

Bright
Things
Come to
Confusion

Seth's Story

JOSH ATEROVIS

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Cover Design: Josh Aterovis

Chapter 1

A bloodcurdling scream ripped through my dreams, snapping me awake in an instant.

I sat bolt upright in my bed, heart hammering in my chest. Had it been real or just a nightmare? I heard angry voices coming from elsewhere in the house and my heart rate slowed as I realized it was just my parents fighting again. Nothing new there. I wondered what it was about this time.

Just then, I heard a crash and decided this fight seemed worse than usual. I felt my stomach clench up. I slipped from my bed and crept towards the door.

“Get out!” I heard my mother scream.

As far as I knew, she’d never kicked Dad out before. I grabbed the door handle and eased my door open. I almost leapt from my skin when I saw my little brother Kane standing in the hallway, just a few feet away.

He turned when I opened the door and stood staring at me like a deer caught in headlights, his eyes huge and round. It was obvious he’d been there for a while and had probably heard a lot more than I had.

Kane turned back toward the voices and eased up to the corner of the hallway, then suddenly stepped into the living room.

“Mommy?” he gasped.

The look on his face told me that whatever he was seeing out there wasn’t a pretty sight.

Dad stepped into view, and I quickly melted back into my room.

In the sudden silence that followed, Dad’s voice carried easily to where I stood. “Go back to bed, sweetie. Mommy and I are having a disagreement. It’ll be okay.”

He didn’t sound at all convincing to me, but Kane turned reluctantly and trudged back down the hall toward his room.

“You too, Seth.” Dad added, making me jump.

With a sigh, I shut the door and returned to my bed. I didn’t go to sleep, though. I lay there awake, straining to hear what was going on in the living room, but they kept their voices down after that.

Somehow, that scared me even more. I laid awake for what felt like hours.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I had to know what had happened.

Once more, I slipped from my bed and eased open my door. The house was dark and eerily quiet. I thought I heard a soft snuffling, almost like someone crying, coming from the direction of the living room. A creepy blue light emanated from the doorway and a horror movie I'd watched — without permission — the week before crept into my mind. I almost lost my nerve about leaving the relative safety of my room, but I gathered up all the courage I had and dashed quickly across the hall, letting myself into Kane's room as silently as possible.

At first, I couldn't find him in the pile of stuffed animals on the bed. I hadn't even known he owned that many. He must have unloaded his entire toy box onto the bed. Was he trying to hide under there? I started tossing them aside, looking for my little brother. He had enough toy animals to populate a small zoo. Finally, I found him curled into a ball in the center of the bed.

I shook him gently awake and he came up with a ragged gasp.

"Shh," I hissed quickly. "It's just me."

Kane blinked at me with his huge green eyes, looking more like a startled owl than a nine-year-old boy. His reddish-blond hair even stuck up like the ear tufts of a great-horned owl.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Late. I need to talk to you."

"About what? Are Mommy and Daddy still fighting?"

"No, but that's what I want to talk to you about."

"Now?"

"Yes now. What were they fighting about?"

"I don't know," he said, his little face screwed up in confusion. "Mom sounded really angry, like she hated Dad. Do you think she hates him?"

"I don't know, Kane. Just tell me what they were saying."

"I couldn't even understand most of it. Mom's voice was all funny. She was yelling at Daddy to get out and then he said something about us, and then..." He stopped suddenly as if he'd just remembered something. "Hey Seth, what's a faggot?"

I froze.

"Seth?" he asked.

“What did you say?”

“What’s a faggot?”

“Why?”

“Because, I heard Mom say it when she was fighting with Daddy.”

“Are you sure that’s what she said?”

“Yeah, what does it mean?”

I turned without answering and was at the door in a flash. I let myself out of Kane’s room and tiptoed down the hall as stealthily as I could manage. I peeked around the corner into the living room. Mom was sitting in front of Dad’s old laptop, crying. The images on the screen confirmed my worst fear.

I half stumbled back to my room, my heart gripped in the tight confines of grief and terror. I knew now why Mom and Dad had been fighting.

They’d been fighting over me.

They’d discovered my secret. What would happen now? Would they come screaming into my room? Throw me out? Hit me? The waiting was almost worse than what I felt was the inevitable confrontation.

It had all started a few months before. I was playing at a friend’s house when his mom had run to the store, leaving us alone. She wasn’t even out of the driveway yet when he’d asked if I wanted to see something cool. He’d opened her laptop, and in just a few minutes, we were staring at pictures of naked women.

At twelve, I’d barely started thinking about sex, but my friend was obviously a little more advanced than me. It didn’t take him long to start rubbing at his crotch, which was home to a bulge he didn’t bother to hide. I found myself more interested in what was happening between his legs than the images on the screen. In fact, the large breasted women made me a little uncomfortable. I found all these new things more than a little overwhelming, and I was glad when we heard his mother’s car pulling back in and he turned off the computer.

For days after that, I found myself wondering what my friend looked like without his clothes. It didn’t really strike me as all that odd that I was thinking about my male friend naked. After all, it was just curiosity — or so I told myself. There was no way I was gay, a term thrown around quite a bit at school. I knew it meant guys who

liked guys, but more than that, I knew it was something very negative and dirty. That wasn't me...was it?

My sudden obsession with seeing my friend naked soon grew to curiosity about almost every boy in my class. The brief glimpses in gym class weren't enough. It was weeks before it occurred to me that if the internet held pictures of naked women, maybe it would hold pictures of naked guys as well. The only problem was, Mom and Dad had parental locks on my laptop. Adult sites were blocked. But I was pretty sure there were no such blocks on Dad's old laptop that he left in his home office in the living room.

I waited impatiently for several days before I was left alone at home to try out my theory. As soon as Mom left with Kane, I ran to Dad's computer and typed a few keywords into the search engine.

Seconds later, I had all the naked guys I could wish for. They were a lot older than me, but I didn't care. I was in heaven. Over the next few months, I was online every chance I got, searching for pictures and videos of naked guys. I started saving my favorites on a thumb drive that I kept carefully hidden in my room.

But somehow, Mom and Dad had found the files. I must have forgotten it when I was almost caught the day before.

One mistake and it was all over. They knew about me. And they'd fought about it. Over me.

Over the last few months, I'd come to the uneasy conclusion that I might be gay, but it was still something I wasn't ready to face. I wondered what they had thought when they found the files. They must have been so disappointed. I'd never heard Mom sound so upset. I wondered what they would do. I waited and waited, shivering alone in the middle of my bed, but no one ever came.

At some point, I began to cry. I must have eventually cried myself to sleep.

The next thing I knew, my alarm was going off. It was a school day. My world hadn't come to an end, but maybe they were waiting for the morning. I dragged myself out of bed and went through my morning routine out of habit, all the while wondering when the other shoe would drop.

I entered the kitchen hesitantly. Kane sat at the kitchen table eating a bowl of cereal while warily watching our mother. He hadn't finished dressing yet. He had his pants on, but no shirt, socks or shoes.

Usually, he wouldn't be allowed to eat until he was ready for school, which just confirmed to me that something was very wrong.

Mom stood by the sink, staring blankly out the window, dark circles under her eyes, her shoulders slumped.

"Get a bowl of cereal and get ready for the bus," she said listlessly without turning. She can't even stand to look at me, I thought darkly.

"I'm not hungry," I mumbled. The very thought of food made my stomach heave. I didn't get a response.

For several minutes, the only sound in the room was Kane's spoon clinking against the bowl and the slight slurp as he ate.

Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Where's Dad?" I asked, hating the tremble that betrayed my emotion. Kane's spoon stopped halfway to his mouth.

"Gone," Mom said harshly.

I gulped. "When will he be back?" I asked in a small voice.

"He's not coming back," she snapped in a voice that clearly said that was the end of the subject.

Kane dropped his spoon with a clatter, splashing milk and cereal all over the table. Mom spun around and glared at the mess.

"Clean it up," she barked, then pushed roughly past me. "Don't miss the bus," she yelled back at us before slamming her bedroom door.

Kane looked at me with round eyes. "Daddy's gone?" he asked, his lower lip beginning to tremble.

I grabbed some paper towels and started mopping up the milk and Lucky Charms. I didn't know what to say to Kane. What could I say? That Dad had left because he found out his oldest son was a faggot and he couldn't stand it? That Mom was so devastated she couldn't even look at me? That it was all my fault that our family had been ripped apart?

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I cleaned. Kane stared in horrified silence. I didn't want to go to school. I didn't want to face all my friends and pretend nothing was wrong. I wanted to curl up in my bed and cry. Or better yet, I wanted it to all go away. I just wanted all of this to be a terrible nightmare. But Mom had said not to miss the school bus. She probably didn't want me in the house.

A sudden thought occurred to me as I stared down at the sodden mess of paper towels and colored marshmallow shapes. If I had messed things up, maybe I could fix them as well.

“Kane,” I said and he looked up at me with tear-filled eyes. “Finish cleaning this up, then get ready for school, okay?”

He stared at me uncomprehendingly.

“Kane?” I said, a little more sharply than I’d intended.

He flinched a little, but focused on me this time. I repeated my instructions and he nodded.

I walked to my parent’s bedroom door and took a deep breath before knocking hesitantly. There was a muffled response from within, which I took as an invitation to come in. Once inside, I suddenly didn’t know what to say. Mom was lying on the bed, not bothering to hide the fact that she was crying. She still wouldn’t look at me.

“M-Mom?” I began shakily. “I...I’m sorry.” I stopped and choked down a sob. After a second, I tried to continue. “I...I know you’re really upset right now, but I promise to be really good from now on, okay? I’ll do whatever you want me to do. Okay?” There was no response except for silent shuddering. “Okay, Mom? And maybe if I’m good, Dad will come back.”

That, at least, seemed to get a reaction.

She sat up and looked at me for the first time that morning, her bloodshot eyes narrowed. I took an involuntary step back. “Your father isn’t coming back. Ever. He’s gone for good.” She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself down. “But I will need you to be good. Both you and Kane. It’s just us from now on, and that means we’re all going to have to pick up the slack. And what I want you to do right now is get ready for school. So please go help Kane and make sure you don’t miss the bus.”

I nodded mutely and turned to go.

“And Seth?” she called. I stopped, afraid to turn back around and look into her eyes again. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

Somehow, I managed to get Kane ready. I don’t even remember any of it. All I could think was that I really had destroyed our family and now Mom hated me because of it. I could see it in her eyes. She’d tried to hide it, but I’d seen it.

When I got home from school later that day, Mom was barricaded in her room and didn't even come out to ask me how my day had been. That had always been something Dad asked as soon as he got home from work every day, no matter how busy he was.

A sharp jab of grief blindsided me as I realized I might never hear him ask me that again. All at once, it hit me that there was something different about the house. Not just the absence of Dad's presence, but something more. It only took me a few seconds to realize what it was. I quickly went from room to room, but it was the same everywhere. Everything having to do with Dad was missing — every photo, every object that was his, every memento of our family trips — as if he'd never existed. For a panicked second, I thought that maybe I had somehow imagined him.

Kane arrived home at that moment and just the sight of him quickly brought me back to earth.

Since Mom still hadn't made an appearance, I fixed Kane a snack of some fruit and milk.

A couple of hours later, I was wondering what to do about dinner when she finally emerged from her room. One look at her and I almost wished she hadn't. Her face was splotchy, and her eyes were swollen and bloodshot. It was obvious that she's been crying again.

Suddenly, I wasn't hungry anymore. I made her feel that bad, I thought miserably to myself. This is all my fault.

Without even asking, she picked up the phone and ordered a pizza to be delivered, then left me some money to pay for it before turning around and going back into her room, shutting the door firmly behind her. Kane watched all this with wide, frightened eyes.

"Is Mommy going to be okay?" he asked in a small voice. He looked like he could burst into tears at any second.

You have to be strong, I told myself firmly, even though I felt like I could cry, too.

"I'm sure she'll be fine," I lied. I wasn't sure at all. It seemed like our entire world was crashing down around us. "She's just sad about Dad leaving..." My voice caught in my throat and I had to stop. I swallowed a few times, then continued, "Don't worry. I'll take care of you."

He gave me a tremulous smile, and I quickly turned away to hide the tears that were threatening to spill over, rummaging in the refrigerator for sodas as an excuse.

We watched TV until the pizza arrived. I had no idea how much to tip the delivery guy, so I gave him two twenty-dollar bills for one large pizza.

“Keep the change,” I said, feeling ridiculous but not knowing what else to say. It must have been okay, because the pizza guy just nodded and said thanks.

After we ate, I helped Kane with his homework and then did mine while he watched cartoons. When his bedtime arrived, he went to bed and let me tuck him in without arguing — something I don’t think he’d ever done before in his life. I think we both knew that the rules were different now.

Once that was done, I realized I needed clean clothes for the next day. This was the day Mom usually did laundry so most of my school clothes were dirty. I figured that was up to me as well. I turned on the light in the laundry room and stared at the messy pile of clothes on the floor. It looked like someone had dumped out the laundry basket and then kicked stuff everywhere.

With a sigh, I started the washer and threw in clothes at random, not even knowing enough to sort the colors. I just about had a full load when I recognized one of Dad’s favorite shirts. It was the first thing I’d seen that was his. I stopped and just stared at it for a minute before slowly reaching out and picking it up. I brought it to my face and inhaled.

It still smelled like his cologne.

Before I knew what was happening, I was on the floor curled into the fetal position, weeping into the shirt. Everything I’d been holding back for Kane’s sake, all the guilt and fear and grief, just came pouring out without inhibition.

I don’t know how long I cried, but I suddenly noticed Kane in the doorway. I cut off my sobs with a hiccup and sat up.

“You miss Daddy too?” he asked with a tear-filled voice.

I simply nodded and in a flash, he was in my arms crying on my shoulder. I held him and cried with him, the two of us sitting on the laundry room floor, grieving together in a pile of dirty clothes. We formed a bond that night that would get us through the next few years.

The following weeks were a living hell. Mom barely spoke to us except to yell and always seemed to be on the verge of losing her temper. Kane and I tiptoed around trying to guess what we would do

to set her off next and avoid doing it at all costs. We weren't allowed to talk about Dad. All she would tell us was that they were getting a divorce. Kane and I hadn't talked any more about their big fight since that first night. It seemed we'd both silently agreed to avoid the topic. I don't know about Kane, but most nights I cried myself to sleep in a fit of self-recrimination and missing Dad.

For my part, I'd vowed to myself to do exactly what I'd promised Mom. I didn't touch the computer except to do homework and every time I caught myself thinking about a boy, I'd mentally slap myself. I was determined to be the perfect son. I might have lost Dad, but I wasn't about to lose Mom as well.

Despite my best efforts, it became obvious that I'd already lost her, at least emotionally. She was a completely different person. She'd never been the warmest person — Dad had always been the affectionate parent — but now she was positively frigid. She seemed to grow more distant with every day. The further she withdrew emotionally, the harder I tried to please her.

The one positive was that Kane and I continued to grow closer than ever. Mom had said that we would all have to pick up the slack, but it seemed I was doing most of the picking up. I went from a carefree kid to the man of the house in just a matter of weeks. I kept doing the laundry and even started doing some of the lighter housework. Most mornings, I was the one who fixed Kane's breakfast and helped him get ready for school. I found myself becoming very protective of my younger brother.

The only other thing to benefit from this situation was my schoolwork. My grades up till then would best be described as average, but I transformed myself into the perfect student. In the process, I discovered a certain satisfaction in my work, in getting an "A" on my papers and receiving the recognition from my teachers brought on by my sudden interest in academics.

In some ways, the attention from my teachers helped offset the loss of my father and my mother's continuing withdrawal. It wasn't what I really wanted, but it was enough to keep me going.

I think some of my teachers recognized the deeper pain that I struggled so hard to hide at school, and made a special effort to be supportive and encouraging. When things failed to improve at home, I simply threw myself even deeper into school activities, becoming involved with extracurricular clubs like after-school drama.

The next few years blurred into a routine. Mom mellowed somewhat — we didn't have to walk on eggshells around the house anymore — but she was as distant as ever. She took almost no interest in our lives beyond making sure we didn't interfere too much in hers.

Kane followed my lead by doing well in school, but his true escape became skateboarding. I kept an eye on him, knew all his friends, and generally made sure he stayed out of trouble.

For my part, I felt I lived up to my end of the bargain. I was now a straight-A student, at or near the top of my class. I had also become the class clown, always cracking jokes. The goofy persona I adopted kept people at arm's length, and gave me a sort of confidence.

I was friendly with everyone, but had few close friends and no one that I really allowed inside. If no one got too close, no one could hurt me or find out my secrets. It seemed easier that way. No chances of me finding myself attracted to one of my male friends. If I was lonely much of the time, well, that was the price that had to be paid. My plan worked as well as I could have hoped...until I was fifteen.

If Kane's escape was skateboarding, then mine was acting. I loved theater. I loved getting lost in a part, being able to become someone else for however brief a period, forgetting who and what I was. It was my sophomore year and we were putting on a production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." I was Lysander, which was quite an honor considering I was still an underclassman. The other cast members were probably the closest thing I had to friends, but I rarely spent time with them outside of school. There were four of us who received the starring roles in almost every production, and we'd formed a tight knit bond. There was Lia Mercado playing Helena, Amira Carter as Hermia, and Cole McBride as Demetrius.

Lia and Amira were as different as night and day. Lia was a junior and looked as if she'd be more at home on the field, cheering for the team, pom-poms in hand. She had long, shiny black hair that fell straight to her waist, and expressive dark eyes. She was barely five feet tall, but she made up for her small stature in personality. She was also one of the best actresses in our school. She wasn't vain at all, despite her almost perfect good looks, and she was always willing to take any role and totally become that character.

The only thing Lia and Amira has in common was their love of theater. Where Lia was small and bubbly, Amira was tall and intense.

She had flawless dark skin, eyes that flashed when she was angry or excited, and short hair that was almost shaved.

If Lia and Amira hadn't shared a passion for acting, they probably would have never spoken, but then, that was true of all of us. I would certainly have never allowed myself to get as close to any of them if it wasn't for the camaraderie of long hours spent in rehearsals and the giddy relief of cast parties.

Finally, there was Cole. Like Amira, he was a senior. This would be his last play before he graduated. When I'd first started drama as a freshman, Cole had been a little threatened by me. Before I'd come along, he'd been unchallenged as the best male actor in the group. It hadn't taken anyone very long to realize that I was just as good as Cole. We settled into a kind of adversarial rivalry for roles that gradually eased into a competition of a friendlier sort, and eventually into something akin to friendship. Or as close as I came to friendship. We had a mutual respect for each other's acting ability. What Cole didn't know, what no one knew, what I barely dared admit to myself, is that I admired Cole for more than just his acting ability.

Cole was slightly shorter than me and thin. He was on the swim team in addition to theater and he had the classic swimmer's build, streamlined and powerful, but not showy. I'd always thought his name would have been more appropriately spelled "coal". His hair was so black it sometimes seemed to reflect blue, and his eyes were just as dark. His creamy complexion seemed even paler against the stark contrast. I thought he was one of the most beautiful boys I had ever seen, and he had a natural grace to his movement that complimented his looks. Just being in his presence never failed to make me feel awkward and gangly.

Over the last year, I had grown to almost six feet tall and I had yet to adjust to my sudden height. My poker-straight, reddish-blond hair had a mind of its own, so I had adopted a carefully mussed look that was harder to achieve than one might think. Next to Cole, I felt like a court jester before a prince. I tried very hard to hide my awkwardness around him, covering it with one-liners and pratfalls, and most of the time, I was successful.

Every now and then, though, I would catch him looking at me with a strange expression, and, for a second, I thought he knew how I felt. But then he'd look away, and I'd convince myself that it had just been my imagination.

Our first performance was only a few weeks away, and Mr. Roedel, the drama director, was starting to get hyper. Of course, he always got hyper as opening night approached. The closer it got, the more manic he'd become until he'd practically be in heart failure by the time the curtains opened.

This time, though, even I was a little nervous. Rehearsals had been rough. A lot of the lines were really long and, with the unfamiliar Shakespearean English, some people were having a lot of trouble memorizing them. The guy who was playing Theseus could barely get two words out without getting stuck, and Hippolyta wasn't much better.

I wasn't worried about myself. I'd been blessed with a very good memory, and I'd memorized all my lines already. I was concerned about everyone else though — for Cole's sake as much as anything. Lia and Amira pretty much had their lines down, as well, although there were still a few places they stumbled over. Of the four of us, Cole was having the most difficulty, which was odd since he usually had his lines memorized before I did. I passed it off as nerves about his final performance. I knew he wanted it to go well.

Most of our in-school rehearsal time was spent on scenes one, four, and five since those were the ones Theseus and Hippolyta were in. Since Hermia, Lysander, Demetrius, and Helena were in these scenes as well, that left the fairy cast pretty much on their own most of the time.

When Mr. Roedel finally realized this, it was obvious he didn't know quite what to do. Theseus and Hippolyta still needed a lot of work, but we needed to rehearse the Woods scenes as well. His solution was to stay even later after school. I didn't have a problem with this, as anything that kept me out of the house even longer was fine by me.

After a week of this arrangement, however, we still weren't spending much time on scenes two and three. Cole grew more and more nervous, since most of his biggest scenes were in the neglected parts.

Finally, Lia came up with a solution.

"Why don't we get together at my house and work on these scenes?" she suggested after a particularly discouraging rehearsal.

Cole brightened up immediately. "That's a great idea!" he said happily. "When?"

“Whenever. What works for you guys?” Amira and Cole quickly said that they were available anytime. Lia turned an expectant gaze at me. I had never been to Lia’s house before and I’d never been anywhere outside of school with Cole. I realized everyone was waiting for my response.

“Whenever is fine for me too,” I mumbled.

After checking with Alyson, Jayden, and Elliott — who played Titania, Oberon, and Puck respectively — we settled on Friday evening. Lia said she’d order pizza.

“It’ll be like a little party!” she enthused with a giggle. She threw her arm around my waist since she couldn’t reach my shoulder and jumped up and down. “I can hardly wait! It’ll be so much fun!”

I smiled tightly. I wasn’t used to socializing outside of school, let alone going to parties.

“We have to work too, Lia,” Cole said, coming to my rescue.

“Oh, I know, but it doesn’t mean we can’t have fun!”

As we went our separate ways, my stomach clenched at the very thought of spending time alone with Cole. Sure, we wouldn’t really be alone, but still..... Somehow, it was okay at school. Being in the intimacy of someone’s home, though, scared me.

Amira usually gave me a ride home after practice since she lived a block away and Mom couldn’t be bothered to pick me up. I was unusually quiet on the ride home, and she couldn’t help but notice.

“What’s wrong?” she finally asked.

“What? Huh? Nothing!” I sputtered. I’d been in my own little world of worry.

“You haven’t made a single joke since we left. Something is obviously bothering you. You were fine until Lia suggested rehearsing at her house.”

“It’s not that,” I said quickly. “I’m just worried about the play, you know, and my lines and all...” I faded out lamely.

“You know your lines better than anyone else in the damn play,” she scoffed. “What’s really bugging you?” When I didn’t respond, she tried a different tack. “Look, Seth, you know you can trust me, right? We’re friends, aren’t we?”

I looked over at her nervously. What was she getting at? Sure, we were friends, but we’d never been the type that confided in each other. Just school friends. The kind you saw in the hallway and said

“hi” to, chatted with at lunch, maybe even did things like give you a ride after school, but that was it...wasn’t it?

“I’m fine,” I insisted.

Amira sighed. “Whatever.”

I could tell I’d disappointed her, but what was I supposed to do? Tell her I was pretty sure I was gay but that I’d destroyed our family by being careless about it before and I wasn’t about to let it happen again? That I was afraid to be alone with Cole because I had a crush on him?

I gasped out loud. I’d never admitted that I had a crush on Cole, not even to myself.

“Oh for God’s sake,” Amira burst out, causing me to jump. “I know you like Cole,” she said quickly, as if she just couldn’t hold the words in anymore.

“What?” I yelped.

How could she know? I hadn’t even admitted it to myself until a few seconds ago.

“The way you look at him, the way you avoid being too close to him, the way you blush when he speaks directly to you. It’s obvious.”

“Obvious?” I whispered, horrified.

She looked over at me and realized how terrified I was. She quickly pulled into the parking lot of a strip mall and parked.

“It’s only obvious if you know what to look for,” she said, soothingly.

“Do you think anyone else knows?” I asked with growing panic.

She shrugged. “I doubt it. I’ve never heard anyone say anything specifically about you. You know how some people just assume that any guy who does theater is gay.”

Gay.

She’d said it out loud. The word seemed to hang in the air.

Suddenly, I felt like I couldn’t breathe and I began to hyperventilate.

“Put your head between your legs,” Amira ordered, pushing my head down. “Take deep breaths. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Fill your lungs.” I tried to do as she said and, slowly, my breathing returned to normal.

“It’s not the end of the world,” she said softly. “There are a lot of gay guys at school. Nobody cares.”

“You don’t understand,” I said with a slightly hysterical note creeping into my voice.

“Yeah, actually I do.”

“You can’t understand,” I wailed.

“Seth, I’m gay too.”

That stopped my impending panic attack in its tracks. I sat up and stared at her, not believing what I’d thought I heard. “What?”

“I’m gay. I dig girls. I’m a lesbian. A dyke. A rug—”

“I get the picture,” I said quickly.

“So, you see, I do understand.”

“Not really,” I moaned.

The shock of her revelation was wearing off and my panic was returning in full force.

“I’m not going to tell anyone, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“It’s not just that,” I said, trying hard not to hyperventilate again. I started talking, barely realizing I was speaking. “When I was twelve, my parents found out I was gay. I’d left some stuff on the computer. They had a big fight about it, and my dad left. My mom hasn’t been the same since. It’s like she can barely stand to look at me.”

“Oh God, Seth, I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“I swore to myself that I would make them proud of me, that I would be straight. I guess at the time I thought it would somehow make things right again, bring my dad back. It’s obvious that isn’t going to happen now, but still...you know? I just want to make them proud of me.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes. I’d run out of words, and Amira didn’t seem to know what to say.

Finally, she made up her mind. “You know, being gay isn’t something to be ashamed of, it’s just a part of who you are. People who think it’s something evil or bad are the ones that have it wrong. You can’t help who you like, and you can’t make yourself be something you’re not. I know you probably don’t want to hear this, but if your dad really left your family just because you’re gay, then he was a jerk and you’re better off without him.”

My head snapped up. “He wasn’t a jerk,” I hissed. “You don’t even know him.”

Amira’s eyes widened. “I don’t have to know him to know it’s a shitty thing to leave your kid when he needs you the most.”

“And I suppose your parents know about you and are fine with it, huh?” I challenged.

“Actually, yes. I told them last year. They had a little trouble with it at first, but everything is fine now.”

A pang of jealousy shot through me. “Well we can’t all be that lucky,” I said bitterly.

“I’m really sorry, Seth. Maybe I shouldn’t have even brought this up, but I could see it was really bothering you and I thought if someone else knew it would be easier on you.”

“Maybe you were wrong,” I said, turning and looking out the window.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

She started the car and pulled back out into the traffic. We didn’t speak again until she pulled into my driveway.

“I won’t mention any of this again unless you choose to bring it up,” she said quickly, before I could get out. “If you want to talk, you know my number. And you don’t have to worry about me saying anything to anyone. I promise.”

I got out without saying a word, but I shut the door gently instead of slamming it, as I probably would have done a few seconds before.

I avoided Mom and Kane for the rest of the night, shutting myself in my room and not even coming out for dinner. I just told them I wasn’t feeling good. Mom was easy to avoid, but Kane was a little harder. I snapped at him when he stuck his head in my room to ask if I needed anything. I felt bad about it as soon as I saw the hurt in his eyes, but I was too caught up in my own misery to follow him when he withdrew his head and shut the door again.

I was dreading Friday evening more than ever now. What if Amira broke her promise and told everyone? It would have been completely out of character for her, but it was still a fear.

Her words kept echoing through my head. Was Dad a jerk for leaving? I’d been so busy blaming myself that I’d never allowed myself to be angry at him for abandoning us. For the first time ever, I allowed myself to feel a bit of the resentment that I’d buried so deeply.

And what about the other stuff she’d said? She’d made being gay sound like being born left-handed. Just a part of who you are, not

something you can help or change. That was also something I'd never let myself consider.

I didn't sleep much that night. I had too much on my mind. And it was only Tuesday. Would I even survive until Friday?

Chapter 2

The rest of the week dragged by so slowly I thought I'd go crazy. I spent most of my days avoiding Amira and my nights avoiding Mom and Kane. Mom hadn't even noticed. Kane, on the other hand, gave me a look like a kicked puppy every time he caught my eye. Amira was less obvious, but I could tell my reaction had hurt her feelings. I felt terrible, but I just wasn't prepared to deal with being gay. Why couldn't she understand that?

I was also dodging Cole. Trying to avoid both him and Amira made for interesting rehearsals. I'd interact enough to say my lines and block our stage positions, but then I'd retreat to a corner by myself as soon as we were released. My antisocial behavior was unusual and wasn't going unobserved, but I was too caught up in my thoughts to notice.

Thursday night, things came to a head with Kane. I was hiding out in my bedroom, working half-heartedly on some homework, when he barged into my room. He shut the door firmly behind him and leaned against it, arms crossed over his chest as if barring me from leaving. At twelve, Kane was still quite a bit shorter than I, but he was built sturdier, probably from all his skating.

"What are you doing?" I asked uneasily.

"What wrong with you?" he asked, his voice firm and stubborn. "You've been treating me like crap all week. Did I do something wrong?"

I sighed. "It's not you."

"Then why have you been hiding in here and yelling at me every time I try to talk to you?"

"I've just had some stuff going on."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Just...stuff."

"So.....talk to me about it."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't, Kane. You wouldn't understand."

“Why wouldn’t I understand? Just because you’re older? I’m not stupid you know. I’m your brother and we’ve always been there for each other. You’ve never kept secrets from me before.”

If you only knew, I thought darkly.

When I didn’t answer, Kane slowly moved away from the door and sat down on the bed. “What’s going on, Seth? Please talk to me. I’m worried.”

“Don’t worry about me,” I mumbled, refusing to look up at him. “I’ll be okay.”

“I can’t help it when you’re acting like this. Ever since Dad left, all we have is each other. You’re always there for me. Let me be there for you.”

I bit my lip to stem the flow of tears that was threatening to spill over at any second. “Maybe I’m just scared of losing you too,” I whispered.

Kane’s eyes grew wide. “Are you stupid or something? You could never lose me. Look, whatever is going on, you can tell me.”

I looked him directly in the eye. I could see he meant it, but I was still so scared. Maybe he did mean it, but once he knew what was really bothering me, would he feel the same? How could he, knowing his big brother was a fag? Would he forgive me if he knew I was the reason Dad left?

I slowly began to shake my head no, but Kane wasn’t having it.

“God damn it, Seth! Just fucking tell me!”

I stared at him wide-eyed. I’d never heard my brother curse before. I didn’t even know he knew those words.

Suddenly, he began to cry.

I sat in stunned silence as the first few tears slowly built into a full-fledged sobbing bawl. I quickly moved to his side on the bed and pulled him against me. Kane threw his arms around my neck and buried his face in my chest.

Right after Dad left, we’d both spent far too much time crying. It hadn’t been at all uncommon for me to hold my little brother like this, but it had been a long time since then, and it felt awkward now. After a while, we’d both sort of shut off that part of ourselves.

Eventually, he cried himself out, but he still refused to let go.

“What was that about?” I asked gently, half-afraid I would set him off once more.

“I’m losing you,” he sniffled pitifully.

“What? No you’re not!”

“Yes I am. You’re acting just like Mom did after Dad left. First him, then her, and now you.” With that, he started crying again.

“Kane, I don’t mean to pull away. You know I love you. It’s just that...I’ve been having a really hard time with some things lately...”

He sat up suddenly, pulling away and staring at me accusingly. His face was red and tear-streaked, his eyes shining with pain.

“Why can’t you tell me about it then? I could be here for you. Sometimes things aren’t as bad as you think they are when you have somebody to talk to about them.”

“It’s not that simple, Kane. I wish it was, but this isn’t something that’s just going to go away if I talk about it.”

“It’s not that simple, Kane,” he mimicked angrily, leaping up from the bed and whirling to face me. “You wouldn’t understand, Kane. Well, fine. If you don’t want to tell me, that’s your business, but I sure as hell can’t understand if you won’t even give me the chance.”

He spun around and stormed towards the door.

“I’m gay,” I whispered so softly I didn’t even think he would hear me.

He must have heard something though, because he stopped dead in his tracks, hand on the doorknob. He spun around to face me, his eyes wide. “What?”

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and repeated myself. “I’m gay.”

Here it comes, I thought. He’ll realize that I’m the whole reason Dad left us in the first place. He’ll realize that I’m the reason Mom retreated into her own little world. He’ll realize that I’m the reason our family fell apart.

And he’ll hate me.

My eyes were still squeezed shut when I felt a pair of arms sliding around my neck. I flinched away as my eyes flew open. Kane was staring back at me, a weird little smile making his mouth twitch.

“Didn’t you hear me?” I rasped. “I said I’m gay.”

“So?” He couldn’t have sounded less concerned. He smiled. “Thanks for telling me.”

“Wait. It doesn’t bother you?”

He shrugged. “Not really. It doesn’t change who you are. You’re still my big brother and I love you.”

I took a second to let that sink in.

He continued, "And I mean, I kind of wondered."

"You what?"

"Well you never had a girlfriend and you're into theater and stuff."

"That's a stereotype!"

He shrugged. "Sometimes, stereotypes can be a little true. Besides, there's all that stuff with Dad though..."

"Stuff with Dad?" I repeated, unable to believe that's all he had to say about it.

"Yeah, it's a little weird, right?"

"I think it's a little more than weird. I destroyed our whole family."

Kane's face scrunched up. "Huh?"

"That's why he left. It's my fault..." I was just getting worked up, but Kane cut me off.

"How is it your fault?"

"They found out, so Dad left, and Mom hates me."

"What are you talking about? Dad didn't leave. Mom kicked him out."

"But...I saw the computer. And you said that they were talking about a faggot. You asked me what it meant."

"I dunno about any computer, but you never let me finish telling you what I heard that night and it upset you so much I never brought it up again."

"I don't understand."

"I didn't understand a lot of what I heard back then, but I've thought about it a lot since. They were arguing, and Mom said that Dad disgusted her."

"Maybe he wanted to kick me out or something..." I suggested weakly.

"Will you let me finish! Mom was yelling at Dad to get out, and Dad said they should think about us kids. Then Mom told him she didn't want him to ever come near us again."

"What? Why?"

"She said he made her sick and she never wanted to see him again."

"But...I don't understand."

“Seth, she called *him* a faggot.” When I didn’t respond, he continued. “Don’t you see? Dad is gay, too.”

My mind reeled. I felt like the bed had dropped out from under me and I was falling. Then everything went black.

The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes again was Kane’s face hovering above me wearing a concerned expression.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “I’ve never seen anyone faint before.”

“I didn’t faint,” I said indignantly as I struggled to sit up.

Then Kane’s big revelation flooded back into my mind and I almost fainted again.

“Seth!” Kane gasped as I swayed.

“I’m...I’m okay,” I said.

But I wasn’t okay. Everything I’d believed for so long had just been turned upside-down. The last three years of my life had been cast in an entirely new light.

“You really thought that you’d caused all that?” Kane asked with disbelief in his voice.

“I saw Mom looking at the computer...” I was so confused. Suddenly, I didn’t know what to believe. “Are you sure you’re remembering it right?”

“Positive. And why do you keep talking about the computer?”

“I, uh, had pictures on a thumb drive,” I said sheepishly. At Kane’s blank stare, I explained, “Of naked guys.”

Understanding flooded his face. “And Mom found it?”

“I guess. I saw her looking at the pictures later that night when I left your room. I thought they knew and that’s what they were fighting about. I thought that was why Dad left and Mom blamed me.”

He sat quietly for a minute, obviously thinking about what I’d said.

“I don’t think they knew it was you,” he said after a minute.

“Where else would they have come from?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe Mom thought they were Dad’s. I think if she knew they were yours then she would have said something.”

I realized he was probably right. I’d been reading her silence on the subject as proof of her knowledge, but now I realized how absurd that was.

Kane frowned. "You've really been blaming yourself all these years?"

I nodded.

"I don't know how you did it," he said quietly. "I barely made it through knowing it didn't have anything to do with me. I couldn't have done it without you watching out for me."

"Yes, you could have."

"Maybe, but you sure made things a lot easier. I can't believe you thought I'd hate you."

"I was just so afraid," I said softly.

His arms were around me again in a flash. "Well now you don't have to be afraid," he said fiercely. "I don't care who you think is hot. I love you and I'm proud of you."

I hugged him back tightly. "Thanks, little bro."

"So," he said with a grin as he sat back. "Who do you think is hot?"

"Kane!" I gasped.

"What?"

"I can't believe you asked that!"

"Well, you always ask me who I like."

"That's different."

"How?"

"I dunno. It just is."

"It's so not. Tell me! Who do you like?"

I sighed. "That's part of the problem," I said. "It's this guy from drama."

"Do I know him?"

"I don't think so. His name is Cole McBride. He was in the play last fall, the modern-day fairy tales? He was Jack in Jack and the Beanstalk."

"Black hair?"

"Yeah, that's him."

"So...what's the problem? I'm no expert, but he's pretty cute. For a guy, anyway."

"His looks are definitely not the problem. The problem is I can't let anyone know I have this stupid crush on him."

"Why not?"

"Kane, come on. This is high school we're talking about. I haven't even dealt with being gay yet. You're only the second person

who even knows, assuming Mom and Dad really don't know. I'm definitely not ready to be outed at school."

He quirked his mouth to one side. "Yeah, I guess you're right. The kids at school are always picking on this one guy they say is gay."

"Is he?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? They think he is, so that's all that really matters."

I nodded. "Exactly. I mean, middle school is worse than high school. Nobody really picks on the gay guys at my school."

"Hey, wait a minute. Did you say I was the second person who knows? Who else knows?"

"Amira, this girl in the show I'm doing right now."

"You told her before you told me?"

I could tell he was hurt.

"No," I said quickly. "She figured it out. She said she could tell because she's gay too. That's what I've been upset about all week. I was afraid that if she could tell that easily, maybe other people could too. And then I find out you knew all along..."

"I mean, I didn't know. I just wondered, is all. And you don't hafta worry about me. I won't tell anybody if you're not ready to come out or whatever."

I smiled. "Thanks, Kane. How do you know so much about all this, anyway?"

He rolled his eyes. "I watch TV."

"Well, it means a lot."

He grinned. "I'm glad I could do something nice for you for a change." He stood up and scuffed his foot against the carpet. "And, you know, if you need to talk about anything, I'm here for you. Just cuz I'm younger doesn't mean I can't help."

"Yeah, I know that now. I think you just proved yourself pretty well."

He glowed with pride as he scooped in quickly for another hug before heading for the door.

"But Seth? I don't think I'd tell Mom if I were you," he warned.

"Don't worry, I have no intention."

He nodded and exited.

I stared after him, letting all the new information swirl around my brain. Kane knew about me and he didn't care. Neither did Amira.

And Mom and Dad didn't know. It would take me a while to get used to that concept.

Most importantly, though, Kane thought Dad was gay too. My mind had yet to wrap itself around that bit of information. Could it be true? And if so, what did that mean? I had to find out more. But how? I couldn't exactly ask Mom.

I walked over to my desk and I looked down at my neglected homework. I had a feeling it wouldn't get finished tonight.

With everything I had going on in my head, it wasn't at all surprising that I was very distracted the next day at school. Usually attentive and responsive, my teachers found my sudden distractedness frustrating and mildly alarming. More than one teacher pulled me aside after class to ask me if everything was okay. I gave the same answer each time, assuring them that I was fine. Most of them accepted my reassurance with varying degrees of incredulity. Mr. Roedel refused to be put off so easily. He'd cornered me after another disastrous rehearsal and totally failed to buy my assertion that all was fine.

"Give me a little credit here, Seth," he admonished gently. "I may be a little preoccupied with opening night approaching and our snail's pace progress, but a blind deaf man could tell you haven't been yourself this week. And then today, you flubbed several of your lines. What's going on?"

"It's really nothing, Mr. Roedel, but thanks for being concerned."

"Being concerned about my students is part of my job, Mr. Connelly." He always reverted to our last name whenever he was making a serious point. "It happens to be a part of my job that I especially enjoy. I hope you know you can talk to me. You might find I'm more understanding than you think."

That caused me to stop and think. Was he hinting about something or was that just my imagination? There were rumors that Mr. Roedel was gay, but then, that was only to be expected for a slightly flamboyant, single, male theater teacher. I'd never put much stock in the whispered stories about his supposed boyfriends. I decided that it was just an innocuous offer to listen.

"Thanks, but it's just some personal stuff. I'm sure it'll all work out and I'll be back to normal by Monday."

"I hope so, for your sake. If you change your mind, just know you can talk to me anytime."

I nodded and made my escape. I was still thinking about how odd that whole exchange had been, when someone caught my sleeve and I found myself cornered again — this time by Cole.

"Hey Seth," he said with a nervous smile that somehow made him even more endearing.

"Er, uh, hey Cole," I mumbled. "I thought you'd left already."

"I was waiting for you," he said.

"For me?" I gulped. "How come?"

"Amira said she was supposed to pick you up for the rehearsal at Lia's tonight, but she's going to be late."

Funny, she hadn't mentioned that to me, although, to be fair, I hadn't given her much of a chance to say anything to me.

"So, um, she asked me if I could pick you up," he continued, looking even more nervous. "I said yeah, but I, uh, don't know where you live."

I felt my face heat up with anger and embarrassment. Anger at Amira for setting this up and embarrassment at being put in this position. Damn it! Why couldn't I be old enough to drive?

And then suddenly, I didn't care if I was old enough to drive. I didn't want to go to this stupid rehearsal. I didn't want to spend a long, uncomfortable night at Lia's house, feeling out of place and awkward.

"You know, Cole," I said wearily, "I don't think I'm going to be able to make the rehearsal tonight. I'm really sorry but you'll just have to do it without me."

I turned and walked quickly away. I'd only taken a few steps, however, before Cole called after me. "Uh, Seth?" I stopped and turned to face him. "Since I didn't know where you live and I was going to pick you up and all, Amira said I should just take you home too." I stood there wishing the school would just collapse on top of me and end this day. When I didn't say anything, Cole continued hesitantly. "You know, that way I'd know where you lived..."

He looked so nervous and insecure standing there that I felt sorry for him. It wasn't his fault Amira had turned out to be a conniving bitch.

I sighed. "Yeah, okay. Thanks, Cole. That's really nice of you."

He shrugged and bit his lip. He stood there for a minute before realizing that I was waiting for him to lead the way to his car. He blushed slightly and started moving.

I fell into step beside him, and we walked silently to the parking lot. For the first time ever, I realized that Cole seemed just as uncomfortable as I did. Maybe he knew I was gay and didn't want to be alone with me any more than I wanted to be alone with him. Only our reasons would be very different. I wasn't ready for anyone to know I was gay, and he probably just didn't like being alone with a queer boy.

I was so lost in my thoughts I almost walked into him when he stopped suddenly in front of a dark gray Honda.

"This is my car," he said.

"It's nice." "Lame, Seth, very lame."

"Thanks."

He unlocked the car before walking around to the driver's side. I climbed in, sitting my backpack on my lap, and we both buckled up. He started the car and pulled out of the lot. Neither of us spoke the entire time.

Once on the road, I realized he didn't know where my house was, so I gave him directions to my neighborhood.

We drove a few minutes in silence before Cole spoke up.

"Hey Seth, I know you said you couldn't make it to the rehearsals, but if there's any way you can, it would mean a lot to me. I've just been really nervous about this play for some reason and the extra time with everyone would make me feel a lot better."

I couldn't believe Cole McBride was practically begging me to come. Was this really happening? Had Amira set him up to do this?

"You don't need me," I said quietly.

"Yes I do! You're really important to me! I mean...to the play. I mean Lysander is really important." He blushed furiously as he kept his eyes carefully on the road.

What was going on?

I didn't answer right away; in fact, I didn't say anything except to give him some last-minute directions to my house. As he pulled up in the driveway, I looked over at him. He was staring straight ahead and biting his lip again. The last of my reserves melted away.

"Pick me up at six-thirty," I said and quickly jumped out of the car.

Kane was standing at the door when I got there. He raised one eyebrow. "Wasn't that...?"

"Yes," I said in a voice that clearly said that was the end of the subject.

For once, he took the hint and dropped it.

I was a nervous wreck waiting for Cole to come back. I was such a mess that I couldn't even eat dinner. I didn't know how I'd make it through the rehearsal without making a complete fool of myself. By the time he pulled back into our drive, I was practically crawling up the wall.

"Calm down," Kane said soothingly. "Just do your lines and you'll be fine."

"You make it sound so easy," I grumbled as I started out the door.

"And you make everything so hard," he called after me.

"Hi," I said as I climbed into his car for the second time that day. He smiled at me and his whole face lit up. God, he was beautiful.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come," he said.

"Well, here I am," I mumbled.

"Thanks. It means a lot." He was dripping with sincerity.

"You're, um, welcome."

He tried to make small talk all the way to Lia's house, which was about fifteen minutes away, but I wasn't feeling very chatty. Most of my answers were of the monosyllabic variety. It didn't stop him from trying.

Lia's house turned out to be a charming two-story Colonial, white with black shutters. She greeted us at the door and guided us through a tastefully decorated interior and down to the finished basement, which had been transformed into a cozy rec room, complete with a big-screen TV, giant couches, and a well-used pool table.

Everyone else was already there, including, much to my surprise, Miss I'm-going-to-be-late Amira. If she was going to lie about being late, the least she could do was actually show up late. I glared daggers at her until she looked away guiltily.

"Great, now that everyone's here, let's get started," Lia said brightly.

The rehearsal went smoothly overall. The first run-through was a bit shaky, but we improved with each pass. Everyone knew more of

their lines than they'd expected, and by the third time, we all felt much more confident about the scenes.

"Well, hey," Cole announced after we'd finished. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm feeling a lot better about this now. How about we go through it one more time and then call it a night?"

"Let's take a break first," Amira suggested.

I'd done my best to ignore her throughout the night. It had made for rather awkward scenes when it was just the two of us, but no one else seemed to notice.

"Okay," Cole agreed with a shrug.

"I'll order the pizza," Lia said and pulled out her phone.

Several conversations quickly sprung up as I retreated to a corner. Much to my chagrin, Amira made a beeline for me.

"Can I please talk to you for a second?" she asked quietly.

"Don't you think you've said enough?" I snapped.

"Seth, please?"

"Fine," I agreed through gritted teeth. "But not here."

She nodded and led me back up the stairs. "Seth and I are going outside to get some fresh air," she called to Lia.

We went outside on the front lawn, where I stood with my arms crossed tightly across my chest. I stayed quiet, letting my body language do my talking for me.

"Look," Amira started, "I know you're probably mad at me for asking Cole to take you home today and pick you up, but I really did think I was going to be late. I promise. I had a bunch of chores I had to do for my mom and I didn't think I'd ever get them done in time, but it turned out they went faster than I thought they would."

"So out of everyone else involved, you just had to ask Cole?" I was still angry; she wasn't getting off the hook that easily.

"It was just the most logical choice, Seth. He doesn't live that far from us and he can drive. It didn't make sense to ask Lia to come get you and you hardly even know Alyson, Elliott, or Jayden."

I grudgingly had to admit she had a point. "So you weren't just trying to set me up?"

"No, I promise."

I sighed. "It was just so shocking to have him come up to me and tell me you'd asked him to take me home. Especially after what we talked about the other night."

"I'm sorry. I would have told you, but you've been avoiding me all week."

"You could have texted."

"It seemed easier to let him explain it to you then text somebody who isn't talking to you."

I grimaced. "Yeah, sorry about that. It's been a rough week."

"How's it going?"

"I thought you weren't going to bring it up."

"I didn't, you did. You know, I could be a friend if you'd let me."

I looked into her eyes and saw that she was sincere. I decided to take a risk. "I had a lot of trouble with it up until last night."

"What happened last night?"

"I told my brother and he was fine with it."

She broke into a wide smile. "That's great!"

"Yeah, he's really cool. Not that it's all peachy-keen now. I still have a lot of stuff to deal with, and I'm definitely not ready to come out yet or anything, but at least I know I have someone in my corner." I looked over at her and smiled. "Make that two people."

She gave me a quick hug. It felt weird, but not at all unpleasant. Is this what it was like to have a real friend? I kind of liked it.

"There would be other people in your corner too, if you'd let them in," she said softly into my ear.

I drew back. "I don't think I'm ready for that yet," I said.

She smiled and winked at me. "Baby steps," she said and we both laughed.

"Are you out?" I asked.

"I mean, I don't hide it."

"You were the first person to know about me," I told her.

"I thought your mom and dad knew," she said hesitantly, as if afraid to bring up the subject of my parents.

"So did I," I admitted. "But apparently I was wrong all this time. Kane, my brother, said he's pretty sure they don't know."

"But...I thought you said that was why your dad..."

"That's what I've thought all these years, but Kane says he thinks my dad is gay too and that's why my mom kicked him out." I frowned suddenly. I was still new at this friendship thing and it suddenly occurred to me that I was probably oversharing.

Amira seemed to read my expression. “Don’t worry,” she said quickly, “I won’t tell anyone what you tell me. It stays between us. Scout’s honor.”

“You’re not a Boy Scout,” I pointed out.

She laughed. “Whatever. You can still trust me.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” I asked suddenly.

She shook her head. “Not right now. There was this one girl that I was really into, but she didn’t go to our school, so it was hard to see her. Then her parents found out and they didn’t like it at all. They forbid her to see me and that made it even harder, so we just eventually broke it off.”

“Sounds like Lysander and Hermia,” I said.

She laughed. “Yeah, star-crossed lovers. That was us.”

“Is there anyone you like now?”

“Maybe,” she said teasingly.

My response was cut off by the door opening behind us. It was Cole. He looked out at us curiously for a second before speaking. “Hey guys, the pizza’s here.”

Amira looked at me with raised eyebrows. “You ready?”

“Ready,” I said with a smile.

With an answering grin, she presented her arm and I looped mine through it as we walked towards the door. Cole gave us a surprised glance before disappearing into the house.

After we ate, we started from the top with Act 1, Scene 1. It contains the first big scene for Amira and me as Hermia and Lysander. The words took on new meaning after our conversation.

LYSANDER

*Ay me! for aught that I could ever read,
Could ever hear by tale or history,
The course of true love never did run smooth;
But, either it was different in blood,—*

HERMIA

O cross! too high to be enthrall’d to low.

LYSANDER

Or else misgraffed in respect of years,—

HERMIA

O spite! too old to be engaged to young.

LYSANDER

Or else it stood upon the choice of friends,—

HERMIA

O hell! to choose love by another's eyes.

LYSANDER

*Or, if there were a sympathy in choice,
War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,
Making it momentary as a sound,
Swift as a shadow, short as any dream;
Brief as the lightning in the collide night,
That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,
And ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!'
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to confusion.*

The last run-through of the night was, by far, the best. Everyone felt good about our parts when we were finished. Now, if the rest of the cast could get their act together, we'd be fine come opening night.

As everyone was getting their jackets and stuff together, Alyson suggested everyone go to the local creamery for ice cream. Lia immediately agreed. Jayden and Elliott seemed uninterested, but it was Amira's answer that I was really waiting for. I wasn't up for more socializing right then, but I'd assumed she'd be taking me home after our bonding session in the yard.

Then I noticed the way Amira was looking at Alyson and I knew what her answer would be — and who she liked. Sure enough, Amira enthusiastically agreed, and my stomach dropped.

Cole spoke up, "I think I'll just head home." He turned to me. "Hey Seth, do you want a ride home?"

I had to make a choice, I could be the only guy going for ice cream or I could drive home alone with Cole. I'd survived the ride home from school and the drive here, so it stood to reason I could handle one more.

I smiled. "Thanks. That'd be great."

His face lit up again with his smile. "You ready now?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. "See ya, Amira. Bye, guys."

"Bye," they chorused.

Amira winked at me and I stuck my tongue out at her.

"You guys are pretty good friends, huh?" Cole asked me as we walked away.

“Who?” I asked, genuinely confused.

“You and Amira.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess so.” We hadn’t been good friends for that long, but there was no need to go into that with him.

We were almost to his car when he suddenly stopped. “Would you like to go for a walk?”

“A walk?” My voice cracked a bit. I just wanted to go home.

I glanced around Lia’s neighborhood. It was nice, a planned residential area with trees standing sentry along the street like the guards at Buckingham Palace. There were no streetlights, so the road was illuminated only by the light from the houses. It fell across the macadam in a patchwork of shadow and warm yellow pools.

“Yeah. There’s a little park at the end of the street. I didn’t want ice cream but I’m not really ready to go home, so I thought maybe we could hang out at the playground. If you don’t mind, I mean.”

I did mind, but it seemed rude to say so. I shrugged, and we set off at a leisurely pace. Cole was looking everywhere but at me. I took the opportunity to study his face and wonder what was going on inside his head.

We walked along in a heavy silence until we reached the park. It was just a small community playground really, a small clearing bordered by trees, with a few pieces of well-worn play equipment clustered in the center.

Cole made for the swings and I trailed along behind him. He settled into the center seat, and I sat in the one to his right. He pushed off gently, but I stayed still. I wasn’t quite sure what we were doing here.

“Can I ask you a question?” he asked after a few seconds.

I was immediately on guard. “I guess,” I said warily, “Although I may not answer it.”

“That’s fair enough, I guess,” he said. Then he went quiet again. I’d just decided he’d changed his mind about asking when he spoke up in a voice so soft I could barely hear him. “Why do you avoid me?”

“Wha—wha—I..you,” I stuttered. Whatever I’d been expecting, it hadn’t been that. I took a deep breath and forced my thoughts into some semblance of organization. “I don’t avoid you,” I lied.

“Yes. Yes, you do,” he said just as softly.

“I...I...” I sighed. “You’re right. I do. I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“Do you not like me? Is it something I did? Is it because I got Jack in the last play?”

“No, it’s not like that,” I said desperately. I silently prayed to whoever might be listening to open the ground and swallow me, but of course, it didn’t happen. It never does when you really want it to.

“Is it because I’m gay?” he asked in that same barely audible voice.

The world went blurry, and I suddenly felt like I was going to throw up. I jumped off the swing and walked quickly toward the trees. I heard Cole following.

“That’s what it is, isn’t it?” he asked. His voice sounded so defeated that I could barely stand it. “If that’s what it is, I wish you’d just tell me. I’ll leave you alone, I promise. I just need to know why you always seem like you can’t wait to get away from me.”

“Why does it matter?” I asked hoarsely.

“Because...because I like you.”

I spun around. “What?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You...like...me?”

“I mean, I totally understand if you’re not into me. Or into guys. Or whatever. It’s just that you’re so funny and talented and smart and...cute...”

He stopped talking and his eyes grew wide, as if he’d said more than he intended.

I didn’t know what to say. Cole McBride thought I was cute? Nothing that was happening seemed real, as if I would awake any second now and find myself in my bed at home. Or like it was some sort of elaborate prank and everyone would burst out of the trees at any second laughing. Things like this didn’t really happen, did they?

When I didn’t respond, his shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “Please forget I said that. I won’t bother you anymore.”

He turned and started walking away.

“Cole, wait,” I said quietly.

He stopped and turned back. The moonlight fell across his face now. He was so handsome, my heart felt like it would beat out of my chest.

“You wanted to know why I avoid you. It isn’t anything you did. I didn’t even know you were gay. The reason I’ve been avoiding you is because...” Deep breath. “It’s because I like you too.”

Chapter 3

We stood staring at each other for what felt like forever, neither of us saying a word. The silence grew between us until it became an insurmountable wall.

I'd just about given up when Cole brought the wall crashing down with just one sentence, "I think maybe we should start over."

I nodded vigorously, eager to agree to whatever he suggested. "Should we sit back down?" I asked tentatively.

He answered by walking back over to the swings and settling into the same one he'd chosen before. He didn't swing this time, just silently watched as I sat next to him, his eyes never leaving me for a second.

"I've wanted to hear you say that for so long," he said after a moment. "It almost seems like it's just a dream."

I don't know what came over me, but I found myself reaching over and pinching Cole on the arm.

"Ow!" he yelped.

"It's not a dream," I said with a giggle.

He grinned suddenly, his face lighting up in that now familiar way. "Wow," he said with a happy sigh. "You really like me?"

I grinned back and nodded shyly.

He laughed out loud. "I can't believe this! I thought you hated me because you'd heard that I was gay."

"I was afraid to get too close to you because I thought you'd figure out I was gay."

He laughed again.

I had a million questions and I just couldn't hold them in anymore. "People know you're gay?"

"Yeah, I thought everybody knew. I've not exactly kept it a secret."

"I had no idea."

"I figured Amira would have told you, if nothing else."

"Amira knows?"

"Yeah. Like I said, most people do."

"You're only the third person who even knows about me."

"Hey, it's cool. Everyone should come out at their own pace."

"I don't know if I want to come out at all. Nobody bothers you?"

He shrugged. "I guess it depends on what you consider bothering. I get called names sometimes, but that doesn't really bother me. I've been pushed around a couple times, but I went to the principal both times and she took care of it. We have a pretty strict non-harassment policy at our school. But for the most part, no one really cares who I like."

I'd never even considered that it might be that simple. It amazed me that this had been going on right under my nose and I'd been so caught up in my own misery that I'd missed it all.

I got lost for a minute in my own thoughts. When I looked up again, he was simply staring at me.

"What?" I asked, suddenly self-conscious.

"You're so cute," he said in a gentle voice.

"Me?" I yipped. That was twice now he'd called me cute.

"Yeah, you."

"No way. I'm skinny and goofy and my hair never wants to do anything I tell it to."

He laughed. "I love your hair. It's so adorable. You're so adorable. Do you know how many times I've forgotten lines because I get lost looking at you?"

"Really?"

"Really."

"Wow. I never even imagined. I've always thought you were the most beautiful boy I've ever seen." I blushed as I said the words. It felt so strange to be talking about this out loud, especially to Cole of all people.

He didn't say anything for a minute, and I found myself terrified that I'd gone too far.

"I pretend that I'm saying my lines to you," he said quietly.

"What?" I asked in surprise.

He stood up and turned to face me. The moonlight fell across his face like a spotlight. He began to speak softly, his voice slowly gaining strength as he recited his lines from the play with an intensity I'd never heard from him.

"Things growing are not ripe until their season," he said, "So I, being young, till now ripe not to reason. And touching now the point of human skill, Reason becomes the marshal to my will and leads me

to your eyes, where I o'erlook Love's stories written in love's richest book."

My breath caught in my throat as the familiar words took on new meaning spoken directly to me. By the time he finished, my heart was pounding so hard it almost drowned out his voice.

He slowly began to move toward me, each step closer caused my heart to beat even faster. He stopped in front of me, so close I could feel his body heat in the cool night air. I looked up at him, my heart in my throat. He began to lean in toward me, seemingly in slow motion. I was completely lost in his gaze. His lips slowly descended to mine.

It was my first kiss and it was from the boy of my dreams. I let go of the chains to pull him closer.

And suddenly, we were falling.

We hit the dusty ground with a thud, my legs still caught awkwardly in the swing, Cole landing heavily on my chest.

"Oof," I grunted.

"Oh my God! I'm so sorry," Cole said as he struggled in vain to disentangle himself.

All at once, the situation struck me as hilarious and I started to laugh. After a few seconds, Cole joined in. The laughter built until we were howling, and Cole once again collapsed against my chest. Eventually, we laughed ourselves out, but we continued to lay like that for a while, catching our breath, his body creating a pleasant pressure against mine. I had no complaints.

Finally, he pushed himself up on his elbows and looked down at me. "I can't believe this is really happening," he whispered.

"Do I have to pinch you again?" I asked with a smile.

He smiled back, then slowly leaned in for another kiss. This one wasn't interrupted by gravity, and it proved to be much more satisfying.

After a minute, he gently broke off the kiss. I gave a soft moan of disappointment; I didn't want it to end. I was happier than I'd been since Dad had walked out of our lives and never come back. I hadn't thought I'd ever be this happy again.

"This probably isn't the best place to do this," he said with a chuckle.

"I don't care," I said and tried to kiss him again, but he pulled back with a laugh.

“What if somebody catches us?”

I hadn’t thought about that. Suddenly I became very aware of the fact that Cole was lying on top of me in the middle of the playground. “Yeah, okay. Good point,” I conceded.

Cole managed to stand up, then took my hand and helped me get untangled from the swing. He pulled me to my feet and we stood staring into each other’s eyes, our bodies almost touching but not quite. I realized he was still holding my hand and looked down. He followed my gaze.

He cleared his throat nervously. “So, um, since you like me and I like you...” He paused and took a deep breath. “Would you like to be my boyfriend?”

I felt my eyes widen. Wow. I wasn’t sure I was ready for that yet. I began to stutter, “Oh wow...I mean...whoa...I didn’t expect...” I took a deep breath of my own and forced myself to speak coherently. “Can I think about it and get back to you?”

Immediately, hurt flashed through his eyes. He let go of my hand as if it had burnt him and stepped back. “Never mind,” he muttered. “It was a stupid question.”

“It wasn’t a stupid question,” I said quickly. “It’s just that this is all happening a little quickly here. A couple hours ago, I didn’t even know you were gay. Hell, a couple days ago, I could barely admit I was. I just need time for all this to soak in, you know?”

He gave a jerky little nod, but I could tell he was still upset. I stepped closer to him. “Cole, you know I like you. Kissing you was incredible. I’ve never felt like that before. This is all just really new for me. Please try to understand.”

He visibly relaxed. “I’m sorry. You’re right.” He took my hands in his again and held them against his chest. “Take all the time that you need. Just please say yes after you think about it.”

I laughed and leaned in against him. He let go of my hands and slid his around my back, holding me tightly. It felt very right.

“Kissing you was pretty incredible for me, too,” he said into my hair.

I tipped my head to one side and smiled at him. He quickly leaned in and kissed me. Not a long lingering kiss, just a short sweet smooch.

“I guess I’d better get you home,” he said after a few minutes of just standing there holding me.

I sighed. "Yeah, I guess so," I said reluctantly.

Neither of us moved.

"We're going to have to let go eventually," he whispered.

"Yeah, but maybe not just yet," I whispered back.

His arms tightened around me. We stood like that for a few more minutes before I gently pulled away. He let his arms slide around me until his hands rested lightly on my hips.

"So much changed tonight," I said, staring into his eyes.

"All for the better, I hope," he said with a lopsided smile.

"Definitely."

He spun me around by my hips and gave me a gentle push in the direction of Lia's house. "If we don't start walking we're never going to leave," he said.

I laughed as I reached back for him and we walked down the street hand in hand. As we approached Lia's though, I dropped his hand.

He glanced over at me questioningly.

"I'm not ready for anyone else to know," I said simply.

He grimaced. "I want to scream it from the roof." He laughed at my startled expression. "But I won't," he added quickly. "I'll wait until you're ready."

I smiled as he unlocked the car doors. Climbing in, I couldn't help but think how different it felt from earlier that day in the school parking lot. Now he knew I was gay, and I knew he was too. And not only that, we'd kissed! It still felt unreal, like I was floating through someone else's story.

As he pulled away from the curb, the questions that had been pushed aside earlier in the evening began to resurface.

"Have you had a boyfriend before?" I asked him.

"Yes. Twice," he said softly.

"What's it like?"

"Well, my last dating experience was a disaster."

"Oh, I'm sorry..."

"No, it's okay. I'm past all that. He was a jerk. He cheated on me, so I dumped him. It hurt at the time, but I'm okay now. Live and learn."

"What about the other one?"

He smiled sadly. "You might say that one is bittersweet."

"What do you mean?"

"I really liked him. He was sweet and funny and cute. We had a lot of fun together. It was nice having someone who really understood me. He was great. But he was terrified of anyone else knowing about us and that wasn't so great. Sneaking around and lying got old really fast."

"So what happened?"

"It got to be too much. We started fighting about stupid stuff and eventually we broke up."

I thought about that for a minute. "Wouldn't you just be getting into the same thing again with me?"

He glanced over at me and shrugged. "I don't know. Would I?"

"I'm not ready for people to know."

"You wouldn't have to tell the whole school."

"I don't know if I'm ready to tell anyone."

"You told me."

"That was different."

"Amira knows."

"Did she tell you?" I demanded, ready to be furious with her if she had.

"No," he assured me quickly. "At least, not exactly. The other day she said something about a friend who was having a hard time accepting that they were gay. I didn't associate it with you until I saw you two together tonight."

"Oh," I said, slightly mollified, but still a bit miffed that she'd mention me at all.

"You need to stop being so defensive," he said gently. "There are a lot of people who would be supportive of you if you'd let them."

"I'm not used to letting people get close to me."

"I've noticed. But is that how you want to live the rest of your life?"

My answer came quickly. "No."

"Then you have to start letting people in. I hope you'll start with me."

I turned and studied his face in the light from the dashboard while he drove. He was so beautiful. It was hard for me to believe he wanted me. It all seemed too good to be true. I was afraid that if I allowed myself to believe I could be that happy, that something horrible would happen. I wasn't supposed to be happy. That's just the way it was. Right? I'd been miserable for so long it was all I knew.

“Is it possible to be afraid of happiness?” I asked almost under my breath.

His mouth tugged down at the corners. “I think so,” he answered thoughtfully. “And I think it’s all that stands between many people really being happy. Like, it’s right there within reach, if they were just willing to take a risk and let it happen.”

I sighed. “I think I have a lot to think about tonight. No matter what happens though, I hope we can be friends.”

“Me too,” he said, giving me a small smile. “And if I’m still hoping for more than friends, well, you’ll just have to deal with it.”

I laughed. “Baby steps,” I told him.

He laughed too. “As long as we’re moving in the same direction.”

He pulled into my driveway and suddenly I became nervous. What was the protocol here? We weren’t boyfriends, but we had kissed. Would he try to kiss me now? What if Mom happened to be at the window? I quickly reached for the door handle.

“Seth?” Cole said quickly. “I really...I really enjoyed tonight. Think about what I said, okay?”

I nodded; hand still on the handle, ready to make a run for it if he made any sudden moves.

“I’d really like to kiss you goodnight, but it’s pretty obvious how you feel about that,” he chuckled. “So, good night unto you all. Give me your hands, if we be friends, and Cole shall restore amends,” he said, paraphrasing Puck’s closing speech.

I smiled and felt myself relax. I took a quick look at the house, and seeing no one at the windows, I took Cole’s hand in mine and leaned in for a short kiss. He didn’t let go of my hand right away, giving it a gentle squeeze before reluctantly relinquishing it as I swung open the door.

“Talk to you soon?” he asked hopefully.

“Count on it,” I said, and was rewarded with another of his illuminating smiles.

I practically floated inside. I couldn’t remember ever feeling that happy. I coasted on my natural high all the way to my room, where I dropped backward onto my bed and just stared at the ceiling.

When I was around ten, I’d become obsessed with astronomy. Dad had bought me a telescope and then helped me paint my ceiling black with painstakingly applied tiny stars of glow-in-the-dark paint.

The light in the center of the room represented the sun and we painted in all the constellations we could fit. I'd been a stickler for accuracy and it had taken forever to finish.

Since Dad left, I'd thought a few times about painting over it, but had never actually been able to bring myself to do it. However, it wasn't the galaxy on my ceiling that I was seeing now; my mind was far above it, lost among the real stars.

"Hello, Earth to Seth," a voice rudely brought me back. Without getting up, I turned my head to find Kane standing in my doorway, an amused expression on his face. "Welcome back," he quipped.

"Bite me," I said with a dopey grin.

"No thanks," he shot back. "I'll leave that to your boyfriend."

"What?" I gasped, sitting up with a jolt. "How...? I mean...I don't have a boyfriend!"

Kane started laughing. "Chill out, Seth. I was just kidding."

My heart was in my throat as I glared at my little brother. "Well, it wasn't funny."

I'd hoped to sound stern, but it came out rather whiny. It made Kane laugh all the harder. I continued to glare until he'd calmed himself down.

"So, how'd it go tonight?" he asked once he'd regained his composure.

"What do you mean?" I asked defensively.

He rolled his eyes. "Rehearsal? You were a nervous wreck before you left. Or was that just because what's-his-name was driving you?"

"Cole, his name is Cole."

Kane smiled mischievously. "So it was Cole you were nervous about."

I growled warningly.

"Oh come on. I want to know what happened to make you act all goofy."

"Nothing happened. And I was not acting goofy."

"Yes, you were. Something obviously happened, and I want to know what. Please tell me?"

"I don't wanna talk about it."

"Please, Seth?" He gave me his puppy dog eyes and I felt myself giving in. He didn't use them often, but when he did, I just couldn't say no. "I'm your little brother!"

“Fine,” I surrendered huffily. “But come in and close the door.”
He grinned triumphantly as he shut the door and bounced up onto the bed next to me.

“So what happened?” he asked eagerly.

“Rehearsal went well,” I started off slowly. “Everyone knows their parts now and we all feel a lot better about the play.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Kane interrupted. “Can we get to the good part now?”

I gave him a playful shove. “Who’s telling this story?”

“Obviously not me or we’d be to the good part already.”

I laughed. “Okay, okay. After practice, the girls wanted to go get ice cream, so Cole offered to drive me home.”

“Mmmhmm,” Kane said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

I felt my cheeks heat up and knew I was blushing.

“Anyway,” I continued. “When we got outside, Cole asked if we could take a walk.”

“Mmmhmm!” Kane said again.

“Look, are you going to keep interrupting with your little comments?”

He giggled. “Okay, I’ll stop. I promise.”

“As I was saying, he asked if we could take a walk and I agreed, but I was really nervous. So we walked to this little park at the end of the street, and he asked me why I was avoiding him. I said I wasn’t.” Kane snorted and got a warning glance. I took a deep breath. “Then he asked me if it was because he’s gay.”

“I knew it!” Kane shouted, jumping to his feet.

“Do you mind?”

“Not at all. What happened next?” he asked, practically vibrating with excitement. “Did you kiss?”

“Kane!” I gasped in shock.

“What? Did you?”

“I... He... We...”

“Oh my God! You did, didn’t you?” he crowed.

“Shh!” I hissed.

He jumped up on the bed again, bouncing up and down on his knees. “Seth and Cole sittin’ in a tree,” he started to sing.

I grabbed a pillow and shoved it over his face, pushing him down on the mattress. “Will you keep it down! Jeez, you’re going to have Mom in here if you don’t stop.”

He went limp, and I removed the pillow.

"Sorry, I'm just excited for you," he said, looking up at me with a grin.

"A little too excited, if you ask me."

He suddenly became serious and sat up. "Seth, you don't understand. You've been there for me for so long — always taking care of me and trying to make sure that I was happy — but nobody was there to make you happy. It's just really great to see you find someone you like and who makes you feel good."

I felt a little teary all of a sudden. I grabbed him and pulled him against me for a tight hug.

"So," he asked after a second. "How was the kiss?"

I laughed and shoved him away. I wiped my eyes and decided to just give in and go with it.

"It was incredible," I sighed happily.

"Did you use tongue?"

"None of your business."

"Did you?" He pulled the puppy dog eyes again.

"Yes," I admitted with a blush.

"Did you guys do it?"

"Kane!" I cried.

He giggled. "Just kidding. But seriously, are you guys, like, boyfriends now?"

"No," I said slowly, drawing the word out. "He asked me, but I said I needed to think about it."

"What's to think about? You like him, he likes you...seems obvious to me."

"That's just it, though. It's not that simple. Maybe if we were straight it would be, but we're not."

"Well duh. Thanks for that newsflash. Why isn't it that simple?"

"Okay, look. If you want to date a girl, you can just ask her out, and if she says yes—"

"What do you mean 'if'?"

"—if she says yes, you can walk down the halls at school holding hands and no one will even blink. But if I say yes to Cole, then we have to be really careful. There are a lot of people out there who don't like gay people. They could make life really hard for us."

"Then don't hold hands at school."

"There are other reasons too."

“Like what?”

“I’ve barely accepted that I’m gay, I don’t know if I’m ready to jump right into being someone’s boyfriend.”

“You won’t know unless you try.”

“And what about Mom?”

“Oh.” That brought him up short. I’d begun to think he had an answer for everything. “Yeah. She can’t find out.”

Definitely not. It was hard enough to pretend to be straight all these years when I didn’t have any friends. How much harder will it be if I have a boyfriend? And then there’s Dad.”

He screwed up his face. “Dad?”

“I need to know what really happened the night mom kicked him out. I need to know if he’s really gay like me.”

“How are you going to find out about Dad?”

“I’m going to try and find him.”

Kane’s eyes grew round. “How?”

“I don’t know exactly. I guess I could start with social media.”

I grabbed my laptop, and we searched for his name on Facebook, but nothing came up. We got the same result with Instagram. Next, I tried a Google search. The first thing that came up was a website for a graphic design and marketing company. That was what Dad did for a living. I clicked on the site, then clicked on the About Us tab.

I gasped when a picture of Dad appeared, smiling and looking a little older than I remembered.

“Wow,” Kane said under his breath. “That’s him.”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t know what to do next.

“Is there a phone number or something?” Kane asked.

I clicked on Contact Us, and a contact form loaded on the screen. Damn. I’d been hoping for a phone number or an address. Then I thought to scroll down. And there it was, below the form. A number.

I stared at the screen, hardly believing how easy it had been. It was my first tangible link to Dad in years. If I wanted, I could call him, hear his voice again. It had been so long. My hand reached for my phone, almost of its own volition, but I stopped just short of picking it up.

“What are you waiting for?” Kane said breathlessly. “Call him.”

"It's late," I said, glancing at the clock. "This is probably an office number. He won't be working at this time of night. Besides, you'd better get to bed."

I was pretty sure it was a cell number based on the exchange, but I was reaching for any excuse to not dial him at that moment.

"It's a Friday night, I don't have to get up early in the morning," Kane argued.

"What do you want to do? Stay up all night?"

"I want you to call Dad. We could at least leave a message."

"I...can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I'm not ready."

"Well, I am. Here, give me your phone." He made a grab for my cell, and I snatched it away.

"Kane, no!" My voice came out sterner than I'd intended. Kane's face fell. "I'm sorry. It's just...I think we should wait and call tomorrow."

"You promise you won't call him without me?"

"Yeah. I'm just tired right now. A lot has happened tonight."

He nodded wisely. "Like your first kiss."

I blushed. "Yeah, like that."

He grinned. "I want to hear more about that kiss."

I threw a pillow at him, which he easily dodged. "No way, José."

"Aw, come on," he wheedled. "You're my big brother. You're supposed to tell me these things. How else will I know what to expect from my first kiss?"

"It's just kissing. I don't want to talk about it."

He made a face. "Okay, fine. But what are you going to do about him?"

I sighed. "I don't know yet, and I really don't want to talk about that either."

"Well, if you're going to be boring, I guess I'll go watch TV in bed," he said.

He started for the door but then suddenly scooped up the pillow I'd thrown at him and gave me a solid whack across the face.

"Hopefully, that knocked some sense into you," he said with a wicked grin.

He was out the door before I could react.

A few seconds later, the door reopened just wide enough for Kane to stick his head in. "For the record," he said in a serious tone. "I think you should go for it."

He closed the door again, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I woke up late the next morning with a renewed sense of purpose. I was determined to call Dad — and the sooner the better. I needed to talk to him, to know what had happened. I went to find Kane, but no one was home. I found a note from him on the counter saying Mom had gone shopping, and he was tired of waiting for me to wake up, so he was going skating.

I was suddenly impatient to talk to Dad, but I had promised Kane I wouldn't call without him. Then an idea hit me. I might have promised not to call him, but I hadn't promised I wouldn't text him.

I pulled out my phone, but then just sat staring at it. What would I even say? "Hey, it's your son who you haven't even talked to in three years?" What if he didn't want to talk to me?

Maybe I could just pretend to be a customer or something. Just see if he'd even respond.

I started typing.

"Hi. I was wondering if you were accepting new clients," I tapped out, then hit send before I could chicken out.

I sat staring at the screen. A bead of nervous sweat ran down my side, reminding me that I needed a shower. I decided that would be a better use of my time than waiting for my dad to maybe text back a potential client on the weekend.

I showered and got dressed, deliberately not checking my phone. When I was fully dressed, I finally gave in.

I picked it up and saw a notification. Someone had texted.

I opened it up to see a reply.

"Yes, depending on the project. What are you looking for?"

My dad. I was looking for my dad. I couldn't very well say that, though, and I didn't really know much about Dad's job — certainly not enough to fake my way through a conversation.

Then a flash of inspiration hit me.

"I'd rather discuss it in person," I sent. "Could I make an appointment?"

"Of course," he replied almost immediately. "When would work for you?"

"How about Monday?" I suggested.

"What time?"

What time, indeed? If I was really planning to keep the appointment, it would have to be after school. I got out at two-thirty, so I suggested three, and he agreed.

"Where should I meet you?" I asked, and he sent back an address.

Was that really his home address? He used to work from home when he lived here. I stared at the address, reading it again and again. Baltimore. He was so close. The realization that, after all these years, I finally knew where to find him hit me like a wave — intense, almost overwhelming.

Suddenly, I knew I couldn't wait until Monday. I needed to see him.

I had to figure out how to get to him. Once again, I found myself cursing the fact that I couldn't drive yet. I searched the address on Google Maps. We lived in the suburbs of Baltimore County, which surrounded the city like a donut with a bite taken out of it, and he was on the outskirts of the city on the other side of the county.

I pulled out my wallet and stared dejectedly at its pathetic contents: three whole dollars. I could probably take a bus, but I'd never ridden one in my life and, if I had to be honest, I was a little scared at the prospect. There was no way I could walk there. I had Lyft on my phone, but it was linked to Mom's bank account and she'd told us to only use it in an emergency. I felt like this qualified, but Mom would ask questions, and she couldn't know about any of this.

Another crazy idea occurred to me. Or maybe it wasn't so crazy. I quickly pulled out my phone and dialed a number that, even one day ago, I wouldn't have even dreamed of calling.

"Cole?" I said when he answered.

"Hey!" he said, and despite my reason for calling, I felt a quickening of my heartbeat.

"Hi," I said, suddenly shy. "This is Seth."

"I know. You're saved in my phone from our group texts. And I recognized your voice." He sounded genuinely happy that I'd called, and I suddenly felt guilty for only calling him because I needed a ride.

"Oh... I...uh... I need to see you," I stammered.

"Really?" He sounded excited.

“Um, yeah. I need to talk to you about something. And I kind of need a favor.”

“Anything,” he said without hesitation.

“You may want to hear me out before you commit to anything,” I warned him.

“When do you want to talk?”

“Anytime, but preferably not on the phone. Are you busy now?”

“Not really. I was just hanging around the house. You want me to come over?”

“Could you?”

“Sure. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

We said goodbye, and I hung up. Once again, I stared at the address. I was getting closer all the time, but closer to what? I went to watch for Cole to arrive.

I had intended to head him off in the driveway and ask him if we could go somewhere else, but he was out of the car before I could even get to the door, and it seemed rude not to invite him in. I was nervous as hell since I didn’t know when Mom would be home. I really didn’t want to have to explain Cole to her. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had a friend over to the house.

I quickly showed him around the house, which didn’t take long since it wasn’t very big, and the tour ended in my room. As he stepped into my sanctuary, I suddenly felt very vulnerable. Except for Kane and my mom, no one had been in here for years. I wondered what Cole would think of the painted ceiling that suddenly felt extremely juvenile. Or the ragged teddy bear sitting on top of my dresser, the one I’d had since I was born. Or the assortment of academic trophies on the shelf. Would he see me as an immature geek? I held my breath as he looked around.

“Nice,” he said, and I let out my breath in a whoosh. “The ceiling is really cool,” he added.

“My dad and I painted it,” I said softly.

He turned to face me. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you mention your dad before,” he said casually.

“I haven’t seen him in years,” I blurted out.

His eyes widened. “Oh my God! I’m so sorry,” he said as he reached out a hand, as if to snatch back his words.

“No, it’s...it’s okay. It’s...a long story.”

"I have time," he said. I tried to look away, but somehow couldn't. I saw something in his eyes that made me want to tell him the whole story — but not here.

"Can we go somewhere else and talk?" I asked.

He gave me a confused look.

"I don't know when my mom is coming home, and I'd rather not be here when she does."

Understanding flooded his eyes. He had such expressive eyes. I could tell almost every thought that went through his mind without him even needing to speak. If I'd been able to look him in the eyes before, maybe I would have seen his feelings for me before things reached the point they did at the park last night. Not that I would have had the nerve to act on them, so maybe it was better that things had happened the way they had.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Anywhere."

"Then I have an idea."

"Where?"

He grinned. "I'll surprise you."

I found myself smiling in return. We started toward the door at the same time and stopped awkwardly.

"You go first," I said shyly.

He just stared into my eyes and once again, I was caught in his gaze.

"I couldn't stop thinking about you after I dropped you off last night," he said in a husky voice.

My breath caught in my throat as he leaned slowly towards me. His lips closed over mine and my arms instinctively circled around his neck. I was losing myself in his kiss when I heard the front door open. I leaped away from Cole as if I'd been burned.

"I'm sorry"— he started, but I shook my head to cut off his unnecessary apology.

"Let's go," I said, eager to get out before Mom did something to embarrass me.

I made a beeline for the door, passing Mom as she went into the kitchen with an armload of bags.

"I'm going out," I called to her.

She glanced up to respond and stopped when she saw Cole. Her eyes narrowed, and she stepped back into the hall.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?” she said.

“Mom, this is Cole. Cole, this is my mother.”

“Eve Douglas,” she said, holding out her hand. “What’s your last name, Cole?”

“McBride, ma’am,” he answered politely.

“Where are you going?” she asked me, although her eyes never left Cole. I was impressed that he refrained from squirming under her scrutiny. Where her sudden interest in my activities had come from, I didn’t know. Usually she couldn’t care less what Kane and I did as long as we left her alone and stayed out of trouble.

“Just out,” I said.

She finally turned her icy glare to me.

It’s funny how when you’re around someone all the time, you tend to stop really looking at them, but now I saw her as Cole must see her. She was a small woman, barely reaching five foot in height, and if she weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet, I’d be surprised. But what she lacked in size, she made up for in personality. She exuded an intimidating aura that left men more than twice her size trembling in her wake. She’d had long hair when I was younger, but a few years ago, she’d started wearing it short, almost severely so. It was still as fiery red as ever, but now instead of a curtain of red gold, the spiky locks more closely resembled dancing flames. Her eyes were the same shade of intense green that both Kane and I shared.

She stared at me for a few seconds and then she simply turned and went into the kitchen. “Don’t be late,” she called over her shoulder, almost as an afterthought.

“Let’s go,” I said, grateful for the release.

“Wow, your mom is intense,” Cole said once we were in his car.

“No kidding,” I muttered.

“Is she like that all the time?”

“Pretty much.”

He gave me a sympathetic look before starting the car and backing out onto the road.

“Do I get to know where we’re going yet?” I asked.

“Nope,” he said with another one of his grins. “But feel free to start talking any time. I can drive and listen at the same time.”

“Talk about what?” I asked in confusion.

He shrugged. "Beats me. You're the one who said you needed to talk to me when you called earlier. If you don't know what about, I sure don't."

I laughed but then sobered up quickly. Cole noticed and glanced over at me with concern on his face.

"Hey look, if this is about me asking you to be my boyfriend, you're right, it was too fast. I should have never asked. It was wrong of me to put you in that position."

"It's not about that. And you had every right to ask. I just need a little more time. Actually, what I did want to talk to you about is one of the reasons why I need more time."

"I'm listening," he said gently when I paused.

I took a deep breath. "When I was twelve, I woke up one night to hear my parents fighting. That was nothing new really. They'd been fighting for years, but that night it seemed worse than usual, so I got out of bed and tried to sneak out into the hallway to hear what they were fighting about.

"When I opened the door, my little brother Kane was already out in the hall, and he barged into the living room where Mom and Dad were. Dad sent us back to our rooms, but I couldn't sleep. Later that night, I went into Kane's room to see if he'd heard more than I did. He had, and he started telling me about it. He said he'd heard them use the word faggot.

"I panicked. I knew what a faggot was, and I was pretty sure I was gay by that time. I went to the living room and there was my mom at the computer, looking at all the pictures I had on there."

I paused again and glanced over at Cole, trying not to blush. His eyes were on the road, but I had no doubt that he was listening intently.

"They were pictures of naked boys. I figured they'd found them and that's what they were fighting about. I went back to my room and cried myself to sleep. The next morning, Dad was gone. I never saw him again. Mom never mentioned the pictures, and we weren't allowed to talk about Dad."

"Oh wow. Seth I'm so sorry—" Cole started.

"Just wait," I interrupted. "I'm just getting started. I spent the last few years believing that Dad left because he found out I was gay and couldn't handle it, and that Mom had pulled away because she was disgusted too, but stuck with me as my mother. I tried to be the

perfect son. And I tried to be straight. I kept thinking that if I was good enough, maybe she'd love me again, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I hoped Dad would come back. Neither happened, but something else happened recently that changed everything.

"When I came out to Kane, he told me what else he'd heard that night. It has nothing to do with me."

"You mean they didn't know you're gay?"

"No, they have no idea from what I can tell."

"Then why did Kane hear them say something about a faggot? And why did your dad leave?"

"Kane thinks they were fighting because my dad is gay."

"What?" he exclaimed, looking over at me and swerving dangerously into the wrong lane.

"Eyes on the road!" I squealed. Once the car was back on the right side of the road, I continued. "From what Kane heard, Dad is gay, and Mom freaked out about it. Which I guess I can understand. She threw him out."

"But why haven't you seen or heard from him since he left? Even if they got divorced, wouldn't he have visitation rights?"

"I don't know. That's one of the things I want to talk to him about."

"You're going to talk to him?"

"I hope so. That's what I need your help with."

"Me?"

"Yeah. I managed to get his address, but I don't have any way of getting there..."

"I'll take you," he said immediately.

"Are you sure? I mean, I hate to even ask, but I don't have anyone else..."

"You didn't ask. I offered."

"But I mean..."

"I offered, Seth. I want to do this for you. I want to help."

I was suddenly overwhelmed by emotion and I felt tears welling up in my eyes. I turned quickly towards the window as the first few tears squeezed out and rolled down my cheeks.

"Thank you," I managed to mumble.

As I stared out the window, I noticed where we were for the first time. We'd driven into the city and we were heading steadily towards the Inner Harbor. Baltimore's harbor is one of the oldest harbors in

America. It had become a very dangerous and seedy place until the 1970's when it was completely redeveloped and restored. Now it's a beautiful tourist attraction with restaurants, museums, shops, the National Aquarium, street entertainers and much more.

"We're going to the Inner Harbor," I announced brilliantly. As if this was news to Cole.

"About time you figured it out."

"My mind was on other things," I defended myself, but with a smile, since I knew he was only kidding. I realized that I'd better snap out of it and start paying more attention to Cole.

"Oh, is my presence distracting you?" he teased.

I gave him a sidelong glance from under lowered lashes, trying to act as sexy as I knew how. I didn't have a lot of practice. "You know it," I purred...or tried to purr. I guess I pulled it off because I got the satisfaction of seeing Cole blush.

"Ahem," he cleared his throat. "I, uh, was planning on maybe taking you to the Aquarium if you were interested, but if you want we can just go right to your dad's."

"The Aquarium?" I repeated dumbly.

The National Aquarium is world-famous and huge. It's home to over 10,000 animals. It's also pretty expensive to get in.

"I, uh, didn't bring any money with me."

"That's okay. I was planning on paying for you anyway."

"You don't have to do that!"

"I know, but I was hoping you'd let me. Think of it as our first date."

I felt my face flush with pleasure. I could barely wrap my mind around the idea of me going on a date with Cole McBride. It still didn't seem possible.

We had a great time. For a while, I was able to forget everything else and just enjoy being with Cole. We did our best to stay discreet, but the occasional lingering touches and quick kisses stolen in the dimly lit shark alley were more thrilling than anything I'd ever experienced. Eventually, though, our visit had to end. I felt a pang of sadness as we left, but the moment we stepped outside, my thoughts snapped back to my father. Cole must have sensed the shift in me, because he didn't hesitate for a second.

"Are you ready to go find your dad now?" he asked.

I took a deep breath. "As ready as I'll ever be."

“So what’s the address?”

I had it memorized by now. I rattled it off, and he cocked an eyebrow and let out a low whistle. “I have an aunt who lives in that neighborhood,” he said. “It’s really nice.”

“So you know where it is?” I asked excitedly.

“More or less. Let’s go.”

I spent the drive in quiet anticipation. Cole seemed to sense my need for silence and respectfully left me to my thoughts. I was so nervous by the Cole parked on a block of the two-story brick rowhouses that I felt like I was about to crawl out of my skin.

Cole shut off the car, but I didn’t move to get out. After a minute, Cole spoke up. “I, uh, can’t imagine how scary this must be,” he said softly, “but I want to respect your privacy and all, so I’ll stay in the car if you want.”

I shook my head no. “Please come with me,” I managed to whisper.

Cole slipped out of the car, came around to my door, and opened it for me. Still, I sat unmoving. I just couldn’t bring myself to get out of the car. Cole reached out a hand, and I reluctantly took it and let him draw me from my seat.

“Now what?” I asked. My voice broke on the second word, sending the end of the question into an upper register that caused me to flinch.

“Now we go knock on the door,” Cole said gently.

“What if he’s not home?” Having arrived, I was determined to postpone this as long as possible.

“Then we come back another time.”

“What if he doesn’t want to see me?”

“Then we leave, but I seriously doubt that’s going to happen.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this nervous in my life,” I confided.

He took my hand in his and smiled at me. “That’s why I’m here.”

After a few shaky breaths, I was as ready as I was going to get. Finding which rowhouse was Dad’s was as easy as finding the unobtrusive brass letters above the doors.

I stood in front of Dad’s door shaking with nerves and squeezing Cole’s hand so hard it’s a miracle I didn’t shatter his bones. I was about to chicken out and make a break for the car when Cole reached up and knocked on the door.

“What did you do that for?” I gasped.

“It’s what you do when you want someone to answer the door,” he said mildly. “And you looked like you were about to run.”

Before I could respond, the door swung open.

Chapter 4

Standing in the doorway was my dad.

In person, he didn't look all that different from the last time I'd seen him — just not quite as tall. I guess he hadn't shrunk. I'd just gotten taller. His shoulders were still broad, his reddish-blond hair was still cut short and neatly parted, and his eyes were the same pale blue I remembered. There was a bit more gray at his temples, and he looked like he might be in better shape, but otherwise, he was the same Dad I'd carried in my memory all these years.

As he focused on my face, it took him a second to realize who I was, then a few more seconds to process the fact that I was standing on his doorstep. He stared speechlessly at me, his eyes wide, and his mouth forming a perfect "O" of surprise.

"Hi, Dad," I squeaked.

"Oh my God, Seth," he whispered, and then a shout, "Seth!"

He lunged toward me, pulling me into a bone-crushing bear hug. Before I knew it, I was clinging to him like a child, sobbing into his shoulder—Cole momentarily forgotten. I didn't know how long we stayed like that, lost in our own little world, speaking a silent language only we understood. Eventually, though, I became aware of Cole still standing awkwardly on the steps—and that we'd been joined by another man, roughly Dad's age, watching quietly.

I didn't want to let go, but Dad gently pushed me away and held me by my shoulders, looking me over intently.

"I can't believe how much you've grown," he said, his voice choked with emotion. "I doubt I'd even recognize Kane now."

I couldn't help grinning. "He doesn't look that different. He's not grown as much as I have."

He shook his head in confusion. "But what...how...?"

"It's a long story," I said.

He suddenly seemed to remember that we weren't alone. "Well we can't stand out here on the front steps all day. Come in, and, uh, you too, of course," he added to Cole, who was still trying to melt into the scenery.

We followed Dad and the other man through a short entranceway and into a well-decorated living room. The color scheme

was decidedly masculine, all dark browns and tans. It was very cozy and den-like. I don't know what I had been expecting but this wasn't quite it. We all stood awkwardly in the center of the room for a few moments; no one seemed to know what to say.

Finally, Dad took the initiative and began a round of introductions. "Steve, this is my son Seth," he said formally. "Seth, this is..." He paused and looked into Steve's eyes. "...this is my boyfriend, Steve."

My heart stopped. So Kane was right. Dad was gay...and Steve was his boyfriend.

I took a better look at the man standing next to my dad. Steve was about the same height as Dad, a little over six foot, and just as fit. His hair and eyes were dark, and he had a well-trimmed mustache. He shook my hand with a warm smile.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Seth. I've heard an awful lot about you."

"It's, uh, nice to meet you too, Steve."

And then it was time for me to introduce Cole.

"Cole, this is my Dad." As I was speaking, several things clicked into place at once. I took a deep breath and couldn't hold back my grin. "Dad, this is my boyfriend, Cole."

I don't know who was more surprised, Cole, Dad, or Steve. The looks on their faces were so comical it was all I could do not to laugh out loud.

"Boyfriend?" Cole and Dad chorused, recovering at the same time.

I just grinned in response.

"You mean...you're..."

"Gay," I announced happily. It felt so right and so...good just to say it out loud. It was strangely freeing. It was almost like I was accepting it myself for the first time.

Dad looked like he needed to sit down. For that matter, so did Cole. Steve must have agreed with my assessment, because he gently took Dad by the arm and led him to the nearby sofa. "Have a seat," he said, indicating the two overstuffed armchairs.

Cole and I sat and waited for Dad to process this new bit of information.

"So how did you find your dad?" Steve asked to fill the silence.

"Google."

"Of course," Steve said with a chuckle.

"Actually, um, I was the person who texted you this morning asking if you were accepting work and made an appointment to meet with you on Monday," I confessed. "I guess you can cancel that since I showed up early."

"You're gay?" Dad asked suddenly, as if he hadn't heard a word I'd said since I'd come out.

"Yeah."

"Did you know I was before you came here?"

"Kind of, but I just found out recently."

"I guess your mother told you."

"No, actually Kane did. Mom never even mentions you."

"Kane?" Dad exclaimed. "How does he know?"

"He overheard you and Mom fighting that night...the night you left. He's known all along but he never told me. I guess he thought I knew too."

Dad shook his head in disbelief. "When did you figure out that you were gay?" he asked.

"I knew before you left. Actually, I've spent the last few years thinking that was why you left." A pained expression crossed Dad's face. "I thought you and Mom found out and you couldn't stand it, so you left."

"What? No! That's not what happened."

"I know that now. But for a long time, I blamed myself, especially when Mom...withdrew."

"Withdrew?"

"She...changed after you left."

"Changed how?"

"She became cold, distant. I thought it was all my fault. I thought if I could just force myself to be straight, things might go back to normal. Pretty dumb, huh?"

Dad looked stricken. "Seth, I am so sorry. I don't ever want you to have to pretend to be something you're not," he managed to say. "I did that for most of my adult life, and you and Kane were the only good things to come out of it. But what made you think we knew you were gay?" Dad asked.

"I thought you found my pictures on the thumb drive and figured it out."

His eyes grew large. "Those were your pictures?"

I blushed. "Where did you think they came from?"

He shook his head. "Your mother thought they were mine and I thought she'd downloaded them just to use against me."

"Use against you how?" I asked sharply.

Dad pursed his lips. "Never mind. I shouldn't have said as much as I have. I was just so shocked..."

"No, tell me."

"Seth..."

"Please, Dad. I need to know what happened. I've spent so many years blaming myself."

He glanced up at Cole. Steve cleared his throat, "Hey, uh, Cole, why don't we go get a soda in the kitchen?"

Cole leaped out of his chair like it had burned his bottom. He was clearly eager to escape this emotional scene.

When the two of them had exited, Dad patted the cushion next to him, and I moved to sit on the couch.

"Your mother and I, we'd been having issues for years, pretty much our entire marriage, really. I was always gay, but I was raised to be very religious and I was in denial. I married your mother to try and deny who I truly was. I tried to make it work for you and Kane, but I was reaching a breaking point. Before I could even talk to your mother, she confronted me with that damn thumb drive."

I looked away guiltily.

He continued. "She accused me of being a pedophile. I'm sure all the models were over eighteen, but they looked young. It looked especially bad that they were just a few years older than you. She wanted me to stay away from you and Kane. There was no way to prove I hadn't downloaded them. They were on a thumb drive plugged into my laptop. Your mother kicked me out and insisted she'd go to the police if I didn't stay away from you boys. I didn't want to have my name dragged through the mud, and I didn't want you boys to have your father known as a pedophile. People talk. I didn't want you to deal with that. And she had that thumb drive to hold over my head. I didn't know what else to do, so I stayed away. I'm sorry. I should have fought—"

"You're sorry?" I gasped raggedly. "I was right all along, I just had the details wrong."

"Right about what?"

"It was all my fault. Those were my photos. If Mom hadn't found them, she never would have kicked you out and kept you from us." My voice kept climbing. I was fast approaching hysteria.

Dad grabbed me by the shoulders. "Seth, listen to me. None of this was your fault. Your mother and I are adults. You were just a kid. You.....you're still just a kid. I missed so much..."

"All this time I just thought you didn't care about us," I said in a small voice.

The tears started to roll down Dad's face again. "I did care. I cared so much that I stayed away to try and protect you. Maybe that was the wrong thing to do, I don't know, but I did what I thought was best at the time."

We cried together for a few minutes and then we both seemed to dry up at the same time.

"Oof," Dad said, humor warming his voice. "I haven't cried like that in quite a while."

"Me either."

"So..." Dad said slowly. "How is your mother?"

I frowned. "Who knows? She lives in her own little world. She never pays attention to Kane and me except to yell at us if we do something wrong."

Dad pressed his lips into a thin, straight line. "Then she doesn't know you're gay?" I shook my head no. "You might want to keep it that way for now," he said, his voice carefully neutral. "And how's Kane?"

"He's good. He's a great kid. More like my friend than my little brother. Very mature for his age."

"Sounds like he's had to be," Dad said dryly. "Like you," he added after a moment's thought.

I grimaced. "I don't feel very mature. Most of the time I feel like I'm some dumb little kid that just manages to screw everything up."

He laughed. "Hey, I still feel that way too sometimes." He looked at me and just shook his head. "I can't believe you're sitting here in my living room."

I grinned and wiggled my eyebrows. "Believe it."

He laughed. "Let's go find Steve and your friend."

"Boyfriend," I corrected him, feeling a warm fuzziness just saying the word.

“Boyfriend,” Dad repeated. “He seemed as surprised as I was at that announcement. How long have you two been boyfriends?”

“How long have we been here?” I asked and we both laughed again. “He asked me a few days ago but I wasn’t sure before. Somehow, it just seemed right at that moment.”

“I think I can understand that. What’s his name again?”

“Cole.”

“Cute name.” He grinned. “Cute kid. You have good taste.”

I giggled. “I could say the same for you.”

We located Cole and Steve in the kitchen. They were sitting at the table eating ice cream and looking awkward. Steve jumped up as we came into the room.

“Everything okay?” he asked, his eyes shifting between the two of us.

“Everything is great,” Dad said.

“Ice cream?” Steve offered.

“None for me, thanks,” Dad said.

“Me either, but thanks anyway,” I said, sitting next to Cole. He looked over at me and smiled.

“So, will we be seeing more of you around here?” Steve asked.

I looked over at Dad, but he just shrugged. “I sure don’t have a problem with it, but I have a feeling your mom would.”

“She doesn’t have to know,” I suggested tentatively.

Dad raised his eyebrows. “I don’t know if I want to be a part of sneaking around behind your mother’s back.”

I felt my face crumple. “But I just found you again! I don’t want to lose you already.”

He sighed. “I don’t want to lose you either. I guess we don’t really have a choice.”

I turned to Steve, eager to change the subject now that I’d gotten permission to continue seeing Dad. “Do you live here too?” I asked him.

He shook his head no. “I’m just visiting for the weekend. I live on the Eastern Shore.”

“How’d you guys meet?”

“After I left your mother, I spent a lot of time in Delaware, at a resort town that’s pretty gay friendly.”

“Rehoboth Beach?” Cole asked.

Dad nodded. "I became friends with an older gentleman who didn't have any family. He kind of took me under his wing. I don't know what I would have done without him."

"What's his name?"

"Charlie. He lived in Ocean City, but spent a lot of time in Rehoboth. He knew everybody in town. He introduced me to Steve, and the rest is history."

"Do you still see Charlie?"

Dad suddenly looked sad, and Steve slipped his arm around Dad's shoulder. "He died last year."

"Oh...I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Dad said. "But tell me more about you. Tell me about school. How are you doing? What are you into these days?"

I told them about school and the upcoming play, and invited them both to come. We sat and talked for a couple hours before Cole reminded me that we needed to get home. I gave Dad my email address and phone number, so we could at least stay in touch that way until we could make plans to meet again.

We hugged at the door until Steve and Cole practically had to pry us apart. As soon as we were in the car, Cole exploded.

"Boyfriend!" he exclaimed with the air of someone who had held something in for far too long.

I giggled. "Well, if you'd rather not..."

"Are you kidding?" he interrupted me. "I want it more than anything! You just really caught me by surprise, to say the least."

I giggled some more.

He leaned over and gave me a quick kiss before starting the car and heading for home. He glanced over at me out of the corner of his eye. "I'm really glad things worked with you and your dad," he said softly. "And I'm really glad I got to be there for it. It makes me feel closer than ever to you."

I nodded happily and reached over to take his hand. "I'm glad you were there too."

We drove home in a contented, comfortable silence. When we arrived home, I leaned over and gave him a kiss without even thinking about it. I walked inside feeling as if I'd changed today and wondering if it would be something other people could see from the outside.

Mom was nowhere to be seen, which I was thankful for. I wasn't ready to face her right now, knowing what she'd done to us. I went to

look for Kane and found him on his bed listening to music and reading comic books. His back was to the door, and the music so loud in earbuds he didn't hear me come into his room. I could hear it from the door.

I just couldn't resist. I slowly crept up on him. I was just about to pounce on him with a roar when he sat up and screamed right in my face. I almost leaped from my skin. Kane collapsed back on the bed, overcome with laughter.

"Ha ha, very funny," I said sourly as I sat next to him.

"Gotcha," he said, still giggling. "You should have seen your face."

"I didn't think you heard me," I said, finally cracking a smile. He had gotten me pretty good.

"I saw your reflection in the window. So what were you up to today? I was surprised when I got home and Mom asked me who your friend Cole was. She said you left with him this morning?"

I nodded. "What did you tell her?"

"I just said he was a friend from school and that you were both in theater together." He narrowed his eyes and stared closely at me. "Something happened today, didn't it?"

"Is it that obvious?" I asked, breaking into a grin.

"Maybe not to anyone else, but remember who you're talking to here."

I got up and closed his door before joining him once again on the bed. "I saw Dad today," I whispered.

"What?" he screeched, his expression darkening. "You promised!"

"Shh! I needed to talk to him and I wanted to do it in person, not over the phone."

For a moment, I thought he was going to stay mad at me, but then his face cleared. "I'm still kind of pissed, but tell me everything."

So I did, quickly taking him through everything that had happened and all I had learned. When I finished, he just sat silently for a minute.

"In a way, I feel kind of sorry for Mom," he said after a while.

"You what?" I asked in amazement.

"Come on, you have to admit that would be hard to accept. Finding out your husband is gay is one thing. That would be hard enough to deal with. But then she found those pictures and thought

they were his. She must have thought that he wasn't just gay, but he was also some kind of a pervert. It had to be really hard on her."

"Hard on her? What about poor Dad? He thought she'd downloaded them to blackmail him into staying away from us. How do you think he felt? He couldn't even see us. At least Mom got to see us, not that she ever seemed to care."

"I'm not saying that I think it was harder on one than the other, Seth. All I'm saying is that I can see things from her side too."

I pouted. I still wasn't ready to stop being mad at her.

"Anyway," he said after a minute, "Dad's okay?"

I nodded grudgingly. "He seems like he's really good. He has a nice place and his boyfriend seemed very nice."

"Good," he said with a certain satisfaction. "Can I go with you to see him sometime?"

"Sure," I said, happy that he now seemed to be back on my side again.

When did it come to taking sides? a small voice asked inside my head. I purposefully ignored it.

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "I almost forgot. Something else happened today too."

"What?" he asked.

"Cole and I became boyfriends," I said, beaming.

"You said yes?" he asked excitedly.

I nodded.

"That's great!" He threw his arms around me in a tight hug. "I'm so happy for you!"

"Thanks, little bro," I said affectionately. "I'm really lucky to have a brother like you."

"Yeah you are," he said.

I laughed and gave him a playful shove. "Admit it, you'd be lost without me looking after you."

"Hey, I'm not a baby anymore. I can look after myself."

"Fine, then how about if I go live with Dad?"

He lost his teasing smirk. "You're not serious, are you?" he asked in an odd voice.

"I hadn't really thought about it. It just came out." I thought about it for a minute. "It does kind of make sense, though, you know?"

"Mom would never allow it."

"I'm old enough to have some say in where I live."

"I don't want you to go." He suddenly sounded upset.

"Kane, I never said I was going anywhere. Chill out."

He took a few deep, calming breaths. "You're right, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think I could live without you. You're not just my brother, you're my best friend."

I pulled him into another hug. "And you're mine," I told him. "But you could live without me if you had to. You're a strong little man. You've got to believe in yourself. You're going to have to live without me someday. I'll go to college in a few years."

He shook his head into my shoulder. "I don't even want to think about it."

"Neither do I, but you never know what could happen."

I felt a strange chill run down my spine at my words.

"Let's talk about something else," he pleaded.

"Okay," I eagerly agreed, and I began to tell him about my trip to the aquarium with Cole.

Soon, he was back to his usual good-natured self, but I couldn't get my mind off our conversation. A nagging sense of foreboding had crept over me, ruining my good mood for the rest of the day.

The dark cloud hung over my head for the next few days, but eventually, as things progressed with Cole and nothing bad happened, I forgot all about it. And things did progress with Cole. We were making out every chance we could get, even in school. It was a bit risky to do it on campus, but it was like we couldn't resist, and the risk made it even more exciting. By the end of our first full week as boyfriends, most of the school knew about us. Nobody seemed to care aside from our theater friends, and they were just excited for us.

Before I knew it, it was time for the opening night of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." It went beautifully, almost without a hitch. If Theseus and Hippolyta were a little stiff and needed a few cues, well, who cares? I never missed a line and neither did Cole.

I felt myself flush with secret pleasure each night when he said the lines he'd quoted to me in the park. His eyes would meet mine and it was as if he was saying them just to me. Dad and Steve attended the first night, Kane came the last night, and, to my knowledge, Mom didn't show up at all.

The next couple weeks flew by. I spent all my free time with Cole, and even got to see Dad again, although Kane couldn't go because he had a dentist appointment.

About a month after Cole and I started dating, Mom announced one Friday that she was going out of town for the weekend to visit her father, my grandfather. She gave Kane and me the choice to go with her or stay home alone. I didn't hesitate to choose option B. I had never been close to my maternal grandfather. He was a distant, domineering retired military man of the sort who believes that children should be seen and not heard. I immediately began to imagine a whole night alone with Cole. I couldn't wait to talk to him, but that night was graduation, and I didn't want to distract him before he walked.

Lia was supposed to pick me up since Amira was graduating too.

I dressed in a nice pair of khakis and a deep maroon button-down shirt. I fixed my hair in its usual carefully mussed look, just for Cole — he still insisted he liked it that way — and then I waited impatiently for Lia to show up.

The ceremony itself was mind-numbingly long. The speaker, someone I'd never heard of from the State Legislature, was obnoxiously dull. I could have sworn he was a little tipsy. He droned on about his first job, which apparently involved carrying sacks of shit...and he actually used the word "shit." It would have been hysterical if it wasn't so boring.

Then came the seemingly unending procession of students accepting their diplomas. We're a pretty big school, so the graduating class was quite large.

Finally, it was over, and I went to find Cole. It took forever to find him in the throng of parents, family, and friends. Everyone looked alike in their caps and gowns. I finally found him posing for pictures with his parents. I waited patiently until they were finished before catching his eye. His face lit up as soon as he saw me. His mom turned to follow his gaze and smiled warmly at me.

"Judging by the look on my son's face, I'm guessing you must be Seth," she said as I approached.

I was surprised that she knew about me and it must have shown on my face because she laughed warmly.

“Oh, we’ve heard all about you. All good things of course,” she added with a wink. I know I must have blushed scarlet.

I shook hands with her and Cole’s father, mumbling something about it being a pleasure to meet them. She insisted I pose for a picture with Cole and then we stood chatting for a few more minutes before Mrs. McBride graciously excused herself and her husband, leaving me alone with Cole.

“Sorry about that,” Cole said as he pulled me into a tight hug.

“Nothing to be sorry about. They seem really nice. It just surprised me.”

“They’re great, but I should have warned you.”

“I have something for you,” I said, handing him the card I’d spent almost an hour picking out. “And I have a surprise too.” He stopped opening the card and looked at me expectantly. “Read the card first.”

He read the card and gave me another hug and a quick kiss on the cheek.

“That was really sweet,” he said. “But what’s my surprise?”

“Well, I have a graduation gift for you.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything, Seth!”

I giggled. “I didn’t get you anything, I’m giving you something.”

He looked at me in confusion. “Huh?”

“Think you can spend the night at my house tonight?”

His eyes slowly grew as the implications sank in. “But what about your mom and your brother?” he asked.

“She’s out of town and Kane went with her,” I said with a grin. “I’ll be home alone.”

“I’ll ask Mom and Dad,” he said with an answering grin. “Stay here,” he called over his shoulder as he took off to find them.

While he was gone, I spotted Amira with her family and went over to congratulate her. We were still talking when Cole appeared at my side, grinning from ear to ear.

“They said yes,” he said, barely containing his excitement.

“Who said yes?” Amira asked, curious as always.

“My parents said I can stay at Seth’s house tonight,” he burred.

Amira raised an eyebrow and gave me an appraising look. I couldn’t help but blush, which set Amira to smirking. “You two boys

have fun,” she said with a wink. “But don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

I mock frowned. “All things considered, that doesn’t leave much, now does it?”

Amira laughed out loud and pulled me in for a hug. “I’m going to miss you when I go off to college,” she said out loud, and then added in a whisper meant only for me, “How about if you do all the things I wouldn’t do?”

I pulled away blushing hotter than ever. We said our goodbyes and she left with her family.

I turned to Cole. “I can’t believe your parents said yes! I’m so excited.”

“Me too, but there is one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You have to come to my graduation dinner with my family.”

I blanched, but agreed.

Dinner was at a fancy seafood restaurant in the city, and his family turned out to be his parents, both sets of grandparents and his older sister, Bethany, who was away in college but had come back for Cole’s graduation. They were all very nice, but I couldn’t help feeling awkward. I felt like they all knew what Cole and I would be doing later that night. Not that I was even sure what we’d be doing, but I had some ideas and they all involved very little clothing.

After dinner, we stopped off at his house so he could pick up a change of clothes, then drove on to my house. It was dark and empty, as anticipated.

Once inside, however, we were both overtaken by a sudden case of shyness.

“What do we do now?” Cole asked nervously.

“Want to watch a movie?” I suggested.

“Sounds good.”

We went into the living room where I turned on the TV and flipped through the selection of movies, not seeing anything that appealed to me. I felt Cole move up behind me and slide his arms around my waist.

“Anything you want to see?” I asked.

“More of you,” he whispered huskily as he began to nuzzle my neck. All thoughts of movies fled from my brain. I gasped. “Would you be terribly upset if we skip the movie?” he asked.

“Who cares about a movie?” I said shakily.

I turned in his arms to face him and we began to kiss in earnest. His hands slid under my shirt to caress my chest. I took that as permission to do the same to him and slowly began to run my hands up and down his back, my lips never leaving his, our tongues entwined.

I don’t know how long we stood there, locked at the lips, before I noticed he was unbuttoning my shirt. His fingers moved nimbly up the row of buttons, faster than I could have imagined possible. Almost before I knew what was happening, he was pushing my shirt off my shoulders, where it fell to the floor. I was so caught up in the moment I didn’t even think to be self-conscious.

I began to unbutton his shirt, but my fingers were clumsy compared to his, fumbling with each button for far too long. Before I was even half finished, Cole simply grabbed the shirt and ripped it open, sending the remaining buttons flying in every direction.

I broke away from the kiss for the first time to drink in my first sight of his naked chest. It was just as I’d imagined it. Firm and toned, but not overly developed. He was beautiful. I looked up into his eyes and found him staring at my face.

“I’ve wanted this for so long,” he said softly, his voice gruff with desire.

“I’ve never done this before.”

For the first time since he’d slipped his arms around my waist, my brain had time to catch up with my body and I suddenly found myself scared and unsure. He’d had boyfriends in the past. I was completely new at this. He had experience. I had none. I wasn’t even sure what to do. What if I didn’t live up to his expectations?

“I know.” He sounded so gentle and loving.

“I don’t want to disappoint you,” I shyly admitted.

His face broke into a tender smile. “You could never disappoint me.”

He pulled me against him as he kissed me once more. As his bare skin touched mine for the first time, it felt like fire spreading across my chest. I pressed the entire length of my body against his. I could feel that he was as excited as I was.

I broke the kiss again, long enough to whisper, “Let’s go to my room.”

We half-walked, half-stumbled down the hall, kissing and touching everywhere, losing shoes and socks as we went, until we were wearing nothing but our pants when we finally arrived by my bed.

We stopped again, at the same time, almost as if we were thinking with one mind. I stared into his eyes, searching for something, although I didn't know what.

"I love you, Seth."

That was it. That was what I'd been searching for. He'd only whispered the words, but they had sounded like a shout to my heart. I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, to capture the image into my memory forever. When I opened them again, he was staring at me anxiously. I realized he was waiting for a response.

I smiled and kissed him gently on the lips. "I love you, too."

He leaned in for another kiss, but I surprised him by taking a step back. I locked eyes with him, and deliberately began to undo my pants. His eyes widened as they slowly traveled down my chest and over my stomach to where my hands were working. I pushed the pants down and stepped out of them. Now I was only in my underwear.

He started to take a step toward me, but I placed a hand firmly on his chest, stopping him. I let my hand slide seductively down his stomach. He sucked in a breath with a sharp hiss. Finally, my hand reached his waistband. I hooked a finger into the top of his pants and slid it around to his button. His mouth opened slightly as his breathing deepened. I undid the button with none of my earlier ineptness, tugged down the zipper, and then slid his pants down, revealing his tented boxer-briefs. I let my hand trail lightly over his bulge and he gasped out loud.

"I thought you were new at this," he rasped.

"I am. Just a natural, I guess."

And then, he was on me, pushing me back until I hit the bed and we fell over onto it together. Our hands were all over each other and I was suddenly caught up in something bigger than me. I don't even know when the underwear came off, but everything after that remains perfectly clear. And it was incredible. What I didn't know instinctively, Cole patiently and tenderly taught me. The lessons continued late into the night, or I guess it was morning, when we finally drifted off to sleep, totally exhausted, but completely satisfied, at home in each other's arms.

I awoke with a start to find the sun streaming in through the windows. I glanced over at the clock to find it was almost noon. Cole was still wrapped around me, his arm across my chest and his leg thrown over mine. His face was nestled into my neck. I idly wondered what had woken me up.

And then I heard it. Voices. Inside the house.

With a jolt, I sat up in bed.

What was going on? Mom and Kane weren't supposed to be back until tomorrow.

"What's going on?" Cole asked, his voice blurry with sleep.

The voices were louder now and there was no mistaking my mother, especially when she was mad. And she sounded plenty angry.

"Shit!" I cursed, as I remembered the trail of clothes we'd left strewn from the living room to my bedroom.

A sudden fear clutched at my heart. This was not going to be pretty.

That thought had no sooner crossed my mind when my bedroom door flew open with a crash that brought Cole bolt upright beside me. We stared in wide-eyed terror at the tiny figure of my mother standing in the doorway. She looked like one of the mythical Furies, her eyes burning with rage, her lips curled up in a snarl.

"How dare you?" she growled.

"Mom, I..."

"Shut up," she snapped. "I don't want to hear it. I can't believe this. What? Does it run in families? Is this like some sort of inheritable gene? Some disease that gets passed down from father to son?"

"Ms. Douglas, it's not like that," Cole spoke up, sounding angry. I had to admire him for his courage, at the same time marveling at his stupidity. "I love—"

"I said shut up!" she screamed at him with a vehemence that even caused me to flinch. "I leave for one night and come back to find my son in bed with some faggot slut and you think I want to hear about how you love him? You don't even know what love is. 'You're just a filthy cock-whore.'"

Suddenly, my vision blurred. I'd always thought that "seeing red" was just a saying, but I discovered now that it wasn't. I could never remember being so angry, so filled with hate.

"Shut up," I said in a menacingly low voice.

Either she didn't hear me or chose to ignore me. She just kept up with her horrible diatribe. "I'm so glad I left Kane with my father. I'd hate for him to have to find out his brother is nothing but a piece of faggot trash."

"Shut up," I growled, a bit louder. Something in my voice caused Cole to flinch away, but there was no stopping my mother.

"I should have known when I found out about your father that he'd probably already molested you, turned you into—"

"I said shut up!" I roared, leaping out of the bed, heedless to the fact that I was still completely nude. "Shut up! Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP!" It finally seemed to sink in that I was slightly beyond control, and I had the pleasure of seeing something akin to fear swim through her eyes.

"Do you have any idea how much I hate you?" I asked through gritted teeth. "Dad didn't make me gay and only a sick mind like yours would even think that. He's never touched me in a sexual way and if you ever try to say he has again, I'll—" I stopped, not sure what I'd do, but I could see in her eyes that I'd made my point. "I didn't even know he was gay until a few weeks ago. All these years I thought he left because he found out I was gay and couldn't stand it."

Confusion flickered over her face.

"That's right, Mommy Dearest, I've known I was gay since I was twelve. Those pictures you found? They were mine. I saw you looking at them that night and thought you'd figured it out. I waited and waited for you two to confront me. I fell asleep crying. I woke up the next morning to find Dad gone and I blamed myself."

Tears were running freely down my face now as the words continued to tumble out. "I tried to be straight. I really did. I hoped that maybe it would make you love me again. You tell Cole he doesn't know what love is, but you're the one who doesn't know the meaning of the word. All you care about is yourself. I've practically had to raise Kane since Dad left."

She suddenly seemed to flare back up again, attempting to regain control of the situation. "You'd better not have laid a hand on him," she shrieked.

"Fuck you!" I screamed. "You just don't get it, do you? And you never will because you're a selfish bitch."

"Get out of my house," she screamed back. "Get out and don't ever come back!"

“Kicking me out, huh, Mom? Just like you did Dad.”

“Get your shit and get out!”

“With pleasure.” I leaped forward and slammed the door in her face.

“And don’t call me Mom ever again,” she screamed through the door. “I only have one son.”

I turned to find a shocked Cole cowering in the bed. As soon as I saw him, all the adrenaline rushed out of my system, and I suddenly felt weak-kneed. I sat heavily on the floor, as the steady trickle of tears became a torrent. The sobs caught me by surprise, ripping up through me with such force that it hurt.

I don’t know how long I cried before I felt Cole kneeling next to me. He hesitantly wrapped his arms around me, almost as if he was a little afraid of me. I curled into his body, grateful for the contact. Some part of my brain vaguely noted that we were both still naked, but there was no eroticism in his touch, only comfort.

Eventually, I cried myself out and I pulled gingerly away. We looked at each other without saying a word. There was something in his eyes that hadn’t been there before, but I wasn’t quite sure what it was.

“I’m sorry,” I said at last, although I wasn’t exactly sure what I was apologizing for. That he’d had to witness that? That we’d gotten caught? Everything?

“I...” He paused. “I thought you were going to hit her,” he said nervously.

I opened my mouth to deny that thought had even crossed my mind, but I stopped and thought about it. While it was true that I really hadn’t thought to hit her, I may have if she hadn’t stopped talking when she did.

“I didn’t plan on hitting her,” I said slowly. “But I was so angry, I probably could have.”

“I’ve never seen you like that.”

I shook my head. “That’s because I’ve never been like that before. I’ve never been that angry in my entire life. But when she started saying those things about you and Dad...” My voice trailed off.

“Where are you gonna go?” he asked after a minute.

“Dad’s,” I responded without hesitation.

“I’ll take you,” he said. I smiled gratefully at him. “Want me to help you pack?”

I nodded and stood up. I suddenly became very aware that neither of us was wearing a stitch of clothing and I felt myself blush. He grinned up at me.

"I'm sorry last night got ruined," I said, turning quickly to pull on my boxers from last night.

"Nothing was ruined," he said, standing and moving up behind me. He massaged my shoulders for a minute until I relaxed. "Last night was perfect. Nothing could ruin it. This morning was a separate thing. Sure, I would have liked to have been awakened a little more gently, and maybe had a second round..."

I blushed again and leaned back against his chest. I could feel that he was indeed ready for a second round. I was wondering how he could even be thinking about sex at that moment when my body started to respond on its own.

"I...I need to pack," I mumbled.

"I know," he said softly into my ear.

A few minutes before, being romantic was the last thing on my mind. It was quickly becoming the only thing on my mind. I couldn't believe I was feeling like this so soon after what had transpired with my mother — and with her still in the house!

A sudden banging on the door quickly brought us both crashing back to reality.

"I'm leaving but I'll be back in an hour," Mom yelled through the door. "I want you gone when I get back."

I stood still until I heard the car start outside and drive away. I moved away from Cole and he didn't try to hold me back. I think he knew we didn't have time to fool around. I got dressed then started opening drawers and pulling out my clothes, piling them in stacks on my bed.

"What are you going to pack them in?" he asked.

"There are trash bags in the laundry room on the shelf above the washer and dryer," I told him. He slipped on his boxers and pants and left the room, reappearing a few minutes later with not only the box of trash bags, but also our other discarded clothing from the night before.

"Thanks," I said. He opened a bag and I started dropping in the piles of clothes. My entire wardrobe barely filled one bag. I suddenly felt sad, seeing pretty much everything I owned in one black plastic trash bag.

That's my life, I thought. My entire life in a trash bag. How appropriate.

That's when the doubts crept in. What if dad didn't want me? Where would I go then? Maybe I'd end up sleeping on the street. Or maybe I'd just kill myself and then it will be me inside a black bag.

"What else?" Cole asked, snapping me out of my dark reverie.

"Oh, um...I dunno. My school stuff I guess." It didn't take long to gather that together. Most of it was still in my backpack.

"What about your trophies and stuff?"

I glanced over the shelves of academic trophies and awards. "Nah," I said. "Leave 'em as a souvenir."

"Come on," he argued. "You worked hard for them. You might want them later."

I let him talk me into packing them too. He insisted on wrapping each trophy in one of my T-shirts, which we had to dig out of the clothes bag. After that, we carried the bags out to his car.

"Anything else?" he asked while we were standing in the driveway.

"I should leave a note for Kane," I said, just as Mom pulled into the driveway. She was back well before her allotted hour.

She got out of the car carrying a paper bag emblazoned with the logo of a local hardware store. She stared coldly at me, but stalked towards the house without saying a word. At the door, she stopped and spun around dramatically.

"I hope you have everything out because I'm changing the locks now," she announced.

"I wanted to leave a note for Kane," I said as evenly as I could manage.

"No," she said simply.

"He's my brother. He deserves to know what happened."

"He's no longer your brother. I'll tell him all he needs to know."

"Just like you told us about Dad? And he'll always be my brother, you can't change that."

"You'll never see him again," she proclaimed haughtily, her head thrown back, eyes flashing. She looked like some sort of otherworldly elf queen. I felt a chill go down my spine.

I stood still, my eyes locked with hers, refusing to be the first that looked away. It was a battle of will and I would not give in.

“Come on, let’s go,” Cole said, opening his door. I didn’t move. “Seth?” I still didn’t move. Cole grew quiet as he watched the silent struggle between mother and son.

After what seemed like an eternity, she swung around and stormed into the house, slamming the door behind her.

I’d won, but somehow, the victory felt quite hollow.

“Are you ready now?” Cole asked softly.

I nodded and climbed into the passenger seat.

Neither of us spoke as we drove to Dad’s. I didn’t know what was going on in Cole’s mind, but he seemed different now, withdrawn. A gulf had opened, and it seemed to be ever widening. I didn’t know if things would ever be the same between us, but I had other things on my mind. Like, what if Dad didn’t want me living with him? He’d been on his own for a few years now, he had a boyfriend, maybe he wouldn’t want a kid around all of a sudden. Sure, he’d seemed happy to see me, but that was just a visit. Moving in was something else entirely.

What would I do if he didn’t want me? Where would I go? Cole had said his parents were supportive of his sexual orientation, but I doubted that would extend to allowing his boyfriend to move in with them. I didn’t have any other family really. Would I end up homeless? I’d read about gay kids who got kicked out and ended up on the streets hustling to survive.

That thought scared me. I had no street smarts and I knew it. I didn’t have much confidence that I’d survive long on the street.

We pulled up in front of Dad’s rowhouse and Cole turned the car off. We sat in silence for a minute, neither of us moving.

“He’s not going to turn you away,” Cole said after a minute. It was almost like he’d heard my thoughts. I turned to look at him.

“How do you know?”

He shrugged. “Because he loves you.”

And my mother didn’t. He didn’t say it, but it was there, hanging in the air. I gave a jerky nod and got out. I felt Cole’s presence behind me as I walked to the door and knocked.

Dad seemed surprised when he opened the door. “Seth, I didn’t expect you today,” he said. He looked behind me. “Hello there, Cole. Come on in, guys.”

“I hope it’s okay that I just showed up,” I said nervously as Dad started for the living room.

He stopped dead in his tracks and turned around. "Of course it is! I didn't mean it to sound like that. This is your home, too. You're always welcome here. I just meant that I was surprised to see you today."

I felt my throat close and I had to fight down the tears that were threatening to spill over.

"Seth, what's wrong?" Dad asked, quickly coming closer.

I somehow managed to squeeze the words past my throat. "Mom kicked me out."

Immediately, Dad pulled me into a hug. He wasn't quite quick enough to hide the pain on his face.

"I'm so sorry, son," he said in a choked voice.

I was determined not to cry again, but it was a losing battle. Just the comfort of having my dad's arms around me was enough to make me fall apart. He simply held me until I calmed down, then led me to the living room with his arm around my shoulder.

Cole followed as unobtrusively as possible.

"What happened?" Dad asked once we were all seated.

I haltingly began to tell him about Mom deciding to go see her father, and me inviting Cole to spend the night. I blushed at saying this to my father but there was no judgment in his eyes, so I continued. I told him how Mom had come home unexpectedly this morning and found us in bed together, and how she'd flown into a rage and thrown me out. By the time I was finished, I was almost in tears again. Dad gave me a second to get myself under control before he started speaking.

"I'm sorry that happened," he said slowly. "I, of all people, know how that feels. I would have hoped your mother might have grown over the last few years, but it sounds like the only thing that's grown is her bitterness. But maybe this is all for the best."

I must have looked at him like he'd lost his mind, because he chuckled a little. "Think about it, Seth. You can move in with me here and you can just be yourself. No more lying or hiding who you are."

"You mean I can move in with you?" I said, sounding pathetic and needy, even to myself.

I saw pain flash through Dad's eyes again. He was trying to be strong for me, but I could tell this whole situation hurt him as much as it hurt me.

“Of course you can live here, Seth. You didn’t think I’d turn you out on the streets, did you?” He paused, and the pain deepened. “You did, didn’t you?” He sighed. “What else would you expect? I disappeared from your life. You hardly know me anymore and your own mother just turned her back on you. Seth, you’re my son and you always will be. I love you. I want you to live here. You can’t know how much I’ve missed you and Kane. It’ll be a dream come true to have you with me.”

Seeing the sincerity in his eyes, I knew his words weren’t just meant to comfort me. A weight seemed to lift, and I released a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. Despite the fresh tears welling up, I couldn’t help but grin at him.

Then I thought of Kane. “Mom wouldn’t let me leave a note for Kane. I don’t want him to think I abandoned him.”

“Can you text him?”

“Mom won’t let him have his own phone yet.”

“Email?”

“Mom won’t let him have a personal account either. He has a school account, but she monitors that.”

His eyes narrowed. “She’s quite controlling, isn’t she? Well, don’t worry about that right now. We’ll find a way to get news to him. Let’s get your stuff inside and into the spare bedroom — well, your room now.”

We quickly brought in my bags of belongings and Dad and Cole helped me get set up in my new bedroom.

The next couple of weeks were difficult but exciting. Dad and I got to know each other again, and I settled into my new living arrangements. Dad wanted me to finish out the school year at my old school since there were only a few weeks left, so he drove me there and picked me up each day.

I missed Kane horribly, but every time I tried to intercept him somewhere, I seemed to miss him. I went to his school one day, but the teachers wouldn’t let me talk to him. Apparently, Mom had told them that I was strictly forbidden from seeing him.

The one and only time I tried to catch him at home, Mom was there, and we just ended up having another huge fight. Kane hadn’t even been home. I worried about how he felt about me being gone and what Mom had told him, but just had to hope that he remembered how much I loved him and would know I hadn’t just abandoned him.

Cole and I didn't see much of each other. He'd graduated so he wasn't at school, and the distance between us had continued to grow. It bothered me, but I had too many other things going on to worry about it too much.

The day after the last day of school, Dad asked me if we could sit down and have a serious conversation. My heart was in my throat as we settled into the living room. A million different scenarios were flying through my head. Was I in trouble? Had I done something wrong? Did he change his mind about me living there? Was Kane okay?

He didn't leave me in suspense for long. "Son, I have a big decision to make, and I want you to be a part of it," he said with a serious expression.

I nodded, still nervous but not as badly as I'd been just a few seconds ago.

"Before you showed up on my doorstep a month ago, Steve and I had been talking about me possibly moving to the Eastern Shore. Obviously, that discussion was tabled when you came back into my life, but it's recently come up again. Steve and I have gotten pretty serious, and it's a long drive back and forth from where we live now. I have a house in Ocean City..."

"Whoa!" I interrupted. "You have a house in Ocean City? Plus this place?"

"Remember my friend Charlie? He left me his beach house when he died. I've been thinking about moving there full-time. I want you to be a part of making that decision though. I can take you down to see it and let you think about it, but if you don't want to move, we won't."

"Would Steve live with us?"

"No, neither of us is really ready for that. We would just like to be closer. You don't have to answer right now, but I want you to think about it. Okay?"

That weekend, we drove down to Ocean City, and Dad showed me the house. It was incredible. It was on the north end of town, right on the beach. I fell in love with it at first sight. I gave Dad my answer that night.

"Are you sure?" he asked me. "What about leaving all your friends?"

“What friends? I don’t really have any. Amira, Lia, and Cole were pretty much the only people I ever talked to and Amira and Cole graduated this year. They’ll be going off to college this fall, and I’ve never been that close to Lia.” I sighed. “Besides, things with Cole are pretty much over anyway.”

“What? Since when?”

“He’s been getting kind of distant lately. I think it’s because he’s going to college in Florida. He won’t be coming back very often. I don’t think he’s really into the whole long-distance boyfriend thing.”

Truthfully, things hadn’t been the same between us since he’d witnessed my fight with Mom. I think it had scared him more than he’d wanted to admit.

Dad nodded. “What about Kane?”

“I already don’t see him and, if Mom has anything to say about it, I won’t, so it doesn’t really make any difference where I live. At least this way you can be closer to Steve. I really like the house, and it would be cool to live near the beach.”

“So you’re sure?”

“I’m sure. Maybe a fresh start is what we both need.”

Dad grinned and I could tell he was really happy with my decision. “You’ll make new friends at the school here, maybe even find a new boyfriend. It’s going to be great, I just know it!”

I grinned back at him, but once again, I felt a strange sense of foreboding sweep over me.

Stop being so negative, I told myself sternly, but I couldn’t hold back the shiver that ran through my body. Luckily, Dad didn’t notice my shudder or the falter in my smile.

We returned to Baltimore, but it was really only to pack up. I saw Cole one last time before we left. It was an amicable break-up. His relief was almost palpable when I told him we were moving to Ocean City. Within two weeks, we moved lock, stock, and barrel into the beach house.

Over the next couple of months, I found I liked living in Ocean City a lot more than Baltimore. For one thing, it was a beach town and there were always tons of hot, half-naked guys everywhere. I started a new habit of jogging on the beach, mostly for the eye candy.

For another, it was a very different pace than in the city, even though I’d read somewhere that Ocean City was the most densely

populated city in the country during the summer. Things just seemed much slower and more laid back. It suited me.

I didn't make any friends that summer, but I felt at home for the first time in years. I loved living with Dad, and we had a lot of great times with Steve. I still missed Kane, but, overall, I was happy.

Finally, September rolled around. I was very nervous about starting at a new school, but I'd decided that I was going to live my life honestly this time. No more sneaking around and hiding who I was. People had been fine with it at my old school, and I had no reason to think they'd be any different here.

The first day of school, I put on one of the new outfits Dad and I had bought in Rehoboth Beach. We'd gone on an epic shopping trip that resulted in what was basically a whole new wardrobe for me. This was good considering how little I used to care about my appearance.

I looked at myself in the mirror and barely recognized the person looking back at me. I looked so much more confident. Almost sexy, I thought with a grin. My hair looked the same as always, but Cole had finally convinced me it looked good.

"Stop primping and come on," Dad said from the doorway, causing me to jump. "You don't want to be late to school on your first day."

I grinned at him and then followed him after one last look in the mirror.

"I've created a monster," he grumbled as we started downstairs.

Despite my decision to be out at school, I almost lost my nerve as I sat in my first class and the teacher asked us to each tell the class five things about ourselves. All the other kids were saying dumb general things. Most of them had probably known each other since kindergarten. I was already the new kid. Did I really want to make myself even more of an outsider?

Suddenly, it was my turn. I stood up and took a deep breath. "My name is Seth Connelly," I started out. "I just moved here from Baltimore. I was very active in the theater department there. I live with my Dad. I have a little brother who still lives with my mom. And I'm gay." I sat down and tried hard not to blush.

The room was deathly quiet and every eye in the room was staring at me in disbelief, including the teacher. I wasn't sure if they were just startled by my admission or if they had a problem with it. Either way, it was over and done with now. I'd made my decision.

The rest of the class passed uneventfully, but afterwards, everyone quickly left the room without even making eye contact with me. I sighed and went out into the hall. Maybe coming out on my first day hadn't been such a good idea after all. Maybe I should have settled in and gotten to know some people first.

"Watch where you're going, fag," someone growled at me as I was rudely jostled.

I turned in time to see one of my classmates moving quickly away. He had brown hair and eyes and would have been kind of cute if it wasn't for the sneer on his face. I struggled to remember his name as I made a mental note to watch out for him in the future.

Zach...that was it.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully — until my final class, the one I'd been looking forward to most: Theater, my home away from home. I got turned around trying to find it and ended up stopping by the office for directions. By the time I arrived, the class was already in session. I knocked politely on the door, and the teacher called me in. *Mr. Tatum*, I reminded myself.

"Yes?" Mr. Tatum asked.

"My name is Seth," I announced. "Seth Connelly. I just transferred to this school. Sorry I'm late. Still learning my way around. Here's my paperwork."

I handed him the file the office had given me that morning and looked around the room. It was a pretty good-sized class.

After Mr. Tatum finished reviewing the paperwork, he looked up and studied me closely. It felt as though he was sizing me up, weighing something behind his eyes. I wondered if I measured up, but I must have since he simply sniffed and said, "It appears this is all in order. Why don't you find a seat, Mr. Connelly, and we can continue with the class."

I scanned the room again, and that time, one boy stood out. He was watching me with an unreadable expression. Though he looked small enough to be a freshman, I knew he had to be older, since there were no ninth graders in this class. His wavy blond hair fell just past his ears, and his striking blue eyes peered out from behind a pair of glasses. He was beautiful in a quiet sort of way, but something about his body language told me he was used to being overlooked.

Our eyes met, and for a brief moment, something passed between us — so sudden and intense it nearly stole my breath. Then he looked away, and the connection snapped like a thread pulled taut.

Whatever that was, I was sure he felt it too. I'd see it in his eyes, and I wasn't about to let it go.

I was in luck. The seat next to him was empty. I slid into it, and he glanced over at me nervously.

I extended my hand. He eyed it cautiously but, after a brief moment of hesitation, he tentatively placed his in mine.

A jolt of electricity shot through his hand into mine. He jerked away, eyes wide, and I knew he'd felt it too.

A grin spread across my face. "Hi. I'm Seth."

"Killian," he replied in a soft voice.

Even his name was sexy.

He blushed slightly and turned back to face Mr. Tatum.

A faint blush colored his cheeks as he turned back toward Mr. Tatum. I watched him a moment longer before finally shifting my attention to the front of the room. But the small smile tugging at my mouth wouldn't go away.

Maybe things wouldn't be so bad after all.

And just maybe, Killian would be a big part of that.

About the Author

Josh Aterovis is the award-winning author of multiple LGBTQ+ novels blending mystery, romance, suspense, and the supernatural, including seven novels and multiple short stories in the acclaimed Killian Kendall Mysteries series. His work explores themes of identity, chosen family, grief, healing, and queer resilience, often centering flawed but deeply human characters navigating extraordinary circumstances. Known for emotionally grounded storytelling and vivid atmosphere, Josh's books have earned a devoted readership among fans of queer fiction and genre-bending narratives.

In addition to his work as a novelist, Josh is an immersive theater creator and producer with Submersive Productions in Baltimore, Maryland, where he develops original, site-specific experiences that blur the line between audience and performer. His storytelling across both page and stage is driven by a passion for creating meaningful, transformative experiences that invite audiences to connect, reflect, and imagine new possibilities.

Learn more at joshaterovis.com or submersive.org.