

# EDEN REVISITED

Adam's  
Story



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# **Eden Revisited**

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# Chapter 1

“Hey, Hillbilly, how’s it going?”

“I wish he wouldn’t call me that,” I seethed quietly while waving as if the nickname didn’t bother me.

“They don’t mean anything by it,” Jason said.

“I know, but I hate it. It’s demeaning.”

“Have you told him that?”

“Well, no...”

“Then you can’t really complain.”

I hated it when Jason was right. Which was always.

We were only one month into my freshman year of college, and I already knew I’d won the roommate lottery with Jason. He was everything I wanted to be — handsome, smart, confident, suave, and sophisticated.

At least that’s how he seemed to me. I was smart, but that was about all I had going for me. We were roughly the same height, but while I was a pale, skinny, redhead, he was a tan and blond and muscular from all the hours he spent at the gym.

Our looks weren’t all that differentiated us. Jason had grown up in a big city, while I grew up in a very small town in Western Maryland, nestled in the foothills of the mountains, where everybody knew each other, almost everybody was poor, and folks watched out for each other.

We attended a small Baptist college in rural Virginia. It wouldn’t have been my first choice, but since my grandfather was paying for it, I didn’t put up much of a fight. My grandfather was the pastor of the small Baptist church I’d gone to my entire life, where the members maybe looked down ever so slightly on those who attended the Methodist church a quarter of a mile down the street. My father was a deacon, and my mother taught Sunday school, and we never skipped church.

I’m not sure how Jason ended up at a Christian school. He never explained and I somehow never asked. He was agnostic, bordering on atheist, and openly challenged our professors. He certainly opened my eyes to other viewpoints, and, despite our differences, we became close friends.

In fact, for that first month, he was my only friend. Being sheltered and from a very small town, my social skills were lacking. It didn't help that I hated the nickname I'd been bestowed in my first week there, so I also avoided the other students out of embarrassment.

Jason eventually got tired of me hiding in our room and started dragging me along when he went out to spend time with his friends. Before long, they became my friends by default, though, for the most part, I was simply there, following Jason around like a puppy but otherwise quiet.

About two months into the semester, we were hanging out around a picnic table in the woods that bordered our dorm, one of our regular spots, when Heather, one of the girls in our group, singled me out.

"So, Adam," she started, causing my head to swivel in her direction. I wasn't used to being addressed directly since I generally flew under the radar. "Are you seeing anybody?"

"Huh?" was my witty reply.

"Are you seeing anybody? Like...dating."

"Oh, um, no."

"Why not?"

"I dunno."

"Do you like anybody?"

I felt my face heating up and quickly stared down at my beat-up tennis shoes. "Not really," I said with a shrug, hoping she'd drop it.

"Maybe if you weren't always hanging out with Jason, you'd meet somebody," she said, trying to sound casual but there was a slight edge to her voice that I noticed.

Heather had a huge crush on Jason, and everyone knew it. Not that she made any effort to hide it. The fact that he clearly didn't return her interest drove her crazy, although she tried to act like it didn't.

"Have you ever had a girlfriend?" she pressed.

"Leave him alone," Jason said, coming to my defense.

I shot him a grateful smile, but Heather just rolled her eyes.

"Chill out, Jason. I'm just asking. But I bet he hasn't, have you, Adam?"

Everyone was looking at me now, so I replied with a sigh.  
“No.”

“See? I knew it. I don’t know why, you’re kind of cute in a Jonathan Brandis sort of way.”

“You think he looks like Jonathan Brandis?” a girl named Amy asked incredulously.

“I mean, maybe, if Jonathan was a ginger,” Heather said with a giggle.

I was resisting the urge to crawl under the table. I hated being the center of attention, especially this kind of attention.

“What does it matter to you?” Jason asked. “Are you trying to date him?”

“No, I have my eye on somebody else. I’m just saying. Oh, hey, maybe we should find Adam a girlfriend!”

“No!” I said emphatically, but Heather steamrolled on.

“Oh, I know somebody who would be perfect for you, Adam. Her name is Jessica. She’s in my ‘Survey of the Bible’ class and she’s so sweet and cute.”

I looked to Jason for help, but he just smiled.

“Might be good for you,” he said.

“Et tu, Brute?” I muttered, but I could recognize a losing battle when I saw one.

Before the end of the week, I submitted to my first and only date with Jessica, who was not at all as advertised, being neither sweet nor cute. She was homely and seemed about as excited to go on our date as I was.

The next couple of weeks were a series of blind dates, all of which turned out disastrous, which almost anybody with half a brain could have predicted. The next, whose name I promptly forgot as soon as the date was over, was visibly disappointed when she realized I was the person she was meeting. The third was nice enough, but we had nothing in common. The fourth didn’t stop talking from the moment she walked in until I made my escape. I’m not sure I said a grand total of ten words the entire time.

Back in our room, I complained bitterly to Jason after each train wreck of a date. He was quietly supportive, but also obviously amused by my predicament.

“Maybe you should just date Heather,” I said after the fourth date, feeling dangerously close to the end of my rope.

“Why would I do that?” he asked, genuinely surprised.  
“Maybe it would distract her from trying to play matchmaker,” I replied. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

“Just tell her no.”

“Have you ever tried to tell Heather no?”

“All the time. Do you know how often she asks me out?”

“Yeah, well, she’s made it her life’s mission to find me a girlfriend. Why me? I’m not even the only single guy in our friend circle. Heck, you’re single!”

“Much to her chagrin. That’s the whole point, though, right? She thinks we’re too close, and that if you spend more time with a girlfriend, maybe she’ll get me to date her.”

“That’s crazy.”

“I know that, and you know that, but does Heather?”

“Well, I stand by my suggestion.”

“Friends don’t let friends date Heather Bradley.”

“But apparently friends let Heather Bradley set up their friends on a never-ending series of terrible blind dates.”

He laughed.

The very next day, Heather waylaid me on my way to class. “Adam!”

I turned to see her barreling at me across the courtyard, and it was all I could do to keep from groaning out loud.

“How’d it go with Michelle?”

“Who?” I asked before I remembered that she was date number four. “Oh, lousy. Just like the first three.”

“Oh, well, it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“It doesn’t?” I asked hopefully.

“No, because it suddenly hit me out of the blue this morning. I know the girl you’re destined to be with.”

“Oh come on, Heather,” I begged. “I’ve gone along with your dumb plan, but I’m done. Four was enough.”

“Just one more, Adam,” she wheedled. “I know you two will hit it off. It’s meant to be.”

“What is that supposed to even mean?”

“Just trust me.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because, I only have your best interest at heart.”

More like her own best interest, but I knew it was pointless to argue.

“Fine. When and where?”

She grinned. “Friday at six at the Grill. Promise you’ll be there?”

I sighed in defeat. “I promise.”

“Cool beans,” she said, backing away. “You won’t regret it!” She spun and ran off for her class.

“Bet I will,” I grumbled.

The Grill was the campus soda shop. They served burgers, hot dogs and pizza and that was about it, but if you wanted anything more, you had to leave campus and drive half an hour to the nearest town.

I showed up there five minutes early that Friday, eager to get the next disastrous date out of the way. I didn’t even know who I was meeting or what she looked like. I hoped Heather had given my mystery date more information than she had me. Or maybe I hoped she hadn’t, and I could just leave after a few minutes.

I waited until six on the dot and was about to leave when a very short girl approached me.

“Are you Heather’s friend?” she asked.

I bit back a sigh and turned to face her. She was tiny, couldn’t have been an inch taller than five feet, and slim, with almost no breasts, narrow hips and short red hair. She was wearing a pair of boys’ jeans, an oversized sweatshirt and zero makeup.

To say I was surprised would be an understatement. She was nothing like the overly made-up girls Heather had set me up before.

“Uh, yeah,” I replied. “I’m Adam.”

“Oh for Pete’s sake,” she said as she rolled her eyes.

“Sorry?”

“Oh, it’s not you. It’s just that my name is Eve. Now I get why Heather wouldn’t shut up about how you and I were meant to be.”

I burst into laughter. I couldn’t help it. After a moment, she joined in.

The rest of the date went surprisingly well. It turned out we had some things in common, like we were both from small towns.

She was easy to talk to and, by the end of the night, I thought I'd found a new friend, if nothing else.

Eve saw things a little differently. After several more dates, it became clear that she wanted to be more than friends. It was equally clear that she was growing impatient waiting for me to make the first move.

I, on the other hand, was paralyzed with fear, doubt and confusion. Eve was a great girl, the first one I'd enjoyed spending time with since I'd arrived at college. So why didn't I feel anything for her beyond friendship?

After our fifth date ended with her stomping off in a huff when I froze up after she tipped her head back at the end of the evening, clearly inviting a kiss, I decided to talk to Jason.

He was in our room when I returned, working on a paper at his desk.

"Hey, can I talk to you?" I asked.

He turned and took one look at me and knew something was wrong. "Sure. Did something happen on your date tonight?"

I sighed and dropped onto my bed. "More like what didn't happen." I quickly filled him in on the feeling of increasing expectations from Eve and her reaction when I failed to kiss her.

When I finished, Jason gave me a measured look.

"What?" I asked.

"Just... Are you sure you're into Eve?"

"What do you mean?"

"Heather was a little pushy about the whole let's-find-Adam-a-girlfriend thing, and you didn't seem that enthusiastic. But you've gone out with Eve a few times now, and most guys would have at least gone in for a kiss by now. I know we're at a Christian college and all that, but it's not like kissing is prohibited."

"I know, I just...I don't feel ready."

"Ready? What do you need to be ready for? She's not asking for you to knock her up."

"Jason!"

"I'm serious. If you like her, just kiss her. If you don't like her, then stop leading her on. Shit or get off the pot."

I wrinkled my nose in disgust at his crass idiom, but he just rolled his eyes.

"Adam, do you even like girls?"

My jaw fell open in shock.

It was the early '90s. You just didn't make accusations like that, especially not at a Baptist school that would expel homosexuals if discovered. But even aside from that, things were just very different then. Now, there are gay people everywhere – on TV, in movies, in magazines. You're surrounded by it. Even in the most backwoods hillbilly town, you can watch *RuPaul's Drag Race* or *Heartstopper*. Growing up in our little town, I didn't know one single person who was gay. I'd heard of it, of course, but only as an object of derision, something awful to be avoided at all costs.

I felt my face heating up. "How could you say something like that?" I finally managed.

"Look, no offense. And no judgement. I couldn't care less. You just don't seem that into Eve. Or any other girl so far."

"I like Eve!"

"Then kiss her already."

"I've never kissed anybody, okay?" I admitted. It was true. I'd never dated anyone in high school, a decision wholeheartedly supported by my conservative parents.

Jason's eyebrows jumped up in surprise, although, to his credit, he didn't tease me. He simply asked, "Really?"

"Yeah. I don't even know what to do. I'm embarrassed." I was, although, if I was honest with myself, that wasn't the entire reason for my reticence.

Jason shook his head. "It's not rocket science. You just mash your lips together and go at it."

"But what if I do something wrong? Or what if I'm a bad kisser?"

He stood up with a sigh and crossed the room to where I was pacing. He grabbed my shoulders to stop me. "Dude, you're thinking too hard."

"What does that even —"

He cut me off mid sentence by suddenly pulling me forward and pressing his lips against mine.

I didn't react. I couldn't. I was frozen, my arms hanging limply at my sides. It was as if my brain simply short circuited.

The kiss was brief. He stepped back and raised an eyebrow as if to say, "There."

I stared at him in disbelief for several seconds before my brain kicked in and I started sputtering. "Why did you do that?" I demanded. I was surprised that I sounded a lot calmer than I felt.

"Now you've had your first kiss."

"I'm not gay!"

He rolled his eyes. "I didn't say you were, and, for the record, neither am I, which is why it isn't a big deal. Chill."

"But you kissed me."

"It was just a kiss. It's not like we're sleeping together. Anyway, I'm going to go grab a shower before I hit the hay."

He grabbed his towel and sauntered out of the room as if he hadn't just changed my entire life. Of course, maybe he didn't know he had. While I'd managed to remain calm externally, internally my mind was exploding. My heart was hammering so hard in my chest, I feared I was going to have a heart attack.

I stood in the center of the room for several minutes, my mind replaying the kiss over and over, examining it from every angle, dissecting my reaction. I finally snapped out of it, but only because it occurred to me that, based on past experience, Jason would eventually be returning to the room dripping wet with just a towel wrapped around his waist soon, and I didn't want to be there when he did.

I grabbed my keys and bolted from our room. I walked around the campus, hands shoved in my pockets and my head down, for over an hour. My mind never stopped racing.

The problem was that I liked the kiss. A lot. Specifically, I'd liked kissing Jason. I had no interest in kissing Eve, but now all I could think about was kissing Jason again. Did that mean that Jason was right to question whether I even liked girls? But that was crazy. I couldn't be gay. I was just confused. After all, I'd never kissed anyone, male or female, so it only made sense that I'd react to my first kiss, no matter who it was from.

That was what I finally convinced myself of, anyway. I just needed to kiss Eve and all would be well.

So that's exactly what I did. At the end of our next date, I laid a big, passionate kiss on Eve.

And I felt nothing.

That scared me, but I just pushed all those terrifying implications deep down and ignored them as hard as I possibly

could. I would make things work with Eve because, in my mind, I had no other choice. I had to be straight. I had to marry a woman. That was the only option. I just simply refused to acknowledge anything that didn't conform to that worldview.

That strategy actually worked...for a while. I continued dating Eve, and our relationship grew more serious. We became official before winter break and came back in the new year stronger than ever. Everyone in my friend group — or Jason's friend group, I suppose — was super supportive, and no one was more thrilled than Heather, who constantly bragged about being a consummate matchmaker. Never mind that her first four matches were disastrous. I occasionally caught Jason staring at me speculatively, but he never pressed the issue, and, outwardly, he seemed happy for us.

Everything seemed to be going great. This was the life I'd envisioned for myself.

Then I met Eric.

Jason introduced him to the gang one night while we were hanging out around the picnic table. Eve was taking a night class with an early morning one the next day, so she wasn't with us, for a change. Jason and Eric were in the same world religions class. Eric was around my height, with dark brown hair parted down the middle with bangs that brushed his cheekbones. His eyes were dark, but always seemed to be sparkling with some private joke, his lips full and red, and his skin darkly tanned. He looked like he'd stepped off a TV show on ABC's TGIF block.

After Eric's initial introduction, Jason pulled me aside. "Hey, I think you and Eric have a lot in common and he's really had a hard time making friends here at school. You guys should hang out."

I gave him a confused look. "A lot in common? Like what?"

"Well, you're both from really small towns."

I laughed. "Almost everyone here is from a small town. You're like the only person I've met who isn't."

"Just trust me. I think you'll hit it off."

I shrugged it off, but I had to admit I was intrigued by the handsome new guy. I mean, his looks had nothing to do with my fascination. He was somebody new in our circle, that was all.

It turned out that I didn't have to seek Eric out. As soon as we returned to the group, he stuck to me like glue, asking about where I grew up, my major, my interests. If there weren't other people around, it would have felt suspiciously like a date.

I glanced over at Jason a few times, but he was holding court, talking loudly a ways away from where Eric and I sat. A small part of my brain noted that it was almost performative, as if he was deliberately distracting everyone so Eric and I could talk, but that was silly. Right?

As it got later and people started to peel off to return to their rooms for the night, Eric suggested we hang out again sometime, and I quickly agreed. I'd enjoyed talking to him, and he seemed like a really nice guy, so why not?

When I said good night and headed inside, Jason fell into step with me.

"So what did you think of Eric?" he asked.

I shot him a look, but just said, "He seems cool."

"Yeah, he really is. I knew you'd like him."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. I just knew you'd get along."

I shook my head, but there was no denying that he was right. The two of us had talked all night, practically ignoring everyone else.

I was just making a new friend. Nothing wrong with that.

Eric and I started hanging out more often. Soon, I saw him more than I saw my own girlfriend. Luckily, Eve was very serious about her studies, so she didn't seem to mind. If anything, she almost seemed relieved that I had someone else to hang out with.

Jason was also happy I had a new friend. He seemed as pleased with his matchmaking as Heather had been, if perhaps a lot less obnoxious about his gloating. To be fair, he was definitely better at it than Heather, so he'd earned his bragging rights.

In fact, Eric and I got along so well, we'd arranged to be roommates the following school year. Jason was, once again, fully supportive, no hard feelings.

We reached the end of freshman year and parted ways for the summer.

None of us lived especially close to each other, so I didn't see Eve, Jason or Eric during our break, though I spoke to all of them on the

phone with varying frequency. I talked to Eric the most, almost every night, usually after I talked to Eve, though she and I only talked a few times a week. I missed all my friends, but Eric most of all. We'd sometimes talk until one or both of us fell asleep, phone still in hand.

I couldn't wait to return to campus in the fall.

Our sophomore year started strong. Eric and I moved into our new dorm room together, I continued dating Eve, and the old gang still met up regularly at the picnic table — minus one of the regulars. Heather didn't return for our second year. Nobody seemed to know why, though there was a rumor that she'd gotten pregnant over the summer. Everyone was scandalized by that particularly juicy piece of gossip, but nobody really questioned it. It was simply accepted as fact, even though I have no idea who even first brought it up. For I knew, she'd been hit by a Mack truck and was dead.

The first few weeks of living with Eric were great. It was like all those phone calls over the summer we spent talking late into the night, but in person, each of us laying on our beds in the dark, but with the added bonus of seeing him in just a towel or in his underwear daily.

It turned out that Eric was not a shy person. He had no problem changing in front of me, or even laying on his bed in just his tighty whities. I tried my best not to stare, but it wasn't easy.

All guys compare, I told myself whenever my eyes betrayed me. He's just really in shape. That's all.

Eventually, our late-night chats turned to more intimate subjects. We were both virgins. He was surprised that Eve and I had been dating for almost a year and we still hadn't done more than kiss. I was shocked he hadn't gotten lucky considering how hot he was.

It wasn't long after that particular conversation that I noticed Eric becoming a lot more touchy-feely — a hand on my lower back here, an arm around my shoulder there. At first, I would stiffen up each time. My family had never been particularly affectionate, nor was Eve, so physical touch made me nervous. Apparently, however, I was more starved for that sort of attention than I could have even guessed, because I was lapping it up in no time, leaning into his body and even hugging him back.

When he suggested he lay on my bed with me for one of our nightly talks, I agreed with very little hesitation, and then, that was the new norm. He still returned to his bed when we got tired, but I had to admit I liked having him next to me, our bare legs brushing against the other, arms pressed together.

Then, one night, we fell asleep. Or I fell asleep, only to wake up in the middle of night with Eric spooned against my back, his arm tight around me.

I thought my heart would beat out of my chest. Did he even know he was cuddling me? Would it be awkward when he woke up? Why was my dick so hard?

I have no idea how, maybe it was just the fact that it felt really nice to be held, but somehow, I fell back asleep. When I woke again in the morning, Eric was gone, his bed untouched.

Had he woken up and freaked out? Would he want to change rooms now? Had our friendship changed?

The thought of losing him made me want to vomit. He was the best friend I'd ever had.

I was seconds away from a full-blown panic attack when the door swung open and Eric entered, a towel wrapped around his waist and water droplets beaded on his tan skin. He flashed me a grin and went about his morning as if nothing had happened. I slowly relaxed, realizing I had overreacted.

After that, it wasn't uncommon for him to sleep in my bed with me. It didn't happen every night, but often enough that I knew it was deliberate. Neither of us commented on it.

About a month after that first night, though, things changed.

We were laying in my bed, side by side, staring up at the ceiling while we talked, when Eric suddenly rolled toward me and threw his arm across my chest. It was the first time he'd done that while we were both awake.

I stopped mid sentence.

"Is this okay?" he asked, his voice quiet but confident. "I'm just getting comfortable."

"Um, yeah," I managed, slightly breathlessly.

"Good. What about this?" he scooped his body closer until he was pressed against my side.

I gasped softly, but managed, "I...guess."

“You guess? I can give you more space if you want...” He started to pull away.

“No!” I said a little more forcefully than I intended. “It’s fine.” I added more calmly.

A little smile played around his lips. “Just fine?”

“I mean... I guess it’s kind of nice.”

He pushed himself up on one elbow, his arm pulling me tight against himself. “I think it’s nice, too.” He stared down at me, his face serious now. His eyes seemed to be searching mine. There was a sort of hunger in his, a hunger I recognized in myself.

Then, without warning, he leaned in and kissed me.

I’d been half anticipating his move, so I didn’t fight it, just allowed it to happen. No, I did more than that. I welcomed it. I kissed him back. I wanted it as much as he did.

If I’d thought the kiss with Jason was great, nothing prepared me for Eric. It was like fireworks were exploding in my head. When he finally pulled away, I was left breathless with my heart pounding in my chest and the hardest erection I’d ever had in my life.

He stared down at me again, his eyes heavy-lidded, his lips wet and glistening in the dim light that filtered through our window. I wondered what he saw in my wide-eyed, deer-in-headlights stare that I surely returned. Whatever it was, he must have liked it, because he swung a leg over my body and dipped his head for a second round, which quickly turned into a hot and heavy make-out session.

I could tell he liked it as much as I did, since I could feel his hardness pressing into my hip, grinding slightly against my skin. His knee pressed on my erection and, before I even knew what was happening, I came. Hard.

I threw my head back against my pillow and gasped through my first orgasm with another person while Eric buried his face in my neck, grinding more aggressively against my leg. Within seconds, he was shuddering through an orgasm of his own.

I enjoyed a few brief moments of bliss before the full import of what had just occurred hit me, and my entire body stiffened.

Eric noticed the shift immediately and raised his head.

“Are you okay?” he asked gently.

"We shouldn't have done that," I said, my voice tight with building panic.

"Shh, no, it's okay," he said quickly, but I was having none of it.

"No, it's not okay," I said, sitting up abruptly. "I have a girlfriend. I'm straight."

He sat up more slowly, almost warily. "Straight?"

"Yes. I love Eve."

His face clouded over. "Do you?"

"Yes, of course. Why would you even ask that?"

"Because I'm pretty sure you were kissing me back just now before you shot a load in your underwear."

I felt bile rising in the back of my throat and had to gulp several times before I could speak without the fear of vomiting. "I'm confused. You're confusing me."

I laid a hand on my chest, but I recoiled. I needed to get away from him. He was too close. But I was against the wall. I squirmed my way to the foot of the bed and stood up and started pacing.

He sighed. "You're definitely confused, Adam, but I don't think I'm the one confusing you."

I stopped. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you wanted that as much as I did. I could see it in your face."

"So you admit you wanted it?"

"Of course I admit it. I'm not the one so far in the closet that you can't even find the door."

"Wait. You're...gay?"

He gave me a confused look. "Duh. Why do you think I've been sleeping in your bed and cuddling most nights?"

I rubbed my face and started pacing again. "I don't know. I just thought we were friends. Good friends."

"We are. But I like you more than a friend. And I thought you felt the same way. You never said anything or asked me to stop. I thought you liked it."

"I..." I was about to say I did, but that felt like a step too far. "I didn't know what to say."

"So you didn't like it?"

I opened my mouth to agree but couldn't bring myself to say the words. I did like it. In fact, I liked it a lot. Instead, what came out was, "We're Christians. We go to a Christian college. We can't like it."

Eric's eyes widened and he appeared to be fighting back laughter. "I'm only here because my parents insisted and they're paying for everything."

"Do they know you're gay?"

"Of course not."

"What if they find out?"

"Then they'd stop paying for me and I could drop out. I never wanted to go to this school anyway. The only good thing to come out of it has been meeting you."

My breath caught in my throat for a moment, but I just shook my head. "Eric...I can't."

"Can't what?"

"Do this. Be whatever it is you want me to be."

"All I want is for you to be who you really are."

"No, you want me to be somebody I'm not."

"Look at me and tell me you didn't feel something when we were kissing."

I couldn't.

"Look," he said after a few moments of heavy silence. "I'm not asking you to come out. Hell, I don't want to come out either. Not here. Maybe after I graduate. I'm just asking you to give us a chance."

"There is no us," I said harshly. I immediately regretted my words. I could see the pain in his eyes even in the dark room. "I'm dating Eve," I added, hoping to soften the blow. "I'm going to marry her someday."

I don't know where that last statement came from. I had some vague idea that we'd eventually get married after college, but I certainly hadn't proposed, or even given it serious thought.

If I thought that would somehow make him feel better, I was wrong. He looked even more sad.

"I think that would be a mistake," he said quietly.

"No," I said emphatically. "*This* was a mistake."

His face drained of color. "Adam..."

“I need some space,” I said, and started pulling on clothes, ignoring my damp, sticky underwear.

“Adam,” he tried again, but I just grabbed my keys and fled the room.

I walked around by myself for hours, mentally flagellating myself for being so stupid, ignoring the signs, letting things go too far. Of course Eric was gay. And of course he took advantage of naivete. Isn’t that what gay men did? That’s what my grandfather always said. Which is how I knew Eric was wrong. I wasn’t gay. I couldn’t be.

But what was I supposed to do now? We were roommates. How could I face him again after what happened, knowing what I now knew?

When I returned to my room in the wee hours of the morning, I found it empty. I didn’t know where Eric had gone, and, for the moment at least, I didn’t care. I was just happy to not have to deal with him. I collapsed into my bed, tried very hard not to think about what happened there just a few short hours before, and fell into a fitful sleep.

The next few days were torture. Eric eventually returned to our room, but we weren’t speaking to each other. He seemed angry, though what he had to be angry about I couldn’t fathom. I was the one he’d pushed into a compromising position.

Since I wasn’t hanging out with Eric, I suddenly had a lot more free time on my hands, much to Eve’s annoyance.

“Where’s Eric?” she asked after a few days of me shadowing her every free moment.

“I don’t know,” I replied sulkily.

“Well, whatever little tiff you two are having, get over it and work it out, because I have too much work to do to have you underfoot all the time.”

“It’s not like that,” I protested, but she was having none of it.

Next, I tried hanging out with Jason, but it quickly became apparent that he knew at least some of what had happened between Eric and me, since he immediately began to try to get us to talk.

“You guys were getting along so well,” he said. “I hate to see you throw away such a close friendship over a misunderstanding.”

We were alone in Jason's new dorm room while his roommate was in class. Jason was sitting on the edge of his bed, and I was in his wheeled desk chair.

"The only misunderstanding was that he thought I was something I'm not," I snapped back.

Jason shook his head sadly. "Adam, you'll never be truly happy until you can accept yourself for who you really are."

I stood up so quickly, the chair flew back and crashed into his desk.

"You knew, didn't you?" I accused.

"Knew what?" he asked, looking genuinely confused.

"You knew that Eric was a homo and that's why you introduced him to me. You still think I'm a queer too."

Jason's face fell even more. "Can you not say things like that? It's not cool. I just thought you guys might get along. And I was right. You were inseparable for months."

I rubbed my face. "How did I manage to fall into the one group of sinners at this school?" I groaned.

He rolled his eyes. "First off, even if I did believe in all this, which you've known for a long time that I do not, I would have to remind you that according to your own beliefs, we're all sinners. More importantly, though, it's good to be exposed to different types of people and beliefs outside your own. It makes you a better, more well-rounded person."

"The Bible says, 'Bad company ruins good morals,'" I replied.

Jason gestured toward the door. "Hey, if I'm such bad company, there's the exit. You're the one who came looking for me."

I stared at him for a few seconds, then let myself out without another word.

He was right. I had sought him out. And I'd been drawn to Eric. I had no one to blame but myself.

For the next few weeks, I withdrew into myself. Eve barely noticed, she was so caught up in her studies, and I wasn't speaking with the only other two people I considered friends on campus. It was a lonely few weeks, and I spent it in a constant state of turmoil.

Midterms happened, and I suppose I did well enough to pass, but it was all a blur. I was so relieved when winter break arrived, and I could go home for a few weeks and get away from it all.

Those weeks away from school actually helped clear my head. And by “clear my head,” I mean I started to realize how much I missed Eric. He was all I could think about, including that kiss. I started to think about what he and Jason had said. I didn’t reach out to anyone though. I waited until we were back on campus to try and talk to him.

“I’ve applied for a room transfer,” he stiffly informed me as soon as I walked through the door of our room.

“What? Why?”

He looked at me like I was crazy. “Because I don’t intend to spend the rest of the school year sharing a room with someone who can’t accept who they are or admit what they want and who wasn’t even speaking to me when I left for winter break.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

His eyebrows shot up. “You’re what?”

“I’m sorry. For how I reacted. For how I acted. For treating you like that. It was...a lot. It still is.” I dropped my bag and sat on my bed.

He was watching me warily. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I’m sorry, and...maybe you’re right.”

“Right about what?”

“I do...” I stopped and took a deep breath. “I do have feelings for you.” He looked like I’d punched him in the gut, so I quickly rushed on. “I don’t know what that means yet. I’m still figuring it out. And I have feelings for Eve too. Maybe I’m bisexual or something. I don’t know. But I do know I don’t want to lose you as a friend. You mean too much to me.”

“Where is all this coming from?”

“I did a lot of thinking over winter break.”

“I mean... duh. But so did I, and I came to some different conclusions.”

“Like moving out?”

“Yes.”

“Can we talk about it?”

“After the way you treated me the last few weeks before break?”

“Eric, I can’t tell you enough how sorry I am for that. I was confused and scared, but you didn’t deserve to be treated like that.”

“You’re damn right, I didn’t. And I don’t intend to let you treat me like that again.”

“I’m asking for another chance. You’re all I thought about while I was away. What can I do to prove to you that I’m serious?”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you, Adam. It’s just that I don’t know if I can just forget about what happened. What if I give you another chance and you get overcome with guilt again? Where does that leave me?”

“What do you want from me?”

“Space.”

“Okay, I can give you space. Just...don’t move out. Not yet anyway.”

He sighed and sat on the edge of his bed. “It’s not like there’s a room available right now anyway.”

I gingerly sat on the edge of my bed, facing him, our knees only a couple of feet apart.

“If I give you another chance, what does that even mean?” he asked after a few moments of awkward silence.

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

He threw his hands up, and I rushed on.

“I just mean I don’t know how all of this works. I don’t even know what you want. Do you, like, want to tell people about us?”

He snorted. “Here? God no. Can you imagine? I’m not trying to get expelled.”

“So...like...things would kind of be like they were before? Like, when we’re alone, we...you know, but when we’re with friends or outside the room, we’re just friends?”

He thought for a minute. “Maybe. But when we’re alone, you’re all mine.”

I nodded enthusiastically.

“Will you continue dating Eve?”

I nodded again, with less enthusiasm.

He wrinkled his nose. “I guess that’s for the best. We’d be less suspicious that way.”

“So...are you saying we can try...whatever this is?”

“Let me sleep on it.”

That night, as soon as the lights were out, I got my answer when he crawled into my bed.

The next few months were a veritable paradise, at least for me. By day, I was Eve's devoted boyfriend, but my nights belonged only to Eric, aside from the occasional date night with Eve. I was completely satisfied with the arrangement, but as time went on, I could tell Eric was growing dissatisfied. His little comments about Eve became more and more acidic, betraying his jealousy, and he was moody more often than not. Whenever I tried to talk about it, however, he would shut it down and insist that everything was fine.

But it wasn't fine. And I didn't know how to fix it. I was nineteen and far out of my depth.

By the end of the school year, my double life was beginning to take its toll. I was ready for a break from both of my partners. Both Eve and Eric had internships lined up for the summer — Eve at an inner-city ministry in Philadelphia and Eric at a law firm all the way in New York City — while I was just going home.

Summer flew by, and I talked to both Eve and Eric as often as possible. Eve's internship kept her busy, so we only talked a few times a week. Eric and I started off talking almost every night, but as the summer progressed, we talked less and less. He'd befriended some of his gay coworkers, and they'd introduced him to gay nightlife, and soon he was far too busy to talk to his secret closeted boyfriend.

I couldn't be mad at him. In fact, I was happy he was experiencing new things, but I did worry about how this might affect our arrangement. Would he want more from when we returned to school? Would he want to end things? I wasn't sure which idea scared me more.

When we returned to school in the fall, I was uncertain and nervous about seeing him again. I arrived first and waited anxiously in our room. As soon as he came through the door, I could feel the energy had shifted.

His dark hair was cut in a trendier style, his clothes were tighter, his shoes nicer, but above all that, he just seemed...lighter. Was that an earring glistening in his left earlobe?

I stood and stared at him, speechless.

He grinned and dropped his bag, then did a little twirl.

“What do you think?”

“You look...different.”

“I feel different. I feel like a new man. New York opened my eyes in so many ways.”

“It shows.”

He frowned a little. “You don’t have to sound so unhappy about it.”

“I’m not! I mean, I’m glad you had fun. It’s just...”

He put his hands on his hips. “Just what?”

“You’re going to stand out here on campus.”

He cocked his head to one side. What was up with all these new mannerisms?

“You mean I look too gay now.”

“Well, I mean, yeah. Kind of. Is that an earring?”

“Oh yeah. Trevor talked me into it.”

“Trevor?”

“I told you about him.”

“No you didn’t.”

“I totally did. You must have just forgotten.”

It was my turn to frown. I was positive he hadn’t mentioned anyone named Tommy. He’d talked vaguely about work friends, but never dropped any names.

“Was he a work friend?”

“No, we met at a club.”

“Did you date him?”

He grabbed his bag and started unpacking. “Maybe,” he said with deliberate nonchalance. “Why? Would that make you jealous?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. If you were seeing someone, why didn’t you tell me?”

He sighed dramatically. “I didn’t need all the drama, Adam. I was having a good time. I wanted to get away from all this...childishness. Besides, why should it matter? You’re dating Eve. We’re just casual, right?”

I didn’t know what to say. Technically, he was right, but I felt like I might vomit. It was all too much.

“Did you two sleep together?” I don’t know why I asked. I couldn’t help myself.

He rolled his eyes. "Duh. Of course we did."

I felt flush, hot and cold at the same time. I needed air.

I mumbled something unintelligible as I rushed past him and out the door. I took a long walk around campus in an attempt to clear my head, but I didn't make any real progress. I felt like my world had crashed, but what had changed really? Aside from Eric's entire personality and appearance, that is. How would the other students react to his new look?

Eric didn't have many close friends here at school aside from Jason, but he often hung out with Jason's — and by extension my — friend group. His makeover made me nervous. Our school was pretty homophobic. I was positive his new look and flamboyant body language would attract notice...and gossip.

And I was his best friend. I shared a room with him. We were always together.

A sense of deep dread settled over me. I felt like my world was turning upside down and I had no way of righting it. I was scared what his appearance might mean for me, but at the same time, perhaps unfairly, I felt betrayed — as if he'd cheated on me while he was in New York and made drastic decisions that would impact my life without warning me.

Some small logical part of my brain reminded me that I had a girlfriend and my relationship with Eric was a dark secret and I'd made decisions that affected Eric without considering him so I had no right to cast stones, but the hurt part of me drowned out that rational voice.

I don't know how long I wandered around in a fog, but when I finally — and reluctantly — returned to our room, I was relieved to find it empty. For a moment, I wondered where he was, but then I threw myself into my bed and fell asleep fully clothed.

The next few days confirmed all my fears. Eric was the talk of the campus. I couldn't keep count of how many people came up to me to ask what was going on with him. Even Jason seemed caught off guard. By the end of the week, the general consensus had arrived at the obvious conclusion: Eric was gay and he'd come out...at a conservative Baptist college.

There's an old, somewhat crass saying that says, "that went over like a fart in church." Eric's dramatic debut as an out proud gay man was more like explosive diarrhea.

As for Eric, outwardly, he seemed unphased. He went about his every day tasks ignoring the growing unrest about him. What started as stares and whispers quickly progressed to gossip, and by the end of the week, people were uttering slurs as he passed.

I had no idea what was going on in his head. I'd distanced myself from him as much as possible considering we shared a room and we hadn't spoken since that first day.

My friends — formerly his friends as well — had circled the wagons around me. They'd asked me within the first twenty-four hours if I'd known he was gay, and I'd fudged the truth a little and said he'd shocked me as much as anyone when we'd come back from summer break. I mean, sure, I avoided their actual question, but I wasn't lying.

I could see the disappointment in Jason's eyes, but I also noticed that he wasn't exactly standing up for Eric either. After a few days of watching Eric be treated like a pariah, he did ask if this is how Jesus would treat him, but he was quickly shot down with a barrage of Bible verses and didn't push farther.

It was only a matter of time before the administration got involved. I heard a rumor that he'd been called in for a conference with the school president and that it hadn't gone well.

All I knew for certain was that I came back from class one day to find his entire side of the room cleared out. Our RA knocked on the door as I stood staring at his stripped bed.

"Hey, uh, just wanted to let you know that your roommate has dropped out," he said awkwardly. "Or got kicked out. Nobody knows for sure. Either way, he's gone, and it's for the best. I'm really sorry you got stuck in that position. You handled it with grace."

I nodded, mumbled something about needing to finish a paper, and shut the door in his face. I leaned in, resting my forehead against the door and let out all of my grief, sobbing as silently as possible. By that point, we hadn't spoken in at least two weeks, but it still hurt that he'd leave without saying goodbye. It was as if what we'd had meant nothing to him, as if I meant nothing to him.

If anything, the next few days were even harder than the weeks that came before. While Eric was still there, I'd been in a sort of panic mode, trying to mitigate the damage to myself. With him gone, the full weight of my grief hit me, but I couldn't show it or share it with anyone, especially Eve.

Eve had been incredibly, and perhaps uncharacteristically, supportive through the entire ordeal, fiercely defending me while loudly denouncing Eric. Only once, while we were alone, did she ask me if he'd ever "tried anything" on me. I'd stuttered out an unconvincing denial then burst into tears, which only served to prove to her that he must have and I'd suffered in silence — which in a way I had, just not the way she thought.

I sank into a deep depression. I didn't have anyone to talk to so I kept it all inside, stuffed down deep. Everyone around me took the shift in my demeanor to be a reaction to Eric's quick and utter downfall. Of course, they weren't wrong, just, once again, not for the reasons they thought.

Eventually, the gossip about Eric died down and people moved on to the next thing. I continued dating Eve. After all, she was safe. I knew that I was at least bisexual — more likely gay. There was no denying it by then, not even to myself. I also knew that I never wanted to hurt as badly as I had with Eric. If that was love, then I didn't need it. I still got along great with Eve; we were friends. I convinced myself that it would be enough, that it was better this way. If I didn't care deeply for her, I couldn't be deeply hurt. It never occurred to me to ask if that was fair to Eve or not. I was in self-protection mode, still grieving deeply over Eric.

Our last two years of college passed by in a blur. I withdrew from everyone but Eve, applying myself to my studies with the same fervor that she did, a turn of events that further cemented our compatibility in her mind.

The day before we graduated, I proposed to Eve and she accepted. We were married a few months later.

## Chapter 2

In all the time Eve and I had dated, we'd never slept together. To Eve, the idea of saving yourself for your wedding night was just the expected thing to do. For me, it was simply a matter of lack of interest.

Our wedding night was...uneventful. I couldn't get an erection. Eve was not amused, but I passed it off as nerves. The next night I knew I had to perform, so I did the only thing I could think of, I closed my eyes and pretended I was with Eric. It worked, but later that night, after Eve fell asleep, I cried myself to sleep.

I went through the next couple years in a sort of fog. Sex continued to be a sticking point for us, but it wasn't the only issue by a long shot. Eve wanted children, while I insisted I wasn't ready.

Eve wanted to continue going to church, but I'd lost my taste for sitting on a pew listening to a pastor condemn anyone who wasn't exactly what they believed a Christian should be — especially gay people. We tried a few different congregations, even briefly attending a very modern, casual church with a full rock band, but none stuck for long and, eventually, the fights about going became more frequent than actual attendance and we just stopped going altogether.

Even with that small win, I was miserable, and Eve couldn't help but notice. Things became increasingly tense between us. She always had to initiate sex and, even then, more often than not, it was a repeat of our wedding night. At one point, she decided it had to be a medical issue, and I submitted to a battery of tests, all of which indicated I was perfectly healthy.

Our next fight arose when she suggested we see a sex therapist. I flatly refused, insisting I just had a low libido, but that wasn't an acceptable answer for her. Finally, just to appease her, I got a prescription for little blue pills, which at least took care of the erection issue, even if I still had little to no interest. I could at least stay hard long enough to perform my husbandly duties to her satisfaction.

I had just about decided to ask her for a separation when she shocked me with the news that she was pregnant. I was furious

at first; I didn't understand how she could have gotten pregnant when she was supposed to be on the pill. She insisted that it wasn't always fully effective; that it sometimes failed.

Some quick research showed she was right, but secretly, I believed she got pregnant on purpose in an attempt to keep me from leaving.

If so, it worked. I stayed with her. I just couldn't leave the woman who was carrying my child. It wasn't how I was raised.

For a while, during the pregnancy and right after our son Seth was born, things got better between us. We didn't fight as much since Eve didn't expect sex while she was pregnant, and Eve was one of those lucky women whom pregnancy really agrees with.

Of course, after Seth was born, he was my entire world. He made everything else worthwhile. I couldn't believe we'd created this tiny, perfect being, that he was a part of me. I loved him in a way I'd never loved anyone else.

The brief moment of happiness was too good to last, though, and, by the time Seth was a year old, we were fighting even more than before. Eve was the first to suggest we have another child. She wanted a daughter. I figured it had worked the first time, so why not try it again. We were trying the second time, though, and predictably, we had a very hard time, which only caused more tension.

It took months, but finally she gleefully announced she was pregnant again. Just as before, things improved for a while, until she found out she was carrying another boy. That threw her for a loop at first, but she quickly bounced back. We'd just have to try for a third. I had my doubts about that as two seemed like plenty, but kept them to myself in the interest of maintaining our fragile peace.

When our second son, Kane, was born, we were doing better than ever. It didn't hurt that I got a great new job — complete with a much larger salary — with a big advertising firm in DC around that same time. More money meant Eve could quit her job and be a full-time, stay-at-home mom, which was her dream.

Soon, though, I started spending long hours at the office. By the time I got home at night, Eve was so tired after spending all day alone with two babies that she didn't have enough energy to initiate sex or start a fight, and I fell into a routine in which I found myself content, if not really happy.

Again, it couldn't last forever. As the boys got older, suddenly my salary just wasn't big enough. Eve found herself with more time on her hands, but she still refused to go back to work. Then, the old fights started up again.

I loved the boys with all my heart and couldn't imagine losing them. I knew a divorce would be messy — everything was messy with Eve — so I made an effort. I started a side business doing freelance graphic design work, but it was slow to take off.

We went to marriage counseling. I knew full well what the problem was, but it was a secret I couldn't tell. I tried as hard as I could to be a good husband and father, but I found myself sinking steadily into depression. I began to withdraw from Eve and the boys, spending more and more time at the office, even spending the night there at times.

We went on like that for years. My side business grew steadily, which I found gratifying, but, aside from the boys, the situation at home remained tense at best — and more often miserable. In the last year, Eve had finally started working again, part time, but somehow, that only seemed to make her more resentful.

I'd pretty much resigned myself to the idea that this was just my life. It probably would have continued indefinitely...if it weren't for Bryant.

Bryant was a consultant brought in to help my company streamline our systems. He was tall and movie-star handsome, with artfully tousled dark hair, warm brown eyes that twinkled mischievously when he talked to you, and a gym-fit body that he showed off with skin-tight button-ups that looked like they might explode at any moment, sending buttons flying like shrapnel.

Every woman in the office developed an immediate crush on him...and so did I. It didn't help that he seemed to show extra attention to me, going out of his way to stop by my desk to chat and even inviting me out for drinks after work.

I turned him down the first few times, making excuses about needing to get home to the kids. To be fair, I was trying to be better about getting home on time, a concession I'd made as part of our counseling. Not to mention, Bryant made me distinctly nervous. I hadn't acted on my same-sex attractions since college, and those days felt far behind me. While I had managed to justify going

behind Eve's back when we were dating, betraying our wedding vows felt like a step too far.

Bryant was persistent, however, and he finally asked on a night that I knew Eve and the boys had plans. If I timed things right, she wouldn't even know I got home late. I gave in and agreed.

We went to a nearby bar popular with the after-work happy hour crowd and managed to score a booth in the corner after we got our beers.

"Glad it finally worked out," Bryant said with a grin as we slid into our respective sides of the table.

"Yeah, me too," I said, somewhat more reserved. "I wasn't trying to dodge you. It's just tough when you have two pre-teen boys at home. Do you have kids?"

He threw his head back and laughed as if I'd made a particularly hilarious joke. "No, no kids," he said finally, but didn't elaborate.

"Lucky you," I said with a grin of my own, then hastily added, "I'm kidding, of course. The boys are my entire world. The only good thing to come out of my marriage actually."

As soon as those last words left my mouth, I regretted them. Why would I say that to someone I hardly know?

He just chuckled knowingly, however, but thankfully changed the subject to safer topics. He was easy to talk to, and soon I'd relaxed. After the second beer, I realized I was actually enjoying myself. It was an unfamiliar feeling of late. I had fun playing with Seth and Kane, of course, but this was different. I was spending time with another adult, having a grown-up conversation while enjoying a couple of beers.

Eve and I didn't have any close couple friends. She had a few casual friends, moms of the boys' classmates, and we occasionally got together with them for cookouts or what have you, but I never clicked with their husbands, who, it seemed, could only converse about sports.

This was different. I liked Bryant. He was intelligent, witty, and it sure didn't hurt that he was easy on the eyes.

Time flew by, and before I knew it, it was time to head home. We agreed to grab drinks again some time. I made it home before Eve and the boys, so I even avoided an unnecessary argument. It was a win all around.

A couple of weeks later, Eve announced that she was taking the boys to visit their grandmother, her mother, since they had a long weekend due to some sort of teacher's in-service days. She presented it as a last-minute whim, which meant it was too late for me to take off work, but I suspected she'd had the trip planned for some time and just didn't want me to go. I was fine with that since her mother and I had never particularly liked each other.

It also gave me the opportunity to get drinks with Bryant again.

Luckily, when I casually suggested it at the office, he jumped on the invitation without hesitation.

"Perfect timing," he said with one of his megawatt grins. "I was just wondering what to do with myself after work. And I know just the place."

I'd assumed we'd head back to the same place as before, but he clearly had other plans. Not that it mattered to me one way or the other. I was just looking forward to more adult conversation.

After work, he suggested we drive to the bar he had in mind. After a brief negotiation, we agreed that he would drive and I'd leave my car in the parking garage at work. Before long, we were parked and walking up the block. He led me to a nondescript brick building with a plain black door flanked by a pair of brass gas-lit lanterns. A small brass plaque under one of the light fixtures identified our destination as The Veranda.

He pushed the door open confidently and strode into the dark interior. I followed him with a bit more hesitation.

Inside, we were greeted by a trim, middle-aged gentleman in a fitted dark suit who asked if we had a reservation. His bristly mustache bounced as he spoke, and I had trouble tearing my gaze away from his upper lip.

"I do," Bryant replied, and gave his name. "But we're just going to the bar for now."

The *maitre d* or concierge or whatever he was gave us a little bow and gestured toward the hallway that lay behind him.

Bryant thanked him, and we plunged deeper into the dimly lit building. He led me to a wood-paneled bar that looked as if someone had picked up a venerable London pub and plopped it down in the middle of Washington, D.C.

"A reservation, huh? Fancy shmancy. How on earth did you ever find this place?" I asked, as we took our seats in a high-backed booth.

"A friend recommended it," he said simply. "I've been a few times while I've been in town. They make a mean Manhattan."

"I still have to drive home later," I said with a laugh. "I'd better stick to beer."

"Oh, come on. One cocktail won't kill you."

"You have no idea how much of a lightweight I am," I told him. "I don't drink much hard liquor."

"Beer it is, then," he agreed easily. "Beer isn't really their thing here so I doubt they'll have an extensive selection. Light or dark? First round's on me."

"Oh no! Let me get it."

"I insist," he said with another disarming smile. "Do you have any idea how much consultants get paid?"

I snorted. "Probably a whole lot more than me."

"Bingo. I'll get the first round. Light or dark?"

"I'll keep things light."

"That's what I like about you," he said as he slid out of his side and headed toward the bar.

I was glad he was gone because I felt my face heat up at his offhand comment.

A few minutes later, he returned carrying two pint glasses filled to the brim with frothy beer, one a pale golden yellow and the other a dark chestnut brown. He handed me the paler brew.

"Here you go. One light beer. After all, we don't want to make you late getting home to the wife and kids."

"Actually Eve and the boys are out of town for the weekend, visiting my wife's mother."

He raised an eyebrow. "That explains the invite then." Then his eyes widened. "Wait a minute. You guys are Adam and Eve?"

"Yes, and trust me, I've heard all the jokes."

He laughed. "I'm sure you have. So why didn't you go with them?"

"It was last minute," I explained. "Besides, I can't say I have the best relationship with my mother-in-law."

Bryant clucked his tongue. "Such a cliché."

I laughed. "I suppose so."

"What could she possibly have against you? You seem like such a nice guy."

I hoped the dim lighting would hide the blush I could feel creeping up my cheeks again.

I shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe anyone who dared take her precious daughter away would have faced the same amount of disdain. Or maybe she just really dislikes hillbillies."

"You? A hillbilly?"

"That was my nickname in college, actually. I'm from a really small, very poor town in Western Maryland."

"Oh, I get that. I grew up in Ohio in a town that barely rated a dot on the map. You don't strike me as the hillbilly type, though."

"Well, I guess there's a reason I never moved back after college."

"I get that too. So, how'd you meet your wife, anyway?"

"That was also in college. We dated through pretty much all four years and got married soon after graduation."

"Sounds romantic."

"It does, doesn't it." I couldn't keep the bitterness out of my voice.

Bryant was sharp, and picked up on it right away. "Trouble in paradise?"

"Is that an Eden joke?" I asked as he took a sip of his beer.

He looked confused for a split second, then almost spit his mouthful across the table. "No!" he said, when he'd gathered himself. "Just an honest question."

I took a deep gulp of beer. "In that case, I suppose you could say that. Not that it was ever paradise. Sometimes, I feel like we only got married because it was the expected thing. Date, get married, have kids...you know the drill."

He shrugged. "Nobody says you have to fall in line."

"It felt like it at the time. Or maybe it was just me. But what about you? Where do you live when you're not consulting for our illustrious little company?"

"I'm based in Delaware."

"Do you like it?"

"Yeah. I live in a great little community near the beach."

"Sounds pretty nice. Are you married?"

"I'm as single as they come."  
 "Have you ever been?"  
 "Nope."  
 "Really?" I was surprised.  
 "Guess I just haven't found the right one yet."  
 "I'm sure you've had no shortage of offers," I said with a laugh.  
 "You'd be surprised."  
 I shook my head. "A good looking guy like you?"  
 His face split into a grin. "Oh, so you think I'm good looking, huh?"  
 I sputtered while he laughed.  
 "I'm just saying, every woman in the office would love to be sitting where I'm sitting right now."  
 "Let's just say I'm more interested in the present company than any of them."  
 I froze, my beer halfway to my lips, my eyes locked on his.  
 "I'm not hitting on you!" he rushed on. "Just stating preferences."  
 I took a small sip of my beer but immediately choked on it, as if I'd forgotten how to swallow.  
 "You okay?" he asked, concern filling his voice.  
 I nodded and tried to pull myself back together.  
 "So you're...gay?" I finally managed to wheeze.  
 "Guilty as charged. That's not a problem is it?"  
 "No," I said quickly. Too quickly. "I mean, my roommate in college was gay."  
 He raised an eyebrow again, ever so slightly. "Oh really? I've read some hot stories like that online."  
 I started choking again while he laughed.  
 "I'm just teasing you. You're safe with me. I have a strict policy against chasing after married men."  
 "What if they chase after you?" I asked before I could stop myself.  
 Both eyebrows jumped up. "Are you?"  
 "No! Sorry. I just couldn't resist the joke."  
 He stared at me stone faced for a few weighted moments before breaking into a smile. "You know, I actually thought you might be gay or bi when I first met you."

"You did?" I asked as casually as I could manage while my stomach dropped to the floor. I tried to laugh but I sounded more like a strangled anteater. I cleared my throat. "What made you think that?"

"Something about the way you looked at me."

I could tell my face had to be beet red, and I felt a trickle of sweat run down my back as fear gripped me. I fought down the growing sense of panic, and tried to continue naturally. "And how did I look at you?"

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "It's difficult to articulate. It's sort of just one of those things a queer person learns to recognize. That said, it's obviously not fool proof."

He laughed, but I didn't join him. I was lost in my thoughts.

What exactly was I so afraid of? Would it really be so bad if this man, who I barely knew, thought I was gay? Or bi? Or just not one-hundred percent heterosexual? It's not like he knew Eve and would run to tell her.

The truth was that my queerness was something I'd shoved so far down that I'd almost come to forget, or at least I'd refused to acknowledge it. Thinking about it now, brought back all those painful emotions and deep fear I'd felt with Eric. Even now, the mere thought of it sent ice through my veins. How would Eve react? She'd make sure I'd never see my sons again, I was as sure of that as I was of anything.

And yet...as I sat there across from Bryant, someone who had just come out to me as easily as if he was sharing what state he grew up in, I felt a strange longing to just...be myself — fully — in a way I hadn't been since those first few months with Eric. That seemed like a lifetime ago. It was a lifetime ago.

"Earth to Adam..."

I suddenly tuned back in to find Bryant studying me carefully. How long had I been lost in my thoughts?

"Is everything okay?" he asked gently. "If I've made things too weird we can call it night and I'll pick up the tab."

"No, it's not that," I said. "Just...you're right."

"About what?"

"I am..." The word stuck in my throat. "I am gay."

To his credit, he didn't laugh in my face or make a snarky comment. He simply nodded.

"Gay, not bi?" he asked gently after a few silent moments passed.

"Gay, not bi," I confirmed.

"If I get too personal, feel free to hit the brakes, but have you been with a man?"

"Yes," I answered without hesitation. It felt good to bare my soul after so many years of hiding. "My college roommate and I were lovers for a while."

His eyes grew wide. "So it really was like the stories!"

I shrugged and forced a chuckle. "I suppose so. Not that I've read them, so I can't really say for sure."

"Never mind all that. What about your wife?"

I grew more wary. "What about her?"

"How do you feel about her?"

"I care about her. Or I did. These days we coexist. We tolerate each other at best, but most of the time it feels like we loathe each other."

"So why did you get married?"

"Things weren't always this bad."

"I mean, sure, but why marry a woman at all when you were with a man and knew you were gay? That would have been what? Like a decade ago? That was like peak gay visibility."

"A little more than that, but I get your point. But the truth is, I didn't know. Or I couldn't admit it, even to myself. I guess you could say I was deep in denial even while my roommate was deep in me."

The words left my mouth before I could really process what I was saying, and I immediately felt my face blaze with embarrassment yet again.

Bryant threw his head back and laughed long and loud. When he finished laughing, he wiped his eyes and grinned at me. "Isn't it amazing what we can convince ourselves of?"

There was no judgement in his tone, and I felt myself relax a little more.

"I was raised in a very conservative, religious family," I explained. "I went to a tiny little Baptist college where the entire student body knew everyone's business. My roommate came out at the start of our junior year. Went off to New York for a summer

internship, came back out and proud — new haircut, earring, tight clothes, the works."

"A fairy tale as old as time," Bryant said with a smirk.

"Yeah, well, it felt more like a nightmare at the time," I said. "The entire school turned against him overnight. I was terrified the same thing would happen to me."

"So what did you do?"

I sighed. "Something I'm not proud of. I distanced myself. It had to be such a difficult time for him, and I abandoned him completely."

"You were a kid," he said. "Don't beat yourself up too much."

"I was old enough to know you shouldn't ditch your friends when they need you."

"You were scared. Give yourself some grace. What happened to the roommate?"

"He dropped out. Or got expelled. I'm not really sure."

He looked surprised. "You don't know?"

"I never asked. Just heard rumors. We weren't even speaking by the time he vanished."

"And you were never curious? You never looked him up or anything?"

"No, I just tried to forget that part of my life. But it's not that easy, of course."

"Hence the two of us sitting in a gay bar in Washington, D.C."

"This is a gay bar?" I asked, aghast, looking around for signs I must have missed.

He laughed again. "Yes, but a sort of private club. And relax, you can't catch it...especially if you already caught it."

I relaxed and laughed a little. "Sorry. Old habits and all that. I guess you're a member?"

"No, but a friend is. I'm just using his guest pass while I'm in town."

"That's nice of him."

"He's a nice guy. Besides, he doesn't get to D.C. much these days."

"Why not?"

"He's getting up there in years. He used to live here. I didn't know him back then, but I've heard he was quite the power broker in his time. He bought a little beach house when he retired, went back and forth for a while, but eventually sold his place here and lives exclusively in Ocean City now."

"How'd you meet him?"

"He struck up a conversation with me at a bar in Rehoboth Beach. We've been friends ever since. When he heard I was going to be in D.C. for work, he insisted I take his membership card."

"Sounds like a good friend," I said, thinking about how I had no friends at all, really. Unless Bryant turned into a friend. I smiled to myself, thinking how nice it would be to have a friend.

"The best. So what's got you smiling like that?"

"What? Oh, um, nothing. Just thinking about friendship."

Bryant shook his head with a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. "You are an interesting guy, Adam."

I laughed. "I'm going to take that as a compliment since it's been a very long time since anyone besides my sons thought I was remotely interesting."

He laughed as well. "Tell me more about your sons."

So I did. And that led to another topic, which led to another, and before I knew it, I glanced at my watch to see we'd been chatting for hours. Our one beer had turned into several, and I was definitely feeling it.

"Oh man," I groaned. "It's getting late and I still have to drive back to Baltimore."

"I'm sorry!" he said quickly. "I just assumed you lived here in D.C. I wouldn't have bought that last round if I'd realized. Or the one before that either. Are you okay to drive?"

"Not at this exact moment, but I'll have some water and I'll be fine."

"Why don't you crash at my hotel tonight?"

I tried his trick of raising a single eyebrow. I was drunk enough that I wasn't sure I pulled it off. "Are you trying to seduce me? I thought you didn't chase after married men."

"I don't. You'll be on the couch."

"Ouch."

"No, the couch."

We both laughed as if he'd just made the funniest joke ever.

It took a little more convincing, but I finally gave in, and we caught a cab to his hotel. His room was surprisingly nice, another reminder that he was probably being paid very well to consult for my company.

True to his word, there was a full-sized couch, and that's where I slept.

My passing thought about friendship turned out to be prescient, though, and that night was the start of a friendship. We grabbed drinks a few more times over the next couple of weeks whenever I could, but far too soon for my liking, his work wrapped up. We decided to grab drinks at The Veranda one last time before he left town.

We were a few drinks in when he slammed his hand on the table, making me jump. "You have to come down to the beach and visit me this summer," he declared dramatically.

I snorted. "I'm sure that would go over well with Eve. She threw enough of a fit when I told her I'd be home late tonight."

He frowned.

"What?" I asked.

"How long are you going to keep putting yourself through that?"

I shrugged and started down into my pint glass as if looking for an answer. "I guess until Seth and Kane are out of the house, at least."

His frown deepened. "Have you thought about leaving?"

"Of course I have. I just can't risk losing the boys."

"Even if Eve got full custody, you'd still have visitation rights."

"You don't know Eve. She's vindictive. She'd make my life more miserable than it already is and do everything in her power to keep me away from the kids."

"That's awful."

"That's Eve. But look, let's not spend your last night in D.C. talking about my witch of a wife. Meeting you has been one of the best things that's ever happened to me aside from my sons."

He blinked. "That's really sweet, Adam."

"I'm serious. I haven't had a friend since college, and I can't even begin to explain how good it feels to be out to someone."

"You don't have to explain. I get it."

"Do you? You're out and proud. I've been so deep in the closet for so long, I forgot there were other options."

"But what's the point if you don't get your perky ass out of the closet?"

"Hey! Are you hitting on me?"

"Don't get your hopes up. I just have eyes."

I laughed.

"I'm serious, though," he continued. "I know you don't want to lose your boys, but what lesson are you teaching them by hiding who you are and staying in an unhappy marriage?"

I was taken aback. I'd never thought of it like that. "I...I'm teaching them that they mean more to me than anything in the world."

"Including your own happiness?"

"Yes. Including my own happiness."

He nodded slowly. "I guess that's fair. I just think there's a flip side where you could be an example of what it means to live authentically. But hey, who am I to say? I don't even have kids, right?"

His words had gotten to me, though, and the mood had shifted. We finished up our drinks, settled the tab, and left not long after.

We walked down the street together for a while, side by side, not talking. I was lost in thought, and he respectfully left me to it.

When he stopped suddenly, I was surprised to see we were back at the office building.

"You okay to drive?" he asked.

"Oh yeah, I'm fine," I said quickly.

I wasn't really fine, but I wasn't drunk by any means. My mind was swirling. Was I setting a bad example for the boys? Was there a way out that wouldn't start World War III with Eve? Was I staying in the closet for fear of losing the boys or fear of getting hurt?

"Adam?" Bryant said, and I realized I'd zoned out while standing on the sidewalk.

I looked up at him and thought once again how much he'd changed my life in such a short time. Then, without thinking, I stepped forward and leaned in for a kiss.

He quickly dodged my clumsy attempt, deftly turning it into a hug instead.

"Adam," he whispered fiercely into my ear. "I understand where that came from, and I respect it, but I think that would be a big mistake right now."

I pulled away, embarrassed. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what I was thinking."

"I do. And it's okay. Really. You're in a vulnerable place, still trying to figure out who you are and what you want. I'd like to be your friend through that process, and I think adding anything to that right now would just end up with both of us getting hurt."

"Admit it, I'm just not your type," I said, forcing a laugh as I tried to pass off the entire awkward encounter as a joke.

"Ha. Trust me, that's not the issue. I just..."

"Don't chase married men. I know."

"I was going to say that I value you more as a friend than a one-night stand."

And just like that, tears were streaming down my face.

"I value your friendship, too," I managed.

He pulled me in for another hug, and we said our goodnights.

I mulled over our conversation the entire drive home. The city blurred past my windows in streaks of light and color, but I hardly saw any of it. My hands were steady on the wheel, but inside, I was spinning.

Bryant's off-hand comment kept echoing through my mind. "What lesson are you teaching them by hiding who you are and staying in an unhappy marriage?"

The words had landed like a pebble dropped into a deep well, sending ripples that were still reaching places I hadn't dared look at in years.

What was I teaching them?

That love meant self-denial? That being a good father meant disappearing into a shell of a man? That lying to yourself — and everyone around you — was noble if it was for the right reasons?

I told myself I stayed for them. That sacrificing my happiness was the cost of being a good parent. But was it really about them? Or was I hiding behind them to avoid the truth?

To avoid the fallout. The shame. The mess.

The truth was, it was easier to be miserable with Eve than to face the possibility of losing them. Easier to endure the icy silences, the accusations, the slow erosion of who I was, than to risk the custody battle that would surely come. The rumors. The judgment. The loneliness.

But Bryant had changed something. Or maybe he'd just held up a mirror, and for the first time in years, I looked.

In just a few weeks, he had reminded me what connection could feel like. What it meant to see someone — and be seen in return. And even when I'd overstepped, even when I'd made a fool of myself outside that office building, he didn't turn away. He didn't shame me. He held me. Told me the truth without cruelty. Gave me space and grace, even when I didn't deserve it.

I wasn't in love with him. I knew that. But I was starved for something — acceptance, yes, but also softness. Friendship. Safety. Desire. I hadn't realized how hollow I'd become until he started filling in the edges.

But he was right.

Now wasn't the time. Not for that.

Still, his words circled me like a quiet challenge: Who are you when no one is looking? What kind of man do you want your sons to grow up to be? And will they ever become that if you're too afraid to be one yourself?

I sighed and blinked hard against the sting in my eyes. The road narrowed into the familiar quiet of my neighborhood. The porch light was still on.

I slowed the car as I pulled into the driveway, heart heavier than when I left.

I wasn't sure what came next.

But I knew I couldn't keep doing this forever. Something had to change.

And soon.

Still lost in thought as I stepped inside, I barely noticed the quiet until I saw Eve sitting rigidly on the couch, still fully dressed, arms folded so tightly across her chest they might have been the only thing holding her together. Her back was ramrod straight, her expression carved from stone.

She never waited up for me. Not when I worked late. Not even during the good patches. Never.

My pulse quickened. A quiet alarm went off in my head. Something was very, very wrong.

She rose slowly as I entered, and I felt myself instinctively brace — jaw tightening, shoulders stiffening, heart thudding against my ribs.

"I told you I was staying late to say goodbye to a coworker," I offered, already on the defensive. "It was an office thing." The lie tasted like copper in my mouth.

"I know your little secret," she said through clenched teeth.

The words hit me like a body blow.

My mind instantly began racing. How? Had she found out about Bryant? The Veranda? The carefully constructed lies I'd wrapped around myself like armor? My gut twisted, but I forced my voice to remain calm.

"What secret?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't play dumb. I feel like such a fool. It's all... It's all so obvious now."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, even though I was already pretty sure I did.

She began to pace, tension rolling off her in waves. "I don't know how I missed it all these years. Eric back in college. Your complete disinterest in sex. All the time you spend with the boys..."

That last one threw me. I'd been growing more certain she'd figured out I was gay, but what did the boys have to do with it?

"The...boys?" I echoed, confused.

She turned on me sharply, venom in her expression.

"Look, Eve," I said, carefully, cautiously, "I know I probably should have told you a long time ago. But it's something I've struggled with. For years. Most of my life, honestly."

For a moment, I thought she might cry.

But instead, her face twisted into something ugly. Revulsion. Contempt.

"Do you hear yourself?" she hissed. "Do you know how sick you sound right now? If I find out you've done anything inappropriate with the boys—"

My blood ran cold.

"Jesus, Eve. How can you even say that? They're my sons. They're kids."

She didn't flinch. "Seems to me that you like little boys," she spat.

It felt like a slap. A cold, disorienting slap to the face.

"What?" I gasped. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I found your hidden stash."

"My what?"

"The photos."

"What photos?"

"Don't play dumb! On your thumb drive."

My head spun. "What thumb drive? I don't know what you're talking about. I don't have any photos."

"I found it plugged into your laptop. Tucked inside a folder labeled with your work files."

And then, a sickening thought hit me. Sudden. Sharp.

"You found them," I said slowly, "because you put them there. Didn't you?"

Her eyes widened — but not in guilt. In outrage.

"You're going to stand there and flip this around on me?"

"They're not mine, Eve! So how else would they have magically appeared? You think I'm stupid enough to keep something like that plugged into a shared laptop?"

"Liar!" she screamed. "Of course you're lying! That's all you've ever done in this marriage. Lie after lie after lie."

That one hit deep.

"Damn it, Eve," I snapped, my voice breaking. "I might be gay, but I am not a pedophile."

She recoiled, then surged forward, her face darkening with fury.

"So you admit it? You're gay?"

"Yes," I said, finally. Exhausted. Honest. "But that doesn't mean anything has to change. I haven't acted on it. I never—"

"Doesn't have to change?" she repeated, incredulous.

"Doesn't have to change?! You have a hidden file of photos — boys who barely look older than Seth! You're a homosexual! And you think things can just stay the same?"

She was spiraling now.

"You were probably fucking Eric back in college too, weren't you? How many others have there been? Huh? Tell me the truth!" Her voice cracked as her fury turned to fear. She blinked rapidly. "Do you have AIDS?" she whispered, as if the words themselves were contaminated.

"For God's sake, no. I've never been with anyone — man or woman — since the day we got married."

"Why should I believe anything you say?"

"Because I stayed," I said, the words raw. "Despite everything, I stayed. I chose you. I chose our family over my own happiness."

The moment I said it, I wished I could take it back.

Her expression didn't just harden, it collapsed inward, then rebuilt itself as something monstrous. Rage, yes — but also betrayal. As if I had confirmed everything she feared, and worse.

Her hands began to tremble. Her skin flushed a violent red. I honestly feared she might have a stroke right there in front of me.

I took a cautious step toward her.

Then she screamed.

It wasn't a sound made for human ears. It tore through the air like a wildfire, and before I could react, she was moving.

She began grabbing everything she could reach — vases, picture frames, books — and hurling them at me with terrifying precision. One exploded against the wall beside my head. Another shattered at my feet.

"You disgust me!" she shrieked. "Get out! Get OUT!"

"Eve, please—"

A heavy brass figurine soared past my head, close enough that I felt the air move.

"GET OUT!"

Suddenly, all I could think about were the boys. Their faces. Their futures.

"Eve, we can work through this," I pleaded. "The boys—"

"I don't want you anywhere near the boys!" she roared.

"God, you make me sick! All these years I wondered why I wasn't enough. And now I know. You're a goddamned faggot. and I want you OUT. I never want to see you again."

"Mommy?"

We froze, then turned toward the hallway.

Kane stood there, small and barefoot, his stuffed bear hanging limp in one hand. His eyes were wide, brimming with tears. His lip trembled. Fear and confusion radiated off of him.

I caught a flash of movement behind him and I knew Seth was awake too.

How much had they heard?

The question hit me like a cold splash. Kane was only nine — still soft around the edges, still prone to nightmares after scary movies. Maybe he hadn't fully understood what Eve had been screaming. Maybe the venom in her voice hadn't translated into meaning.

But Seth...

Seth was twelve. Old enough to understand every word. Old enough to know exactly what a faggot was. Old enough to know it was meant to hurt.

"Go back to bed, sweetie," I said gently, forcing calm into my voice though my throat felt like sandpaper. "Mommy and I are just having a disagreement. It's going to be okay."

Kane's huge eyes swept the room, taking in the chaos. Shards of ceramic littered the floor. A photo of the four of us at the beach was face down and cracked in its frame. He looked to Eve for reassurance. She was still trembling, chest heaving, knuckles white at her sides. But to her credit, she gave a stiff, silent nod. It wasn't much, but it was enough for Kane. He turned and padded away, glancing back once as if to make sure I was still standing.

"You too, Seth," I called softly.

He didn't respond, but I heard his door click shut a few seconds later.

Only once I was sure they were in their rooms did I turn back to Eve. I took a slow, careful step toward her.

"Eve," I said, low and deliberate. "They don't need to be a part of this. They don't need to hear—"

The crack of her hand against my face was so fast, I didn't even see it coming.

My head snapped to the side, and for a moment, everything froze — the sting blooming across my cheek, the sharp tang of blood in my mouth where my teeth had caught my lip.

I'd never been hit before. Not by anyone.

"Don't you dare tell me what our children do or don't need," she hissed. Her voice trembled with fury and something deeper — betrayal, humiliation, grief. "You've lost that right. You don't get to be the concerned parent now. I want you out of this house. Right now."

"Eve..." I tried again, still holding my voice steady.

"Now."

"We need to talk about this. We need—"

She launched at me, a silent attack, fists flying. There was no grace to it, no technique — just blind, unfiltered rage. She struck wherever she could reach: my chest, my arms, my face. A solid punch landed against my mouth, splitting my lip. I tasted blood again.

I didn't fight back.

Some part of me — shameful, twisted — believed I deserved it. That I had built this house of lies and now had no right to complain when the roof came crashing down.

The whole time she hit me, her words came in sobbing, breathless bursts, "Get out — get out — I hate you — get out!"

I finally caught her wrists, not to hurt her, just to still her. Gently, I pushed her back, holding her at arm's length.

She crumpled then, almost instantly, her rage evaporating into something hollow and broken. She wrapped her arms around herself, her entire body shuddering like she was barely holding it together.

Tears streaked her cheeks, but she fought them like they were a weakness she couldn't afford to show.

"Go..." she gasped, her voice ragged. "Just go."

I hesitated for a heartbeat, but there was nothing left to say. Nothing she could hear, and nothing I could give that wouldn't make things worse.

I turned and walked out.

Outside, the night air hit me like a slap of its own — cool and sharp, thick with the smell of cut grass and distant honeysuckle. I stood on the lawn for a moment, disoriented. The porch light cast a dim glow over the sidewalk, but the rest of the world felt shrouded in shadow.

I didn't know where to go.

I thought of the office. It was quiet there, sterile. But the thought of being alone right now felt unbearable.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket with trembling fingers, staring at the dark screen. I didn't know who to call. I didn't know what I wanted.

All I knew was that I couldn't go back inside. And I couldn't go back to pretending.

Not anymore.

I got into the car, but that was as far as my mind could process. Where to go? What now? Who now?

One name rose through the fog of panic and humiliation, cutting through the noise in my head like a flare in the dark.

Bryant.

I didn't know what I needed — comfort, direction, a place to land — but I knew I couldn't do this alone. He was the only person I trusted to see me like this. The only person I could think to call.

My fingers trembled as I pulled up his contact. I hesitated for only a moment before hitting dial.

He answered after just two rings. "Hey, Adam," he said, his voice light, warm. "Didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

That gentleness undid me.

"Yeah," I said, but the word caught, rough and cracked in my throat. "I guess you could say the shit has officially hit the fan."

There was a beat of silence on the other end. When he spoke again, his tone had shifted — soft, grounded, full of concern.

"Are you okay?"

"No," I said truthfully. My voice broke. "Eve kicked me out. I...I don't know where to go—"

"Come back here," he said immediately, without hesitation. "Just come here. We'll talk when you get here. Are you okay to drive?"

I nodded before realizing he couldn't see me. "Yeah. I think so."

"Okay. I'll be waiting for you. Just get here safe, buddy."

*Buddy.*

The word landed like a lifeline. One person. One anchor. At least I had one friend in the world.

I ended the call, but the weight of everything crashed down the moment the line went dead. I sat behind the wheel, numb, staring blankly out the windshield before I forced myself to shift into gear.

The drive back to D.C. was brutal.

I made it less than halfway before the first wave hit — grief, shame, disbelief — swallowing me whole. I had to pull over on the shoulder, gripping the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles ached, as sobs racked my body. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Just cried, hunched over in the dark, a grown man falling apart in the front seat of his car.

I managed to keep going, only to stop again a few miles later. The second wave came softer but deeper, like something shifting beneath the surface. I wasn't just mourning the night. I was mourning years of pretending. The cost of holding it all in.

By the time I reached the hotel, it was the middle of the night. The streets were mostly empty, the lobby quiet except for the young desk clerk, who looked up as I entered and immediately paled. I must have looked like a walking horror story.

Bryant was already downstairs, waiting for me.

His face didn't change when he saw me — no shock, no pity — but his eyes scanned me quickly, his body language alert. Without a word, he crossed the lobby and ushered me toward the elevators with a hand on the small of my back. It wasn't until the elevator doors slid shut that I saw my reflection in the mirrored back wall.

I barely recognized myself.

My lip was split wide, the skin around it already purpling. There were thin, angry scratches across my cheek and jaw, probably from Eve's rings — or maybe from the shards of whatever she'd thrown. But it was the cut above my eye that was most alarming. Blood had matted in my eyebrow and streaked down the side of my face. No wonder the desk clerk had looked like he was about to call the cops.

I reached up instinctively, wincing as my fingers brushed the wound.

"Jesus," I muttered, almost to myself.

Bryant didn't say anything. He just reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a neatly folded handkerchief — who even had those anymore? — and gently pressed it into my hand.

"Here," he said quietly. "Let's get you cleaned up first. Then you can tell me everything."

His voice was steady, his presence calm. And in that moment, I felt the first sliver of safety I'd known all night.

I nodded, swallowing the sob that threatened to rise again.

And for the first time in a very long time, I didn't feel completely alone.

When we got to his room, Bryant gently steered me toward the bed. The bedding was rumpled. He'd clearly been tucked in for the night when I called.

"I'm sorry," I said, guilt rising up suddenly and catching in my throat. "I didn't know who else to call—"

"There's nothing to be sorry for," he said firmly, easing me down onto the edge of the mattress. "I'm glad you called. Now let's get you cleaned up."

He disappeared into the bathroom. I heard the water running, the soft clink of glass or porcelain, and then silence. I stared at the hotel carpet, numb, until he returned carrying a damp hand towel. Without asking, he began gently wiping the blood from my face.

"You're going to stain the towel," I mumbled, trying to push his hand away.

"It's just a hotel towel," he said with a soft smile. "Trust me, they've seen worse."

I gave in and let him tend to me.

"Bryant, I can do this," I said, though my voice lacked conviction. "I've interrupted your night enough..."

I trailed off when I saw the look he gave me — steady, kind, and utterly unbothered.

He went back to the bathroom to rinse the cloth, then returned and resumed with quiet precision, dabbing at my temple. The blood was mostly gone, but now his touch lingered, inspecting the cuts.

"They're not as bad as they looked," he murmured.

"I guess I'm just a wimp," I said, trying for levity with a shaky smile that collapsed almost instantly. "And a liar."

“Hey,” he said, sitting down beside me. “None of that. I take it you told her?”

“Not...intentionally,” I admitted. “I’d been thinking about what you said the whole drive home, but I wasn’t ready. She was waiting when I walked in, arms crossed, eyes like knives. She had her own accusations lined up.”

“What kind of accusations?”

“She started talking about secrets, like she’d figured something out. She brought up Eric, my roommate from college. I thought maybe she’d finally realized I was gay.” I paused. “But then she said she found photos. Claimed they were on my laptop. Said they were of young boys.”

Bryant’s face went still.

“She accused you of—?”

“Of being a pedophile, yeah.” I rushed on. “But I swear to God, I don’t know what she’s talking about. I have never had anything like that on my computer. I thought maybe she planted them.”

His expression darkened, all warmth gone from his eyes. “You really think she’d do that? That she’d go that far?”

“She’s vindictive. If she knew I was gay, maybe she wanted a way to keep everything in the divorce — the house, the kids. This gives her a way to destroy me. And it’s working.”

I swallowed hard as the thought hit me with full force. “I’ll never see the boys again.”

The sob burst out of me before I could stop it. My body folded in on itself as I wept. Bryant pulled me against him and held me tightly, grounding me, not flinching even when my tears soaked into his shirt.

“You don’t know that,” he said softly, once my breathing slowed. “Don’t go to the worst-case scenario right away. You can fight this.”

“I can’t,” I said, pulling away and wiping my face. “I know her. She’ll use this. She’ll go public if she has to. She’ll ruin me. Even if I clear my name, the accusation alone—”

“It leaves a stain,” Bryant finished quietly.

I nodded. “I’d lose my job. My reputation. And the boys— God, the boys. I don’t want them to grow up thinking their dad’s some kind of...monster.”

Bryant took a breath, then let it out slowly. "Okay. So what now? What do you do from here?"

"I...I don't know."

"What about your parents?"

I let out a hollow laugh. "Not an option. We were never close, and they're evangelical, far-right. Swallowed the red pill a long time ago. If Eve hasn't already called them, she will soon. She'd love turning them against me."

"Well, then," he said gently, "you don't have to figure it all out tonight. One step at a time. First, sleep. Then we'll make a plan."

"I've already intruded too much," I said, glancing down at his shirt and winced. "Oh God. I got blood all over you."

He chuckled. "This shirt's been through worse. Don't worry about it."

I stood, a little unsteady. He rose with me, steadying me with one strong hand on my arm.

"I'm just...messing everything up," I muttered.

"Hey," he said, giving me a small shake. "Look at me. I know it all feels like it's crashing down around you, but listen: you're free. Whatever happens next, you're out. You don't have to lie anymore. You don't have to shrink yourself to fit someone else's version of who you should be. That's a good thing, even if it feels like hell right now."

"I can't even think about that yet."

"Then don't," he said, his voice gentle. "But don't forget it, either. Now, get out of those clothes and get in bed."

He started unbuttoning his shirt, revealing a chest I'd thought about more than I cared to admit. Broad, muscular, dusted with dark hair.

"I, uh..." I took a deep breath. "You don't know how long I've wanted to hear those words from you. But I think I should probably take the couch again. I'm not in the best headspace..."

Bryant rolled his eyes and smirked. "We're not fucking, you big galoot. Keep your drawers on. Literally. I just don't think you should be alone tonight."

I gave in and pulled my shirt over my head, emerging just in time to see Bryant stepping out of his pants. Even in the dim light, I couldn't help noticing the way his body moved — strong,

unselfconscious. And, of course, my own body responded in the worst possible way.

I tried to shut it down, picturing Eve naked and yelling, which did the trick.

Bryant seemed to sense my discomfort, and mercifully, he flipped off the bedside lamp.

I finished undressing in the dark, stripped down to my boxers, and cautiously climbed into bed beside him.

"I'm probably going to get blood on the sheets, too," I murmured.

"Oh my God," he groaned, half amused, half exasperated. "Will you shut up about the blood already? Worst case, they charge me for linens. Big deal."

I stared at the ceiling for a while, my mind still spinning, heart pounding in the quiet.

Eventually, I managed to whisper, "Thank you, Bryant."

"You're welcome," he said softly. "That's what friends are for." He shifted beside me, settling in. "Now get some sleep," he added. "Things will look brighter in the morning."

They didn't, though.

I'd been sure I wouldn't sleep at all, that my mind would spin through the night, replaying every awful second, every word, every blow. But Bryant's steady, quiet presence beside me was enough to silence the chaos in my head, at least for a while. I passed out almost as soon as I closed my eyes.

The panic returned the moment they opened again.

I sucked in a sharp breath as the previous night hit me in a flood — Eve's accusations, the boys' wide-eyed fear, the blood on my face, and the weight of everything I'd lost.

Bryant was already up and, thank God, fully clothed. He stood near the little hotel coffee maker, squinting at it like it had personally offended him. When he noticed me stir, he looked over with a tired but genuine smile.

"Oh, hey. Good morning. I was gonna let you sleep. Sorry if I woke you."

"You...didn't," I mumbled, rubbing at my face — then flinching when my fingers grazed the cut above my eye. "What time is it?"

“A little after six. I’m an early riser. Coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

I reached over the edge of the bed to grab my pants from the floor, slipping them on as I stood. My shirt followed, crumpled and still faintly stained. I muttered something unintelligible and headed into the bathroom to pee.

Under the harsh bathroom lighting, I got my first real look at myself. The gash above my eye had stopped bleeding but was swollen and raw. Bryant had cleaned me up pretty well, but some dried blood still clung stubbornly to my eyebrow. My lip was split, and my whole face looked...older. As if I’d aged five years overnight.

I stared at my reflection a moment longer than necessary, then splashed cold water on my face and used a clean towel to wipe away the rest of the dried blood. A shower would’ve felt good, but I didn’t want to keep Bryant waiting.

He was pouring two cups of coffee when I emerged. He held one out to me with an exaggerated bow, like it was an offering to the gods.

“So, what’s the plan?” he asked after I’d taken a grateful swig.

“I wish I knew.”

“You work today, right?”

“Fuck.” The word came out sharper than intended. “Yes. I do.”

The thought hadn’t even crossed my mind until he said it.

Bryant raised his eyebrows. “Then unless you plan to call out, you’re gonna need clean clothes. You wore those yesterday.”

I let out a weary sigh.

“Will Eve be out of the house today?” he continued.

“She should go to work,” I said, thinking aloud. “But after last night...I don’t know.”

“She probably hasn’t had time to change the locks yet,” he said carefully. “If she’s gone, you could slip in and grab what you need.”

“That’s...smart.”

He grinned and wagged his eyebrows. “I’m more than just a pretty face and a hot bod.”

That actually drew a quiet laugh from me — short-lived, but real.

“What about after work?”

I hesitated, then shrugged. “I’ll figure something out.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll extend my room for another night. You can crash here again.”

“Bryant, I can’t ask—”

“You didn’t. I offered.”

I opened my mouth to protest again, but he cut me off with a look that said don’t.

“When would Eve usually leave the house?”

“After the boys catch the bus. Around seven.”

“And you need to be in the office by?”

“Eight-thirty.”

He nodded, calculating. “You’ll be cutting it close, but if she’s gone, you should have enough time to get in, grab clothes, maybe even shower.”

“Maybe I should just call out...”

“That’s up to you. But maintaining some normalcy might help. Even if it feels impossible.”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “You’re right. At least pretending things are normal might help keep me sane.”

“And keep Eve from getting too much of a head start spinning her version of the story.”

I winced. “God, I didn’t even think of that.”

Bryant handed me my coffee, then pulled me into a tight hug.

“You’ve got this, Adam.”

I leaned into him for a moment longer than I meant to, then stepped back and managed a weak smile. “I sure hope so. Thank you. For everything.”

“Hey,” he said simply, “people were there for me when I needed them. I’m just paying it forward.”

## Chapter 3

I tried not to overthink things on the drive home. One thing at a time, I told myself again and again, gripping the wheel tight enough to whiten my knuckles. Just get in. Get your clothes. Get out.

But the second I turned onto our street, my stomach dropped. Eve's car was still in the driveway.

I pulled over and stared at the house, pulse pounding. What now? I couldn't risk another confrontation. I didn't have it in me.

Just then, the front door flew open and Seth came barreling out. I exhaled in relief and glanced at the clock. Somehow, I'd made better time than expected. But any sense of triumph vanished when I really looked at him.

He stood on the sidewalk, his back to me, shoulders hunched, head low. His body language screamed confusion. Hurt. Shame. I didn't need to see his face to know he was reeling.

My chest ached.

I started to open the car door, desperate to talk to him, to try and explain, but just then the school bus pulled up. He turned slowly and climbed aboard without looking back.

The bus idled as it waited for Kane, who, in true Kane fashion, came flying out of the house at the last possible second. He always made it by the skin of his teeth. He slammed the door behind him, dashed to the bus, and boarded seconds before the driver pulled away.

I waited, engine idling, watching the house, hoping Eve would leave for work. But the door stayed shut. Minutes ticked by. I was running out of time.

Maybe she's calmed down, I thought. Maybe we can talk like adults.

And maybe unicorns will burst from my ass and we'll ride into the sunset.

I snorted bitterly, then pulled into the driveway and killed the engine. For a long moment, I just sat there, staring at the house — our house — so full of memories I wasn't sure I could separate

from the woman inside. The place where we'd laughed. Fought.  
Made a family.

I shook off the nostalgia. That life was gone. I wasn't here  
for ghosts.

I climbed out and walked up to the front door. My hand  
hesitated for a second before sliding the key into the lock. It turned  
easily.

Bryant was right. Eve hadn't changed the locks. Yet.

Inside, the house was eerily calm. The living room had  
been cleaned. No more shattered vases, no more broken glass. If I  
hadn't lived through last night, I might've thought I'd imagined it.

I made for the bedroom, but the door was closed. As I  
reached for the knob, I heard a faint sound from within — a shuffle,  
maybe, or quiet crying. My hand froze in midair, then pulled back  
like I'd touched a flame.

Whatever courage had carried me this far dissolved.

Okay, new plan.

I turned and wandered into the kitchen to collect my  
thoughts. I glanced out the window...and froze.

There, overflowing from the backyard trash can, was what  
looked like my entire wardrobe.

My stomach twisted.

I stepped outside, lifted the lid, and peered inside. Sure  
enough, my belongings had been tossed out like yesterday's  
garbage. Shirts. Jeans. Shoes. My toiletry kit. Even the bottles of  
medication I took for my blood pressure and depression were buried  
beneath a hoodie.

I sighed. At least most of it was still clean.

I hauled the trash can to the car and unceremoniously  
dumped the contents into the trunk. It wasn't everything, but it was  
enough to get by. Still, I couldn't bring myself to leave just yet. The  
memories in that house weren't just hers — they were mine too. I  
deserved something more than just the clothes on my back.

In the garage, I found a small cardboard box, then crept  
back inside.

I filled it with framed photos of the boys, a few personal  
mementos, and some important files from the desk drawer. I stood  
in the middle of the now-pristine living room, box in hand, trying to

decide if there was anything else worth taking — when the tears came.

I sat on the couch and let them fall.

Is it worth it? I asked myself. Is being true to who I am worth losing my family?

This was all my fault. I'd known who I was when I married Eve. I'd built a house of lies and then had the audacity to be surprised when it all came crashing down. Didn't I owe it to my kids to stay, to be present? Who cares if I was unhappy? I'd been unhappy for so long, it had become second nature.

Maybe I could fix this.

I tucked the box into the backseat of the car — just in case — then walked back to the bedroom and knocked.

There was a long pause.

"Seth, why aren't you at—" Eve's voice caught as the door opened and she saw me. Her expression turned ice-cold. "What are you doing here?"

"I just want to talk," I said, keeping my voice even.

"I have nothing to say to you. I told you to leave, and I meant it."

"Please. Just give me five minutes."

"I don't owe you anything, Adam."

"We can work through this. I'll do whatever you want — counseling, a church program, one of those...ex-gay things if that's what it takes. I just...I can't lose the boys."

Her lip curled in disgust. "There's nothing to work through. It's over. I don't want you near Seth or Kane ever again. Leave now, or I'll call the police and get a restraining order."

My mouth fell open. "What the hell are you talking about? You can't get a restraining order! I haven't done anything. I have a right to see my children!"

"All I have to do is show them the pictures," she said coolly. "You'll be arrested."

The blood drained from my face. "Did you... did you actually download child porn? Just to frame me?"

For a moment, something flickered in her eyes. Uncertainty? Guilt? Then it vanished, buried under a mask of rage.

"I'm sure it's enough to ruin you."

My anger flared. "So that's the goal? Ruin me? It's not enough to take the kids and the house. You want to destroy my entire life. Are you really that twisted?"

"How dare you accuse me of being twisted, you cheating pervert."

"I never cheated on you," I said through clenched teeth. "Though maybe I should have. Then at least all of this might feel like it meant something."

She raised her hand again, but this time I caught her wrist before it could land.

"Don't," I said quietly. "I don't know what kind of sick game you're playing, but I never thought you'd sink this low. You can't keep me from my sons. They're mine too. And they're the only good thing that ever came out of this miserable marriage."

A flicker of pain crossed her face, but it was gone in a heartbeat, replaced by that same cruel determination.

"Don't try me, Adam," she whispered. "I'll bury you alive."

I let go of her wrist and stepped back.

"Eve..."

"If you stay away, I won't call the police," she said, her voice hard as a diamond, "but only to spare the boys the embarrassment of finding out their father is a pedophile."

"I'm not—"

"Enough!"

"Alright! I'll go. Just tell me one thing. What are you going to tell the boys?"

"I'll tell them whatever I want."

"Eve...please."

She glared at me for a few seconds, then heaved a monumentally beleaguered sigh. "What do you want me to tell them Adam? That Daddy likes other men better than Mommy?"

"Tell them...tell them that I love them, but I had to go away. Tell them that sometimes mommies and daddies stop loving each other..."

"For God's sake, they know what divorce is. Everybody is divorced. I'm not going to tell them you stopped loving me though. You never loved me."

"Eve," I groaned.

"I'll tell them we're getting a divorce, and that's all they need to know."

"They'll ask questions..."

"Then I'll deal with it as it comes up."

"You'll only make the boys hate you," I said. "They'll resent you for taking me away from them."

"They'll be better off without you."

That one hurt more than anything else she'd said.

"Cunt," I snapped, the word escaping before I could stop it.

"Faggot," she spat back, venomous.

I laughed, a harsh, broken sound. "So this is what we are now? Just name calling and slinging hate at each other until there's nothing left?"

"You made your choice."

"No," I said. "I made a mistake years ago. But I'm done pretending. I should've left a long time ago."

"Well, go. And don't come back. If you ever show your face here again, I'll make sure the entire world knows what kind of monster you are."

I looked at her one last time, searching for a trace of the woman I'd once loved. But that person was gone. Just like the boy I used to be — the one who'd been in love with Eric, who'd buried his heart for the sake of being what everyone expected.

But maybe it wasn't too late for that boy. Maybe I could be someone better now. Bryant was right. I'd wasted enough time living someone else's life.

Without another word, I turned and walked out.

I shut the door behind me — quietly — and with it, closed the chapter on that part of my life.

I changed into clean clothes in the car — nothing fancy, just the least wrinkled option that didn't smell like garbage — and drove to work on autopilot. My mind was still stuck in the emotional wreckage of the morning. I hadn't even had time to fully process what had just happened with Eve.

The moment I walked into the office, I knew something was off.

The shared workspace where I sat alongside half a dozen coworkers had always been noisy — small talk, keyboard clatter, the occasional joke tossed over a cubicle wall. Now it was dead quiet. Everyone kept their eyes glued to their monitors, studiously avoiding mine.

I greeted them anyway. “Morning.”

A few mumbled responses, but still no eye contact.

Something was wrong. Really wrong.

Heart pounding, I turned on my computer. As soon as the desktop loaded and I opened my inbox, my stomach dropped.

A company-wide email, sent from my address, timestamped at 1:43 a.m.

I hadn’t sent anything at 1:43 a.m.

The subject line made my vision tunnel: “Attention: The Truth About Adam Connelly”

I clicked. Bold, black letters screamed from the top of the message:

“Adam Connelly is a cheating, perverted faggot.”

I stared at the screen in stunned disbelief. The words blurred. I could barely breathe. She’d actually done it.

Eve had sent this — from our shared computer, from my account — while I was recovering from her emotional sledgehammer. Outted me in the most malicious way possible. To my entire company.

I didn’t even hear my supervisor approach until his voice broke through the fog.

“Adam?”

I fumbled to close the email before I realized he’d doubtlessly already seen it. I turned to him, red-faced.

“Could I see you in my office?” His expression was serious. Maybe a little pitying. Definitely not good.

I followed him wordlessly, my legs moving like they didn’t belong to me.

He shut the door behind us, then sat. He didn’t offer me a seat.

“Would you care to explain this?” he asked, sliding a printed copy of the email across the desk.

I stared at it a moment, then forced myself to meet his gaze.

“My wife and I...we’re going through something. She must have sent that after we fought last night. I didn’t know until I walked in and saw it myself.”

“Adam,” he said, his voice neutral but clipped, “your personal issues have no place in this office. I’ve had complaints from nearly every department this morning. You need to get your situation under control. Quickly.”

“Yes, sir,” I murmured, face hot with shame. “I will.”

He gave me a terse nod and turned back to his monitor. Dismissed.

I walked out and sat at my desk, numb. Everyone was still pretending not to see me. But I could feel them watching. Whispering. Judging.

There was no salvaging today.

I knocked on my supervisor’s door again. He barely looked up.

“Given the circumstances, I’m taking a personal day,” I said, already backing away.

I returned to my desk, grabbed what little was mine — some pens, a coffee mug, a photo of the boys — and shoved it all into my bag.

Then I left. No goodbyes. No glances back.

Bryant looked surprised when I knocked on the hotel room door before noon.

“I take it things didn’t go well?” he asked, stepping aside to let me in.

I dropped into the nearest chair like a marionette whose strings had been cut. “Understatement of the year. After round two with Eve — she threatened to erase me from the boys’ lives — I got to work to find out she’d emailed everyone. From my address. Outed me. Called me names. Lied.”

“Jesus,” he said softly. “So...you quit?”

“Not officially. I took a personal day. But let’s be real — I can’t go back there. Not after that.”

He nodded slowly. “So what now?”

I dropped my head into my hands. “I don’t know. I can’t think. Everything’s imploding.”

“Yeah,” he said gently. “No kidding.”

When I didn’t speak again, he moved to sit on the bed and leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

“Okay, I’m going to ask you some personal questions. Tell me to piss off if I go too far. First, your finances. Do you and Eve share a joint account?”

I looked up, surprised. “Yeah, for bills. But we both have separate accounts too. She can’t touch mine.”

“That’s good. If you walk away from the job, how long can you survive on your savings?”

“I’ve been freelancing on the side — graphic design stuff. If I quit, my non-compete clause ends and I could expand into branding, marketing. It wouldn’t be overnight, but I could make it work. Maybe six months, if I tighten the belt.”

He nodded. “What about a place to live?”

“I was thinking a cheap motel, just until I can figure something out.”

His expression turned thoughtful. “You should probably get a lawyer, too.”

“Yeah,” I agreed with a sigh. “I have a feeling things are going to get even uglier.”

He shrugged. “Hey, who knows? Maybe she’ll calm down and become reasonable.”

She didn’t.

If anything, Eve only became more unreasonable as the days passed. Any lingering hope I’d had that she might calm down and start acting rationally evaporated quickly. She refused to allow me any contact with the boys — wouldn’t even let me speak to them on the phone — and insisted that any communication going forward had to go through her lawyer.

I stayed with Bryant one more night, grateful for the warmth of a familiar face and the rare peace it offered. But by morning, he had to leave for his next consulting job, and I was back on my own.

With nowhere else to go, I checked into a cheap motel near the beltway. The kind of place where the front desk clerk doesn’t make eye contact, and the sheets feel like sandpaper. It was

supposed to be temporary — just a few nights while I hunted for an apartment I could afford and move into quickly.

Hiring a lawyer had already taken a significant bite out of my savings. He was competent, sharp, and realistic. He didn't promise miracles, just the best shot I had. But his hourly rate was a painful reminder of how fast the clock was ticking on my financial stability.

Still, I knew I needed legal protection. Eve had already proven she was willing to scorch the earth.

After a week of desperate searching, I finally found a place I could afford that didn't require a credit check or references — a sad little unit in a crumbling row house in West Baltimore in a neighborhood that looked more like a war zone than a major American city. The building leaned with the weight of time and neglect. Half the houses on the block were abandoned; some were boarded up, others little more than burned out shells.

The apartment itself was barely livable. The walls were stained with age, and a musty, sour smell clung to the air no matter how long I kept the windows open. No amount of scrubbing seemed to make a difference. The grime felt like it had seeped into the bones of the place. It was infested with roaches, and something else I tried not to name when I heard scurrying in the walls at night.

There was a single cracked mirror above the rusted sink, and a flickering light overhead that buzzed constantly like it was mocking me. But it had running water, a locking door, and rent I could afford for at least a few months.

It wasn't a home. But for now, it was a hiding place. A cocoon of sorts. If I could survive here, if I could endure, maybe I could emerge on the other side of this mess as someone new. Someone braver. Someone free.

That bravado didn't last long before depression took over.

I'd only been staying there for a couple of weeks when Bryant surprised me by stopping by to check on me.

"Hey! Had to see the new place!" he said, glancing nervously around. His eyes shifted to me, and a concerned look came over his face.

In the last two weeks, I'd made a chameleon-like adaptation to my surroundings. I hadn't showered or shaved in days, and it was entirely possible that I hadn't even changed my clothes.

His expression changed to horror as he walked through the battered door and took a look around.

"It's...nice," he said, entirely unconvincingly.

"It's all I can afford," I said with a shrug.

"It's temporary. How are things going?"

We'd talked a few times since he went home, but it had been at least a week since we'd last chatted.

I shrugged. "The lawyer says I don't have much of a case unless I can prove Eve set me up, and even that could get really ugly. Basically, I just have to roll over and let her get away with everything. Walk away from the boys. Give her the house."

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Adam. How's the business going?"

I shook my head. "I haven't been able to focus on anything. To be honest, I haven't even been working on the jobs I already have."

"Adam, you need to snap out of it. You're going to run through your money way too quickly."

"I already am. Why do you think I'm in this dump?"

He looked around again, then got a far away look on his face. After a few moments, he turned to face me.

"Well," he said, rubbing his hands together thoughtfully, "I've got an idea."

I looked at him warily. "Oh?"

"I'm going to wire you three grand. No arguments. It's not charity — it's an investment in your comeback."

"Bryant, I can't—"

"Shut up," he said, half-smiling. "Use it to get a real apartment. Something with windows and fewer rats. A clean place, somewhere you can think. Get a therapist. Talk to your lawyer. Do your laundry."

I blinked. "You don't have to do this..."

"I want to. And someday, when you're on your feet, you'll do the same for someone else. That's how this works. Community, not charity."

I swallowed hard, emotion catching in my throat.

"Also," he added, "you need a schedule. Wake up. Shower. Make a to-do list, even if it's just 'eat breakfast' and 'send one email.' Get a cheap coworking membership if you can. Treat

freelancing like a job. You need purpose. Structure. And above all — don't isolate."

"I don't have any friends."

"You have me."

I nodded slowly. "Yeah. You're right."

"I know I am. Look, this sucks. No question. But this doesn't have to be your ending. This is the part in the story where you fall apart...so you can rebuild stronger. You've already started. Just don't stop now."

Tears welled in my eyes. I looked away, blinking fast.

"Thanks," I said finally. "For everything."

Bryant pulled me into a hug. "You've got this, Adam. You just need a clean slate and a bit of stubbornness."

I managed a weak smile.

"I think I can do stubborn."

"Good," he said, grinning. "There's just one condition," he said, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Honestly, anything."

"Come down and visit me in Rehoboth in a few weeks. I'll introduce you to some people — good people. You'll have some more friends in no time. Deal?"

I simply nodded. I didn't trust myself to speak.

"Good. Then let's go apartment hunting. Because this roach motel you're in now? I wouldn't let my ex live here."

"What about the lease..."

"I'll pay any penalties for breaking it."

I shook my head. What had I done to deserve his kindness?

We found a better place — nothing fancy, but a massive step up from the deathtrap I'd been existing in. It was an airy studio near the heart of the city, tucked into the upper floor of a stately nineteenth-century townhouse that had long since been carved into apartments. The hardwood floors creaked underfoot, the ceilings were high with ornate plaster moldings, and the tall, sun-filled windows looked out over a quiet, tree-lined street. It wasn't much, but it felt like a sanctuary. The moment I moved in, it was as if a fog lifted.

With my head clearer and my surroundings less oppressive, I was finally able to focus on work again. Payments for completed projects started rolling in, and soon new clients were seeking me out for expanded services — branding, campaign work, social strategy. For the first time in months, maybe years, I felt something like hope.

It was the end of summer before I finally made good on my promise to visit Bryant.

He lived in a charming little bungalow in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, a gay-friendly resort town that buzzed with sun, surf, and rainbow flags. I stayed for a full week, and, true to his word, Bryant made it his mission to show me every gay bar the town had to offer: Aqua, Purple Parrot, Diego's, Blue Moon. Each night we made the rounds, and each night he introduced me to a new group of friends — sharp, stylish, confident gay men who knew exactly who they were.

I felt like an imposter among them.

They were welcoming, even kind, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I didn't belong. I'd barely scratched the surface of accepting myself. I'd spent so long hiding, denying, pretending, that the idea of flirting — or being flirted with — made my skin buzz with anxiety. I smiled and nodded, laughed at the right times, but inside, I felt dull and disconnected. I was a ghost in a room full of fireflies.

I'm sure they all thought I was a cold fish. Or worse, a dull, cold fish. Bryant laughed it off when I told him how I felt, but I just couldn't shake the feeling that I wasn't ready for all of...this.

On the fourth night, things shifted a little.

We had dinner with a friend of Bryant's, a gorgeous Greek-American lawyer named Ilana. She had a cloud of wild, black curls, intelligent honey-brown eyes, and a smile that made you feel like you'd already passed some secret test she didn't tell you you were taking. She was instantly charming, grounded, and warm in a way that made me forget to be on edge.

At first, I wondered if Bryant had set me up with her to test if I was really gay, but that theory went out the window when she casually mentioned a new boyfriend.

"Oh really, now?" Bryant teased. "Tell us all about him."

Ilana grinned as she sipped her wine. "Well, he's tall. A little older."

"How much older?" Bryant asked, feigning concern.

"Late 40s."

Bryant smirked. "So you got yourself a sugar daddy."

She rolled her eyes and swatted him. "Please. I'm a lawyer. I don't need a sugar daddy."

"Right, right. So you're the sugar mama."

"No sugar anything. He's just...charming. And kind. And calm. He's got his life together. Which is a refreshing change."

"There must be something wrong with him if he's single at that age," Bryant said with a grin.

Ilana rolled her eyes. "He's divorced, but on good terms with his ex-wife. They have a teenage daughter."

Bryant gave an exaggerated spit take.

"A daughter? Are you sure you're ready to be an evil stepmother?"

"Darling, it's the role I was born to play. But in all seriousness, she seems like a really nice girl."

"You've already met her?"

"Yes, and she's gorgeous. She looks like a model. Her name is Nila."

"What's Mr. Charming's name?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Lysander."

Bryant frowned. "What kind of name is that?"

"It's from Shakespeare. Not that I would expect you to know that, you Philistine," she shot back.

"How'd you meet?" he asked, ignoring her friendly jab.

"He's also a lawyer. We met on opposite sides of a custody case. After it closed, he asked me out for a drink."

Bryant raised his brows dramatically. "Mixing work and pleasure? Ilana! How scandalous."

"I know, right?" she said with a wink. "But he's so smart and handsome. No, not handsome. He's...debonair."

"God, what is this? A romance novel?" Bryant teased, but his smile was affectionate.

The banter was easy and full of history. I felt my shoulders loosen for the first time all week.

"How do you two know each other?" I asked.

"Bryant dated a former friend of mine," Ilana replied.

"I kept Ilana in the breakup," Bryant added.

"I let you keep me," she shot back. "It wasn't a hard decision. The guy cheated on him. And as lousy as he was as a boyfriend, he was an even worse friend."

Bryant grinned. "I found out he was cheating when I caught a case of gonorrhea. Romantic, right?"

I recoiled, but he just laughed it off.

"Occupational hazard. You'll find out soon enough," he said, raising his glass. "To bad decisions and the lessons they teach us."

"And to better decisions in the future," Ilana said.

I clinked glasses with them both and smiled, though I actually hoped I wouldn't find out about that facet of dating.

On my final evening in Rehoboth, Bryant told me to wear something nice.

"I've got one more person I want you to meet," he said mysteriously.

My stomach knotted. Was he setting me up?

We ended up at a sleek seafood restaurant just off the boardwalk, all polished wood and nautical decor. At a corner table near the windows sat an older gentleman already sipping a martini. He beamed when we approached.

"Bryant!" he boomed grandly with a cheeky smile. "You're late."

"Fashionably," Bryant replied with a grin. "Uncle Charlie, this is my friend Adam. The one I told you about."

I couldn't help but wonder what, exactly, he'd told him.

Charlie looked to be around eighty, maybe older, with a thick mane of white hair, crisply styled. He was thin without being frail, his eyes were a clear, striking ice-blue, and he wore a seersucker suit with the casual grace of a man who'd been dressing like that his whole life. A navy cravat circled his throat like a signature.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir," I said politely.

He waved me off. "Oh please. None of that 'sir' nonsense. I may be old, but I'm not dead. Call me Uncle Charlie. And forgive me for not standing — my hips are paying the price for far too much disco dancing in the seventies." He gave a laugh so full of mischief it made me smile.

I liked him instantly.

Dinner was a whirlwind of laughter and stories. Charlie had apparently known everyone who was anyone in the New York queer scene of the '70s and '80s, and he spun tales of Studio 54, Fire Island, protests and pride marches, heartbreaks and chosen family. Yet, even as he talked, he was never performative — always attentive, drawing me in with questions about my work, my story, my struggles.

He was sharp, witty, and generous, and by dessert, I felt like I'd known him for years.

When we said our goodbyes, he pulled me into a brief but firm hug.

"You're going to be fine, sweetheart," he said into my ear. "Trust me. You've already done the hardest part."

I blinked back emotion I hadn't expected.

Back in the car, I cleared my throat. "Bryant, I can't thank you enough for this week — for everything, really. I feel so fortunate that we met when we did. In such a short amount of time, you've become my best friend. I don't know what I would have done if it wasn't for you. And your uncle is an absolute delight."

"First of all, he's not really my uncle. Everyone just calls him Uncle Charlie. He's the friend I mentioned who insisted I use his membership to the Veranda while I was in D.C., so in some ways, he's responsible for our friendship. I had a feeling you two would hit it off.

"But listen," he added, more gently now. "You would have been fine. You're stronger than you believe. Look at how you've already rebuilt your life in just a few months."

"But I couldn't have done it without your help."

"Sure you could have. I just helped out a little. You already took the hardest step — walking away from a life that was killing you. Now, you just have to keep walking. Keep showing up. Build something new. Your business. A home. A life that fits you. Not anyone else's idea of who you should be. You've got time. You've got talent. And you've got people in your corner."

He smiled, warm and steady.

"And for what it's worth?" he added. "You're not a cold fish, Adam. You're just thawing out."

That time, I laughed for real.

Over the next year, my business continued to grow, slowly transforming from a modest freelance hustle into a fully functioning creative consultancy. Clients came steadily—some even through word of mouth—and for the first time in my adult life, I had control over my own schedule, my income, and, most importantly, my identity. It kept me busy, and in many ways, that was a blessing.

The divorce, on the other hand, dragged on like a slow-moving freight train—loud, relentless, and impossible to ignore. But since I'd agreed to all of Eve's terms early on, it moved along without any major flare-ups. It was the path of least resistance, the only way to keep things from spiraling further out of control. Still, my biggest loss wasn't the house or the financial strain—it was the silence from Seth and Kane. Eve made good on her threat to cut me off completely. I had no contact with the boys. Not a call, not a text, not even a secondhand update.

That absence was a hole I learned to walk around every day, but it never stopped hurting.

The holidays were the hardest. I sent presents to the boys—books, games, little things I knew they loved—but I had no idea if they ever received them. Eve never responded. For all I knew, the gifts ended up in a donation bin or the trash. I sent them anyway. It made me feel like I was still trying.

Bryant, ever attuned to when I was slipping into despair, made sure I was never alone for long. He invited me to his annual Friendsgiving, which turned out to be a potluck dinner full of delicious food, inappropriate toasts, and a group of queer folks who laughed loudly and hugged freely. Then he insisted I spend Christmas at the beach. We drank cocoa, watched terrible holiday movies, and walked the quiet, icy shoreline on Christmas morning.

I started visiting Rehoboth at least once a month — weekends when I could swing them. Bryant became my refuge, and over time, Ilana and Uncle Charlie became part of that chosen family too. Ilana's boyfriend, Lysander, turned out to be every bit as polished and debonair as she'd described—tall, graceful, with warm brown skin and silvering temples. He was the kind of man who wore linen effortlessly and somehow made being a lawyer seem romantic.

Every visit included at least one dinner with Uncle Charlie, who refused to let age or decorum slow him down. He flirted shamelessly, told stories that had me in stitches, and always managed to say something wildly inappropriate with absolute charm. I adored him.

It was early summer when life took another unexpected turn.

Bryant hosted a small cookout in his backyard, the kind of gathering that felt like summer distilled: string lights swaying in the breeze, mismatched chairs dragged onto the grass, drinks sweating in their glasses.

Uncle Charlie was holding court from a cushioned patio chair, martini in hand, looking every bit the eccentric Southern gentleman. He wore seersucker shorts, a pale blue button-down with the sleeves rolled, a white-and-navy cravat, boat shoes with no socks, and a jaunty straw boater with a matching ribbon. The man could've stepped out of a Tennessee Williams play.

Ilana and Lysander were huddled near the grill, chatting with Bryant while he carefully monitored the burgers and sausages. Most of the other guests had gone inside to grab refills, so I took the opportunity to sit down beside Uncle Charlie.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite brooding artist," he said, reaching over to pat my knee. "You clean up well. How are things in the world of Adam?"

"Better," I said honestly. "Business is good. I've got some breathing room for the first time in forever. My lease is about to end, so I'm deciding whether to stay put or find something a little bigger."

"Need more space for your harem of gentleman callers?" he teased, with a wicked glint in his eye.

I chuckled. "What gentleman callers? There's been a grand total of zero."

He rolled his eyes. "Well that's a damn shame. You're wasting your prime, sweetheart. If I were thirty years younger, I'd be all over you like glitter on drag night."

"Somehow, I don't doubt that," I laughed. "But give me a break. My divorce isn't even final yet."

"Pfft. That's just a technicality. You should be out there slutting it up like the rest of us had to. My generation didn't survive Reagan and Stonewall for you to sit around behaving like a Puritan."

I grinned and leaned back in my chair. “Didn’t you once tell me no one actually died at Stonewall?”

He waved a hand. “It’s called poetic license. Besides, the point stands. Go out. Kiss a boy. Or three. Wear something tight. Let someone buy you a drink. You deserve some fun.”

“Maybe I will,” I said, a little surprised at how much lighter I felt just saying it out loud.

He looked at me for a long moment, then asked casually, “You particularly tied to Baltimore?”

The question caught me off guard.

“No, not really. I mean... I stayed nearby for the boys. I was hoping, maybe someday, I’d get visitation. But that’s looking more and more unlikely.”

He nodded slowly, thoughtfully, then took a long sip of his drink. “Hmm.”

“That’s it? Just hmm?”

He shrugged, far too nonchalantly. “Oh, nothing. Just wondering.”

But I knew that look. He was scheming. Uncle Charlie always had a plan.

I raised an eyebrow. “Charlie. What are you plotting?”

He just smiled, all innocent mischief. “You’ll see, darling. Good things come to those who wait...and those who know the right queens.”

And with that, he raised his martini and toasted the air.

I didn’t know what he had in mind — but I had a feeling life was about to get interesting again.

It was another two weeks before I found out what Uncle Charlie had up his immaculately tailored sleeve. He called me out of the blue — something he’d never done before. He was an in-person kind of guy, the type who preferred hand-written notes and face-to-face gossip over texting or phone calls. So when I saw his name flash across my screen, I knew something was up.

Even more uncharacteristic, he asked if I could make it down to the beach that weekend. No preamble. No explanation. Just a breezy, “Can you manage a little getaway, darling? I have a surprise.”

It was earlier than I'd planned to visit again, but how could I say no? Curiosity clawed at me the moment we hung up — not that I would've turned him down even without it. Uncle Charlie was one of those rare people whose presence was a gift in itself.

But he'd never invited me to his house in Ocean City before. That alone was enough to make the hairs on the back of my neck prick with anticipation.

It had been years since I'd last been to Ocean City. When I was a kid, every summer my father would load us into the old wood-paneled station wagon and drive us *downy ocean*, as locals said, like it was a sacred pilgrimage. We'd spend a sticky, sunburned week splashing in the surf, eating way too much boardwalk food, and riding the tilt-a-whirl at Trimper's Rides — that old amusement park at the southern tip of the boardwalk where the scent of fried dough hung thick in the air. We never left without enough boxes of saltwater taffy to weigh down the back of the car. The taffy would be handed out to friends and neighbors upon our arrival home, distributed like souvenirs of summer.

Those memories lived in a hazy, golden part of my brain — all warm breezes and simpler times — so when Charlie invited me to his place, I was curious to see what Ocean City looked like now. I'd heard it had changed dramatically over the years, transforming from a charming seaside escape to Maryland's most popular tourist attraction, drawing millions of tourists every summer. I'd read somewhere that, during the height of the season, it became the most densely populated city in the country.

I drove down on a Saturday morning and quickly discovered that rumor wasn't far off. The Ocean City of my childhood was barely recognizable. Nearly every square foot of sand seemed to have been claimed and built upon. The town had traded its modest motels and beach cottages for towering high-rises that loomed like sentinels along the horizon, casting long shadows across the strip. The main drag, Coastal Highway, was a cacophony of honking cars, sunburnt families hauling beach chairs, and packs of shirtless twenty-somethings darting across traffic without warning.

It was sensory overload — neon signs flashing, car horns blaring, the blur of bright swimwear and portable speakers — and I felt more like I was navigating a festival gone feral than visiting a beach town.

But when I finally reached the far north end of town, where Charlie lived, it was like crossing an invisible border into another world. The noise faded. The buildings shrank. The air seemed clearer. There were no flashing signs, no screeching children with dripping cones of Thrasher's fries.

It felt like arriving at an oasis.

I was expecting something like Bryant's cozy bungalow — a modest, well-kept cottage with maybe a few eccentricities thrown in for flair. Instead, I arrived at the north end of town to find a stunning cedar-shingled beach house that looked like it had been lifted from the pages of a *Southern Living* magazine and lovingly dropped onto the dunes.

Not near the beach — on it. The house sat directly on the sand, nestled like a forgotten gem among the high-rise hotels and noisy rental properties that crowded the shoreline. A broad wraparound porch faced the street, adorned with white rocking chairs and overflowing planters bursting with deep red geraniums and trailing vines. A neat gravel path wound through a landscaped yard of native shrubs and waist-high pampas grass that swayed in the breeze like a silvery halo.

Uncle Charlie was already on the porch, his signature martini in one hand, his straw boater hat in the other. He wore a lavender linen shirt, crisp white trousers, and a mischievous grin.

"Uncle Charlie," I called as I stepped out of the car, momentarily stunned by the serenity of the place. "This is...beautiful. I didn't know places like this still existed in Ocean City."

He chuckled as he gestured welcomingly, throwing his arms open wide without spilling a single drop. "Only a few, and mostly up this way. I bought it for a song in 1967 — back when gay bars were still raided, and you could get a beachfront property without selling your soul."

He gestured toward the wall of concrete and glass hotels to the south. "Developers have been throwing money at me for decades. 'We'll give you seven figures and throw in a penthouse,' they say. But why give up my little piece of paradise for an HOA?"

"I don't blame you. This place is a time capsule — in the best way."

"Come inside. I've made us cocktails."

He moved slowly, every step looked painful, but he didn't complain. I followed up across the porch and inside. The moment I crossed the threshold, I felt like I'd stepped into another century. I'd expected driftwood frames, seashell mobiles, and kitschy crab-themed throw pillows. Instead, I was greeted by the scent of pipe tobacco and sandalwood, the soft hush of Persian rugs underfoot, and the sight of dark, antique mahogany furnishings gleaming in the late afternoon light.

Art lined every wall — some in ornate gilded frames, others tacked up unceremoniously with thumbtacks or binder clips. Nearly every piece depicted the male form in some fashion: oil paintings, charcoal sketches, vintage magazine tear-outs, and a few avant-garde photographs that left little to the imagination. It should've felt overwhelming, but instead, the home radiated warmth, intimacy, and a kind of joyful irreverence.

Charlie caught my gaze lingering on a particularly romantic painting of two young men asleep under a tree.

"That one's special," he said softly, handing me a glass. "Painted by a boy I loved once. A long time ago. He's gone now, but the painting stays."

I didn't say anything right away. I just nodded, letting the moment pass with the respect it deserved.

"Anyway," he said, his tone lightening again, "let me give you the grand tour."

The first floor was divided into a living room, a family room, a half bath, and a kitchen with dining space. The second floor had two bedrooms and a full bathroom.

"Small but she gets the job done, which is what they used to say about me back in the day. Now, come sit on the back deck, or the veranda, as I prefer to call it. I want to pick your brain about something."

We settled into a pair of deep wicker chairs on the back porch, which opened directly onto the beach. A few sunbathers lingered on the sand, their laughter carried to us on the breeze. I took a sip of my drink and waited.

"I know you've been thinking about your next chapter," he began, "and I've been thinking about how a man like you might write it."

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you trying to play fairy godmother again?”

“Darling, always. But this time, I’m offering more than a cocktail and unsolicited sex advice.” He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a key. He placed it gently on the wicker table between us.

I stared at it for a moment, then looked up.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a key, dear,” he said, lips twitching.

“Well, yes, I gathered that much. But what’s it to?”

“This house.”

I blinked. “I don’t understand.”

Charlie leaned back in his chair, swirling the remains of his cocktail with a finger that sparkled with an opal pinky ring. “I’m getting along in years, Adam,” he said, as if reading from the prologue of a long-prepared monologue. “Now, don’t argue, I know I look fabulous. But I also know the difference between vanity and reality. In my head, I’m still a twenty-year-old twink who can do the Hustle in three-inch platforms. But my hips and knees say otherwise.”

He took a sip of his drink, then continued, his tone softening. “Most of the boys I ran with back then are gone. The ones who didn’t vanish in the plague are now riddled with arthritis and bad tempers. Me, I’ve been lucky. But I’m not stupid. The time I have left is precious, and I want to spend it wisely. Which brings us back to the key.”

I tilted my head. “Uncle Charlie, aren’t I a little old to be your houseboy?”

His eyes sparkled with wicked delight as he let out a cackle. “Oh, heavens, no! Nothing so scandalous. Although, if I were, it would be someone more your age. I’m far too brittle for a live-in twink now. But no, what I need is companionship. Some help with the day-to-day nonsense. Light cooking. Grocery runs. Maybe the occasional reach for something on a high shelf. I’ve got a cleaner once a week, but between visits, dust and detritus refuse to respect her schedule.”

He paused, growing more serious. “Truth is, I had a bit of a scare. About two weeks ago. had a little fall. Right in my bedroom. Still don’t know what happened. No warning, no drama — just me

and the floor having a surprise rendezvous. Didn't break anything, thank God, but I couldn't get up for a while. And it occurred to me, if something had gone wrong...I would've just laid there until I didn't need to worry about groceries anymore."

His voice cracked just slightly on that last part. He looked away, out toward the water.

"The housekeeper wasn't due for days. I keep telling myself I'm fine, that I'm still self-sufficient. But fine doesn't mean invincible. And as glamorous as I may be, darling, this place gets damn lonely some days."

I studied him, trying to separate the showman from the truth-teller. But I realized it didn't really matter. Even if part of this was performance, the fear beneath it was real. And so was the offer.

"Charlie..." I hesitated. "Are you sure? I mean, you seem every bit as capable as I am."

He turned back to me with a small, knowing smile. "Yes, I am — for now. But I'd rather be a little overly cautious while I'm still capable than wait until I'm not. I've seen too many people put things off until it's too late. That's not how I want to go."

He swirled his drink gently. "And besides, it's not all doom and gloom. The way I see it, you need a fresh start. A place to catch your breath. Somewhere with salt air and less heartbreak. You've spent the last year clawing your way back from the rubble. Don't you think you deserve a soft place to land?"

I didn't answer right away. My throat had gone tight.

When I finally managed to speak, my voice came out quieter than I expected. "Why me?"

Charlie raised an eyebrow. The question seemed to catch him off guard.

"Well, who else would I ask?"

I gave a half-hearted shrug. "I don't know. You know so many people."

He scoffed and waved his drink in the air with dramatic flair, not spilling a drop. "And I hate most of them."

I gave a soft laugh, but shook my head. "You do not. What about Bryant? You've known him longer than you've known me."

Charlie's expression softened. "Bryant is a good friend. One of the best. And I cherish him dearly. Honestly, he's the only other person I'd have even *considered*. But he's gone so often with

work. Jetting off to a consulting gig or some exotic locale. He's too busy building a career, living a fabulous life. And that's exactly what he should be doing."

He took a sip of his drink, then looked at me over the rim of the glass. "But you...you have your own business. You work from home. You'd be here. And that matters. There's a comfort in knowing someone's in the house, even if we're just passing like ships in the night."

"So...it's practical," I said slowly, nodding. That made sense. I could accept that.

But Charlie wasn't finished.

"No," he said, gently but firmly. "Not just practical."

He sat forward a little, resting his glass on the table between us. "If you're going to make me be sentimental — and God help me, I guess I will — there's something different about you. Maybe you remind me of someone I once knew. Maybe you don't. Maybe it's just one of those inexplicable things where two people click. You can't plan for it. Can't manufacture it."

He hesitated for a beat, then went on, quieter now. "I've lived a very full life, Adam. But I'm still human. I still get lonely. And I've earned the right to be selective. I couldn't just share my home with anyone. But you? You're kind. You're steady. You listen. You've had your heart broken and you're still standing. You know what it means to hurt and not give up. That matters to me."

I swallowed hard, but the lump in my throat didn't budge.

Charlie gave me a faint smile and reached across the table, his hand light on mine. "I think it would be good for both of us. That's all I'm saying. It could be mutually beneficial."

He leaned forward and placed his hand gently on mine. "But this isn't charity, Adam. I'd never insult you like that. This is an arrangement between friends. You help me out with small things, and I give you space to rebuild your life in peace. You'd have your privacy, freedom, and ocean views. And me, of course, lurking about like a stylish ghost."

A laugh escaped me despite the lump in my throat.

He pressed on, "Just say you'll think about it. No pressure. You wouldn't have to decide tonight."

I picked up the key, turned it over in my hand. It was surprisingly warm from the sun — and surprisingly heavy for

something that seemed so simple. I could feel the weight of what it represented — not just a key to a building, but maybe...the beginning of a new chapter. One I hadn't even imagined. A fresh start somewhere new didn't sound all that bad.

“Maybe we can work something out,” I said, slowly.

Charlie's face lit up like the boardwalk at dusk. “Good. Wonderful! We'll hash out the details later. For now, finish your drink and go take a walk on the beach. That's step one of becoming a proper coastal homo: long, introspective beach walks with a tasteful playlist.” He winked. “Preferably with some Chappell Roan.”

I laughed again and stood, slipping the key into my pocket. As I stepped off the porch and onto the warm sand, I let the sea breeze fill my lungs and tried to imagine what it might feel like to finally stop surviving and start living.

## Chapter 4

In the end, moving in with Charlie was surprisingly easy — at least on the surface. But of course, there were practicalities and negotiations to work through, even if he liked to pretend everything was as simple as handing me a key.

The first point of contention was rent. I'd barely begun to ask what a fair monthly contribution might be before Charlie cut me off with a dramatic wave of his hand.

"Absolutely not," he said, horrified. "You're not paying me rent. What would I even do with it? Roll it up and stuff it into my mattress with the rest of the money I'm not spending? I have more than I could ever possibly spend already."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he plowed ahead. "Your help around the house will be worth more than any check. And don't forget, I want you to have time to focus on your business. I didn't invite you here to be my butler."

"I wasn't planning on butlering," I said dryly.

He smirked. "Good. Because I'm not the easiest person to serve. Just ask my last lover."

Still, I couldn't help but feel a little guilty. "Charlie, it doesn't sit right with me not to contribute anything."

"Well, you can help with groceries," he relented. "And wine. Lord knows I go through enough of it." He paused. "And maybe you can help me figure out this damn new smart TV I bought. I swear it has a mind of its own."

"Done," I said, holding out a hand. He shook it solemnly, as if we'd just finalized a high-stakes business merger.

We made other practical decisions together over the next few days. I would move into the guest bedroom, with a view of the dunes and just enough space for a desk and my computer setup. Charlie had it painted a calming sea glass green and made a big fuss about getting it professionally cleaned before I arrived. I offered to do it myself, but he insisted that was no way to start a new chapter.

As I began packing up my apartment back in Baltimore, I was struck by how little I truly owned. A few pieces of cheap second-hand furniture, some clothes, books, and computer

equipment. I sold the furniture on Facebook Marketplace, lightening my load until it all fit into the back of Bryant's SUV. "More trunk space," he'd said, "and I don't trust your jalopy to survive the Bay Bridge if it was weighed down with all your crap."

Ever the loyal friend, he'd taken the weekend off to help with the move. He showed up with coffee, his usual sarcasm, and a surprisingly efficient packing strategy.

"You sure about this?" he asked as we stacked the last of my boxes in his car. "You're moving in with a semi-retired gay activist with a caftan collection and a penchant for martinis."

"I know," I said. "It's weird. But it feels...right."

"Good." He clapped me on the shoulder. "Because I think it's going to be really good for you."

Once everything was packed, I stood in the empty living room for a moment. The walls were bare now, stripped of the few pieces of art I'd managed to scavenge from secondhand shops. Without them, the place looked even more temporary, as though I'd never really lived there at all.

"You okay?" Bryant asked from the doorway.

"Yeah," I said, but I didn't move. "I guess I just thought this was where I'd start over. Now it feels like I've been waiting to start."

He walked over, slung an arm around my shoulders, and gave me a squeeze.

"Then maybe this next place is where it really begins."

The drive to Ocean City took longer than usual thanks to traffic, but I didn't mind. I kept the windows cracked, the music low, and the rear bumper of Bryant's car in view. Somewhere around Easton, I realized I wasn't anxious. That was new.

When we finally pulled up in front of Charlie's house, the sun was beginning to dip low over the horizon. The air smelled like salt and sunscreen, and the sky had that soft golden haze that makes everything feel briefly cinematic.

Charlie was waiting for us on the porch, two glasses of wine already poured.

He flitted around like an overexcited host, directing where everything should go, providing snacks and drinks, and insisting we all sit down for a proper lunch on the porch. I half-expected him to toast my "arrival into queer coastal domesticity."

By the end of the day, I was unpacked and settled in, my things neatly tucked into the second floor bedroom that smelled faintly of lemon. As the sound of the waves filtered in through the open window, I sat on the edge of my new bed and breathed a sigh of relief. I felt grounded in a way I hadn't in a long time.

Maybe Bryant was right, maybe this would be good for me.

We spent the next few weeks slipping into a rhythm. Charlie, ever the grand queen and benevolent tyrant, appointed himself my personal guide to gay culture — an undertaking he dubbed *Operation De-Cloister the Closet Case*.

He instituted weekly movie nights with religious devotion. We started with *Paris Is Burning*, and by the time we hit *To Wong Foo* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, he was quoting entire scenes by heart, complete with hand gestures and dramatic accents. When he insisted we watch *Mommie Dearest* and *Valley of the Dolls*, I pointed out that he might just be trying to corrupt me with camp.

"That's the point, dear boy," he replied. "Every self-respecting homosexual should know who Neely O'Hara is and why Joan Crawford *hates* wire hangers."

Outside of movie nights, he dragged me to his favorite shops and gay-friendly cafes, flipping through racks of vintage jackets or sipping overpriced espresso with an air of judgmental delight. "Style isn't about money," he told me once, "It's about taste. And darling, yours could use a smidge of direction."

For someone who liked to moan about his aching hips and fading stamina, Charlie had a surprising amount of energy. If not for the occasional wince when getting up from low furniture, I'd never have known he was in his eighties. The man could out-walk me in a mall, out-dance me in the living room, and definitely out-talk me at a dinner party. Realizing this, and not wanting to look like a sluggish houseguest, I reluctantly agreed to his suggestion that I join his gym.

He swam laps. I wheezed through the treadmill.

As we made our rounds to local haunts — bars, bookstores, galleries — I noticed something else: everyone knew Uncle Charlie. Everywhere we went, someone was hugging him, waving, calling out, "Charlie, darling!" I began to feel like I was in the presence of

minor royalty. A local legend. And to my surprise, I was warmly welcomed simply because I was with him.

Then, one night after dinner, we opened a second bottle of wine. It was late. The windows were open and the air was thick with salt from the ocean and the soft hum of crickets just beyond the screen door. We sat in the living room — him in his usual wingback chair, me curled sideways on the couch — when he set his glass down and gave me a long, unreadable look.

“Would you like to hear my story?” he asked, suddenly serious.

“I thought I already was,” I said, gesturing at the half-empty wine bottle. “You’ve been narrating your entire life one Judy Garland quote at a time.”

He smiled, but didn’t laugh. “No, I mean the real one.”

I straightened slightly. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

He nodded once, folded his hands in his lap, and began.

He told me he’d been living in New York City during the Stonewall Riots — “though I wasn’t at the bar that night,” he said with a smirk. “I was at home, pretending to be straight and drafting a real estate contract. A tragic evening all around.”

At the time, Charlie had been a rising star at a prestigious Manhattan law firm, ambitious and closeted — “I knew I was gay, of course, but I was a proper Catholic boy from Connecticut. I figured I’d just marry a debutante and have nervous breakdowns in secret like the rest of them.”

But something about Stonewall broke that illusion for him.

“It was the first time I ever saw people like me fight back,” he said, swirling his wine slowly. “I watched on the news, saw queens throwing bricks, drag performers cursing at cops. And I thought, ‘Maybe I don’t want to die quietly after all.’ So I quit the firm. Just like that. Walked away from six figures, which in those days was basically a king’s ransom. And I joined the Gay Liberation Front.”

I blinked. “The real GLF?”

He nodded. “Met my first boyfriend there. The artist. The one who did that painting you admired, of the boys under the tree. That was him and I. We protested together. Got arrested at one of our kiss-ins. My parents disowned me after that. Said I was an embarrassment. But I finally felt alive.”

When their relationship ended, he moved to Florida in the late '70s to fight Anita Bryant's vile "Save Our Children" campaign. "We lost," he said simply. "That loss gutted me. It made me doubt whether we'd ever win. So I ran away — to San Francisco. Thought maybe the West Coast would be kinder."

It wasn't.

He was there when Harvey Milk was shot. He joined the protests after Dan White's ludicrous sentencing — the infamous "White Night Riots."

"By that point, I was exhausted. I was angry. I wanted to believe in something again. That's when I met Pietro."

His voice softened on Pietro's name, like touching silk. "He was older. Kind. So gentle. We moved in together after six months. Built a life."

Then came the virus.

They lost dozens of friends. Pietro got sick. Charlie cared for him until the very end. "It was like watching the sun die. I still dream about him, sometimes. He smelled like tobacco and cedarwood and almond soap. I kept a bottle of his cologne until the glass cracked."

He stared out toward the window for a long beat before continuing.

"That's where all my money came from, you know," he said quietly. "Pietro left me everything. His family tried to take it from me, of course. Vultures. They swooped in the moment he passed, suddenly full of righteous indignation, acting like I was some kind of grifter who'd tricked him in his final days. But they weren't there. Not when it counted. They never had time for him while he was alive — didn't return his calls, never came to visit. Not once. Not even when he was down to skin and bones and couldn't get out of bed without help."

He set the glass down with more force than necessary, though his voice remained steady.

"I wasn't in it for the money. God, no. I would've given it all up in a heartbeat if it meant I could've saved him. But I was the one who held his hand in the hospital. I was the one who washed him and fed him and made sure he died with dignity. They didn't get to sweep in at the end and rewrite that story."

Charlie leaned back and let out a long, measured breath. “We went to court. It got ugly. Accusations, character assassinations — you know the drill. They tried to paint me as some opportunistic leech, just the ‘roommate’ who overstayed his welcome. But Pietro had been smart. Everything was in writing. The will was airtight. And I had years of witnesses who knew exactly who I was to him. I won.”

He looked at me, then, not with pride, but something closer to weariness.

“I didn’t ask for any of it, but I protected it like it was the last piece of him I had left. And in a way, it was. So yeah...that’s where the money came from. It wasn’t a windfall. It was a war. And a promise kept.”

When Pietro died, Charlie fled again — back to New York, then eventually to D.C., and later Maryland. He’d joined ACT UP in the mid-’80s, galvanized by the government’s callous neglect.

He was there for the FDA protest in 1988 — the infamous “die-in.”

“I wasn’t arrested,” he said. “But I helped plan it. We made cardboard tombstones and laid them across the road. I carried one that said, ‘He died because you didn’t care.’”

In 1993, at the March on Washington, he met Tim McFeeley from the Human Rights Campaign Fund. “He said he needed fighters. I told him I was tired. He said tired people make the best warriors. We see the long road.”

Charlie worked with HRC for almost two decades. Lobbied Congress. Met presidents. Buried more friends than he could count.

“I’ve been angry a long time, Adam,” he said, looking up from his wine. “But lately I just want to make space for something softer. Something warmer. Maybe even hopeful.”

The room was quiet except for the whisper of the waves in the distance.

“I had no idea,” I finally said.

He gave me a small, tired smile. “No reason you should have. That’s the point of surviving, dear. So the next generation doesn’t have to carry all of it. But sometimes...I think it’s good to share it. So someone remembers.”

“I will,” I said, my voice barely audible.

He raised his glass. “To remembering, then.”

I clinked mine softly against his. “To remembering.”

Our routine seldom varied. I worked during the day, breaking only to make us lunch — Charlie insisted on a proper lunch — and in the evenings, we’d sit on the back deck, watching the gulls circle overhead and listening to the waves until the air turned too cool for Charlie’s liking.

Weekends were for outings. We often headed to Rehoboth Beach, Charlie’s spiritual home, to visit his favorite bars. Bryant usually joined us, and Ilana and Lysander came along when they were free. We caught the occasional drag show, sometimes took in a movie, and ate out far more than my bank account would have liked — though Charlie more often than not insisted on paying, waving away my protests with a dismissive flutter of his hand. “What good is money if you don’t use it to feed your friends and fatten them up?” he’d say.

To my surprise, I was content. For the first time in a long time, I felt settled — not quite healed, but healing.

The only disruption in the calm was Charlie’s ongoing campaign to nudge me back into the dating pool. He paraded a steady stream of eligible bachelors past me: a charming accountant, a sweet-natured musician, a too-handsome-for-his-own-good bartender. I went on a few polite dates, mostly to appease Charlie, but nothing sparked. No chemistry, no second dates, and certainly no one-night stands — much to his chagrin.

“You’re wasting your youth!” he’d cry with dramatic flair.

“I’m in my forties, Charlie,” I’d reply, rolling my eyes.

“That ship has sailed.”

“If I were a younger man, I’d snap you up in a heartbeat,” he’d declare with mock indignation.

I’d laugh, and he’d fix me with a look both fond and wistful. “Let me rephrase that. You are quite the catch. I just happen to be too old to do anything about it. You deserve someone, Adam. A partner. A future.”

“I’m not ready for that yet,” I’d say. The line had become almost automatic.

Usually, that was the end of it. But one evening, as the last of the light drained from the horizon and we sat on the deck wrapped in sweaters, Charlie pushed further.

“Why not?”

I blinked at him. “What do you mean, why not?”

“I mean exactly that. Why aren’t you ready? What’s standing in your way?”

I hesitated. “My divorce isn’t final...”

“A loveless marriage. You’re not pining after Eve.”

“The boys...”

“They don’t have anything to do with this. Don’t use them as a shield.”

“I don’t know anyone...”

“I’ve introduced you to a dozen perfectly eligible men. You didn’t like any of them?”

I sighed, cornered. “I’m scared, Charlie. It’s been a long time. I’m out of practice.”

He nodded slowly, no judgment in his eyes — just understanding. “You’re smart, kind, honest, and easy on the eyes. And no, don’t argue with me. I’ve seen you come back to life in the past year, Adam. You don’t have to be ready. You just have to be open.”

“Yes, Mother,” I said dryly, smiling despite myself.

He arched a perfectly groomed brow. “You should listen to your mother. Now get inside before you catch your death of cold — and wash behind your ears!”

That was the weekend I noticed it for the first time.

We took our usual walk on the beach, a slow amble along the surf’s edge, but Charlie was winded by the halfway point. He leaned on my arm more heavily than usual, pausing to catch his breath. He tried to play it off with a chipper “Let’s go!” when he recovered, but we both knew something was off.

After that, I started to notice more.

Afternoon naps, where he used to be indefatigable. Dozing off in front of the TV, or even, once, mid-dinner. His pill organizer — once barely used — was now full of prescriptions. He never mentioned doctor visits, and I began to wonder if he was trying to hide something.

Was this just age catching up to him all at once?

No. Charlie was too self-aware, too proud, to let things slide unnoticed. He'd been hiding it. From me.

And I needed to know why.

One morning, I made his tea and waited on the back deck. It was one of those crisp fall mornings that hinted at the winds of winter just around the corner. He didn't see me at first. He walked out slowly, his posture bent, his face drawn and pale. For a fleeting second, I saw the truth — unvarnished, unguarded. He looked...old.

Then he spotted me, and just like that, the mask snapped back into place. His shoulders straightened, his face brightened with a grin, and he practically sang, "Adam, I didn't see you there."

He eased into his chair with practiced grace, but I wasn't fooled anymore.

"Charlie," I said gently, "we need to talk."

His eyes locked on mine, pleading silently for me to let it go.

I didn't.

"Are you sick?" I asked.

He closed his eyes. A long silence stretched between us. Finally, he nodded. "Yes."

I felt something hollow open in my chest.

"How long have you known?"

"A few months."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't want you staying out of pity for a dying old man. I wanted you to feel free to leave when you were ready."

I barely heard the rest. *Dying*. The word echoed in my skull, erasing all other thoughts.

"What is it?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

"Cancer."

"Is it...treatable?"

Charlie grimaced. "The treatment is worse than the disease. I've seen friends go through it and suffer horribly. And for what? A few measly months? I've lived a full life, Adam. I'm not afraid to die. I just want to go out with dignity. I want to leave here knowing I did what I could to make the world a better place, right up to the end."

I shook my head, still not understanding. "But how can you just give up? You could fight this..."

"I'm tired of fighting, Adam. I've been fighting my entire life. I don't want whatever time I have left to be consumed with torturous treatments that make me sick and weak. And for God's sake, my hair might fall out! I'm a vain man, Adam. Let me die with my hair intact."

"How long?" I rasped, ignoring his weak attempt at humor.

"Six months, if I'm lucky. Likely less."

My vision blurred. "You should've told me."

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps? You're the only person in my life right now."

"I'm hardly the only person in your life. You have Bryant and Ilana. You'd have more if you'd only let them in."

"Didn't you think that I might need some time to deal with this? It never occurred to you that I might want to be there for you through this?"

"Of course it occurred to me," he replied calmly. "I didn't want you to feel obligated to stay when you need to move on with your life."

"Move on with my life? Is that what you wanted to do when you found out Pietro had AIDS?"

"That was different," he said stonily, although I could tell my point had been made. "Pietro was my lover."

"And you've been like a father to me the last few months. How could you think I'd just walk away from that?"

"I'm not your responsibility."

"And I wasn't yours but you were there for me anyway, a complete stranger. Who's going to take care of you?"

"I'll hire a nurse."

"I'm fully capable..."

"It's not about being capable. It's about ensuring you're free to live your life."

I exploded. "And what? Just leave you to die alone? You were there for me, Charlie. You saved me. You think I was going to walk away from you now? This isn't just your decision. I'm not a child and I'm not a puppet that you can control by pulling my strings."

He blinked for a second, then nodded. "You're right, of course. I have been treating you like a child. Perhaps it's because I've come to think of you as the son I never had."

His quiet confession took my breath from me. I slumped into the chair beside him.

"So I can stay?" I asked when the silence stretched too long.

"I was never going to ask you to leave. I just wanted you to feel like you could."

"You'll let me help?"

He gave a faint smile. "Could I stop you?"

"No."

"Then why fight it?"

"No more secrets," I said.

He raised a hand solemnly. "Scout's honor."

"And you'll ask when you need help."

"Unless you're busy with work..."

"Charlie."

He sighed. "Fine. Agreed."

"Shake on it."

We shook, sealing the deal.

He kept his word. But no promise could stop the decline. In the weeks that followed, he began to fade faster than I could accept. By winter, he was barely the man I had met just a little over a year before — just a pale, shrinking shadow of his former self. I moved my office into his bedroom, working while he dozed under the weight of his pain meds.

It was hard to wrap my mind around the concept that someone could fade away so quickly. It took all his strength now just to cross the room, even with my assistance. I knew it was just a matter of weeks, maybe even days, before he'd be completely bedridden.

He never said it out loud, but we both knew: the end was near.

One morning towards the end, he refused his pain medication even though he was obviously in a lot of pain, so I knew he had something important in the works. He still made appointments without my assistance, which often meant I didn't know what his plans were until he was ready to reveal them to me. It was a small thing I could do to give him some feeling of independence, even though it often caught me off guard.

"Who's coming today?" I asked him as I handed him a cup of tea. It was only lukewarm in case he spilled it on himself as he'd done a few weeks before.

"Randall Dupont," he said.

"Your lawyer?"

He nodded. "I want to make some changes to my will."

Alarm bells rang. "Charlie...don't you dare pull a Pietro."

He played dumb. "Hmm?"

I sat beside him, meeting his eyes. "Don't even think about leaving your estate to me."

He grinned. "And if I do? What are you going to do, kill me?"

"Be serious. I don't need it. I wouldn't know what to do with it. Do what you planned on doing with it. It'll do more good in the hands of those organizations than in my bank account. I'm doing fine with my business. You've given me more than enough."

"For your information, Mr. Know-It-All," he said, clearly delighted, "I wasn't planning on leaving you my estate."

"Oh. I..."

"And if I were, I wouldn't need your permission."

"Charlie..."

"Ah, get your foot out of your mouth and get to work. And be a doll and give Randall and me some privacy when he gets here, will you?"

Curious as hell, I wouldn't learn what changes he'd made until months later.

It was a rare good day.

Charlie was lucid, the pain dulled just enough by his medication to let him sit upright in bed, propped by a fortress of pillows. Sunlight filtered through the gauzy curtains, casting long golden stripes across his blanket. I'd made tea, and we sipped in comfortable silence until he broke it with a soft, almost fragile voice.

"You've started, you know," he said, eyes distant.

"Started what?"

He turned to look at me, and for a moment, I saw not the fading man before me but the force of nature he had always been. “Your family. You’ve already begun to build it.”

I blinked, confused. “I don’t—”

“Bryant. Ilana. Lysander. Me.” He gave a small, sad smile. “You’ve become like a son to me. And I like to think I’ve been something like a father to you. You didn’t ask for that, and I didn’t mean to impose it, but it happened just the same.”

My throat tightened. I reached for my mug, but my hands weren’t quite steady.

Charlie went on. “We don’t always get the family we’re born into. Sometimes, if we’re lucky, we get to make our own. And that kind of family — chosen family — it’s a patchwork of people who see you, who love you for who you are, not who you’re supposed to be. That’s real. That lasts.”

“But you won’t,” I said before I could stop myself. My voice cracked. “You won’t last.”

He reached for my hand, his own shaking. “No, I won’t. And that’s why I need you to keep going. I need you to make space for more people to love you. You’re strong, Adam, but you’re not meant to do life alone. Let people in. Let them matter.”

I shook my head, blinking fast. “It’s hard.”

“Of course it is. Loving people always is. But it’s also the only thing worth doing in this world. The marching, the protesting, the organizing... You think all of that mattered because of politics? No. It mattered because of people. The people I fought for. The people I lost. The people I loved. Pietro. My friends. And you.”

A silence fell between us, heavier than before. He looked at me with a steadiness that rooted me to the floor.

“When I’m gone,” he said gently, “I don’t want you to close yourself off again. I want you to keep choosing. Keep building. Keep loving. Make your family, Adam. You’ve already started. Don’t stop.”

I squeezed his hand. “I don’t know how.”

He smiled, weary but proud. “You’ll figure it out. That’s what families do. We show up, we stumble, we hold each other steady. You’ve held me steady. Now let others do the same for you.”

I didn't know it then, but that would be one of our last real conversations.

And I would carry those words with me like a lantern, lighting the road ahead.

He passed quietly, in his sleep one morning, just before dawn.

I knew the moment I stepped into the room. The spark that made Charlie *Charlie* was gone.

The funeral was packed. Hundreds of activists, lawyers, former colleagues, and old friends came to pay their respects. Bryant, Ilana, Lysander, and I sat in the front seats usually reserved for family. He was right. That's what we'd become. Charlie's family. Each other's family.

Everyone there agreed on one thing: Charlie had done what he set out to do.

He made the world better.

And I would never be the same for having known him.

Not long after the funeral, I moved out of the beach house that I'd shared with Charlie. Randall Dupont, Charlie's lawyer, had told me I was free to stay as long as I needed, but it felt empty without him. The business was doing well enough that I was able to afford a much nicer rental back in Baltimore this time around — an entire row house on a tree-lined street.

A couple of months after the funeral, I received a call out of the blue from Mr. Dupont. He asked me to come to his office. I had a feeling I was about to find out what changes Charlie had made to his will.

And I was right.

"Mr. Connelly," the middle-aged lawyer began after I'd been seated in the soft leather chair facing his ornate desk. I'd always found Mr. Dupont to be a pleasant, if somewhat stuffy fellow. He was slightly pudgy, with a receding hairline and dark eyes that I found inscrutable. "As I'm sure you recall, I visited with Charlie shortly before his death."

"Please, call me Adam," I said. "And yes, I remember. Charlie told me he was changing his will."

"Ah, yes. Indeed." He seemed somewhat flustered that I'd jumped ahead in the script he was following. He paused for a moment and found his place. "The reason that I've asked you here today is because when he changed his will, it was changed to include you."

I sighed. Mr. Dupont blinked. It wasn't the reaction he'd expected.

"I specifically asked him not to do that," I explained.

"Indeed," Mr. Dupont said, still blinking rapidly. "Perhaps this will explain things better," he said after a moment, sliding a cream-colored envelope across the desk in my direction.

I picked up the envelope and stared down at it for a minute before gently ripping it open. The outside gave no hints as to its contents. It was completely blank save for my name written in the uneven scrawl that had become Charlie's handwriting in the last weeks of his life. Inside, I found a single sheet of matching cream stationery.

It was a letter from Charlie.

*Dearest Adam,*

*Before I say anything else, I want to thank you, though mere words cannot hope to express the depth of my gratitude. You came into my life when I had no reason to expect anything but emptiness and made my final months fuller than I had any right to hope. You are truly the son I never had.*

*I know you will make some lucky man a wonderful and fulfilling partner someday, and I firmly believe that you will be reunited with your children. I know you try to keep that part of yourself buried deep within, but I see the pain it causes you not to see your boys. I wish my money could do something to alleviate that pain, but it cannot. In the end, money can rarely, if ever, mend matters of the heart.*

*You've made it quite clear, much to my amusement, how you feel about being included in my inheritance, but I hope you'll forgive me for what I am*

*about to do. If you are reading this, then I am already gone and there is nothing you can do about it anyway."*

I could almost hear his dry chuckle as I read his words.

*I am leaving you the beach house. I believe it meant as much to you as it did to me, and I know you will take good care of it. I am also leaving you a small amount that you can do with as you wish. If nothing else, do what my friend told me to do after Pietro's gift to me and place it in a bank account until you are ready. Perhaps you can save it for the boys. Whatever you decide, I hope that you will accept it with the intention with which it is given to you -- out of love and appreciation.*

*Finally, with the end of my life you have run out of excuses to avoid your own. Start living, Adam, and live fully. Life is a gift; do not waste it.*

*With great affection, Uncle Charlie*

Tears ran down my cheeks as I read the last words.

"Ahem," Mr. Dupont cleared his throat. "In addition to the bequest of the home in Ocean City, you are also to receive what I believe Charlie referred to as a small amount of cash."

"So I read," I said with a sniff. "What exactly did Charlie consider a small amount?"

Mr. Dupont named a figure that nearly caused me to fall out of my chair.

"You must be joking," I gasped.

"I assure you I'm not," was his dry response.

Charlie had outwitted me.

I didn't want anything to do with the money — or the house, for that matter. I opened a savings account, deposited the inheritance, and tried to forget about both. What mattered more was the promise I'd made to Charlie. I took his advice seriously and made a genuine effort to start living again.

I was still scared — terrified, really — but I pushed myself to go out. I called up a few of the men Charlie had introduced me to.

I even went on second dates with a couple of them. None of it sparked anything more than polite conversation and awkward goodbyes.

It was months before I could bring myself to return to the beach house. In my absence, the house had fallen into neglect. Weeds choked the garden beds, dust blanketed every surface inside. I spent a weekend cleaning, pruning, and trying not to notice the way Charlie's presence hung in every room like a shadow that refused to lift.

He would have wanted it kept up, I reminded myself. During the day, I managed fine. But after the sun went down, the silence in the house became unbearable. That first night, I survived by going to bed early. The second night, sleep didn't come so easily. Restless and unsettled, I finally decided to drive up to Rehoboth.

I parked downtown and walked to the Blue Moon — one of our old haunts. I hadn't been there since Charlie began to fail. The place was mostly unchanged. A few familiar faces, but mostly new ones. I got a lot of sympathetic glances, but thankfully no one said anything. Not at first.

"You here on vacation?" asked the bartender, a darkly handsome guy who looked to be in his mid-twenties. I hadn't seen him before.

"Huh?" I replied eloquently, surprised to be addressed.

"I don't think I've seen you around," he said, sliding a Manhattan across the bar. "I know most of the locals. Figured you were visiting."

"I have a beach house in Ocean City," I said, taking a sip. "Inherited it, actually. First time I've been back since my friend passed away. I couldn't stay there another night by myself. This used to be one of our favorite spots."

He paused mid-wipe, studying me more closely. "You're not talking about Uncle Charlie, are you?"

The sound of his name spoken aloud — especially here — hit me like a punch to the chest. I swallowed the rest of my drink. "Yeah. It was Charlie."

"Damn," the bartender said softly. "That guy was a legend. I wasn't even working here when he passed and I've still heard stories."

I nodded, blinking rapidly. "He was the best. I wish you could have met him."

"I'm sorry for your loss," he said, then grimaced. "And I'm being an insensitive schmuck. You just lost your partner and here I am—"

"We weren't lovers," I cut in quickly. "He was like a father to me. Helped me through a lot."

"Sounds like Charlie," said an older man from the far end of the bar. "Sorry, didn't mean to eavesdrop, but that was him. Always looking out for a fellow queer."

"Uncle Charlie loaned me money after I broke my leg and couldn't work," said a guy from a nearby table, rough around the edges but sincere.

"He paid for my wedding," added a woman with a buzzcut and tear-bright eyes.

"He covered my mom's funeral when she died," a young man chipped in.

The bartender smiled. "Sounds like one hell of a guy."

"That doesn't even begin to cover it."

He handed me another drink and raised his own. "To Uncle Charlie."

The toast echoed through the bar: "To Uncle Charlie!"

I raised my glass and took a deep drink.

Someone slid onto the barstool beside me, but I didn't look up.

Then he spoke. "You knew Charlie?"

I sighed, not ready for another round of remembrance.

"Yes," I said, still not turning.

"You knew him well?"

His voice was soft, a little hesitant. I glanced over — and stopped cold. He was striking: tall, with waves of dark brown hair, and eyes that held a grief I recognized instantly. It was the same pain I saw every morning in the mirror.

"Yeah," I said quietly. "You?"

He nodded. "Yes. We were good friends. Or I thought we were. I didn't even know he was sick. Didn't hear about his death until after the funeral, or I would've been there."

"He didn't want people to know?"

"But you knew?"

"I...I took care of him at the end."

"Are you a nurse?"

"No, just...a friend. Chosen family."

A small, sad smile crossed his face. "Charlie was big on chosen family. You must've meant a lot to him."

"He meant a lot to me, too. He meant a lot to many people." I gestured around the bar. "How did you know him?"

He smiled again, but a bit embarrassed this time. "Sorry, I should've introduced myself. I'm Steve Redden."

"Adam Connelly," I replied, shaking his hand.

His eyes lit with recognition. "He mentioned you! In one of his emails. Said you'd moved in and were 'a great blessing to an old man.' His words. Said you'd been a huge help."

I felt a pang in my chest. "That sounds like him."

"He helped me, too. Years ago. Paid for me to go to architecture school after my parents cut me off. To this day, I don't know how he found out about me."

"He had contacts," I said, smiling faintly.

"He was a good man."

"That he was."

I bought him a drink. We talked until last call.

We exchanged numbers, but in my inebriated state, I gave him the wrong one — my work line — and didn't hear from him for days. I figured I'd read things wrong and he wasn't interested...until I checked my business voicemail and found his message. I called back immediately, mortified. He laughed it off and said he'd love to see me again next time I came down.

We started FaceTiming almost every night. I found myself looking forward to those calls more than I wanted to admit. By the time we made plans for a second date, my nerves were a wreck. I changed my clothes three times, and I hadn't even brought that many to the beach house.

We met again at the Blue Moon bar, then moved to the attached restaurant for dinner.

We had a wonderful evening. The chemistry was just as evident as our first meeting. I was really enjoying myself until he brought up the subject of families, something that had somehow never come up in all our FaceTime conversations.

"Do you have much family?" he asked.

"No, I'm not close to my parents and I was an only child," I told him. I don't know why I didn't mention my marriage and two kids, but something stopped me.

"I'm sorry. I think I mentioned that my parents disowned me when I was still in school. I do have a sister though."

"Are you close?"

"Not as close as we used to be. She's never been very supportive of me after I came out. Her husband is even worse. One of those self-righteous Christian types."

"That's too bad."

"Yeah, and the worst part is, I think he's trying to keep me from seeing her at all. She just had her third child, and he's made it pretty clear he doesn't want me to even come for a visit."

"That's awful," I said, thinking once more about my boys and how I wasn't allowed to see them either. "Do you like kids?"

He shrugged. "As long as they are someone else's."

I looked up, my fork stopping in mid-air. "You don't want kids of your own?"

"Not really. I'm not one of those assimilation gay guys who yearns for two kids and a picket fence. I like my life the way it is. I don't need additional complications."

"Oh," I said, my heart sinking fast.

At least I'd found out now instead of later, I tried to tell myself, but I couldn't stop the intense feeling of disappointment. On some level, I hadn't given up on getting my boys back, and, if Steve was that adamant about not wanting children, that ended things before they'd even started, as far as I was concerned.

I grew quiet after that, answering questions as briefly as possible. I'd gone from wanting the evening to last all night to just wanting it to end as soon as possible. I'm sure Steve noticed my withdrawal, but he didn't give any sign. He insisted on paying the bill, and then we rose and walked outside. The night was clear and warm.

"Let's walk on the boardwalk," Steve suggested.

"No, I should really be going," I said in an attempt to beg off.

"It's a beautiful night," he said persuasively. "It's too early to go home. Come on, walk with me." When I hesitated, he added, "Please?"

How could I say no to those puppy dog eyes? I sighed and fell into step beside him.

We walked in silence down the street and onto the boardwalk. It was the perfect romantic setting. Couples strolled hand in hand down the boardwalk, the beach stretched out waiting for the next day of sun worshippers to descend, the moon sparkled on the ocean like a million diamonds scattered across its surface.

"So what did I say wrong?" he asked after a few minutes.

"Nothing," I answered too quickly.

"Come on, Adam. Give me a little credit. Everything was going great and then you suddenly pulled away like I'd slapped you. What was it?"

I sighed. "I have two kids."

His eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

"Boys. One is thirteen and one is ten, almost eleven."

"Wow. Do they live with you?"

"No, they live with their mother, my ex-wife. She won't even let me see them."

"Wow. I don't know what to say."

"There's nothing to say. I haven't given up on getting them back, so I guess that means we're over. I wouldn't want it to complicate your life or anything." My voice sounded bitter even to my ears.

"Adam, when I said that I didn't know you had kids."

"It doesn't change anything."

"Yes it does! It changes everything."

"How?"

He stopped, obviously at a loss for words.

"See?" I said wearily. "It doesn't change anything."

I walked away to stand at the rail overlooking the beach. I felt Steve walk up behind me. After a moment, I felt his hands on my shoulders. I tensed up immediately.

"We've only known each other for a few weeks," he said softly. "We've still got a lot to learn about each other, but I already know that I like you. A lot. You're different from anyone I've ever met. You're a good man, Adam."

"What about my kids?"

He tenderly began to massage my shoulders. "I hope to get to meet them someday."

"But you said..."

"I know what I said, but hear me out. The thing is, I've never pictured myself with kids. I've known I was gay since I was very young. I came out in high school. Dated a lot. And I've never found anyone I could see myself settling down with...until now. I guess I just grew accustomed to thinking I'd never have a family so it was just easier to say I didn't want them."

I felt the tension easing out of my shoulders under his fingers...and his words.

"But now?" I said, in a voice that was barely audible.

"Now I've met you."

"We just met. We hardly know each other."

"I know enough. All I'm asking is for a chance. I didn't even know you'd been married before a few minutes ago, let alone that you had two sons. It doesn't change how I feel about you. I'll admit it caught me off guard, but it's just another facet of you."

"It's not a dealbreaker?"

He gently turned my shoulders, so I was facing him. "It's not a deal breaker. It's a gift. If they're a part of you, I'm sure I'll love them."

He leaned in and I felt his lips press against mine. For a second, I felt as if I were falling but then I felt his strong arms slide around my body and I felt more grounded than I'd ever felt in my life. We kissed for an eternity or maybe only moments — I couldn't tell you now — before I pulled away.

"Thank you, Charlie," I whispered, and Steve's arms tightened around me.

Even now, I believe Charlie had a hand in bringing Steve and I together.

One last gift.

The beginning of something new.

## 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.

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