakfast. They tie off the lambs' balls with rubber bands, and they eventually just fall off for lack of blood. They cook 'em up for breakfast," I said.

"I can see all those Australian boys waiting at the bus stop with big ole dicks tenting out their pants," Justin said.

"They call Australia 'down under,' but maybe it should be called 'up under,'" Brian said.

That was pretty damn clever, and we all laughed.

"I'm just giving you my research," I said. "Do with it what you will."

"It sounds to me like this family needs to travel a lot more," Rick said.

"Rick, I'm going whenever anybody goes anywhere, but this is a traveling family, man," Jus said. "I can't believe the places I've been since I've been here."

"That's important to us, Jus," Rick said. "Where all have you been?"

"New Orleans twice, Sarasota twice, North Carolina twice, Boston most recently, and New York a couple of months ago," Jus said. "Pretty soon Montana."

"That's about right for a year and a half," I said. "You ain't really been to Atlanta yet, though, or Savannah or Charleston. Or Williamsburg or Washington or Philadelphia. Or San Antonio, San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, Miami, Chicago. All those places."

"Have you been to all those places," Jus asked.

"Yeah, and some more, too," I said. "You will, too, eventually, Bubba. I've never been to Montana, though, and I can't wait."

"I actually checked my email today, and I had one from Chris," Jus said.

"You did? What did he say," Kevin asked.

"He's so excited he doesn't know what to do with himself," Jus said.

"I had the same kind from him yesterday, Jus," I said. "We're going to have a hell of a good time, but this is also like a pilgrimage thing, too, you know? Chris hasn't made any friends there yet, and we're his friends. We're his best friends."

"I know. I think right now I've got a friend in a low place," Jus said.

"Where the whiskey drowns and the beer chases," I sang. "My blues away, and I'll be okay."

Every one of them knew all the words to that song, and we all sang it together, me leading. The "low places" of the song wasn't exactly what we meant about Chris, but the double meaning of "low" worked. He was low without friends in Montana.

That was one of those great times when our family was all together. We were missing Jeff and Alex, of course, but they had lives to lead. And those lives weren't 100% connected to that family, like Tim's and mine, and Justin's and Brian's were.

It was just the six of us going to Montana the next day, and I couldn't wait to see my little boy.

Chapter 09

(Kyle's Perspective)

We were leaving for Montana at ten, so, naturally, I woke up at five and couldn't go back to sleep. Jesus! Why? I knew I would sleep on the plane, but why was I so damn hyper that I couldn't sleep? When Tim and I had made love the night before, he commented about how good it was because I was excited. I was glad it was good for him, but I really didn't understand how being excited about a trip made me a better lover. Go figure.

We were going to be gone for two weeks, so I made my last round of the crab traps that morning. I pulled those bad boys up out of the water to store for a couple of weeks, at least. At one of them, I threw the bait back into the water, and I saw a gigantic blue crab come up and grab it. They were getting wise to me, and I needed to break off crabbing for a few weeks because of that. You don't think dumb animals like crabs get wise to that sort of thing, but they do. Especially the older and bigger ones.

When I went back to the house, Trixie was up. She wanted out, so I let her. She didn't know what a trip was, but she was fixing to take her a big one. She was such a good dog, you could take her

anywhere. I couldn't remember if Chris was at our house before or after we got Trixie, but I think it was before. Anyway, they were going to love one another, and I knew it.

From where we lived, air flight was always the same. Emerald Beach to Atlanta. Atlanta to the world. Only this time, it was Emerald Beach to Atlanta. Atlanta to Salt Lake City. Salt Lake City to Missoula. It took almost the whole damn day. But we finally got to Missoula, and Chris, his dad and step-mom, and his half-brother David were waiting for us.

Chris was in his chair, of course, and I ran across the place to where they were. I snatched him out of that wheelchair in a second, and I was hugging on him big time. They all wanted a piece of him, too, so I passed him on to Kevin. Kevin passed him on to Rick. We passed him around.

We were all crying. Just bawling our eyes out because we had him again.

"Stop it," he said. "This is an ice cream moment. We need to go eat ice cream."

It was definitely an ice cream moment for all of us. We went to a Baskin-Robbins place, and we loaded up. It was ritual. It was spiritual. But it was also very damn good. Chris fed himself, and he got it all over his face, his chest, and his lap, but he seemed to be doing better at it. More steady or something.

"Open up," Jus said.

He had a big spoonful of ice cream ready for Chris's mouth.

"I don't want you to feed me, Justin," Chris said.

"I know you don't, but we're going to be here all night while you feed yourself," Jus said.

Chris laughed.

"You've got my number, don't you," Chris said.

"Yes, I do," Jus said. "I'm feeding you this ice cream if I have to hold your nose and make you swallow it."

Chris laughed, but he let Justin feed him.

The mother's name was Betty, and the dad's name was Ralph. They were really, really nice, too. David was fifteen, and he was a good looking kid. Chris had already turned seventeen, so he was my age, sort of, and David was Brian's age. Ralph was the dad of both of them, but I could tell Betty treated Chris, and took care of him, too, just like she had given birth to him.

They all loved Trixie, and that was a good thing, too, because she was going to stay at their house. They didn't have enough room for all of us, so we were going to sleep at a hotel. We were going to be camping a good many nights, though, so Trixie would spend most of her time with us. Just like I knew she would be, Trixie was crazy about Chris, and he was crazy about her, too. Before we got Chris changed out of his ice cream clothes, she started licking at a stain right on his lap. Nobody saw it but me, but ole Chris started boning up, as anybody would.

"Stop it," I said to Trixie, kinda sharp.

She backed off.

Chris got this hurt look on his face, like he was all disappointed or something.

I started laughing at him, and he laughed hard, too.

"You're a bad little fucker, aren't you," I said to him.

That only made him laugh more.

"What's so funny," David asked.

"The dog was licking me, and she gave me a hard-on," Chris said.

David looked at me, and I could tell he was embarrassed.

"Don't be embarrassed, Bubba. We don't have any secrets from one another, do we, Kyle?"

"Not anymore," I said.

David laughed, but I could tell he was still a little embarrassed.

"Y'all call each other 'Bubba,'" I asked.

"Yeah. He's the one who started it," David said.

"That's what we say, too," I said.

"I know. He thinks you guys are gods or something," David said. "If you guys do it or say it, then he does, too."

"They are," Chris said. "You'll see."

We had rented an extra-big van so that all ten of us, eleven counting Trixie, could go places together. Betty wasn't going to go camping with us, though. We decided to do a little sight-seeing in Missoula that night while it was still light. We drove around, Ralph driving. He took us to the University, and it was really nice. We drove around some downtown, too, and then we went to Caras Park down by the river. It was pretty, and they had this big ole carousel thing.

"Do you all want to ride the flying horses," Kevin asked. "I do."

"Flying horses," Justin asked. "Why do you call it that? The sign clearly says 'carousel.'"

"That's what we call them in New Orleans," Kev said.

"Y'all got a different name for everything, don't you," Justin asked. He teased Kevin a lot about the way he talked.

"Not everything. You'd still be called 'asshole' there," Kev said.

"Ouch. You got me last on that one, for sure," Justin said. "I never saw it coming, shithead."

"We started playing that game, too, since Chris came to live with us," David said.

"It's fun, ain't it," Jus said.

David pulled me aside.

"You guys just cuss like that in front of them," he asked, meaning Kevin and Rick.

"Pretty much," I said. "Are your parents offended, because we can cool it if they are."

"No. Not at all. Chris and I and our dad do, too. Mom doesn't, though. But she doesn't mind," he said.

"What about words like 'fuck,'" I asked. I didn't think a lady would like a word like that. My mom didn't.

"We don't say that one. I mean, we do, but not in front of her," he said.

"Okay. Thanks for the heads up," I said.

I told the rest of them, and they said they'd be good. Brian almost never cussed, anyway.

We hadn't really talked about it, but I was hoping Chris and David, or just Chris, at least, could stay with us at the hotel. There were two double beds in our room, and I figured we could get a roll-away for those two.

"Kevin, we want Chris and David to stay with us at the hotel," I said.

Chris overheard me, and he grinned his crooked little grin.

"Do they want to," Kevin asked.

"Hell, yeah," Chris said. "Of course we want to, Kevin."

"You didn't even ask your brother," Kevin said.

"I know, but he'll want to," Chris said.

"I'll ask your parents," Kevin said.

He asked them, and they said it would be too much trouble taking care of Chris.

I knew better than to put my two cents' worth in, but I sure wanted to argue about that little matter. Ole Dave came to the rescue.

"They took care of him for almost three weeks at their house," he said. "Plus, I'll be there. Please!" He was begging. If Clay and I ever got into trouble with my daddy, it was for begging. He hates for

a kid to do that worse than anything, and I'm pretty sure he'd pop me for it even now. It worked that time, though, and they finally said yes.

We were all excited about that.

"Kyle," Chris said to me real low, "I've gotta pee."

"Well, go pee," I said. "I don't have to."

He laughed.

"Don't tease me, Bubba," he said.

"Come on. Let's go," I said.

I found a restroom, and I wheeled him in. The only way for him to pee was to sit on the toilet. He needed help getting his pants down and getting on the toilet. I undid his belt and the button and zipper on his pants, and he surprised the shit out of me by pulling them down himself. When he was at our house, he was super stiff and couldn't bend much at all. He was bending pretty good now.

"What the hell happened? You're not stiff anymore," I said.

"It goes down if you don't play with it," he said, just as serious as you please.

At first I didn't know what he was talking about, but then it dawned on me.

"Not your dick, asshole. Your joints or muscles or whatever."

That little sucker was laughing his behind off.

"Okay, you got me last. So what happened?"

"I started taking therapy all the time," he said. "The doctor here thinks I'll get a lot more flexible and stronger, if I keep up the therapy."

His left arm and hand were always better than his right, and his left leg and foot weren't twisted like the right one, either. He couldn't do much with the left, but that's the hand he ate with.

"Watch what I can do," he said.

He had finished peeing, and he reached down between his legs and grabbed his dick. He started shaking it off. My eyes probably got like saucers when I saw that.

"Do you want to see what else I can do with it," he asked, his voice full of devilment.

I laughed.

"No! I don't want to see you do that." I paused. "I'm glad you can do it, though."

He grinned.

"I think it's growing, too," he said. "I want a big one like you've got."

He was teasing the hell out of me, and I was loving it.

"You didn't used to be so bad," I said.

"I was. You just forgot," he said.

"Come to think of it, you were a hellion," I said.

Mr. Uhle stuck his head in the restroom.

"Is everything all right, guys," he asked.

"Yes, sir, everything's fine," I said. "We'll be right there."

"Okay. Just checking," he said and left.

"Come on. Let's get out of here," I said.

I did up his clothes, put him back in his chair, and we took off.

"I really noticed a difference in his flexibility," I said to his parents and the others.

"He's in therapy with some really excellent therapists, and his doctor has high hopes that he'll get much better than he is. He's even talking about maybe crutches before too long," Ralph said. "And maybe some surgery to straighten out that right foot so he can wear a brace."

"Oh, man," we all more or less said.

"He may even lose his status as the CP poster boy," Ralph said. "By the way, Kyle, those pictures were wonderful, and what you did with the money was even more wonderful. Thank you."

"I'm going to get plenty more on this trip. We'll have like this before and after line up. Then he can be the poster boy for physical therapy," I said.

"Does the therapy hurt, Chris," Tim asked.

"Hell, yeah, it hurts," Chris said. "It wears me out, too, but it's worth it when I hear stuff like what Kyle said."

"Chris!" his mom said, sounding sort of shocked.

"If you're worried about the language, don't be," Kevin said.

"I know. I don't know why I reacted that way. I hear it all the time from my three guys," she said, "and that was unusually mild, actually."

We all laughed.

(David's Perspective)

I was very nervous about meeting Chris's friends from Florida. He had said they were really nice and all, but they knew him. They didn't know me. I always felt awkward and shy around new people, especially new guys near my age, and I didn't know what to expect. About two minutes after they landed, though, I saw how much they loved my brother, and they were all just as nice to me as they could be. By the time Kevin asked about us staying at the hotel with them, I felt like they were my friends, too, and I really wanted to stay with them.

Chris had told me that they were all gay, and I didn't know what to expect about that, either. I mean, I know not all gay guys are swishy and all, but that had me a little nervous, too. I had never talked to anybody about it, not even to Chris, but I thought there might be a chance I was gay. It took me a long time to put that idea together in my head, and I still wasn't ready to admit, even to myself, that I was. It worried me a lot, not knowing. Maybe I'd have a chance to talk to them about what it's like being gay.

When Chris came to live with us, I went from being an only child all my life to having an older brother who had a disability. Chris had spent time with us during summers before his mom died, but we really didn't see that much of one another. I always loved him, though, and I always thought of him as a very good friend. A lot of people are afraid of him because they think if they do anything at all with him they'll hurt him. But he's as tough as I am, or tougher. I could see that those Florida boys weren't one bit afraid of him, and they were passing him back and forth in the airport like he was indestructible. I mean, it is possible to hurt him, of course, just like it's possible to hurt anybody, but he and I roughhouse a good bit, and he can give just as good as he can take.

Chris needs help with bathroom stuff. I mean, he can't get on and off the pot by himself, and he can't really bathe himself very well yet, either. Since he started therapy, though, he's gotten more independent. He tries to pull himself onto the toilet, but somebody has to be there to make sure he doesn't fall off. He told me about something that happened in Florida when he started laughing so hard at something Justin said that he actually fell off. Evidently, he let loose a load of shit while Justin had him in his arms, and it got all over Justin. I asked him if Justin was mad at him, and he said he wasn't. He didn't used to be able to wipe himself, but he does that now, using paper in his left hand. I always check him, though, just to make sure he's clean, if I happen to be the one taking care of that. I don't know if my mom and dad check him, but I do. He's getting better, but it's slow.

Taking a bath with Chris is pretty much fun. I know my dad bathes him without getting in with him, but I don't. What's the point of not getting in? We have an over-sized tub, and the two of us fit in it just right. I've learned from bathing him that there's nothing wrong with his "guy equipment," that's for sure.

It's only about an inch-and-a-half long when it's soft, but hard that boy is as big as me. I don't have to actually wash him because he can pretty much do that on his own. I have to help him get in position so he can get all parts of himself, though. We have a little seat type of thing that we put across the tub for him to sit on. I have to help him get onto that, and then I have to help him get back in the water to rinse off. I guess some people might think the stuff I do for him is pretty gross, but it really isn't. When I had to wipe his butt, that wasn't too good, but his occupational therapist has taught him how to do that, or has given him enough coordination that he can do it.

Right after my parents gave permission for us to stay at the hotel, Kyle called the place and asked for a roll-away bed for us to sleep on. They said they were pretty tired from their trip, so we went to the hotel kind of early. I figured we'd be up a long time talking, and that was okay with me.

"Dave, the thing is, the five of us have been brothers for a while now, and you just became our brother tonight," Kyle said. "Are you cool with the idea of having us as your brothers?"

"Yeah, I'm very cool with it," I said. "Sort of flattered, even."

"Well, how can Chris be our brother without you being our brother, too," he asked.

I couldn't dispute his logic, even if I had wanted to.

"Here's the deal, Dave. No embarrassment among brothers, okay? I mean, we see each other naked all the time, just like brothers do, and nobody's shy about it. If we get hard, we get hard. Period. It's normal and natural, and we can't do anything about it, anyway. This little fucker right here is as horny as a two-peckered goat, so you've probably seen it already."

He was referring to Chris, and I laughed a little.

"See? I knew it. And he's deceptive as hell. He ain't a shower, but he's a major grower," Kyle said.

It took me a second to process that, but I laughed when I figured out what he was talking about.

"I'm sort of a grower myself, Kyle," I said.

"Some were built to show; some were built to grow. Only the good Lord knows why that is. The only thing I ask is, just don't be embarrassed around us, okay?"

I already liked him, but I started liking him even more when he said that.

"Okay, let's put up ones," he said.

I didn't know what he was talking about, but they all started taking out money. They started putting one dollar bills on the bed.

"You got any money," Kyle asked Chris.

Kyle was just as nice as he could be, but he talked kind of gruff sometimes. I knew it was part of how he teased people, but it kind of scared me a little bit when he did that.

"I'm not giving you my money," Chris said.

"Don't make me have to frisk your ass, Chris. I'll do a full body-cavity search in a heartbeat," Kyle said.

"What do you need money for," Chris asked.

"We're buying you a hooker," Kyle said.

"Give him my wallet, Dave," Chris sort of shouted, and they laughed their asses off.

"It's just ones, Chris, and it's for soft drinks and snacks from the vending machines," Brian said.

"Shit! No hooker," Chris said.

They all laughed again.

Kyle and Justin looked at each other with knowing looks.

"We ought to," Justin said.

Kyle nodded and smiled. "I know," he said. "We've got enough ones here. Let's go get some snacks, Jus."

The two of them left the room.

"What's going on here," Chris asked.

"You heard as much as we did," Tim said. "They went to get some cokes and snacks. I'm sure Kyle brought a bottle of liquor. He always does on trips, and he and Jus have a drink or two."

"It's been a long time since I've had a drink," Chris said. "My first and last one was at Kevin and Rick's house."

"You've had a whole drink," I asked Chris.

"Yeah. So what? Haven't you?"

"No. Not yet. But I think I'm going to," I said.

They laughed, but I was serious. I wanted to try that.

"They put the booze in coke, and it doesn't taste bad," Chris said. "Dave, I even smoked a cigarette. Or at least part of one. Justin and Kyle both smoke, and Justin let me smoke part of his, once."

"Really!?!???"

He was blowing my mind. I thought of my brother as this weak little cripple or something, but that boy had done more stuff than I had. And, unless I had completely misread Kyle and Justin, he was going to get laid, too. If not that night, then real soon. I guess it was right that the older one got laid before the younger one, but I never even thought that would be a possibility for him. I wasn't jealous of that, exactly, but . . . yeah, hell, I was. I wanted to get laid, too, but they weren't going to fix me up. I was going to have to do it on my own.

"Open up," Kyle said, pretty gruff.

Tim opened the door, and they brought in two arm loads each of stuff for us. There must have been fifteen or twenty dollars worth of drinks and snacks. Kyle got the ice bucket and darted out again to fill it up. He was back in a minute.

"Who wants a drink," Kyle asked.

It turned out Tim and Brian just wanted cokes, but the rest of us wanted real drinks. Kyle came out from the bathroom in a minute with four red plastic cups with whiskey drinks in them. He handed them out, and he handed me a black Sharpie marker.

"Write your name on your cup so you don't lose it," he said. "That's going to be yours the whole trip."

I wrote my name on mine and passed it on. They all did the same. Tim and Brian were drinking their cokes right out of the can, so they didn't need the pen.

Justin lit a cigarette and passed the pack to Kyle. He lit one, too.

"Anybody else," Justin asked.

"Yeah, let me have one," I said.

I had watched Justin and Kyle real carefully to know how to do it. I put the cigarette in my lips and fired up the lighter. I did it awkwardly, though.

"Have you ever smoked before, Dave," Justin asked.

"No," I said, a little embarrassed at my innocence.

"Just light it and suck in just a little smoke. After you do that, inhale through your mouth, and then blow out the smoke. Like this." He demonstrated.

I did it like I thought he showed me, and I coughed big time.

They laughed, but I didn't have the sense they were really laughing at me.

"You took in too much. Just a little tiny bit until you get used to it," he said.

I tried it again like he said, and I didn't cough that time. After a couple more hits, I got pretty lightheaded.

"This is making my head spin," I said.

"You're doing it too fast, man. Just take it slow," Kyle said.

I was really glad I was sitting down because I got an erection. It was probably a combination of smoking and drinking and being with those boys that did it to me. Or maybe it was just one of those that just happened. I didn't know. They didn't pay any attention to me, though, and that was fine with me.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm getting comfortable," Justin said.

He stripped down to pure skin, and the rest of them did the same thing. I didn't know where to look. I mean, I didn't want to stare, but, God, I wanted to see them so bad.

"I want to get comfortable, too," Chris said.

"Hold your horses. I'm getting to you," Kyle said.

Again, he said that gruff, but he sure didn't mean it gruff. I didn't understand that. Tim and Brian talked really nice, but Justin and Kyle talked really harsh, especially to each other. They would say stuff, and then they would hug or punch each other or show some other sign of affection. I guess it was just their way. Chris talked to them that way, too, and I knew he loved those boys more than anything, and they obviously loved him. But they were also really polite, which didn't fit at all with the gruff way they talked to one another. I think that must have been some kind of culture thing, or something.

Kyle went to work on Chris's clothes after he got undressed. All four of the Florida boys had little tattoos low on their stomachs, and Kyle and Tim had little gold hoops through their nipples. I wanted to get a closer look at all of that, but I was afraid to stare.

"Look at this," Kyle said, lifting Chris's left leg really high. "Can you believe this shit? Do y'all remember how stiff he used to be?"

My brother's dick and asshole were totally on display to the whole room, and nobody seemed to care, least of all him.

"It's the physical therapy I'm taking," he said. "I take occupational therapy and speech therapy, too."

"You're talking a lot clearer, too," Kyle said. "What's that all about?"

"Speech therapy," he said, but he said it garbled on purpose.

They caught on and laughed their asses off.

"Do you like Trixie," Brian asked.

"Yeah, Bri," Chris said. "She is so sweet. Can she do some tricks?"

"He taught her a bunch of tricks, Chris," Justin said.

I knew he was Brian's boyfriend, and it was pretty obvious in the way he said that. He didn't say that one bit gruff, either.

"She knows a few," Brian said.

"Do you even know you have a new brother," Kyle asked.

"You mean Alex? Yeah, I know about him. Kyle, you're not the only one with an email address, you know?"

"Your days are numbered, Bubba," Kyle said. "I'm getting your ass one of these days."

"So where is Alex," Chris asked.

"He's home working," Justin said. "Kyle made the arrangements for this trip before we met him, and he doesn't know you, anyhow. Plus, he couldn't afford it."

"Couldn't afford it? Kevin and Rick didn't pay for this trip," Chris asked.

"Nope. They paid for themselves, but we all paid our own way, Bubba," Justin said.

Chris got big tears in his eyes.

"You all paid your own way," he asked.

"That's right, 'cause we all wanted to spend some time with you," Kyle said. "We all chipped in for Trixie. I was going to pay for her, but they all wanted to pay, too."

He was bawling, but I knew he was happy about it.

"Kyle, sing," Justin said.

"Blame it all on my roots,

"I showed up in boots,

"And ruined your black-tie affair . . .

Kyle had a great voice, and the rest of us joined in, following him. He even knew the famous "third verse," which Garth Brooks only does in live concerts. Kyle kept the singing pretty low because it was getting late and we had neighbors. That song was one of my all-time favorites, and it was the perfect way to end the night. I loved those Florida boys.

(Justin's Perspective)

The flights out to Montana were good, but we did hit a little turbulence along the way. Kyle was sound asleep, of course, so he never even noticed.

"I hope Trixie's all right," Brian said, after a pretty good little bump.

"Yeah, me, too. Kyle said dogs fly all the time, though, so they must have her someplace safe," I said.

When we picked up Trix after we got to Montana, she didn't look any the worse for wear, that's for sure. They had shipped her in a crate, and she sort of stumbled a little bit when we let her out of it. That only lasted a few seconds, though, and then she was fine.

Seeing Chris in the airport was something I was going to remember for the rest of my life. The place wasn't even as big as the airport in Emerald Beach, so he and his family were right there at the gate waiting for us when the plane landed. Kyle grabbed him up out of his wheelchair and hugged the stuffing out of him. Then he started passing Chris around. We were so happy, and he was, too.

Chris's brother David was a real nice kid. Good looking as hell, too. Dark hair, dark eyes, a little smaller than Brian, five six or seven, probably. Chris and Dave were going to stay at the hotel with us, and I was looking forward to that.

When we were getting up money for cokes and snacks in the hotel room, Kyle made some smartass comment about collecting money for a hooker for Chris. Everybody laughed when Chris pretended to be real eager. Or maybe he wasn't pretending. Who knew? We figured he was straight, and we knew he was horny.

Then I got to thinking. What were the chances of him ever getting laid on his own? Probably slim to none. He was a cute kid and all, and I loved him to death, but he had about as much sex appeal as a cold, wet sponge, or one of those crabs Kyle was always catching. Not only that, but when was he ever going to be in a hotel unsupervised by his parents? I mean he probably would be as a grown-up sometime, but a seventeen-year-old boy needed it bad, and he wasn't any different from anybody else when it came to sex.

"You know what I'd really like to do," I asked Kyle when we went after the snacks.

"What's that, sweetie," he said in the voice he thought sounded gay but that really just sounded stupid.

"Cut it out, Kyle. I'm trying to be serious, okay?"

"All right. Calm down. Sorry, dude."

I laughed when he said that. I just couldn't stay mad at Kyle, no matter what.

"What would you really like to do," Kyle asked.

"I'd like to get a hooker for Chris," I said.

"You're serious, aren't you," he said.

"Hell, yeah, I'm serious. You know he's dying, man," I said.

He put the stuff he had in his hands on the floor, and he put both of his hands on my shoulders.

"Bubba, I want Chris to get laid, too, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Jus, every time I hear the word 'prostitute' or 'hooker' or anything like that, I see you in that motel room where we found you."

"It's not the same thing, Kyle," I said.

"How do you know, Bubba?"

Kyle was being very kind and gentle, and it really touched me that he felt the way he did.

"I guess you really don't know," I said. "I doubt anybody knew about me."

"Let's don't do the hooker thing, okay," he said. "I was only teasing, anyway."

"I know you were teasing, but it got me thinking," I said.

"The fact of the matter is, I'll bet there are girls here who would do it as a mercy fuck," he said. "I just don't happen to know any of them."

"I doubt he could even do it, anyway," I said.

"Oh, sure he could. I mean, couldn't you figure out a way for him to fuck you?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"No, it's the same thing. Her on top, him on bottom. He could do it," Kyle said.

"Yeah, I guess. I hadn't really thought about the how-to of it," I said.

"You know what? You and I are going to have to be some major flirts on this trip. With girls, I mean," he said.

"What are you talking about," I asked.

"Justin, you know as well as I do that you and I could get laid every day by a different girl. If we weren't queer, that is," he said.

"Minor detail."

Kyle laughed.

"Seriously. You know what I'm saying."

"Yeah, I do," I said. "So what do we do? Seduce 'em and then turn 'em loose on Chris?"

"Basically, yeah," he said. "If they want it bad enough, he'll be good enough."

"Kyle, you're about the most devious person I ever knew," I said.

"I know," he said, grinning his ass off.

God, that boy was cute enough.

"So when do we start," I asked.

"Tomorrow. We probably ought to say something to Tim and Brian, though. We don't want their feelings to get hurt," he said.

"This is going to be a hell of a trip. It's the GCL trip."

"GCL?"

"Get Chris Laid," I said, and he and I laughed our asses off.

There were a couple of young guys passing in the hall just then, and I was sure they heard what I said. They both laughed and said "good luck."

"See, everybody wants it for him," Kyle said.

(Tim's Perspective)

Kyle and Justin both woke up earlier than anybody else on our first full day in Montana. They wanted Brian and me to go down to breakfast before the others woke up, and Brian and I did what they asked. While we were eating, and afterward, too, they told us about their scheme to get Chris laid. I knew they were doing it out of love for Chris, and I knew it was just going to be an act. Still, I didn't know how I would feel seeing Kyle flirt with girls. I mean, I had seen him doing that before, and it hadn't really bothered me because I knew he wasn't going after sex, but still.

"Tim, we're not going to do this unless you and Brian are 100% behind us, Babe," Kyle said.

"Let's see how it goes today, and then let's evaluate it," I said.

"Timmy, you know this isn't going to be about us, don't you?"

"Of course I know that, Kyle. Do you think I'm stupid?"

I said that a lot more harshly than I intended to.

"That's it. We're not doing it," Kyle said.

"Kyle, man," I said. "I didn't mean that to sound like it did."

"But that's how you feel, isn't it," he asked.

"Kyle, I don't know how I feel. I'm just afraid . . ."

"Afraid what, Tim? That I don't love you? That you don't mean everything to me? That I wouldn't stop living if you weren't with me?"

"I know all of that, Kyle. I know you love me. I'm feeling awful right now. I know you'd only be doing it for Chris, and I want him to be happy, too, but this isn't making me happy, Babe."

"And that's enough of a reason for us not to do it," Kyle said.

When I looked into his eyes, I saw the big tears ready to come out. I knew in the very marrow of my bones that Kyle Goodson was all mine forever, and I felt like a dumbass jerk for feeling the way I did. I couldn't help it, though.

"I feel the same way Tim does," Brian said.

"Well, I guess it's going to be ole Rosy Palm for Chris for a while yet," Justin said.

We all laughed.

After breakfast we went back to our room. Chris and Dave were still asleep, but we were all supposed to meet up in an hour. Kyle went over to the roll-away and kicked it.

"Get your drunk asses out of bed, you sorry sons-a-bitches," he said.

Chris woke up laughing, or he might really have already been awake. David looked like he was shocked, and he looked like he was scared to death of Kyle. Kyle noticed.

"I'm sorry, Dave. I didn't mean to scare you, man. I'm harmless, believe me," Kyle said.

"That's not what that boy said when you broke his arm," Chris said.

"You really broke a guy's arm," Dave asked.

"Yeah, but I should have drowned his ass. Nobody drops in on me surfing. Nobody!"

Poor David didn't know what to think. He had a look on his face that was somewhere between awe and terror.

"I'll protect you, little brother," Chris said.

Kyle was standing on David's side of the bed, and he leaped on it, grabbing both of them up in a big hug. He and Chris were laughing hard, but poor Dave didn't know what was going on. Kyle put his mouth on Chris's stomach and gave him a raspberry. Then he did the same thing to David, and then Dave finally laughed.

Dave and Chris both had erections, and Kyle had succeeded in pulling the sheets off them, exposing them to the world. We all understood, of course, but Dave was a little embarrassed by his.

Kyle sniffed at Chris and said, "You need a bath in the worst way. You're nasty. And what's all this shit on your face? Did you even bring a razor?"

"No, I didn't bring one. I'm growing a beard," Chris said.

"Not today," Kyle said. "Trixie'll lick it off you. You can use my razor."

"He and I can take a bath together," Dave said. "I can shave him."

"Okay, Bubba. Do we need to wait up here, or can we meet you downstairs?"

"You can meet us downstairs. I can take care of him. You're not really a monster, are you?"

"Not at all, dude," Kyle said.

Kyle leaned over and kissed Dave on his forehead. Dave smiled nicely, and I knew Kyle had won him over.

Chapter 10

(Kevin's Perspective)

That first day in Montana we did things close to home so Betty could go with us. She insisted that only the guys go camping, and we didn't argue. Maybe she wanted the peace and quiet of her home without the men folk there. Who knew?

It was a Monday morning, and our plan was to camp later that week at the Glacier National Park, which was about three hours north of Missoula. That day we were going to do some local stuff, though.

Missoula was the headquarters for the Western Division of the National Forest Service, probably because the University was there, and they had one of their nine smokejumper bases in Missoula. In fact, the Missoula Smokejumper Base was the first of its kind, where they used airplanes to first locate and, later, to get firefighters into the heart of a forest fire. Jumping in with parachutes was the most practical way to do it since there are too many mountains to make regular landings.

We went to the Smokejumper Base and took the tour. They had some pretty amazing video of forest fires and of people fighting them. There was a sort of museum with firefighting equipment, clothing, and other stuff they used to fight fires. There were 85 smokejumpers assigned to the Missoula Base, we were told, and they ranged in age from early twenties to mid-fifties. Fire season was from mid-June to mid-September, and we were there right in the middle of it. We saw a map of the area, and they had markers to show where fires were going on and how many smokejumpers were at each area.

"I'd love to jump with a parachute," Kyle said.

"I know. That would be really cool. I'm surprised you haven't already done it," Justin said.

"Don't make me have to jump on you, buddy," Kyle said.

"Don't jump on, but you can jump up me," Justin said.

Ralph and Betty were laughing at their antics.

"Sometimes the guys get hung up in trees," Dave said. "I'll bet that's pretty scary, if there's a fire down below coming your way."

"Last summer they lost some equipment and supplies when parachutes didn't open properly," Ralph said. "There was something in the news lately about them solving that problem, though."

We went on a tour of the hanger and saw some of the planes they used. We also saw the dormitory the people live in on the base. Evidently, they don't have to live there, but housing is available. The tour guide told us a lot about what that base was all about, and I knew it was an eye-opener for all of us.

We went to a place called the Garnet Ghost Town. It had been a mining town in the 1880's and onward into the middle of the twentieth century. It was really well preserved.

We had Trixie on a leash at that place, and she was very obedient. Brian got her to do some tricks for us when we stopped for a rest, and Chris loved it.

"She sits up better than I do," Chris said.

We laughed, but it was a sort of nervous laugh.

Our next stop was Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site. It was a working cattle ranch, and we all enjoyed seeing that place.

"Would you say this is a museum," Tim asked.

"Sort of," I replied.

"This is the kind of museum I like," he said.

"I wish we could get on some horses and round up some cattle," Kyle said. "Did y'all know there's a place just north of Emerald Beach where you can ride horses and rope real cattle?"

"We need to do that one of these days," Rick said.

"I know. We haven't ridden horses in a long time," Kyle said.

That night we went to a Missoula Osprey baseball game. It was great. Very small-town America, and the kids had a good time. Betty begged off the baseball, though. The minor leagues definitely have a place in the American spirit, maybe more than the Majors.

* * *

The next day we packed up the van for our first camping adventure. We got an early start, and the boys were clearly quite excited.

"Boys, you're going to see proof today," Ralph said, as we pulled out of the hotel parking lot.

"Proof of what," Kyle said.

"Proof of the existence of God, Kyle. Nobody but God could ever have made what we're going to see," Ralph said.

The drive to the park was absolutely spectacular. The mountains we were used to in North Carolina were mere hills compared to what we saw. I had never really understood the concept of "purple mountains' majesty" until that day, but they truly did look purple. They were magnificent.

"Would y'all mind if we stopped a few times so I can get some pictures? I'm afraid the ones I've been taking are going to be blurred," Kyle said.

Ralph was driving the first leg of the trip, and he was happy to stop. Kyle was at his hyperactive best, and there was no telling how many pictures he shot. He was using his digital camera, mostly.

"Why are you using that one," Tim asked him.

"Because I can get the color so precise with PhotoShop, Babe," he said. "This may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Tim, so if I don't pay real close attention to you, please don't be mad at me."

"You're really excited, aren't you," Tim asked.

"Tim, I'm so excited, I'm about to you-know-what," Kyle said.

"I don't know what. What are you talking about, Kyle," Chris asked.

"He's so excited, he's about to cream his jeans," Justin said.

Chris had a confused look on his face.

"He's about to shoot cum, Chris," Justin said emphatically. "You know what that means?"

Chris got a really bright look on his face, and we all laughed.

"Gimme a break," Kyle said, and that made us laugh even more.

I checked out Kyle, and he was as hard as a rock.

We ate lunch at the Apgar Visitors Center near the southern entry to the park, and we made arrangements for the three nights we were going to be there. We had a ton of camping equipment on the

roof of the van, but we rented four canoes and a trailer to carry them on for the time we were going to be there.

Our first excursion was Logging Lake, and it was magnificent. We heard what sounded like a pack of dogs howling in the distance, and Trixie's ears perked right up. It was like that sound struck some primal chord in her nervous system.

"Those are wolves," Ralph said. "They've been coming down from Canada for about the last fifteen years or so, and now we have several native-born wolf packs in the park."

Kyle got down close to Trixie.

"You want you a wolf?" Only he said it "woof," just like he talked about the Guff of Mexico and the game of goff. He didn't quite say "hep" instead of "help," as many natives of Emerald Beach did, but it was pretty close. The "L" after a vowel was a real problem for him.

"She doesn't want a wolf, do you girl," Brian said.

All Brian had to do was open his mouth around her, and all of her attention was focused on him. The boys knew Trixie was really Brian's dog, and they respected that because they respected him and all the time he spent working with her.

"That woof's gonna come get you and bite your ass off," Kyle said, grabbing her playfully on the rump.

"We'll put Kyle out for bait," Justin said. "That'll poison anything."

"Very funny," Kyle said. "But that's a GML."

"What's a GML," Justin asked.

"Got Me Last," Kyle said.

"I know what you're talking about. GCL, right?"

Kyle nodded, and he and Jus laughed. None of the others showed any sign of recognition, so I figured it was something between the two of them.

Our next stop was Bowman Lake, and that's where we were scheduled to spend the night. You had to go on narrow gravel roads to get to it, and we were just about the only people around. It was the clearest, bluest body of water I had ever seen.

The three Eagle Scouts and Rick pitched camp for us in less than a half hour. We had three tents, each one for three people. Rick and I were going to share with Ralph, and the six boys were going to divide up in the two tents for them. To my surprise, the tent roster for the boys was Kyle, Justin, and Chris in one tent, and Tim, Brian, and Dave in the other one.

We had bought two fishing licenses at Apgar, and we had fishing gear enough for two to fish at one time. We put the canoes in the water, and some of them went for a canoe ride. Ralph and I were left behind at the camp.

"Kevin, I can't believe your boys," Ralph said, after he and I had settled down with drinks.

"I know. They're something, aren't they?"

"They're more than something, son. They're incredible. Chris talked about them constantly, but I took it all with a grain of salt, more or less. But he was right," he said.

"You've got two fine boys, too," I said.

"Thanks, and I agree with you. Kevin, I want you to know I didn't abandon my handicapped son," he said. "His mother and I just couldn't make it, and we divorced when he was eight months old. We didn't find out for sure about the Cerebral Palsy until he was three. That had nothing to do with our incompatibility. By the time we knew about that, Betty and I were married and we already had Dave."

"Ralph, Rick and I would never presume to judge you, man. I can see you're devoted to Betty and to the boys. I'm just glad we've been able to get to know you," I said.

"I have gay friends, you know?"

"Yes, I do know," I said.

"How did you know that," he asked.

"Because you have us. We're all gay, and we're all your friends," I said.

"That's not what I meant," he said.

"I know, but I wanted to make a point. We love Chris, and we love David. How can we not be friends?"

"You're a pretty perceptive guy," he said.

"I have to be to keep up with our brood," I said.

"Somehow, I got the impression there were more kids in the family," he said.

"There are. Two more, at least," I said.

"Help me so I can sort this out," he said.

"Okay. Here goes. At the moment, Brian is our only official foster child. Justin was for a year, but he turned eighteen on July 4th, so he's no longer officially a foster kid. He's one of our foster adults.

"Then there's Jeff. He's twenty and will soon be twenty-one. He's with us because his parents basically disowned him when he told them he was gay. He was the partner of Kyle's older brother, Clay. Only Clay's dead now. He died last October. Jeff has been our honorary foster son ever since. He doesn't have anyplace else to go."

"You know you're blowing my mind, don't you," Ralph asked.

"Well, there's more," I said. "We have another honorary foster son by the name of Alex. He's eighteen and, therefore, legally an adult. He ran away from a terribly abusive situation in New York earlier in the summer, and he's been with us since the twenty-first of June, when Kyle and Tim found him in a parking lot. He had to have emergency surgery the day he came to our house as the result of the abuse his step-father did to him, and he's been with us ever since. He has no place to go, and he's too old for the state to take care of."

"My God," Ralph said.

"Of course you know about Chris being a foster son for three weeks. We were devastated when he had to leave, Ralph."

"Somehow, the trip out here let me know that, Kevin," he said.

"We had another boy living with us this summer for six weeks, but he was really a house guest, not a foster son," I said.

"Another gay kid?"

I nodded.

"Is this Seth you're talking about," he asked.

"Yeah, it was Seth," I said.

"Did Chris know him?"

"No. We met him in February, and we didn't see him again until mid-June. He's our New Orleans boy," I said. "His dad works with my sister-in-law. That's basically how we got to know him. He's as much an honorary foster son as Jus, Jeff, and Alex.

"Actually, Tim and Kyle are honorary foster sons, too. They officially live with their parents. Tim was a foster son for about six months when his dad was on a ship in the Indian Ocean because of the war in Afghanistan, but that was all done privately, not through the foster care system of the state. Our only real link to Kyle is that his parents asked Rick and me to be his guardian if they were both killed. He'll be eighteen in November, though. Oh, and we also work for his father and will ultimately work for him one day, probably."

"Kyle is the one Chris talked about the most," Ralph said. "He really loves that boy."

"I'm not surprised. We all do, and Kyle was the one of us who spent the most time on Chris's care when he was with us. Kyle is an unbelievable kid, Ralph. Do you know anything about the concept of the alpha male?"

"You mean like in a wolf pack," he asked.

"Yes. Scientists are studying the existence of human alphas, now, though, and Kyle fits the description to a tee," I said.

"I hadn't conceptualized it that way, but I can see what you mean," he said.

"He can be extremely dominant, and the rest of them yield to him as though it was his birthright. He's never obnoxious about it, fortunately, and he's got a good heart and a whole lot of character. He called me Adolph earlier this summer when I wanted to discuss an issue that he wasn't interested in discussing. The fact is, Kyle has enough power over people that he could be another Adolph Hitler."

"Whoa! That's pretty scary."

"That won't ever happen, but that's the kind of effect he can have on people," I said.

"Dave told me Kyle really scared him yesterday morning. Then he said that Kyle was really just joking and that Chris knew it all the time," Ralph said.

"What did Kyle do?"

"Evidently, he and Tim and Justin and Brian had gotten up early. They had gone down to eat breakfast. When they came into the room, Kyle kicked the bed Dave and Chris were in, and it scared Dave. He said Kyle was talking about breaking a boy's arm and wishing he had drowned him over some surfing incident. It wasn't that clear to me, but Dave also said Chris seemed to know Kyle was teasing. Kyle jumped in bed with the two of them and actually ended up kissing Dave on his forehead when Kyle realized he had scared Dave."

"That's classic Kyle, Ralph. He would die before he hurt Chris or stood by while somebody else did. This trip was Kyle's idea, and he organized every detail of it. The four boys all paid their own way, and Trixie's way, too. Rick and I only paid for ourselves. This is actually a bad time for Rick and me to be away from work, but we knew it had to be now if it was ever going to happen."

"So you guys wanted to be here just as much as they did," he said.

"Yep," I said.

The boys and Rick started coming in from their lake activities just then. Kyle got the cooking organized, and he and Chris had caught some pretty nice fish for dinner. We had steaks to eat, and they were great with grilled fish. It was just another pool party for Kyle, only the pool was one of the most magnificent lakes I had ever seen.

(Justin's Perspective)

I couldn't believe I was in Montana. I mean, they had already taken me on some awesome trips, but they were nothing compared to this. It was going to end up costing me about fifteen hundred bucks, but it was worth every penny of it. It was a good thing we were staying at a hotel that was the same brand as one of the ones the Goodsons had. The room was \$19.95 a night because of that, divided four ways. And it wasn't one of those places where you had to hand out a tip every time you turned around. This place was much more my speed than that place in Boston had been. And you know what? I slept just as good and had just as much fun as I had had at the one in Boston. Maybe more.

The thing for me was the ride from Missoula to Glacier National Park. It was unbelievable. I couldn't wait to see the pictures Kyle was taking. It was going to be all color pictures, and I saw colors I didn't even know names for.

We camped the first night at Bowman Lake, and that was about the prettiest thing I had ever seen. We made camp around three o'clock in the afternoon, and Brian and I went out in a canoe. Of course, we had Trixie with us.

"You want to do some parking, Little Buddy," I said.

Brian's face lit up.

"I think Trixie needs to use the bathroom," he said.

We beached the canoe out of sight of everybody but God, and we went to town. None of us had gotten laid the night before or that morning because of Chris and Dave in the room with us, and that was all right. Brian and I needed each other, though, and we took advantage of the privacy we found. Ole Trixie sat sentry duty over us, but she didn't try to horn in on our play. It was like she knew.

When we were done, we were nasty.

"Let's wash off in the lake," Bri said.

"Okay," I said.

We splashed in and sort of did a belly flop into the water. I lost my breath, it was so damn cold.

"This is ice water," I gasped.

Brian laughed, but I knew he was cold, too.

"This is the coldest fucking water I've ever felt," I said.

He was laughing at me, but I noticed he jumped up out of it right away, too. His dick was the size of an acorn, a small acorn like we got in Florida, and he didn't even have any balls that you could see. I looked down, and I was the same way.

"The lake monster ate our dicks," I said.

The one thing about Brian, after he's been fucked, he thinks everything I say is hilarious. He laughed hard at my comment. I really didn't think it was all that funny. I grabbed him up in a big hug, and we kissed standing in that ice bucket.

"I love you so much," I said. "You and Tim were right. The idea Kyle and I had was stupid," I said.

"Jus, wanting to get Chris laid wasn't stupid. It was sweet. We just have to figure out another way to do it," he said.

I had my arm around his shoulders, and he was rubbing my chest and my nipples while we were standing there. Ice water or not, here came the dicks.

"At least they ain't broke," I said.

We laughed, we went to shore, and we did it again.

* * *

Kyle's idea was we would pull lots to see who slept with who in the tents. He got three little sticks and three bigger sticks and kept them in his fist. You couldn't tell which was which. We each chose one, and it ended up that me, Kyle, and Chris would bunk together. That was cool with me. It was cool with everybody.

I told the story while we ate about us going in. I didn't tell why we went in, just that we did. They all thought that was funny as hell.

"What all turned blue," Kyle asked.

"The usual," I said.

"What do you mean, 'the usual'?"

"Everything that sticks out. Ears, nose, lips. Take it from there, Kyle," I said.

"Everything?"

Everybody was laughing their ass off except me and Kyle. I wasn't going to let him get me last, and I knew he was fixing to. I just wasn't going to let him.

"Yeah, everything. You ever seen half of a blueberry Popsicle?"

They all lost it then, even Kyle.

"You got me last, you bastard," he said, and they all laughed some more.

I let it go that he was definitely right about the bastard part. He didn't mean it that way, and I knew he didn't. Plus, I didn't care.

After we got in our tents, Chris said he had to go to the bathroom. All three of us were buck naked. There were facilities at that place, but it was too rough to ride him over in his chair. Kyle picked him up--he wasn't heavy at all--and the two of us took him outside.

"Just do it here," Kyle said. "Aim that thing."

Chris started laughing.

"I have to pee, but that's not all," Chris said.

"Oh, okay," Kyle said.

Me and him marched him down to the bathroom building. It wasn't too bad, and it didn't stink like I thought it would. Kyle set him on the toilet.

"Justin, I need some help. Talk to me like you did the day of Tim's birthday party," Chris said.

That was the day he shit all over me after he fell on the floor from laughing so hard. Kyle knew what had happened, and me and him laughed hard. Chris was laughing, too.

"Kyle, be ready to catch him if he starts falling off," I said. "I've been there once. I ain't going back."

We all laughed some more.

Chris made a loud fart, and then we heard it hitting the water. I knew one of us was going to have to wipe him, and I really didn't mind doing that, and I knew Kyle didn't mind, either. To my surprise, he got him a wad of toilet paper in his left hand and went after his butt. He wiped himself.

"Dave always checks me," he said.

"Do we need to," Kyle asked.

"No. See."

He held up the last bundle of toilet paper he had used on himself, and it was clean.

"You're making so much progress, I can't even stand it," Kyle said.

Chris got really serious all of a sudden, which wasn't like him.

"Kyle and Jus, I've made an awful lot of progress since I've been here. When I was in Florida, I had PT once a week in school, and OT once every two weeks. Here I have one or the other every day except Sunday, and I'm not even in school right now. It's all through the university. If my dad didn't teach there, I wouldn't be getting it, probably. And I'm going to walk with crutches pretty soon. They've convinced me I can, and I'm not stopping till I do it. I'm not as involved as I thought I was, and I'm going to be independent one day, like you guys are."

I looked at Kyle, and he had huge tears running down his face.

"You're going to be a family man one day, too, aren't you," Kyle said.

"I hope so. I want to have two little boys. I'm going to name the first one Kyle Timothy Uhle, and I'm going to name the second one Justin Brian Uhle," he said. "And I want the four of you to be their godparents."

Kyle was already crying when Chris said that, but then I started, too.

"Happy tears," Chris asked.

"The happiest," Kyle said.

"Let's get back to the tent before they drink all the booze," Chris said.

Kyle and I carried that boy back to our tent over our heads, and the three of us were laughing our

asses off.

Who should we find in our tent but--you guessed it--Brian, Tim, and Dave.

"Where have you all been," Brian asked.

"Getting happy," Kyle said.

"Have you guys been smoking weed," Dave asked.

"No, we don't do that," I said. "Just being good friends, Dave."

I had smoked weed many times in my past, but the subject had never even come up in a serious way since I was at Kevin and Rick's house. I figured Kyle had had a toke or two in the past, but he and Tim and Brian didn't seem to be interested in it. I would have smoked me a joint if somebody had handed it to me, but I didn't really crave it. I knew Kevin and Rick would have been super pissed off if I had bought some and brought it home, so I hadn't even pursued it. Not that it wasn't available. That just wasn't something they did, so I didn't do it, either. I had done a little cocaine, too, in the past, but I wasn't about to go there with them.

"Would anybody like a drink," Kyle asked.

The same four who wanted a drink on Sunday night wanted one on Monday night, too.

The three of us from our tent were already naked so Brian, Tim, and Dave got naked, too. Dave got a hard-on. I knew he had had one the night before, but it wasn't that noticeable and nobody commented. That night, though, he couldn't hide it, no matter what.

"This is embarrassing," Dave said.

We had a little battery-powered lantern, and we could see his face get red.

"What did we tell you about being brothers and not being embarrassed around us," Kyle asked.

"I know, but still. None of you are hard," Dave said.

"Just leave it alone. It'll go down," Tim said. "Kyle, can I see you a minute in the other tent? I need to ask you about something."

"Sure, Babe."

They took their drinks with them. The four of us started laughing as soon as they were out of hearing.

"What do you think Tim's going to ask him," Brian asked, laughing.

"Probably something like, 'Babe, my ass itches deep inside. Would you scratch it for me with your dick,'" I said.

They all screamed with laughter.

"No, I think Tim will say, 'Kyle, I didn't get enough to eat tonight. Can I have a hotdog?'" Chris said.

Dave's hard-on didn't go down any, and I guess all the sexy talk wasn't helping him with that. I thought it was pretty funny. I made another drink for the three of us who were drinking. I lit up a smoke and offered them to Dave. He took one, and Chris wanted one, too. I figured we were corrupting the Montana boys, but not any more than they wanted to be corrupted.

After about forty-five minutes, Kyle and Tim came back. Their dicks were smaller than they usually were soft, and that, to me, was a sign. Plus, Kyle's was wet on the end. You tell me! Kyle poured himself another drink.

"How was it," I asked.

"How was what," Kyle asked.

"Sex. What do you think I'm talking about," I asked.

"We didn't have sex," Kyle said.

"Will you say that on your honor, Kyle," Brian asked.

I forgot about that Scout's honor thing. I needed to remember that.

"No," Kyle said, grinning his fool head off.

"That's what I thought," I said.

"Don't you need to ask Brian something in private," Tim asked.

"Nope. We already did it. Twice," I said.

"When," Kyle demanded.

"While you and Tim were gone," I said.

"Where?"

"Right here," I said, "with them watching. Why you reckon Dave's got that boner?"

"Seriously, when did you guys do it," Kyle asked.

"This afternoon. That's why we got in the water. To clean up," I said. "Something I don't recommend doing, by the way. That lake is ice water."

"Are you guys shocked," Tim asked Chris and Dave.

"Hell, no," Chris said. "I know you guys have sex. I just wish I could."

"I'm ready anytime you are, Bubba," I said.

Chris stated giggling, just like I knew he would.

"Not with you, asshole," Chris said.

"That ain't the only way to have sex with a guy," Kyle said. "With his asshole."

Chris giggled.

"How else," Dave asked.

"Well, there's oral sex. That's something we all do, right guys," Kyle asked us.

We all said yes.

"And kissing and hugging and just rubbing against one another. Just being close to one another in a sexual way," Kyle said.

"You guys don't always butt fuck," Dave asked.

"No, Dave. We do it that way, but not always," I said.

Kyle reached over and took Dave's dick in his hand. He just held it, sort of squeezing it a little.

"Just doing this is sex, isn't it," Kyle asked.

Dave was breathing hard, and I thought he wanted to get off. I knew Kyle had done that out of impulse or something, and I knew he hadn't thought it through. Kyle turned his dick loose.

"Why'd you stop," Dave asked.

"Dave, I didn't think you minded me touching it, since you didn't knock my hand away, but I didn't know what you might want," Kyle said. "We hadn't talked about it or anything. And we're right here with everybody. I'm sorry if I led you on, but that's not what I meant to do."

"What you did felt good, Kyle," Dave said.

"I know," Kyle said. "I shouldn't have done it, though."

* * *

After the younger guys went to their tent, Kyle made the three of us a third drink. I was beginning to feel it a little bit, but I wasn't drunk or anything.

"I feel like a turd," Kyle said, once we had our drinks.

"Why? Because of what you did to Dave," Chris asked.

"Yeah, man. That was so wrong of me," he said.

"I don't think Dave minded, Bubba," Chris said.

"I know he didn't mind me touching him, but he thought I was going to jerk him off. That was never what I intended to do," Kyle said.

"Kyle, I think Dave has a crush on you," Chris said.

"What?! How can that be," Kyle asked, genuinely surprised.

"Is Dave gay," I asked.

"I don't know for sure, but I'd say the chances are pretty good," Chris said. "His two best friends are gay. Or at least they act like they are. They act like sissies."

"That doesn't mean they're gay, Chris," Kyle said.

"I know it's not proof, but I think they're gay. My two best friends are gay, only they don't act like sissies," Chris said.

"Who are they," Kyle asked.

I knew Chris was talking about him and me, but that dumbass had a thick head that night.

"He's talking about us, shit-for-brains. You and me, Kyle," I said.

"Were you really talking about us," Kyle asked.

"Of course," Chris said.

"We love you, Chris," Kyle said.

"I know you do, and I love you, too. Unlike my brother, though, I don't want to have sex with you," Chris said. "Or you, either, Jus."

"Having you guys come all the way to fucking Montana to see me has made me the happiest person in the world. When I'm at physical therapy or occupational therapy, and they're pushing my ass so hard I want to cry, I think of the two of you. That makes me work harder than even my therapists want me to work. I'm always going to have CP, guys, but I'm not always going to be the gimped up little shrimp I was in Florida. I've gained ten pounds since I've been here, and every bit of that is muscle. There's not much I can do about my right side. That's the part that isn't responding well, and it probably never will. But my left side isn't affected all that much, and that's what's going to let me walk. I won't ever run like Rick and you guys, but I'm damn sure going to walk."

"I think we should get together every six months for a progress check," Kyle said.

"I wish," Chris said.

All three of us had dicks as hard as rocks, the two queers and the straight guy.

"Christopher, I'm going to get your ass up on skis on Grand Lagoon in Emerald Beach, Florida, one of these days," Kyle said.

"Yes, you will, Kyle," Chris said. "I promise you that, my brother."

(David's Perspective)

When Kyle grabbed my dick, I thought I was going to heaven. I really didn't think he intended to jerk me off right there in public, but I could hope.

I had never met anybody like Kyle before. He was really good looking, really smart, and really well built. He was funny as hell, too, and most of the time he was really nice. But there was something about him that scared me.

A lot of the time, Kyle was gruff. I mean, he didn't say mean things except to tease, and a lot of the time he just talked regular, most of the time, in fact. But when he talked to Justin or Chris or Rick, he talked gruff. It was real confusing because I knew he wasn't being mean. It was like their form of humor or something. He talked to Trixie like that, too, and she lapped it up.

Kyle scared me bad when he kicked the bed Monday morning to wake me and Chris up. Chris was laughing, but he scared me. He was a much bigger boy than I was, and I knew he could whip my ass, if he wanted to. When he jumped into that bed, I thought it was all over for me. I knew I hadn't done anything to piss him off, but I was still scared of him. He ended up kissing me on the forehead, though.

All that aside, Kyle was the boy I wanted. Meeting the Florida boys and getting to know them let

me know it was okay if it turned out I was gay. I don't think I had ever met a happier bunch of people in my life, and they really seemed to love one another. If I could be like them, I didn't give a shit if I was gay.

Chapter 11

(Jeff's Perspective)

I had really mixed feelings about not going with them to Montana. I knew Chris, of course, and I liked him a lot. I hadn't really done that much with him, though, like Kyle, Jus, and the others had. The bottom line, though, was Tyler wanted us to go on vacation together.

Tyler was shaping up to be a really incredible guy. He was a whole lot like Clay, and I was beginning to realize that Clay wasn't the only person I could ever love. I still loved him, of course, as I always would, but he was gone. Tyler was there. Ty wanted us to live together, and I figured a two-week vacation, where we were together constantly, would help me sort that out. I was right.

"Did you have fun tonight," Tyler asked me. We had just made love after a night at several gay clubs in South Beach in Miami.

"I had fun because I was with you, but I would have had more fun with you holding me, watching TV, and eating that treat stuff Kyle makes back in Emerald Beach," I said.

He squeezed me.

"I was hoping you'd say that," he said.

"We're pathetic. We're both home-bodies, aren't we," I said.

"Yeah, we are, but what's pathetic about that? That's what we enjoy," he said.

"It's not really pathetic. I was just joking," I said. "I think most guys our age like the club scene, though."

"Yeah, and I think we do, too, in moderation. I mean, a pitcher of lemonade in my house when I was a kid was a celebration."

I laughed.

"We weren't quite that subdued, but it was close," I said.

"Jeff, there's something we have to face and deal with, dude," he said.

I didn't like the way he said that. I was leaning against his chest, so I couldn't see his face.

"What, Ty," I asked.

"Jeff, the fact of the matter is, I'm in love with you. Head over heels, man. You're everything I ever want."

That made me gasp for breath. It was at that moment that I knew I felt the same way about him.

"Me, too," I said.

"What?"

"I'm in love with you, too, Ty. I hadn't formulated it mentally that way until just now, but that's what I am. I'm in love with you. I love you."

"Don't tease me, now. Don't say 'got you last,'" he said.

"This is no 'got you last,' Ty," I said. "I mean it. I love you, and I think it's probably for good."

He squeezed me tight. Then he kissed the top of my head.

"Probably?"

"Well, definitely, if you live, but given my history . . ."

He laughed.

"I'm going to live, dude," he said.

"I know. Will we live together?"

"Jeff, nothing would make me happier than living with you. Loving you every day. Seeing you

there when I came home from work. Oh, man."

"I've got money. Did you know that? Did you know Gene Goodson pays me every month as a manager trainee? I thought he did that as a kind of scholarship or something, when I was at the University of Florida, and I thought it would end in May, when I actually went to work for him. But it didn't end. I still get a check every two weeks, plus what I make as a bellhop."

"Who signs the check," Ty asked.

"Kevin," I said.

"Duh!!! What the fuck, man?! Mr. Goodson doesn't even know you're still on the payroll. It's Kevin, man. He's the one giving you that money every month."

"Yeah, I guess."

"You guess?! Kevin knows Mr. Goodson wants you taken care of, Jeff. He's doing it, man."

"I told you that about the money to say I think we can live together in a nice place, if you want to," I said.

"Are you really willing for us to live together," he asked.

"Yeah, I am," I said.

"Jeff, that is a done deal, just as soon as we get back to Emerald Beach. This makes me so happy," he said.

"It makes me happy, too."

We kissed, and we made love again.

(Alex's Perspective)

I couldn't believe they let me stay at their house while they were gone. I would have loved to go to Montana with them, or anywhere, really, but I couldn't afford it. Plus, I didn't know the guy they went to see, and I would have felt like a third wheel on a bicycle.

I went to work that morning, as usual, and Mr. Rooney caught me as I was clocking in.

"Alex, come into my office, please," he said.

My stomach did a flip-flop. I had no idea what he wanted.

"Alex, I'll get right to the point. Seth Mathews quit, as did Kyle Goodson. I'm sure you knew that."

"Yes, sir, I knew that."

"I want you to work in the bell service. What do you think?"

"Yes, sir, I can do that," I said.

"Good. I think you can do it, too. Let's go talk to Jason, the Bell Captain."

That's how I started. I didn't expect that, but I was ready.

To my surprise, Mr. Rooney had already talked to Cody about becoming a bellhop. He was a valet parker, which wasn't a bad job, except that you had to be outside so much. Being outside might sound pretty good, but when the temperature's 95 degrees, with 95% humidity, it's not that good. They would let the guys come in to cool off, but they basically had to be outside.

Jason the Bell Captain told me I had to shadow Stephen for a day or so to learn what I had to do. I knew who Stephen was because he had been to a party at Kevin and Rick's house, but I didn't really know him.

Stephen was pleasant enough, and he actually knew who I was from having seen me at the party. He told me what I had to do, and I went with him when he made three or four room calls, including room service. It wasn't very difficult, that was for sure, and Stephen had the kind of personality that let him talk freely with the guests. I think he probably got better tips because he was so friendly.

"You're ready to be on your own," Stephen said, after a few hours.

"Cool," I said.

"Let's grab some lunch, and then we'll talk to Jason," he said.

Cody was in the serving line right in front of me. He was his usual cheerful self, and you couldn't help liking him. He had one of the nicest smiles I had ever seen, and he was really very good looking.

"Are you missing Seth," I asked Cody, once we had found a table.

"Yeah, sort of," he said. "I've had email from him every day since he left."

"What's he up to," I asked.

"Well, his dad bought him a weight set, and he joined a gym, too," Cody said. "You probably don't know this, but he gained ten pounds while he was here. He really got into the physical fitness stuff."

"How long was he here," I asked.

"Just six weeks. That's pretty amazing, don't you think?"

"I don't know. I'm not really into body building and weights and all," I said.

"That's a lot of weight for just six weeks," Cody said. "Have you heard from Kevin and Rick or anybody?"

"Yeah. Kevin called last night to check on me. They're camping, but they had gone into a store to buy food or something. He called me from there. They're having a great time," I said.

"I miss going over to their house," Cody said.

"Well, come over after work. I've been pretty bored there by myself. I watched all the porn videos Kyle has, and TV doesn't interest me that much. They watch baseball all the time, and that bores me, too. But having them all there is always fun," I said.

Cody followed me to Kevin and Rick's house after work. I was driving Justin's truck, and most of the other cars were there. Rick's SUV was at the airport, though.

"Do you want a snack," I asked.

"Yeah, but I'll get something later. I'm not exactly a stranger here, you know?"

"True. You feel like swimming?"

"Sure," he said.

I had spent hours and hours with Cody when he and Seth were dating, and I thought I knew him pretty well. That was in a group, though. When it was just the two of us, I felt a little self-conscious.

We went out to the pool area and stripped on the patio. We had done that a hundred times, and I had seen every inch of Cody before. That day, though, my eyes felt drawn to his body. His pecs, in particular, interested me, and his ass was an eye-magnet, as far as I was concerned.

"You like what you see," he asked, jokingly.

I'm sure I blushed.

"Sorry," I said, and I looked away.

"It's okay. You can look all you want, as long as I can look at you, too," he said.

We both laughed, and we dove into the pool. We fooled around, swimming some, splashing one another some, standing talking some, too.

"Tell me about those porn videos," he said.

"They're actually pretty good. No plot, of course, or barely one, anyway. They're in German or Czech or some language like that, so you really couldn't follow an elaborate story, even if there was one. Lots of hot skin, though," I said.

"You're bi, right," Cody asked.

"Not really. I thought that when I first came here, but I know I'm gay," I said. "Not that I've had any experience either way."

"Well, I think you're cute as hell," he said.

I blushed some more. Why was he making me feel so strange? He wasn't doing or saying anything out of line, but I just felt sort of weird around him. I wasn't uncomfortable, exactly, and I sure didn't want him to leave. It was just unusual.

"I didn't have any experience when I met Seth," he said, after a longish pause.

"Really?"

I knew that was totally lame, but I felt like I had to say something. I mean, he was only eighteen, same as me, and if I didn't have any experience, why should he necessarily have any?

"Do you find me attractive? I mean, in a sexual way," he asked.

Get right to the point, why don't you, I thought. Of course I find you sexually attractive, I thought. Do you think I'm blind?

"Er, . . ."

"You don't have to answer that," he said. "That was way too forward of me."

"No, that's okay," I said.

"Let's get out and get a snack," he said.

Phew! I thought. Good plan.

We dried off, but we didn't get dressed. The custom was to hang around in the nude after a swim, if you felt like it, and I really wasn't interested in putting my sweaty uniform back on.

There wasn't a whole lot of food in the place. Kyle had made up a big batch of that stuff they called Tick Supreme, with raisins, peanuts, and M & M's, before they left. He had wanted to take it, but at the last minute they decided it was too much trouble to try to wedge it in somebody's suitcase. They left it.

"You want a beer," I asked Cody.

"Yeah, that'd be good," he said.

We took our beers and the jar of Tick Supreme out to the patio. It was still afternoon by the sun, even though it was a little after six o'clock. We sat at a table, and I poured some of the treat out into a bowl I had brought out.

"This stuff is so good," Cody said.

"I know," I said. Then, after a pause, "Are you and Seth still boyfriends?"

"No," he said with a sigh. "We're still very good friends, though."

"It would be pretty tough being boyfriends so far apart," I said.

"That's what he said. I know he's right, but he was my first one ever. I cried a good bit when he left."

"Were you in love with him?"

"I love him like a good friend, or a brother, even, but we weren't really in love with each other."

"Do you mind talking about this," I asked.

"Not at all."

We hung out for a while. Eventually, we shot some pool, and Cody went home around nine. I went up to my room--Brian's room, really--and surfed the Web a while. I read a couple of stories from the Nifty Archive, and I ended up jerking off. No surprise there. What did surprise me a little, though, was I kept seeing Cody's face in my mind's eye as I was doing it.

* * *

The next day at work Cody asked me if I liked to bowl.

"Sure," I said. "I'm not real good, but I like it."

"You want to go bowling tonight?"

It was a Friday, so we didn't have to get up for work the next morning.

"Yeah. That sounds like fun," I said.

"I'll pick you up around six, okay," he said.

"Cool," I said.

He picked me up right on time. We had both showered and put on shorts and tee shirts. That was pretty much the uniform of Emerald Beach, along with deck shoes and no socks.

"You smell good, man," he said when I got in the car.

"Thanks. I kind of rummaged around a little bit in Justin and Brian's bathroom and found some aftershave."

"Did you shave?"

"Not tonight. I did this morning, though. I just splashed it on to smell good," I said.

"Cool."

We went to the little bar and grill where we always went. One of the waiters that I had noticed a few times before waited on us.

"Do you think he's cute," Cody asked after he had taken our orders and left our table.

"Yeah, I think he's cute. Do you?"

"Yeah. Very."

"Do you think he's gay," I asked.

"Yeah. Very."

He said that with exactly the same intonation he had used to answer my first question. I laughed. I felt much more at ease with him than I had the night before. Maybe having clothes on made the difference.

"Do you think he thinks we're gay," I asked.

"Only if he saw me doing this."

Saying that, he ran his hand up my bare inner thigh, and the feeling was electric.

"You're going to make me stiff, if you don't stop," I said.

"And being stiff would be bad because . . ."

He was grinning, and I grinned back.

"Because it'll make my shorts get all wet," I said.

We both laughed.

"You're too vain," he said. "I find a wet spot on a guy's shorts pretty interesting."

He took his hand away then, and the waiter delivered our salads. That boy grinned at us.

"See, he saw," I said.

"So what?"

"So nothing." After a pause and a few bites of salad, I asked, "Are we on a date?"

"Well, I thought we were. Do you want us to be?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Have you ever had a date with a boy before," he asked.

"No, this is the first one," I said.

"But you've had dates before, haven't you? With girls, I mean?"

"Well, sort of, for school dances and stuff like that. Never just to go out with a girl because I was interested in her, though," I said. "I just never did that."

"I never did it, either," he said. "And I know what you mean about dances and proms and stuff like that. You sort of had to do it, and I always had a good time, but my good-night kisses were speed record-breakers."

I laughed, and he did, too.

"I know what you mean," I said.

As the meal progressed, we joked around more and more. I felt whatever self-consciousness that was left over from the night before melt away.

When the check came, I said,

"This may be a date, but it's going to be Dutch treat, okay?"

"Oh, I never thought I was paying for both of us," he said.

"You shit," I said, and we both laughed.

On the way to the bowling center, I asked Cody to stop at a convenience store.

"I want to buy a pack of cigarettes. Do you mind if I smoke?"

"I'll tell you what. I'll pay half so I can smoke some, too," he said.

"So I guess you don't mind," I said.

We laughed.

We had fun bowling. He was pretty good, and I was awful. Naturally, we were in a lane right next to a man and his two sons, who must have been eight and ten. Those little boys were awesome, and the man was fantastic. I, of course, threw gutter balls almost as often as they threw strikes, and every time I did it the younger kid would look at me and grin. He was a little shit. A very cute little shit, but a little shit, nevertheless.

When we finished bowling and went outside, the heat was almost overwhelming. It was around ten o'clock, and it must have been close to ninety degrees. Cody and I both took our tee shirts off.

"You want to ride around a while," he asked.

"Sure," I said.

The Strip, as they called it, was bumper-to-bumper, and we rarely got up over ten miles an hour. There were as many people on the pedestrian areas as there were in cars, and people kept darting between the cars to cross the road.

"This is the first time I've been out here on a Friday night," I said. "I haven't really done much away from the house and away from work since I've been here."

"So you really haven't sampled Emerald Beach night life, have you," he asked.

"Not really. Kyle and Justin and those guys go out, but it's always with their boyfriends or with other friends. I just haven't felt real comfortable tagging along, you know?"

We were passing what appeared to be a huge nightclub. There were a million cars parked in a gigantic parking lot and all up and down the street, too.

"What's this," I asked.

"This is Club La Vela, supposedly the largest nightclub in the country. Next door is Spinnaker, and next to that is Pineapple Willy's. These three clubs, and a couple of slightly smaller ones a little way down, are the center of what's happening on the beach at night," he said. "Do you want to go in?"

"Will they let us in?"

"Yeah. You just have to be eighteen to get in. Twenty-one to drink, but my cousin works the door here, and he'll give us a twenty-one wrist band."

"Yeah. Let's go in. I've never been in a place like this," I said.

We saw some people leaving, so we followed them to their car. False alarm. They were just out to smoke pot. We followed another group, and they actually left. We got their parking place.

We walked up to the entrance, and there was a crowd trying to get in. Cody sort of snuck us around to the side to find his cousin. He spotted him, but he was busy.

"Champ," Cody called out. He said it two or three times, a little louder each time.

After a couple of times, I could tell the guy had heard him, and he looked around.

"Champ! Over here, man," Cody screamed.

He definitely heard that, and his face broke into a huge grin when he saw Cody. He told one of the guys who was working with him to pick up his slack for a few minutes, and I could tell the guy wasn't any too happy about it. Champ came over to us.

"What the fuck are you doing here," Champ said.

"We want to get in," Cody said. "This is my friend, Alex Stewart. Let us in."

"You can't get in here, asshole. Gimme a hug."

Cody and Champ hugged.

"What do you mean we can't get in? We're both eighteen," Cody said.

"Bullshit. You ain't eighteen," Champ said.

"What do you mean, I ain't eighteen. You were at my fucking birthday dinner and at my fucking graduation. Don't you remember?"

Champ got this sort of far-away look on his face.

"Shit, I been smoking way too much. I remember now. Did I give you a present?"

"Yeah. You gave me two presents, in fact. One for each. Really nice ones, too," Cody said.

Champ got this strange look on his face again, like he was trying to solve a serious problem, and it was just beyond his grasp.

"Your brother told me you turned queer. Is that right?"

"I didn't turn queer. I've always been queer. I just came out to the family, that's all," Cody said.

"Oh, is that all? Will you still be my friend?"

"Champ, you are fucking wasted, man. Of course I'll still be your friend," Cody said.

"I know. I've been smoking so much, and doing lines and shit. Don't tell the rest of the family, though, okay? Promise me, Cody."

"I won't tell anybody. Just let us in, okay?"

"Okay."

He grabbed two wrist bands from the table, and he snapped them on us. They were both a sort of coral color. I saw a sign that said "Green=Teen," "Blue=New (18)," and "Pink=Drink."

"How much," Cody asked.

"Just a big hug, Billy," Champ said.

"Billy's my little brother. I'm Cody, remember?"

"Shit! Of course I do, buddy. Get your asses in there. And have fun," he said.

"Whoa," I said.

"I know. He's had way too much Emerald Beach summer," Cody said.

The lobby was crawling with people. I read the dress code, and shorts and tee shirts didn't quite make the code at night. That's not to say half the people we saw weren't dressed that way, though. I read another sign that said that place had 48 bar stations, 10 theme rooms, 3 band stages, and 14 dance floors. The official capacity listed by the fire marshal was 7,000. A couple of theme rooms were for teens between fifteen and eighteen. I didn't know anything about nightclubs, but that seemed really big to me. Like maybe it really was the biggest nightclub in the country.

"This isn't officially a gay club, but there are supposed to be a couple of rooms where gay guys congregate. Do you want to find them?"

"Sure," I said.

We found one pretty quickly. We went in, and it was mostly guys, but there were some girls in there, too. Cody asked me if I wanted a beer, and I said I did. The music was way too loud to talk, though.

There was no hope of sitting down. There were tables, of course, surrounding the dance floor, but they were all taken. There was a shelf on the wall around the room, and we found a relatively empty place on that shelf.

"Do you want to dance," Cody asked.

"Sure," I said.

We set our beers on the shelf and took off our shirts. We draped them around our cups of beer to mark them as ours, and we danced. I basically had two left feet when it came to dancing, but Cody was really good. Nobody cared if I could dance or not, though, and I got caught up in the general mayhem of the place. I was soon sweating like a bull, but everybody else was, too. It was like this sea of hot, sweaty male bodies, and I knew that's where I belonged. For the first time in my life, guys were checking me out openly and flagrantly, and I was doing the same to them. It was totally liberating.

After we had danced for a long time, and had drunk a couple of beers, Cody said,

"Let's get a snack. You want to?"

"Yeah," I said.

We each got a sandwich and one order of nachos to share. We switched from beer to coke.

"What do you think of this place," Cody asked.

We were out on an enormous deck overlooking the Gulf, at a table, and we could actually hear one another.

"It's pretty unbelievable," I said. "I've never been to anything like this."

"I know. It's so big, and there are so many people. They open at ten in the morning, and they stay open until four in the morning. And there is a crowd of people here all the time. This was the headquarters of MTV during Spring Break."

"Do you think Kevin and Rick come here," I asked.

"I'm sure they've been here, but this doesn't really seem like their style, you know?"

"I do know. They're sort of like family guys."

"Yeah," I said. "I think they'd rather be camping in Montana than bustin' loose on that dance floor."

He and I both laughed because we both knew that was exactly what they would rather be doing.

"Let's walk around a little bit more and then go home, okay," he said.

"Okay," I said.

(Chris's Perspective)

When Kyle called to say they wanted to come see me, I just about had a fit. The time I had spent with them in Emerald Beach was absolutely the best time of my life, and I loved them a whole lot more than I did my dad, at that point.

My parents divorced when I was like one year old, or younger. They had been sweethearts in college, and they had gotten married on their own, without a big wedding or anything. I was born ten months after they married, and I think they probably realized they had gotten married too young. My mom never said anything bad about my dad, the whole time I was with her. I knew she didn't really love him anymore, if she ever had, but she didn't hate him, either.

I don't really have any recollection of not being in a wheelchair, but there must have been a time when I wasn't. Mine had been a very difficult birth, and it had ended up that I was born by caesarian. That meant they had to cut my mother open to get me out of her. That happens a lot, but the doctor might have waited just a few minutes too long, in my case. That might be why I had Cerebral Palsy.

Anyway, that wasn't something to dwell on. I mean, I was the way I was, and there wasn't anything I could do about it.

When I lived in Florida with my mom, I went to lots of doctors, of course. They all pretty much said the same thing. Half of my body was moderately screwed up, and the other half was only a little screwed up. I started going to physical therapy when I was little, but then the funding for that dried up somehow. When I started pre-school, I started back on therapy, but it was only once a week or so. I don't know if that did any good or not, but it satisfied the law that the public schools had to follow.

About ten years later my mom got cancer. It was the bad kind, and she went down, down, down, real fast. My grandparents, her parents, looked after me, but her medical needs came first. I mean, I wasn't sick at all. I was real healthy, in fact. I was just gimped up with CP. They didn't know I needed more than I was getting at school.

Finally my mom died. My grandparents loved me to death, and I knew that, but I also knew they couldn't really take care of me. My grandmother had a stroke, and they had to put me in foster care until my dad could come get me. That foster care was the time in Emerald Beach, and it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

I found myself in the home of a gay couple who had a bunch of gay boys living there. I knew I wasn't gay, or at least I thought I knew that, but those boys were so incredibly nice to me, I would have cheerfully turned gay if I could have. I actually fell in love with them. I don't mean that in a gay, sexual way, because that wasn't part of it at all. They were my brothers to the core, and if one couldn't take care of me like I needed, the other one did. They teased the hell out of me for being a crip or a gimp or whatever, but they did that out of love, not meanness. You can always tell the difference.

I teased them a lot, too, though, and I got them last as many times as they got me last. My favorite was Kyle, but Justin, Tim, and Brian were very close seconds. Justin was sort of the most unusual one because of his accent and his dead-pan approach to everything. He and Kyle were best friends, and those two boys went after each other tooth and nail. But it was always in fun. Always.

Tim and Brian were younger and quieter. They were best friends, too, and sometimes they played with me without Kyle and Justin being there. Kyle and Jus always wanted to do physical stuff, like swim or ski or shoot pool or play basketball. Tim and Brian would play board games with me or just watch TV. And TV wasn't always a baseball game, like it was with Kyle and Justin. It was news or sitcoms or movies.

The three weeks I spent in Emerald Beach were probably the happiest days of my life because of those boys. When I came to Missoula, my dad and Betty, my mom now, and David, my brother, made me feel welcome. The third day there, though, they had me at the doctor's. That guy spent three hours with me, uninterrupted. He and my dad were friends, so I guess I got better treatment than most, but there wasn't an inch of me he didn't test for something. And yes, he examined that, too, and, yes, it did get hard. My dad was in the room with me when that happened, and he got embarrassed. It had happened so many times with the boys in Emerald Beach that I didn't even think twice about it.

That's when I got into therapy. The doctor said I hadn't been given the therapy I needed. A lot of what I thought was CP was just from the lack of working me out. He said on that very first day that he thought I should be able to walk, and he said I would have to show courage and determination to do it. He told me it wouldn't be easy. I wanted to do it, though. I wanted to one day be able to walk down the street with Kyle, Justin, and the others. And by God, I was going to do it, or die trying.

(Brian's Perspective)

Going to Montana was a real adventure. Chris and I were very good friends, and I guess you could say he and I loved each other as friends do. I guess I somehow missed the fact that he had a brother, though. The rest of them seemed to know that, but it came as a surprise to me when they met

us at the airport.

David was almost exactly my age. I had a couple of weeks on him, but that was all. He and I were almost the same size, too, and we both had dark hair and dark eyes. He didn't have much of a tan, though. None of them did. He was a really nice guy, and he and I sort of hit it off. Everybody was making a lot over Chris because he was our friend, and I did it, too. But I also wanted Dave to feel comfortable with us, so I made it a point to be friendly to him.

Our days at Glacier National Park were really great. We were tent camping, and Tim, Dave, and I were in the same tent. We had canoes, and one day Dave and I went canoeing together.

"What's it like to be gay," he asked out of the blue.

"I'm not too sure I understand what you mean," I said.

"I'm not too sure I know what I want to know," he said. "Do you feel different?"

"Different than what," I asked. "I've always only ever been gay. I don't feel strange or anything, if that's what you mean. That might have to do with living in a gay household, though."

"Okay, let me put it another way. Do you feel out of place with guys who aren't gay?"

I had never really thought about that before. Did I feel out of place with straight guys? Hmm.

"I'm in the Boy Scouts, and those guys are all supposed to be straight. They all aren't, though, so maybe that's not a good example. Five of the nine Eagles in our troop are gay," I said.

He and I both laughed. I thought some more.

"I don't think I've ever been in a situation where I felt out of place because I was gay. I've felt out of place sometimes because the guys were older or younger, but that's about it. I don't think most people think I'm gay when they just meet me casually," I said.

"Oh, definitely not. Nobody would know that any of you guys are gay, just meeting you. I knew it before I met you, but I started having doubts that it was true when you guys got here," he said.

I figured I knew what those questions were all about.

"Do you think you might be gay, Dave," I asked.

He was very quiet for a few moments. Then the tears welled up in his eyes, and I knew.

"I think I might be, Brian," he said, "and it scares me to death. I've never told that to anybody before. Anybody. Not my dad or my mom. Not even Chris. Please don't tell, okay?"

"That's not for me to tell, Dave. You know, I didn't chose to be gay, and I probably wouldn't have if I had had the choice. In fact, I definitely wouldn't have. But if the fairy godfather came to me and asked me if I wanted to change, I'd say no."

He chuckled at my pun.

"You guys joke about being gay all the time, don't you," he said.

"Yeah, I guess we do. I mean, I know straight people don't joke about being straight like we joke about being gay, but I think it's the fact that we're a minority. There are only three or four black kids in my school in Emerald Beach, but when I lived in Tampa there were a lot of black kids. They used to joke and tease each other a lot about being black. We never joke and tease about being white because white people are the majority. But I think minority groups do that as a way of protecting themselves, sort of," I said.

"I don't get what you mean," Dave said.

"Okay, let me see if I can explain. Kyle, Justin, and Rick are the biggest teasers in our family. Sometimes they call somebody a faggot or a fruit or something like that to tease. If they call me those names, it can never offend me because if I am, they are, too. But if somebody else calls me a name like that, I don't bow up or go to pieces because I've heard it so much from them. Am I making any sense?"

"Yeah, I think I see what you mean. You've sort of beaten the other guy to the punch."

"Right. About two months ago, in June, anyway, Tim drove his new Jeep to the hotel where Justin and Kyle and another one of our brothers, Jeff, worked. Some guy went berserk and spray-painted the word 'faggot' on Timmy's car. I wasn't there, but I know just what happened. Kyle got so angry they had to hold him back so he wouldn't beat the guy to death. Kyle wasn't angry because the word was 'faggot.' He would have reacted the same way if the guy had spray-painted 'angel' on the car. Kyle was mad because the guy had violated Tim's car. He had only had it for a month at that point, and Tim was so proud of it."

"Shit," Dave said. "Do you guys get harassed like that a lot?"

"I'm not saying this very well. That guy didn't do that because he knew, or thought, Tim was gay. He did it because he was mentally ill. We don't get harassed at all," I said.

"Are you guys out at school," he asked.

"Kyle and Tim are, but I'm not. I mean, I probably am, since I'm with them all the time, and all, and with some other gay friends, too," I said.

"Do Kyle and Tim get picked on at school?"

"Kyle was elected student body president for next year by a huge majority. Over twelve hundred votes," I said. "No, they don't get picked on."

"No shit??!"

"No shit," I said. "Kyle's a down-home, normal, quality guy. The other guy was a pompous prick. Everybody knew Kyle was gay, too. To his credit, the other guy never made an issue of it, but it wouldn't have done him any good, if he had. The principal has a gay son who is very out in the community, and she would have probably kicked his ass if he had talked about it. But maybe he's just a fair individual, too, you know?"

"When did you know you were gay," he asked.

"When I was twelve. Looking back, I guess I always knew I was different, but that's when I decided I was gay," I said.

"Isn't that pretty young," he asked.

"I don't know. That's when I was in puberty. I guess I still am in puberty, but you know what I mean. How old were you when you first thought you might be?"

"Maybe I was a little older than you were. Did you start having sex when you were twelve?" I chuckled.

"Just with this," I said, raising my right hand. "Justin's the only person I've ever had sex with, and we're going to have our first anniversary in November."

He was quiet for a few moments.

"Brian, do you believe in God?"

"Yes."

"Do you think God hates you because you're gay?"

"Where did you get that? Your parents didn't tell you that, I know," I said.

"No, not my parents. They wouldn't care if I was gay. I know that. But you hear people say stuff like that. On TV and all," he said.

"Don't believe that stuff about God hating gays. He made us gay. Man, that belief is so anti-religion . . ."

"That's what I thought, too," he said.

"What time is it?"

"Damn! It's after five. We need to get back to camp. Brian, thank you so much for talking to me. You are such a cool guy, and I feel so much better," he said.

"Do you know what you and Chris need to do?"

"No, what?"

"You need to come to Florida to live with us for the whole summer next year, dude. You've got a houseful of brothers down there, Dave, and I know Kevin and Rick would roll out the red carpet for you guys," I said.

"We'll see," he said.

"Guaranteed jobs, and good jobs, too. A beautiful house to live in, and some pretty neat guys to be your friends. You probably don't realize this, but they're never going to let Chris go. That's just a fact. We can't be up here all summer, but you guys can sure be down there with us. Think about it."

"I will." He was quiet for a few moments. "Brian, what would you say if I said I love you?"

"I'd say I love you, too, and we're going to be friends for life."

Tears trickled down his cheeks. Happy tears.

Chapter 12

(Kyle's Perspective)

When I had promoted that trip to Montana, I had just wanted to go see Chris. I sort of thought of him as my own kid. I knew that was ridiculous, since he and I were almost the same age, but I actually did think of him that way. I mean, when he was at our house, he depended on me just like a little kid would have, and I grew to love him just like a father would a child.

What the big surprise was, though, was that place was un-fucking-believable for a photographer. That's me I'm talking about. I had no idea of the beauty of that place. I mean, we were in spots where if you did a 360 turn, every degree was more beautiful than the last one was. I took it all in with my eyes, but I couldn't help myself with the cameras. I decided to shoot most of them in digital because I knew I could get on my computer at home with Adobe PhotoShop and fine tune those pictures to make them perfect. I figured out I could turn a black and white into art in the darkroom, but nothing worked on color as well as a good computer program. I could print those pictures out on photo-quality paper on that top-of-the-line laser color printer my dad had in his office, and off to New York they would go.

I especially like to get one of the guys, or Trixie, in my shots, though. I got one of Justin nude, and it looked like his soft dick was touching the top of the mountain in the distance. He was just in silhouette, so you couldn't see his face, but you could damn sure see those incredible muscles in his gut. I got a bunch of really good ones like that. Not just of Justin; of everybody. I thought I was probably going to have to give whatever money I made on those shots to the Chris Uhle Fund of United Cerebral Palsy. It just seemed right to do that.

After Glacier National Park, we went back to Missoula for the weekend. We had kept our rooms in the hotel, since they were so cheap and all. It was still the six boys in one room. We wouldn't have it any other way.

I talked to the bell captain that Saturday night.

"Hey, dude. What's up, man," I said. "I'm a bellhop at this brand of hotel in Florida."

"Well, then, you know what's up. Not a goddamn thing. Dead as a doornail tonight."

"I was just wondering. My brother has Cerebral Palsy."

"Is he in a wheelchair? I saw a guy like that come in a little while ago."

"Yeah, he is. That's him. He's horny as hell, man."

That guy was probably twenty-two, twenty-three years old. He knew.

"Yeah? So who isn't?"

"Well, it's not like he can prowl the clubs, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. He's not gay, is he?"

"No way. He wants a woman. Do you know anybody who's into mercy-fucks of handicapped guys?"

"Yeah, one or two, probably. What's it worth to me?"

"A hundred bucks," I said.

"Yeah, I can probably make that happen. Give me a little while, okay?"

"Yeah, but not too long, okay?"

"I got you, buddy," he said.

I went up to our room and told them we had to go out to see something.

"What," Chris asked.

"Something. You've already seen it. You stay here. You won't be disappointed."

He grinned so big at me.

"You took care of me, didn't you?"

"I think I did, but I'm not a hundred percent sure. If it happens, go for it. If it doesn't happen, there'll be a next time. Like next week," I said.

"Kyle, come here," he said.

"What?"

"I love you, Bubba," he said. "I really do, Kyle. Whether it happens or not. I really love you."

"You faggot," I said.

He laughed so hard when I said that, I thought he was going to fall out of his fucking wheelchair.

Oh shit!!

"I'll tell you everything," he said.

"Thanks, but you know that doesn't do anything for me," I said.

He laughed.

"You queer. Get out of here so my babe can come see me," he said.

"I hope this works, man," I said.

"If it does, it does. If it doesn't, it doesn't. But Kyle, you cared enough to try. How can I ever replace that?"

* * *

We walked around in downtown Missoula, which ain't a whole lot to walk around in. It was a Saturday night, and there was not very much going on. We found a pizza place that was open, though.

"Why are we out walking around instead of being in the hotel room," Dave asked.

"Because your brother needs privacy," Justin said.

"For what?"

"What do you think, Dave," Brian said.

I knew Dave and Brian had gotten close on the camping trip, and that's when it showed.

"You mean . . . ?"

"Yeah, exactly. Kyle thinks he set it up with the Bell Captain, but he doesn't know for sure. We just have to wait and hope."

Big tears came into David's eyes.

"What the fuck's wrong with you," I said.

I knew he thought I talked gruff sometimes, and I talked that way to him just then. I was sorry I did, but I couldn't take it back.

"You guys love my brother that much," he asked.

"Yes, we do, Dave. Chris is our brother, and he'll always be. We'll always do whatever we can for him."

We stayed out a good three hours that night, and, when we went back to our room, Chris was sound asleep in bed. He had been in his chair when we left, and I knew there was no way he could have gotten into bed without help. All right! I thought.

"Keep it quiet. Chris is asleep," I whispered to the rest of them.

We were very quiet getting ready for bed. Once we were in bed, though, Chris said,

"Thanks, guys. It was wonderful."

That's all he said, and that was all he needed to say. Our brother wasn't a virgin anymore, and I owed a Bell Captain a hundred bucks. I was happy as hell to pay it, too.

(Tim's Perspective)

My brothers were unbelievable. I mean, Kyle had put that trip together, and he basically took charge of all the food while we were camping. And he also got Chris laid. I realize that isn't real high on the Pathway to Heaven Chart. In fact, it might be pretty close to the bottom, but on the Make a Boy Happy Chart it was at the top. If making somebody happy and raising his self-esteem and self-confidence to the very top was a sin, then so be it.

We spent Sunday at Chris and Dave's house with their parents. It was a nice enough house, more like mine than like Kevin and Rick's. Some friends of theirs came over. They were the parents' best friends, and they had a boy my age, sixteen, and another one who was fourteen. They were nice guys, but they were both pretty shy. That was probably natural, considering they didn't know us, and all. The younger guy, Marty, brought a radio controlled airplane like Brian had, so we played with that. He and Brian got into a pissing contest about who could do the most tricks with the plane, but Brian and Marty got along really well.

We had Trixie out there with us, of course. She was watching that plane for all she was worth, too. When it was Chris's turn, he landed it way out in the field that was behind their house. Trixie barked when she saw that, and she took off after it.

"What's that dog doing," Marty asked. He sounded a little worried.

"She thinks it's a bird," Justin said. "She's retrieving it. She's a retriever."

"She's going to tear my plane up," Marty said.

"No, she won't," Brian said. "She knows what she's doing. She gets mine all the time."

Sure enough, she brought it back and gently set it down at Brian's feet. He hugged her and petted her, and Trixie looked like she was the happiest dog in the world. The plane was in perfect condition, too.

Later on we were all sitting at a big picnic table, eating. They had barbequed some ribs, and they were delicious. Chris had a towel on him as a bib, and he had sauce smeared all around his mouth. He was doing a lot better with his eating than he had done at our house, though.

"What time are we leaving tomorrow," Kyle asked.

"I don't know. What time do you want to leave," Rick asked.

"It takes about three hours to get there," Ralph said.

"Are you guys headed to Yellowstone," Marty's dad asked.

"Yeah," Ralph said. "We're going to be there pretty much all week."

"Let's try to get off by eight," Kevin said.

Kyle and Justin looked at one another with pure devilment on their faces when Kevin said "get off," and I didn't know what to expect.

"I can get off by eight. Can't you, Kyle," Justin said.

"Oh, yeah. Easy," Kyle said.

Kevin had realized by then what was going on, and he grinned at Rick. They both made gestures to indicate they thought the situation was hopeless. Kyle, Justin, Brian, Chris, and I laughed. Nobody else even knew what was going on.

"What are we going to do tonight," Kyle asked. "Do you guys know someplace we can shoot pool?" He addressed that to Marty and Pete, the older one.

"Yeah, I know a place," Pete said.

"You do," Pete's mother asked, like he had said he knew where the local drug dealer was.

"Yeah," Pete said, non-committally.

"I think you boys should do something that Chris can participate in, too," the lady said.

"Don't worry about me," Chris said. "I have a date tonight, anyway."

There was dead silence at that table, and nobody even moved.

"Did you say you have a date, son," Ralph asked in disbelief.

"Yeah. I hope that's okay," Chris said.

Kyle and Justin were beside themselves, like two five-year-olds on Christmas morning.

"Sure, it's okay," Ralph said.

You could tell he was proud as hell of Chris, but he was also a little--what?--confused, maybe.

"Same girl," Kyle asked.

Chris smiled shyly and nodded.

"Come again," Ralph said.

"He had a date last night, and he's got another date tonight with the same girl," Kyle said.

"Amazing," Ralph said.

"I know. Who'd want to go out with him twice," Kyle said. He reached over and ruffled Chris's hair.

"Do you need any money, or anything else," Ralph asked.

"I could use some money," Chris said.

"We'll take care of the 'or anything else,'" Jus said.

He, Chris, and Kyle laughed.

"I enjoyed my dinner, Betty. Thanks," Kyle said.

He said that at the end of every meal somebody else cooked, and that was the signal that it was time to leave the table. The rest of us said we enjoyed our dinner, too. Pete and Marty looked at us like we were crazy or something, but they got up when we did. We all took our plates and silverware into the kitchen, too, and put that stuff in the dishwasher. Pete, Marty, and Dave didn't touch theirs. I guess they didn't know about doing stuff like that.

Pete and Marty went with us in the big van back to the hotel. Kyle or Justin or somebody would take them home later.

"I want to hear more about this hot date," Rick said.

"What do you want to know," Chris asked.

"Who is she? How'd you meet her," Rick asked.

"That's all classified," Chris said.

We all laughed.

"He met her through me," Kyle said.

"What did you do? Hire a hooker," Rick asked.

"No. We talked about doing that, but that's not what happened," Kyle said.

"Did you get . . .," Rick started to say.

"Yep," Chris said, chuckling.

"You got what," Marty asked.

"He got laid last night," Justin said, "and with any luck he'll get laid again tonight."

"You mean like having sex," Marty asked.

Pete was embarrassed by his brother.

"Jesus, Marty," Pete said.

"Well, I just want to make sure I understand what they're talking about, Pete. I didn't even know he could have sex," Marty said.

"Well, he can and he did," Kyle said. "But I think the rule about not talking in public about what you do in private should apply to Chris, too. I was glad you brought your plane, Marty. We had fun with that."

"You should have seen Trixie, guys," Brian said to Kevin and Rick. "She retrieved it perfect, just like she does mine."

From that point on we talked about other things. We got Chris all bathed and shaved for his date, and we left him in the lobby when we went out to shoot pool. We stayed out till about 11:30, and Chris got back to the room around one.

"How did it go last night," Kyle asked Chris when we woke up.

"It went good. I think I'm in love," Chris said, grinning.

"You're not in love. You're in lust," Kyle said.

Chris laughed. "I think you're probably right."

"Are you going to see her again?"

"I'd like to, but she's moving back home to California this week," Chris said.

"Bummer," I said.

"I know," Chris replied. "I never thought it would happen for me."

"It did, and it will again, buddy," Kyle said. "Do you feel any different?"

"I feel like a real person. I feel like I can do anything I set my mind to," Chris said. "I don't know what you did, Kyle, but thank you for doing it."

"I didn't do anything," Kyle said.

"On your honor?"

"No way. Shut up, stud," Kyle said, laughing. "I need a big breakfast this morning. Let's go."

(Chris's Perspective)

I really thought Kyle and Justin were joking about getting me laid. I mean, I wanted to do it. I thought about it all the time, in fact, but I didn't think it would ever happen. I guess I underestimated my brothers.

Her name was Lisa, and she was nineteen. When she first came up to the room, I was pretty nervous and scared. We talked for a while, and we each had a drink of Kyle's whiskey. She was really pretty, and she was incredibly nice. She helped me get into bed with her, and we both still had all of our clothes on. We started kissing. I knew about using tongue in a kiss, but she really showed me how it was done. One thing led to another, and, pretty soon, I wasn't a virgin anymore.

"I'm leaving Wednesday morning to go home," she said, after it was over. "I'd like to see you again, though."

"What about tomorrow," I asked.

"I work until five, but we could do something tomorrow night," she said.

"Okay," I said.

I wanted to ask her why she wanted to spend time with me, why she wanted to have sex with me, but I didn't. I didn't know much about sex, but I knew she had enjoyed it. I guess I really didn't care why.

Sunday night she picked me up at the hotel, and we went to a movie. After the movie, she took me to her apartment, and we had sex again. Twice, in fact. The second time it took me a pretty long time to shoot, and she loved that. Then she took me back.

Kyle and Jus and the other guys didn't ask me for details, like I thought they would. I felt incredibly proud and happy about the whole thing, though. I might never have sex again in the rest of my life, but I knew I could if the circumstances were right. I thought that one day I might meet a girl who didn't mind the fact that my right side didn't work very well or that my smile was crooked. I knew that I would always need to have adjustments and accommodations made for me because I have CP, but I knew for the first time ever that I could be a real man in every sense of the word. The Florida boys gave me a gift that would last a lifetime.

(Rick's Perspective)

Kevin and I were in bed Sunday night while the boys were off doing their thing. He was holding me against his chest and absentmindedly playing with my nipples off and on. We had already made love, but he was keeping me half hard.

"What did you think about Chris's announcement tonight," I asked.

"I don't know. What did you think?"

"I think he has needs like everybody else, you know?"

"True. I'd like to know how Kyle engineered that bit of work," Kevin said.

"He said they didn't hire a hooker. Maybe they found a phone number in a men's room that said 'For a good time call so-and-so.'"

He laughed.

"I've always wanted to call one of those numbers," he said.

"Me, too. Are you going to be able to get off by eight o'clock tomorrow?"

He laughed some more.

"Don't remind me," he said. "I was perfectly innocent in saying that, by the way."

"Oh, I know. But with that bunch, anything is fair game."

"This trip was a great idea, wasn't it," Kevin said.

"Yeah. The kids are having a great time, and I am, too," I said. "I think Yellowstone will be the highlight, though. Even better than Glacier was."

"I think it was a good idea to rent cabins instead of trying to camp in tents this time. The tents were fun, but this place has too many bears for my comfort," Kevin said.

"I was reading something in a brochure that said this year the bears are coming down from the upper elevations in greater numbers than usual. Something about whitebark pine trees not making any pinecones for the bears to eat. It's a natural phenomenon, but, when it happens, the bears become a nuisance."

"I hope we do see some, though, don't you?"

"Oh, yeah. We're going to have to keep the puppy on a leash the whole time," I said.

"I know. She'll be good, though," Kevin said.

* * *

We met the kids in the restaurant the next morning.

"We all got off before eight, Kevin. Did you guys," Kyle asked innocently.

"None of your business," he said in reply.

They all laughed.

"What are you talking about," Dave asked.

Chris giggled with naughty glee.

"He didn't," Chris said, meaning his brother.

"I didn't what," Dave demanded.

They all laughed at poor little Dave.

"Guys, y'all aren't really being fair," I said. "Tell him what you're talking about, Kyle."

"Last night Kevin said we had to get off by eight this morning. He meant we had to leave by eight, but we all took the dirty meaning of it," Kyle said.

That explanation didn't help Dave.

"He's talking about having an orgasm, Dave," Brian said. "Get off is a slang term for that."

David blushed furiously, and I was sorry I had insisted they tell him what they meant.

We had decided we would check out of the hotel that morning. We were only gone three nights on the Glacier trip, but we'd be gone until Friday afternoon on this one. We made sure they had rooms for us Friday night, though. They confirmed them for us, and we left for Yellowstone.

* * *

Our first stop was the Uhles' house to pick up Ralph and Trixie. That was in the direction we were going, so it didn't slow us down any. We left the luggage we wouldn't need at the park at their house, and we'd pick it up when we dropped them off on Friday.

"Did you have fun on your date last night, Chris," Ralph asked, after he had said hello to everybody.

"Yes, sir," Chris said.

"What did you do?"

"We went to a movie," Chris said.

"Is she a local girl," Ralph asked.

"She was here going to college, but she's going back home to California on Wednesday. I probably won't see her again," Chris said.

"She's a college girl?"

"Yeah," Chris replied.

Ralph didn't say anything else, but I'm sure he was dying for more details. None were offered, though.

The drive took us about three hours to the northern entrance of the park. Most of the park was actually in Wyoming, rather than Montana. The park headquarters were near that entrance, but we didn't go there except to pass by it. We went to a little visitor center where there were brochures and a short video giving you an overview of what was in the park. It also talked about the basic rules. You weren't supposed to leave pets unattended, so Ralph, who had been to the park several times before, stayed outside with Trixie on her leash while the rest of us went in.

It would be impossible to describe our time at the park in anything less than a book. The scenery was magnificent, the museums were interesting for the most part, and the geothermal features were absolutely amazing. The cabin we stayed in was pretty rustic, but it was clean and comfortable. The kids were great, of course, and Miss Trixie behaved herself very well. She got a little excited one time when we saw a bear in a field next to the road, but Brian, bless his heart, somehow got her not to bark.

"You want to get that bear," Justin asked her in his playful, gruff way.

"Don't get her excited, Buddy," Brian said. "If she gets excited, she'll bark."

"So what," Justin asked.

"If she barks, the bear will hear her and attack the car to get at her," Bri said.

"Oh! Go to sleep, Trixie. Go to sleep, girl," Justin said in his most consoling tone. That broke

everybody up.

Kyle was trying to get a picture of the bear using a telescopic lens that looked like it was a foot long.

"That bear's jerking off," Kyle said.

"Kyle!" Kevin said.

I knew Kevin was no more shocked than I was, but he was doing that for Ralph's benefit. Kyle and Justin, our two filthiest mouths, had been amazingly restrained on that trip for the same reason. I really didn't think Ralph would have minded their usual language, but they didn't take any chances around him.

"He really is, Kevin," Kyle said. "I'm looking at it through this lens, and it's like a telescope."

"Okay. Thanks for telling us, Kyle," Kevin said.

Kyle laughed. "Any time. I'll be on the lookout for more deviant animal behavior."

"Jerking off ain't deviant," Justin said.

"Guys!" Kevin said.

"Kevin, if you're getting on to them on my account, don't bother. Besides, I don't think it's deviant, either," Ralph said.

"Okay, and I know it's not deviant," Kevin said.

We did our share of hiking in the park, or at least walking around. A lot of the places we walked to were smooth and flat enough to accommodate Chris's wheelchair. If it was too rough for the chair, one of the kids carried Chris. He did exactly what the rest of us did, and he didn't miss a thing. We must have been quite a sight on those occasions.

* * *

It started about halfway back to Missoula on Friday afternoon.

"Is there any way we can stay an extra week," Kyle asked.

"Kyle, you know there isn't, Bubba," Kevin said.

"This trip has been way too short," Kyle said.

"I know," Chris said. "It's been great though, hasn't it?"

"Kevin, I was talking the other day to Dave about Chris and Dave spending the summer with us next summer. What do you think," Brian said.

"They're always welcome," I said for Kevin. "We'll have at least one new boy by then, but that doesn't matter."

"What do you think, Dad," Dave asked.

"Well, I don't know about the whole summer, but a visit, anyway," Ralph said.

"Dad, really the whole summer would be better because then we could get jobs," Chris said.

"We'll see," Ralph said.

"You must know my daddy. That's exactly what he would have said," Kyle informed us.

"Mine, too," Tim said.

"I think it's a daddy thing," Kyle said.

"You call your father 'daddy,' Kyle," Dave asked.

"Sometimes I do. Usually it's just 'dad,' though."

"What kind of work does your father do, Kyle," Ralph asked.

"He has a business, and I guess he just runs it," Kyle said.

"What kind of business is it," Ralph asked.

"It's called Goodson Enterprises, and they have hotels and motels and gift shops. Stuff like that," Kyle said. "Restaurants in the hotels and some of the motels."

"That's where Rick and I work," Kevin said. "He and I are executive vice presidents, and Gene

Goodson, Kyle's dad, is the president and CEO."

"That sounds impressive. Is it big," he asked.

"We're the eighth largest civilian employer in the county," I said.

Ralph whistled softly.

"So, see, Dad, they could find us jobs. That wouldn't be a problem," Dave said.

"Put it on hold, okay, Dave," Ralph said. "I said we'll see, and we'll see."

Everybody got quiet after that, and I figured the boys were thinking about having to say goodbye to their friends. Our arrival had been a joyous occasion, and I figured our departure would be pretty sad.

We got to the Uhle house around five o'clock. We unloaded their stuff, and took it inside. Then we collected our stuff that we had left there. Betty offered us coffee and cookies, but Kevin and I declined.

"I think we better get going," Kevin said. "Ralph and Betty, this has been a wonderful trip, and thank you so much for having us."

We all thanked the adults and told them goodbye.

We said goodbye to the two boys in assembly-line fashion. Kyle picked up Chris out of his chair and hugged him tight. He passed him on to Tim, and then Kyle hugged Dave. All six of us did that with both boys, and, by the time we were finished, everybody was crying. Chris and Dave hugged Trixie, too.

The trip home to Emerald Beach was long but uneventful. It was a Saturday, so there weren't many people flying. As much fun as the trip had been, I was looking forward to being in my own house, and I knew Kev was, too.

(Alex's Perspective)

After our first date on the Friday night of the first week they were gone, Cody and I did something together every day or night. He came over on Saturday afternoon, the next day, and we went into town to look at cars. I had done that before with Justin and Brian, but that time I was more serious about it. We found some pretty nice used cars that I could probably afford, and I made a list of the ones that I'd want to look at again after Kevin and Rick got home. I didn't think they'd feel like car shopping right away, but I didn't want to wait too long because classes would be starting pretty soon.

Looking at cars was fun, but the best part of it was just being with Cody. He wasn't shy or anything, but he had a kind of quiet reserve about him that I really liked. He could crack jokes and laugh as well as I could, but compared to Kyle and Justin, he was a mute. He was definitely the "boy next door" type, and the more time I spent with him, the better I liked him.

I took two steaks out of the freezer, and we cooked those outside on the grill. It was too hot to stay out there, though, so we ate at the breakfast room table. After we ate, we watched the Saturday night movie on HBO. I wanted to ask Cody to stay over, but I was afraid he would think I wanted sex. I mean, I did want sex, and I wanted it with him, but I wasn't quite ready, I didn't think.

"I had a good time today," Cody said. "Do you want to get together tomorrow?"

"I had a good time, too, and, yes, I do want to get together tomorrow," I said. "Let's go to the beach. Do you want to?"

"Sure. I love the beach."

God, I wanted to kiss him so bad, to hold him, to feel him next to me, touching me. Instead of doing that, though, I just put my hand on his shoulder. He smiled sweetly at me, and then he reached down and adjusted himself. I peeked at what he was doing, and I saw that he had an erection. I got one myself in about ten seconds.

"Having a problem," I asked facetiously.

He grinned.

"You know how it is," he said shyly. Then he said, "Can I kiss you?"

I didn't say "yes" or "no." I simply leaned forward a little, and we kissed. It was a short kiss, and both of us kept our mouths closed, but it was, unmistakably, a kiss.

"That was nice," he said. Then we kissed again, only longer and with a little more pressure that time.

"I think I need to go," he said, after we broke the kiss.

"Okay," I said. "I'll walk you out."

We kissed again in the driveway, and that was the best kiss of the night. After he left, I went inside, turned on the security system, and went up to my room to take care of a pressing need.

The beach was crowded Sunday, and seaweed had washed up on the shore. It was starting to decompose and stink, and there were flies all over the place. We found a relatively clean area, and we stayed out there for a couple of hours. It was hot, though, until the sea breeze picked up in early afternoon.

We ate that night at the usual bar and grill place, and then we went home.

"I wish we didn't have to go to work tomorrow," Cody said while we were sitting on one of the sofas in the den.

"I know. Me, too. At least we've got jobs, though," I said.

"Good point," he said, and he tapped me on the nose with his index finger.

I took his hand in mine, and just held it.

"What are you thinking about," I asked him.

"About you and how much I like you," he said.

"I like you a lot, too," I said.

Then we kissed. We started small, like we had done the night before, but that gave way to more passionate kissing pretty quickly. We were both breathing hard in a few minutes, and we parted to catch our breath. He had on a pair of khaki shorts, and he made no attempt to conceal his erection. There was a tiny wet spot just over the head of his penis. I reached down and gently touched it.

"Sticky," I said.

We both laughed.

"You probably have the same thing," he said.

I had my arm in my lap, trying to conceal my hard-on. I moved it away then. What was the point of not letting him see it, I thought. He caused it, after all.

"See," he said.

I did, indeed, have a wet spot. He moved his hand like he was going to touch it, but he pulled back.

We sat for a while in companionable silence. We were right next to each other, and our legs were touching. After a while, our arousal went down, and we made out some more. Around nine he said he had to leave. We kissed goodbye in the driveway again, but it lacked the passion of the kisses inside because of where we were.

"Think of me when you do it tonight," he said.

I grinned.

"I will. You think of me," I said.

* * *

As the week progressed, our make-out sessions got longer and more passionate. I almost came several times that week just from kissing him. Thursday night when I walked him out I said,

"Can you spend the night tomorrow night?"

"Yeah. Are we ready to move up a notch?"

"I am. Are you?"

"Definitely," he said.

"You're going to have to show me what to do," I said.

"Oh, you'll know what to do, but I don't mind teaching you. I can't wait to, in fact."

I stuck my head in and kissed him again, and then he went home.

Friday was usually busier than other days because a lot of people came to the beach just for the weekend. I was glad we were busy, though, because it made the time pass faster. I got erections several times because I had been thinking about what Cody and I were going to do that night, and one time Stephen noticed.

"Looking forward to a big evening," Stephen asked. His voice communicated the leer that was on his face.

"Something like that," I said.

"Is this an 'I hope I get lucky' evening or a 'sure thing' evening," he asked.

"It's a sure thing," I said.

"Great! Do I know him?"

"No," I lied.

Stephen was a nice enough guy, but I didn't want him knowing every bit of my business. I probably shouldn't have told him as much as I did, but it was too late now.

Quitting time finally got there, and I was ready to go. Cody had brought clothes and other stuff to work that day, so he followed me straight home.

Once we got inside, he set his bag down on a chair, and he took me in his arms. We kissed for a few minutes, and we were both hard in no time. I could feel his erection through the pants of his uniform, and I was sure he could feel mine, too.

"You're not nervous, are you," he asked.

"Maybe just a tiny bit," I said.

Our uniform shirts were pullovers, and he started taking mine off me. I helped him with that, and with the tee shirt we were required to wear. When my shirts were both off, he started kissing my chest. When he kissed, and then sucked, my nipple, a charge of electricity went through me. I had figured out my nipples felt good being played with on my own, but having him do it was so much better.

I started taking his shirt off, and then his tee shirt. Holding him, bare skin against bare skin, felt wonderful. I kissed his chest like he had kissed mine, and the aroma of his body was a huge turn-on.

"Let's go upstairs," he said.

He picked up his bag and his shirts, and I grabbed my shirts, too, and we went upstairs. The cleaning lady had been there that day, and the sheets on my bed were fresh and crisp. I pulled down the spread and top sheet.

We finished undressing, and we kissed again standing up. Our dicks rubbed together, and I loved the way that felt.

"Is there anything that's off limits," he asked.

"No anal, okay?"

"None at all, or none with this," he asked, touching his erection.

"None with that," I said.

"You can touch it," he said.

I reached for his penis, and, for the first time in my life, I touched another boy. It was exhilarating.

"I've never done anal with my dick," Cody said. "And I've never had one in me, either."

We got in bed, and the experience of touching another person, rubbing against him, kissing him deeply, and doing everything we did was fantastic. Cody was gentle, but, more than that, he was considerate. He seemed only to want to please me, and he definitely did that.

"I could do this every day," I said. "Several times a day, in fact."

He chuckled.

"I'm glad you liked it. I sure did," he said.

"I feel as though you and I have something special between us now," I said.

"We do. We're together in a way that we aren't with anybody else," he said.

He kissed me, and we got up for a while. We didn't bother with clothes, though, because the night was young.

Chapter 13

(Kevin's Perspective)

The trip to Montana was great, but there's nothing quite like coming home when you've been gone for a while. The look and feel, and even the smell, of our house cheered me up. I was tired, and I knew the others were, too.

Kyle and Tim each went home to visit with their parents, but I figured they'd be back pretty soon. They loved Sunday mornings at our house when we were all together, and we had a lot of reminiscing to do.

The first thing I like to do when I come home from a trip is unpack. Rick thinks that's a bit compulsive, but I like to get it over with right away. He sometimes leaves his suitcase untouched for several days after a trip, but I want mine empty and put away immediately.

After I unpacked, I went out to the den. Rick was there with Jeff and Tyler.

"How was the trip," Jeff asked.

"Fabulous," Rick said. "You wouldn't believe how beautiful that place is."

"It's in the mountains, isn't it," Jeff asked.

"Yeah, and they are spectacular," Rick said. "How was your trip?"

"We had a great time," Tyler said. "The Keys are really neat."

"We ended up stopping in Orlando for a couple of days on the way home," Jeff said. "Ty had never been to Disney or Universal."

"I figured you guys might do that," I said. "Was it packed?"

"Yes, and very hot," Jeff said.

"Were you surprised," I asked.

They just grinned.

"Kev and Rick, Ty and I made a decision on our trip," Jeff said.

He was pretty serious, and I wondered what was coming.

"What was that, Jeff," I asked.

"Ty and I want to live together. In our own place," he said.

"Congratulations, guys," I said.

"That deserves a hug," Rick said.

He got up and hugged the boys, and I did, too.

"That's a big step, but it's a good one," I said. "Have you found a place yet?"

"Not yet. We just got home last night," Jeff said. "I hope you guys don't think I'm not happy here, because I'm very happy living here."

"Jeff, we know what this is all about. This is about growing up, about becoming fully independent, about becoming your own person," I said.

"You and Ty will always be an important part of this family, man. You know that," Rick said.

"I'm going to really miss living here, but . . ."

"But you guys are in love, aren't you," Rick said.

Jeff got a little shy and sort of embarrassed.

"Yes," he said quietly.

"Two people in love need to be together, and they need privacy," I said. "Jeff, what you're doing is absolutely normal and perfectly appropriate. You guys have the finances covered, I guess."

"Oh, yeah," Jeff said. "That won't be a problem."

"Are you going to live on the beach or in town," Rick asked.

"The beach," Ty said. "We both work here, and, except for college, town doesn't really offer us anything."

"Do you think Kyle's going to be pissed off," Jeff asked.

"Why should he be," I asked.

"Kyle and I are very close, you know?"

"Oh, I know you are. But, Jeff, Kyle has never, ever wanted anything but for you to be happy. He'll still see you here, and I suspect you'll get tired of seeing him at your place, too," I said.

"I hope so," Jeff said.

"Jeff, I don't think there's any question about that," Rick said.

"We might want to get a two-bedroom so we can have a 'little brother' room," Ty said.

"When Kevin and I first lived together, we had one bedroom that was officially my room," Rick said. "If you can swing it, I'd sure recommend you do that at first. Even though you guys are in love, and I guess want to spend the rest of your lives together, right?"

"Definitely," Tyler said, and Jeff agreed.

"You're going to still need personal privacy. I never slept in my room, and I probably didn't go in there, even, more than a few times except to get things, but it was nice to have when I wanted it. Or when Kevin wanted it."

"Rick's got a good idea there, guys. I don't think either one of us needs private, personal space anymore, but it was good to have at first," I said.

Alex and Cody came into the room at that point. They sat close to one another on one of the sofas, and Alex took Cody's hand.

"Hi, guys," I said, grinning. "What's up?"

"Hi," Alex said, and he held up his and Cody's hand.

"Are you guys an item now," I asked, beaming.

"I guess we are," Cody said.

"Congratulations. Wow! This is turning into quite an occasion," I said.

"Why? What else is going on," Alex asked.

Jeff told him about his and Tyler's decision to live together, and they both seemed very happy for them.

Justin and Brian came downstairs, and we went through everything again. We told the guys who hadn't gone with us about the Montana trip, and Jeff and Tyler told us about their trip, too.

"I miss Kyle and Tim," Jus said.

"I know," Brian said. "Me, too."

"I'm calling them," Justin said.

He dialed a number but got no answer, so he dialed another one.

"Hey," he said by way of greeting.

Pause.

"Nothing. What are you doing?"

Pause.

"I thought he was going to his house."

Pause.

"Well, y'all get your asses over here."

Then he hung up.

"You're so polite and sweet on the phone, Justin," Jeff said.

Justin laughed.

"Dave, Chris's brother, was scared of both him and Kyle because of how they talk to one another," Brian said.

"He was scared of me?"

"Yes. He told me that. Of Kyle, too," Brian said.

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him it was all an act and that you two were the best of friends," Bri said.

"I'm scared of you, too," Cody said.

We all laughed.

"Yeah, right. So you and Alex are boyfriends now, huh?"

"It looks like it," Cody said. "We're both bellmen now, too."

"Cool," several of us said at the same time.

"There are a lot of changes going on around this place," Justin said. "I don't know if that's good."

It suddenly occurred to me that he really didn't like change. I guessed that was a hold-over from the abuse he had been subjected to in years past. He really didn't show much insecurity or deep-seated anger, but I also guessed there was some below the surface.

"Everything's going to be all right, Bubba," I said. "You're not going anywhere."

"I know," he said.

Tim and Kyle came in, and we had to get them caught up to date on the family happenings. They were both pleased for Jeff and Tyler and for Alex and Cody.

Since the entire family was finally present, we gave out the souvenirs we had brought for them. We had bought something for Seth with the intention of sending it to him, but we gave it to Cody instead, for whom we hadn't planned. Oh, well, I thought.

"Jeff, are you still going to fool around with the Web site," Kyle asked.

"Of course," Jeff said. "I'll bet you've got some good ones from the trip, huh?"

"Yeah, some real good ones, I think," Kyle said.

He and Jeff went off to the study to work on the pictures. Justin, Alex, Cody, and Tyler went out to the clubhouse to shoot pool, and Tim and Brian turned on the TV for a few minutes and then went out to the clubhouse, too.

"Babe, they're growing up and moving on," Rick said.

"I know. I'm happy for Jeff, but I'm sure going to miss him around here all the time," I said.

"Me, too. He'll still be around, though, don't you think?"

"Of course. He'll always be part of this family. I know that. But I'll still miss him," I said.

Rick got up from where he was sitting and moved next to me on the sofa. He put his arms around me in one of his tender hugs. I wasn't depressed, exactly, but I felt tired and sort of washed out. Jet lag,

maybe, I thought.

"We haven't really talked about the new kid," I said. "Tyrone Williams said he wants him here in time to start school. That's a week from Monday."

"Damn. I can't believe how fast this summer's gone by," Rick said. "Don't you remember when you were a kid you thought the summer was the longest time in the world?"

"Yeah. You're right. It has gone by fast. We probably need to get him this coming week," I said.

"Were you thinking we'll put Sean in Jeff's room after Jeff is gone?"

"Shane. His name is Shane, not Sean," I said.

"Oh, shit. I hope to God I don't make that mistake when he's here."

I chuckled.

"Let me call Tyrone and see when he can get him here. I think he's in Kentucky staying with his grandfather or somebody," I said.

I dialed Tyrone's cell phone number, and he answered it after three rings.

"Hi, Tyrone. This is Kevin Foley."

"Hi, Kevin. How was the trip?"

"Great, man. Can I put you on speaker so Rick can hear, too?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Hi, Rick."

"Hi, Tyrone. How you been?"

"Fine, thanks. I guess you're calling about Shane, right?"

"You got it," I said.

"Well, there's been a change in plans."

"Oh? What's up," Rick said.

"It turns out Shane's grandfather is not sickly, like we first thought, and he and the boy have really bonded. He wants to keep him, and Shane wants to stay there."

"Well, that's good, isn't it," I asked.

"Yes, it's very good, at least for Shane. But I tell you, guys, I've got another one I need help with. This kid was living with his mother, and she got arrested yesterday for possession with intent to distribute. Since she was already on probation, she'll be in jail for the next six years. Solid. I need a place for the kid. The gay kid."

"What's he like," I asked.

"His name is Denis Morgan, and he's fifteen, just like Shane. Unlike Shane, though, Denis has been in a couple of scrapes with the law. Nothing really major. Chronic truancy, shoplifting, fighting at school, which actually involved assaulting a police officer. He's on juvenile probation."

"He hit a cop," Rick asked, incredulous.

"Yeah, but it wasn't as bad as that sounds. He was fighting with another kid, and the cop stepped in to break it up. Evidently Denis threw a punch at the other kid, but he got the cop. Under those circumstances, I don't know that I would have arrested him, but the cop was a rookie and . . ."

"And he arrested him," I said.

"Exactly."

"Do you ever do, like, trial placements," Rick asked.

"In a sense, every placement is a trial placement, Rick. If a kid is acting out so much that he disrupts your family, you don't have to keep him."

"I guess I knew that. We've just been lucky," Rick said.

"Yes. You've been very lucky, but you and Kevin are also very good with kids. Justin Davis was a powder keg when he went to you, and you've handled that beautifully."

Rick and I smiled.

"By the way, Justin is starting college in a week," Rick said.

"Wonderful."

"Back to Denis," I said. "Can we think it over. We'll need the complete support of the kids on this one."

"How many kids actually live there full time?"

"Well, we just found out about an hour ago that the oldest one, Jeff Martin, is moving into an apartment. So that leaves Justin Davis, Brian Mathews, and Alex Stewart officially living here," I said.

"I don't know Alex, do I?"

"No, but we've told you about him. He's from New York and ran away. Hitchhiked here, in fact."

"Ran away?"

"He's eighteen," Rick said.

"Oh, yes, I do remember him. So there are just three there?"

"Well, Kyle Goodson and Tim Murphy are here a lot," I said, "but they don't officially live here."

"Well, think about it and talk to the boys. But I really need to know something soon."

"Okay, Ty. We'll get back to you as soon as we can," I said.

We said goodbye and hung up.

"What do you think," I asked Rick.

"This one might be a bit of a challenge, but it sounds like his home life probably wasn't the best. Maybe the stability here will bring him around. I wonder about the truancy. We can make sure he gets to school, of course, and I'm sure the school people will cooperate with us in keeping us informed if he misses any classes," I said.

"It's sort of ironic to be replacing Jeff with this kid, isn't it," he said.

"Yeah. I thought that, too. You want to give it a try?"

"You know I do," he said, smiling.

"Let's get the kids in to talk about it," I said.

We rounded up the eight boys who were in various places on the property. It was time for something to eat, so I ordered pizzas. They fixed themselves soft drinks, and we settled down to eat and talk after the food arrived.

"Guys, we got off the phone with Tyrone Williams from Children and Family Services a few minutes ago, and he has a new boy he needs to place. His name is Denis, and he's fifteen. He's gay, and he's been in some trouble in the past. Nothing too serious, but you all need to know about it," I said.

"What'd he do," Justin asked.

"Truancy, shoplifting, and assaulting a police officer," I said. "Oh, and evidently he got in fights at school. That's how he ended up hitting the officer. He stepped in to break up a fight Denis was having, and Denis punched him."

They were quiet, and it was hard to judge what they were thinking.

"If he gets here and can't behave himself, he won't be able to stay here," Rick said. "Kevin and I are thinking we ought to give him a chance, but you guys are going to have to help us out with him."

"He's gay," Kyle asked.

"Yes."

"If he got picked on at school for being gay, that could explain the truancy and fighting, don't you think," Kyle said.

"Yeah, it could," Rick said.

"And hitting a cop when the cop was trying to bust up a fight is a lot different than just walking up

to the cop and punching him. I mean, that could have been an accident," Tim said.

"Tyrone more or less said the same thing, Tim," I said.

"I wonder what he shoplifted," Jeff said. "If he was poor enough, it might have been something to eat."

"I knew we kept you guys around here for something," Rick said. "Listening to you all, he doesn't sound that bad."

"Watch him turn out to be this meek little guy who wouldn't hurt one of Trixie's fleas," Brian said.

"I hope you're right, Brian," I said.

"Where are his parents," Tim asked.

"He's been living with just his mother, and she got arrested yesterday for possession of drugs with the intent to sell them. She was on probation already, so they hauled her ass to jail," Rick said.

"It doesn't sound like he was in a very good environment," Jus said. "I been there, too."

"I think several of us can relate to bad environments, Jus," Alex said. "Brutal ones, even."

"We'll fix this kid up, Bubba. I think it's kind of exciting getting a new brother," Kyle said.

"So you guys are all cool with Denis joining the family," I asked.

They all indicated their agreement.

"If there's even a suspicion of drugs, Rick and I want to know about it immediately, okay, guys?"

"That's not a problem," Kyle said, speaking for the rest of them. "We'll back him up at school, too. We won't let him get picked on, if we can help it."

"Don't say the S word," Justin said, and we all laughed.

"Why? I'm looking forward to S. First time in my whole damn life, too," Kyle said.

We laughed.

"I love school," Tim said.

"Yeah, you would," Justin said.

"Hey, you picking on my boyfriend," Kyle demanded.

"Shut up, Kyle, you know I'm teasing him."

"Come on, Davis, let's go a few rounds. I need to get in shape for that new Denis boy, in case I need to slap him around," Kyle said.

"Brian, make Trixie bite him," Jus said.

"She only likes big, meaty bones, Buddy," Brian said.

"She'll be fresh out of luck with him, for sure," Jus said. "You don't know what to say, do you, Goodson? You're fucking speechless. I got your ass last."

Kyle laughed. "Yeah, you did, you and your big, meaty bones."

Justin might have gotten Kyle last, but Kyle got the laugh out of it.

"Okay, we're truly home now," Rick said. "And you might know the first one would be a dick joke."

Everybody laughed.

"Speaking of dick jokes, I've seen some around this place," Kyle said.

"Let it rest, Bubba. You got your laugh," Rick said.

"Okay. For now," Kyle said.

"I'm going to call Tyrone back to tell him our decision," I said.

I went into the study to make the call. Tyrone was pleased that we said yes. I asked him what the kid had shoplifted, if he knew, and he said it was two candy bars and a paperback book.

"Where is he now, Ty," I asked.

"He's staying with a neighbor near Blountstown in Calhoun County. She needs him out of there as soon as possible, too. Can I bring him over tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yeah, that'll be fine. We'll be home all day," I said.

"It'll be around two tomorrow afternoon," Tyrone said.

"Good. We're looking forward to meeting him.

* * *

On Sunday morning we did our normal routine for a weekend morning. Cody spent the night Saturday night, as I figured he would, but Jeff and Tyler didn't.

"I miss Jeff," I said when we were all in the den.

"Why? He's never up anywhere near this early on Sunday," Kyle said.

"True, but I still miss him," I said.

"I miss Chris and Dave," Kyle said.

We all agreed we missed them, too.

"What do you all have going on this coming week, fellas," Rick asked.

"Just work for me," Jus said.

Alex and Cody said work for them, too.

"I have Freshman Orientation on Thursday," Kyle said. "Otherwise, I'm going to work on my pictures from the trip."

"What exactly do you have to do to the pictures," I asked.

"Do you know what PhotoShop software is," he asked.

"Ummmmm, no."

"You use it to manipulate pictures," Kyle said. "You know those watermarks I put on my pictures? I use PhotoShop to do that. You can do a lot more, though. I can improve the color, make them sharper and clearer, crop them, blow them up, add titles, if I want to. All of that."

"Isn't that kind of like cheating," Rick asked.

"No, not at all. I can do some of that same stuff in the darkroom, especially with black and whites. It's the finished picture that matters. Not how you got it that way," he said.

"Are these only going to be for the Web site," I asked.

"No, I'm going to print the best ones and send them to New York," he said.

"You ought to try using that new laser printer we have in the office," I said. "That damn thing cost a fortune, and it's supposed to be the most advanced in the world."

"I intend to. Were you surprised when my daddy knew to buy that particular one," Kyle asked.

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, I was," I said.

"Guess where he got the 4-1-1."

"Oh, now it's coming clear to me," I said.

"I figured Gene didn't know squat about that kind of stuff," Rick said. "I smelled the scent of Kyle in that deal from the start."

"I ordered some really good glossy paper. Photo paper, really," Kyle said. "Two bucks a sheet."

"Damn, boy, how many did you get," Jus asked.

"A hundred sheets," he said. "I can't wait to use it."

"Kyle, how much money have you made with your pictures," Brian asked.

"A pretty good bit. I don't know exactly. And some of that belongs to you, too, by the way."

"To me? Why me?"

"Model fees," Kyle said.

"You don't have to pay me," Brian said.

"Shut up. Yes, he does," Justin said.

"Yes, I do, Bri. It's only right. Anybody who's willing to let his hard dick be on display in a gallery in

New York City deserves to be paid," Kyle said.

"What!?" Rick and I said in unison.

"Got you last," Kyle said, and everybody laughed.

"Guys, I gave you my word of honor that I wouldn't take any sexy pictures of guys under eighteen, and I live by my word," he said.

"Hey, I'm eighteen," Jus said.

"Me, too," Alex and Cody both said together.

"Now wait a minute, guys, . . ." I started to say.

"Kevin, I'm not going to do that. Give me some credit, man," Kyle said.

"I know that, Kyle. We know we can trust you," I said.

"Back to you, though, Bri, I owe you money. I was sort of waiting to give it to you when you got in the car market, but I can give it to you now, if you want me to," Kyle said.

"How much is it," Brian asked.

"It's a pretty good bit. Fifteen hundred," Kyle said.

"How many pictures of him have you sold," Jus asked.

"Just two," Kyle said.

"Wow," Jus said. "How much did they sell for?"

"More than that," Kyle said.

"You're not going to tell me," Justin asked. It almost sounded like his feelings were hurt.

"No, I'm not. Come outside for a minute."

Justin looked puzzled as hell, but he followed Kyle out to the patio.

"I wonder what that's all about," Rick said.

"Yeah, me, too. Do you know, Tim?"

"No, I don't know. I can guess, though."

"Well, what is it?"

"Kyle doesn't want Brian to know how much he sold the pictures for because he thinks Brian will think he's paying him too much," Tim said.

"Do you think it's too much," Brian asked.

"Nope," Tim said. "That's all I'm saying about it, and I'm not even sure that's what this is all about."

"That would be just like him, though," Rick said.

They came back inside in just a few minutes, and neither one said anything.

"Well, did you get your business taken care of," Rick asked.

"Yep," they said in unison, and that was the end of it.

"When do you want your money," Kyle asked Brian again.

"You keep it for now," Bri said.

"Okay. Who's hungry," Kyle asked, and we ended family time with lunch.

(Justin's Perspective)

It pissed me off when Kyle refused to say how much he had sold those two pictures of Brian for. I mean, it really wasn't any of my business, but I don't think you do your brother and best friend that way. I didn't know what the hell he wanted with me outside.

"What's up," I asked.

"Bubba, I didn't want to say this in front of Brian because I'm pretty sure he won't take the money if he knows, okay?"

"If he knows what," I asked.

"How much I sold the pictures for. He'll think it's too much, and he won't take it," he said.

"Maybe it is too much," I said.

"Look. Whose money is it?"

"It's yours. Nobody's disputing that," I said. "You earned it."

"That's right, and I can do whatever the hell I want to with it, too, now can't I?"

"No question about that," I said. The boy was stubborn, but at least he was logical.

"Brian's going to be sixteen in a few months, and he's going to need a car. I want him to have a few dollars, at least, to put toward it," he said.

"He's been working all summer," I said.

"I know, but that trip cost him something, didn't it? And he's not making tips like you and I are. He's making hourly, and it ain't all that much," he said.

"Rick and Kevin will cosign a loan for him, just like they did for me," I said.

"Yeah, but think about this. You were working at the time, remember? Brian's not going to be able to work during school, Bubba. For one thing, they shut most of the gift shops down, and for another he doesn't have transportation to get to work, even," he said.

"Are you going to help Alex out with a car, too," I asked.

"No. I don't love Alex like I do Brian. Hell, I barely know him yet," he said.

Like I said, the boy had perfect logic.

"Well, look, it's your money, and you do whatever the hell you want to with it. You won't hear any squawk out of me about it," I said. "And Kyle, you know something?"

"What?"

"You're a pretty damn good guy," I said.

"Let's go back inside. I'm getting hungry."

* * *

Brian and I were the only two around when the new kid showed up with Mr. Williams around two o'clock that afternoon. We were both in the den. He was reading a book for school, and I was reading my history book for college. It was pretty interesting, but it went into way more detail than I needed to know. I figured if I read it now and read it again when the class started, I might actually remember something.

The doorbell rang. Trixie had a bad habit of barking every time that happened, but Brian was trying to train her not to do that. He shushed her after only one bark that time. I wonder if she thought we couldn't hear the bell and needed her to let us know somebody was there.

I went and opened the front door. It was Mr. Tyrone Williams and this kid that I figured must be Denis.

"Hi, Justin," Mr. Williams said, shaking my hand.

"Hi, come on in," I said. "I'm Justin Davis," I said to the boy and gave him my hand. He gave me his, and it was a limp fish. I was tempted to squeeze the shit out of it and tell him to shake hands like a man, but what kind of first impression would that have made? He said his name was Denis Morgan.

"Bri, you remember Mr. Williams, don't you," I said.

"Sure. Hi, Mr. Williams," Brian said. He stood up and shook hands with the man.

"Buddy, this is Denis Morgan, our new brother," I said.

"Hiya, Denis. I'm Brian Mathews."

They shook hands, too, and I'll bet he got the same limp fish I got.

"Let me go find Kevin and Rick," Brian said. "Do you know where they are?"

"I'd check the clubhouse," I said. "Y'all have a seat. Would you like anything to drink," I asked.

"Coffee, or a coke or something?"

"Can I have a coke," the kid asked.

"Sure. Mr. Williams?"

"Nothing for me, thanks," Mr. Williams said.

I got cokes for Denis, Brian, and me.

"So Denis, how old are you?"

"Fifteen," he said.

"Oh. Same as Brian. When's your birthday?"

"June," he said.

At least he didn't have flapping jaws, I thought.

"What grade are you in," I asked.

"Ninth."

He was a nice looking kid, but he really needed a haircut. I don't mind longer hair; in fact, I think it's pretty sexy. His wasn't meant to be longer, though. He just needed a haircut. Wait till Gage gets a load of you, I thought.

"Oh, by the way. This is Trixie. She's our family puppy," I said. Where the hell was Brian and those other ones, I thought.

The kid looked at Trixie and didn't even smile. Not a good sign, I thought.

Denis looked like he was close to Brian's size, only he had light hair. He had a pretty good tan on the parts of him I could see.

"So, Denis, you like to play sports or what?"

"No."

Okay. Unplug that half of my brain, I thought.

"Do you like to watch movies?"

"Some."

Do you like to jerk off, I thought. He'd probably just say "yeah."

"We just got back from Montana yesterday. We were out there visiting a friend of ours who stayed with us for a few weeks in the spring," I said.

"How is Chris," Mr. Williams asked.

"He was great. He's been taking a lot of therapy, and they're going to have him up on crutches in a little while. You ought to see how flexible he is compared to what he used to be."

Brian came back in by himself.

"I couldn't find anybody," he said.

"They knew we were coming," Mr. Williams said.

"I know. We all knew. Brian, call one of 'em on their cell phone. Tell them Mr. Williams and Denis are here," I said.

My phone was on the coffee table, and Brian used it. We all had 'em, including him, but I didn't know where his was.

"Kevin, this is Brian," he said. "Mr. Williams and Denis are here."

Pause.

"Okay, I'll tell them," he said.

He hung up.

"They're all next door helping the Crawfords with something. Kevin said to apologize for their not being here and to say that they would be here in just a minute."

"Okay. I guess I'll forgive them, if they're helping a neighbor," Mr. Williams said. He chuckled, like that was supposed to be funny, so Brian and I chuckled, too.

"Have y'all had lunch," I asked.

I was so desperate, I was turning into Kyle.

"Thanks, but we had lunch," Mr. Williams said.

"I'll be right back," Brian said, and left the room.

Shit! I thought. Where the fuck is he going, leaving me here with these two by myself.

"Yeah, ole Chris is doing good. We're missing him, though. Him and his brother, Dave. Two really nice guys, that's for sure."

"Did y'all make it to Yellowstone," Mr. Williams asked.

"Yes, sir, we sure did. We spent five days and four nights there. Have you been?"

"No, but I plan to go some day. National parks are sort of a hobby of mine," he said. "There are some wonderful Web sites about them."

"So I've heard," I said. "I need to spend some time checking those out."

Brian finally came back with a big bowl of Tick Supreme. He set it down on the coffee table in front of Mr. Williams, and his eyes got sort of big. He was a heavy man, and I knew it took a lot of calories to keep his weight up. He took him a handful of that stuff, popped it into his mouth, and I could see the contentment on his face.

"Oh, this is good. Have some, Denis."

Denis got him some, too. I could tell he liked it.

Denis wasn't a swishy kid, exactly, but you could tell he didn't know anything about the business end of a baseball bat or a pool cue.

"Have you read this book, Denis," Brian asked him, showing him the book he was reading for school. It was Lord of the Flies, or something like that.

That's all it took. Denis finally moved parts of his face.

"Oh, yeah. It's one of my favorites. The structure of that book is so good. The hunt scenes get progressively more violent until the end. I won't tell you about that, though, because I don't want to ruin it for you," he said.

Holy God, we praise Thy name, I thought.

"I hadn't thought about that, but you're right," Brian said. "I've been focusing on the symbolism, mostly."

"Well, the hunt scenes are symbolic," Denis said. "They parallel the deterioration of the society on the island."

"Y'all are way over my head," I said, "and I've actually read the damn book. One of the few I've read."

"Denis, I can absolutely see what you're saying," Brian said. "It's beautiful the way Golding put that together. I'm going to have to start over, or read it a second time."

"I read almost every book at least twice," Denis said.

"I watch almost every movie we rent twice," I said.

"Yeah, because you fall asleep halfway through just about every one the first time you watch it," Bri said.

"Shhhh, don't tell my secrets," I said.

Denis actually laughed when I said that.

"So, I guess you like to read, huh?"

"I love it," he said. "That's basically what I do. My mom and I live in a trailer. She'll be in the living room with her boyfriend du jour, and I'll be in the back reading."

I didn't quite get all of that, but I'd ask Brian about it later. This guy sounded like he was smart as

hell, and I knew me and Kyle were going to have to turn him over to Brian and Tim.

"We have a pretty good library in this house," Brian said. "It's in the study, mostly."

"You have a study," he asked, like he thought that was hot shit. "Oh, my God! I've dreamed about living in a house with a study. And books. And literate people."

"Some of us are more literate than others," Brian said. He looked at me when he said that, and he looked so cute at that moment I could have eaten him up.

"What does that mean," I asked.

Brian just giggled.

I looked at my watch, and they had been here a good half hour.

"Did they say when they were coming, Buddy," I asked Brian. "What were they doing?"

Just then we heard the siren of an ambulance pull up our street and go into the Crawford's driveway next door.

"Shit. Somebody's hurt," I said.

Just then, Kevin and Rick came in the back door, and then into the den.

"I'm so sorry we weren't here," Kevin said as he came in. "Our neighbor's son had a seizure and went unconscious. We were trying to help out until the EMTs got there. It took forever. Sorry."

"Which son," I asked. Those boys were good friends of ours.

"Blake," Rick said.

"Blake had a seizure," I asked. "Is he all right?"

"We brought him around and he was coherent, but that was the first time he had ever done anything like that. We don't know what's going on," Kevin said.

"Kevin and Rick, I hope the boy is all right," Mr. Williams said, "but I want you to know, your two sons have done you all very proud in being gracious hosts. Especially this big guy."

He put his hand on my shoulder, and hearing him say that made me feel so damn good I could have busted wide open. Kevin and Rick were both just grinning their asses off, and I knew they were proud of us.

"And this is your new son, Denis Morgan."

Denis shook hands with Kevin and Rick, but I knew they got the fish, too.

"Welcome, Denis," Rick said. "I hope you'll be happy with us."

"Oh, I know I will be. There are readers here," he said.

Oh-oh, I thought. At least I had a book out.

"Well, Denis, I need to get going. Let's get your stuff from my car," Mr. Williams said. "I'll make an appointment with you guys to see about the paperwork tomorrow."

Just then, Kyle, Tim, Alex, and Cody came in the house. We had to go through the whole introduction thing with them.

"Come on, Kyle. Let's get his stuff," I said. "Can I have your keys," I asked Mr. Williams. He gave them to me.

Once Kyle and I were outside, I said,

"Jesus Christ, Kyle. This kid is a fucking brainiac," I said.

He started laughing.

"What are you talking about," he asked, still grinning.

"You should have heard him and Brian talking about this book Brian is reading. Lord of the Flies, or something like that. They were talking about symbols and structure and shit like that. Hell, I read the book because Kevin wanted me to read it. I thought it was a damn stroke book that didn't quite make it, with all these guys running around naked on this island."

He was laughing so hard he could hardly breathe.

"A stroke book that didn't quite make it," he said, and he laughed some more. "You didn't really think that, did you?"

"No, I thought it was a good book, and I was glad I read it, but I didn't get nothing like what they got out of it," I said.

"I don't think books are really your thing, or mine, either," he said.

"I know. Denis said he always dreamed about living in a house that had a study in it. I always dreamed about living in a house that had a stud in it."

He doubled over laughing.

"What'd you do? Take a funny pill, or something," he asked.

"I don't know. I think Denis is going to be a challenge, but not the kind we thought he was going to be."

Chapter 14

(Justin's Perspective, continued)

Kyle and I brought his stuff into the house. He didn't have that much, but the one suitcase I had weighed a damn ton. I'll bet it's all books, I thought.

"Guys, put his stuff in one of the third floor rooms for the time being," Kevin told us.

"Is it a garret," Denis asked, all excited like.

Kevin laughed. "No, it's just a regular bedroom, Denis," he said.

"What the hell's a garret," I asked Kyle on the way up.

"I don't know," he said.

"Is this bed made," Kyle asked, when we got to the room. He checked it, and it was.

We went into the bathroom up there to make sure it had towels and such, and it did.

"I guess he's all set up," I said.

"There's no computer in here, though," Kyle said.

I didn't think that was a requirement for a good night's sleep, but what did I know.

"Where's your laptop," he asked.

"Downstairs under the bed, in the box," I said.

"Do you mind if he uses it up here?"

"Hell, no, I don't mind," I said.

There were computers everywhere in that damn house. I had the one they had given me for my seventeenth birthday on a desk in my room, and Brian had his on the desk in the room Alex was in. That was officially Brian's room, but he never used it much. Kyle and Tim had one in their room, and Jeff had two in his, a desk one and a laptop. There was one in the study downstairs, and one in the kitchen, too. They were everywhere.

We went down to our room and got the laptop I had gotten for my eighteenth birthday. We took it back upstairs to the third floor, and Kyle set about working it after he plugged it in. He typed in some stuff here and there, and he was satisfied it worked.

"It's working. Let's go downstairs."

"What did you do," I asked.

"I configured it for the network in this house. I put in an IP address and a gateway address, and such. What do you think I did?"

"Oh, yeah. I forgot. That's what I thought you did," I said.

He started laughing and jumped on me, getting me in a headlock. Kyle was a very affectionate guy, but he was rough. He gave me a nuggie, and it hurt.

"You don't know what the fuck I was talking about, do you," he said.

"No, I really don't, but can I still be your friend?"

He laughed hard. "You and I are going to be friends on our deathbeds, joking and getting each other last," he said.

"I hope so," I said.

"I know so."

Back downstairs in the den, everybody was all huddled up. They were getting to know Denis. They had probably already gone over the house rules about sex, but I didn't think that was going to be an issue with him anytime soon.

"He's all set up," Kyle said. "Computer, toilet paper, and everything."

We laughed at that.

"There's a computer in my room," Denis asked, all excited.

"Yeah. We're on a local area network here, with cable modems," Kyle said.

I had no idea what that meant.

"Be still my heart," Denis said. "I've died and gone to heaven."

They all laughed. He was actually a pretty cute boy, I noticed, now that I wasn't terrorized by having to entertain him and Mr. Williams by myself.

"Who wants to swim," Kyle asked.

"We can swim, but we're going to six o'clock Mass," Rick said.

"It's only four o'clock," Kyle said.

"I know, but I'm just telling you. We leave at 5:45. Dressed," Rick said.

Jeff and Tyler were there, and they went out to the pool with us.

"We swim naked here, Denis," Brian said.

"I think I'll just sit out and watch," Denis said.

"You can wear a suit, if you want to," I said. "Naked ain't a requirement."

"No, that's okay. I really don't have a suit," he said.

"I'll lend you one," Brian offered.

"No, that's okay," Denis said.

Brian started to insist, but I said, "Buddy, it doesn't look like he wants to swim."

"Okay," Brian said, smiling real sweet. "I get the hint."

We had a good time in the pool that afternoon. I did a bad thing accidentally and smashed a volleyball into Kyle's face when we were playing. He went under and came up with a bloody lip. I knew it hurt, but he didn't say a word about it. That was just part of the game, but I still felt bad about hurting him.

After Mass we went to the Pelican's Roost, like we usually did. It was just us that night. When we went to Mass on Saturday night, Jerry, Pat, and Mike joined us. They weren't there that night, though. It was just the immediate family, and that was pretty big. After we ate, we went home, and everybody got together in the den.

"Denis, tomorrow morning Rick and I have to go to work," Kevin said, leading off.

"So do Alex and I," I said. "The rest of these guys are off for their last week before school starts."

"Kyle, will you get things organized in the morning," Rick asked.

"Sure," Kyle said. "You know I will."

"What are you guys going to do tomorrow," Kevin asked the ones staying home.

"Read," Tim said.

"Read," Brian said.

"Denis, do you need help getting organized for tomorrow," Kevin asked.

"No. I'm going to read, too. That's what I do," he said.

"Kyle?"

"I thought I would rape and pillage awhile tomorrow, and then rob a couple of banks on Tuesday," he said.

"Oh, so that means working on pictures, right," Kevin said.

"You got me last on that one, Bubba. Yeah," Kyle said, laughing.

"Okay, I'm satisfied," Kevin said. "You all have plans for tomorrow, and that's good."

"I am still tired from the trip," Kyle said. "You coming, Tim?"

Tim would be coming, all right, but not the way Kyle said it just then. He was so damn obvious when it came to wanting to have sex with Tim. That was all right, though.

"Kyle, did you ever get up with your parents," Rick asked.

"Yeah. They're in Destin with Doc and Sonya," he said.

"I didn't know your dad wasn't home, Tim," Kevin said.

"No, sir, he's in Destin."

Duh, I thought.

"Well, goodnight, guys," Kevin said.

We all said it, too. In about five minutes, we were all headed to bed.

(Kyle's Perspective)

Timmy and I just lolled around in bed on Monday morning. We made really good love that morning, really intense, and that would probably hold me for the whole day. Maybe even two days, but I doubted it.

"Let's get up," I said.

"No. Let's don't get up. Let's stay in bed all day," he said.

I laughed a little bit.

"You sorry-ass load. We've got a new brother, remember," I said.

"Fuck him," Tim said.

"No, thanks," I said.

Tim and I both laughed.

"He's a real piece of work, isn't he," Tim said.

"Yeah. Jus said he and Brian discussed a book Brian was reading, and it was way over Justin's head," I said.

"I seriously doubt that," Tim said.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. He was funny as hell, yesterday, though, pretending to be dumb," I said.

"People who don't know him probably think he is dumb, especially because of his accent and all. You want people to think you're dumb, too, don't you?"

"I'm surprised it took you this long to pick up on that," I said.

"No. I picked up on it a long time ago, and I know what you're doing with that. But I've got your number, Babe. I know how not dumb you really are."

I laughed because I knew he really did have my number on that one.

"That's why they picked on Denis in Blountstown, I'll bet. They won't pick on him at Beachside. There are too many other kids like him there for that to matter. He just comes across as smart. He

doesn't come across as gay. And we're doing this thing about academic achievement this year. I'm going to be all about academic achievement," I said.

He laughed.

"Shit, Kyle, you're all about having fun and surfing and taking pictures and shooting pool and giving parties and planning trips," he said.

"I know, but that's our little secret, okay? In public, I'm all about academic achievement. By the way, what exactly does that mean?"

He laughed. "God, I love you so much," he said. "We're going to have a great life together, aren't we?"

"Those are my plans," I said. "And I love you so much, too. Didn't that work out good?"

He laughed.

* * *

Tim and I finally took a shower and went downstairs. Brian and Denis were both down there already, reading books at the breakfast room table.

"Did you sleep good, Denis," I asked.

"Yes. That bed is wonderful. The room is beautiful, too. I noticed the curtains and how nice they are," Denis said.

"Did you have a chance to try out the computer," Tim asked.

"Yes. It was like lightening. I didn't have one at home, and the ones in school were really slow," he said. "I knew cable modems were fast, but I had no idea they were that fast."

"Did Kevin or Rick say anything about getting you registered for school," I asked Denis.

"No. I guess I need to do that," he said.

"I'm going up to school in a little while. I'll take you, if you want me to," I said.

"Can I do it without an adult," he asked.

"Yeah. You just have to fill out some forms. You might have to bring some home for Kevin and Rick to sign, but you don't really need them to register," I said.

"What grade are all of you going to be in," he asked.

"I'm going to be a senior," I said.

"Junior," Tim said.

"Sophomore," Brian said.

"And I'm going to be a lowly freshman," he said.

"You know who else is going to be a freshman? Peanut," I said.

"That's right. I forgot about that," Tim said. "I wonder if he's registered."

"Yeah, they took care of all of that in middle school," I said. "But you know what, he wanted to change his PE class. I wonder if he's done that."

"Did he want to get out of swimming? Is that what it was," Bri asked.

"Yeah. He swims like a fish. He'll pass that proficiency test right away," I said.

"Am I going to have to take swimming," Denis asked.

"Yep. Every freshman has to, or pass a swimming proficiency test to get out of it. It's a graduation requirement," I said.

"So hell will start all over again," he said. He had kind of a long face.

"What do you mean," I asked. "It's not that bad. You don't like to swim?"

"I can swim a little bit, but I probably couldn't pass a proficiency test. It's not that, though. It's the whole locker room thing and the jock mentality," he said.

"Did you get picked on at your old school," Tim asked. He said that so gentle and kind that Denis

had to know he wanted to help if he could.

"Yes, unfortunately," he said. "That school I went to was a haven for rednecks and savages, and they made fun of me and called me names. They pushed me around, too, took my books away from me, that sort of thing."

"Did they call you 'faggot,'" Brian asked, also gentle and kind.

He put his head down and wouldn't look at us.

"Please don't call me that," he whispered.

I touched his arm.

"You're among your brothers here," I said, also trying to be gentle and kind. "We don't hurt each other, Denis. At least not on purpose."

I thought about the volleyball I took to the kisser the day before when I said that last part.

"Are you worried about changing in the locker room," Tim asked.

"That's part of it," he said.

"We're pretty free and easy about nudity around here, Den," I said. "It's all guys, and everything. But you don't have to swim nude here, if you don't want to. We had a guy who stayed with us for a few weeks this summer, and he was shy because his dick was real small. He got used to being naked around us, though. Didn't he?"

Tim and Brian both said he did.

"I can definitely relate. Has anybody ever gotten, er, you know?"

"Hard," I asked.

He nodded.

"It happens all the time, Denis," Tim said. "We just ignore it when it does."

"Yes, but I'm . . . different. "

"Gay," I asked.

He put his head down again, and his lower lip started trembling, like he was about to cry or something.

"Is it that easy to tell?"

"You tell me. How many gay guys have you met in the last twenty-four hours," I asked.

"None, that I know of," he said.

"That figure isn't quite right, Denis," I said. "You've met a houseful. We're all gay here."

He looked shocked as hell.

"They didn't tell you," Tim asked, not believing it.

"We knew about you because Kevin and Rick told us. Besides, we mostly only get the queers," I said.

"Nobody said anything about that," Denis said.

"Here's the way it is. Tim and I are boyfriends, and we have been for about twenty months," I said.

"And Justin and I are boyfriends, and our anniversary is in November. One year, coming up," Brian said.

"Kevin and Rick are actually married to each other, and they've been together over four years," Tim said. "And Alex and Cody just started dating about two weeks ago. Jeff and Tyler have been dating for a couple of months, and they're going to live together. In fact, I think you'll probably get Jeff's room."

"So, do you feel more at home now," I asked. "We're on your side, Bubba. That's what we call each other. Bubba. It means 'brother.'"

"When you say you're boyfriends, does that mean . . . "

"Yes, we do have sex," I said. "I guess they didn't say anything about the house rules about sex,

huh?"

He shook his head.

"Whatever you do in private is your business, and nobody else's. We also don't talk in public about what we do in private. What that really means is in front of Kevin and Rick, or other adults. You never do anything sexual in public. Not even kissing, except like a quick hello kiss or something like that. And you never, ever do anything unless both guys want to do it. That could be fucking or sucking, or even jerking off or kissing. It's got to be mutual. Sex is for love, not for aggression," I said.

"I don't think that will be an issue for me," he said.

"Maybe not now, but you're going to be here a long time," I said. "You'll meet somebody, probably."

"Do the kids at school harass you all," he asked.

"No, they really don't," I said. "And they won't you, either. Everybody knows we're gay. You're going to have three brothers in that school with you, and all of us have a lot of friends, gay and straight. We're going to have your back, now. That's all there is to that."

"This is turning out to be better than I thought, and I already thought it was going to be wonderful," he said.

We all laughed a little.

"But, now, you've got to be a family member, too, you hear? That means you've got to do your part, both the chores around the house and contribute to family time together. No being up in your room reading all the time when everybody else is down watching TV or hanging out together," I said.

"Can I read in the den, say, while everybody else is watching TV," he asked.

"Absolutely," Tim said. "We do that all the time, but we're there together. And sometimes you'll want privacy, and we understand that. None of us is always with the family. Plus, some might be out shooting pool or swimming, while others are watching TV or reading or playing a game or cards or something. It's more like there being a family spirit than it is like having a set of rules about who can do what, when. Does that make any sense?"

"I think so," he said.

"Denis, you'll find out that there is an awful lot of love in this house," Bri said, "and I don't mean just between boyfriends. There's an awful lot of fun here, too, and you'll absolutely always feel safe and be safe here."

"Would you all mind calling me Denny? That's what I like to be called," he said.

"Mostly we're going to call you Bubba, but we'll call you Denny, too, if that's what you want," Bri said.

"You're going to be happy here, Denny. I mean that, Bubba," I said.

"Does anybody here ever cry, because I'm afraid I'm about to," he said.

The three of us laughed hard.

"Shit, we cry all the fucking time, Bubba. Cry your eyes out, man. They're happy tears, though, right," I said.

"Right," he said, and the water was just streaming down his face.

"I think this is an ice cream moment, Kyle," Brian said.

"Do you like ice cream, Denny," I asked.

"Yeah," he said.

"Well, watch this, dude."

We didn't have any bananas (I put them on my mental shopping list), but we had everything else. Pineapple, cherries, coconut, marshmallow cream, chocolate sauce, whipped cream, chopped nuts, and

three flavors of ice cream. We made 'em big. It was only ten o'clock in the morning, but sometimes ice cream moments happen then. I was going to be on a sugar high the rest of the damn day, but that was alright. We had us a new brother, and I thought he was going to be just fine, thank you very much.

"God, I'm full," I said when I had finished my ice cream.

"I know. Me, too," Tim said.

"You ate like crazed beasts. Both of you," Brian said.

"I am a crazed beast," I said.

I got up from my chair and started doing a monster walk over toward Brian. I had my arms up in the air and the meanest look I could get on my face. I knew he was ticklish as hell, and I was going to get him for saying that.

I got about two feet from him, and Trixie growled and bared her teeth at me.

"Whoa!" I said, and backed off.

"Trixie! No!" Brian screamed at her.

"What is this all about," I asked.

"She's real protective of me, Kyle. She did the same thing to Justin when he was tickling me in the clubhouse one day," Bri said. "I need to break her of it. Do it again."

"I don't want her to bite me," I said.

"She's not going to bite you. She knows who you are. She's trying to scare you, though."

"Well, she damn sure did," I said.

"Pet her," he said.

"Is she going to take my hand off," I asked.

"Kyle, use your left hand," Tim said.

We all laughed.

I petted Trixie, and it was like it never happened.

"Now do it again," Brian said.

So I did. She growled a little bit, but I spoke her name sharply, and she started wagging. I did it another time, and we didn't get a peep out of her.

By then, I really didn't feel like tickling Brian anymore, so I sat down.

"We've got some lists to make," I said.

Tim and Brian laughed.

"Yeah, laugh all you want to, but we've got things to get done, and a list is the best way to do it," I said.

"What have we got to get done," Brian asked.

"Let's start with school. He's got to get registered, and Peanut's probably got to get his schedule changed. That's probably about it for school," I said.

"What else," Brian asked.

I was on to that little cutie. He was playing the Justin role of teasing my ass for all he was worth, and I knew it.

"School clothes," I said. "Denny, have you got nice clothes for school? If you're going to be Kevin and Rick's son, you've got to dress nice for school."

"We were pretty poor, Kyle. My clothes aren't really very nice. And they don't fit me too well, either, anymore," he said.

"I'm all fixed up for clothes," Brian said.

"Bullshit, Bri. You haven't had on a pair of long pants since the first of March, so you have no idea if they still fit you. You've grown, dude. I've watched it," I said.

"That's not true. I had on long pants at Rick's grandpa's funeral," he said.

"Yeah, and they were mighty high-waters, too," I said.

He laughed. "You don't miss a thing, do you?"

"Nope," I said. "And shoes. Do you have decent shoes? That fit?"

"I could use some shoes," Brian said.

"There you go," I said.

"I don't want to spend all my money on clothes, Kyle. I'm fine with what I've got," Brian said.

"You're not going to spend all your money on clothes. I have plastic," I said.

"Are you going to charge my clothes to Goodson," he asked.

"No. I'm going to charge yours and Denny's, and probably Justin's, too, to Kevin and Rick," I said.

"We're not going to go hog-ass wild, but you're going to get what you need, Brian."

"Is that an order," he asked, grinning.

"If it needs to be, yes," I said. "Kevin and Rick, as good as they are, don't know shit about kids' clothing needs, and Justin is proof positive of that."

"I remember when you had to have a private talk with them about his clothes," Bri said.

"That's right, and they have not given it the first minute's thought since that talk. We're not waiting for them this time," I said.

"Are you like the boss kid," Denny asked.

Tim and Brian almost fell on the floor, they were laughing so hard. Trixie was barking her head off, wanting in on the fun.

"Absolutely," Brian said, still laughing.

"Yes," Tim said, laughing, too.

"I don't get what's so funny," Denny said.

"I don't, either," I said. "What about school supplies? Have you got a backpack to carry your shit in, Denny?"

"No. I just always carry my books loose," he said.

"Not here," I said. I wrote "backpack" on my list. "Pens, notebooks, loose leaf paper, pencils, all that kind of stuff. That's a Wal-Mart trip."

"Put index cards on the list," Brian said. "I've got to do my summer book reports on index cards. The 5" x 8" kind."

"Okay," I said, and I wrote that down. "What else?"

"I can't think of anything else, Babe," Tim said.

"Neither can I," Brian said.

"What about floppy disks for the computer and rulers and stuff like that," Denny said. "I don't have any of those things."

"Good point. And Brian, you're going to need a compass and a protractor for geometry," I said.

"I took that last year, Kyle," he said.

"Oh. Okay. What about calculators? Does everybody have a good one, with the trig functions on it, and all?"

Tim and Brian said they were good, but Denny said he didn't have one.

"I'll give you mine. I ain't ever using it again," I said.

"No. Get him one of his own," Tim said. "You hold on to yours."

"Okay," I said. "You need a cell phone, too, don't you," I asked Denny.

"Do I?"

"Yeah, you do. Everybody's got one. That's a company benefit that Kevin and Rick don't pay for," I

said.

"I often wondered about that," Bri said.

"Yeah, I help my daddy figure out benefits, sometimes," I said.

Tim and Brian laughed, but Denny was in the dark. Leave him there for now, I thought.

"Okay, we've got us some lists. Now we just have to do 'em," I said. "Let me call Peanut."

I had a bunch of numbers programmed into my phone, and I used the alpha code on the keys to keep straight which number was which. I pressed in C-H-I-P for him, and he answered it quick.

I told him I was going up to school to register Denny, and I said he could come, too, if he wanted to. He said he wanted to.

"We'll be there in ten minutes," I said.

"Okay. I'll be waiting for you."

I told Denny on the way over why we called him Peanut and that we didn't know if he was straight, bi, gay, or something else.

"Whatever he is, he's just a great guy, and he's our friend," I said.

"You guys are pretty incredible," he said. "And you can call me Peanut the Second."

I laughed.

At Beachside High School, I was the kid who probably had the most access to the principal of any kid in the place. She and I had gotten to be good friends over the summer, and she already knew my family. She had babysat my dad when he was little. My dad had had an older brother who had been killed in the war in Vietnam, and it turned out her husband and my Uncle Joe had been very good friends in school. Not only that, but her son had cut his eye teeth as a chef in the restaurant of one of our big hotels. Talk about deep, entangled roots in a small beach town. I had 'em coming and going, and I was just really learning about them.

"Miss Sally, I want you to meet my newest brother, Denny Morgan," I said, when I introduced them. "He's going to be a freshman. And this is my good friend Chip Rooney, another freshman."

"Hi, Denny. Hi, Chip. Welcome to Beachside," she said. "Have you registered yet?"

"I did, but I need to change my schedule," Chip said.

"No, ma'am, I just got here," Denny said.

I noticed he said "no, ma'am," and that was a good thing. He needed to say "ma'am" and "sir" as often as he could. That was the way we did it in Emerald Beach. But he had grown up in Blountstown, so I knew he knew that.

We were in the lobby of the school.

"Kyle, take them over to guidance so they can get them squared away, and then come back to my office so we can talk, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

I took them to the guidance office, and there were a lot of people in there. They signed in for an appointment with their counselors and took a seat. It was first come, first served.

"This might take a while," I said. "I've got to go up to the front office, so y'all go to my car when you finish in here. Just wait there for me, okay?"

"Okay," they said.

I went up to the front office, and Miss Sally wanted to talk about Freshman Orientation. I told her I was cool with it and that I would stress academic achievement in my speech. I was supposed to try to whip up some school spirit, and then talk about academic achievement and our plan to make that happen.

"Kyle, the last thing I want to do is put words in your mouth," she said.

"I wish you would," I said.

"No, you've got plenty of words of your own. You can say anything you want to, but I really wish you would hit the academic achievement thing hard."

"Don't worry, Miss Sally," I said. "That's what I'm all about."

"Kyle, I hear you saying that, but I looked at your schedule the other day. It's not exactly what I would call 'academic.'"

"Yes, ma'am, I know that, but did you look at what I took before this year? I've already got fifteen credits at ECCC, and I'm taking two Englishes there this coming year. I might be slouching a little bit at school here, but I'm really not slouching overall."

"I didn't know about the English courses at the college. That's a lot better. Kyle, you have incredible potential. Do you know that about yourself?"

"Yes, ma'am, I think I do."

"I think you'll eventually come back here, with a partner who's a doctor, and you can run this place, if you want to."

"We're coming back, but I don't know about running anything. I just want us to be a Grade A school this year," I said.

"Go get those precious little boys you brought in here this morning. Take care of them this year, Kyle. I think they might need you."

"Yes, ma'am, I will. We're going to have their backs, that's for sure. We might have to bust some ass," I said.

"If you do it on campus, I'll deal with you exactly like I would anyone else," she said.

"Yes, ma'am, I know that," I said.

"Get out of here, Kyle," she said.

Then she winked.

They weren't at my car, so I figured they were still in the guidance office. It was too hot to wait out there, so I walked over to the sports complex. It was just a gym and the swimming pool, but that's what they called it, the sports complex. The pool was an indoor one, and there were big open windows on one side of it. It was supposed to be used year round, and it was, but to me it was always too hot in there in the summer, and the water was never really warm enough in the winter.

There were some guys in the gym playing pick-up basketball. I knew almost all of them, and they wanted me to play. I didn't want to because of Denny and Chip, though, so I faked a limp. They knew I was faking, and they laughed.

Nothing else was going on in the gym. I checked the weight room to see if anybody I knew was in there, but it was empty. Empty and hot as hell. The main gym was air conditioned and felt good, but it must have been off in that room. And it really smelled bad, too, like feet or something.

Then I went to the pool, and who should I see but Chip.

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be in guidance changing your schedule," I said to him.

"I already did it. They told me to come over here to see if the coach would give me my swimming test," he said.

"What are you going to do? Swim naked?"

"You wish, don't you," he said, with a big grin. Then he pulled the top of his shorts down a little bit to show me he had a bathing suit on under them. "I came prepared."

"Do you know where the coaches' offices are," I asked.

"No. I've never been in here before," he said.

"Come with me."

I found a coach I knew and liked, and I told him what was up. He asked Chip if he could swim, and Chip said he could. Then he asked me if I could vouch for that, and I said yes, sir. He got out a form and signed it.

"Fill in your name and the rest of that stuff, and turn it in in guidance," he said.

We thanked the coach and walked over toward guidance.

"I thought I was going to have to take a test, like actually get in the damn pool," Chip said.

"Evidently not," I said.

We both laughed.

Denny was just finishing up when we got to guidance. Chip filled out the form and turned it in.

"Let me see your schedule," I told Denny. He handed it to me.

He had English I, Algebra I, Drama I, and Personal Fitness the first half of the year. There weren't any courses listed for the second half.

"Why don't you have courses for second semester," I asked.

"The network went down before they could print it. That's when I'm taking swimming, though," he said.

"Good. Put it off as long as you can," I said. "Maybe things will grow by then."

Denny blushed, and it looked like he was bowing up.

I grabbed his shoulder.

"Hey, look. None of that shit, you hear? I didn't say that to hurt your feelings. I've never even seen what you've got. I was teasing you based on what you said this morning, that's all," I said.

"Sorry, Kyle. I knew that," he said.

If you knew it, why'd you bow up, I thought.

"Okay. I'm sorry if I made you mad, too. We don't really know one another yet, and I should have been more careful," I said. "Shake my hand, man."

He did, and it was pretty limp.

"Come on. Do it right," I said.

He grinned and shook normally.

"You're going to turn me into a man, aren't you," he said, playfully.

"You're goddamn right, I am. And you, too, Peanut. Now let's go."

"Were you getting ready to fight him," Chip asked.

"I guess," Denny said.

"Son, I don't think you want to take on these big boys," Chip said. "They'll grind you up. They'd turn me into peanut butter."

"You need to be careful, okay, Bubba? I was in the principal's office while you two were in guidance. She told me to look out for the two of you this year, and I intend to. I told her I might have to bust some ass to do it. She said that if I did that at school, she'd deal with me the same way she would with anybody else who fights on campus. Do you know what that means? Ten days out-of-school suspension for the first offense. Expulsion by the school board for the second offense. You acted like you have a pretty short fuse, Denny. Don't get in trouble, you hear, man?"

"Yes, sir," he said, and he didn't say it as a joke or sarcastic or anything.

"Can we walk around and look at the school," Chip asked.

"Sure," I said. "I'm going to call Tim and Brian and tell them to meet us for lunch."

I called them and told them to meet at our usual lunch place in half an hour, and we walked around the school. The cafeteria was nice and big, but we couldn't go in because they were waxing the

floor. The teachers didn't officially start until the next day, but there were some around working in classrooms. We went to the room where Denny was going to have English, and the teacher was in there. I knew her because I had had her for English freshman year.

"Hi, Kyle," she said, as we stood at the open door. "Come in. Are you all ready to start back?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "Miss Johnstone, this is Denny Morgan and this is Chip Rooney, two friends of mine. Denny's going to be in your class for English."

"How do you do, gentlemen," she said.

The one thing about Miss Johnstone, she really stressed reading a lot, and writing, too. She had something she called her classroom library, which was basically just a ton of paperback books all over the place. Denny's eyes got as big as dinner plates when he saw all those books.

"Do you like to read, Denny," she asked.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. I love to read," he said.

"Well, you'll do a lot of reading in my class. If you'd like, you can pick out a book to take home with you, as long as I get it back when you're finished with it," she said.

"Just one?"

She smiled like she liked what she just heard. "No, as many as you'd like, but they'll be here all semester," she said.

He picked out three good sized ones, and she made him sign the card that was in the back of each one. I noticed one of those books had been read by quite a few people, but the other two were almost brand new.

We walked around a little bit more, and then we met the guys for lunch.

After lunch I asked them if they wanted to go into town to the mall.

"Why don't we go tonight, so Justin can go, too," Brian said.

"Okay. What do you want to do this afternoon," I asked.

"I'd like to get started on those books I borrowed," Denny said.

"I need to get home," Chip said.

"Okay. I want to work on the pictures, anyway," I said, so we went home for the rest of the day.

Chapter 15

(Kevin's Perspective)

The house was very quiet when I got home. I knew the boys were there because Kyle's Mazda and Tim's Jeep were both in the driveway. I wasn't quite sure what to expect, but it wouldn't have surprised me if they were all asleep.

Trixie greeted me at the back door, and, once again, she acted like I was her long-lost best friend that she hadn't seen in years. I petted her, and she wiggled with joy.

I grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl we kept on the counter and went into the den. Tim, Brian, and Denis were draped on the two sofas and an easy chair, reading. I knew Tim and Brian both read a good bit for pleasure, but I also knew they had pretty serious summer reading lists from school to get through. As busy as they had been all summer, they were probably reading books for school.

"Hi, guys," I said.

They hadn't heard me come in, and Trixie hadn't barked. They looked up when I said that, and they might have even been a little startled.

"Hi, Kevin," they all said.

"Where's Kyle?"

"Hi, Kevin," I heard just then, from the study down the hall. He came out in a second to join us.

"Did you have a good day, Big Brother," Kyle asked.

"Yeah, it was good. It was busy, though, since I had been gone for two weeks," I said.

"I'll bet, but you kind of kept in touch, didn't you," he asked.

I had Web access to my email, so I had checked it a couple of times every day when I could while we were gone. There hadn't been any major crises for me to have to deal with, though. I talked to Mary Ann Pennington, my secretary, a few times, too, and she had been able to either take care of the little crises herself or tell me about them in enough detail for me to tell her what to do. She and I were a good team, and I thanked God every day for her.

"Yeah. It wasn't too bad," I said. "What did you guys do?"

"Kyle took me to school to register," Denis said. "I'm all squared away for the school year."

"Brian and I have been reading almost all day," Tim said. "We met up with them for lunch, but then we came home."

"I've been working on the pictures," Kyle said. "I've got some I want to print tomorrow."

"Put them on a disk, and I'll print them for you," I said.

"Thanks, but no. I want to do it personally," he said.

"Suit yourself," I said.

Rick came home about then, followed closely by Justin and Alex. Rick made a pot of coffee, and everybody but Tim and Brian had a cup.

"I'm tired," Justin said, once the coffee was served. "I'm skipping my workout today."

"What's the matter, pussy? You can't take it," Kyle said.

"I've been on my feet all day, Kyle, lifting heavy suitcases. I haven't been sitting at a computer doing whatever the hell it is you do," Jus barked at Kyle.

I knew they were setting up a "got you last." I just couldn't tell where it was going.

"Sort of that, 'tote that barge, lift that bale' kind of thing," Kyle asked. "Sort of like, 'working in a coal mine, going down, down, down . . . too tired for having fun'?"

Kyle started singing that song, and he knew every word of it. Trixie lent her voice to the singing, too, until Brian grabbed her and quieted her down. We all clapped when he was through.

"Something like that," Jus said.

Then he sang "Working on a Chain Gang." He was dancing, and when Justin got up to dance with him, they did a kind of line dance sort of thing. When that one was over, he started "I've Been Working on the Railroad." Most of us knew the words to that, so we sang along. We had a good time.

"Kyle, you have a really good voice," Denis said.

"Thanks, Denny. Trixie likes to sing duets with me, don't you, girl," he said, ruffling her fur. She loved the attention.

"Yeah, and she's got a better voice," Justin said.

"Good one, Jus," Tim said.

We laughed.

"Well," Justin asked Kyle.

"Okay, you got me last, but that was pretty damn weak," Kyle said.

"Just like your voice," Jus said.

We all laughed.

"Shit!" Kyle said, and we laughed some more.

"Does anybody know how Blake is," Brian asked.

"Yeah, Bri. I called Mr. Crawford this afternoon, and he said Blake is fine. They kept him in the

hospital last night and did a bunch of tests on him today, but they couldn't find anything that caused the seizure," I said.

"I'm glad he's okay," Brian said.

"I think we all are," Kyle said.

"Let's get in the water," Justin said after a pause.

We went out to the pool and stripped down to swim. Rick and I had on dress shirts and ties, but we piled those up on a chair far from the pool so they wouldn't get splashed. I had my eye on Denis.

He went out with us, but he sort of hung behind the rest of us while we were getting naked. We were all in the middle of the pool, and Justin was trying to flip Rick. We were in about five feet of water, and Jus made Rick get on the palms of his hands. He was trying to lift him out of the pool and throw him over backwards. All of a sudden, Denis was there with us.

"Let me try you, Kevin. I don't think you weigh as much as that lard-ass," Kyle said.

He came close to flipping me, but not quite. He tried a second time and came even closer.

"Come here, Denis," Justin said. "Put your feet on my hands now, okay? I'm going to try to flip you backwards, and the object is for you to go in feet first, facing me."

Denis did what Justin told him to do, and Jus succeeded in flipping him.

"Whoa!" Denis said when he came up. "That was incredible."

"Do me," Brian said to Jus.

"Okay. Come here, but you're bigger than you used to be, you know?"

Justin actually flipped Brian, but Kyle couldn't flip Tim. Tim was as big as Kyle, Rick, Justin, and me, and Kyle just couldn't do it. We might not have had a workout in the weight room that night, but they certainly did in the pool.

(Denny's Perspective)

I don't know why she did it. Yes, I do. She needed money for drugs. I mean, she knew she was on probation and that she would go to jail for a long time, if she got caught. Well, she got caught. Six years behind bars. No parole.

She had me when she was sixteen. She didn't know who my father was, but she had it narrowed down to four boys, all around her age. My grandparents weren't much better. My grandmother had been fourteen when my mom was born, and my grandfather was seventeen. They actually got married, but they didn't stay together very long. Each one of them had children by several men and women, respectively, so I had half-uncles and half-aunts all over the place. Even if I had wanted to marry a girl, I would have had to be very careful in Calhoun County to make sure I wasn't marrying somebody who was closely related to me, like even my half-sister.

My mom was probably the worst of that crowd, though. She did drugs openly in front of me and anybody else who happened to be there. We were on welfare all the time, and I got a free breakfast and a free lunch at school. I had a record of truancy, but that wasn't exactly accurate. I showed up at school every morning for my free breakfast and every day at lunch time for my free lunch. If I hadn't done that, I wouldn't have eaten every day.

I didn't go to class sometimes because I was picked on constantly. I was gay, and I had made the very bad mistake of telling my best, and only, friend when I was in the seventh grade. He said he was gay, too, but he told his older brother what I had told him. That was all it had taken. I was out to everybody, which meant I was everybody's punching bag. I never got hurt badly, physically. But I was marginalized. I was a pariah, someone to pick on and make fun of and laugh at.

I was smart, though, and I knew it. I skipped school a lot, except for meals, so I did very poorly.

That started in seventh grade. Just because you're smart doesn't mean you know stuff, so my grades were pitiful. I was never retained, though. I don't know why. I guess I actually went enough to fool my teachers into thinking I knew more than I did. I fell in love with reading in the third grade, and I would spend whole days, whole weeks, even, reading in the tiny little room in the trailer we lived in.

I didn't have many choices. Torment at school because they all knew I was gay; squalor at home; reading books that took me to places I wanted to be.

There was a very small public library in my town, but it was only open three days a week. Children were allowed in only one day a week, and you could only take out two books at a time. I needed more books than that. Two churches in town had libraries, but they were for the members, really. One nice lady who was a volunteer at the public library gave me a couple of books a time or two, but that wasn't nearly enough.

One day I was very, very hungry. I went into a convenience store to go to the bathroom, and I couldn't resist. It had the only magazine stand in town, with a few paperbacks, too. I stole two Snickers bars and a copy of a John Grisham novel. I was busted as soon as I walked out the door.

I had a bad temper. I got into a lot of fights with guys who called me fag or homo or that kind of thing. I was a fag and a homo, and I knew it. But I couldn't stand them calling me that. So I fought them. One time the School Resource Officer got in the middle of it. He was twenty years old, blond, and really good looking. I hit him, though, and he arrested me. I never meant to hit him. He just sort of got into the way of my punch. So I was on juvenile probation for that.

Then she got arrested.

A large black man by the name of Mr. Williams came to see me on Friday afternoon, the day of her arrest. He had been called by the arresting officer, and he's the one who set it up for me to stay with a neighbor. During the course of our conversation, it came out that I was gay. It had to do with my always missing school and fighting there, and so on. He guessed it before I confirmed it, but he didn't seem surprised or upset by the fact. He said he thought he had a good foster placement for me in Emerald Beach, but he didn't say anything about the family other than that it was two men who took in boys in need.

I spent the first two nights with our neighbor. She had four kids, food stamps, no job, broken down trailer, the usual. We had plain grits for supper the first night, and that was okay with me. It filled me up. She did have some butter for the grits, and I put a healthy dab of it on mine. She told me the butter was just for her kids, but it was too late. She and my mom were good friends. She said she wanted to be my foster mother so she could collect the money the state pays foster parents. I didn't say anything about what Mr. Williams had said about taking me to Emerald Beach, though, and she was very surprised and angry when he took me away on Sunday.

The house he took me to was magnificent. When we got there, the two men whose house it was weren't there, and we ended up talking to two boys. The older one, Justin, had sort of darkish blond hair, and he was ruggedly handsome. He had on a tank top, and I could see he was no stranger to a set of weights. The other one, Brian, had dark hair and eyes, and he was stunningly beautiful. I sat down after I shook their hands, and it was a good thing, too. I got an erection immediately.

I was too shy and embarrassed to talk much. That is, until Brian asked me if I had read *Lord of the Flies*. I loved that book for the beauty of its structure and for the skillful use of symbolism. I'm not really into the outdoors very much, but that didn't stop me from loving that book. Brian and I talked about it, and I could tell Justin, who said he had actually read it, wasn't really following much of what we were saying. That was okay, though. Justin was extremely nice and very friendly, and as long as there was at least one boy there--Brian--that I could talk about books with, I knew I would be happy.

After Mr. Williams left, they got a room set up for me, and then they all went swimming. Naked. Besides Justin and Brian, there were Kevin and Rick, the two men, Kyle, Tim, Alex, Cody, Jeff, and Tyler. Brian and I were the same age, but the others were older. They were all naked, and they seemed as natural that way as they were with clothes on. I had seen a few boys naked before, but not many. Seeing that many, and every one of them good looking and well built, overloaded my circuitry, and I kept an erection the entire time we were out there. I was so glad I hadn't taken my clothes off to go in the pool.

Of course I knew that erections were perfectly normal occurrences and that all guys got them, but I got them with alarming frequency. And usually for no reason. I knew the reasons that afternoon, though, and they were all in the pool. I figured it would eventually come out that I was gay, but I wanted to keep that fact about myself secret at least until they got to know me. If they got to know me and like me, they might not be too quick to shun me and be mean to me, I thought.

When Kyle told me the next morning that everybody in that house was gay, I didn't believe it. I figured he was telling me that to make me feel accepted or something. He was obviously in charge, and he and the others seemed really nice and kind. When they started rattling off who was the boyfriend of whom, and how long they had been together, I started believing them. I mean, no group of boys would say that about themselves just to make a total stranger feel accepted. It must be true, I thought. Then, when they explained the house rules about sex, I knew it had to be true. I relaxed a good bit at that point.

Kyle took me to school to register, and I met my English-teacher-to-be. She was a very nice lady, and she let me check out three books. I knew I was going to enjoy that class.

While we were at school, I almost blew it. Kyle made a comment about the size of my penis. It wasn't a cruel comment or a joke or anything, and it actually made good sense, once I thought about it. I was conditioned to react to anything like that by getting angry, though, and fighting. That didn't happen, thank God, but it was close. I promised myself that I wouldn't allow my temper to get the better of me ever again, especially at school and most especially with Kyle.

We went swimming when everybody got home from work that afternoon, and I kept my eyes open for any signs of gayness in that group. We got into some pretty physical horseplay, but it was no different than with any other group of guys. The older ones seemed to be very strong, too. I was fearful at first about getting in naked, but they had told me that everybody got erections and that they just ignored them. I got one, of course, but nobody saw it because I stayed in the water until it went down. If they did see it, they didn't say anything about it.

"Kev, we need to do some school shopping," Kyle said, once everybody was in the den with a snack.

"I think we were about to blow it on the clothes thing again, Babe," Kevin said to Rick.

"I know. I hadn't really thought about it. What kind of clothes do you have, Denis," Rick said.

"He likes to be called 'Denny,' Brian said.

"Oh, sorry. Denny," Rick said.

"He's got shit for clothes," Kyle said.

"I didn't ask you," Rick said.

"I know, but I'm telling you," Kyle said. "And the last time I was at the warehouse, it was just about empty. You must be falling down on the job there, Bubba."

"Very funny. It's almost empty by design," Rick said. "I'm not carrying over a big inventory of this year's styles, like I did last year. It was too late for me to do anything about it last year, but this year I could do something. So I did."

I didn't know what they were talking about, but none of them asked any questions about it. I kept

my mouth shut.

"Take him to the mall," Kevin said. "You have our credit card. Just use that."

"Okay, but Brian needs clothes, too. He's grown two inches in the last six months, and he's filled out a good bit, too," Kyle said.

"I think he looks sexy in those tight tee shirts," Justin said.

He grinned at Brian, who smiled back. A comment like that would have embarrassed me to death, but Brian didn't react except to smile.

"What about you? Do you need any clothes for college," Rick asked.

"Do I, Kyle?"

There must have been some kind of private joke because Justin and Kyle started laughing when he said that.

"Yes," Kyle said.

"You heard him, but I can buy my own clothes," Justin said.

"When was the last time somebody bought you a whole new set of school clothes," Rick asked.

"They never did," Justin said.

"That's why we're buying you a whole new set of school clothes," Kevin said. "We want our sons to look good, Jus, even if we're not very good about remembering to make that happen."

"If you want your sons to look good, you need to see about getting plastic surgery for Kyle," Justin said.

"Ouch! You got me last right here in the groin," Kyle said, grabbing himself.

"Don't grab that. That's the best looking thing you got, son," Jus said.

"Ahhh! You got me again! Brian, make him stop," Kyle said, and I thought he was about to cry or something.

They all laughed.

"Okay, are we ready for the mall? Or, a better question, is the mall ready for us," Kyle asked.

"I think you'd better call your fashion consultant," Justin said.

"Gage," Kyle asked.

"Who else," Justin asked.

Kyle called somebody and the guy evidently said he would meet us at the mall. It was about six o'clock when we left.

We met up with Gage and his boyfriend, Chad, at the main mall entrance. Both of them were pretty flamboyant guys, and I felt a little bit funny about being with them. But the rest of those boys seemed right at home with Gage and Chad, so I went along with the crowd. They introduced me to them as their brother, and that sort of gave me a little catch in my throat.

"We've got to do something about this immediately," Gage said. He flicked up the end of my hair, which I already knew was way too long. "I'd love to be able to get you in to see Antonio, my stylist, but he won't be available until next week. Regis will just have to do. I know one of the girls who works there. Let's pray she can take you right away."

"See, I told you we needed the fashion consultant," Justin said.

"Why don't you boys go do what you do best, and I'll get him taken care of," Gage said.

"What are you talking about," Justin asked him.

"Go eat, sweetie. It's what you do best in a mall without me," Gage said.

They all laughed like that was the funniest thing they had ever heard.

"Come with me, baby. We're going to get you looking good," he said to me.

"Be gentle with him, Gage," Tim said, grinning.

"Gentle? Never!" Gage said, and, again, they laughed.

I went with Gage to the barber place, and it was really fancy. The girl washed my hair before she cut it, and nobody had ever done that to me before.

"Do you think highlights," Gage asked the girl.

"No. His hair is too light for highlights," she said.

"God, wouldn't it look fabulous blue," he asked. "With just a touch of blue eye shadow?"

She laughed, and Gage did, too.

"You're terrible, Gage," she said.

"No, I'm wonderful. Will you marry me?"

She laughed some more.

Having my hair shorter felt good, and I thought it looked good, too. I usually cut it myself, but I hadn't done it lately. Gage paid the girl for my haircut when she was done.

"Thanks for the haircut," I said.

"You're most welcome, but I owe Kevin and Rick so much, a million haircuts wouldn't even begin to scratch the surface," he said.

"Do you go to high school," I asked him.

"Yes, I'm going to be a senior at Beachside. That's where you're going, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," I said. I really didn't mean to say that, but it just came out.

He sucked in a deep breath like he was about to say something about what I had said, but he didn't.

"Let's go find the others," he said.

We shopped for a good three hours, and we finally left when they were closing the mall. I had a very good time, and they got me everything, from socks and underwear to shirts, shorts, long pants, shoes, a jacket, and two pairs of shoes. Brian got a good many clothes, too, and so did Justin. Gage was definitely in charge of all of that. I expected him to want me to wear really wild things, but that wasn't the case, at all. One time Gage picked out a shirt that was kind of bright and not all that nice, in my opinion. He showed it to Kyle. Kyle shook his head "no," and Gage shrugged and put it back on the rack.

We got home around 10:30, and Kevin and Rick were up waiting for us. They wanted to see everything we had bought, and they seemed delighted with everything. I felt real love in that room that night. Brian had said that morning that there was an awful lot of love in that house, and I had a sense of it for the first time that night. There was everything I had never had in my life: excitement, enthusiasm, joking, teasing, and, most of all, normality. I was overwhelmed, and I started crying. God! I was so embarrassed.

Justin noticed.

"Kyle! Get on it, dude," he said.

"What," Kyle asked.

"Friends in Low Places."

Kyle started that song. His voice was beautiful, deep and smooth. He sang it better than Garth Brooks, I thought. They all knew it, too. They were all singing, and they all got up. They picked me up and held me over their heads. My God!

"And I'll be okay," they sang, and they bounced me a little. I was crying, but I was laughing, too. I was so happy. I knew for the first time in my life that I would be okay.

(Kyle's Perspective)

Thursday morning I woke up at 5:30. That was totally ridiculous. I didn't have to give my speech at

freshman orientation until 10:45, but I was so damn wired about that I had to be up early. Tim was so beautiful in bed when I woke up, but, for once, I had other things on my mind. I had to give my speech in that big-ass fine arts auditorium at school, and I was nervous.

Everybody was coming. My parents, Kevin and Rick, Doc and Sonya, Justin and Brian, Tim of course, Alex and Cody, Denny, Chip. Jesus Christ! Why?

I was sitting at the breakfast room table drinking a cup of coffee when Rick and Trixie came in from their run. They drank a large amount of water, and then Rick got a cup of coffee. He sat at the table with me.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir, I think so," I said.

"Are you nervous?"

"I'm up at five fucking thirty when it starts at 10:45. Yeah, I'm nervous."

Rick laughed.

"Does Denny know who you are at school," he asked.

"No, sir. I don't think so. I haven't told him, and I doubt that anybody else has, either," I said.

"He's going to shit when he sees you up on that stage," he said.

"I know."

Finally, my time came. Tim rode with me.

"You're going to be okay with this, right?"

"Yeah, Babe, I'm going to be okay," I said. "Thank you for coming with me."

"Kyle, do you think there will ever be an important occasion in your life when I won't be there with you?"

"No, I know you will be," I said. "But I still want you to know I appreciate it."

"I know, Baby. I know," Tim said.

Then I gave my speech.

"Hi. I'm Kyle Goodson, and I'm the president of the Student Government Association. SGA. I'm a senior this year, but don't be scared of me or of any seniors. I've got two little brothers in your class, and I'll be watching their backs. And yours, too. I'm going to ask them to come up on the stage right now. Denny Morgan and Chip Rooney. Come up here, guys."

They clapped them up to the stage, and that surprised me. I made both of them stand next to me, and I put an arm around each of them.

"These guys are my brothers. And you are my brothers and sisters, too. All of you who have a brother or sister who goes to this school, stand up."

About a third of the group stood up.

"Give these people applause," I said. "This is a family school. We might be Beach Rats, but we're a family of Beach Rats."

They clapped hard when I said that.

"Y'all know what a Beach Rat is?"

The whole auditorium said "yeah."

"Well, I'm a Beach Rat. My daddy was a Beach Rat. His daddy was a Beach Rat, and my granddaddy's daddy was a Beach Rat, too. There have been a lot of Beach Rats, including Mrs. Sally Ortega, our principal. Oh, yeah. She's as much of a Beach Rat as I am.

"But you know what the thing about being a Beach Rat is? A Beach Rat has to be smart. That's right. Beach Rats are smart."

Some of them laughed.

"This school is all about academic achievement. That means studying hard and doing good on the FCAT test next spring. You are going to get an upperclassman assigned to you and a time for him or her to see you. It's all about academic achievement. We ain't running a dating service, so the boys will get a boy, and the girls will get a girl. What they're going to do is get you ready for that test.

"Y'all have been taking that test for years now, just like I did. And you're going to do well on it. That's a rule here. I want to wake up one morning next spring, look at the paper, and see a big ole headline: Marlins Make an A.

"How many of y'all want to go out for sports? Stand up."

Quite a few of them stood up.

"Okay. Sit down. That's real good, and I wish all of you luck. We're a little bit smaller than the city high schools, but we beat them or hold our own against them every year. That brings praise and glory to the school, and that's good. But that's not what gets us an A. It's what goes on in here that gets us an A."

I tapped my head when I said that.

"Nobody's going to care that the football team had a winning season or the volleyball team won all their games. They are going to care if you went to an A school, though. You know why?"

They didn't say anything.

"Come on. Say 'why.' You know why?"

"Why," a few of them said.

"Y'all ain't paying attention. Now come on. You know why?"

"Why," about half of them shouted out.

"Once more. You know why?"

"Why," they screamed.

"Because no high school in this county has ever been an A before. We're going to be the first one. Let me try something. Every time I say the word marlin, you say 'splash.' The marlin is our mascot, in case you didn't know that."

There were a couple of boys on the front row who were laughing and cutting up, not paying attention.

"You two. Come up here," I said.

They were kind of scared, but eventually they came up on the stage.

"What's your name?"

They said Billy or Tommy or Jimmy or something like that.

"Did y'all go to the billfish tournament last month?"

"Yes, sir," one kid said.

"Did you see that big ole marlin that man caught?"

A few kids said "splash" like I wanted them to.

"Yeah," the kid said. He seemed pretty excited about it, too.

"Did you see the marlin," I asked the other one.

"Splash," more of them said.

"No, we left before the weigh-in," he said.

"Too bad. That was a huge marlin," I said. "Broke the state record."

"Splash," a lot more of them said.

"Okay. Y'all can sit down."

"Stand up if you want to join the Marlin Band?"

"Splash," they screamed.

Some kids stood up.

I was having fun, and they were, too. That's what I wanted. Audience involvement.

"How many want to be in the Marlin Drama Club?"

"Splash," they screamed even louder.

It doesn't take much to amuse a freshman. I kept it up throughout the rest of my speech, and I knew everybody was having fun. Then it was time to quit.

"Okay, it's time to move on, but I'm going to end this with the first quiz of your high school career. I'm going to say the question, and you shout out the answer. The first one is a fill-in-the-blank. Listen close. 'A Beach blank has to be smart.' Answer?"

"Rat," they screamed out.

"Good. That's right," I said. "We want Beachside High School to get the grade blank."

"A," they all screamed.

"Right, again," I said. "What's a sound made in the water by a marlin?"

"Splash," they screamed even louder.

"That's it. Thanks."

They really clapped hard. Almost none of that was in the speech I had written and practiced, but I knew those kids had had fun. Hell, I had had fun, too. That was the last of the orientation activities, and they all left to go home.

"Kyle, that was incredible," Miss Sally said. She was grinning big.

"Did I cover everything," I asked.

"Yes. Everything. They're going to remember this the day they graduate," she said. "Thank you, you Beach Rat."

Everybody was laughing, and I knew my parents were really proud of me.

"You wore me out, son," my dad said. "Sally and I were screaming out every time you wanted us to, and this place didn't even exist when we were in high school."

"Your speech was totally different from the one I heard you practice, but it was ten times better," Kevin said.

"I really liked it that you got Chip and Denny up there with you for the whole thing," Brian said.

"That sent a powerful message, too, Kyle," Miss Sally said. "I got on you the other day about saying we're Beach Rats, but you're right. That's exactly what we are. We're a family of Beach Rats, and Beach Rats do have to be smart."

"What happened to him," Justin said in that chip-dry Alabama accent.

Everybody laughed hard, especially me.

"Miss Sally, this is my brother and best friend, Justin Davis. He keeps me straight," I said.

"Ain't nothing could make you straight except . . ."

"Whoa! Guys! We're not at home, you know," Kevin said.

Miss Sally busted up laughing, and everybody else did, too.

"This shoe leather I'm chewing ain't real good," Justin said. "Let's go get us some lunch."

"Sally, come with us," my dad said.

"I'd love to, Gene, but . . ."

"No excuses. Come on," Dad said.

"Oh, okay. Let me go tell my secretary I'm going to be off campus for a while," she said.

"Tell her you're going to be in the restaurant at the Boardwalk Hotel," he said.

That was the best restaurant we had in any of our places. My dad pulled out his cell phone and called them. He told them he needed a table for sixteen in twenty minutes. He said two eights would do, if they couldn't do sixteen, but he wanted it all in a private room. When we got there, in lots of different

cars, they had a sixteen top set up for us. It was in a private dining room. The table was set up in a square, so four people were on each side. I took notice of the way they did that because I could probably use that idea sometime.

Lunch was really good, just like I knew it would be. The general manager of the damn hotel came in to make sure everything was alright. He looked nervous as hell, but my dad made him feel okay about us being there. Those GM's were just too skittish. If we didn't like their place, we damn sure wouldn't be there. They needed to get a clue, starting with that guy.

That morning must have taken a lot more out of me than I thought it had. When we got home to Kevin and Rick's house, Tim, Brian, and Denny started reading. I took to my bed for a nap. I was bushed.

Chapter 16

(Justin's Perspective)

That was the second speech I had heard Kyle give, and I had to give him credit. I could never in a million years stand up in front of a crowd like that and talk. He didn't read a speech like I had seen guys do on TV. He had those kids eating out of the palm of his hand, and every bit of it was pure Kyle. I was surprised he didn't tell them "got you last" when they screamed out that "splash."

That night when we were all in the den, he made up a mess of those snacks he makes. That stuff was so good, I wish I had had three hands to get some of all of it at one time.

"I think we need to have a party Saturday night," Kyle said. "Back to school."

"I was wondering how long it was going to take you to figure that out," Rick said.

"Noon to whenever? Lunch and dinner? All the usual stuff," Kyle asked.

"Yeah. Get it organized," Kevin said.

"Okay," he said. "I'll put the word out. I'll just plan for fifty, and that should do it."

(Kevin's Perspective)

The day after Kyle's speech, Gene called Rick and me into his office. I figured it was just a routine meeting to catch each other up on what had been going on in the business that week.

Gene had all the usual water, coffee, juice, and pastries in his office waiting for us. I knew the pastries and coffee were fresh from the coffee shop on the first floor of the building, but I wondered how many meetings those bottles of water and juice had already been to. Typically, Rick and I had water and Gene had a cup of coffee.

"Guys, I wanted to talk to you about some changes we're going to make around here," Gene said to start us off.

"Okay," we both said.

"One of the best things I ever did was hire you two guys to run the two halves of the business. Profits are way up, and everything is looking real good. To the point that there is very little for me to do. I'm not ready to retire yet, though.

"Ever since Clay passed away, Rita and I have been reevaluating our lives. It's not a secret that she went through some very rough times, but that's behind us now. We're ready to move forward.

"Yesterday, I signed the final paperwork to buy the Harbor House Hotel in Destin. I plan to personally run it as the GM. Rita and I will be moving to Destin to a new house we're building there right now."

That was quite a bombshell. Rick and I looked at one another, wondering what it meant.

"I'll stay on as CEO of Goodson Enterprises, of course, but I don't really do anything in that

capacity, as it is. I know you both have questions from time to time, and I'll still be around to answer them. But you guys don't really need me."

"So what will our relationship be? You and I, I mean," I said.

"That was the issue I had the most trouble with, Kev. The Harbor House won't be part of Goodson. It will be owned by a separate corporation, Goodson and Son, Inc. So as far as you're concerned, you're still only responsible for eleven properties, not twelve. If I need you, that will change, and I'll put somebody else in as GM. For now, though, it's out of the loop."

"And you're moving," Rick asked.

"Yes. Rita and I need to be out of our house. There are just too many memories. Plus, it's way too big for us. Kyle's not there very much, as you know, and we need a new start."

"What about Kyle? He won't leave here, will he?"

"Oh, no. We're going to buy him a condo here, and Rita and I will buy a little one here, too. Probably only two bedrooms for us. We're not leaving this community altogether. That's for sure. And we won't move until after Kyle's eighteenth birthday. I think a lot more than most kids his age, Kyle's grown up. He probably won't be here much longer, either. I know Tim wants to go to medical school, and he can't do that here. I expect they'll be gone in two years."

All of a sudden the reality of Tim and Kyle's moving away hit me. That was exactly what Rick and I had both done, of course, along with countless other people, but somehow it didn't seem right, it didn't seem fair. I wondered if my parents had felt the way I was feeling, and Tim and Kyle's departure was still a good two years away.

"Gene, you have to do what you have to do, and you know Kevin and I will support you completely. But what you just said about the kids is about to make me lose it, man," Rick said.

"I know, Rick. Imagine losing one for good," Gene said.

For the first time I had a glimpse of the enormity of Clay's death in the lives of Gene and Rita. I had thought of it many times before, but the realization of what it will mean when Tim and Kyle move away made their loss of Clay palpable. It was no wonder it had plunged Rita into depression.

The three of us were silent for a long time, each one caught up in his own thoughts about the issues we had exposed that morning. Already that summer we had said goodbye to Seth, Chris, and Jeff. We had said hello to Alex, Chip, and Denny, of course, and maybe that was the way our lives would ebb and flow. Our family had come into existence by accident, so to speak, and it had grown and expanded unplanned, as well.

"It looks like I've thrown a wet blanket on your day," Gene said.

"Gene, I was just thinking how much love can hurt," Rick said.

"It can, Rick, but would you be willing to give up the joy out of fear of the pain," he asked.

Rick took my hand, something we never did in front of Gene.

"Let's go, Babe," he said.

The three of us stood up, and Gene grabbed us in a hug. We stood there clenched in one another's arms.

* * *

That night we all went to the high school football jamboree. Beachside had its own stadium where they played their home games, but the jamboree, which involved all the public high schools in the school district, which was really the county, was played at the big stadium in town. There was quite a traffic jam when the jamboree was over. We had gone in Rick's car so there would be only one parking place to find. That was always a problem at a big event like the jamboree.

"Kyle, Rick and I had a talk with your dad today," I said, once we were all situated in our places in

the den.

"Oh, yeah? Did he give you a raise?"

"No, he didn't," Rick said.

"So what did y'all talk about," he asked.

"Destin," I said.

"Oh. I knew that was coming. He talked to me and Tim about it a few weeks ago," he said.

"What's going on," Jus asked.

We told the kids the news.

"You knew about that but didn't tell us," Jus said, like he couldn't believe it.

"He told us not to say anything about it," Kyle said. "I couldn't break his confidence."

"No, you couldn't, and you didn't," I said.

"You're not moving, though, right," Justin asked, obviously worried.

"Hell, no, I'm not moving. He said they were going to buy me a condo here. They're going to get one here, too," Kyle said.

"I don't understand rich people," Jus said. "What do they need a house and two condos for?"

"To live in. What do you think," Kyle asked.

"Now you got me all worried, Kyle," Jus said. "Are you going to stay there all the time?"

"Nothing's going to change, Bubba. Don't worry about it. You couldn't run me away from here," Kyle said.

"You are going to leave one day, though, aren't you," Jus said.

"Probably. When we go to college," Kyle said, "but you and Brian can come with us."

That was a possibility I hadn't even considered.

"Guys, I don't want to talk about this right now. Nobody's leaving for a long time," I said.

"Yeah? Tell that to Jeff," Justin said.

"Fellas, people grow up and leave home. That's the way it's supposed to be. It's always been that way, and it always will be that way," Rick said.

"Sometimes they leave home before they grow up," Denny said.

The four on that sofa were Justin, Brian, Denny, and Alex, in that order. Not a one of them had a home outside of our house, and they had all left home before they had grown up. We were all quiet, no doubt contemplating what Denny had said. I know I was.

I decided to change the subject.

"Is the party all ready for tomorrow night," I asked.

"Yes, sir," Kyle said. "I've got to get some gas for the boat tomorrow morning, but that's really about it. I'm sort of tired. I think I'm going to bed."

Kyle and Tim told everybody good night, and they went up to bed.

"Yeah, he's exhausted," Justin said.

"Jus, give your brother a break, man," Rick said. "He does get tired sometimes, you know?"

"Yeah, he gets tired of sitting around with that big ole hard-on he's had since we got home," Jus said.

We all laughed.

"I'm tired, too. Are you tired, Brian?"

"No," Brian said.

Justin got the cutest look on his face when he said that. It was sort of a mixture of amusement and panic.

"Got you last," Brian said.

"You devil," Jus said, and he laughed.

They said goodnight and went up. Rick and I bid the other boys good night, too, and we went to bed.

* * *

The party the next day was fun, but there wasn't anything out of the ordinary about it. After they got tired of skiing, the boys congregated in the clubhouse. There weren't enough places for them to all sit on furniture, so quite a few were on the floor.

"I'm scared to death about starting college Monday morning," Justin said. "I don't know if it was such a good idea for me."

"It'll be good, Jus," Jeff said. "Aren't you and Lex and Cody in class together?"

"Yeah, but so what," he asked.

"Well, so we'll be there to help you not get lost," Cody said. "We're going to look out for each other, aren't we?"

"Yeah, and I need a lot of looking out for, too," Jus said.

"We all do," Alex said.

"What about me? Starting high school's pretty scary for me," Chip said.

"Me, too," Denny said. "I'm nervous about being picked on, like at my old school."

"Same here, buddy," Chip said.

"I felt the same way last year," Chad said, "but I didn't really get picked on that much. It got less and less, too, as the year went on."

"Well, we can't help who we are," Gage said. "And just like we stood up for Chad last year, we'll stand up for you guys. If anybody starts anything, you just tell me, and I'll hit 'em with my purse."

They all roared with laughter.

"I know for a fact that Mrs. Ortega won't let people get away with that harassment shit this year. We talked about that. Evidently what I said in my speech last year made her think. She's always been good about looking out for the underdog, but I think she plans to get way better at it," Kyle said.

"Kyle, I didn't tell you how surprised I was to see you up on that stage for orientation," Denny said. "You didn't tell me you were a big shot at school."

Kyle shrugged.

"Well, he is," Tim said. "But he's still down to earth, Denny."

"Cool," Denny said. "I wonder how many other high schools have a gay guy as president of the student body."

"Probably more than you think," Kyle said. "By the way, people around here are pretty tolerant, but I don't think it's a good idea for you guys to come out right at first. Or ever, unless you have to."

"You guys? You talking to me," Chip asked.

"If the shoe fits, Chip, wear it," Jeff said.

"I never even thought about being gay until I met you all," Chip said. "It's all about sexual attraction, right?"

"Right," Kyle said.

"I don't feel any sexual attraction to anybody, boy or girl," he said. "I don't even really know what that means."

"You will, buddy. Don't worry about it. We've talked about this before, remember," Kyle said. He was amazingly gentle with Chip. "But if you do decide, eventually, that you're gay or bi, I still wouldn't blab it around."

"I know that," Chip said.

After a while, they drifted off to other activities. Some shot pool, others played ping pong or darts, some went into the pool, and others played with the Play Station. After dinner, we all went into the pool. Some of the adult friends preferred to wait until it was dark, or at least dusk, to get naked and in the water.

The party broke up around midnight, and we all went to bed.

"Mont and Terry want us to go out on their boat tomorrow," Rick said after we were in bed.

"What did you tell them?"

"I told them we'd call tomorrow morning and let them know. Do the kids have anything going on, do you know?"

"Nothing that I know of," I said. "Kyle asked me if he and Tim should spend tomorrow night here. What do you think?"

"Brian and Denny need a ride to school, although I guess I could take them," he said.

"That's right. I forgot Justin has a class at eight, so he won't be available. It might be a good idea if Denny rode with Kyle on the first day. It might enhance his status to be seen walking in with him," I said.

"True. Let's tell him to stay here. I'm sure that's what he wants to do, anyway," Rick said.

I was on my back, and Rick was on his stomach. He propped himself up on his elbows and started kissing me. That was just the beginning, of course. Rick is always a gentle lover, but that night he took extra pains to make it good for me.

"I love you more than life," I said.

"I love you that much, too."

(Justin's Perspective)

Every month since I've been with Kevin and Rick has been better than the month before it, and I've grown to love those guys almost as much as I love Brian. When you toss Kyle, Tim, and Jeff into the mix, I was one happy guy. That's why when they started talking about Gene and Rita moving, and Kyle getting a condo, I almost lost it.

It's bad enough Jeff is moving out, but he really wouldn't have been comfortable living with Tyler right here with the rest of us. I could accept that, even though I didn't like the idea. But for Kyle and Tim to move would kill me. And they really only spend two or three nights a week at our house, anyway. They spent more time during the summer than usual, though, and I sort of got to like having them around all the time.

Another big change was starting college. I wanted to do it, but I didn't want to do it, at the same time. I knew that didn't make sense, but that was how I felt. The fact of the matter was, I was scared shitless about doing it. I mean, it wasn't like I had just gotten out of high school like Cody and Alex. I didn't even know what you did in high school, let alone whether I could do it. I knew they would all bust their asses to help me, but there was a limit to how much of that they could do. I didn't say very many prayers, but I asked God to help me not make a fool of myself Monday morning.

We went out on the big boat with Monte and Terry on Sunday. It was fun on the island, like it always is. An afternoon thunder storm blew up real quick off the Gulf, so we had to come in earlier than usual. That was okay, though, because we hadn't been to church yet that weekend. By coming in early, we were able to go that night. Kyle told me he was going to become a Catholic, and I thought maybe I might want to do that, too. Not till after I was in college, though. Not too much new stuff at one time.

(Alex's Perspective)

The summer was over. It had been an unbelievable time for me. In the space of two-and-a-half

months, I had run away from my step-father, hitchhiked to Florida, had surgery, gotten my first real job, become a member of an unbelievable family, admitted to myself I was gay, and gotten a boyfriend. It had all happened pretty fast, and I didn't know how much had gone on in my life until I stopped to think about it that Sunday night. The next morning I was starting college.

"Are you okay with everything," Cody had asked me before he left Sunday night.

He was such a sweetie, and I really liked him a lot.

"I'm okay, I guess. But so much has happened in such a short time," I said.

"I know. But that's the way life moves, you know?"

"I know," I said.

"Are we going to school together tomorrow morning," I asked.

"Absolutely. I'm going to pick you and Justin up at 7:15. We can't be late the first day," he said.

"He's so scared," I said.

"I know. We're going to take care of him, though, aren't we?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "That boy's going to be just fine."

(Justin's Perspective)

"Brian, I'm so scared about tomorrow," I said to him in bed. We had just made love, and I knew he probably didn't want to hear that.

"Buddy, don't be scared. What do you have to be scared of?"

"Starting school. I never did that before," I said.

"Justin, do you have any doubt that I love you?"

"No, of course not," I said.

"You're going to see a lot of freshmen tomorrow. A lot of people in general. How many of them are saying tonight what you and I just said?"

"Probably not that many," he said.

"Probably not many at all. And what I just said isn't going to change if you make straight A's or if you make straight F's. It's never going to change, Justin. I'll always be right beside you in bed."

"You don't care if I don't do good in college?"

"I don't give a fucking shit about that. I'm always going to be right here next to you, no matter what," he said.

We were both quiet for a few moments while I took that in. I knew it before, but I loved hearing it again.

"Brian, I love you so much, Little Buddy."

"And I love you that much more. Whatever happens," he said.

(Chip's Perspective)

Kyle and Tim and Brian and Denny are coming to get me tomorrow morning, and I'm going to walk into that school with those boys. I'm going to be so damn proud, I can't even stand it.

I've got some really cool clothes for my first day, and they are going to make me look cool. I just know it.

I took a bath tonight, instead of a shower, and I know I'm getting hair. It's coming in. Finally. I think my penis is bigger, too. I don't know for sure, but I think it is. Maybe it's finally happening. I don't know. God, why me? Is it because I'm an only child? I want a big brother like Kyle or Justin or Tim or Brian, or any of those guys. I guess they're my big brothers, but you know what I mean. I wanted to be CEO of Goodson Enterprises, but that was before I knew Kyle and what was up with that company. Maybe now I

just want to be Kyle's friend.

(Denny's Perspective)

It was all kind of a haze to me. I mean, one day I'm in a trailer in Blountstown, Florida, with four little kids who were obnoxious as hell. The next day I'm in a kind of mansion in Emerald Beach with a houseful of gay guys. I was kind of reeling from all of that. Every day there was something new, and it was always good.

I was pretty scared about high school, but Chip and I were going to hang together. And I knew all those upperclassmen. I thought it was going to be okay.

When the guys went to bed that night, that ended the summer fun. It had been a summer of growth--physically, intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally--for all of them. Cody had come into their lives, along with Chip and Alex and Denny. Jeff and Tyler had fallen in love, and they were preparing to spend the rest of their lives together. The Big Four--Kyle, Tim, Justin, and Brian--had grown immeasurably closer as brothers and friends. Rick lost a grandfather but gained a father. The elder Goodsons had made plans to move ahead with their lives, and Trixie, thanks to Brian and others, had started living up to her name.

The next segment will see the boys in school and preparing for their futures. The fun will continue, but the pace will change, as the boys mature.

I plan to continue writing this story for as long as I have ideas to write about. Thanks to everyone who has made suggestions and who has shared with me what the story means to them. I can't predict when the next segment will be ready; just know that I'm working on it.

Love,

Brew Maxwell