



*Falling Off
The Face
Of The Earth*

*A Novel By
JF Smith*

License



Falling Off The Face Of The Earth by JF Smith is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

You are free:		
	To Share	To copy, distribute and transmit this work
Under the following conditions:		
	Attribution	You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
	Noncommercial	You may not use this work for commercial purposes
	No Derivative Works	You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work
With the understanding that:		
Waiver	Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.	
Public Domain	Where the work or any of its elements is in the public domain under applicable law, that status is in no way affected by the license.	
Other Rights	In no way are any of the following rights affected by the license:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your fair dealing or fair use rights, or other applicable copyright exceptions and limitations;• The author's moral rights;• Rights other persons may have either in the work itself or in how the work is used, such as publicity or privacy rights;	
Notice	For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is to include this page in any reuse or redistribution.	

Disclaimer

This work contains references to certain celebrities and performing artists by name. All references are absolutely and completely fictitious and are not intended to imply any endorsement of this work by these persons or any connection to this work or to the author by these persons. There are also references to creative works (movies and television shows, in this story), with fictionalized aspects for the purposes of this narrative. All other characters, events, and creative works in this work are strictly fictional and any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), events, or creative works is purely coincidental.

Table of Contents

Prologue.....	3
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2	8
Chapter 3.....	16
Chapter 4	25
Chapter 5.....	34
Chapter 6	40
Chapter 7	44
Chapter 8	52
Chapter 9	57
Chapter 10	68
Chapter 11	74
Chapter 12.....	84
Chapter 13.....	88
Chapter 14.....	97
Chapter 15.....	103
Chapter 16	111
Chapter 17.....	117
Chapter 18.....	129
Chapter 19.....	136
Chapter 20.....	141
Chapter 21.....	150
Chapter 22	158
Chapter 23.....	164
Chapter 24	173
Chapter 25.....	182
Chapter 26.....	187
Chapter 27	197
Chapter 28	203
Chapter 29.....	207
Chapter 30.....	217
Chapter 31.....	224
Chapter 32.....	231
Chapter 33.....	238
Chapter 34	242
Chapter 35.....	249
Chapter 36	259
Chapter 37.....	264
Chapter 38	271
Chapter 39	276
Chapter 40.....	282
Chapter 41.....	289
Chapter 42.....	300
Chapter 43	306

Epilogue – Four Years Later	311
Other Works By JF Smith.....	317
About The Author.....	319

Falling Off The Face Of The Earth

JF SMITH

Prologue

It's funny what tourists notice and don't notice.

For example, they can be walking down the pedestrian side of the Manhattan Bridge between Manhattan and Brooklyn, gawking at the bridge itself, commenting on the water below, pointing at the ships, and snapping pictures of the New York skyline. Noticing everything except the guy standing there halfway between Manhattan and Brooklyn - the guy not leaning up against the railing admiring the view, not walking one way or the other, not waiting for someone. Just standing there.

A few locals might notice a guy like this, perhaps wonder what his problem is. But maybe they'd just assume the guy was tweaked out on some drugs. Despite being very well dressed. Not formally, but very fashionably dressed. And despite being there in the middle of the morning, in the middle of the week.

Anyone near enough might wonder a little bit about the phone, though. New Yorkers live on their cell phones. So, who would take his cell phone out of his pocket, not even look at it, and throw it over the security fence and directly into the waters of the East River below? But that only takes a mere moment to happen. Before and after, it's just a man standing oddly on the bridge. Maybe a little shell-shocked looking.

And certainly, no one would ever think to somehow link that slightly off-kilter picture to what would later that day blaze across the national evening news, entertainment gossip shows, and about a hundred websites, all fighting to break the news first. All fighting to provide details the others didn't.

But the one thing that isn't strange is that anyone who does happen to notice, probably only has it occupy his or her attention for a few moments. They might wonder why someone would behave like this. They might wonder about the circumstances that could have lead up to this point in time. They might spend a few seconds wondering about this before they go back to gawking at the sights, or before they continue rushing to wherever they're going. Before they simply move on. But, without exception, what they won't ever think about is what happened *after* that moment to that person.

Chapter 1

James sat in the still, quiet room for a moment and rubbed his forehead. Then he sat and stared ahead at the mini-blinds covering the windows. The late afternoon sunlight seeped in through the slats and illuminated the dancing particles of dust swirling around in stripes of sparks and shadow.

After a while, James heard a small noise and realized he wasn't even watching the dust thrashing around in the sunlight any more. He wasn't watching anything. His eyes had unfocused, and he was sitting on the haphazardly placed couch, squeezed in among piles of the stuff that was all supposedly his, but which felt foreign and strange and meaningless to him at this point. The noise he had heard was the tiniest shift of a slim DVD player on top of a pile of magazines, which was in turn on a pile of cardboard boxes all stacked up in a way that made a complete mockery of most any modern physics text.

James was used to having these moments lately. He'd been having them, for... James looked at his watch briefly... he'd been having them for exactly thirty-two days, seven hours and ten minutes now. That didn't make them welcome; they had merely become routine. Along with feeling numb and empty and sleepy and distant, it had all merely become routine.

He looked at the DVD player again and could see where the slick magazine cover it was sitting on had slid a little bit. He knew what was going to happen next, but he simply took the attitude that it was out of his control. Why bother? Wouldn't trying to prevent it carry the potential of just making things worse? So James, his chin resting on the palm of his hand, watched as the DVD player slid a tiny bit more, buckling the magazine cover in the process. A moment later, the DVD player, when it decided it was past the point of no return and that no one could stop it, made a dash for it. It leapt off the piled-high boxes, and piled-even-higher magazines, to the floor below. What it hadn't counted on was the lamp cord that had gotten tangled with it earlier that day. The lamp was going to be damned if the DVD player managed to escape and leave it behind in this place.

Halfway down, the DVD player got jerked as its weight pulled the small ceramic table lamp off the boxes from behind the magazines, and then fell the rest of the way to the hardwood floor below. The DVD player hit the floor on its corner, springing open the disc tray and sending whatever disc was in it skittering across the floor and under the far end of the sofa. The small ceramic lamp, having a much more pronounced flair for the dramatic than the DVD player could ever aspire to, landed on top of the DVD player and shattered into hundreds of pieces, the small platinum-colored shade all that was left undamaged.

James sighed and felt even worse. Of course, it turned out, it would have been better to get up and prevent this whole thing from happening. He didn't care about the DVD player, but he liked the small Adler lamp, and now it was gone. As with so many decisions, he should have taken the approach opposite the one he did.

He glanced over at the bar area between the kitchen and the living room to make sure the box, the important one, was there and not on the magazines that had started spilling off on top of the lamp and DVD player. He saw the small, black wooden box placed alone on the bar. As long as it was safe, everything else could burn to ashes as far as he cared. The thought had crossed his mind multiple times in the last month. If you're going to start over, then do it, right? Light it all up and walk away. But torching everything seemed pointless, too. He'd just go buy more of roughly the same stuff. It's not like having a different sofa, or a different DVD player, or different cookware would suddenly alter his life in any meaningful way, no matter what the marketing copy said.

James decided it was time to get up. So he stood up and looked around blankly. He could start unpacking a little, but that task seemed overwhelming. Everything in the apartment was in random piles and boxes, waiting for him to get started. He knew the trick was to start off with accomplishing even one small thing and everything else would start to follow more easily. But he couldn't even pick the one small thing to do that would start things rolling. There were too many things for his tired mind to think about.

Instead, he knew what really had to happen was to make a command appearance before his mother. He had longed to see her over the last month, and also dreaded it. She could comfort him, and make him feel like a failure, simultaneously, and all with one glance. She wouldn't actually see him as a failure and James knew it. It was simply his own feeling of failure being magnified by being around her. She was his final safety net, just like she'd always been - through bee stings, despised sports events, failed college courses from too much partying, looking for a job - she'd always been there with the hug, kiss, and kick in the pants he needed to get back on track.

James decided to go ahead and see her, and then he could come back and at least get his bed set up for the night. And after standing staring into empty space, feeling even emptier than the space he stared into, with his head cocked oddly to one side, for probably another five minutes, he stood up straight and started to glance around the room for the keys to the rental car. Naturally, they were in his hand the whole time. So finally, now that all the inanimate objects in the room had had their fun, James was ready to go.

Except, he also needed his apartment keys. James was on to all these little tricks at this point, and he found those hiding in his jeans pocket.

As he walked out, he stopped at the kitchen bar and looked at the black wooden box. He touched it lightly, and then walked out the door. He carefully locked all of it up behind him as he stepped out of his apartment into the stifling August humidity.

Chapter 2

Lawder may have been the town where James grew up, but it felt very different than when he had lived there, up until when he had left to go to college. It seemed smaller now. Smaller in every way. Physically, culturally, intellectually... the list of -ly's could go on and on. It hadn't been that long since he had lived here previously, less than ten years, but he viewed the town through radically different eyes than before. He had always held it in disdain when he lived there, and that was magnified once he got out and became successful in a much bigger, more important world.

But now he was back. A failure. The humiliation of moving back to Lawder would have eaten away at him like stomach acid had it not all been totally overshadowed by the husk-like emptiness of the failure that drove him back here to begin with. Moving back was a trifling cilantro garnish on the huge plate of betrayal and personal failure that was what happened in New York.

On the way from his apartment to his mother's house – his house, in a way, since it was where he had grown up – it still didn't feel like he was home. He wasn't going to be living in the house he grew up in, by choice, which made it feel foreign. He wasn't even going to stay in the town long term, by choice. All of this was just to give himself a chance to come to terms with what had happened. To get away from everything and everyone that seemed to thrust Ian back into his face. The irony that it was his own fault that he couldn't escape Ian, even in west-of-nowhere Lawder, didn't escape James. Eventually, he'd want to face the world again, but he had to heal until then. Eventually, Chicago could be an option, but that was pretty low on his list. He had too much southern boy intolerance for the cold. Even New York had tested that. Miami was pretty high on his list this time, or maybe Los Angeles or San Francisco. And if he was very optimistic, even New York could be an option again at some point, but the thought of that right now made him get a little nervous and clammy feeling.

But until then, Lawder was once again his town. New York was the memory and Lawder was the reality. What would he have thought of himself the day he left Lawder if

he really knew he'd be back to live here again? How disappointed in himself he'd be. He *was* disappointed.

~~~~~

The house James pulled up in front of had hardly changed since even his earliest memories, other than the fact that it seemed smaller than when he was a young child playing in the yard. The house James grew up in was on the corner of Azalea Drive and Franklin Road, the center of James' universe until he had learned about much bigger and more important places.

It was a two-story clapboard house, painted a slate blue with almost-but-not-quite black trim and shutters. There was a wide porch that stretched across the front, plus two large windows upstairs facing out over the street. It was the kind of house he'd probably use in a life insurance commercial, with the husband watching his wife and two daughters with a lemonade stand on the front lawn. Home and hearth and family and all that. The window on the upstairs right had been James' room growing up. The lawn in front wasn't huge, but it was sunny, and it was meticulously cared for (as well it should be). Between the house and the one neighboring it on the left was a stand of cherry laurel trees forming a casual hedge, and along the front of the porch on either side of the steps were perfectly trimmed azalea bushes, deep green in the late summer sun.

The front walk came from the porch steps, but instead of running straight out to Franklin, they turned and went to Azalea Drive instead, the quieter street. On the wall of the house that faced Azalea, there was a trellis that meant a lot to James. Growing up the trellis was honeysuckle. The same honeysuckle that had been growing there for probably twenty years now. When he was very small and his parents had moved in to this house, James had wanted honeysuckle there. Honeysuckle could almost be considered a weed plant in the south, and James knew his mom and dad probably would have preferred something more like a clematis or Cherokee Rose, but to humor James they planted honeysuckle. Soft and sweet honeysuckle. As long as that honeysuckle grew there, James would always know this was his home, no matter what.

He looked over at the very corner of the yard, right where Franklin met Azalea. There was a small yard sign there proclaiming that the yard was maintained by Montgomery Landscaping, but someone had used a very thick marker to add a "Well, DUH!!!" at the bottom. James laughed a little to himself. He hadn't remembered seeing it the last time he was home, but he might have just missed it.

James crossed the lawn and went up the front steps. He peeked in through the glass window in the front door and opened it up. As he stepped into the front hall, he called out, "Mom? You here?"

He glanced up the stairs, then looked past them down the hall to the back of the house. He started back towards the kitchen when he heard a chair scrape across the kitchen floor. He heard his mom call, "James?" just as she rounded out the door from the kitchen. She had an apron with embroidered roses tied around her waist and she was wiping her hands on it.

James' mom was trim, with short dark hair, but starting to sport a few gray hairs these days. Her eyes were bright, and she moved very quickly. She had the energy of a woman who had raised a son and a business almost single-handedly and was ready for another round of both if necessary. Her name was Beatrice, but James was probably the only person in the world to not call her Bea.

At the sight of her, and the smile fixed on her face, James started to lose his control. The emotion of everything that had happened a month before hit James again and almost started to seep out. His mother grabbed him and he hugged her back tightly. Her head against James' chest, she said, "Oh, James. Don't worry. It's ok."

They stood like this for a long moment, long enough for James to hold onto his mother and gain control of himself again. It all reminded James that no matter how much time eventually passed, he'd never fully escape what had happened. He finally nodded some and said, "I'm ok, ok? I'm alright."

He pushed back on his mother lightly and she looked up in his eyes to make sure he was telling the truth. He smiled a slightly weary smile at her and her eyes sparkled. James knew the look in her eyes. His mother now had a new job she could tackle with all her might. Her son was broken and she could throw herself into making him whole again. James laughed out loud at the thought of what he was probably going to start going through.

His mother looked at him suspiciously and said, "What're you laughing at now?"

James shook his head and said, "Nothing."

"Well, I'm glad you're here. I was beginning to worry. I thought about sending Jesus on a mission to save you, but I knew you'd probably not like that."

"I was just getting settled," said James, "and it takes time. That's all. No saving needed."

His mother gave an exasperated frown and moaned, "And why do you have to go live in some awful apartment? I've got this huge house here with just me in it. It's ridiculous!"

They had had this conversation before. James sighed and said, "As much as you'd love to have me here so you could mercilessly stamp out the last shred of adult dignity I have, I'm not quite ready to let go of it that easily."

She wasn't really convinced, though. "Dignity-schmignity! You need your momma right now!"

James threw his arms wide. "And here I am, fully ready for the mighty torrent of momma's love to wash over me!!"

She laughed at James, but as the smile faded, she put her hand lightly on his arm and said, "When will you be ready to talk to me a little? It's not healthy to bottle this whole *whatever* thing up like this. I feel bad that you've not trusted me with anything about whatever it is that happened."

James got serious and said, "I love you, and I trust you more than anyone else I know, but it's not a matter of trust. I've just got to have my own space to deal with New York in my own way for as long as it takes. I'm sorry. But, when I am ready to talk about it, you'll be the first."

Bea looked at him seriously. She hated seeing her son in pain, and she would have given anything to ease it, to share the burden with him. She wished he wouldn't insist on carrying it himself, but she respected his decision.

She hugged him again and he hugged her.

"I love you so much, James, just know that. No matter whatever else may be, I love you more than anything else in this world."

And it made James' heart lighter to hear it. You may know something like that down deep inside, but it always feels so good to hear it said out loud.

She took James' hand and said, "C'mon into the kitchen. I'll get you something to drink and you can say hi to a few of the guys."

She led James back down the hall and into the large kitchen. It still had the same white Formica countertops from when they had moved in years and years before, but a fresh linoleum floor had been put in about four years ago. Even with nothing more than the late afternoon sun coming in through the windows, it was a bright, cheerful kitchen. Sitting at a rough farmhouse style kitchen table were two men, one of whom James recognized. They sat shelling peas, which had been spread out over newspapers on the kitchen table.

James' mom pointed to the Hispanic looking one and said, "You remember Jesus, right? You've met him." Except, instead of pronouncing it HAY-seuss like you would expect for a Hispanic man, she insisted on pronouncing it JEE-sus, like He had come back for the second coming and had a couple of minutes to help James' mom shell a few peas before unleashing the four horsemen of the apocalypse. James had met Jesus the last time he was home, but hadn't yet figured out why his mom insisted on calling him JEE-sus. She had her peculiar ways like that, though. His mom had hired Jesus to be the head horticulturalist for Montgomery Landscaping and she had gone on and on to James about how good he was.

Jesus waved at James and said, "Hey James, welcome back to Lawder, man!" He only had the slightest hint of an accent.

James waved back and said, "Good to see you again, uh, Jesus." He pronounced it HAY-seuss and hoped he was doing the right thing.

The other man, the one James didn't recognize, was much younger, probably only eighteen - twenty at the most. But James wanted to meet him. He was very good looking - with a clear, naturally tan complexion (something James highly respected in anyone

that young), features that balanced between beautiful and masculine very well, and perfectly messy dark brown hair.

James' mom pointed to the younger guy and said, "And that's Roddy Nathaniels. Roddy just joined up earlier this summer, so I don't think you've met him yet."

James unconsciously tried to butch it up a little bit and reached over the table to shake Roddy's hand. As Roddy stood up a little so he could reach over the table, James realized how tall he must be. They said hi to each other and shook hands. Roddy had a good, firm grip, and James looked him directly in the eyes the whole time trying to get a read on him.

They went back to shelling peas and Bea went to the refrigerator to get James something to drink.

She handed her son a beer and he was about to sit down at the table, when his mother stopped him. "Oh wait, you've got to come with me and meet Kevin. He's outside changing the oil in my car."

James took a big swig out of the beer and followed her out the kitchen door into the carport area. Her Toyota Camry was there with the hood up and they walked around to the front of it. It had been jacked up a little bit and there was a person sticking out from under it. She had hired Kevin about seven months earlier to be the new general manager of Montgomery Landscaping. The previous manager had been making a lot of mistakes and bad decisions, but hiring a new foreman had worried his mother just as much. Nonetheless, now that he had been there a little while, Kevin had just about hung the moon as far as she was concerned. James thought to himself that changing your boss' oil was one way to suck up.

All James could see under the front of the car was a pair of thick, filthy legs sticking out of a pair of khaki cargo shorts and ending in socks and a beat up pair of sneakers. Filthy didn't begin to describe it, though. The original color of the socks and sneakers had been lost in the primordial mists of time. With all the dirt, grime, fertilizer, oil, and who knew what else caked on the guy's legs, you could probably blow up a good sized federal building.

Bea yelled at the front of the car, "Kevin, James is here and I just wanted to introduce him to you! James, that's Kevin there sticking out like he's been run over!"

James could hear a muffled and forced "Hey James, welcome back to Lawder! Damn drain plug!"

James yelled, "Nice to meet you, too, Kevin."

He looked out at the driveway and saw a large yellow lab passed out happily in the sunshine near the street. Parked on the street was one of the boxy Montgomery Landscaping trucks, with the massive oak tree logo spreading out wide underneath the business name.

James and his mother started back inside and they heard a muffled "Dammit!" coming from under her car. Back in the kitchen, Roddy and Jesus were finished with the peas and were just drinking their beers and talking about a baseball game.

Bea said to James, "Now, I don't have any big plans, but I'll fix dinner for you. Jesus and Roddy, y'all are welcome to stay for dinner as well, if you want."

Jesus said, "No thanks, Melena's expecting me home pretty quick."

"And I've got a date later on tonight," said Roddy with a twinkle in his eye.

"Aw man, you didn't tell me you had a hot date tonight!" said Jesus, clearly surprised.

"Well just make sure," said Bea, "if you decide to get jiggy, you wear protection! Do we need to run to the store to make sure you've got some little wrappers to take with you?"

Jesus snickered and said, "Yeah man, the extra small ones!"

Roddy turned red and said, "I don't think that's anything anyone else needs to worry about tonight except me."

Then he added, "And I'd need the big ones, thank you very much!"

Just to piss Roddy off, though, Jesus held up his fingers about an inch and a half apart.

James listened to the exchange. His mom had never been a prude or a shy flower. Bea looked at James and said, "How about you, James?"

"Oh, I don't need any rubbers, but thanks for asking, mom," James answered.

His mom grabbed a pea shell off the table and threw it at him.

"I was asking if you'd stay for dinner, homeslice!"

"I appreciate it, but I've got an apartment full of boxes and stuff I need to start getting squared away, or I'll wind up having to sleep on the floor tonight. I'll just grab a sandwich on the way back over there."

James knew it would disappoint his mom to not stay for dinner and offer her the opportunity to start "fixing" him, but he didn't want to wind up spending every moment over at the house, either. He needed to establish a little balance very quickly now that he was back in Lawder.

His mother started shifting some things off the kitchen counter while Jesus started bundling up all the newspaper with pea shells in them. She said to James, "Are you all ready for your first day tomorrow? Do you have a nice clean outfit to wear? Do I need to iron anything for you?"

James rolled his eyes a little and could see Jesus grinning out of the corner of his eye. "No ma, I'm fine. Me big boy now. I even manage to get my underwear on front-side forward most days now."

Roddy asked, "Where are you going to be working?"

"I've gotten a job over at Natahatchee Ford working for Jasper Griffiths."

"Cool! Selling cars would be a pretty neat job!"

James could hear the country accent pretty thick in Roddy's voice, but he didn't mutter or cut words out of his sentences like the seriously back country people so often did. James said, "Actually, I won't be selling them. I'm going to act as the marketing director for Jasper's Ford, Lincoln, and Mercury dealerships. Ninety percent of my job will be running the ads in the newspaper every week. That and, uh, probably putting on a clown costume to entertain the kids on Saturday afternoons."

Roddy lit up a little, "Aw man, a real professional job! You're pretty lucky to have a job like that!"

James was happy to do what he could to impress Roddy, even if he was a straight-boy and way too young. The reality about his job was that it was a massive, massive step down from what he had done professionally in New York, but he didn't want to drag any of that out in the light right now.

James said good-bye so he could get back over to his apartment and start getting things squared away. His mom walked him out to his car.

"You like Roddy, don't you?" she asked slyly. "You think he's cute, don't you?"

James smiled and said, "Yeah, a little, I guess. But don't worry, I know he's straight and way too young for me. I'm no cradle robber."

James' mom was comfortable with him being gay, mostly. She chose odd things to be uncomfortable with or to pick at James over. James could never quite tell when it would happen.

This time, Bea just smiled and said, "He's a very sweet guy. He's actually not much younger than you, by the way. He just looks young. I think he's twenty-five. He was on probation for a year for beating up his last girlfriend, but there's no way he did that. I know who she is, and I think she was just hopped up on drugs, hurt herself, and blamed him. She's been in the hospital twice since they broke up with the same kind of injuries that she blamed on him."

James grew a little concerned, "Are you sure you should have him around? Even if there's a chance he might get violent?"

Bea laughed and said, "I know people pretty well, and I can tell you Roddy is not a violent person. He got more deeply hurt emotionally by that ho-bag girlfriend than she was physically hurt. This is the first date he's been on since the whole thing happened. I'm glad he's going. It was good to hear him joke about it a little."

James leaned against his rental car and looked at his mother. To him, she was one of the most wonderful women in the world.

She put her hands on her hips and asked, "What are you smiling at now?"

"I don't know how you do it, mom. Raising me single-handedly, the business, the hospital work you do, mothering all these people all around you. You're pretty amazing!"

"Well, of course I'm amazing! Why does it take everyone so long to figure that out?"

She smiled and said, "You were an easy child to raise, James, thank God. The business, especially now with Kevin around, runs itself. I cannot tell you what a godsend he has been! I do the hospital work just to keep from watching QVC all day long. And speaking of the hospital, I'll be there in the children's ward most of tomorrow and maybe into the evening."

James hugged his mother and told her he had a favor to ask.

She gently brushed the hair out of his face. "Anything, sweetie!"

"Please don't use the phrase 'ho-bag.' It's very disconcerting to hear a woman your age using language like that."

~~~~~

That night, after getting his bedroom mostly together, James crawled into bed and lay there, exhausted. He thought a little bit about cute Roddy, but mostly he thought about New York. The image that popped up in his mind was that of Ian, strapped in a cruel chair in an otherwise empty room, and being forcibly injected with a drug. It irritated him that this was one of the images he associated with Ian. It wasn't even real. It was a shot from the movie, and it drove James nuts that this was one of the ones that kept popping up in his mind. Maybe it represented to James how Ian was a victim of things beyond his control, or maybe it was because that scene was one he had used heavily in several of the trailers he had worked on for the movie. Maybe it represented the pain that James had caused Ian. Maybe it was all of these.

And despite the fact that he was now in a completely different city and around completely different people, James still was haunted and couldn't fall asleep easily. He lay in bed for quite a while wondering how much time it would take to move past everything. He wondered if he'd ever feel normal again.

Chapter 3

The following Wednesday, James gave in to his mother and agreed to come over for dinner. He felt a little proud that at least he had held off for two whole days since moving back.

His first few days at the dealership had been pretty uneventful. Taking over the marketing duties from the variety of administrative assistants across the three dealerships who had handled it up until then was straightforward. He knew it wouldn't be much of a challenge, but at least once he got a little more into it, he could try to get creative with the marketing in ways the other people couldn't. One nice perk was that he got a company car, so he didn't have to worry about buying one. They let him have a basic Mustang, which James kind of liked.

On his way over to his mother's, James thought about her cooking and decided that maybe he could get back into cooking himself. He liked to cook and was pretty good at it, but he was always too busy to really do much of it while in New York - time was short, the kitchen was tiny, and there were way too many good restaurants within walking distance. The memory of the last time he did cook in New York started to come to mind, though. He had fixed a homemade dinner for Ian, along with a birthday cake. The dinner was ok, but the birthday cake they tried to make together after they had gotten drunk almost needed a hazmat team for its disposal. Ian had loved that night more than just about any other, though. Then James found out Ian had skipped the taping of a guest spot on the TV show *Jimmy Kimmel Live* that evening to be with him instead, which had caused a huge fight with Ian's manager.

James parked out on the street in front and went into his mom's house. Inside, he found Roddy and Jesus, plus another two women he had never met before. There was also a cute, tiny little girl with beautiful olive-colored skin that James assumed was Jesus'. She stared at James with wide, curious eyes.

James' mom came and hugged him, then introduced him to the first of the two women. She was Melena, Jesus' wife. Their daughter with the big, pretty eyes was named

Rosie. She then introduced James to Agnes, the other woman. Agnes was a very pretty, young black girl who worked on the crew with Jesus and Roddy, with a beautiful smile and her hair pulled back into a tight bun. She still had her Montgomery Landscaping t-shirt and work khakis on. She was very excited to get to meet James, as she had many times listened to Bea tell stories about him in New York.

Agnes started asking James about what part of New York he lived in, how often he went to the Statue of Liberty ("pretty much never, actually"), and his job. He started to get nervous when she started in on his old job, but the questions were pretty generic, so he answered them. Jesus and Roddy started listening in at this point, too.

Agnes asked, "So all your company does is promote films?"

"Well, no," explained James. "Channel:Adage has film, music, and theater promotion divisions in New York."

Roddy asked, "Channel Adage? Is that a person's name?"

"No, it's the name of the marketing company. It's Channel colon Adage."

"So there's an owner named Channel and one named Adage?" asked Roddy.

"No. It's just Channel:Adage."

Jesus said, "I don't get it. What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's supposed to be a play on the separation of the medium and the message."

They all had funny looks on their faces.

Jesus said, "I still don't get it."

"Neither do I," said Roddy, and Agnes had a puzzled look of agreement on her face.

James' shoulders slumped a little bit. "It's just something that marketing companies do."

"Putting colons in between other words? It takes a whole marketing company to do that?" asked Roddy.

"No, you don't understand..."

"So how many colons could this company put in between other words in a given day?" asked Roddy, cutting in.

James felt his face getting hot and was sure he was turning a little red. He wasn't sure if they were just making fun of him or if they really didn't get it. "It's just a pretentious way of naming the company, that's all."

Agnes thankfully changed the subject and wanted to know about some of the movies he had helped promote.

James mentioned a few like *Meet The Fockers* and *Ocean's Twelve*, which he had worked on, but he avoided mentioning *Angstrom* at all costs and he prayed they wouldn't ask about it. That one was still in the theaters and would create way too many questions about Ian. Besides, he was getting a little paranoid that they were making fun

of him and he was sensitive to anything like that lately, so his answers were getting much shorter.

Bea came in and told everyone that it was time to eat and to come on in to the dinner table. They all milled into the kitchen to the farmhouse table and settled into seats. James wound up next to his mother's usual spot, but had an empty seat next to him.

Bea said, "Go ahead and help your plates. We're not waiting on Kevin, but he'll be here shortly. He called a few minutes ago and had already left the office."

The table was spread with fried chicken, rice, fresh field peas, and corn on the cob. James, and everyone, started helping their plates. As James was buttering his corn, he wondered how Roddy's date had gone the other night. He wanted to ask, but was also a little paranoid that Roddy had been making fun of him with the whole Channel:Adage thing.

James could hear Agnes ask about how the kids in the hospital were doing and his mom started telling about them.

Right then, James heard the kitchen doorknob turn.

Jesus called out, "Bout time, Brick!"

In stepped this guy James hadn't met yet - fair skinned, thick set, and with an unbelievably dense head of dirty-blond hair with just a touch of red in it. He hadn't shaved in several days, and had a soul patch right under his lip amidst the stubble. But what registered with James were the dense blond eyebrows over the very bright hazel eyes.

Something in the back of his mind started to furiously try and work itself out, and he heard his mother say, "Grab a plate and come on, Kevin."

James heard the word Kevin and realized this was the guy who was under his mother's car on Monday. This was Kevin. But Jesus had called him Brick. Kevin Taylor was Brick. The name Brick had a familiar ring to it. Brick Taylor. And he looked at the eyes again and it hit him.

Brick, or Kevin, looked over at James and smiled a little, almost timidly. He said, "Sorry I'm late. Hi, James!" He was about to cross the kitchen to sit down when James realized he'd be sitting right next to him.

James stopped eating and felt nauseous. He jerked up out of his seat like he had realized it was on fire, startling everyone in the process. They all stopped eating and looked at him. He said to no one in particular, "You're Brick. Brick Taylor."

Brick stopped and said nervously, "Yeah. Brick. I guess maybe you do remember."

Brick took another step towards the table, and James jerked back again. His foot caught the rung of his chair as he stepped back, causing him to fall right on his ass and knocking the chair over in the process. Everyone else at the table was frozen at this point wondering what the hell was going on. James' eyes never left the person named Brick Taylor now standing there, also frozen.

He finally broke out of his shock and looked at his mother. He started to move his chair out of the way and said to her, "Mom, I need to see you in the other room, please."

And without waiting for her to reply, he pushed the chair away hard and almost fell over it again getting out of the kitchen. He rushed out and across the hall to the den and could feel his hands sweating.

A moment later his mother came in with a completely bewildered look on her face.

James immediately started in on her.

"Why didn't you tell me you hired Brick Taylor? Huh?"

His mother was still bewildered. "I did. Do you know him?"

"No, you didn't! You never called him Brick! It was always Kevin. You always said Kevin. No exceptions!" James was almost frantic.

She looked at her son and said, "Sweetie, I don't understand." She was getting upset now at how upset James was.

James almost started shouting, but forced his voice down so the others wouldn't hear. "That's Brick Taylor in there! Don't you remember? Don't you? He beat me up in junior high school!! Don't you remember that?"

His mother immediately looked relieved and said, "Did he? Are you sure?"

This just agitated James even more. "YES! I'd know him anywhere. He used to be skinnier and had redder hair, but I know it. He even realized I had recognized him. I can't believe you don't remember, mom!"

She said, "Honey, I can't possibly be expected to remember all the people that beat you up in junior high school."

Now James wasn't sure if his own mother was making fun of him, or if she was serious about the last statement. He didn't have the strength to figure out which was more likely. The comment stung him. "*MOM!* Only *two* people beat me up. And Brick was the only one that beat me up three times. *THREE TIMES!* I had to have stitches, remember?!"

The light finally went on in his mother's face. "Oh, now I do remember! You did get a couple of stitches that time. I had forgotten all about it, and he never mentioned it!"

James spat at her, "Well, now that asshole is working for you! He's here to have dinner with us. I can't have *dinner* with him!"

Bea looked at her son and finally started to get it. "James, that was such a long time ago. Kevin's hardly the same person he was in junior high school, just like you're hardly the same person. He's one of the nicest, kindest people I know!"

James was boiling and started to say "I am *NOT* staying in this house and having..." just as he looked up and saw Brick tentatively look around the doorway from the hall into the den where they were talking.

James stopped abruptly and turned blood red in the face. James' mom turned around to see Brick standing there.

Brick smiled a little uncomfortably and stepped fully into the doorway.

James spat at him, "Don't come in here!"

Brick said, "Look, I wasn't sure how you'd react..."

"You need to leave. You're NOT welcome in this house!"

James' mom was shocked. "JAMES!"

Brick closed his mouth and held it tightly shut. He looked from side to side, supremely uncomfortable, and more than a little unsure how to proceed.

The three of them held for a pause, then finally Bea turned to Brick and said, "Kevin, go sit down and have your dinner. James and I need to finish talking."

Brick barely nodded, turned and left to go back to the kitchen.

James' mom looked very sternly back at him. Her eyes hardened a little and she said, "James, what has gotten into you? You're acting like a child! You're not in junior high school anymore!"

But James simply couldn't deal with it. He was already vulnerable from New York, and to have all of his junior high torments rear up now was more than he could handle.

His mother was looking at James, waiting expectantly to see if he would suddenly realize how silly all of this was.

James looked away from the door where Brick had been and down at his mother.

"I can't be in this house if he's here," said James calmly, but through gritted teeth.

And with that, James walked out of the den, down the hall and out the front door as fast as he could. By the time he got in his Mustang, he could hear his mother calling after him, trying to get his attention, but trying to not make a huge scene either. James ignored her and drove away.

He only got around the next corner before he had to pull over to the curb and stop the car. It all came out, and James couldn't stop it. He felt alone and betrayed and severely regretted moving back to Lawder. He had thought that no matter what else might happen in his life, his mother would be there for him and he could find support there. But now, the person that had made school a living hell for two years in junior high had become his mother's right hand. The thought of them back at the dinner table, laughing at James, made him feel sick. Brick would go through all the different ways he had terrorized James in school for everyone's entertainment. His last refuge was gone.

James felt his cell phone begin ringing in his pocket, but he wasn't about to answer it now. He spent a few minutes trying to pull himself together and he decided he needed to go get drunk. He looked out of the car window at the relatively new house sitting there. He realized, ironically, that where the house was used to be a wooded vacant lot. The same vacant lot he would hide and cry in because people in school, Brick really, had called him "queer" or "faggot" in front of everybody. Words that had horrible meanings for a thirteen year old - words that he really didn't understand, and yet knew were mean, evil things to say to someone, and even worse, knew the evil things were probably true. James hated Brick for throwing the truth around like an anvil, wanting to do as

much damage as possible with it, wanting to hurt and humiliate him as much as possible.

James started the car back up and drove off to the nearest liquor store and picked up a bottle of vodka. While in the store, he felt his cell phone vibrate a couple more times, but he still refused to answer it. He refused to even take it out of his pocket.

James couldn't wait to get back to his apartment, but about a quarter mile away from it, he felt the phone vibrate again and went to pull it out of his pocket just to see who it was. He knew it was his mother, but couldn't stand not at least looking at it any more. There wasn't anyone else to call him these days, and in fact, no one else that had the number of the pre-paid phone he had picked-up several weeks before. His other cell phone was at the bottom of the East River, where he had thrown it a month ago, along with the rest of his disintegrated life.

He looked at the display, and sure enough, it was his mother. As he put his phone back down on the seat next to the bottle of vodka, he heard a siren behind him and looked up and saw flashing blue lights in his mirror.

James beat his hand violently on the top of the steering wheel and barked "Fuck, fuck, FUCK!" If he could just get a notice of a tax audit and a sudden, explosive case of hemorrhoids, he'd reach a state of nirvana at this point.

He pulled over to the side of the road and rolled down his window and waited for the cop. The cop sat in his cruiser for a moment, then finally got out and swaggered up to James' window. Cops were assholes as far as James was concerned - in it just for the power trip.

The cop was tall and had to lean way over to look into James' car as he asked, "Sir, may I please see your identification and insurance card?"

James pulled out the cards and gave them to the officer. But he did it as sullenly as he could. He wasn't going to be cheerful for this schmuck if he could help it.

The officer looked at the license and said, "New York, huh? Are you passing through?"

James said bitterly, "No. It pleases me no end to be able to say that I live here now."

The officer pulled out a notepad and started copying down the VIN on James' car through the windshield. He said, conversationally, "Really? We don't see many people moving here from New York. Welcome to Lawder!"

James offered back a flat, "Thanks. I grew up here and now I'm back. Things are just great!"

The officer looked James in the eye for a moment. James couldn't tell what he was thinking since the guy had dark glasses on.

"I need to ask you what's in the paper bag on the seat next to you."

"It's a bottle of vodka." And James opened the bag to show the officer it was, and that the bottle was still sealed.

"Thanks, Mr. uh, Montgomery," the officer said, glancing down at James' driver's license. "Do you realize you're driving around with no license plate on your car?"

"I'm not? It's got dealer plates, right? I work at Natahatchee Ford. I just got this as my work car yesterday. They put dealer plates on them."

"This one has no plates at all."

"They must have forgotten, and I didn't bother to look." James was now fuming about how his work was screwing with him too.

The officer said, "Mr. Montgomery, please wait here while I go call in to get some information."

The officer turned and went back to his cruiser and got in. James sat there nervously thinking about what nightmare he was about to have to go through now. He could hear his cell phone buzzing again on the seat next to him. He wanted to throw it out the window, but he just ignored it instead. At best, they'd probably impound the car and James would have to go to the station or something. At worst, they'd throw him in jail and he'd have to call his mom to come get him. Right when he didn't think the evening's humiliation could get any worse, it was peeling back to expose a new round of raw aggravation.

After a few minutes, the officer came back, and before he even had a chance to speak to James, James snapped at him, "So what little nightmare process do I have to go through?"

The officer squatted down so he was face-to-face with James and looked at him through the open window a moment. After a second, he asked James "Sir, are you ok? You seem a little upset. I mean, even a little more so than people usually are for being pulled over."

James said, "It's just been a rotten day. A rotten month, actually, but today was just a fresh, creamy layer on top."

The officer stood back up and said, "Well, you can relax. The car's not stolen, and I called Natahatchee Ford, and they verified you and the car. I'm not going to give you a ticket, but please do make sure they put a tag on it for you tomorrow when you go to work."

"It's the top of my list, I promise you," said James, thick and sarcastic.

"And, Mr. Montgomery," added the officer, "please don't drive angry. It increases the likelihood of accidents a lot."

The Mr. Righteous attitude of the cop was starting to wear thin for James. "I feel nothing but love for all things, great and small, Officer, uh, Adams." There was practically acid dripping off his words.

The officer got up to go back to his cruiser and James started the Mustang so he could get to his apartment. The bottle of vodka was the only friend he had left in the world, and he wanted to spend as much time as possible with it that evening. The two of them had some serious catching up to do.

At home, James hit the bottle heavily until everything started to get a little numb. His living area was still the same piles of boxes and crap that it had been since he moved in. He hadn't even cleaned up the broken lamp or DVD player yet.

James rifled through the pile of magazines and pulled out the *Entertainment Weekly* he had saved, the one with the picture of Ian on the cover and the line "The Science Fiction Film You Know Nothing About."

Everything that had happened that day made the pain sharper than he could bear. He would give anything to be able to do things differently with Ian. If Ian were still alive, everything would be so different. Why hadn't he recognized what Ian was going through? Why had he clung to his own selfish motives instead of just being Ian's friend? That was all Ian ever wanted, just one true friend, not the sea of shallow, self-serving sycophants. James could have so easily been that for him, and actually was in many ways. But James had things to gain from him as well, and that was all Ian saw in the end.

He looked at the cover again, Ian's sloppy, curly hair hanging around his face, framing those incredible, intensely blue eyes - James had called them Aegean eyes. His hair was how it was when he first met Ian, when the principal filming of *Angstrom* was still going strong. Later, Ian had gotten his hair cut very short, but the shaggy look was how James really remembered him.

James finally put the magazine down and looked at his cell phone on the kitchen bar. He decided to call his mother. He knew he'd have to talk to her sooner or later, so he might as well get it over with.

When his mother answered the phone, she said, "James, are you ok?"

"I'm fine. I'm over here with all my friends drinking."

"I was about to come over to your apartment, we need to talk about this. I feel terrible that you left like you did."

"Well, at least you were all able to enjoy the rest of your dinner and talk about the big scene I made."

"No, no one did, I'm sorry to say. And we didn't enjoy dinner at all. Least of all Kevin."

"Oh, I bet I had a worse time than Asshole did."

"Everyone left a while ago. Will you come back over now so we can talk?"

"No, I'm drunk and I'm going to bed. I have to be up fresh and early to get a tag put on my car so everyone can be happy again."

"I'm helping at the hospital tomorrow. Will you come there after work and meet me for dinner? It'll be just there at the cafeteria, but it'll be just the two of us. Besides, there's someone I'd like for you to meet."

"I'd rather you not surprise me with any new people, mom. Your track record with that kinda sucks."

"I swear this isn't anything like that. You know that you mean everything in the world to me and I wish tonight hadn't happened. Just come on up to the children's floor tomorrow when you leave work."

James hung up the phone and looked back down at Ian's picture on the front of the magazine. Once again, the weight became more than he could bear, and the tears started leaking out of the corners of his eyes. He would have moved heaven and earth to have Ian with him there right then, to hold on to.

He finally put the magazine up with all the others. He went into his bedroom to crawl into bed, but wound up sitting on the edge of the bed, staring and unfocused. Lost in no real thoughts at all. He looked over at the nightstand next to his bed. Sitting on it were a small carved wooden pinecone and the black wooden box.

His eyes studied the box before he finally picked it up and opened it. Nestled inside the padded velvet lining was a beveled crystal block, solid and very heavy. He took it out and held it up to the light. Deep inside, you could tell there was a crystal dragonfly buried in it, made out of barely tinted crystals itself, so that the effect was that of almost a ghost of the insect, made of crystals and within a crystal. The light would dance, reflect and refract as you turned it in the light.

He put the crystal block back in the box and put it on the table. Out of the drawer, he pulled a photograph of Ian and James together, a real one - not some hack photoshop job. It was a photo of the two of them kissing, awkwardly because James had held out the camera in his hand to take the photo, back when things were just building between the two of them. Back when they had so much to look forward to.

James had so little of Ian left, so little of his own life left. After everything he had been through, this was all he had to show for it? How could it be worth it? Was this really what life amounted to?

Chapter 4

James awoke slowly to a painful ringing in his head from the vodka the night before. Then he sat up when he realized that it was the phone in the kitchen that was actually ringing.

He grabbed his head to stop it from spinning where he had sat up too fast before he could get out of bed. He shuffled into the kitchen squinting and his head throbbing. The phone continued ringing, so it wasn't just a fluke.

James answered with a muffled hello.

"Is this James Montgomery?"

"Uh-huh," he said slowly.

"Mr. Montgomery, this is Officer J. T. Adams of the Lawder P.D."

"Eeeyeah?"

"I pulled you over last night because your car didn't have a tag."

"Eeeyeaaaahhhh?"

"Well, uh..."

James blanched and ventured, "Awwww, you didn't change your mind about giving me a ticket, did you? You guys aren't allowed to do that, are you?"

"No, see, uh..." There was a nervous chuckle on the other end of the phone before Officer Adams continued. "I forgot to give you your driver's license and insurance card back last night."

James said, "Huh?" And then it sunk in and he said, "Hey! I didn't get it back, did I?" The act of thinking back to the night before caused a stabbing in the back of his head that made him cringe.

"Yeah, so I want to get it back to you. I was hoping to catch you before you left this morning. I'd hate to be responsible for you driving around town with no license or proof of insurance."

"I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I did that to someone, that's for sure," quipped James. He wasn't about to let his headache get in the way of a little sarcasm.

"Will you be home for about ten minutes? I can swing by right now if it's convenient."

James thought how odd small towns could be. In most towns, you might get lucky if they made you pay \$30 to get it back. In New York, they probably would have just thrown it in the Hudson River.

"Sure. Come on by."

Officer Adams got the apartment number from James and promised to be right there.

James threw on some clothes and then waited quietly, trying to meditate his headache away.

Eventually, he heard a knock on the door and opened it. Standing there, Officer Adams didn't really look like Officer Adams any more. He was wearing denim shorts, tennis shoes with no socks, and a baggy, plain white t-shirt, but he had the same sunglasses on as the night before. Now that he got a better look at him than he did the night before, James was pretty impressed. Officer Adams was probably in his late twenties, like James, and was very lean. Down below were a super fine pair of muscular legs. He had a good tan and a handsome face with very short, military-cut hair. Even through the baggy t-shirt, it was obvious Officer Adams clearly worked out a lot.

They stood there for a second, and finally Officer Adams said, "Mr. Montgomery?"

James realized he was staring a little bit so he opened the door and deflected, "Sorry, I was expecting the same uniform from last night." He stepped back so the officer could come inside.

Officer Adams stepped into James' apartment and took his sunglasses off. James finally got to see the blue eyes hidden behind them, slightly reminiscent of Ian's.

"Oh, I'm not on duty today, Mr. Montgomery, so no uniform."

"Ah. Do me a favor and call me James. 'Mr. Montgomery' makes me feel like there's someone else in the room you're talking to."

Officer Adams scratched at the back of his head a little and said sheepishly, "So, I'm a little embarrassed. I forgot to give back licenses and insurance cards more often than I should. Sorry about that."

James said, "No problem, I guess. I mean, I hadn't even realized you still had them." James had wanted to still be pissed off about being pulled over, but it was difficult given how good looking the cop was, and how nice he was being.

Officer Adams looked around briefly and said, "Wow, you did just move in didn't you?"

"Seven months ago this weekend! But I swear I'm going to get around to unpacking any day now!"

"Seven months?!" exclaimed Officer Adams, his mouth dropping open in disbelief as he looked past James at all the boxes stacked up again.

"No, I'm just joking around with you, Officer Adams. I just moved in on Monday."

Officer Adams laughed and said, "Oh, man, I thought you were serious for a second! You can call me J. T. if you like. Everyone does. Aw, look at that sofa! That's a great sofa!"

"Uh, yeah. Thanks," said James, a little nonplussed by J. T. "Officer" Adams' casual conversation.

"Did you get that here in Lawder?" J. T. asked, enthusiastically.

"I brought that with me from New York." It was an expensive sofa and J. T. was right to be impressed with it.

J. T. went to sit down on the corner of it and said, "I'd never be able to afford a sofa like this! This thing is great!" He leaned back to try it out just a little.

"Don't they have sofas like this in the evidence room? Couldn't you just grab one of those?"

J. T. smiled broadly and said, "Oh, I wish! I mean, we can't take stuff out of Evidence, but not even the drug dealers here have stuff this nice! Your apartment's pretty nice, too, by the way. I haven't been in any of these yet."

J. T. saw the puzzled look on James' face and said, "I'm a cop, and we get called in on domestic disturbances in every apartment complex in town. Even the nice, brand new ones."

The smile made J. T. even more appealing. J. T. sat for a second, then bounced up and down on the edge of the sofa, testing its mettle a little bit. He glanced over at the kitchen bar and said, "You did some serious damage to that bottle last night!" He nodded at the bottle of vodka sitting there.

James looked over at it. There was only a tiny bit left in the bottom. Had he really drank that much last night? Surely he hadn't.

He said, "Holy shit! I should feel much worse than I do right now if I really drank all that! I'll bet you can't drink that much in one night."

J. T. laughed and said, "Vodka, no. I hate vodka. Make it Jack Daniels, though, and we'd have a contest." He stood up and looked at the chrome legs under the sofa. He started to stand back up, but then stooped over to look under the sofa again. He reached up under it and pulled something out. He looked at the disc, but James couldn't tell what it was. J. T. laughed a little bit and handed the disc to James and said, "I, uh, assume this is yours?"

It was a DVD proudly named "Hung Horses II: Back in the Saddle" and had a picture of a guy in a cowboy hat and chaps getting blown by another guy.

James turned bright red and said, "I have no idea how that got in here. Someone broke into my place last night and put incriminating, uh, stuff in here."

J. T. looked at James, giving him some play for the joke to finish.

James said, "I want to file a police report. They drank all my vodka, too." He pointed indistinctly back in the direction of the empty vodka bottle.

J. T. finally grinned and said, "Don't worry about it. It's none of my business."

James was still red in the face and his head was throbbing. He finally said, "I think I need to get on to work."

J. T. headed towards the door, but then stopped suddenly and turned to face James, smacking his forehead with his palm. He pulled out James' license and insurance card and handed it to him. "Here, I was almost going to forget to give these to you again. I don't know why I have this problem! Sorry again for the inconvenience, James."

As James let him out the door, J. T. said, "And you might want to keep your DVDs out from under the sofa, they'll get all scratched up there."

When James closed the door, he leaned against it. How could he leave a porno DVD lying out with a cop in his apartment? How stupid was that? His hometown was a small southern one, with plenty of cops that would just love to bust some faggot for having obscene materials. But this guy had surprised James. He was still a little condescending, like any cop would be, but a little more easy-going than James expected, too. And not too shabby looking.

James peeked out his window to the parking lot below and saw J. T. driving off in a black, jacked-up Toyota king cab truck with smoked out windows.

~~~~~

When James walked into the hospital after work, he wasn't quite sure which one was the children's floor. It had been a long time since he had been to the hospital in Lawder and things were different. In fact, he wondered if the last time he had been there was when he had to get stitches because of that motherfucker Brick. He was pretty sure that was the last time. He couldn't even remember going to see his mother there while she was volunteering.

His mother had started volunteering at the hospital years and years ago. Even as a single mother, and building a business on her own, she still volunteered. As James grew up, he needed less of her attention, and the business did better and better and needed less of her attention, too. So she wound up spending more and more time there with the children at the hospital. Twice now the hospital and the city had tried to recognize her with civic awards for her work, but she wouldn't have anything to do with that. She'd

just pooh-pooh their awards and say they were trying to turn her into some kind of publicity hound.

James walked up to the front information desk and asked the elderly lady sitting there which floor the children's ward was on.

"You're Bea's son, aren't you?" she asked, her pale eyes locked onto James.

"Yes ma'am. James."

She smiled very warmly at him. "Bea said you might be coming by tonight. But you look like her, too. You have her kind face, and her strength, I think. I think I might have recognized you even if Bea hadn't said you'd be coming by."

"Oh, well thank you. It's been a long time since I've been here."

The lady looked past James briefly and her old eyes brightened. She called out, "Dr. Sykes, oh Dr. Sykes, come here!"

James looked back over his shoulder and saw a white haired man in a doctor's white coat. He had been on his way somewhere, but walked over to the desk, instead. He didn't really even look at James.

"What's up, Cora?"

Cora's eyes sparkled with merriment. "Guess who this young man is!"

Dr. Sykes turned to look at James, a little bewildered at first. He had bushy eyebrows, but didn't look quite as old as his white hair would indicate. James just stood there a little uncomfortably.

At first, Dr. Sykes seemed a little put out with the game Cora wanted him to play, but then James saw the recognition in his eyes.

"You're not... You're not Bea's kid are you?"

James smiled and Cora laughed and clapped her hands together in delight.

She said, "That's right! James. It's Bea's son, James! I told you the resemblance was there! James, this is Dr. Sykes, head of neurology."

Dr. Sykes reached his hand out to James, who shook it. Dr. Sykes smiled and said, "Well, I'll be darned! Look at you! I remember Bea mentioning you were coming back to Lawder!"

James said, "It's nice to meet you Dr. Sykes. And I'm back for a little while, anyway." It felt a little funny being made a fuss over.

"You're here to see your mom, I guess," said Dr. Sykes, still staring in wonderment. "Let me take you up to where she is."

James started to protest, "Oh, I can find her if you tell me the floor."

"Nonsense! I'll take you! Come on with me!"

James followed the doctor over to the nearest elevator. Dr. Sykes had clearly forgotten all about whatever task he was originally on.

"It's nice to meet you finally. Your mother talks about you a great deal!" He punched the third floor button on the elevator.

"Bea has lots of kids here you know. I don't know what we'd do without your mother! But you, James, are her one and only in the end."

They stepped off the elevator and James immediately saw his mother about halfway down the hall. She was bent over, helping a small black boy, probably ten or so, walk down the hall with an IV stand attached to his arm.

Dr. Sykes called down to her, "Bea!! Look who I found downstairs!"

James' mom smiled and waved that she'd be there in a minute and he saw her turn into a room with the boy.

"James, I'll leave you to your mother. Come by and visit with us anytime!!"

"Thanks, Dr. Sykes. Thanks for showing me up here."

Dr. Sykes waved at James and stepped back into the elevator.

James headed over to a small waiting area, but three of the nurses - a large black woman, a skinny older black woman and a younger Hispanic guy - were walking up to him.

The large black nurse was smiling so much that her eyes were small crescent moons. She said, "Is you James?"

James said, "Yes, ma'am, that's me."

She came up to him with the other two right behind her. She put her hand on his arm and said, "Awww Lordy, James, look at you! It's so nice to meet Miss Bea's baby finally! I'm Hattie, this is Lovey, and this here is Franco."

James said hello to each of them. Hattie kept her hand on James' arm, though, and looked him up and down. "Such a fine young man, just like Miss Bea always said! Would you like some ice cream? I can go get you some ice cream if you'd like."

James laughed and said, "No, thank you. Maybe I'll have some a little later, though."

James' mom had walked up at that point and said, "Thank you, Hattie. I've got him now."

The three nurses wandered back to their duties and James said to his mother, "I feel like a celebrity here."

His mother smiled. "You should. I've talked about you non-stop since you said you were moving back to Lawder! Hattie's asked when you were coming to visit every time I've seen her for weeks now."

"Even Dr. Sykes knew I was your son without me telling him."

His mother's eyes twinkled and she said, "Well, it's no wonder, what with our good genes and all. They give us our distinctive beauty, you know. C'mon, there's someone I want you to meet."

She led James down the hall to one of the rooms near the end. When they walked in the room, a tiny girl with dark hair in pigtailed sat up in her bed a little. She had frightening braces on her legs and a long laceration down one arm that had been sewn up and was almost healed at this point. Her face had several small sewn up wounds as well. She smiled and said, "Hi, Miss Bea!!" Even with the cuts and stitches and braces, her face was radiant. But she glanced at James a little suspiciously.

"Hi, Lindsey, sweetie! Did you already have your dinner?"

Lindsey focused back on Bea, but frowned. "I don't like carrots very much."

"But I bet Hattie got you some ice cream!"

"Yes, ma'am! Chocolate!" She pointed at James and asked shyly, "Who's that?"

Bea grabbed James' arm and said, "Lindsey, this is my son, James."

Lindsey didn't respond, but continued to regard James darkly.

James smiled and tried to be a little engaging, "Hattie tried to give me some ice cream, too, but I haven't eaten it yet! I'll probably have to eat my carrots first."

James' mom walked over to Lindsey and kissed her forehead. "Ok, Lindsey, I'll come back in a little while to tuck you in. Will you wait for me?"

"Oh, of course, Miss Bea!"

James and his mother walked out the room and back down the hall.

Bea said, "When she first got here, you should have seen the pins they had to put in both of her legs, and the back splint she was in. And she's had six front teeth replaced, but they were all baby teeth, fortunately, and her permanent ones will eventually come in. Even the doctors were moved. All that damage from a horrible car wreck, but she's doing great. She'll be out of here soon."

James said, "She looks like she's doing well."

"She's got nothing, James. She'll get out of here, but there's nothing for her."

"I don't understand."

"Her parents were both in the wreck. Both killed. The state has searched like crazy for relatives, but finally confirmed last week that there's no one. She's gone through all this, and has nothing in the end. Barely five years old and all alone. She'll go into a foster home and grow up there. She's had a great attitude through the whole thing, though, and it breaks our hearts."

James was moved. Lindsey was cute, and it was sad to think of everything she had gone through, especially at such a young age.

His mother just looked at James expectantly, and he understood the real point she was trying to get across.

He looked back down the hall towards Lindsey's room, then down at his feet. He said to her, "You're not going to give me a free ride on this Brick thing, are you?"

His mother said, simply, "Children are pretty resilient, despite everything they go through."

James just sighed. She just didn't understand what he had been through in New York, and what additional pain the appearance of Brick Taylor in his mother's house was causing him. He didn't feel safe anywhere any more.

His mother asked, "Are you hungry? I'm starved! Or did Hattie have you eating all kinds of junk before I got there?"

"She did try to get me to eat some ice cream. But yeah, I'm hungry."

She led James back down to the first floor to the cafeteria. It took longer than expected because they had to stop so James' mother could introduce him to every doctor, nurse, radiologist, administrator, anesthesiologist, janitor, physician's assistant, and complete stranger they passed. And then when they got into the cafeteria itself, all the ladies working there had to meet James, too.

When they finally got their dinner, Bea picked a table away from everyone else. They sat down and started eating. Bea asked James about how his job at the dealership was going so far, and then how he liked his apartment. She seemed a little put out that he liked it fine.

As they neared the end of the meal, his mother finally said, "I want you to know that I never would have let last night happen the way it did if I had made the connection as to who Kevin was."

James said, "I know you didn't do it intentionally."

"He tried to quit today. He feels awful. He could barely say the words he was so upset. Which made me cry, too."

James said, unmoved, "I'm sorry, but I have a hard time having any sympathy for him."

James' mother just looked at her son across the table grimly. She didn't know what to do. Kevin had become like a second son to her. How did all of this happen? She always had a better sense of this kind of problem approaching long before it hit. How did she miss this?

James looked down at his tray.

"He was the first person to ever call me 'faggot', which he did in front of about ten other kids. I didn't even know what it meant, but I knew it was bad and was meant to hurt. And from that moment on, for two years, he did everything he could to hurt me. 'Jimmy Queer-Bait'. He'd call me 'Jimmy Queer-Bait' too." James was barely whispering at this point. He had never told his mother or anyone else these things.

James looked up and his mother had her hand over her mouth in shock, the tears creeping out of her eyes.

"Eventually, I learned what the words meant, which hurt even more. How could he know that about me when I didn't even know there was such a thing? In the end, though, he was right. I was a faggot then, and I still am now."

James looked down at his tray again. It didn't particularly upset him to repeat the story — he had cried out all that pain many years ago. His mother had known he was gay since he was in college, but it did upset him to know what it was doing to his mother — that he was ruining an image of someone she had come to care about — but she needed to know that it was a real pain, that it had really happened to him, that he wasn't just overreacting to a playground scuffle. In the end he was drained and numb to everything. He just couldn't feel any more.

Bea gasped, "Oh dear! I didn't know. I had no..." She stopped there, unable to go on.

James let her process it. He continued to stare at the remnant bits of his roast beef on his plate.

"But, he's not like that! He's a different person! I couldn't see him doing that today any more than I could see *you* doing... that... Oh, James, if I had just known you were going through that!" Her voice was cracking with the pain.

"You know what? You say he's changed. So fine, I'll go along with that. But I need for you to respect my wish to not waste my time being his best friend."

It took a long time for his mother to gather her composure again. James watched her, and had never seen her look so worn and small as she did at that moment.

Finally, she said, "It's always been you and me, together. And I let you down. The one person I was put on this earth to look after, and I let this happen."

James said, "I chose to deal with it alone, mom, not you. I'm not trying to blame you for any of what happened, not at all. I just need for you to understand. You look and see Kevin. I look and see Brick. I just need for you to understand where I'm coming from."

"Brick obviously hasn't volunteered any of this information to you the whole time he's worked for you, has he?" asked James.

"No," She said, hesitantly.

To which James commented dryly, "What a stand-up guy."

## *Chapter 5*

Saturday afternoon, James realized his hair was getting bad off. It had been a while since he had gotten it cut and it was starting to get messy. The bad, natural messy, and not the hip, carefully-constructed messy he usually kept it. James thought for a moment how there could be such a huge difference between the two, but one look at his hair would illustrate just how true it was.

James had no idea where to go, and was going to call his mother to ask her where she might recommend. But just because he was feeling a little adventurous and a little bored, he decided to figure it out for himself. He grabbed the Lawder Yellow Pages and flipped through to the salons section. It wouldn't take long as there weren't many.

He looked through the list and found what had to be the most obviously queer salon there - Melvyn's Coiffures.

James dialed up Melvyn's to find out if maybe Melvyn would be the right coiffurist for him.

"Melvyn's Coiffures," answered the voice, with a superfluous supply of s's.

James asked, "Do you know what a bed-head style is?"

"But of course!"

James decided to mess with the guy a little and see if he could throw him off. He asked, "So what's your philosophy for creating the right bed-head look?"

The voice didn't hesitate. "Oh, well everyone just assumes it needs to look like the person just crawled out of bed, but that's totally contrary to the whole notion, really. Anybody can look like they just crawled out of bed. I think what you're really trying to create is a much more intense look, like you just finished with the wildest, stickiest night of sex you've ever had, the kind where you just tore the place up!"

That settled it for James.

He exclaimed, "Yeah! You've got the salon I'm looking for! Any availability this afternoon?"

The guy on the other end of the phone said pointedly, "Bring it!"

James found the salon right on the outskirts of downtown Lawder in a small brick house that had been painted a retina-burning hot pink, with black trim. Out front was a matching pink sign that said "Melvyn's Coiffures" in a swoopy script. The "i" in 'coiffures' was dotted with a little star. So far, this was the thickest concentration of homostyle that James had seen in Lawder.

James walked in, a little bell tinkling over the door as he did so. A tall, fair skinned man in a tight black t-shirt and tight black jeans stood talking rapidly to a dainty, elderly lady, who was taking some money out of her purse. Melvyn's hair was swoopy and dark black – a hairstyle reinterpretation of the sign out front. But worst of all, his head was too big, and the significant hair pronounced it even more.

"So after going through all that, the next Sunday I saw an ad for 800-thread-count sheets for \$29. Just have a seat, love." Melvyn pointed at James and then a chair and continued. "And I'll be damned, pardon my French, if I'm going to pay \$33 for 550-thread-count when I can be reclining in 800-thread-count damask sateen instead. You know? Am I right? I like to be pampered, and if I'm going to pay that kind of money for sheets, I want the most fabulous ones I can get. Plus, if you're going to entertain, you've got to do it right. Don't you agree? So, I took the other set back to Wal-Mart. They wanted to argue some because I had already washed the sheets, but I hadn't even used them yet. They took them back in the end, I promise you that!"

The guy hadn't missed a beat in squeezing in a command to James, while blasting the little lady with the minutiae of his life. The lady never said a word; she just paid, and started tottering towards the door.

After she left, Melvyn was able to focus his considerable energy on James instead.

He put his hands on his hips and examined James.

"So, I'm guessing you're the one that called me on the phone earlier. Am I right?"

James started to wonder if he was going to regret getting mixed up with Melvyn.

"That's me. I'm James."

Melvyn continued to examine James as he moved over and behind his stylist's chair, patting the back of it to invite James over.

"So what are we going to do today, James? It's not every day that I get the provocative kind of question you asked earlier. You like being provocative, don't you, James?"

James said, "Well, I kinda hate to be a tease like that, but I'm just looking to clean up the style I've got now. Nothing new or adventurous today."

Melvyn gave his hair a more thorough examination before declaring, "It's a great style. I don't get to see many hairstyles like these here. Someone knew what they were doing. And don't you worry. It may be the same old same old for you, but it's a treat for

me to get to work on a style like yours! A fabulous little styling bon-bon for me to play with!" He had started going through his shears, trying to select just the right pair.

"If you don't mind me asking, where did you get this cut?"

"Oh, a place up in New York."

"Oh my GOD!! I'm soooooooooo totally envious!! How long ago did you get to go visit?"

"Well, I just moved back to Lawder from there. I lived there for about four years."

Melvyn stamped his foot on the ground. "Oh, get OUT of here right NOW! You are going to make me wet my pants! Why would you move away from the greatest place on earth and come here? I'm baffled, so tell!!"

"It's a complicated story. Let me just say that New York can be a great city, but it has its share of issues as well. The time just came for me to say goodbye to New York."

"Oh, it's always been a dream of mine to go to New York sometime! I've always fantasized about what it would be like in Greenwich Village and Chelsea! All the wonderful people I'd have so much in common with... the shops and galleries, the constant excitement! There would be people there I could actually have a real conversation with, about musicals and plays and fashion and trends in the art world. There, people you meet on the street know about these things. I think I'd totally be in my element there, feel like I really belonged there, you know? Small towns can be so... so... provincial. Lawder can drive me bat-shit sometimes!! Did you actually live in Manhattan?"

"Yeah, in Chelsea, actually."

Melvyn took a step back, his mouth hanging open in shock. "Get OUT of here! You are the luckiest person in the WORLD!" Then he asked a little more slyly, "Did you have a... you know... a roommate there?"

James smiled and said, "No, I was lucky enough to have a place to myself."

Melvyn had started back on James' hair, but now stopped again to ask, "Well, you know, a lot of times, in Chelsea, guys live together there. Isn't that right?"

James knew what Melvyn was fishing for, but he wasn't going to give in that easily. In New York, it was just implicit that the person was gay, as long as your gaydar was pinging, and you could safely proceed from there. In Lawder, it was a lot more perilous to just assume someone was gay. "You know, now that you mention it, there were a lot of guys living together in Chelsea. But not me. Had the place all to myself!" For a moment, James had a problem keeping the smile off his face.

"Well, if I was able to live in Chelsea, I wouldn't mind having a guy for a roommate. Even if the place were really small."

"Yeah, apartments in New York usually are pretty small."

"Was it fabulous being able to wake up in the middle of the night, and call down the block to have sushi delivered if you wanted it?"

James actually had done exactly that plenty of times. He laughed and said, "Yeah, there's not much you can't get in the middle of the night."

"You can call up and get anything?"

"Sure, pretty much."

"*Anything?*" Melvyn asked lecherously.

"Sure, sushi, Indian, pizza, Mediterranean, Caribbean, French... you name it." James was having a blast not letting Melvyn draw him into a totally different conversation.

This went on for another ten minutes or so, Melvyn peppering James with questions about Central Park, spas, James' favorite bars, and shopping.

Finally, Melvyn said, "Ok, Chelsea James, let's see how I've upheld your high New York standards!" He turned James so he could get a good look at his hair, but James had nothing to worry about. Melvyn hadn't tried to get creative or bold; he had just cleaned it up a little for James.

James paid Melvyn and was about to walk out the door when he turned and gave Melvyn what he had really wanted during their whole conversation. He said, "And to answer the question you asked a hundred times without actually asking, yes, I'm gay."

Melvyn stomped his foot and squealed "I KNEW IT! I JUST KNEW IT! You'd better come back soon, Chelsea James! I'm going to have a million questions for you!"

~~~~~

James walked into the grocery store, feeling pretty amused with himself. As over the top as Melvyn was, he had had a good time baiting the guy and toying with him. He might regret telling Melvyn he was gay in the long run, but it had made for a pretty kicky time this afternoon. Plus, for the first time in over a month, it had been fun to think about New York for a little while without being depressed about it.

He made his way to the back of the grocery store to get some milk, thinking to himself that if he ever told Melvyn he had spent an entire evening at a trendy bar in the west village chatting and getting completely wasted with Alan Cumming, Melvyn would probably have an epileptic fit.

As he rounded the bottled juice aisle to get to the dairy section, though, his amusement stopped abruptly. Standing there, talking to what looked like the store manager, was a thick-set man with a dense head of dirty blond hair, with just a touch of red in it. James froze in place. Brick had his arms crossed and was smiling and nodding casually while chatting with the store manager.

Even though Brick wasn't facing directly towards James, the store manager seemed to notice James freezing in place and glanced curiously over his way. James immediately

wheeled around and walked back down the juice aisle before Brick happened to wonder what the manager was looking at and glanced back over his way.

James' hands were already getting clammy as he strode back to the front of the grocery store as fast as he could without drawing undue attention to himself. He set his handheld basket down on the floor at the front end of the aisle, with the granola, bananas, and loaf of seven-grain bread still in it, and proceeded straight out the door without ever looking back.

~~~~~

James put down the grocery bags he managed to carry up and paused before going back for the rest. While driving over to another grocery store a mile farther away, he had fumed about the inconvenience, but now that he was back at his apartment, he just felt dejected and displaced. He didn't even want to go get the remaining bags, but as soon as he stepped out of his apartment door to do so, he saw something that he had not seen since he had moved in.

There was a tall woman fumbling with her keys trying to open the door to the apartment next door to James'. So far James hadn't seen or heard anyone in the apartment, but there she was — tall, tanned, and toned. She had a massive head of sculpted black hair, porn star writ large. Peeking out from her hair were two large gold hoop earrings on each ear. She was wearing a tight tube top with a cringe-inducing floral print pattern and had a huge quantity of gold cuffs and bracelets on her wrists. Below was a pair of white cutoff jean shorts, so very obscenely short that it probably had to be technically considered a cutoff jean thong. Her very long legs ended in a pair of white stacked heel sandals, with (could it really be? Yes, indeed it was) rhinestone Hello Kitty designs on the sides. She was trying to balance dry cleaning, drug store bags, a white purse, a large convenience store soft drink (with bright red lipstick all over the rim), a cigarette, and her apartment keys all at the same time. James knew drag queens in New York that would take a look at this girl and whisper to each other that the bitch needed to turn the volume down a titch.

She was bending her head down as far as she could, and trying to lift her hand just enough, to get the cigarette into her mouth when she heard James behind her. She turned and smiled at James. James assumed it must take huge amounts of effort to begin the act of turning, and then an additional huge amount of energy to stop the motion, all because of the size of her tits. The energy required to overcome the inertia of those puppies would be gargantuan. And even through the high-decibel pattern on her tube top, James could tell one of her nipples was pierced. The tube top was just that tight. Below, and out in the open, was a navel ring.

The look of delight on her face was real, though, probably unlike the basketballs she was smuggling in her tube top. She said through lips painted as heavy and glossy as a

candy apple red Lexus, "Oh, hi!! Yay!! I have a new neighbor!!" At the same time, she lost her grip on one of the drug store bags and it fell, spilling out about five boxes of tampons.

"Shit!" she exclaimed, and started twisting a little and squatting slightly, trying to figure out how to hold onto to everything and bend down to pick up the tampons.

James stepped forward and said, "Here, let me help you. I'm James, by the way." He picked up the boxes of tampons and put them back in the bag for her.

"Oh Gawd! Thank you! I'm just a little scattered today! I'm going to be late for work if I don't skedaddle soon! I can't tell you how happy I am to have a neighbor, though! It'll be great to have a man around!"

James motioned to the keys in her hand and pointed at her apartment door. She said, "Oh, thanks, Gawd yes, that would help!" James took the keys from her hand, which finally freed her up enough to where she could get the cigarette to her mouth so she could take a long drag off it.

James got her door opened for her while she continued to talk, "These are still pretty new apartments, so I was wondering how long it was going to take before someone moved in, but here you are! I'm Stefanie, by the way. That's Stefanie with an 'F' instead of the other way. Stefanie Starr. Two R's in Starr. What did you say your name was again? Oh never mind, it's James. Sorry! I'm soooooo scattered today!"

James held out her bag of tampons to her as she was about to go into her apartment. She took them and said, "I get nosebleeds."

James tried hard, but didn't understand why she said that. He said, "Pardon?"

She held up the bag of tampons. "I get nosebleeds. These are great for stopping them. I saw it in a movie! Isn't it great how movies can be so much fun, but you can learn things from them, too?"

James smiled and said, "Movies that teach *and* entertain are the best!"

She nodded very seriously in agreement with James. "Oh, totally! Look, James, I'd love to stay and talk, but I'm so going to be late for work! I'll see you again soon!!"

"Bye, Stefanie!"

James felt a little like he'd been hit by a truck. A tittie truck in a white jean thong.

## *Chapter 6*

When there was a knock on his apartment door, James roused himself and realized he had zoned out again. He had done it twice now, just while fixing dinner. The moments of doing this hadn't disappeared like he had hoped and he was getting a little worried about them.

He wondered if this was clinical depression he was now suffering from, triggered by everything that had happened. If it was, there was a certain appeal to it. You simply gave up and nothing mattered any more. You couldn't lose a battle you were no longer fighting. He decided he wasn't really quite at that point, though. After all, he may have suffered several traumas in New York, all within the space of one day, that made him simply walk away from everything he had worked for. But, despite having dropped out of his life entirely, he still had a plan to get back on track, and he was working along that plan. Part of that plan was to give himself time to regroup while in Lawder and feel solid ground under his feet again.

He ran into the kitchen to make sure nothing was burned or on fire, then went to the door to let his mother in. She walked in and gave her son a kiss on the cheek to greet him. She presented her son with a bottle of wine that she had brought for dinner and as something of an apartment warming gift, which James took and put on the kitchen bar.

James waved around the room and said, "Well, this is it. What do you think?"

His mother walked around the living room briefly, and peeked over the bar counter into the kitchen. She looked at her son with an air of exasperation mixed with disappointment, "Darling, why would you want to live here when I've got a big house you could stretch out in?"

"Because, mom, I'm not going to be one of those sad twenty-eight year old guys living at home with his mom. If I do that, then I'm just one step away from buying Star Trek figurines on eBay and eating Slim Jims in a dark basement on Saturday nights trying to decide if a Wookie could beat a Vulcan in a fight."

His mother said, "I'm not so sure you're not already there, really."

James flushed pink at how close his mother had hit to home with that comment. She had gotten increasingly impatient with him since he had moved in a little over three weeks prior. She had seen little of him in that time and she was getting very impatient about it. Both James and his mother knew he had been making excuses to avoid coming by ever since he found out Brick Taylor was working for her.

But before James could respond, she said, "Well, is the furniture new, or is it what you had in New York? It looks new."

"It's all stuff I had in New York."

"It's very nice furniture. Very contemporary. You must have spent a fortune on it."

"I didn't buy cheap furniture."

"I'll let you move it into the house. You can throw out any of the furniture that's in there so you can keep all this if you want."

"Nice try, mom, but no."

She finally gave up on that front, knowing it would go nowhere. She walked over towards his bedroom and James followed her. She looked around for a moment, but then something caught her eye and she walked into the room the rest of the way. She looked back at James and had a gentle smile on her face.

"Look at that. You still have it."

She walked over to his nightstand and picked up the small carved wooden pinecone that was sitting there. She turned it over in her hands several times. James flushed pink for the second time that evening. He hadn't thought about the fact that the pinecone was sitting out like that.

He asked, "How did you know I had it to begin with?"

"Sweetie," she said, "I knew you had stolen it the day you took it. But I thought it was sweet you wanted it enough to sneak it, so I just let you have it and didn't say anything. I never thought the business meant anything to you, but it does. It actually made me so very happy to know you had taken it. It makes me very happy right now to see you've still got it."

James admitted, "And I thought I had gotten away with the heist of the century that day! I guess I'm a fool to think I could have gotten away with something like that without you knowing."

"Homeboy, you can't fool mama!"

"Well, I'm sorry I took it from you. I know you only had enough made for you and the employees on Montgomery Landscaping's tenth anniversary. You can have it back."

"Oh, absolutely not! I'd forgotten how nice they were, but I'm much happier knowing you've got it."

She put it back down, and looked at the nightstand for a moment, lightly touching the top of the black wooden box.

"What's in the box?"

James just watched her. He said, "A reminder. You can open it if you like, but I really can't explain it now. It's still very painful."

She picked up the box and had to put her other hand underneath it. "My goodness! It's so heavy. Is it something to do with what happened in New York?"

"Yes."

James' mind traveled back to the night he gave the crystal to Ian. Only a very few had been made, six of which were for the principal actors in *Angstrom* and the others were the grand prizes in a movie tie-in game. Very expensive prizes. All the others had the film's logo *Angstrom* engraved. But James had made Ian's different, special. It was just the dragonfly, with no movie logo. Ian had examined and stared at it in wonder for at least a half an hour. James thought about how happy Ian had been that night. What would he give to be able to relive that night, just once. To have Ian back just for one night.

"Honey?"

James came back to himself and realized he had faded out again.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

His mother was holding the crystal block in her hand and had a look of awe on her face. "I know I can't ask about it, but you know I'm burning to do so. But I was just saying it's incredibly beautiful! I've never seen anything like it. It's a shame to think something so wonderful could be a source of pain for you. I wish there was something I could do."

James rubbed his eyes a little and said, "C'mon, dinner's probably ready by now."

James had made baked chicken, mashed potatoes and steamed spinach for his mother. He explained to her he was starting out pretty easy and was sorry she had to be his first guinea pig.

As they ate, Bea asked James how his job was going, then gave him her opinion of his boss, Jasper Griffiths (a nice man, but a little too much of a good-ol'-boy, she explained), followed by James' questions about how Roddy was doing.

As they were finishing and clearing the plates, James asked his mother, "Did you guys have your usual Friday night poker game?"

"Yes, and I lost five dollars. And Jesus wasn't even playing last night. He always wins when he plays poker."

She was still pronouncing his name GEE-sus and James laughed at the thought of Jesus winning at poker. Of course he'd win at poker. James had a funny picture in his mind of the painting of The Last Supper, but with everyone holding a hand of poker cards and various piles of chips on the table.

"Who all played last night?" asked James.

"Kevin didn't come, since that's what you're really asking, although he usually does. It was Amos, Agnes, Roddy, me, and Perez."

There was a pause, and then his mother said, "Kevin tried to quit again yesterday, James. I had to tell him I was going to have to give him a raise if he didn't shut up with all that foolishness."

"Mmm..." was all James could say, and even that was noncommittal.

Bea studied her son for a moment, trying to decide.

She finally said, "Look, I didn't raise my son to be a porcelain princess, set to shatter at any little shock. I don't know if you're hiding in this apartment from New York, or Kevin, or both. Actually, I do think I know which it is. You won't hardly come by for fear of running into Kevin, and Kevin won't hardly come by because he feels so bad about upsetting you. This is all just nonsense! I feel like Jesus is the only one that will have anything to do with me anymore."

She paused to gauge James' reaction before continuing, "I know you, James Davidson Montgomery, and your head's on more squarely than you realize, despite whatever happened in New York to twist you up so much. Maybe you don't feel it right now, but you're stronger than any of what's happened. You'll see."

She smiled reassuringly at her son, which made him smile in return, appreciative of the support.

"Besides, I never liked those friends of yours in New York. They never seemed like real friends to me. But what do I know? I'm just your mother. But you've got to stop hiding in this apartment, sweetie." she added.

As his mother gathered up her things to go, she put her hand on James' cheek. "I don't like seeing you morose like this. It's not you. Not the James I know. You're settled in now, so you need to get out some. It's just Lawder, so it might make it challenging, but you need to get out and find you some fine piece of ass you can get your freak on with."

"MOM!" James was shocked! James was used to his mother going for a little shock value every once in a while and he thought he could stay above it. But sometimes, damn her, she still managed to really jolt him.

## *Chapter 7*

James put the leftovers of the dinner he had fixed for just himself earlier that evening into some tin foil and stuck it in the fridge. He slammed the refrigerator door a little harder than he should have, but he was in a bad mood. It irritated him that he was spending another Friday night in his apartment.

He would have normally probably liked going over to his mom's place for the usual Friday night poker game just to be around some other people, even more so if Roddy was going to be there. Roddy seemed a little shy, but his dark eyes sparkled when he laughed, and James liked that. Even if he was sure that Roddy was straight, Roddy seemed like a good guy, with a good sense of humor, and so very pleasant to look at.

But, much to his mother's consternation, James shied away from going over to her place unless he knew for certain that Brick wouldn't be there. He didn't like asking whether or not Brick would be around because that felt to him too much like Brick had too much influence over him, even all these years later. But Brick still *did* have that influence over him, really, and even when his mother insisted he wouldn't be there, James felt reluctant to take the chance.

Earlier in the week, James had decided to take a chance on stopping by his mother's house after work, but saw a large blue and white pickup truck parked next to the house and assumed Brick was there, so he just drove on by. What irritated him even worse was that he didn't know if that even was Brick's truck there or not, it could have been a number of other people's from Montgomery Landscaping that had stopped by for one thing or another. Hell, it might have even been Roddy's truck for all he knew. He wound up in a very bad mood the rest of the week as a result.

James sat on the edge of his sofa and his mind wandered back to New York. He thought about his friends Patricio, Louis, and Benard. How they weren't really the friends he thought they were. What ate at him was that all along he had convinced himself that they were good friends, but that was just because they were the right kind of friends. They were just professional enough, or creative enough, or just good looking

enough. They dressed the right way, ate at the right restaurants, went to the right clubs, listened to the right music, and had the right opinions about art. Ian had never liked any of them very much. It had never dawned on James until later what stupid reasons those were for being friends with someone. None of those things really meant anything. How did he mistake similarity of opinions for friendship?

James realized the music he had been playing had stopped - he had spaced out again without realizing it. He looked at his watch and realized he had been there for over thirty minutes this time, unfocused and reliving New York.

He stood up, and was on the verge of giving up and going to bed, but decided to step out of his front door instead. Outside, he leaned over the railing from his second floor apartment and watched the parking lot next to his building. It was still very warm out, especially for a late evening in the middle of September. He watched a girl and a guy walking across the parking lot to their car, ready to go out somewhere. They were both laughing and having a good time.

"That's it!" he said angrily to himself and walked back inside.

He decided he needed to go somewhere. Anywhere. He wasn't going to be a prisoner in his own apartment anymore! His mother, trying to get him out some, once mentioned a bar called Junction 19 that she said was a fun place, so James decided that was as good a place as any. He looked it up on the internet on his laptop just to make sure he knew where it was, and then headed out.

When he got there, it was about what he expected. It was a roadhouse with sad aspirations. It was disappointing, but if he hadn't taken twenty minutes to get there, he probably would have just given up on it and gone home. It was on one of the rural roads on the way out of town, with a gravel parking area with a lone industrial street light trying to serve the whole parking lot. He caught a glimpse of a deck out back with woods beyond that, lit up for the weekend with chili pepper lights. There were only a feeble handful of people out there, probably because it was hot, and the mosquitoes were big enough to pass for vampire bats.

As he walked inside, the scene was hardly better. There was a dusty fake ficus tree in the entryway with a green floodlight shining up in it for ambiance. There was some cheap lattice work set up to separate the entry from the rest of the bar with fake ivy tucked into it here and there. He rounded past the floodlit tree and lattice in front and got back into the bar area itself. Classic rock music was playing throughout the place, but James was glad that at least it wasn't country. A spacious U-shaped bar jutted out from the back wall with seating along the three sides. To the left and in front of the bar were some tables and seats and to the right were some pool tables. Hanging up over the bar area were more of the chili pepper lights. The place seemed to be relatively busy, but there were still seats at the bar and open tables to be found.

James made his way up to the far end of the bar and had a seat. The guy bartending on that end had to be in his forties and probably lost most of his hair back in his early thirties, about the same time his paunch started asserting its place in the world.

"What can I get you?"

"Could I get a mojito?" shouted James over the music.

"A what?" shouted the bartender back.

"A mojito!"

The bartender leaned over towards James a little and said, "No Mexican beers - except Corona in bottles!"

James crossed his arms on the bar and put his head down on his forearms briefly in frustration.

He looked up and said, "Gimme a Jack and water."

The bartender nodded and wandered off.

By the time James had gotten to his fourth drink, he started wondering again what he was doing there. Not just at that bar, but in Lawder. What was he doing with his life in general? He didn't belong there, but he didn't belong in New York any more, either. Some woman had come up and sat down next to him earlier and tried talking to him, but when she had let her hand rest on his knee for a moment, he told her he was gay. She got genuinely offended and left. But James wasn't going to play straight to make Lawder comfortable.

Just after the bartender had brought James another round of Jack and water, James happened to look up at the entrance and saw someone wearing a Montgomery Landscaping baseball cap coming in. It was Brick, of fucking course. James had a flash of anxiety and wondered if he could sneak out the back door to the deck and just leave from there, but he'd have to walk all the way around the bar to the other side to go out the back door, probably drawing Brick's attention in the process. So he was kind of stuck. Christ! Couldn't he go anywhere in that town and not have to deal with this fucker?

James watched to see where Brick went. He thought to himself that maybe he needed this. He couldn't run from Brick his whole life, and he had been there first. James had called dibs on Junction 19 and Brick could go find his own goddamn bar.

Brick was wearing jeans and a t-shirt the color of red Georgia clay. He had finally shaved all that awful stubble that was there the last time he had seen him, but now the soul patch had been replaced by the bottom half of a goatee, the half covering his chin. James thought about how Brick had filled out since junior high. In junior high, Brick had been a skinny bean pole, with brighter red hair than he had now. But along the way he had filled out. Too much, of course - his arms were too thick and he had a little bit of a beer gut beyond his stocky build. His face and expression were rough, with a crude, squarish jaw. His eyes were too deeply set under the too-thick eyebrows. James assumed that working out in the sun probably had covered his arms in freckles, a fevered attempt to produce a tan, but it was hard to tell through the blond hair up and down his arms. It was all exactly what James would have expected of any redneck that grew up there, peaked around 25, and then coasted downhill from there.

Brick waved at somebody at one of the pool tables and walked over to an empty table. One of the cocktail waitresses, the one with blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, strode over to Brick with a big smile and gave him a hug before he sat down.

In the process of sitting down, Brick happened to look over at the far end of the bar, and James knew he had been spotted. Brick stopped in a half-sit and stared for a second before he finally remembered to sit the rest of the way down. Up until then, Brick had been smiling, but now the smile drained out of his face.

The blond waitress yelled at Brick as she headed back to the bar, "Hey Brick! Did you want a Bud or a MGD?"

Brick looked like he had gotten a small shock. He jerked his head over towards the waitress and said, "Uh... doesn't matter." He turned and looked back at James.

James had continued to stare, and was wondering what to do. He wanted to just leave, but he had had enough to drink to feel like maybe he should confront Brick and have it out right there. He was tired of hiding from this jerk.

James wanted to kick himself for still being intimidated by this loser. He had built hugely successful marketing campaigns for some of the biggest movies of the last five years. He had met all kinds of stars and industry people. He had gone to more movie premieres than he could count. He had gone to Cannes the last two years, for fuck's sake! And while he was alive, he had been Ian Famil's boyfriend. There wasn't a person in the bar who wouldn't know who Ian Famil was.

What had Brick done? Probably dropped out of high school, married some trashy girl he had gotten pregnant, squeezed out two or three rug rats with her while making passes at the Hooter's girl that lived in the trailer next door. The guy probably had a thirteen inch TV and a torn up vinyl couch set up out on his front porch so he could hoot at the Baywatch reruns and shoot at squirrels with a pellet gun.

The more he thought about Brick, the angrier he became.

James decided the time had come - he wasn't going to run from this beer gut in a baseball cap any more. He got up and took his drink over to where Brick was sitting. Brick watched James coming over and shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

James sat down at Brick's table, across from him. At first he didn't say anything, but his anger was still steadily building. A moment later, Brick started to open his mouth to say something, but James cut him off.

"Fuck you!!" he violently spat at Brick. Brick's mouth snapped shut and he looked down at the table instead of at James.

Right then, the blond walked up and cheerily placed both a bottle of Budweiser and a bottle of MGD in front of Brick. She said, "I thought I'd surprise you, and these will be on me, darlin'!"

She looked a little more closely at James and Brick and realized something was going on as her smile faded. She said slowly, "Brick, are you ok? Is this guy bothering you?"

James never took his eyes off of Brick.

Brick looked up at the girl. "No, Meg, no. I'm fine. He's not... He's not bothering me."

It didn't look like Meg really believed him, but she left to go back over to the bar anyway.

Brick reached out slowly to grab the Budweiser.

James snarled at Brick, "You made my life a goddamn living hell for years, but I had finally put you out of my mind. And just like a small, insignificant piece of shit that won't fucking flush, you've turned back up!"

Brick never did get to drink any of his beer. He had instead clasped his hands in front of him and just stared at them. His knuckles were white from where he was gripping them so tightly.

James paused a second to take a sip from his own drink. But again, Brick slowly started to open his mouth to say something, and James cut him off again.

"But you know what? You don't scare me. You don't scare me anymore. I hope you hold on tight to your fucking junior high glory days, because they're all someone like you will ever have."

Brick slumped in his chair slightly and continued to stare at the table.

James heard a voice from behind him say firmly, "Ok, buddy, I think you need to leave now."

James turned and saw the bartender standing behind him with his arms crossed over his chest. Meg was a few steps behind him watching with a worried look on her face.

James would have been fine to get up and leave at that point, but he was surprised to hear Brick's voice a little more pointed this time say to the bartender, "No. Eric, no. This is kind of important. I'm fine. Please."

Eric said, "You don't have to sit here and listen to this asshole!"

Brick said, "Yeah, Eric, I do. And I know what it must look like to you, but he's not an asshole. Just give us some space, ok?"

Eric shrugged a little and walked away, clearly disappointed he didn't get to throw the asshole out. James could hear Meg ask him, "Who is that guy, anyway?" as they walked back to the bar.

James was a little surprised by how Brick was letting him go on, but he was on a roll and wasn't going to pass up a golden opportunity. He finally took his eyes off Brick just enough to notice that a lot of people in the bar were watching the two of them carefully.

He looked back at Brick and said, "You can at least take some pride in knowing you were right. You had me pegged the whole time. I'm a card-carrying faggot, and you were the first one to figure it out! Good for you!"

When James said that, Brick, who had been just staring at his hands again, jerked his head up and exclaimed, "What?"

James glanced around again briefly and could tell everyone in the bar was trying to listen in on their conversation. Then he realized Eric or someone that worked there had actually turned down the music to make it easier to hear.

James said loudly, "Yeah, Brick, don't be surprised, man! It's just like the old days! I'll even make it easy for you!"

He stood up, threw his arms out, and literally yelled out for the whole bar to hear, "Alright everybody, Brick wants you all to know I'm a fucking faggot!! One that buys brie, sings show tunes in the car, smokes pole, and drinks mojitos!!!! Even my name is Jimmyyyyyyyyyyyyy Queer Bait! Holy Shit! Who let the fucking three dollar bill in here?!" He turned slowly as he was yelling to make sure everybody in the bar heard it.

James turned back to Brick, who looked like a deer caught in headlights and had slid way down in his chair. He shouted, "How about that, Brick? Huh? Just like the old days! All that glory!"

And then James was done. He looked Brick right in the eye and said quietly, "Feel like a big man again?"

James felt better for having gotten it out, and walked out of the place. He could feel every pair of eyes in the bar boring into the back of his head as he left, but he didn't look back.

By the time he got to his car at the far end of the parking lot, James realized he felt much better. It felt so good to get it off his chest!

James had just opened his car door when he heard his name being called out behind him. He turned and saw Brick running after him, his feet crunching in the crushed gravel of the parking lot.

James leaned against his car and waited for Brick to catch up. It was Brick's turn at this point, and James knew that Brick couldn't do or say anything to hurt him any more.

Brick caught his breath for a moment and took off his baseball cap, holding it in his hands in front of his chest. He let out a nervous chuckle and said, "Uh, I'm not... exactly, uh... I'm not the, uh... smartest person in the world, and I'd spent all kinds of time tryin' to figure out the right thing to say to you. But when you sat down I couldn't remember any of it. Not a word." Brick stuck a finger in one ear and scratched it nervously.

"I guess it was better that way, though. I deserve to hear everything you said, and you deserve to be able to say it. I usually just mess it all up and make things worse if I try and talk anyway."

Brick paused a minute to gauge James' reaction, but James just leaned against his car indifferently.

"So, first off, I am sorry for being the shit I was in junior high. I imagine it's worthless to you to hear me say it after what I put you through, but I am sorry."

Brick paused again and James continued to lean against his car stonily.

"I guess it was fourteen years ago now, and I've changed a lot since then. I've learned some things about myself, and I'd never treat anybody that way ever again. I

look back on what I was like then, how I treated you and a few others, although I think you got the worst of it, and I'd give anything to go back and kick my punk-ass self in the butt. Time has a way of getting around to rubbing our noses in our stupid mistakes, of showing us what poor excuses for people we are. Finally understanding the hurt and pain we caused."

Brick clutched his hat in front of him and got a little reflective. "God, what I wouldn't give to go back and be different. Do things different."

And for the first time that night, James actually softened a little bit towards Brick. It truly felt like Brick was being sincere about this.

Brick seemed lost in his own thoughts for a moment, but eventually came back. He started talking again, but he was struggling to keep it together enough to go on and his voice was now cracking.

"But, uh, I can't go... It's done. Till the day I die, I've got to carry around that stupid, mean-ass teenager that I was with me. But somewhere along the way, even though I don't deserve it, God decided to give me a second chance. To try and put it a little bit right. And I want to so bad, but I'm terrified, too. What if I screw this up, too? How do I live with myself then?"

James felt a stab in his heart with those words. All he could see in his mind was Ian lying on the hotel bed, the morning he found him dead, having killed himself. It cut into him deeply to hear Brick talk about getting a second chance to make something right, knowing that there was no way James could ever get the second chance with Ian that he so desperately wanted. Why did this fuck get a second chance and not himself?

James muttered to himself, "Damn you for saying that!"

Brick said, a little more brightly now, "James, I want to make it right between us! I can, if you'll let me. I swear I can!"

James wasn't even able to look at Brick any more. He was staring up into the pine trees lit up faintly by the parking lot light, his lips tight and his face contorted by frustration and sadness.

Brick watched James for a second, tight with anticipation. He ran his hand through his hair and started shifting his weight from one foot to the other in almost panic.

"Shit! FUCK!! I knew I'd fuck this up and make it worse!! Why did I ever think..."  
Brick's words just trailed off.

James ran both hands through his hair, almost wanting to tear it out, and said, "No, stop. This is all something else." He coughed to try and clear his throat a little. "This isn't your fault."

He stared off into the trees over Brick's head while Brick waited nervously. James looked back at Brick and shook his head a little.

"Sixty seconds ago, I probably would have told you to take your good intentions and shove 'em up your ass. But it turns out, I do have a reason to give you a second chance. I don't think I'd like the person I'd be very much if I didn't give you that chance." He

hated that Brick got this second chance, and he hated that he was the one that was giving it to him. But he had to do it.

Brick clutched at his cap a little harder and started to smile faintly, hope starting to peek out where none had been before. He stood back up a little straighter and said, "Really? Really?"

James just nodded to him.

"Thanks, James! Thanks!"

Brick looked at the ground for a second and James was about to finally get in his car when Brick looked back up and asked, "James, are you really, you know... gay?"

James wondered if Brick wasn't going to be so enthusiastic about fixing everything now, after all. James said, a little irritated, "Yeah, Brick. Gay as a goose."

Brick's brow furrowed a little and he looked up at the night sky for a second, downright crumpling his hat in his hands this time.

"What's the matter, Brick?" said James, taunting him. "You changing your mind about wanting that second chance now from a faggot?"

It didn't seem to James that Brick had heard what he said. He said, "How about it Brick? Second thoughts?"

Brick looked back down at James and said, "Huh?" Then he realized what James was saying. Brick shook his head and chuckled. "No, no, no. I'm fine with that. Time changes a lot of things. I just hadn't thought about you actually turning out gay. I, uh, I..." His voice trailed off.

James said dryly, "Life sure is funny."

Brick looked confused again, but replied, "Yeah, it is!"

"Hey, Brick?" asked James, sullenly.

"Yeah?"

"You can start by doing me a favor."

Brick nodded enthusiastically and smiled. "Sure!"

"Could you stop trying to quit your job? You're driving my mom insane."

Brick said through a laugh, "Sure. I'll stop. I'd hate to lose my job. I love working for your mom and I love the job. Really love it."

James said, "Ok. That's a start, then."

## *Chapter 8*

James grimaced to himself at the decision he had to make quickly, before the light turned green again. On his way back to Natahatchee Ford from a lunchtime errand, he was at a stoplight and saw the Montgomery Landscaping truck up ahead in front of a large old house now renovated into a lawyer's office. All of the crew was gathered around the driver's side door rather than working, including Brick. It looked like they could probably use a little help. With Brick there, James wasn't sure he wanted to be the one helping.

It had only been the previous weekend that James had finally had it out with Brick, and while he felt like he had truly gotten it out of his system, he wasn't sure if he wanted to engage with Brick at all. It was one thing to put the past behind him. It was another to start actually moving forward with the guy.

The light turned green and he decided he really should stop and see if they needed any help. He pulled into the parking area next to the truck and got out.

He walked up and saw Brick, Jesus, the older black guy named Amos (who had worked at Montgomery longer than anybody), Agnes, and Roddy all standing around the driver's door arguing. Amos looked like the old hand who knew he would get paid if he was spreading pine straw or standing around watching other people try to unlock the truck. Roddy looked good as usual, even though he was a little dirty from the morning's work. Brick had a piece of wire jammed down the window trying to open the lock. Nobody had noticed James walking up.

He said, "What's up?"

They all turned and saw James there, and they all stopped talking at the same time and all seemed embarrassed.

Roddy said, "Brick locked the keys to the truck inside, *again*."

Brick immediately scowled at Roddy and said, "Well, Roddy, who actually hit the lock button and closed his door right when I was remembering to get the keys out? Huh? I wonder who that could be!"

Agnes said, "I'm tellin' you that flimsy piece of wire ain't gonna work. It's not stiff enough."

Brick stopped trying the wire and walked over to where James was.

Agnes asked, "You two aren't gonna get all bent out of shape again, are you?" Everyone was watching Brick and James closely.

Brick looked back at her over his shoulder and said, irritably, "No, just keep trying, please!"

Brick took his hat off and gave an abashed smile. "Hey, James. We've been fiddling with that lock for ten minutes. We've got an extra set of keys back at the office. I don't suppose you've got a few minutes and could carry ..."

His voice trailed off because he noticed a police patrol car pull up directly behind the truck. A very young cop got out and came up to Brick and James. He spoke loudly so everyone would hear him and know he was in charge now.

"Alright boys, is there some kind of problem here?"

Brick said, "Just locked the keys in the truck, do you have a slim jim we could try real quick? I've done it before and could probably get 'em back in about two seconds if you've got one."

The cop wasn't paying a whole lot of attention to Brick, though. He was looking at the others around the truck. He had this awful look of superiority on his face.

He nodded over at Jesus and said, "You there. You legal? You got your green card?"

They all erupted at that point. Jesus said, "Shit man! I get so sick of this!"

Brick walked up to the cop and tried to talk him, "Hey, you're new on the force, aren't you?"

The cop turned on him and said, "Sir, you need to back up right now and stay out of this situation unless I speak to you."

Brick ran his hand over his unshaven face, clearly irritated with the cop. James just stood there frozen, wondering if Jesus was going to get busted right there in front of him.

Jesus said back to the cop, "Man, I was born and raised in Austin, Texas! I'm as American as you are."

The cop said, "Sir, that's not what I asked you. Do you have your green card?"

Jesus started muttering to himself, "What sucks so bad is that I actually have to worry about this! I actually have to be ready for this kind of shit!"

Brick had turned away from the scene and had pulled out his cell phone to start making a call. James felt a little bad that he was letting this cop treat Jesus this way and was on the phone instead. James watched as Jesus dug around in the pockets of his

shorts trying to find something. A second later, he pulled out his U.S. passport and handed it to the cop.

Jesus thickened up his accent and said sarcastically, "Hey gringo, check it out!"

The cop looked at it for a second, compared the photograph to Jesus standing in front of him, and handed the passport back.

Jesus said to the others angrily, "How come Perez never gets called out like this? Why is this always happening to me and not him?"

The cop said, speaking more slowly like he didn't expect Jesus to understand English very well, "Very good, senor, but I need your green card." The cop held up his hands in the shape of a card.

Jesus said, shrugging his shoulders, "Are you shitting me? That's a U.S. passport!! As in born and raised in the United States!!"

Amos just stood shaking his head slowly in disbelief and Agnes' mouth was hanging open.

Roddy said, "Dude, what's wrong with you? *American citizens* don't need a green card!"

The cop must have started to feel a little threatened because his hand went to what had to be a bottle of pepper spray on his belt.

At this point, though, Brick turned back to everyone and said loudly to the cop, "Hey, buddy! Do you know who Jerry Pritchard is?"

The cop turned to Brick. He looked puzzled for a minute, then said, "Yeah, I know Captain Pritchard."

Brick held out his cell phone to the cop. "This is Jerry Pritchard on the phone right now. He wants to talk to you."

The cop took the phone, and looked at it stupidly for a second, like he thought this was all a joke. He finally put the phone to his ear and said, "Hello?"

Everyone watched as the look on the cop's face melted instantly from Mr. Big-Shot-In-Charge to outright fear. Even from ten feet away, James could actually hear someone on the other end of the phone yelling.

The cop paused, listening, then said, "Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir!"

The cop's shoulders slumped a little at this point and he said, "Oh no, sir."

There was more yelling and the cop actually pulled the phone away from his ear a little, cringing.

"Ok, yes, sir. Yes, sir. I will."

The cop held the phone back out to Brick and said, "He wants to talk to you again."

The cop was very red in the face and he actually took his cap off. He turned to Jesus and said, "I apologize, sir. I should have realized that no American citizen needs a green card to work. And, uh, I apologize for singling you out this way."

James could hear Brick say into the phone and then laugh a little bit, "Yeah, he's doing it."

The cop twiddled his cap nervously and looked at the rest of the crew. "And I apologize to all of you for any embarrassment this might have caused."

Brick said into the phone, "Thanks, Jerry. I think we're fine now... You know Jesus isn't going to count this. He's still going to want his six-pack... Man, don't try and argue about that with me. You'll have to work that out with Jesus." And he laughed some more and hung up.

The young cop, thoroughly beaten into the ground by now, put his cap back on and turned to go back to his patrol car. He said, "Y'all have a good day, now."

Brick called after him, though, and said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, isn't there something else you're forgetting?"

The cop stopped and looked like he wanted to crawl underneath his cruiser. He said, "Yes, sir. You're right."

The cop went to his patrol car and grabbed his slim jim out of a tool kit he kept in the trunk.

Brick asked him, "Do you want me to do it?"

The cop couldn't even look Brick in the eye and said, "No, sir. Capt. Pritchard said I need to do it."

He walked over and slid the strip of metal down between the truck door and the window and jimmied it around for a few seconds. It took a couple of tries, but then he got it and the door unlocked.

The cop tipped his hat to the crew slightly and mumbled, "Sorry for the trouble."

He got back into his patrol car and got out of there in record time.

Jesus and the others all started laughing as soon as the cop was out of earshot. Roddy yelled out, "Way to go, Brick! You are good for something after all!" Brick returned the compliment with a smirk and a flipped bird.

James looked at Brick and said, "Wow! That was pretty impressive."

Brick nodded and explained, "Jerry's one of the police captains on the force here. I go bowling with him on occasion, and he's met Jesus before. Jerry's ex Army Ranger and definitely not the kind of guy you want to piss off. Poor Jesus has to put up with this kind of shit more often than you'd think."

All the others started to get into the truck, but Brick turned to James and said, "Hey, I bet you probably thought about driving right on by when you saw that I was here. But it means a lot to me that you were willing to stop anyway. It really does."

James felt a little embarrassed that he hadn't really done anything at all. He wished he had been able to do something decisive and helpful, if for no other reason than just so he could feel superior to Brick. He replied, "Well, all I did was just stand around, but I guess I did a pretty good job of that."

## *Chapter 9*

The following day after work, James ran to his apartment to pick up his pile of dirty clothes to take to his mother's. His apartment had hook-ups for a washer and dryer, but the renter had to have their own, and James did not.

He yanked the sheets off his bed and the towels out of the bathroom, and the bag of dirty clothes in his closet and he was ready to go.

He closed his apartment door and was locking it when he heard Stefanie's door behind him.

Stefanie was running towards James, at least doing the best she could given the size of the heels she was wearing, which were click-click-clicking on the concrete of the landing between their two apartments. Tonight she had on some extremely transparent shirt with a collar, but it was tied up over her navel. Underneath was some sort of strapless bra. And then a lemon yellow pair of Capri pants to finish it off.

She gasped at James, "Oh, thank Gawd you're still here! I don't know WHAT I'd do if you had already left! I need you quick! It's AWFUL!"

Without even waiting for an answer, she grabbed James' arm and started running slowly back into her apartment, dragging James and his laundry behind her.

When they got into Stefanie's apartment, she finally let go. One glance at her place told James he might be better off closing his eyes. It looked like something out of a St. Petersburg, Florida retirement home. The small, cheap wooden dining table had a massive plastic flower arrangement in the middle of it, which was surrounded by stacks of catalogs from Sears, Penney's, Talbots, Haverty's, Radio Shack, Lillian Vernon, and about a hundred others. He could barely discern the shape of the sofa because it had a screaming hibiscus floral print sheet thrown over it like a slip-cover. There was a glass and brass curio shelf in the corner with a few more plastic plant arrangements, but mostly porcelain figurines - adorable porcelain kitties with big kitty eyes, to be exact.

She asked him, "James, can you be brave?"

James thought no. His mettle was already being sorely tested by the fabric on the sofa. But besides that, being brave could potentially need to cover an extremely wide range of situations. If she was about to ask him to help carry out the dead body of her john from the night before, the answer was definitely "no." If she was just trying to deal with picking out which floral print bedspread to buy from Linens N Things, well, then the answer was probably "no" there, too.

He put down his load of laundry in a chair next to the table, and decided not to be pinned down. "Uh, maybe."

Stefanie said, "You're gonna have to be brave! I've got to get ready for work, but I can't get into the bathroom. There's some sort of massive thing in there crawling around. I need you to kill it and get it out of there!"

James was, of course, relieved. Suddenly, the thought of browsing through upholstery books with Stefanie had jumped to the number one thing in his life he feared most. A bug, though, he could handle.

James said, "Right. You, uh, don't have any upholstery samples in there, do you?"

Stefanie looked puzzled. "Huh? Why?" But then, without waiting, she emphatically said, "No, none of those."

"Great! I need some paper towels and maybe a glass or cup."

Stefanie nodded and tap-tapped off to the kitchen and was back in a minute with a handful of paper towels and a glass. She handed them to James and pointed him in the direction of the bathroom.

He looked in and noticed that the shelves, window sill, edge of the tub, countertop, every single horizontal surface in fact, was crowded with cosmetics and skin care products of every conceivable kind. That and tampon boxes. There were plenty of those, too.

James looked around for a second and thought the little beast could be hiding anywhere in the forest of eyeliner and lipstick tubes, or perhaps in the rockier terrain made up of cold cream jars, moisturizers, foundation, and boxed tubes of Monistat 7. The last item made James think he wasn't as brave as he thought he was after all.

He looked back over his shoulder at Stefanie cowering at a safe distance. "Where was the last place you saw it?"

She trembled a little bit and pointed near the tub. "It was between the tub and the toilet. You can't miss it. It was huge!"

James stepped in a little further, and then saw it. It was just a cockroach, the kind you see in the south all the time. It had scooched a little further back in the corner of the tub and wall, but was still there.

James said, "Oh, I see it. It's just a cockroach. You have seen these before, right? I mean, you do live in the south."

Stefanie gasped and said, "Oh, they're horrible. Usually I have my boyfriend Rico kill them, but he's not here."

James got up close to the cockroach, and lashed out with the paper towels, smashing it before it could make a dash for it. He grew up with these bugs, and they didn't scare him, but he wasn't exactly fond of the *crunch* they made when you squashed them. Several tubes of lipstick and a bottle of conditioner fell off the edge of the tub.

Stefanie had put her hands over her mouth in anticipation. "Did you get it? Did you kill it good?" she asked breathlessly.

James said, "Done. Your bathroom is safe once again."

Stefanie finally relaxed and said, "Oh, thank Gawd! I can't be late for work! I knew it would be good to have you next door!"

James asked, "So what do you do for a living anyway that you always seem to be working at night?"

Stefanie seemed a little embarrassed. She shook her head and said, "Oh, James! I mean, look at me! The massive fake tits. The hair and makeup. I know what I look like, and people usually get it right on the first try. There's no point trying to pretend I'm something else. What do you think a girl like me does?"

"Mmm, you teach history at the Catholic school?" ventured James, innocently.

Stefanie laughed. "Oh, that's funny! I like that! No, I'm an exotic dancer. A, uh, you know, a stripper."

"Oh, that's good, too! It's got to pay better than teaching at the Catholic school."

"Jimmy! You just crack me up! Maybe you'll come see me dance sometime!"

James clenched his fists and said as politely as he could, "Stefanie, if you don't mind, I really prefer to be called James. Jimmy's never sat well with me."

She gave a mortified grin and said, "Sorry! James! Maybe you'll come see me dance sometime!"

James almost cringed again, but he forced a smile and confessed to her, "Well, you never know. But I'm gay, so strip clubs aren't places I find myself in very often. At least not the ones with women in them."

Stefanie lit up and squealed, "GAY?! That's great! I had a gay friend once a few years ago and he was just the most fun! Ooooh, I'll have to tell Rico you're gay. He'll be a lot less jealous of you helping me if he knows you're gay! He gets jealous a lot."

"Well, then, by all means, make sure he knows I'm really, really gay! No reason to be jealous of me at all!" James didn't much like the idea of pissing off someone that, instead of having a name that was short for Frederico, was probably named after the racketeering and corrupt organizations act.

James said, "Are you sure you're not a history teacher? I think you'd be every grade school boy's fantasy history teacher..."

Stefanie giggled, click clicked over to James, and hugged him to her mountainous chest. "Oh, James, you are just too much!"

As James walked out, he decided he kind of liked Stefanie. At least she knew who she was and didn't try to hide it or make it something other than what it was. Her apartment was an affront to the gay gods, but otherwise he liked her.

~~~~~

James found his mother folding the last of some laundry of her own that she had finished. James gave her a peck on the cheek as he came in.

She said, "I'm all done, so you can start yours anytime. I heard about what happened the other day! Can you believe that awful cop? Persecuting Jesus like that!"

She pronounced it GEE-sus again.

James yelled after her as she left to go put away her stack of laundry, "See, now, you're doing that on purpose! I know you are!"

He heard her faintly call back from another room, indifferently, "Doing what on purpose?!"

James went into the mudroom area and started loading up his laundry. As he started it, his mother came back into the kitchen and said, "Roddy's out back checking on the fish pond. You should go say hello while it's just the two of you!"

James didn't really need to be asked twice. The back yard was one of the nicest features of the house, and it went further back than most people would have thought. Along the back and side were some tall, mature trees - a large magnolia in the back corner, a huge sycamore on the far side of the carport, and a couple of sweetgums between her house and the neighbor's.

James saw Roddy back between the sweetgums and the magnolia kneeling over the fish pond. His mother had it put in several years back when Montgomery Landscaping started getting into waterscapes more and more.

Roddy saw James stepping off the back terrace onto the lawn and waved at him. James sat down on a bench near the fish pond while Roddy finished the water quality tests he was doing. James liked the fish pond, which had a couple of koi that had gotten pretty large at this point. They were swimming lazily around, ignoring Roddy. The pond had a surround of natural rocks, which built up at one end and had a small waterfall splashing back down into the pond. There was a small ornamental Japanese maple near one end, its lacy, purple leaves bending gracefully down and touching the surface of the water.

James said, "You must be the fish pond expert at Montgomery."

"Yeah, me and Perez probably know the most. Amos has actually picked up on a lot of it. Jesus knows a fair amount, too. Brick, though, will kill the fish if he even gets within ten feet of 'em."

"Has the water garden business gotten pretty big for Montgomery?" asked James.

"Ahhh, we do some. Ponds and fish haven't caught on in Lawder as much as other places. Businesses don't care about them, and most of our residential customers are too cheap."

Roddy took his cap off and mopped the sweat off his head. James thought again how really attractive Roddy was. Roddy was proportioned just right for someone his height, and had really handsome features. And then there were those beautiful brown eyes under his messy-in-just-the-right-way brown hair. He thought whoever Roddy was going out with was a lucky girl.

James asked, "I never got a chance to ask how your date went. Shit, it was weeks ago at this point. It was the same day that... well, it was probably over a month ago, I think. You guys have probably gone out a lot since then."

"It was fine, I guess. We went to the Lawder Steak House for dinner. Then she wanted to go see that movie *Angstrom*. I was expecting more of a shoot-em-up, but there's not much of that in it. If you want a lot of action, don't bother with it. But she seemed to like it. It's funny how that guy that's in it killed himself right when the movie came out. He seemed pretty good to me, though."

James limited his reply to "Mmmm."

There was a pause and James asked, "How many times have you two been out now? Have you gotten lucky yet? Did you get your chance to get jiggy with her, as my mother likes to embarrassingly put it?"

Roddy laughed and started putting up his water test kit. "We've been out twice, but she hasn't given it up yet. I want to, though, but mostly just to get some since it's been a while for me. My dick's getting a little bored with my right hand, you know. She's a little old-fashioned, so my right hand might be my only option for a little while longer." James was briefly tempted to offer him a different option.

Roddy leaned way over the water in the pond and reached his arm way down into the water. He pulled out a big handful of leaves and gunk and stuck it in a bag he had next to him. "So, what's the thing going on with you and Brick, anyway?"

James paused for a moment, trying to decide if he wanted to get into it with other people or not.

"Brick hasn't told you about it?" he asked. He had assumed that Brick had blabbed about it to everyone.

Roddy shook his head and reached in the water to grab some more leaves. "No, he won't talk about it at all. Says it's none of our business." He put the handful of leaves and debris in the bag.

James found it surprising that Brick had held back and not used their history as cheap talk over beers with everyone.

James said, "Let's just say that Brick and I didn't get along very well for a while. I didn't know my mother had hired him since she always called him Kevin and I only really ever knew him as Brick. It kind of took me by surprise when I saw him walk in the door at dinner and you guys called him Brick."

Roddy rinsed his hands off in the fish pond a little. "Crazy! What are the chances that would happen like that?"

"Yeah, really," said James. Roddy was right. What were the fucking chances of something like that happening?

Roddy had packed up and stood up at this point. "All done here, James. How does the pond look to you?"

"Looks good to me!"

"Alright! I guess I get to go home now!"

They walked back inside together, and Roddy yelled up the stairs to Bea that he was heading out. James told Roddy goodbye, watched his ass as he walked out to his beat up old Honda, and then went to check on his laundry.

The laundry still had some time to go, so James went upstairs to find his mother. She was just putting away the vacuum cleaner in the upstairs hall closet.

James walked into his old room and was immediately embarrassed by it. He sat down on his old double bed with its ornate iron scrollwork headboard and footboard, and looked at the matador statue on the desk. He used to have a sheer red scarf draped over the shade of the table lamp, but his mother had mercifully taken that off at some point. Up on the wall were several framed black and white prints of Argentina from the forties or fifties. At least, James always assumed they were pictures of Argentina, but how would he really know? They looked the part at the time and that was good enough.

His mother came in and he said to her, "Why don't you just redo this room as a guest room?"

She said, "It's your room. I like it how you left it."

"But even I wouldn't have kept it like this. You know how I was, mom. I redecorated it every time I could afford to, or could convince you to spend the money."

"I'm leaving it. If you want to update it, go right ahead. Move back into it while you're at it. I'm going down to start a little dinner. I'm assuming you'll stay?"

James said, "Sure. Might as well since I've got to get the laundry done."

His mother left to go downstairs and James started looking through the books on his bookshelf. The room was like a time capsule of things from his high school years. He spent a moment thumbing through "Bad As I Wanna Be" by Dennis Rodman, but then put it down to look at one of the Magic Eye books sitting next to it. He tried out a few of the pictures, trying to cross his eyes just right to see the image emerge, but he couldn't do it anymore. He could do it fine when he was in high school.

On a different shelf, he found his high school yearbooks. He looked at his senior year one for a moment, then wondered where the ones from his junior high years were.

He was about to put back the one he had in his hand when he noticed there were some books back behind his high school yearbooks. He pulled the high school volumes out and, sure enough, the two from junior high were behind them.

He grabbed them both and sat back down on the bed. He started looking through the one from seventh grade. He found himself and started laughing out loud. He almost had a page-boy hair cut, for crying out loud! He still had a sizeable gap between his front teeth, too. He flipped through several pages, and sure enough, he was able to find Kevin Taylor as well. They were all black and white photos, but you could still tell Brick's hair was bright red. He was skinny as a pole, but he had a big head and a mass of freckles all over his face. He looked mad because he wasn't smiling. James thought to himself how much more intimidating he was back then. He was in the same class as James, but was a year older, which made him seem very mature and menacing to James at the time. Now, when James looked at the picture, Brick just seemed like a big-headed pipsqueak.

He heard his mom coming back up the stairs and was going to show her the picture, but James was surprised to see that it was the grown-up Brick himself who peeked in his door. He had his baseball cap on with his orange-mirrored, wrap-around sunglasses sitting up on the brim.

James could hardly describe the weird feeling he got knowing that the same Brick that was in the picture in the yearbook was standing in his bedroom. The room where he spent so much time when he was young hating him. Imagining him dying a million different ways.

Brick said, "Hey man, your mom said you were up here. You don't mind me being here, do you?"

"No, come on in." James was lying a little.

Brick came into the room, but only a step or two.

At first James didn't know what to say to Brick, but then he realized what he had in his hands. He said, "It's funny you've shown up right now. I'd actually just looked us up in my old junior high yearbook."

"Really?"

James said, "Yeah, come here and look."

Brick came over, and tentatively sat down on the bed next to James. James handed him the yearbook, which was still on the page with Brick's picture.

While Brick examined the picture, James was torn. Part of him wanted to demand to know why Brick had been so cruel to him in school, and part of him didn't. He wanted to know why Brick had chosen him especially to be the target of all the torture. He wanted to know if Brick understood the pain he caused him. He wanted to know the reason behind all of it. But he also didn't want to know. He didn't want to give Brick the satisfaction of still being hung up on it. Of it still having so much influence on his life. But mostly, James was afraid of the reason. Rather, he was afraid there was no reason. That the single most important thing that happened to him during his junior high years meant absolutely nothing to the other person involved in it. That it was random, or just

boredom, that James was merely a convenient target, and it could have just as easily been someone else.

Brick looked at the page, lost in thought, then laughed and said, "Oh Jesus! Look at me!"

James said, "You seemed a lot more intimidating back then. But I look at this picture and think I could have taken you."

Brick laughed again and said, "You probably could have! I think if anybody had actually fought back at all, I probably would've pissed all over myself and then run home cryin' all the way."

James flipped the pages and pointed at his own old picture. "And there I am. What a dork!"

"I'd forgotten all about that haircut you had!" laughed Brick.

James sat for a moment looking at his own picture, and suddenly feeling empty inside, but for reasons that had nothing to do with Brick. He had so many high hopes back then and in high school. A lot of them he had actually been able to realize, only to find out they weren't quite what he had been hoping for. What do you do when you achieve your hopes and still feel empty?

He said to Brick, "If someone told me back then that, a lot of years later, you and I would sit down together and look at these pictures and actually be... I don't know, polite, I guess... to each other, I'd have thought that person was certifiably insane. I probably would have thought something even worse than that if I could."

Brick just nodded a little and looked around the room. It was starting to get a little darker in the room as the light outside slowly faded for the day.

Brick asked, "So this is the room you grew up in?"

"Yeah, the corner of Franklin and Azalea."

"Is this how it was back then? In junior high?"

"Oh, good God no!" chuckled James, glad for the change in subject. "Being queer, I redecorated this room as often as I could. This is when I was in my Evita period, around my senior year in high school."

Brick couldn't help but laugh a little bit at the idea.

He said, "But you did great! Your mom said you did well in college, then moved to New York and got a great job working for that marketing company."

James said, "Yeah, UGA was much more fun than Lawder ever was. And New York was everything I could have hoped for." Again, he realized that he was lying a little.

Brick scratched at the stubble on his cheek a little bit. He waited a moment, then asked quietly, "So why did you move back? Your mom never said why you came back."

James sighed and said, "Sorry. Off limits."

Brick immediately fell over himself apologizing. "Oh, I'm sorry. James, I wasn't trying to be nosy or anything. I didn't realize you didn't..."

James cut him off, "Relax, it's ok. It's just it's a pretty intense thing for me, and I'm still a little close to it."

"Oh, ok."

"I haven't even talked to mom about it, so it's definitely not anything personal."

Brick just nodded.

James got up to put the yearbook away, then went and sat back down on the bed, a little further away from Brick.

He asked, "So what happened to you after junior high? I never saw you again once I got into high school."

Brick smiled slightly and started out with, "Well, I wound up..." but stopped there.

He looked over at James and said, "You know, I think I'd rather hear what you think happened to me between junior high and now."

James said, amused, "Are you serious?"

"Sure, let me hear it."

James' creativity immediately purred to life.

"Well, you probably dropped out of high school pretty quick, wandered through a couple of no-skill jobs like janitor, Wal-Mart greeter, stuff like that. You maybe got some girl pregnant and had to marry her right off. Probably then squeezed a few more kids out before you realized you'd gotten in over your head. Maybe you got caught shoplifting a NASCAR t-shirt or something like that and did a little jail time. Eventually you graduated up and did a little prison time for knocking over a dry cleaners or whatever. Your wife divorced you in the meantime, and now you just try to make enough to cover the child support you have to pay."

James looked over at Brick, who had a completely stunned look in his eyes. If it had been just a little lighter in the room, James would have seen how red Brick had turned in the face. After a moment, Brick said, "Uhh... Wow... That's pretty harsh."

James felt a little flush and he realized that what he had said was indeed harsh. Really harsh. "Shit! Brick, I'm sorry! I really didn't mean for that to be as spiteful as it sounded. I genuinely don't see you like that."

But Brick had stood up at this point and had started backing away from James. "Man, I guess it's good to know how you really feel."

James started to apologize again, "No, really..."

But Brick interrupted, "Look, I know you have plenty of reason to hate me, and I'm glad we cleared the air the other night, but if you can't move past it and this is what I get to look forward to from you, then we should just stop here."

James sat stunned for a second, and Brick just shook his head, turned around and walked out the door.

James reeled for a moment longer, feeling bad about what he had said. But then he got irritated again. Fuck Brick! He had asked! Brick shouldn't ask fucking questions he

didn't want to hear the answer to! What's more, he had even apologized to Brick about saying it and told him he didn't really mean it as bad as it came out. Brick just needed to not be so fucking sensitive just because of some harmless teasing.

And that's when James got really irritated and wanted to punch something. Only, he wasn't mad at Brick now. Well, he was still a little mad at Brick, but that anger had been completely eclipsed by his anger at himself. The last thought about not being so sensitive over harmless teasing was exactly... *exactly*... the kind of thing Benard or Patricio, or even Louis on a spiteful night, would have said to him after hurting his feelings with some incredibly cruel comment, which was too often.

His anger faded to a deep sadness. He had left New York to get away from that kind of stuff, but had wound up dragging some of it along with him.

~~~~~

James made himself go downstairs, his feet feeling like they were made of lead.

His mother met him at the bottom of the stairs and demanded, "What happened? Kevin left without saying goodbye. He never leaves without letting me know. What happened up there?"

James really didn't want to get into it. He muttered, "Nothing, mom. Just leave it alone, okay?" He didn't hold out much hope that she would leave it alone, though.

Indeed, she wasn't going to be put off like that. "James, you tell me what's going on under my own roof right now!"

James gritted his teeth and sighed. "I just made some stupid comment that came out a little harsher than I intended, and I apologized for it, but Brick didn't want to hear it." James was pissed at himself, and at Brick, and at his mom, and at everything right at that moment.

Bea cocked her head at James and said, "I think that's highly unlikely."

"What? That I made the comment, or that Brick didn't want to hear me apologize for it?"

"That Brick didn't want to hear the apology."

James bristled at what she was implying. "Jesus, mom!"

"Jesus knows Kevin well enough to feel the same way that I do."

The frustration that James felt that his mother wasn't taking his side was palpable and making his hands sweat. He stormed off into the kitchen, but his mother followed right behind.

She added, "Now listen here, though. I know you're very wound up over your whole New York thing, so I know that it wouldn't normally be like you to make ugly comments like that. I know you better than that. So just take a deep breath and let's have some dinner."

James absolutely hated when his mother lectured him like this. Especially now as a completely grown adult. He hated how much his mother was all up in his life right now, too. James definitely didn't want to eat, but he had to wait on his laundry to finish or come back for it later. He knew he'd be far better off sitting through it rather than walking out now and coming back later, so he sat down at the table. His mother started putting the dinner on their plates so they could eat.

She said, changing the subject, "Lindsey's foster parents brought her back by the hospital today. They were finally able to take the braces off her legs and take out the last of the pins. Bless her heart, she was so happy to be able to run around again without those things on her!"

"You know," said James, "you don't often talk about specific kids you've worked with at the hospital. I can only remember you doing that a few times over the years. Lindsey must be pretty special." He still felt sullen at Brick's reaction and his mother's lecturing, but was happy to keep the focus on another subject.

"She is. She's such a sweetheart. She's lost so much, and been so strong about it. I mean, she does have her moments where she wants her mommy and daddy. She can't understand why they haven't come to get her. It breaks my heart! Her foster family seems decent enough. But I worry that they'll start shuffling her around from family to family, though."

"I really miss her, James. The foster parents said I could come visit, though, which I absolutely plan to do!"

When James had finished his dinner and his laundry, his mother grabbed a piece of paper and wrote down a number on it.

She handed the paper to James, "This is Kevin's phone number. I think you should give him a call and apologize."

"I *already* did that," said James, irritated that he was being treated like a five-year-old again.

"Well, then, *do it again*," she insisted as he headed out the door.

## *Chapter 10*

James drummed his fingers on his desk as the phone number he had called started ringing. He couldn't decide what he wanted more, for Brick to actually answer, or to get his voice mail. He wanted the voicemail just so he wouldn't have to talk to Brick, but he wanted to talk to Brick to just get the entire thing out of the way.

That whole day, he had alternated between feeling a little mad at Brick's reaction, and then mad at himself for saying those things to him, and then mad at himself again for justifying his comments exactly the way his old so-called friends in New York would have. That meant that two thirds of the anger was at himself, so he knew he needed to attempt to fix it. Plus, his mom would be riding his ass about it until he did. And she'd know if he didn't. He then spent part of his day being irritated with her that she'd be able to monitor this. Lawder blew chunks as far as James was concerned.

All of this was on top of an underlying frustration of how he was suddenly on the defensive with Brick at all. *He* hadn't made Brick's life a living hell for two whole years. Brick should be the one feeling bad and falling over himself to make James feel better.

Suddenly, the other end of the line picked up and James heard a chipper "Hello?"

He said, "Hey, Brick. It's James."

There was a brief pause, followed by an "Oh, hey" from the other end. It was noticeably less enthusiastic than the "Hello" had been.

James said, "Look, I'm genuinely sorry about the things I said last night."

There was another pause on the other end.

James pressed on, "And this isn't even really an apology." He realized how wrong that had come out. He quickly corrected himself. "Wait, what I'm trying to say is that I do want to apologize, and not just some lame attempt over the phone. Do you have a few minutes in the morning we could meet? I'll buy you some coffee and I can do this in person. Would that work?"

There was an additional pause on the other end. James could see Brick probably trying to decide if he was just going to hang up on him or not. James decided that the best outcome would be for Brick to hold onto the grudge and hang up on James. If Brick didn't accept his apology, then the two of them could just call it even and be done with it. James could pretty much ignore Brick after that point, and Brick could ignore James. Everyone would win.

"If you need me to speak with the boss-lady so you can go in a few minutes late, I can probably arrange it," James offered helpfully. Why did he say that? Why was he trying to convince Brick?

Finally, there was a quiet chuckle on the other end of the phone. Brick said, "Yeah, I guess you would have a little pull with her. Sure, we can meet."

Oh well, James thought, he'd really have to apologize after all.

~~~~~

The Gold Plate was something of an institution in Lawder. Certainly not for being very pretty, or even particularly clean for that matter. But if it involved cooking it in grease, the Gold Plate worked magic. It had worn laminate counters and tabletops, and some of the counter stools were a little unsteady ("Don't sit there honey, that one'll buck you off in no time"). They used paper placemats - the old-school, plain white ones with scalloped edges - that were so thin as to be pointless if you actually got *anything* even remotely damp on them.

Brick had suggested they meet there, so James sat at the counter of the Gold Plate diner, waiting. The air was thick with bacon, biscuits and banter. He took a sip of his coffee, pleasantly surprised to find it was better than a lot of the coffee he'd drunk in New York at four or five dollars a pop. It was about time Lawder got on the scoreboard, he thought.

He looked up when he realized Brick was seating himself on the red vinyl stool next to him.

James noticed that, today, Brick's sideburns had gotten a lot longer and he had a full goatee. James couldn't suppress a quick laugh, which Brick caught. He looked suspiciously at James and asked, "What?"

James shook his head and said, "Nothing really. I'm just now noticing that you're like the man of a thousand facial hair configurations. I don't think I've seen it the same way twice on you."

The firm look on Brick's face held out for a moment, like he wasn't going to soften up towards James, but then finally Brick relaxed and ran his hand over his goatee to

smooth it down. He actually smiled and said, "Yeah, I change it out every few days. I'm always fidgeting with it."

"Well, it looks good on you," lied James. Actually, it wasn't a complete lie. James didn't go for facial hair, but what he had seen on Brick always seemed... appropriate. *Appropriate* was the word that came to mind. Come to think of it, James realized he had never gone out with anyone that had facial hair, ever. He wondered if that was just pure coincidence or if he had, for some reason, unconsciously weeded those guys out without ever even realizing it.

Brick's eyes narrowed just the tiniest bit as he looked quickly around to see if anyone was paying attention, something of a frown creeping across his face. He started, "Are you..."

James already knew where Brick was headed with his comment. Straight guys in New York would rarely get defensive over a compliment from a gay man. But here, in the rural south, James would have to be a little tighter with those kinds of statements. He heaved a sigh and interrupted him, "No, Brick, I'm not coming on to you. You can relax, okay?"

Brick's expression did relax, and James thought he was going to say something back, but they were interrupted with the waitress bringing Brick his coffee.

She was an elderly lady, and definitely moving at her own pace, despite the heavy business the Gold Plate was doing that morning. She asked as she put his coffee down along with a few individual creamer cups, "Hey Brick, good to see you this morning. You fellas gonna have some breakfast?"

Brick looked at James inquisitively and James just shook his head, "Nah, I already had some at home."

Brick shifted his gaze to the waitress and said, "Thanks, Evie, I think we're both just having some coffee today."

Evie wiped at a spot of spilled coffee on the counter and said, "Well, let me know if you change your mind, sugar."

James sat up a little straighter on the stool and started, "I, uh, really didn't mean what I said to you the other night. And I really shouldn't have said that to you." He was lying to a certain degree, because he did see Brick this way. Kinda. But kinda not, too. But he was sincere that he shouldn't have said it out loud. "I guess my imagination just got the better of me. It wouldn't be the first time my big mouth got me in trouble."

Brick put cream in his coffee and took a long sip out of the mug while James spoke. When he finished, Brick looked down at his hands for a moment. James couldn't really see Brick's eyes under the brim of his Montgomery Landscaping cap, but he could tell that he was still a little hurt by what he had said to him. Whatever lingering resentment James might have felt towards Brick ebbed away at that point.

Brick nodded, still looking down at his hands. He took another sip of coffee and said quietly, "Thanks. It's good to hear you say that. I recognize that it would have been all too easy for my life to turn out like that. For someone like me, I mean."

Brick lifted his head a little, but James still couldn't see his eyes under the ball cap. He continued, "I know I'm not smart and really well educated like you, James, but I tried hard to improve my life in a lot of ways."

Brick was succeeding in making James feel even guiltier now. Brick really did seem so completely different than when he had known him before.

"If it's not prying," James suggested, "why don't you tell me what all *did* happen to you since junior high?" He hoped it wasn't the wrong thing to ask. He also desperately wished with every bone in his body that it wasn't as bad as the story he had laid out.

Brick brightened a little bit, which greatly relieved James. Brick said, "Well, my mom moved me over to the county high school rather than Lawder High, which is why you didn't see me anymore. It didn't matter much because I still got into lots of trouble. And you were right about me dropping out pretty quick. I dropped out early in my junior year."

James hoped started to fall.

Brick continued, "I went to work for an auto mechanic in town, which is where I learned what I know about cars. About what should have been my senior year, I met a girl named Jenny and we started dating. I did what I was supposed to do and married her, she wasn't pregnant, though. We moved down to Albany to be near her family, so I got a job as a mechanic down there."

"After that, something started to change, and I realized that the life I was in was supposed to be right, but it just felt wrong for me. I realized I didn't like the person I was. I decided the first thing I needed to do was finish high school. I went back and took night classes and finally got my GED. Jenny hated that I 'wasted' my time on that stuff. She wanted to start having kids, and her parents wanted us to have kids, but I wasn't ready for that. I want kids, and I still do, really bad, but having them then would have been the worst possible time. I decided I needed to go to the technical school, learn something that I could actually use. That pissed Jenny off even more, but I already knew what I had with Jenny was all wrong. It wasn't her fault, but marrying her was the biggest mistake of my life."

"I started taking landscaping and horticulture classes at the tech school down in Albany. A little over a year after that, Jenny and I got a divorce. She told me I was the biggest disappointment of her life. But I stuck with it and got my associate degree from the tech school. That was the proudest day of my life. I got a job working for a landscaping company in Albany for a couple of years, but then I decided I wanted to move back to Lawder. I came back here and worked for Lawder Lawns for about six months before your mom hired me on at Montgomery."

"Being married to Jenny was a hard time, on both of us. It'd be easier to say I wish it had never happened." Brick paused, like he was struggling with how to say the rest. He looked up enough to look James directly in the eye, but immediately dropped his gaze back down again before continuing. "But Jenny was like someone snapping their fingers in front of my face. She focused me on a lot of things I found wrong with my life, all the bad decisions I had made, the people I had hurt and was still hurting."

James sat in silence for a second, the noise of the diner unheeded around him and Brick. Earlier, he felt bad about what he had said to Brick, but now he felt more ashamed of himself than he ever could remember feeling.

James finally said, "Well, you've made me feel like a complete dickhead for my story. It takes a lot for someone to really examine their life like that and swallow their pride enough to make those kinds of changes."

Brick looked up, making direct eye contact with James again. He said, hopefully, "You think so?"

"I really do," admitted James. He liked it better when he could look right at Brick's eyes.

"You were part of it, you know. Once I started really seeing what a shit I had been to you and others was when I realized I didn't want to go through life being like that. I became more determined to change. It's partly why I feel like it's so important to me now to make up for junior high." He added, "What I did to you has haunted me, James."

James nodded in silent understanding. He said, "Well, it just about kills me to say it, but you really have turned out to be a pretty decent guy, you know. And even worse, I have to admit my mom was right."

James was more than a little surprised to see Brick positively beaming. Brick admitted, "You know, though, there was one thing you were pretty close on when you mentioned shoplifting a NASCAR t-shirt..."

James inwardly winced at this.

"I will admit to getting really drunk and getting kicked out of a NASCAR race once over in Talladega," said Brick, a grin across his face.

James inwardly breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Brick was still grinning. James nodded and said, "Ouch, you gotta be pretty damn drunk before *that* happens."

Brick said, "Drunk enough that I don't remember any of it. I'm told I grabbed a hat off one of the cops and tried to play keep-away with it."

"How do you know it really happened?"

"The friends I was with took pictures. They gave me a framed picture of it for my birthday."

James laughed out loud at this, and so did Brick.

Brick took off his hat briefly so he could brush his hair forward unconsciously. He said, "Thanks, James, for this. And even more, thanks for giving me the chance to make things right between us."

James nodded and was the one looking down at his own hands this time.

The silence got almost uncomfortable between them, and James was about to say something. But Brick looked around himself again to see if anyone was listening before leaning back in towards James a little and saying, "Uhhhh... so there's..." He stopped

abruptly and sat up straight on his stool. The look on his face hardened as he looked over towards the door of the diner.

Brick jumped up off of his stool and shouted over towards the door, pointing at it, "Roddy! You little twerp!"

James spun around and saw Roddy by the front door trying to duck down and pushing his way back out the door.

Brick yelled out at him, angrily, "You're fired, Roddy! For real this time!"

A few people turned around to see what the yelling was about and James could see Roddy running back out to his car in the parking lot.

James turned back to Brick, who was sitting back down on his stool, grinning again.

James asked, "Uh, did you really just fire him?"

Brick laughed, "Oh, hell no! He just said he had a doctor's appointment today to get out of installing some sprinkler lines, and here he is sneaking in for breakfast instead. I'm not even pissed about it. We pick on each other like this all the time, and I probably fire him two or three times a week. He's actually a good worker. The housewives love having him come work on their lawns." He laughed again and shook his head. "I'll be able to ride his ass about this for the next month!"

James couldn't help but smile himself. Evie had come back by to fill up his coffee cup, but it was getting late. "How much do I owe you?" he asked her.

Evie just waved her hand, "You're here with Brick, darling, so no charge."

Brick winked and smiled at her and said, "Thanks, Evie! You know you're my number one!"

Evie just shook her head as she shuffled down to the other end of the counter, "Always making promises you know you won't keep!"

Brick just laughed again.

Chapter 11

Several weeks later, James found himself headed to Ten Pins, the bowling alley in town, at about 10pm one night. He couldn't hardly remember the last time he had been in a bowling alley. He knew it had been in high school, but he couldn't remember if it was his sophomore year or his junior year.

He had been at his mother's place earlier that evening when she realized there was a set of keys to one of the landscaping trucks sitting there. The truck was over at Brick's place and he was going to need it first thing the next morning. She had meant to give the keys to Jesus, who had been by earlier, to give to Brick, but they had all forgotten.

So she asked if James would run them to Brick, who was bowling with Jesus and a few friends that evening.

It was a weeknight, and the place was only about half full when he walked in. He had assumed the place would be a dump, but was impressed to see it must have been refurbished in the last several years. At least, he was impressed to the extent that he could be impressed by a bowling alley. James walked past several lanes until he spotted Jesus a little further down trying to pick up a spare. Brick was sitting and drinking and hardly paying attention to Jesus. James noticed that, today, Brick favored an all over, scruffy, stubbly look. He only gave Brick a quick glance, though, because sitting with them was some massive guy with a beer in one hand and a cigar in the other. The guy was huge, with crisp, short black hair and matching black hair all over his arms.

Brick spotted James walking up to them, and being completely wasted, stood up and started yelling at James, "And there's James! C'mon James! Get over here! I got someone you need to meet!"

James waved at Brick, and then at Jesus, who was also clearly drunk and almost tripped over his own shoe trying to roll his ball.

Brick swayed a little bit and said, "James, thish is Cherry Chipurt! Jerry Jipurt! Pritchart! Cherry Pritchart! JER-REE PRIH-CHERT!! One of Lawder's finest!"

Jerry stood up to shake James' hand. The guy must have been six foot five, at least, probably in his early forties, and was built like a Sherman tank. Jerry's face was very angular, with a sharp nose, and his eyes were narrow, almost squinting, under the dark and pronounced eyebrows. When James shook his hand, he felt like he must have the hand of a three-year-old, Jerry's were so big in comparison. James remembered Brick saying he was a captain in the Lawder police department and that the guy used to be an Army Ranger. James believed it, and really understood what Brick had said about not wanting to piss the guy off. He looked like he could tear a Volkswagen in two with his bare hands.

He said, "Hi, Jerry."

Jerry smiled broadly and said, "sup James! Good to meet you! Brick's told me some about you."

At least Jerry's smile put him at ease. James got the impression that Jerry probably actually smiled a lot.

James asked, "So who's ahead tonight?"

"Uh, I'm not sure," said Brick. "Cherry, are we keeping score? I don't remember if we're keeping score or not."

Jesus said, "You dipshit! Jerry and I are. You've been sitting around drinking beer for the last twenty minutes."

"I have? Where's my beer?" said Brick, like it was all news to him. He looked around several times hoping to find a beer.

Jerry and Jesus both pointed at it on the table together and said at the same time, "Right there!"

Brick said happily, "Oh!" and picked it up to take a swig out of it.

James tried again, "So which of you two is ahead since Brick's a little preoccupied."

Both Jesus and Jerry said "Me!" at the same time. Then Jesus hit Jerry in the arm hard and said, "You fucking gringo! You know I've got a 220 on this game and you've got a 170. I'm kicking your ass, dude!"

Jerry took a quick hit off his cigar and looked dejected. "It's true. My ass is sore."

Jesus asked James, "Hey man, what time is it, anyway? Melena's gonna kill me if I stay out too late."

"It's a little after ten."

Jesus' eyes widened. "Shit, I gotta wrap this up! C'mon Jerry, bowl your last round so I can get home!"

Jerry said, "Alright, alright!" He put his cigar down in the ashtray and walked up to the lane to bowl.

Brick had finished his beer and wanted to know if they were having another round.

"No, man! No more tonight. I gotta get home!" pleaded Jesus.

A cute, younger waitress with curly brunette hair came up and said, "Can I get you anything, Brick?"

Brick lit up and said, "Yeah!" but then saw the look on Jesus' face and changed his story. "No, Tina, Jesus says no."

"You sure, sweetie?" And James caught her actually wink at Brick. Brick didn't seem to notice, though. Not surprising given how drunk he was.

"No. No more tonight, I guess. 's a school night," said Brick, scratching at his nose absently.

Her eyes lingered just a moment longer on Brick before she said, "Well, just holler if you change your mind."

She finally looked at Jesus and James and asked, "How 'bout you? Can I get anything for either of you?"

The both shook their heads no and Tina wandered off.

James remembered why he was there and fished the truck keys out of his pocket. He handed them to Brick and said, "Hey, here's the keys to the truck for tomorrow."

"Cool. Thanks. It's good of you to come way all the way over here to give 'em to me! What's these for again?" He was looking James in the eye, but his eyes were half closed and unfocused.

James couldn't suppress a smile at the condition Brick was in. "They're for the truck parked at your place. Mom said you needed the keys in the morning."

Brick snatched the keys out of James' hand and made a popping noise with his mouth. "Oh yeah! Forgot about that. Tomorrow. Ughhhh... I'm gonna feel like poooooooooop tomorrow."

Jerry came back from his final round and Jesus asked, "I wasn't watching. What'd you get?"

Jerry stuck his tongue out at Jesus. "Pthpbhhtbbhtp! It don't matter. You win. Againnnn. I'm gonna go call in a ride for us," was Jerry's reply.

Brick said, "Wait! James, will you drive us home? We're a little drunk. Wait, Jerry's a big drunk, but I'm a little drunk compared to him. But the point is we're drunk. Big or little, we're all drunk. All three of us. There's three tonight, right? Did I count wrong?"

Jesus said, "No, man, I counted and came up with the same number."

"Cool. C'mon James. If you don't, Jerry'll have to call in one of the guys, which means they'll have to leave their stakeout at the Nitty Gritty, which'll make 'em grumpy." Brick put finger quotation marks around the word "stakeout". He started laughing, too.

James sort of wanted to get home, but didn't really have anything important waiting on him, so he agreed to take them home.

Jerry asked, "You haven't been drinking, have you?"

James said, "Nothing tonight."

"Good, less go!"

James walked out into the parking lot, while Brick, Jerry, and Jesus kind of stumbled - Jerry finishing his cigar and Brick and Jesus leaning on each other. James realized, though, that his Mustang would be a little small to get all four of them to fit in, especially since Jerry took up the space of about two linebackers.

Jerry said, "Oh, don't worry about that! You can drive my car. I'll make sure someone gets you back to your car any time you want in the morning."

James thought how this was getting more complicated than he originally intended to deal with, but said ok.

That's when they walked over and James realized Jerry had driven a police cruiser. He said, "Uh, should I be driving a police cruiser? Isn't there probably some kind of law or insurance rule against it or something?"

Jerry put his hand behind James' neck and said, "No, no, no. Don't worry, dude. It's just a car with disco lights!"

"And guns!" chimed in Jesus.

That didn't make James feel any better, but he took the keys from Jerry anyway. Jesus got in front with James, and Jerry and Brick got in the back.

Jesus needed to get home, so James had Jesus give him directions to his place first. James was a little scared to touch anything for fear of setting all the sirens off, or calling for backup accidentally, or who knew what else.

He heard Brick and Jerry in the back laughing about something and Jesus seemed to be getting sleepy.

Jerry said, "I can't believe I didn't beat Jesus tonight! I wore my lucky leopard print thong! I always win with that!"

The comment totally took James off-guard. The thought of that guy in a thong caused all kinds on incongruities in James' mind. Surely the guy was joking.

Jesus said through a yawn, "Maybe your thong brings *me* luck, Jerry."

Brick said, "Wait, I want to see it!"

There was some shuffling around in the back seat, and finally Brick said, "You dork! Those are just day-old tighty-whities you're wearing!"

James didn't quite know what to make of what he was hearing.

"Oh, maybe that's why Jesus won tonight," said Jerry, disappointed.

They pulled up in front of Jesus' house and he said, "Ok, I'm going to sneak in. You guys keep it quiet!"

Jesus got out and started sneaking up the front walk. Jerry was giggling and reached up into the front of the car and flipped a switch which turned the cruiser's siren on. Jerry and Brick started howling with laughter and rolling around in the backseat in their hysterics.

The front porch light on Jesus' place came on and Jesus turned around to flip them off. He yelled back at them, "You guys are such sons-of-bitches!"

Jerry reached up again and turned the siren off, still laughing uncontrollably. He told James to take him home next since his place was closest.

"Are you sure it'll be ok for me to drive your cruiser around without you in it? What if I get stopped by someone?" asked James.

"No, it's ok, I swear! No one's gonna stop you. If they do, just tell them I was bowling tonight and they'll know the rest of the story."

Brick laughed and said, "Tell 'em he was wearing his peplard... leplard..." He screwed up his face, concentrated hard, and spat out "LEOPARD... thong tonight!"

Jerry was trying to poke Brick in the side and said, "No, don't. Don't listen to him. You're the one that wanted to touch my underwear!"

"Nuh-uh! I just wanted to see if you actually had a thong on! Maybe James wants to touch your underwear? Hey, James, do you want to touch Jerry's underwear?"

James just shook his head. Drunk was never as much fun when you were the only sober one in the group.

James gritted his teeth and said, "No, I'm fine."

Brick laughed and said, "Oh, come on, James! You're gay! Don't you want to touch Jerry's underwear? I hear it's good luck to touch it." Jerry snickered, too.

James yelled, "Brick, damn it!!"

Brick got suddenly serious. "We're just horsin' around. I'm sorry. Really."

"You didn't have to tell him I'm gay! That's a little personal!"

Brick said, "Oh, Jerry's totally cool with that. Aren't you, Jerry?"

"Yeah, I'm totally cool with it! I'm down with the homos. See, back in my Ranger days, one of my fellow Rangers turned out to be gay. I literally trusted that guy with my life! Aaaaand, I'd do it again. God, he could kick ass!"

James relaxed again. He had to admit, Jerry seemed like a really nice, easy-going guy. One that could snap you like a twig, but nice.

Jerry gave James a few more directions to get him to his house, but then it got quiet in the back except for a few whispers and a little shuffling around. James was wondering what they were up to. That's when he smelled it.

James slammed on the brakes hard, throwing Jerry and Brick off the back seat and setting off a fresh round of laughter. "Are you smoking a fucking JOINT back there?"

Jerry sat back up on the seat and said, "Shit man, don't call the pigs on me!"

Brick said, "Wait! Shit! Did you find it? Where'd it go?"

"I've got it here," said Jerry.

James was almost over the edge at this point. He whispered violently at them, like he was worried someone might hear, "You're a captain in the police department! What are you doing smoking pot?"

Brick said, "We smoke one every once in a while. Jerry hardly ever gets to. But I told him he could trust you. You're not going to narc on us, are you?"

Jerry took a long drag on the joint and finished it in one pull.

Brick said, "Well, so much for that joint. I'm glad I got one puff on it! We didn't even get to offer James any."

"Shit! Sorry, man! You got another, Brick?" asked Jerry.

"No, that was the only one. Sorry, James!"

"Don't worry about it. I'm fine," said James, worried about driving around a police car at night with two guys smoking pot in the back. At this point, it wasn't a matter of whether or not the whole debacle would end up in tomorrow's paper, it was a matter of how big the headline would be.

Jerry gave a few last instructions to James and they pulled up in front of his house a couple of minutes later. James saw who he assumed to be Jerry's wife coming out of the house in her housecoat. There had been more fumbling around in the back seat and giggling before they arrived, and when Brick opened the cruiser's back door, he and Jerry both fell out the back of the cruiser laughing.

When they stood up, they both had handcuffs on. But their handcuffs had gotten looped together, so they had to stand practically back to back. Jerry was mumbling and laughing at the same time, "Shit, how did we get tangled?"

Jerry's wife came up to them and looked at the two of them. She said, "Jerry, what the hell are you doing?"

"Junior cub cadet officer Montgomery has arrested two scoundrels, honey!" said Jerry, a big goofy grin on his face.

Brick added, "Will you come have conjugal visits with us in prison? Heh heh heh!"

Jerry's wife looked at Brick with a tired expression and said, "Hi, Brick. I swear you two act like ten-year-olds when you get together."

James had gotten out of the cruiser at this point, and Jerry's wife came up to him and said, "You must be James. I'm Carrie Anne, and I'm married to a child. But I do appreciate you bringing them home safely." Carrie Anne was a pretty and practical looking woman, with a slim figure, bright eyes, and nice blonde hair. She smiled and James noticed she had very cute dimples when she did so.

"Hey, Carrie Anne. Yeah, it's been quite an experience getting the two of them home tonight. He's a handful!"

Brick snickered, "He's got a lucky leopard print thong!"

Carrie Anne wheeled around at Jerry and punched him in the chest. She hit him pretty hard, but it didn't faze Jerry in the least. "God dammit, Jerry! I told you to stay out of my underwear drawer!"

Brick doubled over laughing, almost pulling Jerry over with him.

"I was just joking around, sugar! Shut up, Brick, you little fucker! You're gettin' me in hot water!" yelled Jerry.

Jerry pulled at the handcuffs on him and said, "Sweetie, will you help us get out of these. Somehow we got a little mixed up here."

Carrie Anne walked over to Jerry and stood up on tiptoe. Jerry leaned over a little so she could give him a peck on the cheek. Her eyes twinkled and she said, "Aw, honey, you boys figure it out!" And she walked back into the house.

Jerry stood, nonplussed for a moment, and said, "Uh, James, could you give us a little help?"

"Where's the key?"

"In the front pocket of my jeans."

Brick said, "Oooh," and giggled some more.

James said, "Ok, here goes." He reached down Jerry's front pocket. He felt around and felt a little silly.

"There's nothing there."

"Oh! Duh! Sorry, I think they're in my other front pocket."

James said, "Are you trying to get me to feel you up? Is that what this is?"

"You might as well. I won't be getting any from Carrie tonight!" said Jerry.

Brick laughed some. "Maybe I should have said they were in my pocket first!"

Jerry tried to turn around to Brick, but that just pulled Brick around behind him again. He said, "Go find your own hand job, man! I was here first!"

James said, "Hold still or I can't feel either of you up!" He reached down Jerry's other pocket and found the key in there. He unlocked the two of them and they rubbed their wrists some.

"That was stupid. Why did we do that again?" asked Brick.

Jerry said, "I did it to get Jimmy to feel me up. I don't know why you did it."

James clenched his teeth. "It's James, please. I'm not real crazy about Jimmy."

Jerry said, "Ooops. Sorry, James. I'll remember!"

Jerry walked over to the front seat of the cruiser and dug around for a second until he found what he was looking for. He banged his head on the roof of the cruiser as he stood back up. He rubbed the back of his head with one hand and held out a business card to James with his other.

"Tomorrow morning, just give me a call and let me know when you want someone to get you back to your car. I'll send one of the duty officers over to take you. Hell, if I'm free, I'll do it myself!"

Jerry put his arm around James and gave him what he probably thought was a light squeeze. "Thanks, James. You put up with a lot tonight. Next time, you'll have to get drunk and high with us, rather than just chauffeuring. It's good to get to meet you, though. Brick said you were a cool guy, and he was right! Talk to you tomorrow!"

James went to get back in the cruiser, and saw Brick already back in the back seat. He opened Brick's door and said, "Hey, ride up front with me. It'll feel weird with you in the back."

Brick had a blank look for a minute and said, "Oh. I guess it would." He climbed out of the back seat and started to get in the driver's seat.

"Alright, champ," said James. "Why don't you let me do the driving. You go get in the passenger seat."

Brick grinned sheepishly and tried again, and finally got the right seat this time.

Brick explained where he lived out towards Lake Natahatchee, on Old Yates Mill Road. James knew the street and headed out that way, driving as carefully as he could. Brick started winding down and leaned his head against the window of the police cruiser.

After a moment, James commented, "Jerry seems like a nice guy. Not like most cops tend to be."

Brick's eyes stayed closed and his head remained against the window, but he answered, "Oh, yeah. Jerry's great! You'd think he was king of the good-ol'-boys by looking at him, but he's not. We got to be buddies pretty soon after I moved back to Lawder." Brick laughed sleepily and said, "I can't believe I got him to smoke pot with you in here! He's usually really picky about who he does that around. Really careful. Which he has to be, for sure."

James drove on in silence for a minute and Brick lifted his head off the window to watch James. He said, "I'm sorry I told him you were gay. I didn't mean to say something I shouldn't. You just seemed pretty open about it so far, which is good, and I just thought you wouldn't care."

James said, "Don't worry about it. I'm not hiding it, and you don't have to either. It just caught me off guard, that's all. It's nice to know someone like him on the police force is completely comfortable around gays."

Brick leaned his head back up against the window and said, "Yeah, it is."

It got quiet again, and James started thinking about how Brick had such great friends. They had fun and picked at each other, but you could tell they all took care of each other and looked out for each other. His own experience with his friends in New York was very different from that. He had always thought that his friends in New York were good friends, at least until the end, anyway. That was when everything went wrong

with Ian, and James finally saw that they really didn't care as much about James as they claimed. It all seemed pretty obvious now, but he didn't know any better at the time.

He thought about how he probably needed to stop the therapy sessions he had started a few weeks before. He had started seeing a therapist there in Lawder to try and help him get over everything that had happened. He had only been twice, and was working up to what actually had happened with Ian. His therapist had instead suggested they begin with discussing James' friends. James tried to get a feel from her if they were really friends, or just people using and putting up with him. Her response was always, "Well, how do you feel?" or "But it's your opinion that matters, and not mine." It frustrated James because he didn't know how to feel about it.

But seeing Brick around his friends, and how he was so comfortable in his life, made James feel lonely and empty. He felt like he had wasted a lot of time on a lie. Except maybe for Ian, but he had ruined that by not really being there for Ian the way he should have. He was a bad friend for Ian the same way his own friends had been to him. Brick, though, just seemed happy. And it made James question how happy he had been in his own life.

He glanced over at Brick and realized Brick was sitting up and looking over at him.

He also realized Brick had just said something to him that he hadn't heard. "I'm sorry, Brick, did you say something?"

Brick replied, "Never mind. This isn't a good time and I'm too fucked up."

They rode in silence for a few more minutes. The houses got farther apart as they drove towards the outer edge of Lawder where Brick lived, where it transitioned from residential to rural. Brick suddenly said, "You know... I admire you, James."

The statement completely took James by surprise. "Why would you admire me?"

"You've done so much, you know. You've been so successful. You had this really amazing job where you got to meet all kinds of important people. You've traveled a lot, and worked on things for movies that everyone knows about and has seen. I bet you had your pick of guys in New York. And your mom told me you got to meet Ben Affleck once."

James had to smile. Meeting Ben Affleck wasn't as impressive as Brick thought it was. "It was just at a press junket for the movie *Paycheck*," he explained. "I barely got to say hello to him."

"Yeah, but there were others. Lots, I bet. The closest I'll ever get to anyone like that is by standing next to a stand-up cutout at the video store."

"Well, you said all that about me in the past tense, which is right. I don't do any of that any more. I don't have that big, important job anymore."

Brick said, "No, but I bet you could. If it was what you really wanted, you could go get another job just like it any time you wanted. Maybe you don't want to, but that's your choice."

James sat in silence. He didn't know how to respond. He certainly didn't feel like anything worth someone else's admiration right now. There was a time when he was so

proud that he would have felt like people did owe him that, but life had shown him otherwise. Brick only knew the surface and didn't realize the truth.

Brick's apartment was in an older two-story house that had been divided up into several units, and was in a quieter, almost rural, part of Old Yates. James looked to see if there was a vinyl couch and old TV set up on the front porch, but he didn't see one. He did see the Montgomery Landscaping box truck parked there, though.

James got Brick to check and make sure he still had the truck keys for in the morning, which he did.

Brick leaned back in the open cruiser door and said, "I've got to let Kicker out for a minute in the back. Do you want to come in?"

James asked, "Kicker?"

Brick yawned, "Yeah, my yellow lab. He's the brains of our little outfit."

"Yeah... but... Kicker?" he asked again.

"Short for Shit-Kicker."

James leaned his head to one side and arched his eyebrows at Brick to express his disbelief that Brick had actually named his dog that.

Brick laughed and shook his head, "I know, I know... He already had that name when I got him. So you wanna come in?"

But James felt a little drained and empty and just wanted to be in bed. "Thanks, but I'm going to go ahead and get back to my place and go to bed."

Brick nodded with sort of a sad, drunk look on his face. "Alright. Maybe some other time. Drive careful."

James got home and finally got ready for bed. He took the dragonfly crystal block out of its box and looked at it for a few minutes. He wished that he could have smoked some of the joint with Brick and Jerry earlier. It would have made him relax a little bit and made his mind stop spinning.

When he did finally turn out the light and lay down to sleep, he found it hard to drift off. James just lay in his bed, awake, counting the strips of light made by the street light shining through the mini-blinds in his bedroom. Tonight there were thirty-seven. Sometimes there were only thirty-six. One odd night there had been only thirty-five. It just depended on how he had moved the blinds when closing them. He lay there for a long time thinking of what he had done to Ian. And what he had done to himself.

Chapter 12

James dug through his pockets until he fished out the card that Jerry had given him the night before. He wondered if it was too early to call Jerry about getting a ride back to his car at the bowling alley, but he had said to call him whenever he was ready to go.

He punched in the number and waited as it rang. James wondered if Jerry would actually even remember him; he was pretty drunk the night before.

A few seconds later, Jerry answered, "Hello?"

James said, "Hey, Jerry? This is James Montgomery."

Jerry boomed into his phone, "James! You ready to go get your car?"

So he did remember.

"Yeah, if it's convenient. I'd like to go on over whenever and pick it up so I can head on in to work."

"You got it, my man! I'm still getting ready to go in myself. I know it may astound you, but I got me a little bit of a headache from last night. I totally blame that asshole, Brick. He's done nothing but get me in trouble since I met him. I'll call in and get one of the duty officers to swing by and pick you up."

James gave his address to Jerry and was about to hang up when Jerry told him, "Thanks for puttin' up with our bullshit last night. I'm glad you came by and could carry us home. Next time, though, you're comin' bowling with us."

"Well, maybe. I'm not a very good bowler."

"Hell, we all suck possum cocks, James, so that excuse'll get you nowhere. I'll track you down if I have to, and I gotta say, I'm pretty good at it."

"Alright, but only if you let me borrow your lucky leopard print thong."

"Washed or unwashed?" asked Jerry.

“Surprise me.”

“You got it!”

James hung up and waited for whoever was going to pick him up.

The knock on the door almost shocked him. He looked down at his watch and ten minutes had gone by. He realized he had been staring at the rug in his living room the whole time. His mind had been spinning over the same things it had the night before. In particular, he thought about the times he and Benard, his ex-boyfriend Patricio, and Louis had been out at one of their favorite bars in New York. They picked on each other, but they all took it a little further than what would be just playing and teasing. It always went just a little too far, to where it actually was intended to hurt, to cut a little too close to the bone. Brick, Jesus, Roddy, Jerry, Agnes, all those guys, teased each other, but it was always good natured.

James definitely needed to stop seeing the therapist. Seeing her did him no more good than sitting in an empty room and talking to himself about it. He wanted some perspective on it, but Dr. Anniston was a limp noodle when it came to that. Maybe he needed to try a different therapist, but for now he might as well just deal with it all on his own.

James went to open the door, and was surprised to see J. T. there smiling, his police cap in his hand.

“Hey, J. T.! I didn’t expect to find you on my doorstep!” exclaimed James. He couldn’t help but notice how J. T.’s arms were tight in the short-sleeved uniform shirt.

“It was funny, but I recognized the address when the dispatcher called me. You doing good?”

James said, “Yeah, I’m doing fine. Oh, hey, check it out! I finally did get all my stuff settled.” He moved out of the way so that J. T. could see into his apartment.

J. T., rather than just peek into James’ apartment, came right on in to look around a little. “You did! It looks great. You’ve got really nice stuff! It’s not cluttered or crammed in. My girlfriend likes to have lots of stuff sitting around. I’m always scared I’m going to knock something off a table and piss her off. You ready to go?”

James grabbed his keys and they walked down to where he had parked Jerry’s cruiser the night before. Another police cruiser was waiting next to it, with a young black female cop waiting on the sidewalk.

J. T. said, “James, this is Shelynne. She’s going to drive Capt. Pritchard’s cruiser back and I’ll run you over to your car.”

James said hello and gave Shelynne the keys to the cruiser. As she took off, Shelynne waved at James and J. T. as they got into the other police car. At first James was going to get in the back.

J. T. said, that smile on his face again, “The back’s for perps, James. Sit up front with me.”

James got into the front and they took off to the bowling alley.

James said, "I'm a little embarrassed to put you guys out like this. It seems like a crazy use of police time to get me back over to my car."

"Don't even think about it," said J. T. "We all do this for each other. We'd much rather spend the time like this if it means none of us are out driving around drunk at night. How do you know Capt. Pritchard?"

"Really, I don't. I just met him for the first time last night. I had to take something to one of the guys he was bowling with, and they asked me to take them home since I hadn't been drinking. Hey, have you ever seen Capt. Pritchard get mad at anybody?"

J. T. laughed and said, "I know why you're asking. And yes, I've seen him blow up furious at a recruit once. And yes, it's scary as shit. I'm ex-Marine myself, and I'll tell you, under no circumstance will I ever, EVER, do anything that I think will piss that man off. It's rare, though, to see him like that. He's normally cool as a cucumber, even in dangerous situations. Everyone on the force really respects him. He's probably going to wind up Chief of Police when Chief McDonnell retires."

James wanted to ask if J. T. had ever seen Jerry's lucky thong, but decided not to.

"So, did you work for a car dealership up in New York?" asked J. T.

"Oh, no. Up in New York, I worked for a marketing company. I specialized in film promotion."

J. T. asked, "What does that mean?"

"You know the ads you see in magazines for movies? The movie trailers on TV? I helped create all that. We'd also do stuff like host press junkets, get stars on talk shows to push the movies, manage the premieres sometimes. Anything that helps generate interest in a film."

"Wow, what a cool job! Did you do stuff for any big films? Anything I'd know?"

"Well, let's see." James thought about it for a second, then said, "I oversaw some of the campaign for *Ocean's Twelve*, and *Paycheck* - that movie with Ben Affleck, and *Ladder 49*. Did you see any of those?"

J. T.'s eyes were wide. "Man, that's great! I saw all those films! *Paycheck* kicked ass! I love that movie! Do you get to work with the stars a lot? Who all have you met?"

"Marketing people usually don't get to meet many of the stars. Most of the time, we don't get involved until after the stars have done their part. But sometimes you do. I got to meet Ben Affleck once, and David Letterman. Who else? Oh, Mike Myers, and Naomi Watts. And Diane Keaton. I got to talk to her for a while."

J. T. was totally taken. "No shit! All those people? That's so cool! Diane Keaton's great! I loved that movie *Something's Gotta Give*!"

James said, "Yeah, that movie's really good."

"So why'd you move back here, James?" asked J. T.

James knew the question was bound to come up, and he had his vague answer ready. "Well, despite the cool aspects of the job, it has a lot of downsides and a lot of

pressure. If a movie flops, we're the first ones they blame. In the end, the job and some other aspects of New York just weren't working out any more."

"Did you have a partner in New York? A boyfriend?"

James started to get a little uncomfortable. "I dated a couple of guys while I lived up there. No one for very long, though." It was the truth.

"Hey, does anyone ever call you Jimmy? James seems a little, I don't know, formal?" asked J. T.

James respected that at least J. T. asked before just calling him Jimmy. "People try sometimes. To be honest, I've never really liked the name Jimmy very much. I try to keep people on James if I can."

J. T. nodded and said, "I can understand that. I prefer J. T. to Julian and Titus. Hey, speaking of movies... have you given that DVD I found a test drive to see if it was scratched?"

James had tried to forget about that. "Is there any kind of obscenity law about having stuff like that in Georgia?"

"Probably," laughed J. T. "But I don't care. I got my own collection of porno, if it makes you feel any better. Straight stuff, of course."

"Well, in that case, I have tried it out and it looked good to me."

"Good, nobody wants to see good porn get ruined!" teased J. T.

As they pulled into the Ten Pins parking lot, J. T. said, "Here you go, James. You had the Mustang, right? I'm glad I got the call this morning. It was cool talking to you! Next time I run into you, I want to hear more about some of the movies you've worked on!"

James said, "Sure, any time! Thanks for the ride, J. T."

As J. T. was driving off in his cruiser, he gave James a thumbs-up through his window and James waved back.

Chapter 13

James' mom put the cup of coffee down in front of James, along with some cream and sugar. James put a little of the sugar in and stirred it around some.

He said, "Ok, so are you going to tell me what this is all about now?"

His mother sat down next to him on the sofa in her den. She looked like she dreaded what she was about to do. James had never seen his mother be so mysterious about anything. She had him come over for dinner because she had something to talk about, but wouldn't say what. All through dinner she wouldn't talk about it, and now it was really starting to worry James.

She kept stalling, and James said, "Look, you're starting to freak me out. Are you ok? Is there anything wrong?"

His mother looked a little relieved. She said, "Oh, no. I'm fine. Healthy as a horse! It's actually a good thing. I'm just not sure how you're going to react."

"Oh my God! You're not dating someone, are you?"

James realized how distraught he would be at the thought. His dad had walked out on them when he was still very young, mostly because his father couldn't handle that his mother was a much better business person than he was - he was very traditional and the man in the relationship should be in charge of all that. But he constantly screwed everything up and his mom was always having to fix it, and stroke his dad's ego at the same time to try and make him feel like he was great at business. But he got tired of it and had left them. Building a successful business got much easier after he had left them and Bea had never shown any interest in another man after he had walked out. The very idea of having a new dad all of a sudden was very disturbing to James.

"What? No! I'm not dating anyone!" She obviously thought that idea was preposterous.

"Then talk!"

She took a deep breath.

"I've been to see Lindsey several times with her foster family. And, God bless her, she's doing pretty well there. And this family is good to her, but they've got three other kids, too. I worry that Lindsey isn't getting the attention she needs. James, sugar, I've started thinking about adopting Lindsey. How do you feel about having a little sister?"

James' bottom jaw dropped open. He totally wasn't expecting this. Not one bit. A little sister? She had volunteered at the hospital God knows how many years and had *never* gotten this attached to any of the children there. He wished he had drunk more than one beer with dinner.

He finally started to stammer, "Adopt... you... Lindsey... adopt..."

She looked at her son, her dark eyes fixed on James expectantly. "Yes, adopt Lindsey."

James closed his eyes hard and shook his head for a second, trying to get a grip on what his mother had just said. It took a long minute.

What he finally managed to say was, "You're old enough to be her grandmother!"

"I *knew* you were going to say that!" She swatted James on the arm.

"Ouch! And I'm old enough to be her... father. Ooof!" Saying that didn't make James feel good at all.

His mother sighed. "I thought maybe you'd be against the idea."

James said, "Wait, wait... I didn't say that. I just got hit over the head with a telephone pole, mom, and it's gonna take a second for me to process it."

Bea said, "Oh James. She's what's called a waiting child, and she's five years old. The chances of someone else coming along and adopting her are very low. I can't bear it! I've thought a lot about it and I think I want to do this."

James knew his mother. She didn't make decisions casually. He knew she really had thought about it from all kinds of different angles, and if the answer was to adopt, it probably was the right thing to do. When she started something, she would stick with it and make it successful, like her business and her hospital work. And she was definitely good with kids.

He said to her, "I know you, mom. I'm sure you've thought about it very thoroughly, and I'm sure I'd be hard pressed to come up with a reason for you to not do it."

"I know I may be a little older than most mothers with a five-year-old, but I'm financially very stable, I've got plenty of time to devote to her, and I've already successfully raised one child," she said.

Then she added, with a twinkle in her eye, "And I've learned from all the mistakes I made with you!"

James laughed. "Like letting a seven-year-old drive the car around by himself?"

His mother looked at him sternly, "You stole the car keys, and we agreed to never mention that again!"

She leaned over and kissed her son on the cheek. "But I'm not looking for reasons to not do it. I'm looking for your support. I'm going to need it."

James was still completely astounded at the idea of suddenly having a five-year-old sister. He leaned over and grabbed his mother and hugged her tight.

"You've blown my mind, mom. But of course, you've got my support! As long as I stay your favorite!"

"Thank you, James! You mean so much to me, and I'd never be able to do this without you. I hope she'll grow up to be as wonderful a child as you've been!"

James said with an evil grin, "Plus, it'll be kind of cool to have a younger sibling I can beat up on!"

Bea gasped, "James! Stop kidding around like that! I won't have that kind of talk!"

James asked, "So who all have you talked to about this?" And just as he said it, he realized he was paranoid that his mother had already talked to probably everybody and that he was the last to know. He felt a stabbing pain inside and didn't want to hear his mother's answer.

But Bea said, "Well, you're the first, really. You're my son, and this affects you more than anybody else. I have talked to an adoption case manager in the state Department of Family and Children Services a little bit. It's quite a process to go through, but for a waiting child like Lindsey, it gets expedited some."

James instantly felt ashamed of himself for thinking his mother would have put him on the bottom of the totem pole. His feelings of being an outsider since moving back to Lawder were even encroaching on his relationship with his own mother.

"Does the fact that you'll be a single mother affect this at all? Will that prevent you from being able to adopt her?" asked James.

"It doesn't, really. They'll look very closely at my lifestyle and stability to make sure I've got the support and resources to raise her well, but I don't think that will be much of an issue, do you? They'll probably want to talk to you some about growing up with me as a single parent, so I guess if you ever wanted revenge on me for anything, your golden opportunity is coming up."

James laughed and yelled "OOH, that's perfect! You are so going to pay for not letting me get that subscription to *In Touch* magazine when I was fourteen!"

He added, "You'll be fine. You've got the money and the time, and you've got me and a hospital full of people that can testify to how good you are with kids. And once Lindsey moves in, I can help, and I bet Brick will, and Jesus and Melena, too. Although, I don't know anything about raising a kid. I never put any thought into that at all, to be honest."

"Having the right support around you is important, and I've got that. Including everyone at the hospital that would love to help Lindsey some more. The case manager will want to talk to lots of people, though."

"Do you think you'll stop volunteering at the hospital?" asked James.

"Absolutely not! There's no reason to quit helping at the hospital! I may scale back a little, but I won't quit. Besides, Lindsey's five. She'll be starting school next fall and it would be good to have her in a kindergarten program before then. I'll still have plenty of time in the day during the week when I can be at the hospital. Lord knows I don't get to lift a finger for the business any more, except to sign some checks now and again. Kevin makes sure of that!"

James knew that wasn't strictly true. His mother didn't get out and work with the crew at all anymore; any gardening she did was strictly for her own pleasure. But she did a little more than just sign checks. She knew almost everyone in town and helped get new business. She almost always handled the trickier negotiations for any business accounts Montgomery Landscaping had and she was very good at it. She had joked that she handled the tricky ones, Brick handled almost all the rest, and they sent Roddy in to sign up the bored housewives, usually wearing a tight t-shirt if possible.

James asked, "Will she keep her own name, or will her last name change to Montgomery? Actually, what is her last name? I don't even know it."

"It's Doland. Lindsey Elizabeth Doland. You know, I haven't even thought about that. I want her to know about her birth parents, so maybe she should keep it. But maybe it would be easier on her at this point in life to share our last name. I guess I'll have to talk to the case manager about that, and go with whatever she suggests."

They got quiet for a moment, and James enjoyed seeing the fire in his mother's eyes. She was clearly very excited about the idea of adopting Lindsey. James couldn't help but marvel at what a remarkable woman his mother was. It didn't seem like there wasn't anything she couldn't tackle. She had raised James alone after his dad split, had built up the business from there, and now, at a little over fifty, she was adopting a child to raise. She had always had a natural instinct for handling every situation. It was almost spooky sometimes.

James grabbed his mother's hand and told her, "You're going to make a great mom again. I've been lucky to have you all to myself for so long, and now Lindsey will be the luckiest girl."

James could tell his mother was about to let a tear slip out, but she grabbed his hand with both of hers and rubbed it.

They talked for a long time, about Lindsey's need for follow-up physical therapy for another year, the challenge of helping her adjust without her parents, the fact that she'd go to the same schools that James had gone to, and many other topics.

Finally, much later, James asked, "There's one other thing that worries me, so I have to know... Is Lindsey potty trained?"

His mother looked at him like he was crazy. "She's five! Of course, she's potty trained! What kind of question is that?"

James looked flustered. "I don't know! I don't deal with kids! How am I supposed to know? I've got a ton to learn, but I'm starting from zero here. But just as long as it doesn't involve diapers, I'll be able to manage!" The relief on his face was tangible.

When James got ready to head home, he hugged his mother hard and told her that he'd be there for her for anything she ever needed, just like she had always been for him. Except for the *In Touch* subscription.

On his way back, though, James realized there was something nagging at him about it. It was more than just the shock of the news and his nervousness about being part of raising a little girl. He felt unsettled and he didn't know why.

Within his circle of friends in New York, the idea of having kids was ridiculous. And then it hit him. His life had stopped in its tracks months ago, and everyone else's seemed to be proceeding fine. He felt isolated and marginalized. That was the word that came to mind. Even in his own mother's life, he felt like he was marginalized. Reasonably, he knew that wasn't the case, but after the hurt he had gone through, he was hoping he'd have Lawder and his mother as his rock he could cling to until he felt like he could move forward again. He had come back to Lawder wanting it to be him and his mother for a little while, just like it had always been, where he'd feel safe. But he had come back to find this Brick guy there, and he still wasn't sure what to make of all that. And now his mother was going to be very busy with a five-year-old. He felt like he was outside looking at everyone else's life.

~~~~~

As James came up the steps to where his apartment was, he heard an odd sound that made him stop to see if he could figure out what it was and where it was coming from. His mind was still reeling some from the bomb his mother had dropped on him, so he wasn't entirely sure he had actually heard something.

But then he heard it again. It was almost like someone crying out faintly, and he realized it was coming from behind him. He looked at the door to Stefanie's apartment and realized that was the most likely place for it to have come from. He walked over a little closer to the door and listened more intently.

A second later, he heard it again, distinctly this time. It sounded like someone crying out in pain with maybe a swear thrown in. A moment later, he heard a noise like a smacking or a slapping followed by someone crying out and a faint "You motherfucker!"

James immediately got agitated. It sounded like Stefanie was getting hurt in there, although he supposed it could be the TV or something. But something about the sound made him believe it was real and not something on TV. James had yet to meet or even see Rico, but from what Stefanie had said about him the last time they talked briefly, he did sound like a roughneck.

He wasn't sure what to do at first. Part of him, the New York part, just wanted to ignore it and go in to his own apartment. But part of him couldn't ignore that Stefanie

might be getting hurt. He didn't want to just call the cops in case it was the TV. He didn't want to just try and barge in, in case it was Rico. He needed an excuse to stop by Stefanie's so he could get a look inside and at Stefanie to make sure everything was ok.

He went into his own apartment quietly and grabbed a small kitchen towel, then went back over to Stefanie's. He knocked on the door, and his blood started racing at the thought of what he might see if she or whoever opened the door. It got quiet and after there was no answer for a moment, James knocked again.

"Hey Stefanie! You there! I'm hoping you can save my life here!" He tried to say it nonchalantly, but wasn't sure he was pulling it off very well.

A moment later, he was about to knock again when he heard some shoes clicking around on the floor inside the apartment. A second later, Stefanie answered the door looking rather frazzled. She was covered in a long bathrobe that she had pulled around her very tightly. James had never seen her this covered up, even in the cooler fall weather. On his first glance, she didn't seem hurt.

"Oh, thank God you're here. Hey, I'm fixing this chicken dish to take over to my mother tomorrow, and I forgot I need white wine for the recipe. I don't have any. Do you have a bottle you could give me? I'll get you a replacement tomorrow."

He tried to look past her discreetly as he talked to see if he could see anything going on inside, but didn't immediately notice anything out of the ordinary.

Stefanie at first looked distracted and puzzled, but when she realized he was just after some white wine, she smiled and said, "Oh white wine? Sure, James, I've got a bottle!" She kept the bathrobe tight around her neck, though.

Right then, James saw something in the back dash from one room to another in the background, and in the dim light, James couldn't see much. But it looked like a naked person with a bottle or something in his or her hand.

Stefanie put her hand out to have James wait while she went to get the wine, but as soon as she went into the apartment to get it, James walked right in with her. She turned back to call out to him and jumped when she realized he was right behind her. This clearly surprised her, but she said, "I hope it doesn't need to be good wine! It was a pretty cheap bottle."

James kept looking into the back of her apartment to see if he could see the person or anything else going on. "It's just for cooking, so it doesn't need to be anything fancy. Whatever you've got is totally fine." James noticed she was walking a little differently, and when he looked down, he realized she was wearing shiny, black patent leather boots with the tallest heels he'd ever seen, even on drag queens.

She grabbed the bottle out of the fridge and gave it to James. She started to direct him back out and said, "Is this ok? Will this do?"

James was about to try and make her go back to see if she had a different bottle just so he'd get a little more time in her apartment, but decided not to.

He said, "This one's great. Thanks!"

Instead, as he got outside her door and she was about to close it he whispered at her urgently, "Stefanie!"

She looked at him funny and he whispered again, "Are you ok? I heard funny noises in there. I wanted to check on you."

Stefanie turned a slight shade of pink for a flash, and then the realization washed over her face. She smiled and relaxed and whispered back, "Oh, Gawd no! Everything's fine! Rico and I are just, uh, you know, messing around."

James whispered back, "Are you sure? It sounded bad! It sounded like someone was getting hurt."

She stepped out of the apartment onto the landing a little and bit her lower lip in embarrassment. She took the opening of her bathrobe and flashed James briefly before closing it and tying it back up. She was wearing an incredibly complicated black patent leather bustier thing with straps and grommets and chains and studs all over. Below that was a pair of black leather panties that James thought was probably crotchless but blessedly didn't have time to verify.

James held out his hands to let her know he understood and had seen enough. Stefanie gave out a small giggle like a wicked schoolgirl.

James said very quietly, "Ok, I just heard a noise that sounded like someone getting hit."

Stefanie giggled again, "Oh, Rico likes to get paddled pretty hard. But don't tell him I told you. He gets real mad if I tell people about that!"

James said, "You don't have to worry about that."

Stefanie was about to go back in when she turned around to James. She smiled sweetly and gently, which completely belied the cruel dominatrix outfit under the bathrobe, and said, "Thanks for checking on me, James! That's so sweet of you!"

Inside his own apartment, James felt a huge relief that Stefanie was ok and that Rico wasn't beating on her. Knowing that Rico liked to get paddled made James a little curious as to what kind of person he really was since he had never seen him.

But with that episode completed, he started back thinking about the whole concept of having a little sister. A very little sister. Who would have ever thought? It boggled his mind, and he was nervous about it. Quite frankly, he didn't want it. But he knew that was selfish. But at the same time, he was trying to get back on his feet. He had been through a lot, and someone in his life had died. Someone very special, and in no small part due to James. He needed time to focus on himself. He had had his mother all to himself for so many years, why couldn't he just have her for maybe one more? Why was this happening now?

And then he felt selfish and ashamed for that. His mother asked very little of other people, and asked very little of James. He couldn't expect to be the only one who needed others to be there for him.

James had never had any ideas about having kids of his own, no desire at all. But now he was going to be involved. He was ok with that, although it did worry him that he

had no idea how to act around little children. They were always something he had just watched from a distance, like a street performer, or a mime. Well, not like a mime at all... mimes were quiet. Why didn't his mother adopt a mime, instead? But this was different. This would be up close and personal. And ongoing. And noisy. James would help his mom any way he could, but he knew there would be expectations for how he would handle this, and it worried him.

He didn't want to express this to his mother. It would make her feel like James was against it, or simply wanted nothing to do with it. He briefly thought about scheduling another appointment with Dr. Anniston, but then he could hear her in his mind, asking "How do *you* think you should help raise a child? What counts are *your* feelings."

James picked up his phone and resigned himself to doing what he had to do. It wasn't such a bad solution, really, but he still felt a little like he was stupid for not being able to handle it alone.

Brick answered the phone with a "Yo!"

"Hey Brick, it's James."

"James?" he asked. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"Look, there's something I want to talk to you about."

"Shoot, buddy!"

"No, not now," said James. "Over the phone would be a little awkward. Are you busy tomorrow night?"

"Is everything ok?"

"Yeah, it's fine. It's not anything bad."

"Just checking. Yeah, I'm free."

"Good. If you come over, I'll even fix dinner for you."

"Oh-ho! Now you're talking! Free dinner always gets my attention!" said Brick, excitedly. But then he added, a little suspiciously, "Wait... do you even know how to cook?"

James laughed and said, "Yeah, I'm actually a decent cook. But until you try it, it'll be something of a leap of faith for you."

"Hmmmm..." said Brick. "Ok, I'm game."

James told him to come on by around eight and they'd eat.

When James lay down in bed later, he thought back to the time in Rockefeller Center. He and Ian watched the people ice skating under the statue of Prometheus. There was one family that had three screaming kids nearby, excited about New York, excited about Christmas, excited about skating, excited about everything it seemed. James referred to them as "disruptions" and wanted to go to the other side to get away from them, but Ian loved watching them. Ian talked about how he would love to eventually have kids. His own or adopted didn't matter. Just to have kids.

James worried that he'd do everything wrong around Lindsey. And then the selfishness surfaced again. His mother would have Lindsey to dote on. James would do everything wrong around her. Sooner or later, probably sooner, he'd be marginalized and not fit in to the way things had changed. The emptiness gripped him again and his mind ran through scenes where he would do entirely the wrong thing with Lindsey and she would wind up hating him. And everyone would wonder how he could be such a dork around her. Eventually, he'd just give up. No sense trying to constantly fit in when it just wasn't going to work. Square pegs didn't suddenly fit perfectly in to round holes.

He sat up in bed and turned the light on. He had to stop thinking like that. He reminded himself that the combination of Ian, his so-called friends in New York, Brick, Lawder, everything was bound to make him feel like an outsider. He'd been through a major trauma and had started his life over. Of course he was going to feel like an outsider for a while.

But, as he tried to fall asleep, the feeling lingered in the back of his mind, not quite ready to give in to reason so easily.

## *Chapter 14*

For once, Brick looked really cleaned up. James thought probably more cleaned up than he had seen him since moving back to Lawder. Brick was wearing khakis, a white knit shirt, and clean sneakers. And he had apparently shaved that day, too, but was sporting a soul patch and a mustache that drooped down below the corners of his mouth just a little bit. He had an expectant look on his face, and his dense eyebrows arched up over his eyes.

James opened his apartment door the rest of the way so that Brick could come on inside.

Brick said, "Alright, I did get the right one!" the smile spreading across his face.

James led him in and Brick whistled as he looked around. "Man, you've got a great looking place! It's so clean and simple, but great stuff!"

James said, "Well, it was all much more cramped in my New York apartment. I've got a lot more room to spread out here. Have a seat and let me know what you want to drink."

Brick sat down on the sofa and said, "A beer's fine, I guess."

James walked into the kitchen, but said, "A beer? I've got that. I've also got vodka and Jack Daniels, too, if you want any of that. Hey, I've got some scotch in here, too."

"Hey now, a scotch and water would be great! I don't hardly ever get to drink scotch!"

While James was getting his drink, Brick asked, "So how much smaller was your New York place compared to this?"

"Probably about half this size, and way over twice the price. But then, if you leaned out over my small balcony, you could see the Hudson River down 16th Street." James came back into the living room with Brick's scotch and water.

"Did you buy all this furniture up there?"

“Yeah.”

“It’s great stuff. I wasn’t sure what kind of stuff you’d have, but now that I see it, I get it.”

James asked, “So what kind of stuff did you imagine me having?”

Brick paused a second, just the tiniest upturn of a grin in one corner of his mouth. He said, “Uh...”

James shrugged and said, “Go on, it’s your chance for revenge. Hit me with your best shot!”

Brick said, “Well, let’s see...” He trailed off, though, and couldn’t seem to make himself go any farther.

“Come on. I’ll help you,” teased James.

Brick grinned, so James proceeded. “Gilded cherubs? A few collector Barbie dolls in Bob Mackie gowns under a glass display case?”

Brick continued to grin, but he was trying to hold it back, too.

James said, “How about black and white photos of nude black men, holding calla lilies? A large crystal and brass chandelier over the dining area and pink tulle stretched out over the bed.”

Brick said, “I don’t even know what a tulle is.”

James laughed and kept going. “And an antique carved wood sofa with velvet paisley upholstery, and penis sculptures on either side? Does that come close?”

Brick laughed, “That’s quite a picture. Honestly, you’re more creative than I am. I might have pictured some flowery fabric on the sofa or something, but nothing as out there as you said.”

“Well, it’s a shame. That’s what I actually had in my place in New York before I decided to redecorate and bought all this,” said James, mischievously.

Brick laughed. “This is good scotch, by the way. Really good! Thanks for letting me have some of this. I’m too cheap to ever buy any for myself.”

James inwardly agreed with Brick. He liked Scotch, too, but was used to not advertising it. Benard and Louis in particular gave him hell for liking such a “breeder” drink.

“I only drink it when I’m already really drunk. Then I want scotch because I think it’ll make me look all sophisticated and manly. Make yourself at home. I’m going to check on dinner. There’s the remote to the TV if you want.”

James got up to go to the kitchen, but Brick followed him and stood in the kitchen door.

“So what did you fix for dinner? It smells good!”

“I made a small beef tenderloin with a soy ginger glaze, some asparagus and roasted potatoes.”

Brick's eyes got big. "You made all that?"

"Sure," said James checking on the potatoes in the oven.

"Did it come out of a box?"

"No!" laughed James.

"You didn't just go buy it somewhere?"

James closed the oven door. "No, I fixed it up all by my little old self. I actually can cook a little bit. Are you worried I was going to serve dog food tacos or something?"

"No. I just never thought about you cooking, I guess. I can cook only if the instructions on the box have no more than two steps. I consider getting a soup can open quite an achievement in the culinary arts."

A few moments later, they sat down to dinner at the table. Brick tried his beef tenderloin and had to go on for a few minutes about how good it was.

"James, I'm not kidding. I don't hardly ever get food this good. Not even your mom can cook like this, and she's pretty decent! Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"I started in college, and just got better as time went by. By the time I moved to New York, I was pretty good. But then, in New York I did less and less over time. I had a tiny, uncomfortable kitchen, and there's too much good food too convenient there to spend a lot of time fixing your own."

James watched Brick eat eagerly for a moment, realizing that watching him enjoy dinner was better than hearing him say the words.

Brick eventually said, with his mouth full, "So, I wondered all night last night what you wanted to talk about. You wanna let me know what's up?"

James took a good belt off of his own Jack and water and said, "Has my mom talked to you about anything lately?"

Brick's expression clearly showed he was trying to figure out exactly what James meant. "Well, yeah, I talk to her usually once or twice a day."

"No, I mean something important. Not really work-related."

Brick finished chewing and said slowly, "That would be no." He was eyeing James suspiciously.

"What would you think if I told you that she wanted to add on to the family."

Brick's eyes got huge, then he almost seemed mad, "Dude, don't even try to pull that shit with me. There's no way your mom is..."

James cut him off, realizing what his statement must have sounded like. "Sorry, that came out wrong. She's not pregnant. Definitely not pregnant. She wants to adopt Lindsey, the little girl from the hospital."

Brick had a blank look for a second while he tried to fully understand what James had said. But then his face lit up. "Really? Hey man, that would be so great! She loves

Lindsey so much, and... Dude! You'll have a little sister! That is, absolutely, the coolest idea I've heard in, like... *forever!* Holy shit!!"

Brick pretty much stopped eating. James could see the wheels spinning in Brick's mind, turning around all the great things about his mother adopting a little girl.

"So, you like the idea, I guess?"

"Are you kiddin'? Fuckin' ay! I'm crazy about it! It's the next best thing to having my own kid! Wow! When's she gonna get Lindsey?"

"Slow down. She's only barely started talking to an adoption person about the idea. I don't know how long it takes. She did mention, because of Lindsey's situation, it'll go a little faster. So do you think my mom's age will be an issue?"

"Nah! Don't treat her like she's some old lady with one foot in the nursing home. She's got lots of energy and is in great health. I doubt that will be an issue. She'll have lots of help. You, me, Jesus and Melena. Hey, Rosie's almost the same age as Lindsey, so she'll already have a friend! Plenty of people at the hospital would give their left nut to help your mom after all she's done there."

James was finishing the last of his asparagus. He was a little embarrassed to get into the next topic, but it had come up.

"So how much have you been around little kids?" he asked Brick.

Brick thought for a moment and answered, "Well, some here and there. I've been around Rosie probably the most."

James asked, "How do you know what to do with a kid like that? The right things, that is?"

Brick cut off another big bite of his tenderloin. "I don't know. You just do it. You keep your pot real well hidden, try and keep 'em away from porn on the internet, and don't let 'em play with chain saws. Pretty obvious stuff," he said casually.

James felt a little stressed. He really didn't feel like it would always be as obvious as Brick thought it would. What would he do? Why did this come so naturally to everyone else?

Brick asked, putting two and two together, "Are you worried that you're not going to do the right things with her?"

James sighed. "I'm worried about a ton of things. What if I can't figure out how to connect with her? What if she wants to know where her parents are? What if she's allergic to peanuts? What if she hates me?"

Brick laughed. "I think you worry too much. You take each one of those things one at a time and deal with it if it comes up. *If* it comes up."

But Brick could still see the tension in James' face.

"Look, James. You'll do fine. No one really knows what they're doing. The great thing is that kids don't know we don't know what we're doing. Every parent fakes it. Your mom's been faking it all these years and you never figured it out. And you turned

out just fine. You'll be the same way with Lindsey. Besides, remember, your mom's there to do all the heavy lifting. You're just the older brother."

"I know. But I still worry about even the little bit I will have to help with, and I'm old enough to be her father. I don't want to screw it up. I don't want to let my mom down."

Brick nodded, "Ok, so now we get to the core of it. James, you're probably the only one that doesn't have some faith in you. You're making it more complicated than it needs to be. I'm no Einstein, and I'll probably do more than my share of screwing up around her, but you just take it one step at a time and do what you can. Besides, Bea set good examples for you. When you're not sure what to do, you can always think about what your mother would have done with you when you were that age."

That actually made James feel better. He had called Brick out of desperation, but it had turned out to have been a pretty good idea.

James poked at the last potato on his plate. "Thanks, that helps. I'm just nervous because I feel like everyone else has so much experience with kids and I've got nothing. Absolutely zero."

Brick said, "Every kid's different and previous experience will only get you so far. We'll all be there to support your mom. And you."

Brick leaned back in his chair and patted his stomach a little. "I can't tell you how good that was! That was an incredible meal! Hoo, man!"

Brick helped James clear the plates and then helped him start cleaning up the kitchen some.

"When do you think your mom is going to tell everyone?" asked Brick.

James shook his head and replied, "Not sure. It probably won't be long, though. I get the feeling that she's ready to make this happen as fast as possible now."

"Hey, by the way, it's late in the season, but the lake is still warm, so me and a few others might go for a last swim in Lake Natahatchee on Saturday. Go with us!"

James said, "I didn't think Lake Natahatchee had a public beach area. Where are you going?"

"We do Dr. Sykes' yard and he said he's going to be out of town over the weekend. His house is on the lake and I asked if we could maybe use his dock on Saturday. He was fine with it, so we'll be there. Will you go, too?"

James' immediate reaction was to say no, but he decided to waffle instead. "I might. I have some stuff I was probably going to try and get done this weekend, but let me see how much I get done the rest of the week."

Brick seemed a little disappointed, but said, "Ok, no problem. Just try hard to get your stuff done so you can go with us. It'd be cool if you could go. Let me know if you decide you can go."

They finished cleaning a few minutes later, and Brick said he needed to head on home. James saw him to the door and told him he'd talk to him later in the week.

When he closed the door and sat down on the sofa for a minute, James started thinking about the things Brick had said at dinner. He got that empty feeling inside again. Brick seemed to handle everything so well. It wasn't just that he was excited and comfortable about Lindsey, but it was also the things he had said to James. It all had made James feel a little stupid because Brick made it seem so obvious.

And then there was the invitation to the lake. In a way, it was nice that Brick invited him, but he knew he would feel like an outsider again if he went. He wasn't sure if it was better to go and put up with the feeling or just not face it at all. And it nagged at him some that he was becoming a little more dependent on Brick for a social life.

James fell over on his side on the sofa and just lay there feeling empty and distant for a long while.

## *Chapter 15*

When James got to Brick's apartment, he saw him outside loading up a couple of folding chairs in the back of his truck, a big old blue and white Ford king cab. It had enough dirt and dust on it to fade the colors and let you know it hadn't been washed in who knows how long. James thought it must be well over 10 years old from the looks of it.

Brick waved at him and James parked next to his truck.

"Bout time you showed up! It's gonna be a perfect day for this," said Brick. Brick had on a navy blue tank top and board shorts, and was wearing his orange mirrored sunglasses.

James put his ice chest into the back of the truck and said, "Well, I wasn't given a whole lot of choice. But when you're right, you're right. It will be a great day for the lake." Even for mid-October, it was expected to get up to the low 80's.

A couple of days before, James got a call from Jerry asking why he wasn't going to the lake. James had waffled again, but Jerry told him, in a voice that probably would have terrified anyone that didn't know Jerry, "That's not the answer I'm looking for, boy. I'll handcuff you and drag you there in the back of the cruiser if I have to."

James had replied that the handcuffs sounded pretty good, which made Jerry laugh. Jerry finally convinced him to go, though.

James asked Brick, "Is there anything else I can help load?"

"Grab those floats off the steps."

James walked over to the steps to grab the floats when Kicker bounded around the truck to greet him. He stuck his snout right into James' crotch hard enough to make James stop.

Brick yelled, "Kicker, quit that and get in the truck."

Kicker ran around to the open door and jumped in.

"Why does he do that?" asked James.

"I don't know. You're the only one he does it to. You been dunkin' your nuts in dog food?"

James grabbed the floats off the front steps of the house and tucked them into the folding chairs in the truck bed.

They went to get into the truck when James noticed Kicker was sitting up in the driver's seat.

Brick scowled at the dog and said, "I put you in back! After what happened last time, I ain't lettin' you drive again, you goober. Now get in the back."

Kicker gave him a puzzled look. Brick pointed emphatically at the rear seat and he jumped into the back. Brick and James climbed into the front seats and headed out. James heard Kicker thumping his tail on the seat behind him, and when he turned to look back, Kicker gave him a big slobbery kiss.

Brick and James were the first to show up at the lake, so they got the stuff out of the truck and took it down to Dr. Sykes' dock. Kicker helped by bringing his floating bone toy from the truck. Dr. Sykes had a big house, with a great view out over the lake. The lawn sloped gently down to the water's edge, and there were a few nice shade trees growing off to the side a little bit so as to not block the view.

Brick grabbed the bone from Kicker and threw it out in the lake as far as he could, and Kicker went running down the dock at top speed, took a flying leap into the water, and swam after it.

James started blowing up one of the floats while Brick went ahead and jumped in the lake after Kicker. James watched as Brick swam out a little towards Kicker, who had just reached the bone. Brick had an even layer of dirty blond hair covering his chest and stomach, but James realized that he actually wasn't as chunky as he originally thought. Brick was a solid guy, and he did have a very slight beer gut, but the rest of him was clearly in good shape from doing plenty of outside landscaping work each week. It wasn't a lean, gym-toned body, but it definitely wasn't the body of a beer-swilling redneck that sat around watching TV all the time, either.

James blew up the floats and he and Brick started floating around in the lake on a couple of them.

Brick said, "So I guess a big topic today will be the bomb your mom dropped last night at our poker game."

James said, "Yeah, I'm guessing it will. It will probably spread pretty fast at this point."

James had been at the poker game the night before, but he really didn't play much. He had actually volunteered to cook dinner for whoever showed up. When his mother announced her plans during dinner, it about floored Jesus, Agnes, and Perez. Everyone was excited, though, and had a million questions about it.

"You doing better with the concept of having a little sister?" asked Brick.

"Yeah, I guess. You're right that I need to stop worrying about it now and just take it as it comes."

"Jesus is bringing Melena and Rosie today, I think, so you can practice on her some," suggested Brick.

And sure enough, a few minutes later, they saw Jesus, Melena, Rosie, and Roddy coming around the house and down to the dock. Kicker went running up to them to greet them, and since Rosie was the right height, he started licking her enthusiastically in the face while she squealed with joy. Brick and James got out of the water long enough to go see if they needed any help carrying anything down.

Melena immediately came up to James to give him a hug. "James, Jesus told me last night! I'm so happy your mom is going to adopt Lindsey. I think it will be wonderful! Rosie will love having a new friend to play with. And you will be a big brother now! Are you excited about it?"

James admitted, "Yes, very excited. And a little nervous, too!"

Melena beamed, "Don't be nervous! You will love her immediately, and then you'll see how easy it is!"

Melena set up a chair underneath one of the trees and Jesus took Rosie out on a float in the water with him.

Roddy and Brick got back out in the water and threw the bone back and forth between them, making Kicker go from one to the other trying to get it. The instant Roddy stripped down to his cutoff jeans, though, James knew his eyes would be glued to him the rest of the day. Roddy had the smooth, bronzed, lean body just like what James liked the most. He loved just the trace of a treasure trail of hair from Roddy's stomach heading down into his swim shorts.

James got out on a float and chatted with Jesus and Rosie some. He asked Rosie how old she was, what did she like about Kicker, and did she go to kindergarten. Any question he could think of. Rosie answered, but she wasn't very chatty about it. It wasn't very encouraging to James.

James finally got up to go get a beer and decided to go sit over with Melena for a little while. He started asking her about her job at the bakery and her other family that lived in Lawder.

Just as James was about to ask her some more about how she handled Rosie, though, they all heard a booming voice from up at the house yelling, "So where is everybody?!"

He looked up and saw Jerry coming down towards the lake with his own float. With him, though, was another guy that looked like a college student. They came down towards Melena and James, and Jerry introduced his son, Cory, to them. James shook Cory's hand, and realized Cory was definitely his father's son. He wasn't as tall as his dad, and probably was only barely shorter than James. But he had the same overall build as his father — the same wide shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist. Cory's face was a little rounder than his father's, though, and what were strong, angular features on

his father, were a little softer on Cory. James decided he had a more boyish face. Cory still had a little acne going on, which James thought was odd for a guy his age.

Cory went on to get in the water with Roddy and Brick, and Jerry asked James to help him go get the rest of the stuff out of his SUV.

As they walked back up to the driveway, Jerry said, "I need your help a little bit. Cory's having a little trouble lately and it's driving me nuts. I'm getting some anti-gay vibes from him. I've heard that he's called a couple of smaller kids in his class 'queer,' but I don't think he means much by it. I guess he's getting it from his friends at school, because you know neither me nor Carrie Anne are like that. Anyway, if you're comfortable with it, I'd like to make sure he gets it that you're gay. I think the more he's around people he knows are gay and sees how regular they are, the more it will help this issue go away. Do you mind if I do that?"

This kind of problem with a college-aged kid didn't make much sense to James. "Jerry, how old is your son?" he finally asked.

"He's thirteen."

James almost did a double-take. "What? Jesus Christ, Jerry! He's thirteen?! He looks like he's seventeen or eighteen, at least!"

Jerry said, "I know. They grow up so fast now. He's been gettin' a little too big for his britches these days. I want to fix this the right way, but I swear sometimes I feel like I'm just going to have to pop some sense into him! So do you mind? You don't even really have to do anything, other than be yourself."

"So I should just start blowing Kicker out on the dock in front of everybody, right? Because everyone knows queers are all about the dog dicks, yeah? I've been looking forward to doing it all week long."

Jerry hit James in the chest and laughed, "You sick fuck! But sure, something needs to knock some sense into that boy!"

"Seriously, I'm fine with it. He may figure it out on his own, even."

"I doubt it. The thick-skulled little punk."

They grabbed the other floats and chairs Jerry brought and went back down to the lake.

Brick was up at the ice chest on the dock. He yelled out at him, "Hey, Jerry, what do ya want?"

"Anything, as long as its name has the letters B, E, and R in it!" yelled Jerry back.

Brick dug around in the ice chest and yelled, "Hamburger, coming up."

Jerry yelled, "No, the other thing! You know!"

"A lobster?"

Jerry bellowed, "A BEER, DADGUMMIT!!!!"

Brick smirked. "Oh, we don't have any of those!"

Jerry went to chase Brick, who ran away to the end of the dock, laughing and mocking him. Jerry reached into the ice chest and grabbed himself a beer since he couldn't get one out of Brick.

Brick set his beer on the end of the dock and dove back into the water to resume the game of Frisbee he, Roddy, and Cory were playing. James jumped in to start playing, too. He had played Frisbee a lot during college and was pretty good back then. They tossed it from one to another while treading water.

Cory threw the Frisbee over towards Roddy, but James jumped up in front of him and grabbed it away. Roddy tackled James in the water and tried to push him under, which resulted in James laughing and pushing back. They wrestled around a little bit until finally Brick yelled to just throw the dang Frisbee. James threw the Frisbee to him, but then Roddy pushed down on his head just to get in one last good lick.

Jerry had stopped on the dock to talk to Jesus and Rosie for a minute, but finally decided it was time to get in the water himself. James got a little distracted as he noticed Jerry take off the shorts he had on over a bathing suit, and then his shirt. James' first thought was, *dear God, that is the biggest man I've ever seen!* Jerry had a massive chest of solid muscle covered in dark hair. He had a military tattoo of some kind, probably a Ranger one, on one bicep, and his legs looked like tree trunks. He ran down the length of the dock, which resulted in a flying cannonball into the water that looked like an underwater nuclear test.

But the water settled and Jerry didn't come up. Roddy said, "Where'd he go? Is he ok?"

Cory looked around and said, "Uh oh, watch your feet! He's going to grab somebody!"

They all looked down into the water to see if they could see him, but no one could.

Almost a minute elapsed and James said, "Are you sure? I'm kinda worried."

Cory said, "Nope, he can stay under for over two full minutes. He does this..."

And right then, Cory got yanked underwater just like an alligator had grabbed him.

Jerry burst through the surface of the water laughing like crazy, followed by a sputtering Cory.

"Dang it, dad! You always do that to me!" yelled Cory.

"Hooo! And you always fall for it! Sucka!!" laughed Jerry. But he swam up and put his arm around his son's neck.

Cory tried to wiggle away, whining "Dad, quit it!"

They started throwing the Frisbee around some more, Jerry joining in this time.

Brick said to Roddy, "So, I forgot to ask you, did you go out with Ansley again?"

Roddy caught the Frisbee, and shook his head. He said, "No, she cancelled on me at the last minute."

He threw it over to James and continued, "I doubt she'll be calling me again. Even if she does, I don't think I'll go out again. We didn't click very well."

Jerry piped up at this point. "What about you, James? Have you met a boyfriend since you've moved back to Lawder?"

James threw the Frisbee to Brick and tried to be nonchalant. He said, "Nope, not yet." He wanted to watch Cory's reaction, but couldn't help but notice that Roddy had a startled look on his face as well. James guessed no one had said anything to Roddy yet and he hadn't figured it out for himself.

Brick threw the Frisbee to Roddy, who was still caught on what Jerry and James had just said, and the Frisbee hit him right in the side of the head. Brick and Jerry both started laughing hysterically, and James couldn't help but smile as well. But he really hoped Roddy didn't get alienated by finding out James was gay.

Jerry asked, "Well, have you been out looking?"

James gave Jerry a sarcastic look. "No. Where am I supposed to go look? They don't have a 'Gay Man' section at the grocery store."

Jerry said, "Sure they do, it's got a big sign over it that says 'Meat Department'."

James couldn't help but notice that Cory was glaring at him now. And then he started swimming back towards the dock.

James turned to Roddy and said, "Hope what Jerry said didn't freak you out."

Roddy smiled and said, "Nah, just took me by surprise. How did Jerry know you were gay?"

James got a tart look on his face and looked pointedly at Brick. "Oh, you can ask blabbermouth about that!"

He splashed at Brick, who splashed back, and then the three of them were splashing and laughing at each other like a bunch of cub scouts on a Jamboree.

James got out of the water to get another beer and then lay out at the end of the dock to get a little sun. Brick and Roddy grabbed two of the floats and started gliding idly around in the water. Jesus, Rosie and Melena were under the tree and Rosie was eating a sandwich.

Jerry had started swimming out into the lake, fast and without stopping.

James wondered if Cory was going to be the young bully at school, picking on kids he thought were gay and making their lives hell. James felt bad for any kids caught in Cory's crosshairs. The kid looked like a full adult at only thirteen and was far more intimidating than Brick had ever been.

A few minutes later, Jerry finally got back from swimming out to what must have been the middle of the lake. He grabbed one of the chairs and went to sit near his son, but Cory apparently wasn't too keen on being near his dad right then. He got up from where he had been sitting next to Kicker and got on a float out in the water instead, getting near where Roddy and Brick were drifting off the end of the dock.

Roddy had drifted over to James and asked him, "Hey, how do you feel about having a younger sister?"

James said, "Excited, I guess. It'll be hard to really feel like just a big brother, though, with this kind of age difference."

"Yeah, but you'll probably be in the best situation since you'll just have to jump in and help out occasionally. No heavy responsibility."

"And thank God she's potty trained," added James. "I don't think I could handle the diaper thing!"

Roddy laughed, "Yeah. I'd love to have kids myself, but I guess I've got to get a girlfriend first."

James wasn't sure if he should bring it up or not, but decided to see what would happen. He said, "My mom said you've been on probation for a thing with your last girlfriend."

Roddy looked a little embarrassed. "Yeah, I got busted for beating her up. But I swear I didn't do that. I'm not an abuser. She had been doing some drugs and weirded-out and hurt herself, and then blamed me. She had some emotional problems."

James said, "I believe you. I can't see you being like that with anybody. Plus, my mother is a scary good judge of character. I mean a *freakishly* good judge of character, and she's crazy about you."

"I appreciate that," replied Roddy. "It's hard to get people to move past me having that conviction out there. Everybody treats you different, like you're going to explode at any minute, when they find out. Your mom and Brick were great to give me a chance, though. And don't tell Brick I said it, but it's been great working for him. He's one of the nicest guys around."

"I couldn't bring myself to date at all while on probation. What happened hurt and it scared me to death. I guess I should be surprised it didn't turn me gay! Part of my problem is that I like edgy girls. Women not afraid of their wild side, especially in bed, you know? But those women usually have lots of other baggage, too, and that's where all the trouble comes in."

"I bet it does," said James.

Brick had swum a little closer, and yelled at James, "Hey James, c'mere a minute!"

James swam over to him. Brick looked around and said, "No, I've got something to say to you. Come over a little closer."

So James swam up to just a few feet away from Brick. Brick said, very seriously, "Closer. This is important."

So James got up right next to him in the water. He wondered what was so important.

Brick looked around and said, "I just wanted to tell you that... I'm peeing on you right now!"

James jerked back and yelled "You sick dumbass!" He swam away from Brick as fast as he could and over to Roddy's float.

Brick was laughing hysterically. Roddy was laughing at James, too.

James said to Roddy, "What the fuck are you laughing at, asshole?"

Roddy just said, "Classic!"

Brick eventually calmed down and said to James again, "Sorry, I'm just kidding, James! It was too easy, so I had to. Really, though, I do have something to say to you." And he nodded slightly to indicate Cory.

So James swam back over to Brick and Brick swam up closer to James.

He said, "So, I was just kidding last time, but this time I really am peeing on you."

James started splashing at Brick hard and said, "DAMMIT!"

Brick was laughing, and with James splashing at him as hard as he could, Brick actually started laughing and choking at the same time.

Finally he pulled himself together and said, but he started laughing again as he said it, "I really do have something to tell you."

Roddy started laughing again when Brick said this, too and even James started laughing at this point.

James sniped at Brick, "Oh, hell no! You had your chance, dickhead! Write it down and mail it to me!"

The rest of the afternoon continued along these lines. James particularly noticed that Cory ignored him, but didn't seem to mind talking to Jesus, Brick or Roddy. He spent time watching closely how Jesus acted around Rosie, trying to figure out how to treat a little girl that age. He wound up not quite being sure how to do it, though. Brick seemed completely comfortable around Rosie, and Rosie seemed completely comfortable with Brick.

When James got into his car to go home, the stress of what he was up against started rising up within him again. Rosie had been a challenge to get even one-word answers out of her. What if he couldn't do any better with Lindsey than he did with Rosie? How did Brick get that level of trust and familiarity with Rosie? It irritated him some that it seemed so easy for Brick, but was such a struggle for James to get right. He tried to remind himself that at least he had tried, but it still made him feel small to think about how ineffective he was. The empty and disconnected feeling once again took over him for the rest of the day.

## *Chapter 16*

Lindsey sat in the car until Bea came around to let her out. When she got out, she stared at the slate blue clapboard house in wonder, clutching her stuffed giraffe doll tightly to her chest.

Bea said to her, "Do you like this house? It's yours now."

Lindsey looked up at her in astonishment and asked, "Mine?"

Bea said, "Ours! We're going to live here together!"

Lindsey looked at James and Brick standing over next to Brick's truck. "Do they live here, too?" she asked shyly.

"No, just you and me. But James and Kevin come to visit lots."

Lindsey just looked at Bea and the house. Bea waited a moment to see if she would have anything else to say, and when Lindsey didn't, she said, "Well, sweetie, why don't we go inside, and you can pick out which bedroom you'd like for your very own!"

James and Brick had pulled up separately in Brick's truck, with Lindsey's things in the back. They left her things in the truck for a moment and followed Bea and Lindsey into the house to see how Lindsey responded.

As soon as they walked in, Kicker, who had been asleep in the den, came to meet them in the foyer. Lindsey saw him and clung to Bea's leg more tightly, nervous at the sight of the large dog.

Brick said, "Lindsey, that's Kicker. He's my dog and he's very friendly. He just wants to say hi."

Kicker's tail was wagging and he came up to Lindsey and gave her a big slurp on the ear since she had buried her face in Bea's side. She looked back at Kicker a little unsurely. But Kicker moved on to James. James was ready this time and put his hand over his crotch, but Kicker was persistent. James tried to block him, but Kicker's

persistence paid off and he managed to nuzzle James' hand out of the way and push his nose deep in between James' legs.

James' mom said, "James! Stop that!"

James looked at her and said, "What? I'm not doing this, Kicker is! Yell at him! I don't know why he does this!"

This made Lindsey giggle a little bit, much to James' immense relief. Anything to get her laughing felt like a huge achievement.

Brick squatted down and wrapped his arms around Kicker and said, "He's a good dog. Would you like to pet him, Lindsey?"

Lindsey looked unsurely at the dog for a moment, then reached out and petted him on the head. Kicker just smiled and licked at her hand a little, which elicited an "Ewww..." from Lindsey.

James pointed at the stuffed giraffe she was holding onto tightly and asked her, "Does your giraffe have a name?"

She nodded slowly.

"Can you tell me his name?"

"His name's Miller."

James said, "Oh, Miller's a great name for a giraffe. Did you come up with that name yourself?"

"No, my dad did. He said he was a long neck, like a Miller."

James and Brick couldn't help but laugh a little bit. Apparently, Lindsey's dad had been a beer drinker. "Well, I think Miller's the best name I've ever heard for a giraffe. I'm glad he got that name!"

They walked upstairs, and Bea showed Lindsey both bedrooms — James' old room and then the other one that was always set up as a guest bedroom.

Bea asked, "You can pick any room you like, Lindsey. Do you have one that you like better?"

Lindsey seemed a little excited at the choice. They were in James' room and she said, "I like this one!"

James squatted down to be on her level and said, "You know what, Lindsey? This used to be my room. When I was a boy your age, this was my room!"

Lindsey said matter-of-factly, "That must have been a long time ago!"

They all laughed and James said, "Yes, it was! A very long time ago!"

Lindsey looked over at Brick and said, "Did you grow up in the other room?"

Brick smiled at Lindsey and said, "No, I grew up in a different house, but not very far from here!"

Lindsey went and looked out the window. When she turned around, she said, "That bed's weird!"

James said, "Well, we can fix that!" And he couldn't help but add excitedly, "Yay! We get to redecorate!"

"Sugar? Do you like the bed in the other room?" asked Bea.

Lindsey went and ran down the hall to the other room and yelled back at them, "I like this one better! It's not weird!"

"Ok," said Bea. "We'll swap the beds and put the one you like in your room. Why don't you come with me downstairs and I'll fix you a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, ok?"

"k."

Brick said, "We'll go ahead and swap out the beds, and then get her things out of the truck for her."

Bea and Lindsey headed downstairs and James and Brick started moving the wrought iron bed out into the hall to make room.

Brick said, "She's doing pretty well. I was wondering if moving her yet again was going to scare her, but she seems ok."

"Yeah, it does seem like she's handling it well," said James. "I guess the real test will be her first night in a strange house. I told my mom I'd stay here tonight so I could be upstairs with her in case she gets scared or starts wandering around."

"Probably a good idea," said Brick.

"It's gonna feel weird sleeping down the hall in the guest bedroom. In all these years, I've never slept in that room."

"Do you want me to sleep out in the hall in case you get scared or start wandering around in the middle of the night?" asked Brick, a sly grin on his face.

James snickered, "Always trying to be the daddy!"

He added, "This has been my room for twenty-eight years. It's strange to know it's not mine anymore."

Brick said, "Well, dude, you're her big brother. If you wanted this room, you should have called dibs first!"

"Damn! I don't know all these rules! How am I supposed to know this stuff without ever having had a brother or sister?"

"Man, you'd better learn fast, or Lindsey's gonna walk all over you like you're a mall next door to a retirement home. Focus on the rules for calling 'shotgun' - those are the most complicated."

The two of them finished getting Lindsey's bed set up, and got her things out of the truck and took them up to her new room.

When they got back downstairs, Lindsey had just started in on her sandwich. Kicker was sitting attentively right next to her, hoping for any accident that might benefit him.

Bea asked, "Did you get everything set up ok?"

"All set!" said Brick.

"I took Lindsey out in the backyard for a minute to show her the fish pond. She's fascinated with the waterfall and the fish. Would either of you like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?"

James said, "Thanks, mom, but I'm fine."

"Kevin, how about you?"

"Nah, I'm good, Bea."

Brick went over to Kicker and straddled him. He said, "You know, Lindsey, Kicker here can make a few funny faces!"

"He can?" she asked, incredulously.

"Sure!" Brick held Kicker's ears straight up in the air, and pulled back on the top of his head some so his eyes opened wide.

"Here's Kicker looking very surprised!" Brick put on a funny voice and pretended to be Kicker talking "Oh! What do you mean I don't get to have a peanut butter and jelly sammich?!"

Lindsey giggled a little.

Brick pulled down on the loose fur underneath Kicker's neck and shook it back and forth some while going "Gobble gobble! Gobble gobble!"

"This is Kicker pretending to be a turkey!"

Brick lifted Kicker's front paws off the ground and crossed them. He danced him back and forth a little bit while making some bad beat box sounds. Kicker's tongue was lolling out one side happily. Brick said, between beat box sounds, "This is hip hop Kicker, Sir Kicks-a-lot!"

Lindsey was laughing and dancing along with the sounds. She said, "Do another!!"

Brick said, "Uh..." and had to think a moment.

Finally, he smushed all the skin on Kicker's head forward, giving the dog a mushy face in front almost like that of a Shar-Pei.

Brick leaned over to look at Kicker's face and said, "And this is... well, I guess he kinda looks like Richard Nixon like this."

James and Bea both laughed at that one. Brick looked up at them with a smile on his face.

Lindsey said, "Who's Richard Nixon?"

Brick said, "Don't worry about it, sweetie!"

Lindsey put her sandwich down and started petting Kicker on the head. For his part, Kicker was more interested in trying to lick her fingers, which made Lindsey squeal with laughter.

When Lindsey finished her sandwich, Brick said, "Since you all seem pretty settled in now, I'm going to go. Lindsey, would you like to give Kicker a hug goodbye?"

Lindsey nodded and got up. She went to Kicker and wrapped her arms around his neck, and tried to avoid him licking her all over at the same time.

Brick went over and got on his knees. He held his arms open and said, "Ok, and how about a big hug for your Uncle Brick?"

She came over and gave Brick a hug as well. Brick gave her a peck on the cheek, which caused her to scratch at her face where he kissed her. She said, "Your face is prickly!"

Brick ran his hand over his mouth and chin. "I suppose it is!" He had an even stubble on his face, and had grown his sideburns out longer and wider than usual.

While Brick was putting his jacket on, James went over and gave Kicker a couple of slaps on the side to say goodbye. He closed the back door after them and watched as Brick let Kicker into the passenger side of the truck. By the time Brick got around to the driver side, he had to yell at him to get out of his seat, though.

James and Bea spent the rest of the afternoon trying to engage Lindsey as much as possible. They talked about getting a Christmas tree the next weekend, and tried to get Lindsey to come up with some presents for Santa to bring her. The adoption case manager came by for a little while with some paperwork, and to see how Lindsey was settling in.

That evening, after they watched *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* on TV, Bea and James took Lindsey upstairs to tuck her in for her first night in her new home. They got her snug in bed and made sure the nightlight was on. Little Lindsey was clearly tired as her eyes were already drooping. James sat on the edge of the bed to say goodnight while his mother watched from the doorway.

"Lindsey, did you have a good first day here?" he asked her.

She just rubbed her eyes a little and nodded sleepily.

"How about a hug before you go to sleep?"

Lindsey just looked at him from under the covers, though, and didn't respond.

James frowned and asked, "No hug?"

And still Lindsey just looked at him through tired eyes.

James deflated a little, even though the whole day had pretty much gone the way he expected. He said, "Ok, sweetie. You sleep tight! If you wake up and need anything, I'll be right down the hall, ok? Come get me if you need anything!"

She nodded at James, and he left to go downstairs while his mother tucked her in the rest of the way.

A moment later, his mother joined him downstairs in the den. She sat next to James on the couch and took his hand.

"James, I know what you're thinking, and you did very well today," she said. She glanced up at the ceiling where Lindsey's room was. "She's really tired and was barely able to keep her eyes open while I said goodnight to her. Don't worry about it."

James said, "I'm fine. I don't expect her to be all about me. I saw her in the hospital for 30 seconds, and then again when we visited her with her foster family a few weeks ago. I'm practically a complete stranger to her." He couldn't help but think to himself how Brick was also almost a complete stranger to her as well, and yet she had warmed up to him pretty well.

His mother looked at him with gentle eyes and she rubbed his hand in hers. "James, remember how well I know you. I know it's important to you for her to accept you as family. And I know it's hard to see Brick get a hug from her. But it'll happen. She'll come to depend on you more than anyone else, I bet."

She had it pegged, and James knew it. He leaned over against his mother and said, "I didn't think it would be this hard moving back home."

Bea put her arm around her son's shoulders and hugged him. "You've been through a lot, but of course it's going to take a little time. But it'll happen, I promise."

When James finally went upstairs to go to sleep, he peeked into Lindsey's room to make sure she was ok and saw that she was sleeping peacefully.

In his own bed in the guest bedroom, James hardly felt like he was in his house at all. The light coming in from the street out front was different, and the room was laid out as a mirror image of the one he knew so well.

He felt like he was being crowded out of everything he knew. His mind had turned lately more and more to setting a specific timeline for moving somewhere else and getting a job a little more in line with his skills. Building a life that he belonged in. Maybe he'd stay three or four more months and then start looking around. That would give him time to make sure his mom and Lindsey were working out well, and it would put enough space between him and Ian that he'd feel a little more like tackling the world again.

He lay back in bed looking at the foreign light patterns on the ceiling and wished he could fall asleep.

## *Chapter 17*

James crossed the street to where the high school football stadium was with the banner rolled up in his hands. He saw the fence near one of the primary entrances where he needed to hang it and was headed that way when he heard someone call out his name.

He turned back and saw J. T. wave at him from farther down one side of the stadium.

J. T. was in uniform tonight, so James assumed he was helping manage the crowd and security for the football game.

They said hello to each other and J. T. asked, "Whatcha got there?"

"It's a sign wishing the Lawder Lions good luck in the playoff game tonight. Natahatchee Ford gives some money to support the team, and since they're in the playoffs, I thought we needed to do a sign as well wishing them luck. The guy that normally would put this up for us couldn't do it tonight, so I said I'd do it."

J. T. said, "That's pretty nice. Let me help you hang it."

James laughed and replied, "It's still marketing, though. It's got Natahatchee Ford/Lincoln/Mercury printed on it, but I kept the company names pretty low-key."

"So how is the job working out?" asked J. T. "You miss the movie business?"

James wrinkled his nose up a little. "Meh. It's okay, I guess. The owner is a little bit too much of a bible-thumping good ol' boy for my tastes. He's very much into his car salesmen and doesn't seem very interested in my ideas about how to approach marketing a little differently. But it pays the rent, so I can't complain too much."

J. T. grabbed the other end of the banner to help James with it. He smiled broadly and said, "I heard that!" James really liked it when J. T. smiled like that. James thought that, despite being a cop, J. T. was a decent guy, and definitely good looking. James didn't have a uniform fetish, but the cop uniform on J. T. did look good.

They used the thin rope that James had brought to tie the sign on the fence, and then J. T. stepped back to look at the sign. It read "Lawder Loves Its Lions!! Good Luck In The Playoffs!" and had the dealerships' names printed underneath.

J. T. asked, "Are you staying for the game?"

"Nah, football's not really my thing. Just needed to get here and get the sign up before the crowd arrived."

A few people started trickling in to the game. J. T. kept an eye on them, but asked James how everything else in his life was going.

"Well, I've got a little sister now," he said.

J. T. looked dumbfounded for a moment and didn't say anything. James laughed, "My mom adopted a five year old girl."

"Your *mom* did? Not you?"

"Yeah," said James. "I know it's a little odd, but she did. She just came home with us a couple of days ago. We've all been adjusting some, but she's doing well. I'm a little awkward around her, but trying to make her feel at home."

J. T. asked, "That sounds pretty wild. How old is your mom?"

"She's 53, but she's in good health and has time to spend with her, so it's working pretty well. My mom owns Montgomery Landscaping."

J. T. looked like a light had gone off in his head. "Oh, I know them. I see the trucks around a fair amount. Your mom owns that company? That's pretty amazing!"

"Yeah, she and my dad started it, but he split pretty soon after, and she built it up into something solid all by herself."

James asked, "Are you from here, J. T.?"

"Almost. My family's from Tifton. While I was in the Marines, I got to be an M.P. for a while and liked it. When I got out, I was able to get a job here with the Lawder P. D., so I'm not too far from them."

"That's good. Hey, how's your girlfriend?"

J. T. laughed, "She's fine. She drives me nuts sometimes. Women can really be completely baffling, ya know? Well, maybe you don't know... We were out at dinner with some of her friends this week, and she got some food caught in her teeth. I didn't want her to go through dinner with that stuff there, so I tried to point out she needed to get it out without everyone at the table seeing me. She blew up at me for telling her, though. You get that I was just trying to help her, right, James? I asked her later what was I supposed to do, just let this huge thing hang out of her mouth the rest of the night? She got all mad and said I should have texted her on her cell phone to tell her. I mean, doesn't that seem a little extreme to you? How the hell was I supposed to know there was this text-when-food-in-teeth rule all of a sudden? Is there some subscription I can get to keep up with this stuff?"

James laughed at J. T.'s story, and J. T. started laughing again, too.

"So what about you, James? Have you met a boyfriend here yet?" J. T. queried.

"No. It's not exactly easy to find gay people here like it is in New York. Up in New York, you couldn't stir 'em with a stick! I thought the three hundred pound manager of the Burger King I was in the other day was flirting with me, but it turns out he just had a lazy eye," said James through a smart-ass smile. "Thank God!"

J. T. nodded and said, "It definitely would suck if that was your only choice."

More and more people had started arriving for the game, so J. T. said he needed to get back to keeping an eye on the crowd. James flashed his teeth at J. T. and said, "Do I have anything in my teeth?"

J. T. shook his head and said, "I'll text you if you do!" He slapped James on the back heartily as James headed back towards the parking lot where his car was.

When he had almost reached his car, he heard another voice yell out "Hey, James!" He turned around and saw Brick jogging towards him from across the parking lot.

Brick was in a flannel shirt, with a light down jacket and cowboy boots under his jeans. He still hadn't shaved at all since he and James had brought Lindsey home with Bea, so he was getting closer to having a full beard.

"I didn't know you were coming to the game tonight!" said Brick, happily.

"Oh, actually, I'm not. I came here to put up a sign for the Lions from the dealership. I was about to head home."

"Well, come on with me! I got two tickets for me and Jerry, but he had something happen down at the station that he needed to deal with tonight. Like he's got some big important job or something, the asshole! The other ticket's just going to go to waste."

James said, "If I used it, it would still be wasted. I'm a stereotypical gay when it comes to football, Brick."

"No, don't worry about that! C'mon!"

James paused a moment, mostly trying to come up with another reason to not go with Brick.

Brick noticed the hesitation and frowned a little bit. He said, "You know, James, there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about. Come on with me to the game. Even if you stay for just a little bit."

James finally relented and they headed back over to the stadium. On the way in, Brick waved and said hello to a bunch of people, something James was used to with Brick. In the stadium, they had rotten seats, down towards the end zone, but at least they were on the home side and not with the visitors. Brick bought a couple of coffees to help keep them warm, even though the weather was very good for football. The temperature had dropped to the mid-forties, but the air was still and clear. Lawder didn't get into the playoffs often, so the crowd was pumped for the game. James had been to quite a few football games in the same stadium when he was in high school, but it was just with friends, and they hardly ever cared about the game itself.

As they waited for the game to start, Brick asked James how Lindsey was doing. In fact, things were about the same. Lindsey didn't completely ignore James, but she was still quiet around him and James could still sense the reservation in her. Brick mentioned that when he talked to Bea on the phone, she was just ecstatic to have Lindsey there with her. He promised to bring Kicker by the next day to visit with Lindsey some and to go with them to get a Christmas tree. James joked that Brick only wanted to bring Kicker by so he could watch James get cock punched yet again.

Once the game started, they spent a few minutes watching it. Brick had gotten pretty quiet. James was hoping that Brick would hurry up and get to whatever it was he wanted to talk about so he could maybe get out of there.

Brick finally said, "Ok, so I wanted to talk to you."

James noticed that the good mood he had been in earlier had given way to an uncomfortable look on his face, like he really didn't want to talk about whatever.

Brick rubbed his hands up and down his thighs rapidly to warm them, or stall, or something. "Have... uh... Am I doing..."

Brick stopped and took a breath. "Let me start over." He looked over at James and said, "Ever since you moved back, I've worked hard to fix things between you and me. And at first, it seemed like I was doing ok. But lately, I think I've screwed something up. I get a little bit of a feeling that you really don't want to be around me. It may be all in my mind, and I guess I hope that's all it is. It's not like you're avoiding me, I don't think. But it seems like if you're given a choice, your choice is to not, uh, be around. Tonight's a good example."

Brick looked down at his feet and said, "Aaaaaaand if that's what you really want, then that's fine. It's ok to just say so. And if it's just my imagination, then that's ok, too. I guess I just worry too much. But if you'd rather not be friends and hang out because of something stupid I did, then I'd like to know. I want to fix it. I do lots of stupid things, so I'm used to having to fix whatever I've messed up."

Brick had finished and waited to see how James would reply. James sat there feeling that same empty feeling he would so often feel around Brick. Even now, Brick had picked up on it and was man enough to swallow his pride and want to understand it and fix it. In fact, James realized, Brick was smart enough and nice enough to even give James an out. James could say it was just Brick's imagination and he wouldn't have to go any further and Brick wouldn't pursue it. What kind of a guy was that smart *and* nice? He looked over at Brick, whose hazel eyes were fixed on James in anticipation of hearing how bad he had screwed up. So much about Brick made him feel empty. Empty and regretful. But James could see the sincere look in Brick's eyes. He was tempted to say that it wasn't anything, that it was just Brick's imagination, and avoid the whole thing.

Or he could be honest and tell the truth. That it really wasn't Brick's fault at all. But that would mean exposing part of himself and trusting Brick a little. The real question was could he be man enough to be the friend to Brick that Brick had been to him?

He knew the right answer; it just didn't make it any easier. And it just made him feel worse.

James took a long time to think through this, but eventually came back to Brick and said, "You know, Brick, you don't owe me your friendship. You've shown me that you really aren't the same person that bullied me in junior high, so that's behind us. But none of that ever obligated you to a friendship with me."

Brick's forehead furrowed. He said, "No, James, no. Shit, have I messed up that bad? C'mon and please tell me you don't think that the only reason I've been nice to you is because I felt like I had to serve some penance for junior high. No, no, no. That ain't why..." Brick had to stop and James could tell he was really upset.

Brick put his elbows on his knees and rested his forehead in his hands. "Yes, I needed to clear the air, but that was only the first few times I was around you. It's not been that since then. You really are a friend. I hope you are. I've liked having you as a friend." Brick smiled uncomfortably. "More than you know."

Brick sighed and said, "You kinda got the best revenge you could on the bully. You made him see what a good friend he was missing the whole time."

"It never felt to me like you were doing anything for me out of obligation, but I wanted to make sure you didn't feel like you owed me," said James.

Brick seemed a little bit relieved, but it still left the open question.

James knew he couldn't avoid it, that he shouldn't avoid it. He looked out over the football field, only vaguely aware of the game playing out in front of them and hardly cognizant of the cheers and screams of those around them in the stands.

"I had a lot of crashing realizations in New York, Brick. Realizations about what I thought friendship was. Realizations about myself and what kind of friend *I* was. And they were pretty painful. I thought I had it all together up there, but everything got fucked up and I saw how I never had it together at all."

"When I moved back to Lawder, the one person I felt like I could legitimately hate, the one person it would be easy to feel superior to, turns out to be a great guy. A genuinely great guy to everyone around him. You're such a completely different person than the Brick you were supposed to be in my mind."

"You know what it is to be a real friend, Brick, and you are. But that just reminds me of how shallow my friends in New York were... of how I really fucked some things up," said James, haltingly. "You remind me of how little of a friend I was to the person that meant the most to me and needed a friend more than anything in the world." Even being vague, James was having difficulty saying these things. His throat was clenching on the words.

James looked over at Brick. "You're a great guy, Brick, and it cuts into me like a knife."

Brick just stared for a while. Then his brow creased and he pressed his lips together. He said, quietly, "I, uh... don't... I don't know how to fix that."

James laughed gently and Brick said, "I don't know... I don't know what to do."

James shook his head and said, "There's nothing for you to do. There's nothing you can do. It's not *your* problem to fix at all. I've just got to come to grips with what

happened in New York, that's all. I've felt so bad about myself, and I've become a little envious of you. That's the vibe you've been getting. But I promise not to do that any more. It's a shame for me to say that you're probably the first real friend I've had since I graduated college."

Brick was still trying to understand it all. "I'm sorry, James. I wasn't trying to make you feel bad. I should have realized you were struggling with why you moved back down here."

James was actually feeling a lot better for having just said it all to Brick. It felt good to open up with him a little, "Stop it. My point is that I know you weren't trying to make me feel bad, goober! It's just me holding it all in and everyone else having to deal with my weirdness because of it."

James didn't realize how much better he'd feel for having said it to someone, but he did. He had forgotten what it was like to trust someone with something and know they wouldn't turn around at some point and use it to embarrass you or make you feel bad. To expose a sensitive spot to someone and know they wouldn't rub salt in it the first chance they got.

But Brick still seemed a little troubled. Like he hadn't let himself fully off the hook yet.

James said, "Stop acting like you didn't do something right. Even making me talk about this when I didn't think I wanted to was the right thing. I'm going to go get another round of coffees and I want you perky by the time I come back."

James stood up to go get the coffee, and a few steps away, he turned back to Brick and pointed at him. He ordered, "Perky, dammit!"

When James came back with the coffees, Brick had indeed cheered up some, and wasn't dwelling on it any more. He was back watching the game and the crowd and having a much better time.

James still didn't care about the game, but he felt good being there. It felt good to trust someone even a little. He kept his eye on Brick for the rest of the game to make sure he wasn't all wound up thinking he had done something wrong.

By the end of the third quarter, however, it was apparent to everyone in the stadium that the Lawder Lions were going to be soundly trounced in this game, dashing their hopes for a championship.

Brick turned to James and said, "This game's done. There's no real point in staying any longer. Do you maybe want to go back to my place and get high?"

And James was happy to be able to honestly say, "God, that sounds great!"

~~~~~

James followed Brick back over to his apartment. His place was the bottom right one in the old house, and James realized that in the whole time he had been back in Lawder, he hadn't been in Brick's apartment yet.

Brick's cell phone rang as they were getting out of their cars. From what James could tell, he thought it was probably Jerry calling.

When Brick hung up, he said, "Jerry's done fixing the paperwork problem he had to go in for. Somebody screwed something up and a judge was about to let someone walk because of it, so he's had some day. He wants to come over and get high, too. Really bad, it sounds like. So he's on his way over now."

Kicker was waiting for them as soon as Brick opened his apartment door and let James in. And before James realized he was there, Kicker gave him a good solid snuffle in between the legs, which made James jump back up, knocking into Brick.

Brick started laughing and said, "What's your problem with Kicker doing that? I'd think you'd like it. God knows it's been so long for me, I'd probably shoot off in my pants from that alone."

James looked around Brick's living room and realized that, once again, the image James had didn't match the truth for Brick. It was neat and clean and totally picked up, save for a navy blue sweatshirt that had been thrown over the back of an easy chair. The apartment had hardwoods, which probably could do with some refinishing, but it was an old house. The furniture wasn't crappy, old, dirty, or fussy looking. But, it wasn't high end or sophisticated, either. The best way that James could describe it was just simple. It was simple, well-kept furniture in a well-kept apartment. The sofa was a traditional one with clean lines and rolled arms and a slipcover made of blue striped mattress-ticking. There was the easy chair, slip-covered like the sofa, but in a gray cotton material instead. There was one other easy chair, deep and comfortable, in a beautiful, weathered leather and rich caramel in color. In between the sofa and easy chair was a coffee table made of glass and wrought iron. Not intricate wrought iron, with lots of scroll work. It was plain, just enough to support the glass.

James glanced around some more and noticed the low chest with the TV and stereo on it, the dining table, the light blue walls. He liked it all immediately.

Brick started scratching Kicker's head on both sides at the same time with his hands. "Ignore all the hair in here." Brick started talking to Kicker in a baby voice saying, "I told you not to shed, you bad dog, and you go and do it anyway. No treats for you! No treats for you!" Kicker's tail wagged violently and he tried to kiss Brick on the face.

Brick looked back up at James and ran his hand down the front of his flannel shirt. "I shouldn't tease him like that. I probably shed worse than he does. Have a seat anywhere."

Brick went into the kitchen and came back with a rawhide chew for Kicker. He threw it to him and Kicker sat down with it next to the easy chair, happily gnawing away at it. James had walked over to a framed photo he saw on the chest of drawers. It

was a photo of a very drunk Brick being led away by two security guards from the stands. In the background, you could see some cars on the track below.

James took off his coat and asked, "So it's been a long time for you. Have you ever thought about getting remarried?"

Brick looked completely stymied for a full minute, and even looked at his watch, before answering, "After what happened with Jenny, marriage makes me a little nervous. Hell, it makes me nervous about even really getting involved that way again. So I hardly even date. Couple of one-nighters here and there. Eventually, if it's right, then I'll get involved again. You want something to drink? I may even have some scotch in there if I scrounge around a little. You feeling sophisticated tonight?"

James said, "Nah, beer's fine."

He walked around and peeked into Brick's bedroom, which was as neat and simple as the rest of the apartment. Brick came in to hand him his beer.

James asked, "And this is where all the white hot action happens, on those rare occasions?"

Brick laughed derisively, "Oh, God no! If I get some action, it's out behind the dumpster at Luther's Down Home Bar-B-Que! I like to impress!"

James went back into the living room and sat on the sofa while Brick pulled out his bong and bag of pot and started to set up.

Right at the time when Brick finished setting up and it was ready to go, Jerry came busting into the apartment, still in his cop uniform and police jacket.

Brick said to James hurriedly, "If you want a hit, you'd better go now before Jerry gets ahold of it."

James immediately took the bong and took a good hit off it.

Jerry was clearly in a huge hurry to get high. He threw his jacket off, said hello to both of them, and stood impatiently over James, shifting his weight rapidly from one foot to the other. "C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon! Hurry up, man, my turn! C'mon, gimme!"

James finished and gave a little cough as he finally exhaled and waved the smoke away. Jerry jumped on the bong and took a huge hit off it. James could see Jerry's eyes almost roll back into his head from the relief. He then looked over at Brick, and they both started laughing at Jerry. He was still sucking on it, but his eyes focused a little bit and his look told them both to shut the hell up.

Brick said, "Man, something's got you going tonight!"

Jerry let go of the bong and let out a long, "Oooooooooohhhhhh!" as he exhaled.

He unbuttoned his shirt a few buttons and sat down next to James on the couch, taking up far more of it than James did.

Brick had to load a little more pot before he could take his hit. James took a swig of beer and said, "What's got you so worked up?"

Jerry had leaned back in the sofa, closed his eyes, and spread his arms out across the back. He finally opened his eyes and looked over at James and Brick with a shit-eating grin on his face. He said, "I met with the City Council and mayor today. Chief McDonnell's retiring at the end of January, and I'm going to be the new chief of police!"

Brick coughed and pulled the bong away from his mouth. Both he and James were all over each other saying "That's awesome!" and "Congratulations, you son-of-a-bitch!"

Jerry said, "Christ, I'm so excited! Carrie Anne about flipped out! Chief McDonnell told the mayor earlier this week about his retirement and they met with the City Council to pick a successor to appoint. And that's me if I forgot to mention it to you! The new fucking chief of the god damn Lawder motherfucking police department! And they had me in today to tell me."

"You guys can't tell anyone, though," continued Jerry. "They don't officially announce Chief McDonnell's retirement until next week. Carrie Anne's about to bust, and me, too, really. I needed to get high really bad all day to calm down, so thank God you guys were over here!"

James had drawn another round off the bong and Brick was still wide-eyed at the news.

Brick said excitedly, "This so rocks, man! I don't ever have to worry about getting a fucking speeding ticket in this town ever again!"

Jerry had grabbed the bong back and was hitting it again when he said, muffled since he wouldn't stop drawing, "Uh uh. Noh. Absholuley noh. I beddah noh fine out youah doin' anyshing illegal." He finally put the bong down and exhaled through a grin. "Cause if I do, I'll throw your ass in jail so fast, it'll cause a sonic boom!"

Brick held up the bong to him in a salute. "Here, here. It's about time we had someone taking the law seriously in this city!"

Jerry said to Brick, "You cross me, boy, and I'll put you in the back cell with a three hundred pound black guy named Tiny."

James almost sprayed beer out his nose at that one.

Jerry turned to James and said, "And you, I'll throw you in with the dykes!"

"Hah-hah!" taunted Brick.

James took another swig of beer and motioned back and forth between him and Brick. "Hey Brick, I'll swap with ya!"

Jerry laughed and leaned his head along the top of the sofa. "God, I've needed this all day."

Brick got up and walked behind Jerry. He slapped both hands on his shoulders and said, "Seriously, Jerry, congratulations! It's been a long time coming, and there's no better man for the job!"

James raised his beer to Jerry and said, "Here's to the new Chief of Police!"

Brick raised his beer, too, then yelled, "Shit! Jerry doesn't have a beer yet! Hold that thought!"

He ran into the kitchen and grabbed a beer for him.

James tried again, "Here's to the new Jerry of Po... I mean the new Jeef of Police!"

Brick and Jerry raised their beers and Brick said, "Here, here!" Then he giggled and said to James, "You're stoned, man!"

James said, "Oh hoh! Not as stoned as this guy!" He poked Jerry in the side a couple of times as he said it for emphasis.

Jerry started laughing, jerking back, and writhing around while James poked at him relentlessly.

"Stop that!" yelled Jerry.

"Holy crap, you're ticklish!" exclaimed James. Then he poked Jerry in the side a couple more times in the side while saying, "Stop? What? This?"

Jerry recoiled violently on the second poke and actually fell off the couch laughing, which set James and Brick to laughing hysterically. Jerry got up and walked over and stood behind Brick in the easy chair. "I'm serious. Stop it! It hurts! Brick, dammit, make him quit!"

James had an evil grin on his face at this point. "Ok, I'll stop. I promise. C'mon and sit back down, ya big baby!!" And then he pretended to suddenly lunge at Jerry again, which made Jerry jump around the chair to keep Brick between him and James.

Jerry yelled, "Dang it! Quit that!" He moved back around and sat down on the sofa again next to James, but kept a suspicious eye on him the whole time he did so.

Jerry started to lay off the pot and beer so that he'd be able to leave at some point.

James remembered he had never heard the story of Jerry's Ranger buddy. He suggested, "Tell me about your Ranger buddy that was gay, Cherry."

Jerry settled into the sofa a little more comfortably and began, "Well, as is usual in the Rangers, we were all pretty close, and lived in very close quarters for long periods of time. And I wasn't kidding about saving each other's lives on multiple occasions. Clay was the one guy in the unit that didn't seem to be into bedding down every chick that came along, though. I was the same way, but that was because I was already married to Carrie Anne by that point. Cory hadn't been born yet, but I didn't cheat on Carrie Anne. Right before we shipped out to Iraq for the first Gulf War, we had all gone to a bar one night, and the rest of the unit had all picked up girls to take back and have a good time with, but Clay and I wound up shit-faced and talking."

"Over the course of the conversation, Clay admitted to me that he was into guys. I'll admit, it took me totally by surprise, and I wasn't sure what to think. Clay was one serious bad-ass, and this just didn't fit my image of him. At first, I think I was a little put off by it, but I didn't say anything to anyone else, and Clay and I didn't talk about it again."

"Real soon after that, we were shipped off to Iraq and got into some pretty hairy shit over there, before the main fighting started in the first Gulf War. I watched how Clay handled himself, how he respected the brotherhood of us in the unit. I wound up coming to the conclusion that it didn't matter to me. As far as I was concerned, he was as much of a man as anyone in that group. And so one night, when I got him alone for a little while, I broke the silence between us about it, and I told him so. I told him he didn't need to worry about me telling anybody and that I was glad he felt he could be honest with me. And for a man that could be as hard-edged as he could be, the relief in his face let me know just how scared he had been all that time, and how important it was to him to have even just one person he could be honest with. It made me realize that he didn't have to just be careful behind enemy lines, he had to be careful around his own side. I can't imagine what that burden would be like."

Jerry paused here and drank from his beer. He looked thoughtful for a moment, and then continued, "We got back late one night from a particularly haywire mission, and we were lucky to get back. And I mean skin-of-our-teeth lucky. As soon as we were back, I got word that a close buddy of mine in another unit had been killed that day, and after what we had just been through, I didn't know if I could hold up. All the other guys were just tired and didn't say anything to me. It was a war and people died, and they just wanted to get in bed. But on our way back to our quarters, Clay took me aside and told me he was sorry to hear I had lost a friend. And he hugged me. For a second, I didn't think I wanted him hugging me, but then I realized I needed it. He just kept me in that hug out in the dark in the desert in a war zone and let me cry it out. That night, I saw Clay as something even more than the rest of us. He was someone that showed as much courage and strength as each of us, and yet was kinder and gentler than any of us. He and I became pretty inseparable after that. He's one of the finest people I've ever met."

James was very impressed with the story, and Brick was quiet after Jerry finished. James said, "Wow! That's pretty incredible! It'd be amazing to meet this guy one day."

Jerry put his beer can down and said, "Too late, he's had a partner for years now."

James frowned and threw a pillow at Jerry. "You jackass, I didn't mean it like that!"

The three of them talked for another hour at least. Brick told the story of how, when he and Jerry were just becoming friends, Jerry was over and found a roach Brick had left out. Brick was scared to death Jerry was going to bust him, but he wanted to smoke one with him instead. And they talked about Jerry's upcoming promotion some more, too.

And while they talked, before James got too drunk and high to really think coherently at all, he thought about how good it was to sit there and get high and cut up with the two of them. It was the same kind of thing he had done with Benard, Patricio, and Louis in New York, but different. In New York, there was always that razor's edge to everything they said to each other that hurt. And if you pointed that out, they'd always say it was just a joke and to stop being so sensitive. But he saw how friends wouldn't intentionally do that. Real friends knew where to draw the line between laughing with you instead of at you. Why had it taken James so long to see that? But at least now he let himself enjoy the friends he did have rather than dwell on the pain caused by the friends he left behind.

~~~~~

The next morning, James awoke slowly and realized someone was sitting on the edge of his bed. He squinted in the light coming in and realized it was Brick sitting there.

Brick said, "Bout time you woke up."

James smacked his lips once and said, "Why are you sitting on my bed? How did you get in my place?"

Brick laughed and said, "This ain't your bed and this ain't your apartment."

James wiped his eyes and looked around. He said, "Well, fuck me!" He was in Brick's apartment and asleep on his sofa.

Brick said, "I didn't think you'd ever wake up, so I decided to sit down and bounce up and down until you woke up."

"Well, I'm up."

"It took a lot of bouncing," quipped Brick.

James sat up a little. Outside Brick's back window, he could see the bright winter daylight shining through the woods behind the apartment.

He asked, "What happened last night?"

"You got shit-faced," said Brick, "and eventually passed out on the sofa. Really shit-faced, by the way."

Brick stood up and said, "C'mon, let's go by your place so you can clean up. We've got a Christmas tree to go get and a little sister all excited about it!"

James tried to get up, but was tangled all up in the blanket and he fell in a heap on the floor next to the coffee table, cursing as he went down.

Brick laughed, "Maybe you're still shit-faced!"

James stood up more carefully this time and unwrapped the blanket from around him.

He said, "Ok, almost ready to go. But I need to make sure of one thing..."

"What's that?" asked Brick.

"Please, *please* tell me I didn't get so high that I started tickling a 45-year-old Army Ranger that's now our chief of police."

## *Chapter 18*

Through his car window, James could see Brick sitting in the parking lot of his apartment house next to a motorcycle as he pulled off of Old Yates Mill Road. He parked his car next to Brick's big truck and got out.

Kicker came trotting up, snuffed James' crotch good and hard, and grinned for James as he pet him. Brick was working on the motorcycle even in the cold December weather. He had a baseball cap on backwards so the bill would be out of his way, and a tan down jacket to keep the cold out. The motorcycle Brick was working on was a weathered Honda, but it looked to be in fair condition.

Brick looked up at James with a smile and said, "Hey man! What brings you by here?"

"Just wanted to see if you would go out with me to try and find some gifts for Lindsey. Is that your motorcycle?" said James.

"Yeah, it's mine. A leftover teenage fantasy. I've needed to fix this brake line for about six months now, and just finally got around to doing it." Brick grunted as he tried to loosen a bolt that was in his way. "And sure I'll go with you, but you'll need to give me about another fifteen minutes to get this bitch squared away."

Brick dug around in the tools lying around next to him, then yelled, "Hey Kicker!" Kicker came running up to him and tried to lick him in the face. "Kicker, go get the pliers. The pliers, Kicker! Get 'em, boy!" Brick was pointing up at a tool box sitting on the front porch.

Kicker went running up to towards the porch.

"Uh, does Kicker really know what pliers are?" asked James, curious if there was something more to Kicker than he originally imagined.

"Oh, hell no. He just likes to help."

Kicker came bounding back to Brick with a stick in his mouth he found up next to the front porch steps. Kicker's tail was wagging, very pleased with being helpful.

James snickered and Brick took the stick out of Kicker's mouth and started rubbing the dog on both sides of his head. "You loser! That's not a pair of pliers! You're just a worthless bag of fur, yes you are!" Brick's words were harsh, but the tone in his voice was sweet, which made Kicker wiggle around in excitement.

James went up to the toolbox to get the pliers for Brick. He had been wondering if there was anything in particular he should get for Lindsey that would help get her closer to him, but he was drawing a blank.

He handed the pliers to Brick and asked him, "So if you wanted to get a five year old girl to really, really like you, what would you get her for Christmas?"

Brick started digging around with the pliers under the motorcycle. He paused for a second, and then started back on the bike. He said, "Ignoring how incredibly perverted that just sounded, you should know that's not going to do what you want it to. No matter what you get her."

James sighed and Brick said, "Come over here and sit down."

James walked to Brick and flopped down on the cold gravel next to him.

"Don't try to make this happen on your terms, James, because it won't work and you'll just get frustrated. She'll warm up, but it has to be in her own time. You're a little nervous around her, and I'll bet she's even more so around you. But sooner or later, probably sooner, something'll click and she'll be all over you."

James crossed his legs and rested his chin in his hand. He wanted to believe Brick, but was having a hard time feeling like it was going right. Not much about Lawder really felt right since he moved back. He always felt so much like he knew what he was doing in New York, but back in Lawder, his own hometown, he felt as out of place as Gore Vidal at a Star Trek convention.

Brick tried his fingers again up in the motorcycle instead of the pliers. He quipped, "Or you could get her a pony. That would make her love you."

James laughed at this and wondered how much a pony might actually cost.

Brick added, "And you'd have the extra special benefit of being able to make Roddy clean up after it!" which made James laugh even more.

"For what it's worth, and that's probably not much coming from me, Jenny had a nephew that was always a cold fish around me. I like kids and wanted to be the uncle he loved more than all the others and I tried all kinds of things to win him over. I tried talking about the music he liked, wrestling stars, skateboards, all kinds of stuff. Before I could win him over, though, Jenny and I divorced. Maybe he sensed the increasing tension between me and Jenny. Or maybe I was just still too much of an asshole. Or maybe he was the asshole. Who knows?"

James added, helpfully, "Maybe you were both assholes."

"Could be. Two similar assholes, repelling each other like magnets. Sure!" said Brick, letting James verbally poke at him. "The point is, no matter what you do, in the end, Lindsey's going to have to decide for herself that she likes you. But it'll happen, I promise. Probably when you least expect it. The little carpet gorillas are sneaky that way."

James sat there thinking about what Brick said, only dimly aware of Brick cussing and then getting up to go bring the whole toolbox over to the motorcycle.

James thought back to how much Ian liked kids and how much he had wanted his own. James was the one who couldn't care less about kids, and now he practically had one that was his, and it had suddenly become incredibly important to him that this kid love him like family. Ian and Brick had a few things in common, as James realized. Maybe that's why it wound up being easier to be friends with Brick than he thought it would be. Ian would have probably really liked Brick if he had ever had a chance to meet him. James thought it was a little sad that the only way he could have become friends with Brick was for Ian to die.

A memory popped into James' head of one of the nights he and Ian had gone to see a cabaret show down in the West Village. It had rained most of the day, but had finally stopped by the time they got out of the show, so they had gone to a quiet, almost empty coffee bar down near NYU. It was one of those places that had big, overstuffed chairs and loveseats, velvet cushions, thickly layered drapes, and ponderous, rich colors all around. It was a place that invited heavy, hushed conversations.

They had talked about their dreams when growing up and where they were now in life. Without quite knowing why, James had asked Ian why they were there - what their purpose in the world was. James never really thought or talked much about things like that, but the place just seemed to demand conversations of that nature.

Ian said that people were there to extend themselves. And that they did that through other people. Not just the physical way as in having children, but more in the way of relationships with other people. Real friendships and partnerships were crucially important. Real, deep, intimate friendships with other people were the key — people who knew your secrets, fears and weaknesses and liked you anyway. Ian said this is how people last beyond just the time they have in this world. You put yourself into other people so that you go on even when your time has passed, just like you carry pieces of the people you love and care about. The depth of your relationship to others had a real and lasting impact far beyond your own life. The interconnections were life itself, far beyond just the dry, scientific definition.

Probably more than any other night, that night stuck in James' head as being important. He had found something in Ian that he couldn't remember really seeing anywhere else. He wasn't sure what it was, though. A sincerity? Thoughtfulness? Openness? Honesty? Many things possibly, but nothing that he could quite reach out and point to.

Brick set the toolbox on the ground and sat back down next to it.

James watched as he replaced part of an old brake cable with a new one.

"Brick, why do you think we're here?" he asked.

Brick didn't even stop what he was doing. "Look, I know it's cold out here, but this was the best afternoon I've had in a long time to get this piece of trash fixed. Gimme just a little longer and I'll be done. You can go inside and warm up if you like, and I'll be all done in just a few minutes."

James corrected him, "No, no, I'm not being bitchy. Why do you think we're here? What's the meaning of life?"

Brick stopped what he was doing, looked at James a little puzzled and licked his lip slightly, considering what James had asked. What Brick saw on James' face was a serious turn and earnestness. His eyes narrowed slightly and he asked, "Is this some kind of trick question?"

"No, no tricks. I'm just curious if you have any kind of philosophy about it."

Brick wiped his hand on a rag. He watched James closely, trying to understand what was behind the question, and trying to decide about how and even whether to answer.

He dropped the greasy rag and put his hands out behind him so he could lean back.

He said, "You should know that I believe in God. I may not be big on a lot of that religious ceremony and bureaucracy, but I do believe in God."

Brick hesitated, wanting to make sure James was taking him seriously. "I think one of the keys to life is to see grace. Life brings grace, sometimes big, but more often small and subtle. The kind of stuff you only catch out of the corner of your eye, like a lightning bug on a summer night. Sometimes these things seem good and sometimes they seem bad on the surface. But God wants people to notice these things. He watches for the people that don't take them for granted when they're good or fight against them when they seem bad. He watches for the people that have a little faith that there's significance to the things that happen to them, that there's significance to the people in their lives. Those that let go a little can stop fighting the river all the time and swim with it instead, but it takes a little faith to do that. So many people brush past these gifts without any thought and without seeing the significance of them, all the time fixated on the things they need to do, the things they want to achieve, the place they need to be, their focus always just a little further down the road from where they are. But some people are open to the things right there around them, right then, right there – people, events, feelings, coincidences, relationships – and can see significance in them and let those things speak to them. These people hear the voice of God."

Brick finished, and waited to see how James would react to what he had said. James had been looking down at the gravel while he listened, considering what Brick had said.

Brick added, "Some might say, as bad as New York was for you, maybe it was a gift because it brought you back here so Lindsey could be a part of your life, and you her's. Someone might say that it was important that this motorcycle's brakes would need fixin' so we'd wind up talkin' about this, and that maybe this conversation would in turn have some kind of importance down the road. Or someone might say they're unrelated and with no purpose or value. The only real difference is a little faith."

James asked, "Do you think it was important you be out here today working on your motorcycle so we'd have this conversation?"

Brick shrugged noncommittally, "I don't know. Maybe later I'll be glad we did have this conversation, or maybe you will. Not necessarily everything is full up with meaning or importance. Time will tell, I suppose."

James found himself feeling funny after having listened to Brick. He had already picked up on the fact that Brick had a spiritual side to him, but that wasn't a bad thing to James, so that wasn't what made him feel funny. He wasn't sure if he really believed what Brick had said — it all seemed... a little *quaint* to James. James was always a firm believer in making your own life, and, aside from a few bumps along the way, he had always been able to get what he wanted out of life for himself. Once again, though, the common ground between Ian and Brick glowed in James' mind. James hadn't really expected more out of Brick than a half-hearted mumbling of the usual proverbs about life, but Brick had actually put thought into it and formed his own opinions about it.

Brick had continued to watch James to see if he could gauge his reaction to what he had said. He started tinkering with the bike again while James was thinking, then asked while trying to sound casual, "Does that sound like a lot of horse-shit to you?"

James cocked his head to one side slightly. "No. No it doesn't. It's not horse-shit." James tried to be encouraging. "I think there's probably a lot to what you said. Most people never really hardly think about it, including me, really. I keep expecting to see the old, evil Brick Taylor peek through in one way or the other, but he never seems to break free."

Brick laughed as he was finishing up with his repairs to the brakes on the motorcycle. He said, "I've still got a little of the evil Brick sitting up on my shoulder telling me to do things, sometimes, though."

"Do you ever feel like you see this grace in your life?"

"Yeah, sometimes. Like I said, though, you have to have a little faith. You can look at anyone or any event and say it's there for a reason, that there's a higher purpose behind it, but that doesn't mean there is."

Brick looked at his bike and absently started fingering the engine. "You see things happening in your life, and you feel sure they mean something, but you're not sure. You want to understand it, but so often the understanding is just out of your reach, and you have to just take it as it comes until you can truly understand." He looked down at the ground with one greasy finger still on the bike. "You can almost go crazy trying to understand before it's time."

James nodded to show he understood, even though he thought it sounded a little fatalistic.

Brick said, "When I was married to Jenny and things started goin' south between us, I applied to the tech school back up here, hoping I could get her to move back here and away from her family. They were driving me nuts at the time. I also applied at the tech school down near Albany just as a backup. I never heard back from the tech school here, but I got accepted in Albany. Now, I wanted to go to school back up here to get away

from her family, but something about all of it made me not push it. I'm not sure why, but I just felt like I should let it go. I stayed in Albany, and her family made me miserable. But it also brought things to a head sooner. Her family egged her on to divorce me, and she did. I think it would have taken a lot longer for that to happen if she wasn't around her family as much. It worked out better that way, I think, for both of us."

James mused on everything Brick had said, and his own feelings of inadequacy. "You don't talk to many people about your thoughts on this kind of stuff, do you?"

Brick started putting his tools back up into the toolbox. He blushed slightly and admitted, "Mostly, no, I don't. Not usually."

Brick stood up and pushed the bike a little in the parking lot and tested the brakes to make sure they engaged correctly. He asked James, "Will you do me a favor and run in my apartment and grab the helmet sitting up on top of the fridge?"

James said he would and Brick got up on the bike and cranked it up. He went inside and found the helmet right where Brick said it would be.

When he got back outside, Brick was up on the bike with a helmet on already.

James walked up to him and said, "Why do you need this helmet?"

"You're going to put it on and we're going to take a test ride on this motherfucker!"

James said, "Maybe you should be the guinea pig since you just changed the brakes on there."

Brick laughed and said, "I've already tried them here in the parking lot and they're fine. I trusted your cooking, now you trust my mechanic's skills. Put the helmet on and let's go! It'll be short and I won't go fast!" He reached back behind him and patted the part of the seat where James would fit.

James put the helmet on and zipped his jacket up. He lifted his leg up over the back of the bike and found the little footpegs to rest his feet on. He wasn't quite sure what to do with his hands, though.

Brick leaned back to him and said, "Put your arms around my waist and hold on there."

James put his hands on Brick's hips and held on lightly.

"No, put your arms around my waist. You can't hold on like that. Don't be such a pussy. I'm not going to take it personally!"

James put his arms entirely around Brick and pulled himself a little closer.

"Don't be afraid to hold on tighter if you need to. I'm not a little china teacup!" said Brick. And with that, he popped the clutch into first gear and headed out of the parking lot and onto Old Yates Mill.

Despite Brick's assurance they wouldn't go fast, it felt very fast to James and he wound up holding on much tighter than he had started out. And Brick wound up going even faster down the curvy, rural roads. At one point, when they stopped at an

intersection, James rubbed his hands together to try and warm them up. Brick turned back to him and said, "If your hands are cold, put them up under the bottom of my jacket and hold on that way."

James felt a little uncomfortable at this, or rather that it would make Brick uncomfortable. "I'm fine."

"Your hands are almost blue! Just put them up under my jacket and hold on. Jeez!"

So James put his hands up under the bottom of Brick's jacket, where it was indeed much warmer, and held on. Held on tight again since Brick was off, flying down the roads in the winter sunshine.

But before it was over, James wound up enjoying the ride. The air whipped past. The bike swayed from side to side as it followed the curves of the road. The sun gleamed and glinted off the front of the bike. He could see a few ducks flying overhead over towards Lake Natahatchee. But even all the beautiful aspects of the day couldn't overcome the feeling he had deep inside that everyone else had something he didn't.

## *Chapter 19*

Lindsey busied herself frying up something in her plastic frying pan in her new play kitchen with Bea, James and Brick looking on. She pretended to flip whatever she was cooking over in the air and then put it back down on the play stove. Kicker was asleep off to the side of the couch and was the only one that seemed uninterested in Lindsey's cooking. The Christmas tree stood in the corner of the den, naked without its wreath of presents underneath.

Brick asked, "Hey Zee, what're you cooking up on the stove over there?"

Lindsey didn't even look at him and said, "Sammiches."

Brick said, "Mmmmm... fried sammiches! My favorite!"

"This one's for Miller!" replied Lindsey, her attention entirely focused on not burning the sandwich.

"Oh," said Brick, disappointed he wouldn't get a fried sandwich.

Bea grimaced and said, "Kevin, I've asked you and James not to call her that! That name's awful! When did you two start calling her Zee?"

Brick said, "James, when was it? You called her that first. Was it that night we watched *Home Alone* with her?"

James said, "No, it was one of the nights I fixed dinner. We had meatloaf. And you were the first one to call her Zee."

Brick said, "Are you sure? That doesn't sound right. It was when we watched *Home Alone*. I remember because she was falling asleep halfway through the movie and you said, 'C'mon Zee, let's get you in bed!'"

James said, "That was because we had the meatloaf dinner a few nights before and *you* told her she needed to wipe the ketchup off her mouth and you called her Zee."

Brick said, "We had that meatloaf after we watched *Home Alone*."

“No, we had it before. You’re thinking of something else!”

“I know we had that dinner after the *Home Alone* night!”

“It was before!”

Brick started acting like he was explaining it to a child. “We talked about watching *Home Alone* the night we had meatloaf, and we had already watched it. I don’t even remember calling her Zee during that dinner, anyway.”

James started laughing and said, “You so totally did! And we talked about making plans to watch *Home Alone* that night!”

Bea finally jumped in and said, “Stop! I’m sorry I asked! I swear you two have gotten to where you argue like brothers.”

Both Brick and James looked at her and said, “No, we don’t!” at the same time. Brick looked over at James and stuck his tongue out at him.

Bea said, “You stop that, Kevin! All I need is for Lindsey to see that and start doing it all the time!”

Lindsey turned around and said, “Do what?”

James, Bea, and Brick all looked at her and said, “Nothing!” at the same time. And Brick added, “Your sammich is burning.”

“Speaking of that, let me go check on Christmas dinner to make sure it’s not burning,” said James, and he left to go to the kitchen.

Brick suddenly said, “Oh, I forgot! Zee, I’ve got one more present for you. I had it in my coat pocket all day because I didn’t wrap it up.”

Brick got up and went out into the hall to where his coat was hanging up. He pulled a zip lock bag out of the inside pocket and brought it back into the den.

Lindsey was waiting with interest, but when she saw the two dirty globs in the baggie, she looked up at Brick with a scrunched up face.

“What is *THAT*?” she asked.

“They’re flower bulbs. They’re dirty and ugly now, but you and I are going to put them in a pot with some pebbles and water. And in a few days, you’ll be able to see them as they grow into beautiful white flowers. They’re called paperwhites and people love to grow them for Christmas!”

Lindsey’s eyes got big and she said, “Flowers will come out of *THAT*?”

“Sure! Some flowers grow from seeds, and some grow from bulbs. These are paperwhite bulbs.”

Lindsey said, “Cooooool! Can we plant them now? I want to see them growing!”

Brick laughed, “We’ll plant them after dinner, Zee. And you’ll have to be patient. Flowers don’t grow overnight. Now be careful with the bulbs and don’t lose them!”

Bea said, “Oh, Kevin, that’s such a sweet gift!”

"She better get used to gardening early!"

James came back in from the kitchen. "Just a few more minutes, but we're getting close."

He asked, "Zee, honey, are you getting hungry? You ready for some turkey?"

Apparently the fried sandwich was done, because Lindsey was now busy feeding it to her stuffed giraffe, Miller. She didn't turn around and just nodded.

Brick said, "Hey Zee! Show your brother James the other present I gave you."

Lindsey turned slightly to look at Brick like she didn't know what he was talking about.

"You know... the flower bulbs!" said Brick.

Lindsey looked at the baggie with the bulbs in it over with some of her other Christmas presents and shook her head no.

James' face faintly expressed resignation. He got up and said, "I'll go start getting things together for dinner. It's probably done now. Mom, do you want to light the candles on the dining room table?"

She said "Sure," and went into the dining room to get the table ready for their dinner.

They all sat down at the table and Brick said the blessing before they started helping their plates. Kicker, now that there was real food involved, had decided to pay more attention. He stationed himself next to Lindsey, who he knew to be the softest touch at the table, or at least the one that dropped the most food.

Bea helped Lindsey's plate while Brick and James helped their own.

Just a few bites into his dinner, though, Brick leaned back in his chair and said with a full mouth, "Oh man, this is so good! Bea, you're a great cook, and I love your food, but I gotta tell you, your son's cooking is incredible!"

Bea got a tart look on her face. She said, "Kevin, don't talk with your mouth full. You're going to be a terrible influence on Lindsey! And it's those snooty New York recipes James uses. Good old plain Southern cooking isn't good enough for him!"

"Mom, what are you talking about? I used your recipes for the dressing, sweet potatoes, and green bean casserole. Nothing weird or snooty going on there."

But Bea was still looking slightly put out. "You must've done something extra. A white wine reduction or fennel or something. I cook just fine without all that stuff."

James laughed and said, "Oh, that must be it! I forgot about the white wine reduction I used on the sweet potatoes!"

Lindsey looked up from picking at her sliced turkey. "Are we having wine?"

Bea said, "Not tonight, honey. James was just being silly!"

Dinner progressed and Kicker eventually got tired of waiting for food and went back into the den and sacked out again. Through the meal, James watched how Brick

interacted with Lindsey, and although he felt bad that he hadn't fully won her affection yet, he was amazed at how good Brick was with her. Brick was a natural with kids. And Brick seemed so thrilled to be able to dote on her. James decided that Jenny must have really been bad to Brick to scare him off dating and the chance to have his own kid for this long.

At the end of dinner, Lindsey got antsy because she wanted to go play with her toys. Bea excused her, leaving just the three adults at the table.

After she had finished the last bit of the pecan pie they were having for dessert, Bea said, "Well, ignoring Kevin's little barbs about my cooking, this has been a wonderful Christmas dinner!"

"I said you were a great cook!" protested Brick.

"What I'm trying to say is that this Christmas has felt more like a real family Christmas than one we've had in a long time. And James, your dinner was delicious. Thank you for taking on the cooking so I could spend the time with Lindsey."

"Well, I really appreciate you guys inviting me to spend it with you. I've never much liked being alone at Christmas, and there's been a fair amount of those the last few years," said Brick.

"I can't believe you insisted on being here at 6 a.m. this morning to watch Zee open her presents!" said James.

"Well, that's the best part! How could I miss the look on her face when she came downstairs and saw all the loot Santa left for her?" exclaimed Brick.

James started to get up to clear the plates, but Bea said, "Absolutely not! You've already spent all day in the kitchen. I can clean all this up. You two go relax in the den with Lindsey."

Bea started picking up plates off the table while James and Brick went back into the den to see what Lindsey was doing. Kicker was asleep next to the couch and Lindsey was looking through a pop-up book that Santa had brought her.

On his way in, Brick prodded gently at Kicker with his foot and said, "Looks like a dead dog to me." Kicker barely lifted his head to see why Brick was kicking him.

Lindsey looked over with concern and said, "He's not dead, is he, Uncle Brick?"

Brick laughed and said, "No, he's fine. He just looks like he is!"

James looked at the dog, then fell down on his knees and threw his arms out wide in grief. James launched into a passionate lament with wild gestures for emphasis, and near the end of which Kicker started thrashing his tail on the floor.

*This dog is dead  
I fear he is lost  
A fitting eulogy should be read  
Thankful our paths did cross  
Our grief, we would express through weep and wail,  
Wait, duh, were it not for the flapping of his tail!"*

Lindsey was mesmerized by the poem, and as soon as James mentioned Kicker's tail flapping, she started laughing crazily and clapping her hands.

Brick got wide-eyed and said, "Holy sh...! Did you just make that up?"

"Yeah, sometimes they just come out."

Lindsey yelled, "Say it again!"

James looked panicked. "I'm not sure if I can even remember it, but I'll try." James stumbled through the poem again, trying to remember exactly how he had phrased it the first time. Lindsey laughed hysterically through it and came over and grabbed James' hand while he was reciting it.

When he finished, Lindsey clapped again and said, "That was cool!"

James said, "Well, was it cool enough for you to give me a hug?"

Lindsey reached up and gave James a big hug, which meant the world to him given how hard it had been so far to break the ice with her.

Bea came into the den with a casserole dish in her hand and asked, "So what's all the laughing in here?"

Lindsey ran over to her and said, "James just said the funniest poem about Kicker! Say it, James! Tell it to Miss Bea!!"

James' mom looked over at him. James shrugged and repeated the poem for her. Lindsey laughed again at it, but Bea just gave James a look like, "What was that all about?"

He said to his mother, "Well, I got a good hug out of it, so it's worth it!"

His mom nodded approvingly and went back into the kitchen.

James gave Kicker a couple of affectionate rubs on his side, then got up to go sit on the couch. He asked Lindsey, "Zee, what's your favorite present that Santa brought?"

She took the pop-up book and climbed up onto James lap and said, "I like the kitchen! And I like the princess movie, too! But Santa didn't bring me Elmo like I wanted!"

James was taken completely surprised. She had never climbed up in his lap before, and now she did it like she'd been doing it for years. James looked over at Brick with a "How about that?" look on his face.

James put his arms around her as she was looking at the popup book again and said, "Well, pumpkin, Santa has lots and lots of little girls and boys he has to make toys for, and he's very busy. So sometimes you might not get everything you ask for. I bet he wishes he could give you everything you ask for, though!"

Lindsey just nodded her head and said, "I know."

James looked over at Brick, but said to Lindsey, "I got lucky and got a present I didn't think I'd get this year!"

## *Chapter 20*

James had just finished putting up some dishes in his kitchen when his mobile phone rang. It was getting a little late on a Friday night for anyone to call, and he didn't recognize the number, but he answered it anyway.

Immediately, he jerked the phone away from his ear because whoever was on the other end was yelling in his ear, "Yeeee-haaaaaa, c'mon man, you're coming with us tonight!"

James said, "Roddy? Is that you?"

"Yeah, boy! We're goin' out!"

"What are you talking about? Going where?"

Roddy was still yelling though the phone at the top of his lungs. "We finished poker, and now we're goin' out! Yer comin', too!"

James said, "I'm finishing up some stuff around the apart..." but he didn't get to finish.

Roddy started yelling again. "Huh? That sounds like a no! Well hell, we ain't takin' that! Hell no! That no is a no-go, bro! We're comin' to getcha right now!"

James could hear Brick yell, "Damn straight!" in the background.

"Ok, so where are you guys going?" asked James.

"Where're *we* goin', buddy, that's the question! *We!* *We're* goin' to the Nitty Gritty!"

"I've never heard of that one. What kind of place is it?" asked James.

"It don't matter! Get ya butt in gear, jackass!" Roddy followed it with a loud belch and James could hear snickering in the background.

James asked, knowing that questions were proving pretty useless right now, "So how long do I have to get ready?"

Roddy said, "That's right! Get ready! We're about five minutes... Wait, never mind, we're here. We're pullin' up to your apartment right now! Get ya butt down here!"

James could hear Roddy saying to someone in the background, "I thought you said we weren't there yet!"

James walked over and peeked out his window and saw Brick's truck down in the parking lot. Jesus was in the driver's seat.

James said, "Ok, give me one second and I'll be there!"

He had intentionally skipped the poker game that night to finish his housework, but now the party, such as it was, had tracked him down. He went and swapped the sweatshirt he was wearing for a white collared shirt, threw on his coat, and headed down.

James got down to the truck and Jesus, Brick and Roddy were all in there laughing at something. He heard Jesus shush the other two and say, "Shut up guys, here he is!"

James could tell that Jesus has been drinking, but he didn't seem nearly as lit up as the other two. He went up to the driver side and opened the door. He also noticed that Brick had grown a full beard for a change. It was cut close, but it was full. He had his cowboy hat in his lap. Roddy was stretched out across the back seat twirling a baseball cap on a forefinger.

"Hey, Jesus!" said James.

Jesus gave James a smile that was starting to verge on bleary and said, "Wassup? You ready for this?"

James laughed and said, "No, but Roddy didn't exactly give me a choice."

Roddy in the back yelled, "Hell no, that no won't go!" Then he added, "Not even in slow-mo!" and laughed crazily afterwards.

"Jesus, get in back with Roddy and I'll drive. You guys will just have to tell me where to go."

Jesus got out to get in the back, but Roddy had slid over to the driver's side and said, "Aw man, I'm sittin' here. Go around to the other side."

Jesus complained, "Man, you better not start this shit! It's not funny anymore!"

He walked around the back of the truck to the other side, and Roddy had slid back over to the passenger side. He had started giggling and said, "What's wrong with you, man? I'm sittin' over here!"

Jesus said, "You little fucker! Get your ass over there, or you'll ride in the truck bed!"

Brick turned to look back at them and said, "Let's all get back there! We can ride over in the back!"

James said, "Oh, hell no! I'm not driving a truckful of drunk rednecks around and falling out the back! You all stay put!"

Brick crossed his arms and pouted, "You're no fun!" and Jesus grumbled, "My neck's brown."

They started out and Brick gave James directions outside of town to the Nitty Gritty. James wondered if they really knew where they were going since they seemed to be just wandering around out some back roads.

But just when he thought they were playing a joke on him, he saw some lights outside of a beat up cinderblock building with a whole bunch of cars parked around it. They were out in the middle of nowhere, with only some scrabbly pine trees around the building. The only sign was a lit up one on wheels with the letters spelling out Nitty Gritty on it.

James looked over at Brick and asked, "Are you sure this place is ok? It looks like a dump."

Roddy messed with James' hair and said, "Aw don't worry! It ain't so bad! Brick'll tear anyone a new asshole if they try and mess with us. Right, Brick?"

Brick gave James a don't-look-at-me look and said, "Shit no! If you get in trouble, man, you're on your own! I'm a lover, not a fighter."

Jesus giggled and said, "A beer lover!"

They stumbled up to the door and a rough looking guy with a load of snuff between his teeth and lip said, "Ten dollars each." The guy looked like the hairs on his head and his I.Q. were in a contest to see who could be the lowest.

James said to Brick, out loud, "What the hell is this? Ten dollars to get into a cinderblock outhouse in the middle of a cow field?"

The bouncer said to James, clearly not amused and barely keeping the snuff in his mouth, "Maybe you shouldn't be here, boy."

Brick jumped up with a twenty and said, "No, he's good! Don't worry about it."

The guy took the money from Brick and spit into the dirt off to the side, not taking his eyes off James.

They went in and within one second, James knew he had been had. The place was filled with smoke, and there was loud country music playing. There were a bunch of beat up small cocktail tables and chairs spread around a bare concrete floor. But what made James cringe was in the middle of a spotlight. It was a topless woman on a raised stage swinging around a pole with a crowd of men around her hooting and yelling.

James turned to Roddy and said, "You son of a bitch! Dragging me out to west Alabama to some fucking *titty* bar!"

Roddy and Jesus had to hold each other up they were laughing so hard. Brick was smiling. Roddy came over to James and put his arm around his neck. He said, "Aw, come on! You'll have fun! We're gonna find you some snatch that'll turn you straight!"

"Shit! There's so much clap in this place it's got a reserved parking spot! No thanks!"

Roddy and Jesus dragged James up as close as they could get to the stage and sat at a table. Roddy was wide-eyed looking around at the girl on stage and the few others walking around, working the crowd.

He said, "James, check that bitch out! Lookit those tits on her! I hope she gets up there soon! OOH! SHIT MAN! Did you see what the one up there did? The one on stage?"

The girl on stage had bent over for the crowd and pulled her G-string down a little, then let her legs start to slide apart so everyone there got a quick glance at her vagina, all shaved and clean. Well, shaved, anyway, thought James.

Roddy shook his arm in the air and yelled at her, "Do it again! Do it again!" He reached over and slapped Brick in the chest and said, "Makes me want tacos for dinner! You know what I mean?" James couldn't help but think about what a hopeless southern straight boy Roddy was. He was just adorable!

A waitress that clearly was too ugly to be allowed up on stage came by to take drink orders. Roddy said, "I'm buyin' this round! James, get whatever you want for bein' a good sport! You want some tacos, too? Tacos with cheese?" Jesus was leaning over and laughing again.

James looked at the waitress and said, "No, tacos. Thanks, no. I'm going straight to the scotch and water tonight, please!"

Brick leaned over to him and said, "You ain't gonna feel all sophisticated drinking that in a place like this!"

James considered that for a moment, then decided, "You're right." He looked back up at the waitress and said, "Make that a scotch straight up."

She nodded and looked over at Brick. Brick decided to get a scotch straight up as well. Jesus wanted a Jack and coke, and Roddy got a beer.

James leaned over to Jesus and shouted over the loud music, "Does Melena let you come out to places like this?"

Jesus shook his head and said, "She'd kill me if she knew I was here! Don't tell her, man, don't even joke about it! She'd be all 'How bad of you! Going to a place like that on Friday, and then sitting in church with your daughter on Sunday! You should be ashamed!'"

Brick yelled over the music, "Maybe next time you should offer to bring the two of them out here so they don't feel left out!"

He then leaned towards James and said, "We called Jerry on the way over to your place, too, and he wanted to come with us so bad he could just about taste it!"

"Why didn't he, then?" asked James.

Brick said, "Are you kiddin' me? That boy's got to straighten up and fly right. It wouldn't do for the chief of police to be seen out at the Nitty Gritty!"

James looked around at the crowd. He expected it to be a lot of rowdy good-ol'-boys out for the night, but it was more of a mixture than that. There were plenty of the serious roughnecks in there, but there was probably an equal part of blue collar and more professional people in there as well. The majority looked like they all had wives and probably some kids at home.

It wasn't the first time James had been to a titty bar, so it really didn't bother him that much. Roddy was having a blast, and Jesus was doing something sneaky, which made it more fun for him. James watched Brick now and then to make sure he was having a good time. And for himself, he scanned around the room to see if there were any guys in there that were his type. Roddy was probably the most obvious one, but not much else. Usually, there were at least a couple of guys in a place like this that he would have been into, but not tonight.

The brunette up on the stage had squatted down on the very edge of the stage so some pudgy, balding guy could put his face right between her legs before she yanked the dollar bill out of his hand and stood back up.

While Roddy and Jesus started talking about the poker game earlier that night and commenting on the lovely ladies doing their interpretive dance, James watched how they interacted. Brick, tonight though, was quiet, and James noticed he kept looking over at him on occasion. At one point, Brick noticed that James saw him watching and leaned over to ask, "Are you ok here? I know it's probably not your best Friday night out."

James' friends in New York were always quite happy to push him to go anyplace they wanted to go without a second thought, even if they knew it was a place James hated. At least Brick knew it wasn't James' first choice. James got the feeling that if he replied that he really hated being there, Brick would make Roddy and Jesus leave for James' sake.

"I'm fine, Brick," said James. "I've been to titty bars before. They're not really a big deal to me. The dancers are the biggest victims because I'm not going to be tipping any of them."

James felt the painful twist in his stomach again. The one where he realized just how much of a farce his life had been for so long. And that he was just as guilty as everyone else in perpetuating the farce.

Brick smiled and nodded, but James noticed that he seemed to keep a close eye on him nonetheless.

Roddy leaned over with three or four dollar bills in his hand and told James, "Hey James, take these and go tip that girl up there dancing. She'll let you smell her coochie!"

James was about to try and fight back when he heard someone yell from somewhere behind him.

"JAMES?!"

James looked around and saw two huge, barely covered knockers bouncing their way over towards him. James immediately wondered how stupid he could be to not realize he'd run in to Stefanie at this place.

Stefanie came running over to James in her strappy high heels, a camisole top that was cut off just below her nipple line, and a tight tight, short short pair of bright blue Lycra shorts. She got to James, wrapped her legs around him and sat down in his lap and gave him a big, well-cushioned hug.

"Oh, my Gawd! It's so good to see you in here! I just can't believe it!" yelled Stefanie, throwing her long black hair around. Several guys were turning to look at the lucky guy that would get that kind of reception at the Nitty Gritty.

Brick and Jesus watched slack-jawed as Stefanie wiggled all over James and hugged him. Roddy dropped his beer and almost fell out of his chair.

James pointed to the three of them and said, "Stefanie, these are my friends, Roddy, Jesus, and Brick. I'm out here with them tonight."

Stefanie looked at them briefly, and then her face flashed with understanding. She gave James an exaggerated wink that James knew she intended to be very discreet. She said to the other three, "Well, welcome to the Nitty Gritty, boys! James here is one of our favorite studs!"

Brick, Roddy, and Jesus all had eyes about the size of saucers. James looked at Stefanie and started laughing. "Stefanie, thanks, but they all know I'm gay. You don't have to cover for me."

She put her hand on James' chest and said, "Oh, thank Gawd! I didn't want to blow your cover if you were playing straight tonight."

James looked at the other three and said, "She's just trying to cover for me in case you thought I was straight. Stefanie's my next door neighbor."

Brick and Jesus laughed when they realized what was going on, but Roddy's eyes got even bigger. "Are you shitting me? She lives next door to you? You've got a Nitty Gritty dancer living right next door to you? That is so *fuckin' cool!*"

Stefanie got up off of James' lap. She pulled up a chair so she could talk to the others some as well.

She said, "Oh James is just the *best* next door neighbor! I'm pretty helpless around the house, but James is always there when I need him. I can't even count the number of bugs I've made him come kill in my apartment. I just hate bugs and they scare me senseless! You'd think being from the South that I'd be used to them, but I still just can't stand them. And he's helped me change my air filter on the air conditioning."

James looked over at Roddy and said, "And yes, Roddy, she wears nothing but a G-string while I'm helping her in her apartment."

Stefanie laughed. "James, you are so funny!"

And then she laughed again and put her hand on James' arm. "Oh, and of course, there was that time I made him come over. I was going to take the tampon out and I was scared it would start bleeding again like crazy and that freaks me out a little. But I was fine."

The comment made the smiles on Brick and Jesus, and even Roddy, fade a little.

James said, "It was for a nosebleed. Stefanie used a tampon to stop a nosebleed. She was scared it would start back up when she took it out."

Stefanie said, "Yeah, a nosebleed," like she couldn't understand what else they would think it might be.

Brick was the one this time that almost fell out of his chair laughing.

Stefanie looked at him seriously and said, "Oh, nosebleeds aren't funny. You can lose a lot of blood that way if you don't stop them!"

Brick said, trying to be serious again and not entirely succeeding, "I don't doubt it one bit, Stefanie. Sorry, I didn't mean to laugh at it."

Jesus gave Brick an evil grin, smacked him against the head, and said, "Yeah, Brick, stop being such an asshole!"

The announcer came on over the speaker system and wanted everybody to give a big round of applause to their next dancer, Stefanie.

Stefanie giggled and patted James' knee and said, "Ok, James sweetie, this dance is for you!"

Roddy immediately leaned over to James and said, "That's such a waste of a good stripper to have her live next door to a gay guy!"

James nodded and said, "Yeah, sorry!"

Stefanie got up on the stage and the crowd started yelling and cat-calling at her to take it off. She writhed around and rubbed up and down the pole some, and eventually took her top off to show off her massive tits with the piercing prominently featured in her left nipple.

Roddy exclaimed, "Lookit that nipple! It's pierced! Man, I love the way that looks!" He immediately got up to go stick a dollar in her shorts. Stefanie, knowing Roddy was a friend of James, gave him an extra good show. She gyrated her tits within a fraction of an inch of his face several times and Roddy had a huge grin on his face.

Stefanie got the crowd worked up and eventually gave in to their demands to remove her shorts so that she was down to just the token G-string. As soon as she had undressed as far as she was going, though, she started looking over towards James. She grinned and nodded at James and gave him a come-here command with her finger. She pointed to the edge of the stage right in front of her. James shook his head no a couple of times, which started Stefanie laughing some. But she pointed at him again and commanded him to come up to the stage.

James went up there with a few dollars for her. As he got up to the edge of the stage where Roddy was still hanging out, she turned around and bent over so he could get a good look at the moon and stars tattoo on her ass. She turned back around and James waved the dollars at her.

Stefanie squatted down and almost knocked James in the face with her tits, which made him jerk back laughing. She lifted up her left tit to her mouth and pretended to lick her own nipple while grinning at James. He put the dollar bills between his lips for Stefanie to take, but instead she sank down on her knees in front of him on the raised stage. She thrust out her crotch at James and held open the top of her G-string so he could slip the dollars in. James leaned over and Stefanie thrust her crotch right up into James' face so she could snap the G-string over the dollars to take them from him. Roddy started laughing and slapping James on the back and James couldn't help but

smile. Stefanie put her hand on the side of James' face and gave him a kiss on the forehead before she jumped up and started swinging wildly around the pole for the whole crowd.

When James got back to his seat, Jesus was pulling out a few dollars to go give to her as well. He said, "Shit, I've got to get in on this!"

Roddy was sweating he was so excited. "Did you see the ring in her clit?" he yelled.

James said, "See it?! I tasted the thing!"

Brick was laughing at James and said, "I guess you are pretty comfortable here!"

James shook his head and waved at Brick dismissively.

When Stefanie's dance was over, she disappeared and Roddy and Jesus started wondering if she was going to come back out to see them. But a moment later, the waitress appeared with a fresh round of drinks for all of them.

"Compliments of Stefanie!" she said before walking off.

Jesus howled, "All right!" and Roddy started slapping the cocktail table repeatedly. He pointed at James and said, "You are *THE BOMB*, man! I have *NEVER* been anywhere where the strippers started buying *me* drinks!"

When Stefanie came back out, she brought a few friends with her. She introduced Glitter, Tawny, and Chrissy to everyone.

All three of the strippers fussed over James a great deal, rubbing his hair and touching him all over.

Tawny said, "Stefanie has told us all about you, Jimmy!"

James' smile faltered at the name Jimmy, but immediately, Stefanie grabbed Tawny's arm and whispered in her ear.

Tawny tried again and said, "Sorry! Stefanie has told us all about you, James!"

"You're even cuter than she said! It's such a waste that you're gay! I could do all kinds of fun things to you!" said Glitter, winking at him.

Stefanie said, "Ok, you all get lap dances now! But I've got James all to myself!"

And the four girls whipped their tops off in one synchronized motion and straddled the laps of whoever they were closest to.

Stefanie had all kinds of fun teasing James with a lap dance. She even started playing with his dick some through his pants, which made him giggle and try to push her hand away.

Brick, Roddy, and Jesus all enjoyed their lap dances more than James did, but James laughed more during his with Stefanie teasing him the way she did. It certainly made most of the other guys in the Nitty Gritty wonder what James, Brick, Roddy, and Jesus did to get all this special attention. When the dance was over, none of the girls would take any money at all from them. James tried to give Stefanie a twenty, but she wouldn't have any part of it.

On the way back out to the truck later, Roddy put his arms around Jesus and James and said, "Shit, if that's how strippers treat queers, then I'm a cocksucker from now on!"

## *Chapter 21*

James met Brick and Jesus about 4pm outside the police headquarters in Lawder. It was a very cold day and Brick had on a thick down jacket, but a clean pair of khaki pants and clean sneakers. Jesus had on his leather jacket, dark pants and some worn boat shoes. They both were far more presentable than they usually were at the end of a workday.

James asked them, "Did you two have to run home to clean up before heading over here?"

Brick replied, "Nah, it's been pretty quiet lately, so I just stayed in the office and caught up on a lot of paperwork today. Jesus strictly oversaw today and let everyone else do the dirty work."

They went in to the building and found the small auditorium where the city council and mayor were going to thank Chief McDonnell for all his years of service and then swear in Jerry as the new chief. The room had a podium set up in the front with a few chairs behind it. Already seated out in the audience were an assortment of police from the Lawder P. D. as well as members of the Lawder Fire Department. There was also about six or seven members of the Georgia State Patrol. James was sure the rest was made up of friends and supporters of both Chief McDonnell's as well as Jerry's. Among the crowd, James noticed an older lady with two grown girls and their husbands. He assumed they were probably Chief McDonnell's wife, daughters, and sons-in-law. He also saw Carrie Anne and Cory come in and sit up on the second row.

Brick, Jesus and James sat down about midway back and waited for the ceremony to begin. Jesus was a lot cleaner than he usually looked, clean shaven and hair well combed, but he seemed fidgety in his chair. To James, he seemed like a big kid that had to dress up and sit through an hour of church. He glanced over at Brick, who was also clean shaven today except for the neatly trimmed goatee and mustache he had been sporting for the last few days. He just barely caught Brick nodding to acknowledge someone's greeting from several rows in front of them. James scanned up through the

crowd and noticed a very pretty brunette with shoulder length hair who turned around and waved discreetly to Brick.

James leaned over to Jesus and said quietly, "Thanks for letting Zee spend the afternoon with Rosie on Saturday. Those two have become thick as thieves!"

"Oh, it's no problem. Two is not really any different than one, and Melena has fallen in love with Lindsey. If you're not careful, she's gonna steal her away from your mom and keep her for her own! Has Lindsey missed her mom and dad much, or is she over all that?" asked Jesus.

"It hasn't been too bad. There've been a couple of times in the night when she's woken up scared and wanted her mom and dad. She put up quite a fuss about it one time when I spent the night over there. Mom knows to just hold her and let her get it out. There's not really anything else you can do except let her know that, even if her mom and dad can't be there, we're there for her," said James.

The mayor and city council members came into the auditorium along with two policemen in full dress uniforms. One was Jerry, and James assumed the other one, who had snow white hair, was Chief McDonnell. Jerry looked very impressive in his full dress uniform, and the expression on his face was very serious. James decided that Jerry must surely have to have his uniforms custom made. The very wide shoulders tapering to a narrow waist, huge arms and thick legs couldn't possibly fit in even the largest standard sized uniform.

The ceremony began, with the Mayor giving a small speech about the many years of dedicated, much-appreciated service that Chief McDonnell had given, and then the City Council gave him a plaque honoring him and his work.

Chief McDonnell then got up to the podium to speak about his tenure as chief - forty five years with the department and thirty two of those as chief of police. James was amazed to realize Chief McDonnell had been chief of police longer than he had even been alive.

Then Jerry got up to give a small speech as well. He thanked Chief McDonnell for his work, his mentoring, and for not firing him despite all the times he screwed up, which made Chief McDonnell laugh heartily and interrupt Jerry to say, "That's only because you'd hide the termination paperwork so I couldn't fire you!" Jerry continued to talk a little bit about having very big shoes to fill and hoping that he'd be lucky to run the department even half as well as Chief McDonnell. He ended by saying how much Chief McDonnell would be missed by all the men and women in blue in Lawder, as well as the community itself. Jerry went over to where Chief McDonnell was standing off to the side and gave him a big bear hug.

James hoped Jerry held back some on the hug for McDonnell's sake. He had been on the receiving end of those bear hugs multiple times, usually when they were both high. And Jerry seemed to make a point of squeezing James down to the thickness of a drinking straw, even though he'd tell James he was "holding back."

The mayor then came up to officially swear Jerry in as Chief of Police. When that was over, the Mayor announced there was punch and cake in the cafeteria to celebrate Chief McDonnell's retirement and everyone was welcome to join them.

As people started moving towards the cafeteria, James saw Jerry go up and give Carrie Anne and Cory a big hug. It made James think of how straightforward Chief Pritchard's life was. He had a wife and kid that he loved, a job that he was great at and totally deserved, and a whole bunch of people that looked up to him and trusted him, James included.

In the cafeteria, James, Brick and Jesus got a little bit of cake and some of the punch. They started talking some about Jerry's speech and his new job as they watched both Jerry and Chief McDonnell wandering around the room greeting everyone.

But as soon as they started, the pretty brunette that James had seen waving at Brick earlier came up to them. She said, "Hey, Brick, long time no see!"

Brick nodded. "Hey, Lynne. You're right - it has been a while. You doing good?"

Lynne nodded modestly.

Brick motioned towards Jesus and James and said, "Lynne, you probably remember Jesus. And this guy here is James. He's the boss' son, so I have to be nice to him."

James didn't reply, but he smiled and scratched his cheek with his middle finger so Brick would see it.

"Oh, hi James! It's very nice to meet you!" said Lynne and then sank into an uncomfortable silence.

Jesus grabbed James' arm and said, "C'mon, let's see if we can get up there and give Jerry a hard time about his long-winded speech." Jesus pulled James away from Brick and Lynne.

James asked, "What was that for? Who is she?"

Jesus said, "A friend of Brick's. She's always had a thing for him, but Brick's never let it go anywhere."

James looked over at the two of them talking. Lynne was speaking and she hesitatingly put her hand lightly on Brick's chest as she was saying something. Brick was smiling and nodding some as she did so.

"Why not? She's really pretty. Is she not Brick's type?"

Jesus shrugged. "Who knows? Jenny must have really did him bad when they were married to scare him off of a woman like that."

"Must have," agreed James.

As James watched Jerry make his way around the room, greeting everyone that was there, he wondered a little how Jerry would act towards James in front of a large gathering of his own close friends, associates, and townspeople. He didn't quite feel like Jerry would be stand-offish towards James... Jerry was more genuine than that, but he didn't expect quite the same amount of touchy-feely he usually got when it was just him

and Brick and Jerry, either. He didn't mind, really. This was a group of people that Jerry needed to maintain a certain amount of respect among, even if he had to do it on their terms.

Jerry finally made his way around the room to where Jesus and James were standing. James was pleasantly surprised when Jerry came up and embraced him in his usual bear hug, and with his usual wide smile. It definitely made James appreciate and respect Jerry even more than before to know Jerry wouldn't treat him any differently in front of this crowd. Jerry greeted Jesus by putting his arm around him as well. Jerry was beaming and James could tell it had to be one of the proudest days of his life, and deservedly so.

Jesus and James both congratulated Jerry on his new position and on the fine speech he gave.

Jesus grinned and added, "Even though it was a little long."

Jerry looked at him and said, "What's your problem? It was less than five minutes long!"

Jesus didn't say anything. He rolled his eyes, held up his hand and made the "yap-yap-yap" motion.

Jerry and James both laughed and then Jerry asked, "Seriously, it wasn't too long or boring, was it? I'm terrified of having to do speeches like that."

"No, it was fine. You did great!" said James.

Jesus started to say, "Well, actually..." but Jerry cut him off and hit him in the chest with the palm of his hand.

Jerry said, "Kiss my ass, Jesus. Why is it that I can't have one conversation with you where I don't wind up saying 'Kiss my ass, Jesus'?"

"I don't know. 'Cause you're sensitive?" pondered Jesus.

Jerry nodded over in the direction of Brick and Lynne and said to Jesus, "I see Lynne's working on Brick. Think she'll finally get in his pants this time?"

Jesus said, "Shit, I doubt it. Hell, at this point, I bet Brick's zipper is rusted shut anyway."

He added, "Hey, Jerry, you don't even have some cake or punch yet. Let me go get you some." Jesus wandered off to get some for the new chief.

James asked Jerry, "So how's Cory doing? He seemed very proud of you today!"

James had noticed a couple of times, when he had looked over at Carrie Anne and Cory, that Cory seemed to be watching him closely.

"Oh, ok, I guess. Leading up to Christmas, he definitely was on much better behavior. We'll see if the better attitude holds up or not now that we're past all that."

Jesus got back and handed Jerry the cake and punch. Across the room, McDonnell saw Jerry with the refreshments and yelled at him for everyone to hear, "Pritchard!

These are *my* refreshments in here for *MY* retirement. If you wanted cake and punch, you shoulda had your own party!!!"

Everyone in the room laughed and Jerry just held up his cake and punch in a small toast to the old chief.

Jerry said to James and Jesus with a malicious grin, "He can have his fun. I've got one of the guys out putting a boot and a parking ticket on his car right now!!" Jerry winked and slapped James on the back and wandered off, cake falling out of his mouth, to talk to some more of the guests.

James and Jesus decided to go say hello to Carrie Anne, who was chatting with a few men from the Fire Department. James even made a point to say hello to Cory as well, who barely grunted a reply. In fact, now that he was up close to him, Cory seemed to be looking everywhere *other*than James. Carrie Anne, for her part, was great. James knew that Jerry would obviously wind up with a very pretty, but very warm and genuine wife. He liked her a lot.

Brick joined them a moment later and chatted with Carrie Anne and Cory as well. As they separated, Brick said, "Shit, I missed Jerry. Now I'm going to have to wait until he frees up a little so I can harass him."

James asked, "So who's the hottie you were talking to over there? Some history there, maybe? Have you taken her out back behind Luther's Down Home Bar-B-Que?"

Brick snickered. "No, no, no. Stop trying to make me some gap-toothed Casanova! She's just one of those people I run into every now and then."

Jesus asked, "So, did you make plans to run into her later? Hard?"

Brick got a consternated look on his face. "No! Stop it! Lynne's nice, but I'm not getting involved with her."

James said, "Who said you had to get involved? Why not just give her what she wants for a night?"

"Because she doesn't want just a one night stand. She's sweet and isn't looking for just a quick lay! I'm not taking advantage of her that way."

"Well, why don't you let her decide if she wants to be taken advantage of that way?" asked James.

"Because she doesn't even know what she really wants!"

"But isn't that her problem and not yours?"

Brick got flustered and couldn't say any more.

"I'm going to go get more punch. Let me know when you two are done picking at each other," said Jesus.

Brick and James looked at Jesus and said together at exactly the same time, "We're not picking at each other!"

Jesus walked away, but he could hear Brick say to James, "Well, *I'm* not picking on *you*, anyway!" and James laugh in reply, "You're such a fuckface!"

~~~~~

James answered the door just after he had finished making a sandwich for his dinner that night and saw J. T. standing there in uniform, his cap under his arm.

James said, "Hey J. T. Come on in and sit down!"

J. T. nodded at James and came into his apartment. James motioned him to sit down on the couch.

"Still on duty or off?" asked James.

"Just got off."

"Cool. You want something to drink? I just made a sandwich for dinner, I can make one for you, too, if you're hungry."

J. T. slouched back into the sofa and spread his arms across its back. He said, "Nah, I'm good. I just wanted to stop by for just a minute."

"Oh, come on, it's just a sandwich and a beer or something. You've got time for that!" said James.

J. T. seemed a little uncomfortable and said, "No, really, I can't stay. But thanks, anyway."

James almost was about to push a little harder just for fun, but decided not to. He said, "Ok, so what can I do for you?"

J. T. started twirling his hat around on his finger and he stared at it. Whatever he wanted to say, he was having a little trouble getting it out.

J. T. finally cleared his throat and looked up at James, but then looked back down at his hat in his hands instead. "So, uh, you know... do you remember that, ahhh... video you had that I, uh, ran across the first time I came here?" J. T. had turned a shade pinker than usual.

James started to realize where this was maybe going, and he was having trouble believing it. "Yeah, I remember it," he replied.

J. T. looked at James briefly again and said, "Do you still have it?"

"Yeah, I've still got it." James was letting J. T. take it at his pace.

J. T.'s voice cracked a little bit and he didn't take his eyes off his hat. "Could I... maybe, ahhh... borrow it?"

James was happy to see J. T. just spit it out. He also wondered if J. T. was going to spit the rest of it out or not. He thought probably not given how much effort it took for J. T. to just ask to borrow a DVD. He decided to try to maybe pull it out of him.

James said, "Sure, you can borrow it. J. T., are you gay?"

J. T. immediately looked up in embarrassment and said, "Oh, no, no, I'm not queer, I mean, gay. I'm just kinda curious as to what's on one of these DVD's, that's all. Since you had one, I thought maybe I'd check it out to see what kind of, uh, stuff happens in 'em."

James knew he wouldn't get the real answer out of J. T. today. But that was ok. People had to come out at their own pace and James wasn't one to try to put it on his own schedule.

James said, "Sure. Just checking. Up in New York, I had some straight friends, guys, that borrowed some of these from me, just because they wanted to know what kind of stuff went on in them. You know, when you called, I wondered what you wanted to stop by for." James felt pretty sure J. T. was lying. If J. T. had truly just been curious, he would have said so up front.

"Let me go get it for you," said James and he went to go dig the movie out from where he had buried them deep in his closet. Normally, he would have had them more accessible, but he was never sure when his mom would come by and just start rooting around through stuff. Or worse, now he had to also worry about Lindsey being over there for a little while and running across something like that.

While digging through the closet, James thought how nice it would be to have J. T. actually turn out to be gay. It had been a long dry spell for James and thinking that he might be able to get J. T. in the sack was very, very appealing, and not just because he was getting desperate. From day one, he had thought J. T. was good looking. But even if J. T. wasn't into James, just to have a gay friend in town would be very welcome. Melvyn the hairstylist was a bit much sometimes, even if they had hung out together only once or twice since James had moved to town.

He got to the movies back behind his sweaters. He almost brought the whole pile of them out to let J. T. browse and choose, but he thought that might overload him. Instead, he just dug out his copy of Hung Horses II and took it out to J. T. in the den.

"Sorry it took so long. I've got these things buried in the closet pretty far back."

He handed the movie to J. T. who looked at the front and back of the DVD case briefly.

J. T. said, "Uh..."

James said matter-of-factly, "Sorry. You're just going to have to carry it around in your hand where everyone can see it."

J. T. looked at James, unsure if he was kidding or not.

"Let me get a bag or something for you to put it in. If I'm going to loan these out, I probably should have some of those small black plastic bags like they put them in in New York."

James went into the kitchen and grabbed a perfectly clear plastic bag. He went back and handed it to J. T.

J. T. looked up at James with a smile on his face and said, "Ok, you *are* shittin' me now!"

"Finally! I get you to loosen up a little!" said James, smiling back at J. T. That smile of J. T.'s was seriously starting to do things to James.

He went and got a small brown paper bag he had in the cupboard and put the DVD in it for J. T.

James mentioned, "Oh, by the way, I went to see Chief McDonnell's retirement ceremony today and to see Jerry get sworn in. I didn't realize that McDonnell's been the chief of police here longer than I've even been alive."

"Uh, yeah, I missed it. I was out on duty, so I couldn't be there."

J. T. stood up and walked towards the door. He waved the paper bag with the movie safely hidden in it at James and said, "Thanks for letting me borrow this! You know, I hope you'll keep this quiet. I'd rather you not mention to anyone I've got this movie. Uh, especially Chief Pritchard. But really, don't tell anyone, please."

"Well, usually I rent out a billboard to show who borrowed what dirty film from me, but if you really want me to be quiet about it, I'll try."

J. T. gave an uneasy laugh.

"J. T.! Relax! Don't even worry about that! I'm not going to be telling anyone about that movie or who borrows it. Everybody will want to borrow it if they know I've got it!" J. T. was clearly nervous about borrowing the movie, so James was doing what he could to make him relax and trust James a little.

J. T. stepped out of James' front door and thanked him again.

James said just before he closed his door, "Call me and let me know what you think of it!"

Chapter 22

James got his wish a few weeks later. Early in the week, J. T. called up to tell James that he appreciated him lending him the DVD. James told J. T. it was no problem and he could keep it as long as he wanted. J. T. stalled for a moment on the phone and then asked James if maybe he wanted to come watch a movie, a regular movie, with him that Friday night. He asked J. T. if he wasn't going to be going out with his girlfriend on Friday night, but J. T. said that he had broken up with his girlfriend about a month before. James felt even surer of where it was all headed. He said he'd love to watch a movie with him. Then J. T. made James laugh because he said James had a much better TV set and asked if they could watch it over at his place, which James was fine with.

After the call, James couldn't tell how he felt about what was transpiring with J. T. The idea of maybe J. T. turning out gay and starting something with James had a definite appeal, but he wasn't sure how much he was really ready to move on after what had happened with Ian. It had been over six months now since Ian had killed himself, so James felt like he should be over it, but he still felt a little funny. Besides, James was typically into more professional types, but J. T. was physically very attractive to James, and the idea of him being a cop and ex-marine had a certain sex appeal. Then he felt stupid for overanalyzing the whole thing - he had no idea where this would go with J. T., if anywhere at all. He decided to just let it play out and see what happened.

So that Friday, James got home from work as quickly as he could and cleaned up his apartment as best he could before jumping in the shower.

J. T. showed up with the pizza and some beer, dressed in a tight pair of faded jeans and a denim coat over a tight gray t-shirt. J. T. looked hot, and James wanted to jump him right then and there, but he didn't dare. J. T. had brought the movie *Wedding Crashers* for them to watch on DVD.

James grabbed a couple of the beers and put the rest in the fridge. Out in the den, J. T. had taken his shoes off and propped his feet up on the coffee table.

"You don't mind me gettin' comfortable, do you?" asked J. T.

"Make yourself at home!" He handed J. T. a beer and wished that what made J. T. comfortable was stripping down to his underwear.

James started up the movie and turned out all the lights except those in the kitchen and they started in on the pizza.

James asked him, "Have you seen this one already?"

"Yeah, saw it in the theater, but I can't wait to see it again. It's funny as all shit! How about you?"

"Never saw it. I was in the middle of... moving back to Lawder when it came out in the theaters," said James. In reality, *Wedding Crashers* had come out right when everything had fallen apart for James in New York, so he had never gotten around to seeing it.

James watched J. T. toss back a half a beer in one chug, his bicep pulling tight the sleeve in his t-shirt as he raised the beer bottle. James took a sip out of his own and said, "I didn't get to ask you on the phone how you liked the movie you borrowed. How was it?"

J. T. stared straight ahead at the screen and said, "It was, uh, interesting."

James thought that might be all he would get out of J. T., and he wasn't sure if he should press the topic or not, but then J. T. started again.

"I didn't know what to expect in it. I kinda assumed the guys in it would all be skinny and effeminate, but they weren't all like that. Plenty of 'em were like regular guys. Of course, they were taking a dick up the ass, but they were still regular guys. It was kinda cool to see that one big guy getting sucked off by two other guys out in the barn."

James let J. T. set the stage at his pace and didn't push it. They watched the movie in silence and James had another slice of pizza while J. T. ran into the kitchen for another round of beers. It didn't take long for J. T. to bring up the porno film again, though.

"Hey, what's your favorite scene in that movie? The one that turns you on the most," asked J. T.

James thought for a moment, not for his favorite scene, but for the right scene to mention to J. T. He said, "You know the scene out by the river and the guy's on the white horse? He comes across that other guy trespassing on his property and was going to call the sheriff on him, but decides to make the guy have sex with him instead. The trespasser doesn't want to, but the other guy convinces him. I like that scene. The trespasser is good looking." James had picked that because the trespasser was reluctant about sex at first, but then got into it. And the trespasser looked a lot like J. T.

By the time James got to the bottom of his first beer, J. T. had already finished his second and was working on a third. They were done with the pizza, so James took it to the kitchen and brought out another beer for himself.

They watched the movie for about another twenty minutes, and James had to admit it was really good. He remembered paying attention to how it was marketed when it

first came out and liked how they approached it. It was a clever, smart-ass campaign that fit the movie well.

What James had been waiting for finally happened, though.

J. T. stretched his arms up above his head a little bit and asked him, "Hey, James, you don't mind if I stretch out on the couch a little, do you?"

"Nah, go right ahead."

J. T. leaned up against one end of the sofa with his arms behind his head and stretched his legs out down the sofa and across James' lap. James put his hands down on J. T.'s legs and waited a second. Then slowly, James rubbed up and down J. T.'s shins through his jeans lightly. J. T. reached over to take another long swallow out of his beer and watched James rub his legs. The anticipation of where this was going rolled through James. He wasn't very used to playing this part this delicately - normally he would have made a much more direct move.

After a minute or two of this, James reached his hand up through the leg of J. T.'s jeans and started rubbing his legs directly. J. T. just sighed and leaned back and closed his eyes. James kept an eye on J. T.'s face in the flickering light of the TV to make sure what he was doing was ok, but it was clear J. T. was enjoying it. The feel of J. T.'s legs was bliss for James, he had to admit. Even he closed his eyes and just enjoyed touching another person this way for a few moments, not worrying about how to progress to the next step.

Just to see if J. T. would be completely passive or not, James stopped rubbing his legs for a moment. When he looked over at him, J. T. said, "That's good. Don't stop."

James started back and rubbed up and down J. T.'s legs some more. But he also ventured out a little and took his other hand and started rubbing J. T.'s thigh, almost up to his crotch.

J. T. looked away from James and at the TV for a moment, and then said, "You know I'm straight, right? I'm just kinda curious as to what the whole gay thing is like."

James didn't say anything in reply. He wanted to call J. T. on the bullshit, but people just figuring it out couldn't or wouldn't see it as clearly as someone that's been out and comfortable with it for years. And James was even willing to concede that J. T. might try it and figure out he didn't like it. But usually, someone J. T.'s age knew what they wanted whether they would admit to wanting it or not.

J. T. suddenly sat up on the couch and James thought that maybe he was having second thoughts. J. T. took his beer and finished the last half of the bottle in one swallow.

He looked over at James with a faint smile on his face and said, "So let's find out what it's really like." He put one hand behind James' neck and pulled him closer and kissed James right on the mouth. Not a superficial, seven-year-old giving an embarrassed, awkward kiss to a classmate, but a full on, deep kiss that made James glad he had taken a deep breath before it happened. It felt so good to James, so totally welcome after so long. It probably would have felt good to James to kiss even Kicker right on the lips given how long it had been, but James had the extra pleasure of

realizing that J. T. was a very good kisser. For someone so unsure about his sexuality, his kiss was masculine and sure, unafraid to take the lead. James gave it back to J. T. just as well as he was getting it, though.

James pulled out of the kiss and J. T. let go of him. He reached out and touched J. T.'s chest through the gray t-shirt he was wearing, which he had wanted to do all night long.

"Even if you are just curious, you sure do know what you're doing," said James.

A shy smile crossed J. T.'s face and he said, "You think so?"

James nodded and pushed J. T.'s chest to make him lie down on the sofa and said, "Ohhhh, yeah!" as he did so.

James lay down on top of J. T. and started kissing him again, the urgency gaining between the two of them. J. T.'s hands wandered all up and down James - through his hair, all along his back, and across his ass.

James lifted up off of him and straddled him so that he could rub his hands up and down J. T.'s chest. J. T. put his hands behind his head and closed his eyes and enjoyed the attention. James pulled the bottom of J. T.'s shirt out from his jeans and ran his hand up across his stomach and chest. Wanting more, James pulled J. T.'s shirt out from his jeans and exposed as much of J. T.'s stomach and chest as possible. He leaned over and kissed, and licked, and bit his way up and down every bit of J. T. that was available. The thrill of exploration of a new landscape, learning the taste of another person, tracing the outline of muscles with his lips, judging the sensitivity of a man's body, all gave James a rush and made him want more.

James sat up, knees straddling J. T., and said, "You've seen the video. You know there's more to it than just this little bit. If you're still curious, I'll be in my bedroom." And without waiting for any kind of response from J. T., James got up and went to his bedroom to see what happened next.

He didn't have to wait long before J. T. followed him in there.

~~~~~

After seeing J. T. out the door, James needed to go pick up the beer bottles and put away the leftover pizza, but instead, he sat down on the couch and put his head in his hands.

The sex had been good, although a little one-sided. But when it was done, James would have really liked to have J. T. hang around, even for just a little bit. But J. T. got a little weird and needed to get out of there as soon as he could. Were it not for the kiss from J. T. as he walked out the door, James would have thought maybe J. T. hadn't liked

any of it after all. All he could really do was give J. T. a little space to decide what his next step should be.

James picked up the beer bottle nearest him and looked at the last bit of beer in it before just putting it back down. If nothing else came out of it, at least he had a good time for one night.

The last person he had had sex with before J. T. had been Ian. He remembered the night right after *Angstrom* opened nationwide and things were nuts. Ian had been all over the entertainment news and on talk shows for weeks as part of the marketing blitz. And then when the advance reviews came out for the movie, it all stepped up to a higher plane because it was almost all positive, especially about Ian. Since Ian's personal marketing plan was to present him to the world as straight, James and Ian had been hiding their relationship from the media ever since the blitz started in. And so they were doing a lot of very careful sneaking around. Ian had come to James' condo just so they could have some time alone, and even that was difficult. The paparazzi had gotten suspicious that James' relationship to Ian was more than just professional and had taken to staking out his condo on 16<sup>th</sup> Street. But James' building had an eccentricity - it had a basement door that led to an extremely narrow alley that let out through an unmarked gate on 15<sup>th</sup> Street. Ian had been able to come and go that way without being noticed.

Ian had come over that night and they had sex, followed by an argument. A stupid argument. A stupid argument that James would still give anything in the world to not have had. It was an argument about the clothing Ian wore to a taping of a TV interview. James thought it didn't reinforce the Ian they were selling to the public and to the entertainment industry, but Ian interpreted it as being another personal attack against him. Ian had been very withdrawn for weeks and these fights were coming up more and more often at that point. All of them about how James was focused on Ian's career and not Ian. James had managed to convince himself, and Ian, that doing right for Ian's career was best for Ian as well. Ian bought it for a while, at least, and James only realized the fallacy of his thinking until too late. James wondered, if he had just let Ian be himself and wear what he wanted, would things have turned out different? Or were Ian and his fame two mutually exclusive things that couldn't exist together? All Ian wanted from James was to care for the Ian hardly anyone else knew, and all James seemed to focus on was Ian's career, and consequently his own career, until it was too late. How could he have been so stupid and selfish? How could he have been so much like his own shallow, selfish friends without realizing it?

James thought about the note he found with Ian's body. Not the public one left behind that was all over the news. The one addressed to James and James alone. The one he kept to this day, but had read only one time, the day he had found it with Ian. The one that gave James one last choice between protecting Ian's career, or choosing Ian. And even then, he chose Ian's career, and his own. He failed at being a friend, at being there for Ian, even when he knew there would never be another chance to redeem himself for him. And James had fallen apart as a result.

Realizing that, until tonight, Ian was the last person he was physically intimate with brought all the sadness and failure rushing back over James. Having sex with J. T.

was a yet another betrayal of Ian, a severing of one of the few precious things that still tied him to Ian.

James sat alone in his apartment, in the dark, in the middle of the night and cried, wishing he could cry out the pain once and for all. But knowing he couldn't.

## *Chapter 23*

James and Brick stood outside the front door of Jerry's and Carrie Anne's house, arguing amicably over who should actually give the bottle of wine to them. James' point was that it was his bottle of wine they were giving and his idea to bring it, which seemed clear enough to him. But Brick insisted he'd look like much more of a jack-ass if he didn't give it to them since he'd known Jerry much longer than James had. James countered by saying that wasn't his problem and so on and so forth until the front door finally opened with a smiling Carrie Anne standing there.

Both James and Brick had their hands on the bottle and tried to hand it to Carrie Anne at the same time.

Carrie Anne rolled her eyes, but smiled good-naturedly. "I could hear you guys arguing about this bottle while I was still in the kitchen. So just give it here and we'll all agree it's from both of you."

Brick and James followed Carrie Anne in. Brick murmured, "But more from me," which earned him a punch in the arm from James.

James had offered to help with the cooking and bring a dish, but Jerry had said Carrie Anne wouldn't hear of it. So the bottle of wine was a back-up plan.

Carrie Anne said, "Come on in and we'll open this up. Make yourselves at home otherwise."

She looked back at James and Brick before admitting, "I guess I should feel honored to get to be amongst you boys. Usually it's Jerry going over to see y'all and smoke those god-awful cheap cigars."

They could hear Jerry call faintly from the other room, "I pay good money for those cigars!"

James wondered if Carrie Anne knew that Jerry smoked pot in addition to the cheap cigars when he was with them.

They followed Carrie Anne into the kitchen, where Jerry was over the stove helping with the dinner. He greeted them and gave them a big smile while he opened the bottle of wine and served up four glasses of it. James was pleased to realize that whatever was cooking smelled delicious.

Jerry took a sip of the gifted wine and looked impressed. "Hey, this is pretty good!"

To which Brick immediately said, "You're welcome!" while issuing a challenging look in James' direction. James flipped Brick off dismissively.

They chatted in the kitchen for a few minutes while they enjoyed the wine and waited for dinner to be ready.

Finally, though, Jerry looked up like he had just remembered something. He said, "Hang on..." and walked back down the hall towards the bedrooms quietly to check on something.

When he came back, Carrie Anne asked him, "Is his door still closed?"

Jerry nodded and focused his attention on James. He said, "James, old buddy, ol' pal of mine, I think I need to impose on your good gay nature one more time."

James replied, "You're not going to ask me to shave your back for you, are you?"

"No, no, of course not," Jerry replied seriously. "That's what Carrie Anne is for."

Carrie Anne threw her napkin at Jerry and said, "Keep it up, buster!"

"So," Jerry began again, "Cory's gotten worse lately and we can't figure out what's gotten into him."

Carrie Anne continued, in a hushed voice, "James, we don't know what to do. We've tried to talk to him, but he won't say anything at all to us. We know he's not getting this attitude at home, and we hate that he's treating his school-mates, and now his friends, this way."

Brick looked confused. "What do you mean? What's he doing?"

James already knew from the first time Jerry had talked to him about it, but now it sounded like it was progressing. James felt really sorry for any kids that Cory was bullying. Cory would be a terrifying aggressor since all the other kids had to be way smaller than him. James thought how awful it would have been to have been in seventh grade and have a Brick that was built like a senior in high school tormenting him. He couldn't even imagine it.

"He's been picking on some of the kids again," said Carrie Anne. "Calling them queer and faggot, forgive me James, and just being nasty to them. It hasn't been anything physical, but we're worried it might get to that point."

Jerry was checking on dinner at the stove again. He added, "And now he's turning on Jason. Jason's been a friend of his for a couple of years now, but was always a little more sensitive than Cory and definitely a lot smaller. Jason always looked up to Cory so much, practically idolizing him. But now Cory's calling him these names and won't hang out with him anymore. Cory's just not like this. He's always been a good kid, never

getting into trouble. He's always been so great with Jason, even though he's way bigger than him."

James felt a little bit on the spot, and not exactly sure about what he was supposed to do this time. "So what do you want me to do?"

Jerry said, "Nothing really. Just like that day at the lake, I'd just like your permission to show Cory how gay people are just as normal as anyone else and how Carrie Anne and I treat them no differently than anyone."

James felt like he could handle that. And if, by some miracle, it made some kids life in school a little easier, he was all for it. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Sure, of course."

Carrie Anne put her hand on James' shoulder and said, "Thank you, James. Jerry and I must have been hung-over and missed this day in parenting school, but we just don't know what to do!"

James laughed and thought back to how Brick had said almost the same thing to him in reference to Lindsey.

When dinner was ready, Brick poured everyone some more wine and Jerry went back to get Cory for dinner.

When he came back in the kitchen, he was followed by Cory, who stopped dead in his tracks when he saw James there. James got the distinct feeling that they had neglected to mention to Cory that he'd be joining them for dinner that night. Cory looked almost afraid of James, but then focused on Brick instead. He came in the kitchen and said, "Hi, Brick!" cheerfully.

Jerry pointed out helpfully, "Cory, you remember James, don't you?"

Cory replied, decidedly less cheerfully, "Yeah."

Carrie Anne broke the tension by instructing everyone, "Ok, James and Brick, we're not very formal here, so we'll just help our plates here in the kitchen and take them in the dining room."

They all helped their plates to pot roast and mashed potatoes and went to sit down in the dining room to eat. When James sat down, though, Cory was coming in behind him. Cory immediately said with a scowl, "That's my seat you're about to sit in!"

James stood back up, but Jerry cut his son an ugly look. "Cory, James can sit there if he wants. He's a guest here."

But James moved to a different seat. He said, "It's no big deal. One seat's as good as another to me." He added, in as nonchalant a voice as he could manage, "Didn't mean to muscle in on your territory, Cory."

Carrie Anne asked James about some of the movies he had worked on while he lived in New York. James felt it necessary to make sure they all understood he had worked on the marketing campaigns, and not the movies themselves. But when he talked about some of the movies whose campaigns he had helped produce, he couldn't help but notice that Cory seemed more interested and less stand-offish.

Carrie Anne asked James if he had had a boyfriend while in New York. He knew the question was going to come sooner or later, and he was prepared for it.

"Yeah, I did for a while. But he turned out to just not be the right guy for me."

James focused on his relationship to Patricio for this question and ignored his relationship with Ian. And as far as Patricio was concerned, he was being totally honest in his answer. In fact, as he talked about it, he wondered why he had even remained friends with him after they had broken up. Patricio had always been a little bit of a jerk to James, and egotistical. And a liar. Was it just that he was good-looking? Not just good-looking, but the right *kind* of good-looking? Was that the only reason he had put up with Patricio? He tried to think of one moment with him where he felt like Patricio exhibited some kind of redeeming value as a person, but had trouble coming up with it. Patricio always smelled good and dressed well, but that was about the best he could think of.

Jerry asked, "Still no luck meeting anyone here?"

James had been so caught up thinking about Patricio in a way he hadn't ever before, he almost missed Jerry's question. He glanced over at Cory, who looked a little red in the face. He had fooled around with J. T., but he wasn't willing to go into any of that at all for multiple reasons right now.

"No, no luck here so far," admitted James.

"But, they're here in Lawder," countered James, trying to sound more positive. "I know they're around. I'm not worried about finding someone here."

Brick was uncharacteristically quiet during the discussion, instead he watched the dynamic between James and Cory play out a little bit. But at this point, Cory pushed his plate away from him, mostly uneaten.

"Mom, may I be excused?" he asked, sullenly.

Jerry cut in, with a little bit of an edge in his voice, "Son, you need to eat more of your dinner than that."

Cory whined, "But I don't want any more. I'm not hungry!"

"C'mon, Cory, you've got to eat more than that," his mother requested.

Cory pulled his plate back closer and picked at his food some more.

Brick changed the subject slightly to tease Jerry about the soaring crime problems in the city. "I actually saw someone double-parked downtown yesterday, and there wasn't a cop anywhere around. Not a one."

Jerry pointed his fork at Brick and said, "Don't you start with me!"

They continued along these lines for a few more minutes, with James, Brick and Carrie Anne all piling on and picking on Jerry.

Finally, Jerry sighed in mock exasperation, "I don't have to sit here and take this! I'm going back for seconds. Y'all finish ripping me apart while I'm in the kitchen, please." He picked up his plate and left for the kitchen.

When he came back, he put his plate down and asked, "Anyone else want some more while I'm up? Brick, how about you? You can usually pack it away." Jerry reached down to pick up his wine glass while he was waiting on a reply.

Brick shook his head and patted his stomach, "Nah, I'm good. I had a huge plateful and pot roast and potatoes are really filling."

Jerry quaffed some of the wine and asked, "James, you?"

"Nah, I've had plenty. Thanks. That's my wine glass you're drinking out of, by the way."

Jerry looked at the wine glass like he expected it to have James' name written on it, then looked over at what was actually his wine glass that had been right next to it.

Jerry took another sip out of James' glass and said, indifferently, "Yours has more in it."

Everyone at the table laughed, but Cory suddenly pushed his plate away forcefully and exclaimed, "Dad!"

"What?" asked Jerry, resting his hand on the back of James' chair.

"I can't believe you're doing that!" complained Cory.

"Doing what?"

"Drinking out of *his* glass!"

The tension at the table was rising rapidly. Despite the fact that it was just a kid saying it, James felt his face flush. He suddenly felt like a leper.

Jerry said, "So? What's the big deal?"

Cory looked stymied and turned red in the face before he finally spat out, "He's... *queer!*"

And at that word, James wondered how Jerry would react. He really didn't want to see Jerry blow-up suddenly. He really never wanted to see Jerry blow-up at anyone, not even someone that had just called him a queer to his face.

Everyone else was frozen in place with that word just hanging in the air in front of all of them. Jerry put the wine glass calmly back down on the table. He said, with equal but firm equanimity, "Ok, Cory. That's it. That's completely unacceptable. You will go to your room, right now."

Despite how calmly Jerry had said it, James knew it was not the kind of thing anyone in their right mind would argue with.

Cory pushed his chair back violently and stormed off to his room.

As soon as Cory was gone, both Carrie Anne and Jerry were falling over themselves apologizing to James. James stopped them both, laughed and said, "Please. Don't even. Believe me, I've got a much thicker skin than that, and it would take *way* more than what Cory can dish out to offend me!"

This made both Jerry and Carrie Anne relax, but Jerry said, "Nonetheless, I'm not about to let Cory get away with that kind of behavior!"

James nodded, but frankly felt a little awkward about what had happened. He decided he'd rather just let it drop.

"Ok, we do have some ice cream for dessert, so let's get that going," said Jerry rubbing his belly a little. He slapped James on the shoulder and said, "How about you, faggot, you want some ice cream?"

Carrie Anne gasped and turned red, but it just made Jerry and James start laughing. James was once again struck by how very different words like that could come across depending on who said it and the context. It could be either venom or endearment.

James said, "Sure, I'll take some."

Carrie Anne and Jerry cleared the table and started serving up the ice cream. James noticed that Brick had been incredibly quiet during the whole dinner. Looking over at him, Brick seemed embarrassed and pained by what had gone on. James could imagine he would. Not just because of how he had treated James so similarly so long ago, but to see how James still could be the butt of this kind of verbal punch.

Brick just grimaced and shook his head sadly at James, a silent apology for what had happened that evening.

They mostly ate their ice cream in silence, and as they did, James thought about how terrified of Brick he was in junior high school. He imagined Cory treating kids the same way Brick had treated James. Calling them names and making them feel awful, like they wanted to crawl under a rock and die. It worried James and it made him a little angry to think of what some kids were suffering at the hands of Cory.

As Brick and James got ready to leave a little while later, Jerry re-iterated to him, "James, I'm really sorry and embarrassed by Cory's behavior. You'll get a call from him with a sincere apology, so help me God!"

James just brushed it off and said, "Don't worry about it, Jerry."

But then, suddenly and with no warning that he was going to do it, James said, "Wait. No, I think I do have something to say to Cory."

He had no idea what he was going to say.

Jerry looked surprised, but said, "By all means, his room's second door on the right down the hall. Do you want me to go with you?"

"No, this is just for Cory."

Jerry looked at James a little skeptically. Not skeptically like he didn't trust what James might say to his son, but skeptically like he didn't want James to bear any more rude outbursts from Cory. Carrie Anne was biting her lip a little and Brick looked like he wanted to just disappear.

Jerry said, "Ok, be my guest. We'll be right here."

James walked down the hall and knocked on Cory's door. There was a petulant "What!?" that came from within.

James opened the door and stepped in Cory's room. The room was a disaster area like you'd expect from most teenagers. Clothes thrown around the bed and floor. Books and school papers all over his desk along with his laptop computer. There were a few rock band posters on the wall, one of John Smoltz in mid-pitch, and, James noticed immediately, a movie poster for *Constantine*, with Keanu Reeves. James couldn't help but smile slightly. He was responsible for the design of that movie poster.

Cory was lying on his stomach on his bed, earphones in his ears and listening to music. He looked back over his shoulder to see who had come in, and when he realized it was James, he immediately ripped his earphones out, and jumped up off the bed, putting it between himself and James.

Cory looked like a scared animal all of sudden. He snapped at James, "What are you doing in here? You'd better not try anything."

James laughed at Cory and rubbed his eyes wearily. He was remarkably calm given that he still had no idea what he planned to say to Cory. He said, "Cory, your dad's only about twenty feet away. You've got nothing to worry about from me. Besides, I'm into guys, not kids."

Cory eyed James nervously and didn't reply.

And James wasn't sure where it came from, but what he said was, "Look, Cory, I don't care if you don't like me, and I definitely don't give a rat's ass if you think I'm less of a man because I'm gay. But, there's something you should know..."

James wondered... what exactly was it that Cory should know? He looked down at the floor for a moment.

"It may make you feel like a man, like someone big and strong to call other kids queer, or faggot, or cocksucker, or pansy, or butt pirate, or flamer, or whatever. It may even earn you a little respect among *some* of your friends that you're getting this attitude from. God knows you're not getting this attitude from your mom or dad. You may think it's great to make other people, your own friends, look weak and humiliated. But you know what? The more you do it, the more people look at you. And they'll see you for what you really are. Who's the weak and humiliated one then, Cory? In the end, all this that you're doing, it's more about who you are than anything about the kids you're picking on. People aren't as stupid as you think, and they'll see through this. You do this to put attention on others, but it really just makes people take a hard look at you."

James stopped there. It wasn't eloquent, but it was what he wanted Cory to think about. It was what he wanted The Bully in Cory to understand. He watched to see Cory's reaction, but Cory just stood there, still looking like a trapped animal. James realized that Cory's hands were shaking a little, and noticed that his eyes were squinting.

It was time for James to leave and let Cory think about things. He looked down at the floor to take his attention off of him. "Anyway, just think about it, Cory. Think about what kind of person you really want to be."

James turned and left Cory's room, pulling the door shut behind him. Jerry, Carrie Anne and Brick were all standing at the end of the hall waiting anxiously, not knowing what to expect.

Brick finally asked, "You ok?"

James smiled and said, "Yeah, I'm fine. Why?" Were they expecting James and Cory to get into a fist fight in there?

The three others breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed at this point.

Jerry asked, "So what did you say to him?"

James looked thoughtful for a moment. "You know, I'd rather that be between me and Cory. Don't expect any miracles, though."

Carrie Anne looked like she couldn't stand it. She looked between her husband and James a few times, not knowing what to do.

"Did he apologize to you?" asked Jerry, firmly.

"No," replied James, honestly.

Jerry's expression turned hard. "He will, though, I guarantee that."

~~~~~

James rode in Brick's truck in silence as he was taken back to his apartment after dinner. He wasn't sure what kind of reaction he had wanted to get out of Cory. Maybe it didn't matter at all what Cory's reaction was, maybe what mattered was that it made Cory think a little bit, if not tonight, then sometime over the next few days.

To James' surprise, he started thinking about New York. And, for the first time in many, many months, he missed it a little. He missed New York. In New York, in his profession there, in the people he dealt with every day, in the neighborhood he lived in, he simply didn't have to think at all about the kind of small-mindedness he had just experienced at the dinner table. It had been a long time since someone tried to make him feel bad for being gay, and it felt foreign to him. Even coming from a kid, it didn't feel good.

Brick broke the silence in his truck as they drove along by clearing his throat. He looked over at James, a pained smile on his face.

"You have... you have no idea how hard it was for me to see you go through that tonight. How ashamed of myself it made me feel again," admitted Brick.

James smiled wearily. Really, everyone worrying about how this affected him was more tiring than anything.

James said, "Oh, just forget about it. He's just a kid and picked up some bad attitudes in school."

Brick slowly shook his head, but kept his eyes directly ahead on the road.

"No, you don't understand. I just can't tell you how ashamed I am right now."

"Brick, just relax, ok? You're freaking me out over here," said James, teasingly. He pushed Brick's shoulder playfully trying to get him to lighten up and made the truck swerve in the process.

"Besides," James continued, "the one I'd hate to be is Cory once Jerry gets his hands on him tonight."

That finally earned a laugh from Brick and he added, "Amen there!"

Chapter 24

The next Saturday in February, James and Brick took Lindsey to a carnival that had set up in the corner of a shopping center parking lot. It was one of those with several rides including a Ferris Wheel and a low-budget ride-through haunted house, plus the usual games of skill, and a whopping plenty of places to buy food that could clog arteries from twenty paces.

It had rained the day before all day, and Lindsey had been worried they might not be able to go, but the weather had turned out great. It was clear and cool and dry for them, with just a little bit of a winter breeze.

James was happy to have Lindsey for the day so his mother could be at the hospital, but his mind was wandering somewhat due to a couple of things spinning around. Primarily, he hadn't heard anything from J. T. since the night they watched the movie. He wanted J. T. to call back so they could have another date, a more regular one since they had pretty much broken the ice the last time. He knew better than to call J. T., at least not until one more time out with him.

But thinking about what he and J. T. had done together had a downside. It refreshed his memory of Ian and the last time they were really together. Ian's suicide note made it clear that he didn't blame James, and James tried to keep that in mind, but he also knew that his actions carried a lot of the weight of what happened, no matter what anybody else said.

Not surprisingly, James had shaken off Cory's outburst at dinner earlier in the week. But oddly enough, it had awakened in him some fond memories of New York, and he was lingering over some of those memories.

They walked along the midway, looking at all the people and all the things to do. The flashing lights and motion and music and noises all fascinated Lindsey. In all of her layers of clothes, she almost had to waddle between James and Brick.

Brick asked, "Why did you dress her up this much? It's not that cold out here!"

James said a little peevishly, "It is cold and windy, and we're going to be on these rides!"

They had to do a little convincing to get Lindsey to go on the Ferris Wheel, even though it wasn't a very big one.

"C'mon, squirt! You'll love it once you get on it!" said Brick.

Lindsey just shook her head no.

"Uncle Brick and I will be sitting on either side of you. You'll be completely safe. Don't you want to ride it? I'll bet you can almost see our house from up there!" plied James.

She looked up at James with big brown eyes and red cheeks from the cool air. "Our house? You think so? Really?"

James realized he might be over-promising on that one. "Well, maybe. There's only one way to find out for sure!"

"And you'll both be with me?" she asked, looking from James to Brick and back.

"Both of us," said Brick.

"And you won't let go?"

"We promise to hold tight!" Brick assured her.

"Ok, I'll go," said Lindsey, a little unsurely.

They got up to the Ferris Wheel and the carny loaded them up in a car. As the car went up, Lindsey held tight to James' and Brick's hands, but she seemed to be having a good time.

When they got to the top, the wheel stopped to load some additional people.

Lindsey looked around in interest, "Cool! I can see forever from here!"

James looked over at Brick, who had his eyes closed tightly.

James said to him, trying to not attract Lindsey's attention, "Hey, what's up?"

Brick kept his eyes closed and said, "Us! This thing feels r-i-c-k-e-t-y!"

"C'mon, Zee's more of a man than you! We're fine!" teased James.

Brick opened his eyes, which made Lindsey say, "Ow! Uncle Brick! You're squeezing me!"

Brick said, "Sorry, Zee!" and closed his eyes again.

James let it go and Brick didn't open his eyes the rest of the ride.

After the Ferris Wheel, they passed a Frisbee toss where you could win stuffed animals if you got the Frisbee in the circle about fifteen feet away. Lindsey was fascinated by the stuffed panda bears that were the prizes.

She asked, "Can you win one for me?"

Brick pointed at James and said, "You're the Frisbee shark, champ! Win the little lady a panda!"

James paid the guy running the game, who looked like he had mugged a homeless person to steal his clothes.

The carny said, "What's your name, man?"

"It's James."

"Alright, James, win one for princess here! A stuffed panda for the princess! Three tries!"

James tried once and missed bad. The Frisbee felt way off balance, which was probably how the game was rigged.

The carny yelled, "Oh! So close! So close! Plenty of chances, though! Try again, James!"

James tried again, and got closer but still missed. And a third time, which he missed by overshooting a little.

The carny said, "Too bad! Want to try again for another three throws? You're gettin' good! You're bound to win on the next three!"

James didn't want to waste his money on a rigged game, but Lindsey looked up at him like it would be the end of the world if she didn't get the panda.

He said, "Alright, gimme another three tosses," and paid the man the money.

James tried a different tactic this time, putting as much spin on the Frisbee as possible to try and get it to balance out some. It came closer than any of the other tries this time, but still wasn't quite a winner.

His second try landed on the board and was partly in the circle, but it had to be entirely in to win.

Brick laughed and said, "It's half in, can we get half the panda?"

Lindsey yelled, "Uncle Brick! No! I don't want half a panda!"

"I'm just teasing, Zee, don't worry," said Brick as he pulled her back against his legs. He added, sarcastically "We don't stand a chance of getting half a panda outta this guy!"

On his final try, James was very careful with his aim and his spin, and it paid off. The Frisbee landed just barely inside the ring.

James jumped up and yelled, "Alright! Finally!"

Brick slapped him on the back laughing, and Lindsey was bouncing up and down in excitement and giggling!

The carny bowed for James and said loudly, "And Jimmy wins a panda for little buttercup here!!"

James bared his teeth at the guy and was about to say something, but Lindsey grabbed his hands and said, "Jimmy! Why did he call you Jimmy?"

James glared at the carny, who was handing him the panda, and said, "He's not anymore," causing the carny to shrug at him indifferently.

James handed the panda to Lindsey, who hugged it like it was her most prized possession ever.

She said, "But your name is James. Why would he call you Jimmy?"

James squatted down in front of her. "Jimmy's just a nickname that people sometimes call guys named James. But nobody calls me Jimmy."

Lindsey looked at James, giggled, and said, "You look like a Jimmy!"

"No, I don't! How do you know what a Jimmy looks like, huh, Zee?"

"I don't know!" giggled Lindsey.

Brick said, "She got you outsmarted on that one, James."

James pointed at himself and said, "James!" for Lindsey's benefit.

She giggled again and said, "Jimmy!"

James gave up before it became too much of a game for her.

He said, trying to change the subject "How about a funnel cake?"

Brick rubbed his stomach and said, "Hey, man! Now you're talkin' my language!"

They shared a funnel cake, with Brick stuffing away most of it.

The next ride Lindsey saw that she wanted to try was the Tilt-A-Whirl.

James looked concerned and asked Brick, "Do you think it's safe after she had funnel cake?"

"She only had a tiny bit. I bet she'll be ok," said Brick. But then he added, "But I'm skipping, or I'll up that thing up before it even gets going good."

"So naturally you're happy to vote that she gets to ride it with me!"

"Hey, what are big brothers for?"

Brick and the panda sat out the ride, while James and Lindsey got up in the next available car on the Tilt-A-Whirl. They spun as the cars rode up and down hills in circles. Lindsey tried turning the wheel in the middle to get it to spin more, but James had to do it for her to get it to really spin. Lindsey had a blast, though, and got off the ride all red-faced from laughing and spinning.

James was dizzy, and red-faced, too. He poked Brick in the chest and said, "You owe me, dude!"

"Aww, phooey! You did great! I bet you could go again! Huh, Zee?"

Lindsey's eyes got big at the thought of riding again. "Can we, Jimmy? Can we go again?"

James bit his tongue a little and said, "No, Zee, please. I'm dizzy enough right now. We'll go again in a little bit, ok? Or maybe Uncle Brick can go with you next time!"

They wandered around some more and Lindsey discovered a moon walk for the kids. It was a large, inflated room where children could take their shoes off and jump around and bounce up and down for a while. That one was a perfect choice as far as Brick and James were concerned.

They helped her take her shoes off, and before she went in, they showed her the bench where they'd be sitting.

Lindsey squealed and went dashing into the moon walk.

As Brick and James sat down on the bench, Brick said, "You know, I think you're going to have a losing battle if you fight the Jimmy thing with her."

James clenched his fists and said, "I know, I know! I could punch that asshole for getting her going on that!"

They lapsed into silence for a few minutes, and James realized Brick seemed jittery. He kept rubbing his hands up and down his thighs, nervously, and looking around rapidly.

Finally, Brick stammered out, "James, there's something I need to talk to you about, you know. I, uh, probably should have done this a long time ago." He laughed nervously.

James didn't say anything. He wondered if Brick was going to bring up the dinner with Cory again.

Brick was obviously having trouble getting it out, though, and it was taking all the strength he had to say it.

"So, it's kinda weird for me to say this, but you need to hear it more than, uh, anyone else, and, uh..."

James watched Brick expectantly.

Brick finally stammered the words out, almost choking on them, "I'm g... I'm gay, too."

James looked down at the pavement and didn't know what to feel. This wasn't what he was expecting. He would have almost thought it was a joke, but he knew when Brick was joking around.

"I'm gay, James," repeated Brick, more surely this time.

And while James felt like it made some sense, he started to feel a tornado of emotions, and he couldn't separate one from the other. In the end, he just felt weird and had to leave it at that until he could sort them all out better. He had to admit, even with his finely tuned gaydar, he had not really expected Brick to say that.

James crammed his hands in his jacket pockets and looked firmly down at his feet. Brick seemed to be waiting for some kind of response, any kind of response, from James.

All James managed was to grunt a staccato "Hmm..." from behind the frown forming on his face.

Brick heard the tone in James' voice and turned white as a ghost. He spoke, but he was terrified and couldn't get his voice above a whisper.

"I, uh... I should have said something a long... *shit!*"

Brick stopped and tried taking a deep breath, but it didn't really help.

Brick said to himself, "I waited too long."

And that was, in fact, exactly it. That was precisely the predominant emotion boiling up in James at that moment. Brick had sat on this since he had moved back to Lawder. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

Brick looked over at James and tried to explain. "I didn't know when to bring it up. I couldn't do it too soon, but I didn't know how long to..."

"You know what, Brick? Don't," interrupted James. "You can come out whenever you want. It's your right to do it on your terms. But it seems a little hypocritical of you to expect me to open up to you while you've got things like that stuffed safely in your back pocket."

The emotions racing around and boiling in James started to solidify and come into focus, and it definitely didn't feel good. A little bit felt good to find out Brick was gay, too. But part of it felt like Brick had left him hanging all this time to be the odd man out among all the straight people. It was the feeling he had when he was in New York and really started to see his friends up there for what they were. That was what he was feeling now. James wasn't sure if he could take another round of that.

Brick said under his breath, "*Fuck!*"

He said to James, "I know! I'm sorry! Really! You're right! I couldn't do it when you first moved back. Trying to make things right with you would have seemed fake if I told you then. And it wasn't. And then I waited, but then I didn't know when the right time was. And it's not easy for me. I can explain!"

Brick watched James to see if he was getting through to him or not, but James' eyes had not budged off of his own two feet. Brick actually started to stutter he was trying so hard to get the words out. "I w-wanted to, James. I was going to, but I was just a big chicken. Things just got more c-com-com-complicated after that."

Brick hung his head in defeat. James hadn't really listened at all. He was too busy building a wall right then.

A moment later James asked stoically, "So who knows, Brick?"

James' tone was a little different now, and Brick wasn't sure how to interpret it. It wasn't angry. Maybe just indifferent. Brick said quietly, "Just you."

"So you're just now coming out?"

Brick still couldn't quite get the feeling that James really cared about the answer, but he knew better than to not reply. "No, and yes, I guess. I've known since..."

And on those words, James cut him off. "Stop! Just... stop." James really truly didn't want to hear any more. His face was red from what he was feeling and didn't want any more of any of this right now.

James stared off and pulled his coat tighter around himself. It felt like it was getting colder outside than when they first got there. The winter sun was already starting to make its way down lower in the sky.

He said to Brick, "So that's great. You've had me pinned down as your pet queer for a few months now with your straight friends, and that was fun, but now you're ready to fess up to the whole thing."

Brick bent over on the bench and squeezed his head in his hands. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, God no."

Brick held like that for a minute. He didn't know what to say, and he could easily go too far and make things worse. He looked at James, a plea for understanding clear on Brick's face.

Finally, he said, "James, I swear I wasn't doing this to make a joke of you, or make you a pet queer or whatever! I've had a hard time with this, and when I found out you were gay, I thought it would have come across as shallow to say 'Oh my God! Me too! Forgive me for junior high and we'll be best friends forever!' You've turned into one of the best friends I've got and, after our past, I was scared to say it and risk messin' up the friendship we've got. And I'm really getting the feelin' that I've messed it up anyway. Did I, James? Is that what's going on?"

James frowned noncommittally and said, "I don't know."

There was silence for a moment and Brick mumbled, "And they're your friends, too."

Brick was about to say something else, but Lindsey came running up to the two of them in her socks.

James said, distracted and weary, "Zee, where are your shoes? You're racing around here in your socks!"

Lindsey said, completely unconcerned about her lack of shoes, "I don't know."

James grabbed her hand and stood up, "Well, Sock-Hop, let's go find them."

They walked back over to the moon walk and grabbed Lindsey's shoes from the cubby where they were stored and he helped her get them back on.

"Ok, scooter, you ready to go home now?" asked James.

"No," replied Lindsey honestly.

James picked her up and rested her on his hip while she grabbed onto his neck. "Well, that's too bad because we're leaving and we need to take the car with us. So unless you've got money for a taxi, you'll just have to come too. Brick, are you ready to go?"

Brick didn't say anything in return, though. If Brick had been a dog, his head would have been hung low and his tail between his legs.

In James' car on the way back to the house, they rode in silence. Lindsey looked to James and then Brick, and back and forth several times like that.

She said, "What's the matter?"

James was quiet, so Brick said, "What do you mean, Zee?"

"You aren't talking."

Brick said, "So?"

"You two are ALWAYS talking!"

James and Brick said simultaneously, "No, we aren't," which made Lindsey giggle, even as it seriously irritated James.

At home, Bea had just gotten back from the hospital and was starting something for dinner in the kitchen.

Brick came in just long enough to give Lindsey a hug and a kiss goodbye before he left, his thicker than usual biker beard tickling her. He didn't speak to James and James didn't speak to Brick as he left. Lindsey was very excited to tell Bea all about her day at the fair while she helped her out of her layers of clothing.

She said, "We rode the Fairs Wheel, but Uncle Brick got scared on it. And look at the panda bear that Jimmy won for me by throwing lots of Frisbees! And there was a haunted house, but Jimmy wouldn't let me go on that. And there was a ride that spun around and around with a wheel in the middle that made you spin faster, but I couldn't do it so Jimmy did it for me. And I had some funny cake, but Uncle Brick ate most of it. And there was a huge room with a bouncy floor that you could run and fall in and it wouldn't hurt at all!"

Bea said, "Well my goodness! You've had quite a day! Will you take your clothes up to your room for me, sweetie, and then you can come tell me more about the carnival."

Bea handed her the clothes and asked her to go put them upstairs in her room, and Lindsey trotted off to go put them away.

James had just sat down in a chair in the kitchen and was staring blankly. His mother looked at him for a moment.

"What was that about?" she asked.

"What was what about?"

"That thing between you and Kevin."

"There was no thing. Brick just left."

"Exactly! You didn't even speak to each other. Usually you two won't stop talking."

"That's not true. Why does everyone say that?" groused James.

His mother gave him a stern look.

"Nothing happened," he said more emphatically.

Bea looked around to make sure Lindsey wasn't there and said, "That's a bunch of B.S. and you know it. The sooner you go talk to him about your little spat, the better."

James rolled his eyes a little. "There's no 'little spat', mom. We're not in junior high anymore."

Bea pointed the wooden spoon at him to emphasize each word. "You need to *talk* to him."

James sat there and didn't reply.

His mother came over and sat down next to him at the table. She rubbed her hand up and down his forearm. "Honey, not talking about it is the worst thing you can do. And when did Lindsey start calling you Jimmy?"

James huffed in aggravation. "Some asshole carny at the fair called me that and Zee decided she liked it. I can't get her to stop."

James' mom just looked at him with a smile and a twinkle in her eye, and gave him a hug. But James didn't want a hug. He didn't want anything. He wanted everyone and everything to just go the fuck away.

Chapter 25

As if what happened with Brick wasn't enough, James had to leave work early that week because he wound up with a cold that hit him hard. He tried to ride it out and finish some things up at the dealership, but the weakness, chills, and sore throat gained ground very rapidly. The sales manager there at the Ford dealership stuck his head in James' office and told him he looked like roadkill. Normally, someone would have done that out of concern for James, but the sales manager was a jerk and probably just liked having a chance to tell James he looked like shit.

After that, James decided to focus instead on the sales circulars for the dealerships and get those to the newspaper since they couldn't wait. Then he sent a few emails to some of the assistants at the dealerships that could check on a few things for him the rest of the week if he couldn't come back. Even walking out to his car in the dealership lot was a struggle, and James realized he was worse than he had thought while sitting down.

He called his mother on the way home to let her know he had gotten sick and she said she'd check up on him later. She asked all about his symptoms and replied that there was a lot of that going around Lawder right then, so she wasn't surprised to hear he had gotten it. She told him to get in bed and drink plenty of fluids and she'd see him later.

As James started to pull into his apartment complex, he passed a couple of police cars heading out. He wondered what they had been doing there, and he wondered if J. T. had been in one of them.

When he got to his apartment, there was still one more police car parked there with the door open and a cop inside writing out a report.

James wondered if there was a chance it was J. T. He hadn't heard from him since the night they had watched the movie and fooled around, and had wanted to hear from him, especially since what happened at the carnival. But now wouldn't be the best time to see him given the state he was in.

He dragged himself out of his car, and almost didn't bother to walk near enough to the police cruiser to see who it was since he was feeling so bad, but he made himself get just near enough to see who was in it.

The cop looked up and J. T. realized James was there and smiled at him. The smile didn't cure James, but it did make a huge difference in his state of mind. J. T. hadn't freaked out about their night together after all.

J. T. got out of the cruiser and said, "I didn't think you'd be home this early."

James sniffled and fought through the sore throat to say, "Yeah, I'm sick. Got a cold and feel like shit. Good to see you, though."

"Yeah, you do look bad. I'm sorry you're not feeling good. I was going to call you probably tonight anyway. I wanted to see if you wanted to get together again this weekend. You can come over to my place if you want. It may be a little too soon, though, if you're still not feeling good."

"Yeah. Want to, but may not be well. I'll call."

"Don't worry. I'll call you Friday if I don't hear from you sooner. But if you don't feel good, we can get together during the week or next weekend if you want."

James just nodded his agreement. Then he asked, "Why you here?" His throat was killing him, so he was leaving out all but the most essential words.

J. T. said, "Oh, yeah, it was a weird thing! Do you know your next door neighbor?"

James said, concerned, "Stefanie? She ok?"

"Yeah, Stefanie... she's fine. We got a domestic disturbance call. One of the downstairs neighbors said it sounded like someone was getting the crap beat out of them and was worried. We showed up and it turned out, I'm not sure if you knew this or not, she and her boyfriend were having freaky kinky sex in there, but no one was hurting anyone. As standard procedure though, we ran a check on each of them, and it turns out her boyfriend was wanted for skipping out on a bond hearing in Kentucky. He fought hard once he realized we knew who he was, but we got him and we'll slap some stamps on him and mail him to Kentucky so he can serve whatever time he's got waiting on him. Probably a lot since he's been on the run for so long."

James' eyes got big. He managed to rasp, "You shittin' me?!"

J. T. laughed and said, "No. It's all real. Your neighbor was clean, though, so it doesn't look like she was in Kentucky with him."

James couldn't believe he had just missed all that and said, "Wow! Can't believe all that!" James pointed at his throat and smiled weakly at J. T. "Talk to you soon, J. T." He waved at J. T. and took his leave so he could get up to his apartment.

J. T. waved back at him and said, "Take care of yourself! Get better so we can watch another movie or something!"

James could barely lift himself up the steps to his apartment, but hearing J. T. say "or something" was plenty of motivation for him to get well as soon as possible. Seeing J. T. was the one good thing that had happened to him over the last week.

James got into his apartment, rummaged through his bathroom to find a throat lozenge, and then took off his clothes and got in bed.

He slept fitfully for several hours, and eventually woke up to fading light in his bedroom. He had been having a dream where Ian was strapped in the interrogation chair, but he was wearing a police uniform, and the awful man was injecting a drug into his neck. He thought he had heard something, but didn't immediately see anyone in his room.

But just as he was about to fall back asleep, he felt a wet tongue lick his hand, which was hanging over the edge of his bed. James looked over and saw Kicker there wagging his tail and looking at James. Surely his mother hadn't brought Kicker over there, had she?

He turned slowly over in bed and saw Brick standing in his bedroom doorway. If it weren't for how sick he was, he probably would have started yelling. But instead, a weak irritation was all he could manage through the cold.

"How did you get in?" James tried to demand, causing a ripping fire through his throat and making him wince in pain.

Brick said, "I know I'm probably not who you want to see right now, but your mom couldn't come, so I offered to come by instead. She gave me the key to your place."

James rolled back over and said, "Ok. Not dead. Bye."

Brick walked into the room a few steps and said, "You're not getting' rid of me quite that easy. Your mom got one of the doctors at the hospital to call in a prescription for you, and I've got it. So you need to take that. And I got you some orange juice here, too. So sit up and start in on this. You look really bad, by the way. You ought to be glad to have this medicine. Can you sit up a little and swallow these pills?"

James sat up some and took the pills and orange juice from Brick. He got the pills down and drank some more of the OJ, which felt good on his throat. He sank back down under the covers and tried to stop shivering.

Brick said, "I also got you some ice cream. I thought it would make your throat feel better."

James shook his head and said, "Too fattening."

"Well, one of us is going to wind up eating it, and your abs can stand a little bit of extra fat, and I can't," said Brick, rubbing his stomach.

James just lay in bed and didn't reply.

Brick asked, "Anything else you want?"

James just waved weakly at him to go away.

Brick said, "Ok, I'm gonna be in your living room for a little while. Yell if you... well, don't yell. Knock on the table or something if you want anything."

Brick called Kicker and they left the room so James could sleep some more.

James couldn't fall asleep immediately, though. Having Brick in his apartment and having seen J. T. earlier got him wound up emotionally, which on top of the cold, made him a big mess. He spent a few minutes trying to fall asleep, but couldn't manage it. He hadn't spoken to Brick since the carnival, and usually they talked at least once a day. He couldn't help shake the feeling that Brick had played him for a fool. Part of him didn't want to think Brick would do that and missed Brick, but another part felt betrayed and reminded him he didn't think his friends in New York would really do anything to hurt him, either.

He sat up in his bed a little and took the dragonfly crystal block out of its wooden box and looked at it. Ian had been the only person, from beginning to end, that he never had any doubts about. He curled up in his bed in a fetal position, clutching the crystal up against his chest and eventually fell back into an ill sleep.

The fitful dreams James had eventually woke him up once again, though. He wasn't as cold feeling and realized that he had a blanket on him that wasn't there before. He also remembered he had been clutching the crystal block when he fell asleep. He felt around him in the bed to see if he could locate it, but couldn't find it. He sat up and turned on his beside lamp, to see if he could see it on the floor next to the bed, but didn't see it there, either. He checked in the wooden box, and sure enough, it was safely tucked away there where it should be. James didn't remember putting it up, but decided he easily could have done it while groggy.

He sat up on the edge of his bed, and then stood up to go to the bathroom. On his way, he heard a faint sound in the living room, so he went to see what it was. Kicker was waiting on him smiling, and James didn't even bother trying to stop him from pushing his nose into his crotch. James only had on boxers, and Kicker was almost able to get his nose entirely into his shorts. James reached down and scratched Kicker between his ears.

The TV was on with the volume very low, and Brick was sacked out on the sofa with a blanket over him, an empty beer bottle on the coffee table. James didn't want him to stay. He wanted to be left alone. If he was going to have an insistent nurse, why couldn't it be J. T. instead of Brick? He had really started to become good friends with Brick, but Brick was just playing him for a fool the whole time, using James to test the waters. Why did he have to do that?

James shuffled over to the edge of the sofa and sat down, almost on Brick's feet. Brick jerked up like a bomb had gone off. Kicker licked him in the face before Brick pushed him away. Brick looked at the other end of the sofa and saw James sitting there. He rubbed his eyes and sat up a little more.

"You're up. Are you ok?"

James said, "Just going to pee."

"Gotcha. Do you need any more orange juice or anything?"

James shook his head and went back into the bathroom. When he finished, he came back into the living room and Brick was flipping through the channels. James walked through the living room and into the kitchen, ignoring Brick as much as possible.

Brick said to him, "This TV totally rules, by the way! I love this thing! It took me a minute to figure it out, but, God-almighty, what a picture it's got! Hey, can I get you anything from the kitchen?"

James appeared back in the kitchen doorway with a spoon and the ice cream out of the freezer. He let a spoonful of the ice cream slide down his throat and the cold felt like heaven going down.

He shook his head no and just looked at Brick. Brick had apparently trimmed the biker beard down to a mustache and sideburns in the last day or so. Probably the day after the carnival given how much stubble there was at this point.

James said, "No reason for you to stay. Not dying!" It sounded like he was swallowing pine straw and talking at the same time.

Brick said, "I don't think you've looked in the mirror. I've seen Kicker cough up stuff that looks better than you."

James made a disgusted face at Brick.

Brick fiddled idly with the TV remote for a moment and said shyly, "You know, uh, I can accept that I screwed up at the carnival. And handled everything about as bad as I could have. But I wish you'd let me explain at least a little bit."

James started shaking his head at Brick as soon as he brought the subject up. He had no intention of suddenly having to sit there and listen because of his sore throat. He turned back into the kitchen and put up the ice cream.

When he came back into the living room, James said, "No. You need to go."

Brick frowned and his shoulders slumped. "I'll shut up about it. You just, uh... you... fuck. Never mind. And I'll be leaving before long, so you don't have to worry there."

James went back into his bedroom and got back in bed. He hated feeling awkward in his own apartment. He wanted Brick gone and his space back so he could be sick in peace. He lay there stewing over it instead of falling asleep. He wanted to sleep, but felt like shit and felt betrayed and felt angry.

It was one of the nights where there were thirty-six strips of light on the ceiling from the parking lot light below. Not thirty-seven or thirty-five. Thirty-six.

Chapter 26

James saw Jerry wave at him from his barstool on the far side of the bar, and he headed over. It wasn't like James could miss someone like Jerry. The place was pretty empty for a Tuesday at lunch-time, which made Jerry about as inconspicuous as a nine hundred pound gorilla in church. They had that side of the bar to themselves, along with almost the rest of the place. Jerry had asked James to meet him for lunch, but had picked a bar called Woodland's that was supposed to be something of an outdoor sportsman's bar. To James, it looked like a bar in a strip mall with the usual stuff on the walls and country music playing. It did have some fish on plaques on the walls, and a few antlers here and there, and it had a stuffed deer in one corner. One wall had a lot of pictures of regulars out on their adventures - deep sea fishing, deer hunting, one even of some guy descending a line into a cave.

As James got over to where Jerry was, he put his cigar down in an ashtray and came towards James. James knew what was coming and actually stopped, then started to back away from him. He almost backed into a table behind him trying to get away from Jerry, whose arms were open at this point.

Jerry said, "What are you doing? Come here, dumbass!"

James got a table between him and Jerry and said, "No, you'll try to squeeze me in two like you always do!"

Jerry said, "When?"

"All the time! Every time!"

Jerry got around the table to where James was and gave him a bear hug anyway. James couldn't really hug back he was so immobilized by Jerry's thick arms.

"Shit, Jerry, take it easy! I've been sick," said James, trying to recover.

Jerry said, "Ahh! Stop being a pussy! I was taking it easy!"

Jerry must have been waiting a little while, or was thirsty, since his iced tea was already half gone. Jerry was in a pair of tight, very faded jeans, work boots, and a flannel shirt with a down vest over it. James was naturally expecting Jerry to be in his uniform, but he clearly wasn't wearing it. They both sat down and James ordered an iced tea as well.

Jerry teased, "Don't go too wild with those, or I can't let you drive."

"Hey, you've already downed half of one."

Jerry laughed and said, "Are you trying to get me drunk so you can take advantage of me?"

James looked around the painfully empty bar and said, "Well, I don't see anyone else here to take advantage of. Where's your uniform, by the way?"

Jerry pulled at his flannel shirt a little. "Oh, I've got a ton of paperwork to catch up on, so since I'm going to be locked up in my office all day I decided to dress casually. One of the perks of being the asshole in charge, ya know?"

James nodded, "So how is it going? You haven't gotten fired yet, I guess?"

Jerry laughed again and slapped James on his shoulder and said, "Not yet, but I'm working on it. It's going well. At least, there haven't been any big meltdowns among the crew. I think a lot of people were worried that there was going to be a lot of upheaval when I took over, but those fears are all starting to settle down. McDonnell was a great chief and there's not a huge reason to make drastic changes."

"So have you made any changes at all?"

"A few here and there, I guess. Some are just procedural, like how we request time off and get each other to cover shifts. I've also shifted the force's priority in terms of enforcement a little, probably putting a little less emphasis on petty drug stuff, if you can imagine that."

James rolled his eyes and laughed as he took a swig out of his iced tea glass. "How's Carrie Anne liking her new role as the wife of the chief of police?"

Jerry said through a smile, "Oh, she doesn't give a shit about that! She still makes me take the garbage out when I get home."

"So how about you, Jerry? Has all this power gone to your head?"

"I hope not. That might be a question you want to put to all the men and women on the force. They might have a totally different answer to that question than I would."

Jerry finished off his iced tea and the bartender came by with the pitcher to refill it.

He puffed on his cigar again and said, "There's a little more schmoozing involved, but I knew that would come. Cory and I went hunting last weekend with one of the City Council members and his son outside of Shellman. It was a good trip, but he started to put the pressure on me to step up traffic patrols in his neighborhood to slow people down and keep traffic calm. He wants to look good to the people in his neighborhood since he's coming up for re-election this year. I worry about that kind of stuff. It's a downward slide if you start in on it. I never really got a chance to talk to McDonnell

about it, and he never warned me. I may have to call him for some advice on it. It'll make him feel useful, too. He's a good man. I miss having him around the stationhouse."

James nodded his understanding, "It must be harder facing the whole police department by yourself and lose a friend and mentor like that."

Jerry looked pensive for a moment while drinking some more of his tea. He looked sideways towards James and said, "Yeah, you don't realize what someone means to you as a friend until they're no longer there."

James wasn't about to take the bait. Instead, he asked, "How's Cory doing? Does he like to go hunting a lot? Did y'all get anything?"

Jerry just looked at James a moment, his eyes fixed on James to let him know they weren't done with the subject of Brick. But Jerry leaned back in his barstool and tapped his cigar in the ashtray. He replied, "Yeah, Cory loves hunting. We go pretty often, more often during the winter I guess, but I really only do it for him. I don't like shooting anything I don't have to. That's kind of a leftover from my Ranger days. We wind up talking a lot while we're hunting, so it gives me a good chance to really be heard by him. But lately, he's more and more of the typical teenager and doesn't have much interest in what I have to say."

"Maybe it's not talking he needs... maybe it wouldn't hurt for him to get butt-fucked a couple of times. That'll teach him some respect for the gays."

Jerry laughed and said, "You know, there's not many people in this town that would feel comfortable telling me to my face that my son should get corn-holed a couple of times."

James shrugged. "Somebody's gotta say it." He was holding back just the barest trace of a smile on his face.

Jerry laughed loudly and smiled at James. Jerry was a really amazing guy. A total man's man, but perfectly comfortable hugging another guy in public. Perfectly comfortable joking around in ways that would terrify most straight guys. Willing to talk about his feelings and, James assumed this was coming, willing to try and patch things up between two other friends.

Jerry was a great example of how straight people could be stereotyped just as badly as gay people. He was such a good sport about everything and liked to laugh so much. James did realize that he had Brick to thank for being friends with Jerry - he never would have figured out what a great guy Jerry was on his own. Jerry made it easier to be in Lawder and not have really any gay friends around. Well, except for Brick. He kept forgetting that Brick was gay.

That thought hit him and it made him realize that he hadn't really totally written Brick off. But his guard with Brick was way up very high and it wouldn't come down easily. He didn't want a repeat of what he had already gone through in New York.

"I'm not sure what you said to him the other night, by the way," said Jerry, "but something definitely changed."

“Really? How?” James was wondering if maybe he had indeed had an impact on Cory.

“Well, it’s weird. He’s scaled back on being a jerk to the other kids, but he seems jittery and withdrawn now. He’s nervous. It feels like he’s avoiding me and Carrie Anne a lot.”

That seemed odd to James. He wouldn’t have expected what he said to make anyone jittery or withdrawn.

“And did he call you yet to apologize for the other night?”

James replied, “No, not yet.”

And for a moment, when he saw the genuinely pissed look on Jerry’s face, he almost felt sorry for Cory.

Jerry finally shifted in his seat and said, “Ok, stop stalling. We need to talk about the big fucking elephant in the room.”

James just waited. He knew this was why Jerry had wanted to meet him for lunch.

“Look, I’m no good at this kind of shit, other than being a police officer and listening is a huge part of the job. I actually considered just throwing both of you in a jail cell until you worked things out for yourselves. But this isn’t a sitcom.”

James scoffed, “You got that right!”

Jerry continued, ignoring James, “So the alternative is me talking to you, which is probably far worse than the jail cell. So I don’t know what’s pissed you off, but I hate seeing you two guys like this. I’m really close to Brick and he won’t talk about it. And I’ve gotten close to you too, and I hate seeing *you* like this. You and Brick are good friends. I don’t know what Brick did or said to piss you off like this, but I have a hard time imagining it was anything intentional. Brick’s got lots of people that he’s friendly with here in Lawder, but he’s gotten closer to you than just about anyone since you moved back. I can’t imagine him doing something intentional to fuck that up. Your friendship really means a lot to him. And me, too, you dumb fuck!”

James heard the words, and on a certain level had to know they were true. But down inside was his fear of getting hurt again by friends. The feeling underlay everything and nothing could seem to supplant it.

“It’s just hard to explain, Jerry,” he said.

Jerry said, “You don’t have to explain it to me. I’d rather you talk to Brick about it.”

Jerry took another swallow from his iced tea. “Whatever happened, he feels terrible about it. He’s hurting, James. And now he doesn’t know if he should stay away and let you work it out, or if he should be on you trying to talk about it. He feels like he can’t do anything right around you.”

James sat there trying to understand everything and just got turned around in it. His mind and heart pulled him in a million directions and moved nowhere definite as a result.

Jerry waited a moment to see if James had anything to say. Then he added, "You should know, by the way, that I'm not just talking about this because of Brick. You're my friend, too. Probably the only consistently well-dressed friend I've got. But I can tell this hasn't done you any good, either. I wish there was something I could do to help you trust him again."

Jerry paused again to put down his cigar. He looked around to make sure no one was nearby. "Besides, going over to Brick's to smoke a little isn't as fun without both of you."

James nodded to acknowledge what Jerry had said. The bartender came by and took their food order, which seemed to put a natural end to the heavy conversation.

While they ate their lunch, Jerry pushed the conversation to much lighter topics, which James much appreciated.

But after they had paid and were leaving, Jerry put his hand on James' shoulder and said, "Just talk to him, James. Please."

James nodded but made no real commitment.

~~~~~

Later that afternoon, James had gotten caught listening to a co-worker, Phyllis, in his office and desperately wanted some way out. It came in the form of a ringing cell phone.

James held up his cell phone for Phyllis to see. "Sorry, Phyllis, I really need to get this."

Phyllis turned to leave James' office, much to his relief. Phyllis was in the accounting area at Natahatchee Ford. She was one of those sour women on the high end of middle-age, with her prematurely graying hair pulled back in a bun and who listened to Christian music on a transistor radio at her desk, thankfully at a low volume. She had been by several times in the past few months to mention to James about her daughter, who was about James' age, and go on and on about how great she was and how single she was. It hadn't gotten to the point where Phyllis had explicitly tried to fix James up with her daughter, and so far he had simply played stupid and ignorant - he agreed completely with Phyllis that she must be very smart and very attractive, but he never seemed to pick up on how that might or should involve him. But he knew one day soon his luck would run out and she'd stop the pretense of subtlety. James dreaded it. He wasn't going to play straight to humor anyone at Natahatchee Ford, but had a feeling it wouldn't go over very well. Natahatchee Ford/Lincoln/Mercury was a pretty old fashioned workplace in southwest Georgia, after all.

James glanced at the number on his cell and had no idea who it actually was - he didn't recognize the number at all. He mostly just wanted to get rid of Phyllis.

He answered with a "Hello?"

The voice on the other end asked, "Is, uh, is this Mr. Montgomery?" but it sounded horribly upset, the voice cracking and shaking. In turn it almost immediately made James panic just hearing it.

He got up to close the door to his office and said, carefully, "Yes, this is James."

Something in the voice clicked. "Cory? Is that you?" he asked.

At this point, the person on the other end was crying. Not just crying, but full-on *crying* - sobbing openly, his breath heaving and hitching in his throat.

And then it all seemed to spill out at once. "Mr. Montgomery, I'm so... so sorry about calling you that word the other night! I'm sorry! R... really sorry! But you can't tell! Tell me you won't tell, please! You know now and everyone's going to find out and I j... just want to die. My wh... whole life is ruined! Everyone's going to hate me!" Cory could barely get the words out he was so torn up.

James didn't understand what Cory was saying. It didn't make sense, even given what had happened at dinner the previous week.

He said to Cory, "Cory. It's ok. Calm down. I'm not sure what you're saying to me."

Cory let out a terrible sob, "You know. You KNOW! You know I'm gay, that I'm *queer*, and you're going to tell and everyone will hate me!!! You said everyone would see it! I don't know what I'll do when everyone finds out!"

James realized he was gripping the edge of his desk so hard at that moment that he was digging his nails into the wood. He thought furiously back to what he had said to Cory. Could it have been interpreted that way? Could he really have hit a nerve with Cory that he had no idea was there? The idea of Cory being gay seemed ridiculous, but at the same time, the most virulently homophobic people often were just trying to hide the truth about themselves. Was this what all of Cory's bullying was really about?

"Cory," James started, trying to sound as calming as possible, "just relax and take a breath, ok? Don't worry about anyone else for just a moment here."

But Cory just got worse. "You have to... to promise! Prom... promise me! You can't tell anyone! You can't tell my mom and dad! Oh, God, pl... please tell me you won't tell them! Promise me!!!" His voice had gotten higher and James was even having trouble understanding him.

James couldn't possibly imagine Jerry or Carrie Anne reacting negatively to Cory turning out gay. Hell, they'd probably be among the most loving and supportive parents any kid in Lawder could have. But given the emotional state that Cory was in right now, James knew he had probably what would amount to only a tiny window of opportunity to win some trust from Cory. It was already killing Cory with fear to have reached out to James this much. James really disliked the promise, the outright commitment he was about to have to make, but he felt he didn't have much choice and things could go much

worse if he didn't. He'd have to bite the bullet and deal with the implications with Jerry and Carrie Anne later.

He said calmly and clearly, "Cory, I need you to listen to me. I give you my absolute word that I won't say anything to anyone about this, ok? Your secret is completely safe and you're completely safe, alright? This is between you and me only. Not your friends, not even your mom and dad, will know about our talk. No one. Ok? Now, I want you to take a deep breath for me and let me know that you're ok."

And to James' relief, he heard Cory take a deep breath on the other end. The crying subsided some and James knew he was calming down.

But even though he was calming down, Cory said through his tears, "But I'm not ok, Mr. Montgomery! I'm a queer! What am I going to do? All my friends will hate me!"

James said, "Cory, that's better. Just keep breathing slowly. I'm queer, and it's definitely not the end of the world. But no one's going to know you're gay, or even think about it, unless you choose to tell them. I promise. Do you believe me?"

"But you said, at dinner, that they'd know. They'd see me for what I was." Cory was steadily calming down more.

"That's only if you keep calling other people, or your friends, queer or faggot. I know the temptation is great to put that on someone else so people don't think it about you, but it just draws attention, Cory. Just don't do it and no one will think about it, ok?"

Cory replied, almost suspicious that it could be that easy, "Really? But you knew about me."

James almost admitted to *not* knowing about Cory, but he felt that admitting that right now would just make Cory worse for having blabbed it to someone when he didn't have to. "Cory, I promise you that no one's going to know about you if you don't specifically tell them. I know you feel like you're wearing a huge neon sign over your head that says GAY in big letters, but you're not. I went through the same things you're going through when I was your age. I know what you're feeling and how scary it can be."

James paused while Cory considered what he was saying on the other end of the phone. "Cory, will you do me a favor?"

"Uh-huh."

"Will you call me James instead of Mr. Montgomery?"

Cory sniffled, "Uh... ok, I guess. I just don't want to be gay. Everyone hates queers!"

"But that's completely not true. I've got plenty of people that care about me. I've become good friends with your mom and dad, and they know I'm gay."

The tension immediately rose again in Cory's voice. "You can't tell them, Mr. uh... James. You promised!"

"I did," said James, soothingly. "I did and I won't tell them. But your parents will love you the exact same no matter what. That's another promise I can make to you."

There was silence on the other end, save for another sniffle or two.

James ventured, "Cory, can I ask you a question?"

"Yeah, I guess so..."

"What makes you think you're gay?"

"Well, you know. I'm supposed to be into girls, but I'm not, really. Even when my dad had the talk with me about the birds and the bees and stuff, it was always about a guy is supposed to be interested in girls, to want to, you know, *do* things with them. But I think I feel that way about boys."

James thought that Cory seemed to understand pretty well, but at the same time, he didn't want for Cory to jump to a rash conclusion.

"You know, Cory," said James, "lots of boys your age are curious about other guys. In fact, most are. And sure, some turn out gay, but some wind up deciding they do like girls better than boys after all."

"Are... are you trying to tell me I'm not gay?"

"Well, I'm saying don't rush to a conclusion. Give yourself some time to let it unfold and don't feel like you just have to know one way or the other right now. In the end, the only one that can decide whether you're gay or straight, or something in-between, is you. But, Cory, the most important thing to remember is that it doesn't matter how it turns out. You're still you, your mom and dad will love you just the same no matter what, and you're a good person. You're going to be a good-looking man, Cory, and you'll break plenty of hearts, guys and girls!"

"You really think so?"

Cory was sounding much better now. James laughed and said, "I definitely do."

He added, "But, Cory, I want you to seriously think about talking to your mom and dad about..."

Cory cut him off, panicked again, "No, I can't tell them! You're not going to tell them, are you?"

"I'm not going to tell them, Cory. Besides, they should hear about this from you and not me. Why are you so afraid to tell them?"

Maybe James was missing something. Maybe there was a side to Jerry or Carrie Anne that he hadn't seen, but Cory had.

"I don't know. I don't want anyone to know. I just don't want people to hate me, or think I'm a bad person."

"You're not a bad person, Cory. And your parents would never think that about you. I think you'd be surprised at how much easier it will be to figure this out if you don't feel like you're hiding it from them. It's a lot for someone your age to figure out, just like it was for me, and it's so much better to be able to talk to someone about it. Do you feel a little better having talked about it?"

There was a pause on the other end while Cory reflected before he replied, "Yeah, I do."

"And so I'll make another promise to you, Cory. I want you to feel free to talk to me about it if you want to, ok? But keep in mind that keeping it from the people you care about the most is the hardest thing to do, so think about telling your parents so you can talk to them, too."

There was silence again. "James?" asked Cory, "Do you really mean it? I mean, can I really call you and talk about it?" Cory actually sounded hopeful at the thought of having someone to talk to about it.

James felt immensely relieved to have earned Cory's trust. "Definitely. I've been through what you're going through, Cory. I know what it's like. I also know that it can feel like the end of the world, but it's definitely not. The people you care about the most will still care about you just the same. Mostly, you just need some time to figure it out and to understand it. And having people that you feel safe talking to about it will make that happen a lot faster."

"James?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I tell you something?"

"You can tell me anything."

Cory sighed, "I was terrified of you! I was sure you were going to tell everybody! All I could think of was to beg you not to. Plus, my dad told me I would be in big trouble if I didn't apologize. But, I'm glad I called now. I never thought you might actually want to help me, or that you'd care. So... thanks."

James was amazed. He hadn't seen this side of Cory since he had first met him, but understandably so, given what he was going through. Jerry had talked about how Cory was a sweet kid. A kind kid. And James was finally seeing that side of Cory.

"That's what friends are for, Cory. And don't worry, I'll let your dad know you called and apologized and leave it at just that."

James and Cory ended their call, and James tried futilely for the next ten minutes to try and get back to work, but it wasn't working. His mind was spinning and he needed to get out of the office.

Back at his apartment, James broke out the vodka to slow himself down a little. He couldn't decide what the hell was happening to his life. Since moving back, he had had J. T., then Brick, and now Cory all come out to him. Since when had he become the underground railroad for closeted gays?

It wasn't a bad thing, he supposed, and the news from Brick was the only one that really bothered him. Well, that wasn't the complete truth. Now that he had sat on it a few minutes, Cory was bothering him a little, too. Not bothering him like he was offended or betrayed by it, but it definitely made him nervous. In a way, he wanted to help Cory through this. He didn't have anyone when he was that age to help him through it and knew how tough it could be. He knew how Cory would be confused, scared, mistrustful, and probably even angry. He had been, too. But what bothered him was that the situation could turn on him very easily. The way he was trying to help Cory

could easily be misconstrued by anyone. That's why he didn't want this to go on behind Jerry and Carrie Anne's back. James knew with certainty that Jerry and Carrie Anne would handle this kind of news from Cory very well, but he wasn't sure how much their trust and support would extend to James if they felt like he was keeping something from them.

He hated feeling like he was twisting in the wind in Lawder all the time.

## *Chapter 27*

James put the trash bag down where Roddy could get to it and then sat down on the bench next to the fish pond. Lindsey started climbing up on James like he was a jungle gym and he just let her go.

“I gotta admit, James, it took me a little by surprise when he told me he was... you know, but it’s not anything to freak out about,” said Roddy as he finished rinsing out the fish pond filter and putting it back into the water.

James had to admit that it was something that Brick was actually starting to tell some people that he was gay. But he couldn’t shake the feeling of... of... betrayal? Betrayal was probably too strong of a word, although that had been the word that came to mind right after Brick had told him he was gay. It was more of the feeling of just being wounded.

“It’s not that,” said James. He was getting a little tired of trying to explain it to people when he barely understood exactly what bothered him so much about it himself. “It’s how he did it.”

Lindsey asked, “Freak out about what?”

“Nothing, you little monkey,” said James, tickling her a little bit.

“What’s that supposed to mean? I thought you said it was his right to do it when and how it was right for him.”

James countered, “Yeah, but...”

“Do what, when, and how?” interrupted Lindsey.

James said dismissively, “Zee, Roddy and I are trying to talk, please.”

Roddy started running his hand down in the water and pulled out some dead leaves from the bottom to put in the trash bag. One of the fish splashed in the water trying to get away from him. “Well, he’s been pretty quiet lately. Not much fun to be around.”

"Who's not much fun?" Lindsey interrupted again, looking from James to Roddy, trying to follow the conversation.

"No one, Zee," said James.

James was ignoring Lindsey, but Lindsey wasn't in the mood to be ignored. She stomped her foot and yelled at James, "WHY WON'T YOU TELL ME, JIMMY?!"

Both James and Roddy froze and looked at Lindsey, who had crossed her arms in front of her and had a magnificent pout on her face, framed by her pigtails.

James stood up and said, "Ok, young lady, time to go inside. You do not scream at adults when they're having a conversation."

Lindsey started with a "But..."

"Positively no 'buts', Zee. Inside!"

He pointed at the back door and Zee started in to the house, still pouting and very cross.

Roddy had a grin on his face. "You're the meanest big brother I've ever seen!"

James laughed and said, "Kiss my ass! I hate doing that to her, but she needs to learn better manners than that."

Roddy finished cleaning the dead leaves out of the fish pond. He sat back on his knees and said, "Look, I'm not going to tell you what to do about Brick. I don't want to get sent to my room like Zee did."

James flipped him off with a smile on his face.

"And anyway, how come she gets to call you Jimmy and no one else does?" asked Roddy.

"She's my little sister and she can call me anything she likes," replied James, coolly.

They headed back towards the house so that Roddy could leave. But right before they got to the back door, Roddy stopped James and said, "You know, James, I had a judge put me on probation for a full year for smacking my ex-girlfriend around. I didn't do it, and she knew it. But she just decided that I was going to be the one to pay the price for her issues."

Roddy held James' eyes in his own, until finally James had to drop his gaze and look down at the ground instead.

Roddy gave James a friendly smack on the arm and went inside to let Bea know he was finished with the fish pond.

James stood outside for a long time thinking about what Roddy had said.

When he went in, he found his mother in the den putting up a few of Lindsey's toys.

James asked, "Where's Zee?"

"I sent her up to her room. She was upset when she came in and said you made her come in for being bad. What did she do?"

"She interrupted the conversation that Roddy and I were having and started yelling at us."

Bea nodded and said, "Well, then, I'm glad I sent her to her room."

James said, "Thanks for backing me up on that."

Bea looked at James and said, "Well, darling, you may technically be her big brother, but we both know that, in reality, you'll be the main father figure in her life. You need to be that for her, and it's good to see you doing it."

James wasn't sure how he felt about that. It felt like more pressure than he was ready to accept with respect to Lindsey.

Bea gave James a motherly smile and put her hand on his face. "She's lucky to have you for a big brother," she said.

He said, "Ok, I'll go say goodbye to her, and then I've got to go to my date tonight."

"Well, I hope you behave. It drives me nuts that you won't tell me anything about this person you're going out with. It can't mean anything good that he's hiding like this. What if he's a serial killer?"

James groaned and was exasperated with his mother. He said, "I promise you he's not a serial killer. We've been through this before. He's just getting used to the idea that he's gay and doesn't want everyone in the world to know right now. I have to respect his wishes on that."

Bea picked at her hair a little. "Well, I want to meet this mystery person before this goes on too much longer. You'll just have to make him wear a paper bag over his head or something."

She bit at her lip for a moment, and blurted out, "It's not Kevin, is it?"

James was stupefied at how ridiculous the question was. "NO, it's not Brick! Why would it be Brick? Brick's out and proud at this point. Why would you even ask that question? Besides, I'm not even speaking to him."

Bea held her hands on her hips and shook her head a little. "I don't know. I wouldn't call him out and proud right now. Withdrawn and ashamed is more like it. You said the person was just getting used to being gay, right? Who else am I supposed to think it is?"

"There are more gay people in this town than just me and Brick, mom. Lawder's backwards, but it's not *that* bad off. If you expect each new gay person in this town to come register with you, you're going to have to publicize a little more."

Bea scowled at James, "Don't be ugly about it! I was just wondering. You're so snippy lately."

"I am not! I'm going to say goodnight to Zee and then I've got to go."

James' mother grabbed his arm before he could turn to go. She asked earnestly, "Sweetie, when are you going to talk to him?"

James exhaled heavily, like he was tired of carrying the breath around with him. "Talk about what, mom? He said what he had to say and I've said what I need to say."

"James, you need to listen to him."

"I have listened to him! It seems like all I've done is listen to people giving me Brick's point of view!" argued James, impatiently.

"No, you've heard him talking to you. But you're not listening."

James growled in frustration, "Arrgh! I *have* listened to him!"

Upstairs, James sat on the edge of Lindsey's bed, where she was looking through one of her pop-up books and explaining it to Bandit, which is what she had named her stuffed panda. Her eyes were red and James knew she had been crying.

She looked at James and seemed like she was about to start crying again. She rubbed at her eyes a little and asked, "Are you still mad at me, Jimmy?"

James leaned over and put his arm around her. "No, honey, I'm not mad. But you can't just yell at people to make them listen to you. It's very rude and no one respects people that are rude. Part of my big brother job is to make sure you learn manners so people will respect you. But I'm not mad at all, sugar pop!"

He leaned over and kissed her on the head.

Lindsey looked up at him and asked, "How come you and Uncle Brick aren't friends anymore?"

James pressed his lips together and tried to think how to best answer the question.

"You know, Zee, I'm not really even sure myself."

"It's more fun when you and Uncle Brick are together."

James said, "I think you're right, Zee."

~~~~~

J. T. said to James, "James, I don't want to talk about that. Don't ask me questions like that!"

James said, "But you've obviously enjoyed the sex we've had. Why can't I just ask what you like and don't like? It'll help me understand where to go with you next and what to avoid."

J. T. turned pink. He said in hushed tones, like he expected there to be someone at James' apartment door listening to them, "Look, it has been fun, but that doesn't mean I'm ready to talk about it."

James said, "It just seems a little dumb for you to keep pretending like you're still a totally straight man just experimenting. This is, what, our fourth date, and it seems like even you should realize you're past the experimentation phase."

J. T. seemed like he was ready to crawl out of his skin, "Whoa, whoa, we're not dating. I'm not dating anyone right now. We're just buddies hanging out. And yes, some stuff has happened, and it's been fun. But don't go making some big deal out of it."

Why couldn't there just be one normal gay guy in Lawder? J. T. was still in a large state of denial, despite having sex with another man repeatedly. Brick had been more open about it, but only after he had left James dangling out there in front of everyone else. And Cory was bullying other kids trying to deflect attention from himself. Was Melvyn the most normal, functional gay person besides James in Lawder? James shuddered to think, but realized that Melvyn, whom he had occasionally hung out with, might actually be the most well-adjusted.

But as far as J. T. went, James decided not to push it any farther. He said, "Ok, I'll drop it. I've been so comfortable being gay for so long that I forget how hard it is for people trying to figure out if they're gay, too, or if they're just getting their rocks off." James knew that line was a bunch of bullshit, but he needed to say it to get J. T. to calm down.

J. T. said, relieved, "Good. Thanks."

James started clearing the plates from the simple dinner he had fixed for the two of them while J. T. went and put in the movie he had brought over and got comfortable on James' sofa.

James joined him a moment later. He knew the routine pretty well at this point. They'd start the movie with J. T. leaned back, his legs in James' lap. After a little bit, James would start rubbing around on J. T. and soon after that, they'd forget all about the movie. They hadn't gotten all the way through a single movie they had ostensibly watched together.

James was a little stymied in that it was the same thing each time and that he couldn't get J. T. to be enough of an adult to talk about it. But at the same time, it was true that some people just needed more time to adjust to what they were finding out about themselves. Trying to push it might just ruin it.

And even if it wasn't perfect, at least it was some kind of companionship. James had missed that sorely for a long time now, and J. T. certainly was a hot guy, right down to his Semper Fi tattoo at the base of his neck. He was looking for a little more than just a fuck-buddy, though, even if he wasn't looking for Mr. Right to settle down with. Lawder wasn't James' final destination, but as long as he was here, it would be nice to have someone to hang out with, talk to, and screw around with. J. T. would be perfect for that if he could just get him a little farther along with the hanging out part and talking part.

J. T. seemed particularly scared of having other cops find out about what he was doing. James would normally feel that was a valid fear for most police departments, but with Jerry running the Lawder P. D., it seemed like a silly fear. Jerry would never tolerate

any cops ragging another for being gay. J. T. just refused to see it that way, though. He just hadn't had enough exposure to Jerry to really see how he was about gay people.

James drank his beer, getting it down to the halfway mark while J. T. had already bottomed out the beer he was working on. James twirled his beer around, the brown bottle lit from behind by the movie playing on his TV. His mind really wasn't on the movie at all tonight.

He found himself thinking more and more about Brick. What Lindsey had said earlier that evening was right - it was more fun with Brick around. Brick had become James' best friend, but after New York, that was enough to make James distrust his own sense of Brick's friendship, and now everyone was paying a price. No one more so than Brick, though. He saw now how he had overreacted to Brick and had found a way to make his overreaction Brick's fault. Truly, if there was one person in Lawder he could trust above all others, it would be Brick. The very person he had manufactured a completely artificial mistrust of. It was time he fixed that.

James almost felt like sending J. T. home just so he could go see Brick to say he was sorry, but didn't want to send the wrong signal to J. T., either. At this stage, J. T. probably wouldn't handle that kind of rejection very well.

Just as these thoughts were making their way through James' head, J. T. reached down and started rubbing on James' arm and looking directly at him. James knew what the look meant and what was going to happen next.

Chapter 28

For a pleasant, early spring evening in mid-March, James had thought he needed to get out and do something outside, but instead he found himself shut up inside his apartment. Wondering. Wondering for the first time in a long time if he had made a mistake by not staying in the closet, just a little bit.

Earlier that day, just as James knew she eventually would, Phyllis had come by his office at Natahatchee Ford to chat a little. James had immediately felt the urge to make any excuse to not stay there and talk to her, but he couldn't quite manage to get away.

He listened to her drone on about her daughter, thinking of the picture that Phyllis had shown him of her on one of her earlier visits. The daughter had horse-sized teeth, big, south Georgia hair and too much make-up and wore broadly floral-patterned blouses, apparently. And not only had she gone out in public like that, she had gone to a photo studio to have a photograph taken so her mother could pimp her out to whatever single man she ran across. James had been mildly tempted to let Phyllis know that her daughter would have made a good drag queen, but had held his tongue that day.

She finally got to the point that James had been dreading for weeks. She suggested – just like it was a thought that had only now popped into her mind, despite clearly being something she'd been planning for who-knows-how-long – that James should come have dinner at her place one evening and meet her daughter. And wouldn't it be great to meet her, and isn't it such shame that two such nice people didn't know each other yet. And she knew they'd hit it off and become fast friends.

James wondered if Phyllis' daughter was mortified at her mother doing this, or was she happy to have her picking men out for her. James would be horrified for his mother to pick out men for him.

He halfway considered making up some excuse, but that would only delay all this and not end it. Plus, he did have his principles when it came to this stuff. He didn't rub his homosexuality in people's faces, but he didn't lie about it, either.

So he told Phyllis that he was sure her daughter was very nice and that he very much appreciated the invitation to dinner, but she probably ought to know that he was, in fact, gay.

Phyllis' face went blank and she looked at him stupidly like he had started speaking Turkish. She finally said, "What?"

James repeated that he was gay.

Phyllis looked confused and then asked, "Gay?" And then, searching for confirmation, "As in *homosexual*?" She said the word like she was going to catch something from it.

James was happy to confirm it for her. "Yeah, you know... gay... as in queer," he congenially replied.

Phyllis didn't say anything else and just turned and left his office.

James knew whatever happened after that wasn't likely to be good, but he wasn't sure how much of an impact it would have. It could go from his co-workers at the dealerships shunning him, or making crude comments, all the way to just being fired. His boss, Jasper, was a Wednesday-night-church-goer, despite adding bullshit charges to customers' car invoices if he could get away with it, and despite charging in warranty work to Ford that his mechanics never performed. In the end, it didn't matter much to James. He really had not found anyone at the Natahatchee dealerships that he had developed any kind of friendly relationship with. He kept it strictly professional. The question was whether everyone else would be able to keep it that way or not.

The rest of the day, he went about his job and refused to hide in his office after the encounter with Phyllis. His mind was wondering, but he didn't let it stop him. He made it through the day without any further incident, but decided the change would come at some point.

But that evening, despite wanting to not be cowed by what might happen as a result, he wound up wondering about it. Wondering how long it would take Phyllis to spread the word. Wondering how people there would react to it. Wondering how they'd look at him. Wondering how they'd treat him. Wondering who would have the most negative attitude, and who would, maybe, not care at all. Despite all the other bullshit, it certainly gave him a renewed appreciation for his job in New York at Channel:Adage, where it had been a complete and utter non-issue.

James thought about calling J. T. just to have some sort of distraction, but James had found it very hard to engage J. T. in any kind of meaningful phone conversation.

His cell phone started ringing on its own, so he wound up not needing J. T.

When he answered, James was a little surprised to find out it was Cory on the other end. He wasn't sure if Cory was going to call him again or not, and after a couple of weeks with no call, he had thought maybe Cory wasn't going to contact him again.

"Hey, Cory, how are you doing, big guy?"

"Hi, James. I hope you don't mind," ventured Cory, shyly. "You said I could maybe call if I wanted to."

“I meant it, too.”

“So, I had a question for you...”

Cory sounded pretty calm and collected this time, unlike the last time they had talked on the phone.

“Shoot!”

“Is there anything I can do to make myself not be... this way?”

James sighed. How was he supposed to answer that question? Cory clearly wanted a way out.

“Well, Cory, remember how I told you last time to just give it some time and let your natural feelings sort themselves out?”

“Yeah.”

“Just keep that in mind,” explained James. “But if you decide over time that you really do think you are gay, there’s not any realistic way of changing it. Some people try to bury it deep inside and feel like if they act straight long enough, they’ll be straight. But usually those people wind up miserable for living a life that’s just not theirs.”

“Oh.” Cory sounded profoundly disappointed in this.

James tried to be positive. “But keep in mind that it’s not really a bad thing. It’s easy to focus on the fear that some people may not like you because of it. But you know what? Even if you’re straight, there’s going to be people in your life that don’t like you. It’s just the way things are. And the people that *do* like you and *do* care about you will mean that much more to you.”

Cory thought about this a minute. “But what about the other things?” he asked.

“What other things?”

“You know... like how gay people can’t play sports. I don’t want to have to give up baseball!”

James almost wanted to laugh, but caught himself. “Who told you gay people can’t play sports?”

“A guy in my class said queers can’t play sports. Or go hunting. He said only real men do that stuff. But I like baseball, and don’t want to have to quit.”

“Well, the guy in your class is a complete dumb-ass, Cory. Don’t listen to anything he says,” said James, which made Cory actually giggle a little. “Being gay has absolutely nothing to do with being able to play sports or not play sports. If you like baseball, then you should play baseball. What position do you play?”

“I’m pretty good at pitching. My coach says I’ve got a good arm and I’m the only one on my team that can pitch a curveball! I wouldn’t mind giving up hunting, though. My dad makes me go with him sometimes, but I’ve never really liked it. I don’t really like killing things.”

James thought about the ridiculous rumors junior high school students spread. “Well, playing sports or going hunting really have nothing to do with sexual orientation.

There are plenty of gay guys that do those things. Just like there are plenty of straight guys who wind up being artists, or dancers, or... or hairdressers. Let me ask you something, Cory... do you think I fit the picture of what you think of a gay guy being like?"

"Well, no, you don't really. You dress and act like a normal guy. You don't act like, you know, a girl," admitted Cory.

"There are plenty of gay guys that are masculine, tough-as-nails bad-asses, and there are straight guys that can appear a little more feminine. It's easy to get caught up in those outward appearances, but they don't really mean anything in the end." James would have liked to point out that even Brick was gay, and thought that Cory probably would feel even better knowing that someone like Brick was the same as him. But of course, given what was going on between James and Brick right now, he wouldn't feel right bringing it up.

Cory asked, "So if I really like music, and like, maybe, wanted to play the piano, would people think I'm gay because of that?"

"You've got nothing to worry about, Cory. If you like music and want to play the piano, then you should. I think your mom and dad would be proud of you for that, and no one's going to think it's gay." James felt bad about how completely caught up Cory was in the shallow stereotypes of what gay people were like. But at least he had the opportunity to give Cory the truth.

Cory said he needed to go, but thanked James for talking to him about everything.

After he had hung up, James thought about how important it was for homosexuals to stick together and support each other. Maybe one day it wouldn't make any difference, but until then, they needed to be there for each other.

Which, of course, made him think about Brick.

Chapter 29

James pulled into the parking lot at Brick's apartment house in the car he had rented the day before. Brick's truck was parked there, and James could see his motorcycle was there, too, under its blue tarp. The skies had darkened over the course of the Saturday afternoon, and James noticed on the drive over to Brick's how the last patch of blue sky had finally disappeared behind the bruised, low-hanging sky. Even as he parked his car, the raindrops started spattering against his windshield.

James' feet crunched in the gravel from the parking area up to the house's front steps, and before he even got to them, Kicker came running around from the far side of the house, tail wagging to greet James. Kicker gave James the obligatory sniff in his crotch while James leaned over to scrub up and down the dog's sides affectionately. Kicker's sides and back shivered from the giddy sensation.

Together, they went up the steps and onto the front porch as the rain started to really come down. James looked down at Kicker, whose tongue was lolling out of his mouth happily as he looked up at James. He had even missed Kicker a lot. James checked around briefly to make sure no one was looking, and then he squatted down next to Kicker and put his arms around the dog's neck so he could hug him tightly. Kicker wiggled around, trying to get to where he could lick James in the face.

James had hit bottom the day before, or at least what he really hoped was bottom. He couldn't take much more. His boss, Jasper Griffiths, had fired him the day before, saying he felt like he really didn't need someone full time handling the marketing. It was, of course, complete bullshit. He had fired James because the word that James was gay had finally made its way around to him. Phyllis clearly had started spreading the word after he had told her on Wednesday that he was gay. By Thursday, people were definitely acting differently around James. In a way it was amusing. How completely immature were these people that they felt like he was suddenly going to sexually assault them, or start wearing dresses to work, or whatever other stereotypes they had in their mind. He'd been working there, with them, for over six months now. Did they really

thing he was suddenly a different person? And finally, the day before, Jasper had clearly gotten wind of it and decided that James didn't fit in there anymore.

Oddly enough, though, getting fired wasn't even what was driving him to go see Brick. He had already decided he needed to talk to Brick Wednesday night after his conversation with Cory. The betrayal he originally felt at Brick's admission had turned into feeling wounded over time, and now it was feeling like just plain stubbornness on his part. He missed Brick's friendship. And he hoped Brick missed his as well.

When he got up to Brick's door, James could hear music playing in the apartment. He knocked and waited, but there was no noise inside other than the music. He looked down at Kicker and said, "Where's Brick?"

Kicker's ears perked up and he looked at James curiously.

James waited a moment. The first thought that went through his head was that Brick had seen him drive up and didn't want to answer the door. His nerves started to fail him. Maybe Brick didn't care if James was there to say he was sorry. Maybe what James was doing was too little, too late.

Kicker made a grunting noise and sat down on his haunches, his gaze still locked onto James.

But then a very unwelcome memory worked its way up into James' consciousness. In his mind, he saw himself knocking on the penthouse suite door at the Soho Grand. He had expected Ian to open the door, violently yank him into the room, and throw him on the bed laughing as had become one of their little stupid private routines. But that morning, there was no answer. James knocked again on the hotel door and still no answer. His heart rate jumped up and he pulled out the spare hotel room key Ian had given him when he moved into the penthouse suite.

He looked down at the doorknob to Brick's apartment as he remembered putting the key into Ian's hotel and turning the handle to his door.

James' heart rate was through the roof at this point, and he was breathing heavily, and losing confidence in his ability to touch the knob. Part of him said to run away, that he couldn't take a chance on what was on the other side of the door. Part of him said he needed to at least try again.

James forced his hand out and tried the doorknob to Brick's apartment. It turned in his hand and the door to the apartment swung open. Kicker went trotting right on inside like he owned the place.

James stepped in and didn't see anyone inside in the den, but Brick's well worn cowboy hat was on the table. All he heard was the music playing.

He listened to the song and the lyrics, and realized that this song *felt* like Brick. If everything that was familiar to him about Brick were put to a tune, he was listening to it right then. It was a song that sang of the purpose of life, of why people landed in each other's lives, how small things could mean so much. Of how small a person's life is, but how it can be the most important thing in the world to someone else. It was a good song, but it made James feel clammy, lost in his thoughts about Ian. The fear that maybe he

was about to... He tried his best to push that thought out of his mind. He had no reason to think that way, but it had just settled on him.

As James started bracing his nerves to go peek in Brick's bedroom, he happened to glance out Brick's back window and saw him sitting in a chair on the back porch, a beer bottle in his hand, staring off into the rain. The relief washed over James and made him realize he had been on the verge of hyperventilating. He stood still, listening to the song and letting himself calm down.

James opened the back door, Kicker pushing past him to go back outside, and stepped out onto the worn back porch. Brick looked over at him briefly, then turned his attention back out to the rain pouring off the tin roof of the porch. He was wearing a dirty thermal underwear top and navy blue sweatpants, and his beard looked rough. James had seen Brick with a full beard before, but this time it looked really unkempt.

James said gently, "Hey, Brick. Do you mind if I sit down?"

Brick gave a brief, flat glance at the empty chair next to him and said, "Nah, go ahead, have a seat."

James sat down and looked out at the rain, which had brought in slightly chillier air. James wondered how to best say what he needed to say. He wasn't losing his nerve at this point, and he was sincere. But something in the way Brick was sitting there made him wonder if it would be worth anything to him at this point.

James said:

*It's kind of sad how people can be
Blaming others for their own life luckless
Ignoring their own responsibility
In their lives being lived mis'rably
Pointing at others, when in fact, they are the great big...*

James paused, not saying the last word. He looked at Brick, who now had a trace of a broken smile on his face.

Brick whispered, "I think you need to say the last word."

So James laughed and said, "Fuckface."

Brick nodded, but the smile faded from his face. "Pretty impressive," he said. "You managed to almost rhyme something to fuckface."

"Yeah, I know. Not my best effort, I guess," said James, ruefully, making a hint of a smile return to Brick's face.

James said, "Brick, I see now the reason I reacted the way I did. It doesn't excuse it, but at least now I understand it. I'm sorry I treated you the way I did. You deserve better than that, and I let you down."

Brick said, but with a same puzzling flatness, "Don't worry about it. It's ok. I needed the dose of reality, so it's best it happened. It's good to hear you say it wasn't me in the end. I kind of tore myself up about it for a while, and it took a while to accept that maybe it wasn't me after all. I'm glad Jerry was able to talk some sense into you."

"That's funny," replied James. "Jerry did talk to me, even threatened to throw both of us into a jail cell until we worked it out. But he wasn't the one that made me see my mistake. It was Roddy, actually, who did that."

Brick chuckled and said, "Of course it would wind up being that knucklehead to open your eyes."

Brick looked out into the woods behind the house, the rain coming down even harder. He said, "James, I've spent a lot of time in my life realizing what a jerk I could be. And I think I've done a good job of getting rid of that part of me. But I guess a side effect of that is that it hurts much more to realize that someone else suddenly hates you for no good reason you can think of. I need to know that you're not going to do that to me again."

James sighed and felt tired. Not because of Brick, but because of himself. He couldn't seem to stop from making dumb mistakes with the people in his life.

"I'm not going to be that stupid again," he said. "And if by some incredible chance I am, then I never really did deserve you as a friend in the first place."

Brick just nodded and downed some more of his beer. James pretended to watch the rain come down, but he was actually watching Brick. He could tell his friend was still affected by what had happened. How could he have suspected any kind of bad intentions from Brick? It seemed so patently ridiculous now. He could still see the hurt in Brick's kind eyes, lingering behind like fingerprints on a clean window. He thought back to when he first returned to Lawder. He had looked at Brick and noticed his rough, blockish face with the dull, stupid eyes – the face of a dumb brute that had focused on hurting other people in childish ways to boost his own ego. But he saw Brick very differently now. It was a gentle face with kind eyes, the kind of face that couldn't hold malice towards anyone. The shame of what he had put Brick through burned into James. Was his perception of people so completely affected by his own biases? How could you trust your own eyes? The one you had to suspect of betrayal the most was always yourself.

James asked, "Are you ok?"

Brick said, "Yeah."

"Do you mind if I grab a beer and stay here with you?"

"Sure, go grab another one for me, too."

James went back inside and grabbed a couple more beers for the two of them. The storm had turned into a soft, steady rain as far as they could see out over the trees. James took a few sips from his beer. It was an odd feeling to know that the person sitting next to him was gay. Even now, gay seemed like an artificial label when applied to Brick. Hell, if Brick was going to be gay, then Jerry and Roddy might as well both admit to being gay, too, for how well it applied to any of them. Strangely, when James thought of J. T., the gay image had already started to fit, despite J. T.'s attempts to fight it. It wasn't just because he was having sex with J. T. that James saw him as gay, it was certain mannerisms and attitudes that were starting to surface the more time he spent around J. T. But even specifically looking for them, Brick had only a tiny fraction of

those clues that James was seeing in J. T. In the end it didn't matter; James now wanted to understand. He wanted to understand why Brick felt like he couldn't trust the people in his life, ones that he had to know would have been completely accepting of it. He wanted to understand why Brick hadn't told him, if no one else.

"So why did you wait to tell Jerry and Roddy and everyone else? If you're comfortable with it, and Jerry and Roddy and others are, why not put it out there? Why didn't you tell me?" James asked gently.

Brick considered the question before answering. "Well, I'm not really all that comfortable." He paused. "I mean, I know I'm gay. I get that. And I know everyone I care about really wouldn't be bothered by it, especially you, of course. But, I guess... I just have trouble... opening up about it. It's not them, or you, or anybody... it's me."

"I don't understand," said James.

Brick grimaced a little and he stared off into the trees in back of his apartment. "I've never actually had, uh, a physical relationship, with a man."

James tried to understand what Brick was saying and all kinds of questions were popping into his head. But he forced himself to stay silent and give Brick a chance to explain in his own way.

"After marrying Jenny, I was still pretty much the same dickhead I was to you in junior high. The same dickhead I was in high school before dropping out, the same dickhead I was even to Jenny. And maybe deep down I was that way because I felt inferior and it was the only way to feel any better about myself. Anyway, one day I had run out to an auto salvage place outside of Albany for a catalytic converter or something like that. For some reason, the guy that was working there fascinated me. I kept staring at him and I finally realized I thought he was attractive. And then found myself wondering what it would be like to touch him, to hold him, to... you know... kiss him, even. I couldn't understand where these feelings and fantasies were coming from, and yet they didn't feel unfamiliar. It was the first time I had ever consciously had some kind of thought like that. But it was weird, since it didn't feel totally new, either."

Brick scratched at his beard. "He must have noticed me checking him out, because he started checking me out, too. I didn't know what to do. He finally just asked me if I liked to have a 'good time'. I said sure, and I realized I really wanted to. He nodded and we went through the back of his office building, and he led me back outside. I didn't know what had come over me, but I wanted it really bad. When we got outside..."

Brick stopped briefly and drank from his beer. He shuffled his feet uncomfortably and he still wasn't looking at James.

"When we got outside..." Brick repeated, his voice barely audible over the rain, "he proceeded to... to... uh, well, he beat the living daylights out of me. He kicked me all the way back out to the front of his office and told me to get my faggot ass out of there and never come back." Brick still had not looked at James and was gripping his knees tightly.

James was horrified. He said, "Brick, that's..."

Brick held up his hand to cut James off, though. "No, I really kind of deserved it." He paused and James was about to argue with him, but Brick added, "Not, not really, not for

what I was trying to do with him, but for how I had treated too many other people, including you. I needed a taste of my own medicine."

"I wound up with a broken rib, and two black eyes, a split open lip, and a fucked up kneecap. And you'd think that I would have understood at that point. Understood what I had put other people through, but I didn't. When I got home, I told Jenny I had gotten into a bar brawl with some guy passing through town that had made a pass at me. It was just like something I'd do, and Jenny didn't even question it."

Brick stopped and smiled grimly. "How fucked up is that? I was still trying to make everyone else the queer, and still trying to bash them for it. Even after what I had literally just been through."

"But over the next couple of weeks, I stayed home from work because of my rib and kneecap. And all I could think about was that guy. I still fantasized about him touching me. Having him pull me to him and kiss me. Having him look at me like I was the world to him. That was what got to me in the end. It wasn't just a physical thing. I wanted to *mean* something to that guy. I wanted to be *special* to him. I got it at that point. I *was* everything I hated, and I hated myself. And, I finally understood why Jenny never meant that much to me. Why I never seemed to have the deep connection to her I was supposed to. Why she never meant the world to me like I wanted to mean to that guy. And I realized I would either wind up miserable continuing the way things were. Or I could finally really stand up and make a change. So I did."

Brick paused again and finally looked over at James to see his reaction. James shook his head slowly, "Brick, I had no idea. I'm so sorry..."

"Well, don't feel too bad," said Brick with a grim smile. "It changed my life. And it may have been hard, and it may have hurt like hell, and it may *still* hurt sometimes, but at least now I can feel like I'm a decent human being, and I can truly understand how much of an asshole I was before. I finally became myself."

"But there is one unfortunate side effect of what happened to me. I haven't really been able to have sex with a man. I tried a couple of times. I went up to Atlanta one weekend and went out to a gay bar there, but I couldn't do it, despite the few guys that showed an interest in me. The image of that guy beating the shit out of me kept haunting me and I just couldn't. I was unsure and just didn't feel safe. I've had a couple of one night stands with women since then simply because I was horny and could handle that, but haven't felt safe trying to do what I really wanted. So I eventually just accepted it and let go of the need."

"And now there just didn't seem to be much point in telling people I was gay if I was going to have problems ever really acting on it. And that's why I didn't say anything to you. Well, that, and because I couldn't find that time when it felt right. When it wouldn't come across as being... I don't know, fake, I guess."

James reached over and put his hand on Brick's shoulder. "Brick, I feel terrible. If I had known you had gone through that..."

But Brick laughed a little and cut James off. He shook his head and replied, "Nah, don't feel like that. It wasn't the first time in my life I had gotten my ass handed to me, and it's not like I freak out every time a guy looks at me."

James really admired Brick's attitude about the whole thing. Brick must truly be a much stronger person than he ever realized.

"I guess, for most people, you're supposed to be a ghost after you've been alive. But I look back, and I think I was something of a ghost until then, just a shadow, and now I'm alive. Not everything in my life is perfect, but whose is? I'm very glad I didn't go through the rest of my life as that ghost." Brick sipped his beer and chuckled again. "I think if I were to meet that guy again tomorrow, I'd thank him. I'd thank him for the change he started in me. For making me see myself for the first time, for seeing myself as the shadow I was. And then he'd probably pound me into the ground again."

The rain had slowly stopped over the last few minutes, and all that was left was the darkened sky and the drops of water running off of the roof of Brick's apartment.

James asked, "But don't you want to meet someone? Don't you want to have that opportunity?"

Brick shrugged and said, "Yeah. The bar trips weren't a great approach for me. And I know it's pretty much impossible to meet a guy down here, that's gay, that's available, and that I have chemistry with. But at the same time, I have a little faith that if it's right, it'll happen."

James said, "I guess you're right. I can vouch that it's not completely dry desert down here in terms of gay guys."

Brick looked over at James, curiosity in his eyes.

"Well," started James. In a way, he didn't want to rub it in Brick's face, but he wanted Brick to know that being out might help him find someone. "I've actually even managed to run across a guy and start dating him. I'm kind of surprised my mother hasn't mentioned it to you."

Brick's brow furrowed and his mouth slowly opened, but no words came out. He started to wring his hands a little and then he looked down at the ground for a second. Brick gave a little embarrassed laugh and finally said, "No, you're mom never said anything. I should have realized you'd meet someone sooner or later. I should have. It certainly didn't take you much time. Who is it?"

James' face flushed a little red. "I don't think you know him, but I promised him I wouldn't tell anyone we were dating. He's just figuring out he's gay and is struggling with it. I have to let him open up about it at his pace. You do understand that this has nothing to do with me trusting you. It's just that I promised him I wouldn't talk about it."

Brick got a tight expression on his face and he nodded to show he understood.

James added through a smile, "It's driving my mother crazy. It bothers her that I won't tell her who it is or bring him by to meet her. I swear, now that I live here, she treats me like I'm in high school again."

Brick smiled, too, and nodded, seeing Bea in his mind all bent out of shape about James' love life.

Brick and James sat there in silence for a minute. James noticed that Brick had an odd expression on his face.

Finally Brick stood up and faced James. His hands fidgeted a little and he said, uncomfortably, "Uhh, I think, you know, if you're ok with it... I think we could both stand a hug. I know I could maybe use one after the last few weeks." Brick was clearly nervous about how the request would come across.

For James, it was a welcome one. It would make him feel much better, and he could tell it would make Brick feel better, too. Brick had been hurting the last few weeks, and James now understood so clearly now how much so.

James stood up and said, "I would love a hug right now!"

James went to Brick and embraced him tightly. He had hugged Jerry many times, or, rather, been hugged by Jerry many times. It was kind of a one-sided thing with Jerry. Brick was very different, though. The hug was as comfortable as a favorite pair of Sunday-afternoon sweatpants and they let it linger. James put his hand up on Brick's neck and James could feel Brick holding onto him for what felt like dear life.

When he stood back, James bit at his lip in anticipation of what he was about to do.

"Hey, Brick?"

"Yeah?"

"I need to ask a favor," said James, nervously.

Brick's brow knitted. "Yeah?"

James sighed, "I got fired yesterday from Natahatchee Ford. Can I come work for you at Montgomery Landscaping?"

Brick's eyes got real big and he exclaimed, "What?!"

James nodded sadly, "Yeah, too many good ol' boys and bible thumpers there. Once they found out a queer had found his way in, Jasper had to fix that real quick. Only, you know, it wasn't because I was gay. He said he didn't need a full time marketing person any more, but it's funny how two days before I had told the first person there that I was gay."

Brick was still obviously in shock. Then he got a confused look on his face. He even laughed. "Wait. Why are you asking me for a job? Your mom owns the fucking company!"

James deflated in front of Brick. He said, "Ugh. I'd much rather ask you for a job than her. I'll get all kinds of told-you-so's and lectures from her. She'll never let me live it down."

Brick grinned, and then laughed. Then he punched James in the shoulder. "I bet! I guess if I were a real asshole, I'd make you go ask her instead!" He gave James a malicious grin. "But sure, I guess we can make room for one more!"

Then he added, an even more evil grin spreading on his face, "But... you'll actually have to report to Roddy."

James rolled his eyes. He quipped, "Fine. Whatever. Just make sure he knows I have no problem whatsoever with sexual harassment in the workplace."

James felt like he was back to normal with Brick. It felt really good, aside from what he had learned about Brick and how he had come to terms with his own homosexuality.

Brick said, "Hey man, I don't know about you, but I need to get fucked-up and kite-high right now. Do you want to call Jerry to see if he wants to swing by? We can light up and maybe go get some food later."

James smiled and couldn't think of any place he'd rather be. "That sounds like the best idea I've heard in a long time!"

~~~~~

James called Jerry, who was very excited to hear that he and Brick were speaking again, and even more excited that they wanted him to come by for a smoke.

While they waited for Jerry, James and Brick talked. Now that it was all out in the open, Brick had questions. Mostly similar to those that Cory had asked, but James wasn't as hesitant or as guarded as he was when talking to a fourteen year old boy. Brick wanted to know about when James first knew he was gay, when he told his mom and how she reacted, his first kiss, the first time he had sex. He wanted to know what it was like in New York where entire neighborhoods were heavily gay. It was so different than Brick's experiences. And the more they talked, the more James realized that and the worse he felt for it; he felt bad for what Brick had been through. But even as James felt worse, Brick seemed better, more upbeat... genuinely cheerful. James didn't understand it, but he didn't question it either. He was just glad that, for whatever reason, Brick seemed better.

Jerry got there as soon as he could and the three of them got good and high, and they laughed and cut up just like old times. Jerry held back some on the pot, and spent some time smoking one of his cigars instead, which James decided he wanted to try. James about coughed up a lung after one puff, then claimed cigars shrunk the size of your dick anyway, as was obviously Jerry's problem.

James explained how he had gotten fired the day before, which seriously pissed Jerry off. Jerry told James he should bring a lawsuit against Jasper for firing him. James said that wouldn't do any good. Sexual orientation wasn't a protected class, and he couldn't prove that that was why Jasper had fired him. It actually took several tries of explaining to Jerry that he was better off without that job, anyway, since he never really liked any of the people there. He was actually looking forward to spending more time with Brick, Roddy, Jesus, Agnes, Amos, and all the rest. Plus despite how angry his

mother would be at Jasper for treating her son this way, she'd be very happy to have him in the family business.

After they had smoked all of Brick's pot, they went to a local steakhouse for some red meat. Jerry had a new digital camera in his car, and insisted on snapping a few pictures while they ate. He seemed like a big kid he was so excited to have the three of them back together. James found himself wondering several times that night, while watching him, how would Jerry really feel deep down to find out his only son was probably gay. Would he really be ok with it? Or just ok with it for Cory's sake, but disappointed down inside. James thought back to the story Jerry had told about Clay, his fellow Ranger. His respect for Clay, and his insight into what Clay had to go through to be a Ranger and gay, reassured James that Jerry would never be disappointed in his own son.

On their way back out to their cars, Jerry stopped James and told him, "Thanks, you know."

"You mean about finally explaining why your cock is smaller than a fruit fly's?" said James with a still-slightly-drunk grin.

Jerry hit James in the shoulder, almost knocking him down, "My cock is plenty big, shithead! You just ask Carrie Anne! She's never complained!"

James offered, "Maybe she's just used to really tiny dicks."

Jerry said, "Shut the fuck up! I'm trying to be serious here." He did get very serious and put his hand on James' shoulder. "You guys are too good of friends to let it slip away on some bullshit. It's good to have you both back. You know Brick is like a brother to me, and you too. Almost, anyway. You're like a brother-in-law, or some punk-ass step-brother, or something. But like thiiiiis close to being a brother. Soon to hit full blown brother status. So, what was I saying? Oh yeah, but what I'm saying is that I love Brick to death and it's good to see him laugh again."

Jerry pulled James into a hug, which made James cringe since he expected the Ranger hug he usually got from him. But tonight was different. It was a real, heartfelt hug. James was actually able to reach his own arms around Jerry and hug him back. It was the second best hug he had had that day.

After James, Brick went to hug Jerry, but Jerry backed away a step and said, "Get away from me, girly! I don't want your gay cooties!" James couldn't stifle a laugh at that, and Jerry gave Brick a hug after all. The same heartfelt, sincere hug he had given James. James noticed that Jerry whispered something to Brick while he was hugging him, but couldn't hear what he said. Brick just nodded and looked at the ground when Jerry let go of him.

On his way back to his apartment, James' mind ran back over the evening. He had had a really good time, and Brick had seemed to be much more comfortable as well. Brick had started out a little distant, but had relaxed and warmed up before too long. James felt much better and was actually able to forget for a little while that he had just been fired the day before.

## *Chapter 30*

James was finishing putting on a little cologne when he heard someone at his door. It sounded like Stefanie's knock, but he wasn't totally sure. Still, he glanced at his watch to make sure he wouldn't be too late if interrupted and saw he still was doing okay on time. He hoped it wouldn't be another nosebleed this time. A stripper waiting at his front door with a bloody tampon crammed up her nose wasn't exactly at the top of his list of visual images.

He opened his door and saw Stefanie there, biting her lip nervously. With her usual flair for the unexpected, she was wearing what looked like a halter top made by some slutty Indian tribe. It was a flimsy leather, loosely pieced together to give tantalizing peeks underneath, with lots of fringe and beads. Her tits pushed it out so that the bottom hung out several inches away from her stomach. Below, Stefanie had on tight faded jeans and a white leather belt with a large oval buckle made of turquoise. She grinned and said, "Ok, it's some kind of wasp or something this time. I swear they must be building a huge hive in my walls. Can you come kill it for me? Ooooh, you smell good!! Are you going out?" She put her hand out and started trying to pinch his nipple through his shirt playfully.

James swatted at her hand and said, "Hey, Stef. Sure, I'll come take a look and see if I can kill it. Ouch! That one hurt!"

She turned to lead him over to her apartment and asked James again, "So, you got a hot date tonight? Finally? Hmm?"

"Just going over to see a friend, that's all," lied James. "Look at you, Stef! I swear to God you make Cher look like she buys her clothes at the Salvation Army!"

Stefanie squealed and did a model's runway turn for James to see the whole outfit, her arms outstretched. She said, "Oh my Gawd! Don't you love it?! I just got it!! And check out the matching nipple ring!" She lifted up the leather exposing her daunting breasts. She pushed up her left breast and showed James the nipple ring with a turquoise bead on it.

James held out one hand towards Stefanie in protest and covered his eyes with the other. "Stop it, Stef! I can't afford the tab I've got going already for all these five dollar peeks you keep giving me!"

Stefanie giggled. "That one's free tonight. But if you want to see my new clit ring, that'll be ten dollars, up front."

"I'll pass."

Stefanie led James into her den and looked around for a minute, trying to find the rabid killer bug. Then she jumped back with a small scream and pointed at the wall near the window. James saw the black spot on the molding around the glass. He walked up to it to get a better look while Stefanie kept a safe distance.

"Stefanie, you know this is just a moth, right? It's not a wasp! Jesus, you so completely should be blonde!"

"It's got some kind of stinger!" she protested. She grabbed a pillow to hold in front of her, and pointed at it and said, "Right there! Don't you see it! It's practically dripping poison!"

James shook his head and walked right up to the moth. He shot his hand out to try and trap it against the wall, but the moth was quicker and started darting around the den. Stefanie screamed and just about leapt over the couch trying to get to a safer location, all turquoise and high heels and hair. James started laughing hysterically at her, and shouted at her in her bedroom, "Come on back in, Stef, I swear this thing isn't going to hurt you. Look, he's already back over near the lamp by the sofa. I can get him there easily."

Stefanie peeked back into the den and said, "Show me where he is!"

James pointed on the wall near the lamp. To help distract her a little bit, he asked, "So how about a boyfriend? Have you gotten someone game enough to replace Rico for the favors of The Cruel Mistress Stefanie?" He inched up closer to the moth so as to not frighten it.

Stefanie sighed, "No. No one new in my life. And Gawd, it's getting depressing! I did find out that Rico's been put away for three years, minimum, so that's pretty much that with him. I'm sorry, though. Rico was fun. Wild, but actually kinda sweet when it was just me and him around. But I guess that's the curse of the exotic dancer!"

James slapped his hand against the wall and killed the moth instantly. "Got him!" he said, triumphantly.

Stefanie said, "Ewww! Is he really dead? Did he sting you?"

James laughed and said, "Moths don't sting, Stefanie! Christ!"

He walked into the kitchen and rinsed the moth remnants off his hand and got a wet paper towel to wipe the splat off the wall. As he was cleaning up, Stefanie came up behind him and put her arms around him and kissed his neck.

She said, "I don't know how to thank you, James! If you get thrown in prison, I don't know what I'll do! Start sleeping with an exterminator, I guess."

James headed towards the door and said, "Don't mention it, baby!"

She saw him out the door, slapped him on the ass and said, "Well, whoever you're going to see tonight, just make sure they give you the money up front before you give up the bootie! It's the best advice I can give!"

James nodded and said, "Business before pleasure, always!!"

~~~~~

James knocked on J. T.'s apartment door, in something of a nervous expectation of what he would find. J. T. tended to play into the macho, ex-Marine role, so he wasn't expecting much in the way of a home for him.

When he answered the door, James was a little taken aback by the fact that J. T. still had his police uniform on. After what had happened on their last date, it made James a little uneasy to see him in the uniform.

J. T. told him to come on inside and James walked in the door. He said to him, "You've still got your uniform on."

J. T. pulled James to him and gave him a quick kiss. "Yeah, got home a little late and haven't been able to change yet. I tried to clean up the apartment a little for you, though."

J. T. lived in a small, older apartment complex and had a small townhouse style unit. James looked around and finally got to see how J. T. lived first-hand. He'd seen worse, and it didn't give him a headache the way Stefanie's apartment did. The best way James could describe it was that it was one step above how most college students would live. The carpet, which was probably light beige at one point, was now a dingy, textured gray. It was too far gone for shampooing. Torching it and putting the carpet out of its misery was the only humane thing to do. The couch was a dark blue and light yellow striped thing. James could easily see J. T.'s perfect butt print in the end where the end table and TV remote were. The two end tables were something covered with navy blue pieces of fabric, probably plastic milk crates.

On top of the end tables were simple, blocky lamps, but they were surrounded by... stuff. There were photos, a ceramic figurine of the Marines logo, a small teddy bear with a heart on its chest, a clock, a gun, a box of tissues, and a host of other random things. The TV was a decent size, but obviously about ten years old or so and was sitting on a cheap, laminated particle board TV stand with a no-brand stereo and DVD player on the shelf. Sprinkled around it were a bunch of random DVDs. The walls of the living room were covered in the popcorn textured stuff you usually see on ceilings, but the ceiling itself was smooth. James couldn't figure out the logic behind that to save his life. Over in a corner was a weight machine with some clothing hanging off of it, and a few dumbbells littered around its base.

And to top it off, the place had a slightly musty smell to it that reminded James too much of stale fast food.

He looked back over at J. T.

"Look, I know what you're thinking," said J. T. "Don't worry about the uniform – I'm not going to do a repeat of that. I don't think you were a very good sport, but I respect your wish not to be treated that way. Gimme a second and I'll go change out of this."

He said to James, "Hey, can you go ahead and fix the plates, and I'll change into something a little less fun."

"J. T.!" exclaimed James, indignantly. James normally had a good sense of humor about almost anything, but that comment was actually stretching it.

"Just kidding! Just kidding!" J. T. said impatiently and headed up the stairs to his bedroom to change clothes. James wondered if he really was kidding or not.

All the times James and J. T. had engaged in sex, James had been the one doing most of the work. J. T. had been pretty passive about it, something James was willing to write off as the typical newbie response. But on their last date, J. T. had decided he wanted to put his police uniform back on. James had thought it might be kind of sexy, and let him. But as soon as J. T. got the uniform on, he took on something of an aggressive, authoritarian, nasty attitude. James tried to play along a little bit, for J. T.'s sake. But he started calling James nasty names, like 'cocksucker' and 'filthy faggot' in addition to being a little more active in the physical behavior. But what should have been lightweight role-play took on too much of a dark tone for James. After a little bit, James couldn't stand the ongoing humiliating treatment any more. J. T. accused James of not being any fun, but James thought it had all gone too far. The evening didn't end on a great note as a result of the argument. But on the plus side, J. T. had loosened up a little in terms of physical contact, and was willing to kiss and touch now, even if it didn't immediately lead to sex.

James walked into the living room and looked at the picture on the wall of J. T. at attention in his full-dress uniform. J. T. hardly looked any different than he did in the picture, save for a few extra years of age. There was also a more casual picture of J. T. with several of his buddies from the Marines out in a field. They had fatigues on, but no shirts. The image pretty much dripped testosterone. He walked over and looked at some of the things on the end tables next to the couch. The gun was very disturbing to James and actually worried him some. Why would J. T. have a revolver sitting out in plain sight like that? Next to a civil war soldier figurine, there was a white porcelain frame with the word 'Memories' along the bottom. In it was a picture of J. T. and some slightly-overweight blond girl with rather large hair and too much eye shadow. They had their arms around each other, and James had to assume this was J. T.'s ex-girlfriend.

James wandered back into the kitchen, which was pretty darn clean. James got the feeling, though, that the cleanliness there was mostly due to a lack of real use. The trash can next to the counter did have lots of beer bottles in it, but not much else. He dug around in some of the drawers until he found some actual silverware and served up the Chinese food on plates. James was hungry and the Chinese food did look pretty good.

James could hear some music start playing out in the living room, and J. T. strode back into his kitchen and over to the refrigerator to get a couple of beers. He had changed into a pair of gray sweatpants and a tight, black t-shirt with a roaring lion and Lawder Lions written across the front. "How 'bout this? Is this better? It's definitely more comfortable than the uniform."

James put his hand on J. T.'s chest and said, "Much better. You know how to wear tight t-shirts better than anybody I know!"

J. T. took James' hand and rubbed it around on his chest and stomach. A lecherous grin spread across his face and he said, "Yeah, you do like that, don't you?" He reached around James and grabbed his ass and kissed him. "That's what I thought!"

They settled in on the sofa to have dinner. James wasn't really much into country music, which is what J. T. had started playing, but as far as country music went, it wasn't too bad, so he put up with it.

James asked, "Should I be concerned about the gun right next to you on the table there?"

J. T. had a mouthful of lo-mein noodles in his mouth, which hung open as he gave James a confused look. He started chewing again and looked over at the end table next to him and saw the gun there.

He put his plate down and picked up the gun casually. He said, through a full mouth, "Oh, this thing?" He laughed and pointed it at the far wall with both hands and pulled the trigger. James jumped when he saw J. T. pulling the trigger, but all that happened was a small flame came out of the end of the barrel and J. T. exclaimed, "I'm gonna pop a cap in yo' gas grill, mo fo!"

James felt like an idiot for thinking it was a real gun. J. T. said, "It was a gag gift from a friend last year. Come to think of it, I guess most people would think I was an unstable cop if I've got a gun sitting out next to the couch! I don't know where he got it, but it is pretty damn realistic looking."

J. T. took another big bite of his food and said while chewing, "You didn't really think I'd leave a loaded gun just sitting around in my den, do you?"

James tried to laugh it off, "No, not really. But you're right, it's very convincing." But he had wondered about J. T. leaving a gun out in the open in his apartment, despite that claim otherwise.

J. T. looked at James while swallowing, and then put his plate down again. He put his hand on James' back and said, "Look, I know I got carried away last time, but I swear I didn't mean anything that way. I'm not some kind of freak on the edge or anything like that. I know it's taken me a little time to get used to being gay, and a lifetime of living straight doesn't just go away instantly. I'm still dealing with it some, as you can tell. You've been really great and patient with me, and I appreciate it." J. T. moved his other hand to James' leg and rubbed up and down on it.

James wanted to believe J. T., and he did feel like maybe he had overreacted to the whole thing. He nodded and said, "I know. Don't worry about it. After we had argued

about going out somewhere versus staying in, I just wasn't sure if there was something more to the names you were calling me or not."

He drank some of his beer and ventured, "So if you're getting more comfortable, maybe you'd be willing to meet my mother?"

James could instantly see J. T.'s demeanor darken slightly. J. T. said, "Well, I don't know if I'm ready for all *that* yet. I guess there's things that I've done that have scared you and there's things like this that you do that scare me."

James immediately backed off. "Don't worry about it. It's not that I'm committing you to a relationship. That's not why I want you to meet her. I don't really care if you meet her at all. She just treats me like a high school kid now that I'm back living in town and she wants to meet the person I'm seeing. She's hounding me about it and I'm trying to get her off my back. I wish I hadn't told her I was seeing anyone at all."

"You didn't tell her my name, or anything, did you?" asked J. T., suspiciously.

"No, no, no. Don't worry about that. I haven't told anyone about you at all, even Brick. He was curious, but he's not pushy like my mother."

J. T. picked up his plate to continue eating. James pointed at the picture on the table next to J. T. with his chopstick and asked, "Is that you and your girlfriend there in that picture?"

"Yeah, that's Phoebe. Just been too lazy to take that down since we broke up. You know, I think I broke up with her because deep down inside, I knew we were going to wind up together. My mind had been spinning like a top since that first time I found the DVD and knew you were gay. I just hadn't really ever been around someone that I could maybe talk to about it or try it out," confessed J. T.

James thought that Phoebe was a little fat for someone as good-looking as J. T. He pointed over at the picture on the wall with all the shirtless Marines in it. "How about your Marine buddies there. Are you going to tell me you never had sex with any of them? There are some pretty good looking guys there."

J. T. laughed and said, "I never even thought about it then. No sex, no hard-ons in the shower, no beating off late at night while thinking about them, nothing."

"Were any of them gay, that you knew of?"

"None that I knew of. Bennett, the second from the right in the picture, always seemed a little gay, but nobody felt strongly enough about it for it to become an issue. He might have been. Looking at that bunch of losers, I'd have to say that Culpepper, the one kneeling in front, is the one I'd most like to fool around with now. He was a mean son-of-a-bitch, though. He could make it through an obstacle course in half the time it took everyone else, and then he'd get mad at the rest of us for dragging him down. He's still in the Corps. A damn good Marine."

"Would it have become an issue with Bennett if you all thought strongly that he was gay?" asked James.

"I'm not sure. We all liked him. He was a funny guy. Culpepper would have probably made an issue of it more than anybody else."

“What would you have done if Bennett said he wanted to blow you in the shower one day?”

J. T. turned a little red, then tried to laugh. “Honestly, at the time, I probably would have beat the crap out of him. But I probably wouldn’t have said anything to anyone else about it.”

They finished up dinner and came back into the living room just as a slower country music song was coming on.

J. T. said, “Aww, I love this song! Come here!”

James looked at him a little suspiciously, “Why?”

J. T. smiled and motioned to him to come closer. “Just come here, dumbass!”

James came up to him and J. T. wrapped his arms around him and started to sway a little bit. “I want to dance with you to this song. You like to dance, right?”

James didn’t expect this from J. T. at all, and it made up for a lot of the small, uncomfortable things that had happened since they had started seeing each other. James felt suspended in air, J. T.’s cheek against his and gently swaying back and forth. He might not be the most sophisticated man around, but moments like these made him remember how much happiness could be found in the smallest and humblest of moments, just as Brick had said. James pulled J. T. a little tighter to him and found that country music had a lot more to offer than he had ever realized.

“Yeah, I do,” said James, resting his chin on J. T.’s shoulder. J. T. put his hand up on the back of James’ head and led James gently around his living room while the steel guitar and piano in the song showed them the way.

Chapter 31

James stretched, trying to get the soreness out of his muscles. He hadn't really counted on how much he'd hurt after just a week of working outside with Brick and Roddy and everyone else. He may have used the gym regularly, but landscaping was a different kind of physical labor and he could feel it. Plus, he was sure that Brick and Roddy were being rougher on him than strictly necessary, just because they wanted to give him a hard time. They seemed to get a kick out of watching James try to keep up with them. But, despite Brick and Roddy being complete assholes, he had a much better time working with them than he ever had at Natahatchee Ford.

James' mom had reacted about as expected to the news of him being fired. He had to talk her out of her promise to give Jasper Griffiths a piece of her mind the next time she saw him. But she was thrilled he would be helping out with the business, and even happier that he and Brick were back on speaking terms. She offered to have James help her with some of the business development stuff that she still did, but James wanted to focus on just being out with everyone else for a while.

Feeling the ache in his muscles, though, made him decide to take a nap for the first time in a long time on a Saturday afternoon.

And as happens too often with Saturday afternoon naps, it was interrupted when, not ten minutes into it, he got a call from Jerry.

The instant James heard Jerry's voice, though, he knew something was up. It was calm like always, but there was something of an edge in it this time. Jerry said, "James, I need for you to come over to my place, please. Now."

James might have otherwise protested, but something in Jerry's voice made him feel like he wasn't being offered a choice.

~~~~~

When he got to Jerry's house, Jerry was sitting outside on the front step.

James said "Hi" as he came up the walkway to him, but Jerry just nodded his head back towards the front door and led James inside. James knew something was really up; the look on Jerry's face was very cloudy for such a sunny day. His mind immediately went to Cory.

Jerry led James into the den and asked him to sit and wait a moment. When Jerry went back down the hall, he was sure it was to get Cory.

And sure enough, as soon as Cory came down the hall and saw James there, he immediately turned to go back, away from the den and away from James. Jerry caught his son by his pants and said, "No! Get back here right now. We're going to talk about what's going on here!"

Cory fought it hard, pleading, "Dad! I can't! Don't make me go in there!"

Finally, though, Jerry made Cory sit down in another chair. Cory looked like he was about to cry and wouldn't look at James at all. James was suddenly very scared by what was going on. He felt like he wanted to get up and run out, too.

Jerry sat down on an ottoman and put his face in his hands for a moment, before finally lifting his head back up to speak. The pain on Jerry's face was visible, and he looked like he was having a hard time starting.

He finally did start to speak, but his voice was unsure. It was rare to hear Jerry like this. "I, uh... I had a conversation earlier with Cory. And I asked him a question. And in the process of answering my question, James, Cory said... he said that, uh... he said that." Jerry stopped. He had to work himself up to finishing. "Cory said that you molested him."

It felt like a bomb had gone off in James' head.

His mouth dropped open while he tried to comprehend the magnitude of what Jerry had just said. It was nonsense. James hadn't even seen Cory in person since he and Brick had been there for dinner over a month earlier.

Cory had called James one more time this last week, and they had had what James thought was a good conversation. Cory had asked James how old he was when he figured out he was gay, about how he handled it, about the first time he had kissed another guy. It had been a good conversation, but James brought up again that he needed to tell his parents, which had made Cory panicky again.

James was in utter shock. Cory had started actually crying at this point, and tried to get up to run out of the room again. But Jerry grabbed him and made him sit back down. James only barely sensed this happening in the room he was so caught up trying to process the implications of what Jerry had said. And to make matters worse, James remembered he had even made a joke at one point about butt-fucking Cory. It was just a joke, and Jerry had taken it that way, but under these circumstances...

James looked up, unable to speak, his mouth hanging open. He looked at Jerry, then over at Cory, hoping to find some kind of understanding of where this suddenly came from. Of why Cory would accuse James of this. Cory was only looking at the carpet down around his feet.

James slowly shook his head. "I *never* would..." James could feel tears starting in his own eyes. He had been hurt before, but this was something else. Molesting a child? James couldn't even think clearly. All he had done was try to help Cory.

Cory sobbed miserably and James looked back over at Jerry. Jerry himself seemed on the verge of tears, his frown fighting them back.

Jerry finally spoke again, though. He said, his voice still weak, "James, I'm still a policeman. And even hearing something like this from my own son, I react like a policeman. Part of that reaction is to get details."

Jerry started to calm down some, the assurance in his voice gaining a little ground. "One of those details was that this happened last weekend. Last Saturday night, specifically."

Jerry turned to Cory and continued, very gravely, "Cory, I love you and you're my son. But I know that what you're saying is some kind of lie, for whatever reason."

James and Cory both jerked their heads up and looked at Jerry upon hearing that. Cory stopped crying and suddenly looked terrified.

"Cory, I was with James that evening. You just didn't know that. But there was no way James could have done anything that night."

James felt a relief wash over him. Jerry was right! That was the night he and Jerry and Brick had gotten high and then gone out to the steakhouse. But at the same time, James couldn't help but feel terrible that something had happened that made Cory make this claim about him. Why would Cory turn on him like that?

"So, Cory, I just want to understand," pressed Jerry. "Why would you say something like that about James? You've made it clear that you have a problem with him being gay. Is that it? Is that why you've been calling him?"

James suddenly realized when he heard Jerry's last question. Cory must have been calling James from a cell phone! Of course, Jerry or Carrie Anne would see the calls to James on the bill! How could he have been so stupid?

Cory was just sitting on his hands and crying, rocking back and forth slightly. Was that what caused Cory to turn on him? It was just another way to deflect when Jerry had seen that Cory had been calling James. Cory couldn't answer.

Jerry looked back over at James. "James," he asked, "why has Cory been calling you? What's going on here?"

But James felt himself caught. He couldn't very well say that Cory had been making abusive phone calls. That was just throwing Cory under the bus, and it was a lie. But he couldn't admit to what they were really talking about either. James didn't know what to say.

In the end, James just frowned and looked up at Jerry, not saying anything. Jerry waited for James to finally explain, but James sat there with his lips sealed. Jerry waited, flabbergasted that James wasn't explaining anything to him. Cory looked up to watch James' answer, waiting for James to betray him and tell his dad that he was a queer just like James, waiting for his life to end. Cory was white as a sheet. But James didn't say anything. He sat with his mouth shut and that was it.

Cory finally said, "Yeah, dad. I lied. I'm sorry. I was just trying to get back at James for getting me in trouble. I'm sorry. I know it was a bad thing to say about him."

James kept his lips pressed shut. Cory was just thrashing for a way out of this right now. At least now he was taking a little responsibility instead of trying to put it all on James. Cory kept looking over at James, now intently trying to figure out if James was going to spill the truth or not.

Jerry looked back and forth between the two of them, trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

Jerry turned to Cory and said sternly, "Cory, lies like this can literally ruin people's lives. You're to go to your room right now while I finish talking to James, but we're a long way away from being done with all of this."

Cory got scared again, not wanting to leave his dad and James alone. "But, Dad..."

Jerry turned fiercely on Cory, his face burning red with fury. "*NO! Cory! No!* You will *not* treat people like this! James has never done *anything* to you! And don't you *dare* act like this is something you can argue with me about, like... like playing video games longer than you're supposed to! In your room now, or I swear to God, you'll regret it in ways you never *imagined*!"

Even James wanted to back away from Jerry. He had never wanted to see Jerry truly upset, but he was seeing it here. But what was worse than the extreme anger Jerry had let loose, it was the disappointment that was mixed in with it. Cory had all along been afraid of disappointing his parents, and here it was anyway. It was heartbreakingly.

Cory started sobbing again, but stood up and shuffled down the hall to his room like a man with a death sentence.

Jerry sat back down on the ottoman and put his face back in his hands. James sensed how incredibly still and silent the house felt. James suddenly heard a sob escape from Jerry, his entire upper body heaving with it. When he looked up, Jerry had tears streaming down his face.

He stood up and wiped at his face to dry the tears some. He said to James, "C'mon," and motioned for him to follow. Jerry led James back out the front door. Jerry took James halfway down the walk back to his car before turning to face him, fresh tears on his face. He looked like a broken man.

He pleaded with James, "James, I need your help here. I need to know what's really going on. Cory's feeding me bullshit, and you and I both know it. Those calls weren't crank calls. What was he saying to you? Help me out, James."

James couldn't do it, though. He had made a clear and firm promise to Cory to not talk to Jerry or Carrie Anne or anyone else without Cory's consent. And no matter how good a reason he might have right now or what the cost, he just couldn't throw that promise to Cory away.

James just pressed his lips shut and said nothing. He looked down.

Jerry put his hand on James' shoulder, and James looked up at Jerry. Jerry's eyes, normally so piercing, never had looked so old and worn to James. He begged, "*Please, James.*"

James still said nothing.

Jerry took his hand off James' shoulder and turned to go back inside.

James glanced up at the bright sunlight, fighting back the tears from what he was putting his friend through right at that moment. He called after him and asked, "Jerry, do you trust me?"

Jerry turned back, almost relieved to have James say anything to him. "Yes, James, I do. It's a little hard right now given the circumstances. But I do."

"Cory... just give him a chance. Just give him a little bit of time."

James turned and left, leaving Jerry standing on his front step to mull over what he had said.

~~~~~

Back at his apartment, James was in something of a fugue, and couldn't seem to shake it. He needed something to distract him. Something uncomplicated.

So he went over to his mother's house to see Lindsey, currently the most uncomplicated person he knew, and it helped him a lot. He and Lindsey spent the rest of the afternoon together, and he did everything he could to be the best big brother in the world. He took her to the park for a little while, they went and got ice cream together, and they read stories and watched cartoons. "Chillaxing" was the word James' mom had used to describe their afternoon.

While he was there, he tended to the fish pond out in the back yard as well, now that Roddy was giving him that particular grunt work to do. Roddy would even want to come by at some point to "inspect James' work", but really he'd just come by to visit with Lindsey and Bea a little. Roddy had played up on the whole joke about him being James' boss, and Brick being James' boss' boss, and they all had some fun with it. Everyone else seemed to get a kick out of it as well, especially Amos, who teased James that he had seniority over him at Montgomery Landscaping and he'd better not forget it. So Roddy,

who normally took care of the pond in Bea's back yard, took great pleasure in "delegating" that grunt work to James these days.

When James got Lindsey all tucked in bed for the night, she made a comment to James. "Jimmy, I wish you lived here instead of your 'partment." It made James feel warm inside and a tiny bit guilty as well.

When he went back downstairs, his mother said, "I think you love her as much as I do."

"Yeah," admitted James, "the little monkey's pretty irresistible. I never would have thought I'd take to having a small child like that play such a big part in my life."

They talked about how she had grown even since she had come to live with Bea, and about starting Lindsey in the first grade in the fall. She told James a story or two about starting him in school so many years ago, the same grade school Lindsey would go to, stories that James didn't even remember.

James' mom changed the subject after a little bit. "You've enjoyed working with the crew, haven't you, James?"

James knew his mother well enough to know where this was going, "Mom, it's not what I professionally do. It's not what I went to college for. But yeah, I've had way more fun working with everyone on the crew than I did working at Natahatchee Ford."

"I knew when you moved back that you wouldn't like working there, but you needed to find that out for yourself. I'm surprised you put up with it as long as you did. I'm not sure I appreciate you going behind my back to get a job at the business, though," she said, admonishing James with a smile. "However, I very much respect that you didn't come on with the crew trying to be the boss of everyone just because you're my son. But you're smart enough to be doing way more than that. You could take over what I do, such little bit as it is these days, and still have time to work out there with the crew."

James was about to respond when his mother made another comment, one that he absolutely, positively wasn't expecting.

"If you want, I'll give the entire business to you. I'll sign it all over to you tomorrow if you want. I can retire. I practically am retired already."

James actually blushed at the offer his mother had just made. And he knew his mother well enough to know she was serious. Just like she wouldn't have adopted Lindsey without thinking it totally through, she wouldn't have made this offer to James without thinking it through. It felt good that his mother had that much confidence in him, especially after some of the things that had happened lately. But the very thought of anyone really being in charge of Montgomery Landscaping other than Beatrice Montgomery was impossible to James. It was, as they say, crazy talk.

"Mom, I know in your own twisted way you actually mean that. But, no. You've built up and run the business so well, it would totally freak everyone out to have someone else take it over. Plus, for now, I really am enjoying just being part of the crew. Maybe, when it's the dead of summer and I'm running a mower at 4pm in humid 95

degree weather, I'll feel differently. But right now, it's really great to just be one of the guys out there."

To James' surprise, she didn't push him any more on it.

Back at his apartment, as he got ready for bed and with the distractions gone, James' mind clouded again and he didn't know what to do. He had been accused of molesting a minor, for crying out loud. Christ, he had been accused of molesting the son of the chief of police! Even if it had been brief and been exposed as an untruth quickly, the thought that it had happened at all almost made James sick. Part of him felt like he needed to just wash his hands of Cory, or at least that he should. But then another part of him reflected and wondered if he wasn't now receiving the same kind of treatment that he had recently given Brick; wasn't Cory putting someone else to blame for a problem that was, in the end, inherently his? There was a world of difference, though, between James getting a little pissed at Brick and not speaking to him for a while, and Cory accusing James of molesting him. But, despite Cory's misleading appearance, he was still just a fourteen year old kid. A fourteen year old kid going through something very scary.

James' mind just spun in circles. He desperately wanted to talk to someone about it. Well, he wanted to talk to Brick about it, but felt bound to not discuss it with anyone. All he could do was hope that Cory would come around and be truthful, and hope that his friendship with Jerry didn't wind up a casualty of the whole situation.

But something else surfaced in James' mind that he hadn't really thought that much about in several months. Something he hadn't really felt since he stood on the Manhattan Bridge over the East River in New York and thrown his cell phone down into the flowing water.

Things had gotten overwhelming and maybe he needed to consider leaving.

Chapter 32

Come Sunday, James tried to occupy himself with cleaning his apartment so he wouldn't think too much about Cory and Jerry the day before. Luckily, Brick called mid-morning to see if James wanted to watch a movie together that afternoon, and James was all for it. Anything to distract him. Brick offered to get the movies if, maybe, James could perhaps be possibly convinced to fix dinner for them. It was all just Brick's roundabout way of getting James to cook for him, which was totally fine with James. Cooking would definitely help distract him as well.

Any time James seemed to have to himself, he wondered what was happening with Cory and Jerry. Did Cory feel bad about what he had said about James? James felt pretty sure it was just a knee-jerk reaction when his dad had asked about the calls, but still it was a pretty awful thing to do. He wondered if Cory would have let it go further if Jerry hadn't realized it was a lie right out of the gate. That was the scariest thing. Something in him wanted to believe that Cory would have come clean at some point, but it was hard to tell. Right now, all James could do was wait to see if Cory got up enough courage to finally be honest about everything.

Then he'd wonder what was going through Jerry's mind. Had Jerry figured out what the truth was and was just waiting on Cory or James to be honest with him? His reaction yesterday made James feel like he hadn't figured it out. Had Jerry told Carrie Anne about any of it? She wasn't there yesterday when he had been there and everything had gone down. Was Jerry waiting to try to get to the bottom of it first? How could she look at either Jerry or Cory and not know something was going on?

James could almost make himself sick worrying about it. He wound up wishing Brick would hurry up and get there so he wouldn't have so much time to stew over it.

When Brick finally did show up in the middle of the afternoon, James was absolutely ecstatic to see him.

They grabbed a couple of beers, sat down on James' couch and Brick put down two movies.

"Here," he said, "I got two so you could pick."

The one on top was *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, which seemed like a good choice. But James moved it aside to see the other movie and found that it was *Angstrom*. James immediately got nervous.

Brick watched James closely. "So... we don't have to watch that one if you don't want to," he said, pointing at the *Angstrom* DVD.

James just looked blankly at the DVD. Ian was on there. A living, breathing version of Ian. Not just still pictures, or words he had spoken in an interview, but Ian moving and talking and interacting with other people. The thought of seeing that scared James.

Brick ventured further, "You know, because if you're uncomfortable, you know, because of that Ian guy, or whatever..."

The blood suddenly drained out of James' face. He looked down at the DVD case stupidly, then over at Brick.

"How do you..." James said, dumbfounded. He couldn't even finish the question. How did Brick know about Ian?

Brick looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, James. I shouldn't have brought it. I'm genuinely not trying to pry or to make you feel bad."

James was still in shock, wondering how Brick seemed to know about Ian.

Brick said, "Look, I've done a bad thing. We'll just put it aside and I'll never mention Ian..."

James interrupted him, "How did you know?" James realized, to his surprise, that he wasn't upset. He was genuinely curious as to how Brick knew.

Brick didn't even look at James. He just shook his head and said, "Don't be impressed. I'm no super-sharp Sherlock, and it's just a lucky guess, more than anything. The night you were sick and I spent the night here on your sofa, I looked through that stack of magazines you have piled up over there." Brick pointed to the magazines and newspapers on the media cabinet next to James' television.

"Every one of those has a huge story on that Ian Famil guy. But what gave it away were the newspapers. You still have copies of USA Today and the New York Times and all them, all with stories on Ian. People may keep magazines a while, but not usually newspapers. Knowin' your line of work, it wasn't hard to guess maybe you knew Ian. And the timing of his... his, uh, death and you moving back was..." Brick's voice trailed off.

James was amazed at how perceptive Brick really was. James had put tremendous effort into protecting his relationship with Ian from prying eyes, and Brick had found it practically lying out on a coffee table.

Brick said earnestly, "I do want to hear it, though, if you're, you know, okay talking about it. I promise to be a good listener."

James was nervous about Brick figuring out that he knew Ian. He didn't want to talk about it because it meant admitting to things about himself he was trying to forget.

Things that hurt and made him ashamed of himself. But at the same time, he was carrying a lot of secrets right then. Sharing some of that would help with the weight of everything.

James decided that maybe it was time to talk about it a little. He took his wallet out of the back of his pants and fished around in it and pulled a picture out. He handed the picture to Brick.

Brick looked at it a second and said, "Wow! Look at that! You really did know him!" The picture was Ian and James, arms around each other and giving each other an awkward kiss on the lips. James' arm was held out where he could take the picture of the two of them together while kissing.

"That picture is probably worth about two hundred thousand dollars, by the way."

Brick looked at James in curiosity and disbelief.

"But I'll get to that in time," James said.

He drank some of his beer and started telling Brick about Ian. He told Brick how they met on the set of *Angstrom* while it was filming in New York, and how they became involved very soon after meeting. He talked about how Ian didn't care anything about the usual trappings that stars cared about - limos, private rooms at clubs, or shallow, attention-seeking friends – and how Ian wanted more than anything to be a regular guy with even just one real friend. He talked about how Ian was scared of how the movie was going to throw him into a limelight he didn't want or know how to deal with. He talked about how they had so much fun as a regular couple, before Ian became too publicly known, and then how they had to sneak around after Ian did become known. James told Brick how the marketing company he worked for wanted to steal Ian away from his current manager so they could start their own talent management division, and how James was to be the head of it if he managed to sign Ian. He told him how he had no qualms about stealing Ian away since his manager was a complete idiot and had no idea how to handle someone on the verge of being a superstar the way Ian was.

James admitted to trying to serve two masters with Ian, making Ian a success – making him a celebrity and signing him – and being the friend and partner that Ian desperately needed. He talked about how Ian could tell over time, despite James justifying it every time, not only to Ian but to himself as well, that his first priority was Ian's career.

Brick interrupted at one point, "But wasn't he dating that girl? The hip-hop artist?"

"Yeah, Neerja Mireault, the French Indian girl. That was all my idea to set him up with a straight relationship. It was all fake, though. The two of them together hitting the scene in North America at about the same time was a dynamite combination, if I do say so myself. Neerja's a dyke, by the way, so she needed the beard herself. Ian understood why we did it, but he never really liked her. She was a typical rock star - lots of entourage, lots of partying, lots of drugs – everything Ian really didn't care for."

"The more I focused on Ian's career and pushed him, the more withdrawn he got, but I didn't see how deeply it was affecting him. Right after the movie came out, Ian

found out that I would be made head of a new division if I signed him, and I think that pushed him over the edge."

"He called me the night before he committed suicide and asked me to come see him the next morning. He sounded upset, but calm at the same time. I probably should have realized what was about to happen, but I didn't. I was too wound up in what my boss had said that day and what it made me realize about her and about my friends, but I'll get to that."

"The next morning, I snuck into Ian's hotel like I was used to doing because of the paparazzi always there waiting to catch him, and let myself in with the room card he had given me. And he was there, on the bed, gone after taking a bottle's worth of sleeping pills. I'm ashamed to say that that was the first time that I realized how screwed up my priorities had been. The signs were there, and Ian didn't need much from me, but I always put his career, and therefore mine, ahead of him."

James paused, the images in his mind causing him pain he had felt too often. It got harder for him to speak, and his mouth was drying up in an effort to make him stop.

"There were two suicide notes, one generic, and one for me alone. The one to me told me to take the crystal dragonfly, which had special meaning to him and me, and told me not to blame myself for what he had done. It also said I could go public about our relationship, or I could just leave the room and let someone else find him. He said either would be fine with him."

James' eyes were red and starting to leak tears at the thought of the note.

James choked, but continued the story anyway. "On the surface, it seems like a straightforward note. But Ian was giving me one last chance to choose between him and his career. I could go public and tell everyone the truth about Ian, that he was gay, but that he had someone real and special and true in his life, or I could leave things the way they were, and Ian could die the star we made him for all our benefit, the lie intact. And I chose... I chose... the..." James couldn't make it any farther. He leaned over and put his hands over his face to try and make it stop hurting. Brick reached over and put his hand on James' back to try and comfort him.

James sat back up and wiped his eyes. "Well, uh... so, you know how it turned out."

Brick waited a moment, and then said softly, "I'm so sorry, man. I can't even begin to think how hard that must have been to go through. No wonder you walked away from everything you had in New York and came back here."

James said through a wan smile and a sob, "That wasn't all of it, though. The day before I found Ian, my boss, Cerese, called me into her office. She broke the news to me that they had decided I wouldn't be able to get Ian to sign on with Channel:Adage's new talent division, so they decided to hire Ian's manager as the head of the new division to make it happen. I was going to be reporting to that guy. It was so humiliating to me... Ian's manager was a complete idiot and had no idea how to handle a real career, much less launch a division devoted to career management."

"And then she showed me a badly photoshopped image of Ian and me kissing and told me that I needed to be careful about shopping that kind of stuff around to tabloids

trying to make a buck on the side. We got into a huge argument, but I'm not sure she believed me when I said I had nothing to do with it. I knew it was Patricio and Benard who had done it. I knew the photos that were used to create the composited one. They were trying to make a buck by throwing me and Ian under a bus. My friends and my career meant everything to me, and I was nothing more than an opportunity to them. Everything that was important to me in New York fell apart in the space of about twenty-four hours."

James took a deep breath. "When I left Ian's room after finding him, I had nothing, except the crystal dragonfly. I literally never spoke to any of those people in New York again."

They sat in silence for a moment. The apartment was still and quiet. The emotion of telling the story, of everything in the last few weeks, just made James tired.

Brick put his hand on James' back again and rubbed it a little, trying to comfort his friend. "I don't know what to say, James. How could anyone have held up underneath all that happening in their life? I'm sorry your friends turned out that way, but it does make me understand now why you're skittish to trust anyone. I guess I'm lucky to have won any of your trust at all."

James rubbed at his eyes a little more, which were still stinging from the tears.

Brick asked cautiously, "So, uh, did Ian have the hot bod and looks in real life that he had in the pictures I've seen?"

James laughed in spite of what he was feeling. "Yeah, he really did. I've seen a lot of people have to be airbrushed to hell and back to make them look decent in a picture, but what you saw of Ian was all him. He was spectacularly attractive, and he was the most talented person I've ever known. I've never seen anyone who could create and toss off full characters, *amazing* characters, as quickly and effortlessly as Ian could. His skill would have made him an amazing force in the acting world."

"I'm sorry you lost him."

James nodded, then said, "There's something you need to understand, too. When we launched Ian and people saw how young, beautiful and amazingly talented he was, there wasn't a celebrity anywhere who wouldn't have given anything to be seen with him. He already had co-starred with Julianne Moore, Ed Burns, and Michael Gambon. And he was getting calls from A-list stars, directors, producers, studio executives... all wanting to work with him or congratulate him or whatever. There wasn't a single mover or shaker in the industry who wouldn't immediately take his call when that movie came out. But Ian never cared about any of those people. He would have given up a thousand of those kinds of friends for one friend like you. Someone funny, loyal, down-to-earth, and really *there*. So don't act like you're a dumb redneck queer with nothing to offer anyone. Ian would have given anything to have someone like you as a friend. And it's sad but true that I wouldn't have seen what a true friend is - what you are - were it not for Ian."

Brick shuffled his feet on the floor a little, letting what James said sink in some. "Thanks for saying that. I've taken a hit in the self-esteem department lately, so that

helps me feel better." Brick looked at his empty beer bottle and ventured, "You obviously loved Ian. Is he the type of guy you'd normally go for?"

"Yeah, mostly, I guess. He was tall and dark-haired – smooth and thin and lean. Ian had the most piercing eyes I've ever seen. He wasn't as tall as I normally like them, but he was so sweet, and real, and incredibly funny," said James, his eyes going distant as he remembered the good things in Ian for a change.

Brick looked at his hands, then down at his feet and nodded quietly. "So it sounds like Roddy is your perfect type." He smiled at James.

James laughed and said, "Oh yeah, Roddy is a really good looking guy, that's for sure. I wanted him to be gay so bad when I met him. My mom realized right away I had a thing for him."

"Yeah, Roddy is very good looking. Even more so since he's a goober and has no idea how good looking he is," said Brick.

James asked, "Is he your type, too?"

Brick looked up at James and shrugged. "Well, yeah, he's definitely good looking, and I wouldn't kick him out of my bed if I got him there, but I don't know if he's my 'type'. I, uh, don't really have enough experience to have a 'type', I don't think."

Brick added, "I'm glad you told me the story, James. I hope you're not mad. I feel like I kind of pushed you into it today."

James wasn't mad, and he told Brick so. It felt good. It felt good to share something. If he couldn't talk about Cory, then he could finally talk about Ian with someone he trusted. Plus, he felt like he finally was ready to share it with someone he trusted, after having bearing the weight of it for months and months now. And he didn't really trust anyone more than he trusted Brick.

James decided to watch *Angstrom* and see what happened. He thought there was a distinct chance he'd have to stop watching it, especially given some of the horrible things that happened to Ian's character in the movie, but maybe not.

So they watched the film, the first time James had really seen the film in its entirety. And even just seeing Ian on the screen made James feel peculiar, hearing his voice and seeing him move made James feel odd. And in some of the scenes where Ian's character was tortured, James thought he'd have to stop the movie, but he managed to get past it.

When the movie was over, Brick asked, "Are you ok?"

"Yeah, I guess. It makes me feel strange to see him, living and breathing on the screen. I think if Ian were a worse actor, I probably would've had to stop watching. But Ian was so good at completely becoming someone else, like you saw there, it didn't feel entirely like it was him." James felt a little sad and lonely having seen it. He still missed Ian, and guessed he always would. But he also felt very proud to have known him, to have been special to Ian. Maybe if Ian had been just a little more special to him while he was alive, maybe if James hadn't been quite so focused on his own career and his own life, things would have turned out differently. If he hadn't been focused on what he had

decided was supposed to be right for his life, if he had just accepted what was being offered to him in the form of Ian, maybe things would be different right now.

Reflecting on how he had felt bad for grasping for the next step in his career when Ian just wanted James to be the one solid thing in his life, James decided he had done the right thing in standing by his promise to Cory. He felt better knowing he was putting Cory and Cory's trust in him above his own needs right now.

The movie finished, James threw himself into making a huge dinner for Brick. It was way more than either of them could ever hope to eat, and given how much Brick could tuck away, that was saying a lot. Brick even stopped his cooking at one point and asked him if he realized it was just the two of them, and who, exactly, the hell was going to eat all this food?

But James just made a joke about buttering the boss up, and then wound up sending Brick home with about a week's worth of leftovers after they ate a huge portion of the food for dinner.

Brick commented on his way out that he *and* Kicker would be eating like kings for the whole next week.

Chapter 33

James frowned at Melvyn and said, "Just get the fucking popcorn, please! You know you're going to wind up getting it. You go through this same charade every time we come here, and you *always* get the popcorn."

Melvyn gasped, "I do NOT!" But then he smiled, "Besides, it's a known fact, if you dither over the calories for a little while first, they don't count! They proved it! They did! At the Mayo Clinic or the CDC or somewhere like that. You know, one of those places! I can't be bothered with all of the specific details, but they definitely proved it."

Melvyn was being indecisive as to whether or not his waistline could stand having a big tub of popcorn while James stood impatiently waiting for him to agonize through the decision. James was fully aware of this ritual of Melvyn's whenever they went to catch a movie, but he wanted to go ahead and get a seat.

Despite the fact that Melvyn could be a little too over the top and too stereotypical and too drama oriented for James' tastes, it made Melvyn very happy that the two of them could go out as friends every once in a while. James had continued to let Melvyn cut his hair since he had moved to Lawder, but Melvyn had also just assumed that they'd become big friends since they were both gay in a small southern town. James humored Melvyn and did things, like going out to see a movie, with him every once in a while.

It hadn't taken long before Melvyn had also made it apparent that he was interested in James as more than just a friend, but James had nipped that in the bud immediately. He had no romantic inclinations towards Melvyn at all. It took a little effort to convince Melvyn of this, but it became easier when James had started seeing J. T. and could honestly tell Melvyn he was seeing someone. Melvyn had asked a hundred and one questions about the mystery man, but James wouldn't give any information up.

Melvyn had pretty much accepted the status of their friendship pretty well since that point, much to James' relief.

That night, James was still looking for anything to distract him. He was still worried and consumed by what had happened with Cory and Jerry. So he called Melvyn and they had decided to go see the movie *Fracture* because they could both easily agree on anything with Ryan Gosling in it, although Melvyn was disappointed that James had never met Ryan in his previous life.

James gave him an exasperated sigh and said, "Ok, dither yourself slender. I'm going to the bathroom."

James walked over to the bathroom in the lobby of the theater, which was empty when he walked in. He stepped up to the urinal farthest away from the door, started taking a much needed leak, and wished they used a better quality air freshener in the bathroom. He never really liked the smell of the run of the mill urinal cakes, which were assaulting his nose right at that moment.

While he was peeing, three other guys came into the bathroom and took their place at the remaining urinals. James happened to glance over and notice the guy standing next to him, the one wearing a baseball cap. He looked a little familiar. He almost did a double-take when it realized it was J. T.

James was surprised and pleased to see J. T. Well, he backed off of that reaction a little. Being out in public with J. T. had become something of a sore spot between the two of them. James wanted them to do things together – things like going to see a movie, or out to dinner, or whatever. He had wanted to go out on regular dates with J. T. But J. T. had never done anything like that with James. There was always some excuse. He started to get a little put out with J. T. that he couldn't get him to go out and do things exactly like what J. T. was doing right now.

Without entirely realizing it, James stared at him while he mulled over this. When J. T. looked over and realized it was James right next to him, he got a funny look on his face. James was about to say hi, but stopped when he saw the strange expression. He gave J. T. a confused look, trying to figure out what was going on.

Suddenly, one of the guys, the one on the other side of J. T. leaned back from his urinal and scowled at James. He looked to be about the same age as J. T., but with short, wavy brown hair and a little bit of a gut on him.

He looked at James like he smelled something bad and said, "What the fuck are you looking at, faggot?"

James looked back at J. T. trying to figure out if he was with the other guy, or if he was going to say anything, but J. T. didn't say a word. In fact, he looked supremely uncomfortable, like he would have preferred to be anywhere in the world other than standing at a urinal next to James at that moment. James felt himself turning red in the face from the other guy's comment.

At this point, the third guy had zipped up his pants and stepped away from his urinal. He walked up behind James with his arms crossed, which made James suddenly very scared.

The third guy, a big guy with dark hair and a scraggly three-day growth of beard, said through a malevolent grin, "You see somethin' you like, cocksucker?" The comment made the second guy snicker.

James was trembling at this point, in anger, and in fear and was about to respond when J. T. stepped back from his urinal and turned to leave without looking at James. He said to his buddies, "C'mon, let's go."

But just as James was about to relax as the three of them were walking out, he got stabbed in the back in a way he never expected. He heard, very clearly in J. T.'s voice as they were walking out, "Fucking queer!"

James stood there for a moment, petrified, before he remembered to zip up his pants. He went to wash his hands and realized how much they were shaking. Had this really just happened? Had those two words really come out of J. T.'s mouth? He looked around the bathroom, his eyes burning suddenly, thinking maybe it was a really cruel joke.

He leaned over the sink, put both hands on either side of the basin to support himself, and stared down into the white bowl. He could almost... *almost...* understand J. T.'s nervousness and silence. But why did he have to actively participate? J. T. could have just walked out without another word. As much as James knew that what was between him and J. T. was kind of fucked up anyway, this was unforgivable.

He stood up suddenly. He needed to get out of there. He needed to get out of the bathroom and out of the theater. He needed to crawl under a rock, or hide under his bed, or die, or *something*. Anything to make this feeling go away. Because if he didn't get out of there that fucking instant, he was going to go *fucking insane*.

He walked fast back out into the lobby, where Melvyn was waiting, stuffing popcorn into his mouth.

Melvyn could immediately tell something was very wrong.

"What's wrong? What happened? Are you ok?" he asked.

"I can't stay here. I have to leave! Right now!"

James started pulling on Melvyn's sleeve to get him to move.

"Wait! Stop! What's going on?" insisted Melvyn, digging his heels in.

"No! I'm sorry, Melvyn, but I have to leave right now! With or without you."

James turned and started walking towards the door of the theaters, Melvyn soon running after him, trying to catch up.

Outside, Melvyn asked again, "Did something happen in the bathroom? Was it those guys?"

James cringed at the words, "those guys". It would be so much easier if they had been just random people being jerks. He felt his eyes burning again and wanted to get to his car as soon as possible.

He whispered to Melvyn, who was very concerned about James and desperately wanted to understand, "Yes. They made some really nasty comments to me in the bathroom. You can probably guess what kind."

They got in the car, and the entire time James drove Melvyn home to drop him off, he tried to re-assure James. He told James how genuinely sorry he was that it had happened. That Lawder was full of white trash homophobes, and he really wished it was more accepting like New York was. That he had suffered more than his share of the taunts and names, and it was always just spiteful name-calling by ignoramuses. He said James should just ignore it, that he was stronger and better than any of those assholes. It was all just a buzzing in James' ears, though. All he could really hear was J. T. saying, "Fucking queer!" over and over again.

~~~~~

At home, James became despondent. It wasn't just what had happened that night. It wasn't just J. T. calling him a fucking queer in a movie theater bathroom. It was everything. James was worn down and couldn't continue to hold up under the weight of it all.

His cell phone rang and made him jump he was so keyed up. He didn't look at who was calling. He was afraid it was J. T., calling to apologize, or maybe to call him a fucking queer again. He didn't care. If it was J. T., he didn't care what he had to say. If it was someone else, he just didn't want to talk to anyone right then. It continued to ring and buzz and James wanted to throw it through his living room window and out into the parking lot where it would hopefully get run over. He wanted whoever was on the other end to hear the crunch and crack of the phone as it split into a million pieces. He wanted that person to know that the same thing was happening to him. It was all too much and it felt too similar to what had happened in New York.

Instead, James took his cell phone out of his pocket and turned it off. Completely off, so it wouldn't ring or buzz at him no matter what.

James got up and went into his bedroom and sat down on the edge of his bed. Without really thinking about it, he took the crystal dragonfly out of its wooden box and held it in his hand. He looked over and also picked up the carved wooden pinecone he had stolen so long ago. He held both in his hands, feeling the weight of them in his hands. Feeling the weight of his past and present on him.

He sighed and put both items back down on his nightstand.

He shook his head and rubbed his hands rapidly up and down his jeans a few times. He needed to put himself in a different frame of mind.

He went and got his laptop and started putting himself in the right frame of mind for the emails he decided he needed to send.

## *Chapter 34*

All during dinner, James' mom kept eyeing him closely as she picked at her pork chops. James knew she could tell something was wrong, but didn't want to start asking about it in front of Lindsey. Lindsey, meanwhile, was extremely busy with her fish sticks, but despite all the energy and motion put into them, the actual eating of the fish sticks proceeded painfully slowly.

When Lindsey had finally finished her dinner, and after an explanation of how she had gotten a time out earlier that day in kindergarten due to unavoidably smacking Icky Ricky, she went into the den to watch TV.

Once they were alone, Bea just came out and said it. "It's that jerk you've been seeing, isn't it?"

James didn't feel like talking to his mom about it, but felt even less like spending a lot of energy getting her to drop it.

Since the night before when it had happened, J. T. had called multiple times, but James had not answered his phone. In fact, he hadn't answered anyone's calls. Brick had called once, too, and left a message, but James hadn't listened to it, either, he had been so depressed. J. T. had left a couple of messages as well, but those got deleted without being listened to. He didn't want to yell at J. T., or beat him senseless with a frying pan, or cry and beg him for an explanation. Everything he had had with J. T. felt weak and superficial now, and it was easy enough to just walk away from it.

"Yeah, I don't think we'll be seeing each other anymore."

James waited for his mother to start in with the lecture and reproaches, but she didn't.

Instead, she put her arms around him. She said gently, "Oh, James, I'm sorry. I know Lawder hasn't been easy for you. I know you were hoping for something meaningful with this whoever. Whatever happened, I'm sorry it didn't work out the way

you were hoping. It never sounded to me like it would go anywhere with this guy, but I'm sorry it didn't work out for your sake."

"Thanks, mom. And I knew you'd get your I-told-you-so in there sooner or later!"

She smiled and looked at James sympathetically, sincerely wishing she could take his pain onto herself so he wouldn't have to go through it.

James looked back at her a little expectantly for a second, but his mother didn't say anything else. He finally asked, "Uh, aren't you going to ask me about what happened?"

"I could, but would you really want to talk to me about it right now?"

James didn't, but he expected his mother to try and get it out of him anyway. He said, "Does whether I want to talk about it have any bearing on you?"

"Oftentimes, no, but this time it does. I can tell this is one of those things you'd be uncomfortable talking to your mother about. And that's ok, sweetie. But you shouldn't bear it all yourself, either. Kevin will be here soon, James. Talk to him about it. It'll make you feel better, and he'll be glad he's able to help."

James nodded his head.

A few minutes later, while he was in the den with Lindsey watching TV, Brick showed up with Roddy tagging along. Kicker came running into the den first, and Lindsey jumped up to hug him while he licked her hair and face wildly. Close behind Kicker were Brick and Roddy, and she exclaimed "Uncle Brick! Uncle Roddy!" when she saw them.

She ran to Roddy and hugged him around the leg and he squatted down so he could give her a proper hug and kiss on the cheek. Then she ran to Brick, who scooped her up in his arms and kissed her before planting her on his hip with his arm under her bottom.

Lindsey scratched at her face and squealed, "Uncle Brick, your face tickles tonight!"

Brick said, "It does, does it? Are you sure? Maybe we should try it again to see if you're just imagining things!" He rubbed his face around on her cheek some more, which made her laugh hysterically and thrash around in his arms, knocking Brick's baseball cap off his head in the process.

Lindsey followed them back into the kitchen while Brick and Roddy helped themselves to pork chops and baked potatoes. They sat down to eat their dinner, with Lindsey excitedly telling them her perilous story of Icky Ricky rubbing a frog around on his mouth, then licking Lindsey to try and give her warts, followed by the swift and sure retaliatory smack-down, and finally resulting in the unhappy ending of getting a time out.

Lindsey monopolized the conversation long enough so that finally Bea sent her out in the back yard to play with Kicker. Brick took the opportunity to get a word in edge-wise to explain their day to Bea, especially about the one picky client in the morning that pushed the rest of the day off-schedule. Brick assured her that he would only schedule Mrs. Phillips at the end of the day from then on.

Bea said, "I don't even know why we keep her for a client. She's way more trouble than she's worth. Why not let Lawder Lawns deal with her for a change?"

Brick said, "Oh, come on, Bea. She's just particular, and she can't do it herself since her husband died. She's just that way because she's lonely and wants the interaction with other people. We can handle her, just not first thing in the morning anymore."

Brick, Roddy, and Bea continued to talk shop, but James was distracted and uninterested in the conversation, so he decided to go outside and check on Lindsey and Kicker. Out in the back yard, Lindsey was rolling around in the grass near the magnolia tree, Kicker standing up over her, trying to lick her face. Kicker looked up momentarily at James, wagged his tail, and went back to giving Lindsey his whiskery, slobbery kisses. The evening was warm and dry, with a slight breeze blowing through the young, tender leaves in the trees. The sky had dwindled to a faint orange and purple tinge to the west, visible only through the tall trees.

James wandered through the carport to the side of the house near the street, his mind wandering off in its own directions. He got around near the kitchen window where the honeysuckle, his honeysuckle, was growing up the trellis on the wall.

He went up and touched the soft leaves of the plant, happily crawling up the side of the house for many, many years. The vine was starting to bloom now and the thick, sweet fragrance filled James' nose, wrapping him in the memory of so many springtimes past. James had dreamed so much of the day when he'd leave Lawder to conquer the rest of the world, the world that mattered, the real world that he belonged to. The world of intelligence, fine music, exclusive clubs with fashionable clientele, and acceptance of diversity. Not the world of beer, dirt bikes, country music, and people that jerk you around.

What hurt so bad was that he had gotten there. He had had in his hands all that he hoped for, and there it had broken, crumbled, and sifted away through his fingers. And now back in Lawder, where he should be on the top of the heap, he was instead getting hurt by jackasses that he wouldn't have hardly looked at twice in New York.

James leaned towards the house until his forehead rested lightly on the clapboard siding. If J. T. was someone he wouldn't have looked at twice in New York, why did it hurt so bad to be wronged by him?

He heard a noise behind him and turned to find Brick and Roddy walking up to him.

Roddy asked, "What are you doing out here? Holding up the side of the house?"

"Just thinking about things."

"Well, dude, don't hurt yourself."

James laughed politely and stumped his foot into the ground a few times. He looked over at Brick, and just by looking at him, he could tell that Brick could sense something was wrong with him.

Brick asked cautiously, "What's going on?"

"Nothing."

"It don't look like nothing," said Brick, gently.

Roddy asked, "You ok, James?"

James exhaled and said, "It's nothing. I'm fine."

Brick took a step closer to him. "You sure? What's wrong?"

James closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. "Let's just say that Mystery Man and I won't be seeing each other anymore."

Both Roddy and Brick gave James sincerely sympathetic looks.

Brick ventured, "James, I'm genuinely sorry to hear it."

"Yeah, James, I'm sorry it didn't work out. I hope you raked the son-of-a-bitch over the coals," said Roddy.

"No, actually, I didn't. I probably won't either. I'm actually more mad at myself." James looked over at Brick, knowing that he would fully understand what he was about to say. "I saw the signs, but made excuses for him, and I wound up making the same stupid mistakes trusting him that I've made in the past. I'm disappointed that I can't seem to stop doing that."

Roddy said, rather bluntly, "Well, I hope you got some ass out of him. I'd hate to think you went this long and never got a piece of ass out of it. That sounds more like what would happen to me than you."

James laughed, more genuinely this time, and said, "No, the sex was definitely pretty good, but it was all there was. I see now that I was just a sex object for the guy."

"God, what I wouldn't give to have some hot chick using me for just sex!" exclaimed Roddy.

Brick said, "Old Lady Phillips seemed pretty into you today, Roddy. You could probably nail her if you wanted to. I can let you do all the talking with her next time if you're game! She'll invite you in to discuss the work we're doing. She'll slip you a roofie, then ride you like a cheap carnival ride!"

The look of fear, disgust, and amusement, all mixed together, crossed Roddy's face. "Oh, shit no! The woman is so old and wrinkly she probably looks like she's smuggling a shaved Shar-Pei between her legs! Her tits are so droopy and draggy, her nipples arrive two minutes after she does!"

James said, "Yeah, but that could maybe make for some interesting bondage situations, right? She could tie your hands to the headboard with her tits while she sits on your face! Isn't that what you want?" Roddy was always so much fun to tease.

Roddy scrunched up his face in disgust and laughed. "Look, I'm pretty game for a lot of things. But that woman sitting on my face is a little bit past what even I can handle! You sick fucks!"

When Brick stopped laughing, he asked James, "So can you tell me what happened?"

"I'd really rather not," said James, shaking his head.

Brick went over and hugged James tightly, his hand on the back of James' neck. He whispered in his ear, "I'm sorry, James. I know you had some hopes on this guy and I know you must be disappointed. I'm just glad you don't have to waste any more time with the asshole."

When Brick stepped back out of the hug, Roddy stood there uncomfortably for a moment. James looked over at Roddy, and Roddy said, "Oh, what the hell." He stepped up to James and also gave him a hug. It wasn't as full or personal as what he got from Brick, and it was a lot quicker, but James appreciated it, nonetheless. He thought briefly about the kind of hug he'd get from Jerry when he found out what had happened to James, and he flinched a little. And then he felt worse because he wasn't very confident that he'd ever get a hug like that from Jerry ever again.

Brick looked over at Roddy and said, "That was nice, Roddy. Now how about giving me a hug, too, huh?" Brick took a couple of steps towards Roddy.

Roddy stepped back and started to look like a deer in headlights. "You're my boss, man. I'm not hugging you!"

Brick came closer to Roddy, who backed away further. "C'mon man, it's just a hug! And maybe one quick ass-grab! C'mon!" Brick had a salacious grin on his face and lunged at Roddy, who jumped out of the way and went running back around behind James.

Roddy yelled, "Quit it, shit-head! This is sexual harassment! This is a hostile work environment!"

Brick was reaching around James, trying to grab at Roddy. Roddy had his hands on James' shoulders, holding him between himself and Brick.

Brick said, "Don't play hard to get, Roddy! You can always go complain to H. R. if you want!"

Roddy laughed. "Fuck you! You are H. R.! Dammit, James! Don't just stand there! You're the owner's kid, make him stop! He has to listen to you!"

James said, "Sorry, Roddy. I think a hug from Brick here would do you some good."

"See!?" said Brick, grabbing at Roddy again.

Roddy finally stood back and said, "Faggots! I'm done! I'm out of here!" He started to head out to his car on the street. "Thanks for the dinner, James! Your cooking is the bomb, like always! Brick, my man, fuck you!"

Brick yelled back at him, "Prick tease!"

It was very interesting to James how Roddy could call him a "faggot" just now, and be completely harmless. But when J. T. had referred to him as a "fucking queer" the night before, it felt like acid being thrown on him.

As Roddy drove off, James crossed the side yard to the edge of the street and sat down on the curbing, still affected by what had happened the night before, despite his friends trying to cheer him up. Brick followed him and sat down next to him, cautiously

putting his hand on James' back and scratching it around a little, trying to encourage him. "You sure you're ok, buddy?"

"Yeah, I'm ok. Thanks for helping to cheer me up, though," sighed James, his chin resting in his hands.

Brick leaned back on his arms and said, "Well, you know, if you want a little revenge, we could have Jerry send a couple of guys to go bust him on some trumped up bullshit charge."

James' got a surprised look on his face at the thought of Jerry sending some guys by to mess with one of the other policemen.

Brick's forehead furrowed and he looked confused for a second. He said suddenly, "Oh shit! It's not Jerry, is it?"

"What's Jerry?" asked James, not understanding Brick's question.

"You haven't been fucking around with Jerry all this time, have you?"

James busted out laughing and said, "No! What the hell gave you that idea?"

Brick said, defensively, "You just flinched in a weird way when I suggested having Jerry bust the guy."

"No, it's not Jerry! For Christ's sake, how fucked up would that be, huh?" laughed James. "Besides, he's got that itty bitty dick, and I don't waste my time with that kind of bullshit." The misunderstanding had truly done more than anything to make James feel better. He still didn't feel great, but at least it drew some genuine laughter out of him.

"Oh-ho! Such a low blow! And he's not even here to defend himself!"

"Oh, Jerry knows that I know he has a tiny dick."

"You're the only one I know that's willing to tease Jerry like that to his face!"

"Bullshit! You do it, too, Brick!"

"Not like that, I don't!"

"You're too nice. I'm the asshole, so I get to ride him like that."

Brick looked up and James could see his eyes twinkling under the brim of the baseball hat he was wearing, like usual, before he got serious again. "You're not an asshole. Not by a long shot. I hope you know by now that I'm here for you."

James said, "I know. I'll try not to be too clingy."

Brick looked down at his feet. "Don't worry about that. I'm here to be clung to." Brick stuck his finger in his ear and wiggled it around some to scratch it. "It's kind of nice to be needed."

James looked down at his own feet as well. He appreciated the offer from Brick, but last night had taken a large toll on James' ability to trust again. And after New York, he wondered if he'd eventually wind up keeping everyone at arm's length just to avoid the risks of getting too close again.

After he said goodbye and watched Brick drive off in his truck, he went up to help get Lindsey in bed, then said his goodbyes to his mother.

As soon as he got in his car, he heard his cell phone ringing yet again. He sighed and pulled it out to look at the display. Much to his surprise, though, it wasn't J. T. calling. It was Jerry's home phone number.

He wanted to hear Jerry's voice, but was a little nervous about having to deny Jerry the information and understanding he wanted. He answered anyway, but it wasn't who he was expecting.

"Hi, James," said Cory, uncertainty in his voice.

James didn't know how to feel about talking to Cory right now.

"Hey, Cory," he replied limply. He just felt so tired and wasn't sure he wanted to have a conversation with Cory.

There was silence from the other end. It lasted long enough that James would have wondered if the call had dropped, but he could hear Cory breathing.

He finally asked, "Was there something you wanted, Cory?"

There was another brief pause, but then Cory finally replied, "You didn't tell. Even when you were outside with my dad alone, you didn't tell. Even after what I said about you. Why didn't you tell?"

James ran his hand through his hair. "I made a promise, Cory. That promise was important to me."

James frowned to himself. "And that promise is important to me, Cory, because it's important to you."

There was a mute silence again on the other end. James sat in his car, waiting for Cory.

Cory asked, tentatively, "Are you... mad at me?"

"Well, being falsely accused of molesting someone I'm trying to help doesn't rank up there with the best treatment I've ever received," said James, a little more irritably than he probably intended. "But... I know the fear you're feeling, and it can make you do crazy things. Cruel things. Sooner or later, you'll have to face that fear, Cory."

There was more silence and James waited.

When he got nothing, he said, "The ball's in your court now, Cory. You're going to have to be the one to decide what happens next. You and I have talked a lot about what kind of person you'll be now that you know you're gay - what matters and what doesn't matter. But where you are right now, Cory, what you do now... has far more bearing on what kind of person you are, what kind of man you are, than being straight or gay."

James felt himself getting upset. He felt hurt in too many ways right now.

Cory said, "But..." but James just hung up on him. He couldn't continue this call any more.

He sat in his car for another ten minutes before he could start it and drive home.

## *Chapter 35*

James picked up another screw off the floor and compared it to the one in his hand.

“These things look almost identical, but not quite. Can I use either of them, or does it need to be one or the other?”

Stefanie was kneeling next to him on all fours, boobs rolling around dangerously under her Mighty Mouse t-shirt. She shrugged her shoulders and replied, “How should I know? I hate these things!”

“I can’t tell from the diagrams if it makes a difference if you use one screw or the other. Why do these things have to be so fucking complicated for the simplest bookshelf?”

The various parts of the bookshelf were all spread around the floor of Stefanie’s apartment - sides, shelves, a paperboard backing, screws, and various other pieces that they hadn’t been able to decipher yet.

James wiped across his forehead and laughed, “Remind me not to drink a pitcher full of margaritas before tackling something like this next time.”

Stefanie looked up at James, scowling, “Oh no, no, no! Don’t you blame this on liquor! You only had two! You’re not weaseling out of this that easily, daddy!”

“There you go again! You know I love it when you call me daddy!” snickered James. “Ok, let’s just pick one and start!”

He picked up a screw, and looked at the diagrams for step one. He grabbed what he thought were the two pieces of board indicated in the instructions and put them together so the pre-drilled holes lined up. He put the screw into the hole and grabbed the screwdriver to tighten it.

James stopped again, “Shit! How’s this supposed to work?” He handed Stefanie one of the screws off the floor and said, “Look at the head of the screw. How’s this screwdriver supposed to work in that?”

The screw had a six-sided hole in the top of it, but all James had was a flat head screwdriver and a Phillips-head. Neither of those would work right in the screws provided.

Stefanie sat up on her knees, Mighty Mouse stretching grotesquely across her chest. "Fuck! Maybe this thing is all wrong. Maybe I need to box it all up and take it back." She glanced around the oddball pieces that came with the unit and ran across a short length of metal bent into an L shape. She picked it up and looked at it, then tried sticking an end of it into the screw and it fit perfectly.

She lit up. "Oh, wait! This works! Maybe you could use this to tighten the screws!!"

She handed the small metal rod to James, who tried it in the screw he had in place and it did indeed work perfectly. He looked at the first tightened screw like a proud father and sat back on his legs. "Huh! How about that! I wonder if that's what that's really in there for or if it's just an accident?"

Stefanie jumped up and said, "I'm going to fix another margarita! You want one?"

James said, "Yeah, a small one, though, or I'll have to stay home tomorrow!"

Stefanie served up another round of drinks while James finally started making progress on the bookshelf for Stefanie's bedroom. By the time he got to the point of attaching the other side to the bookcase, though, he had hit another snag. The sides weren't lining up correctly and James couldn't figure out what he was doing wrong. The drinks made him feel like he wasn't really doing anything wrong, in fact, and he got rather put out with the whole thing.

"Stef, I think this motherfuckin' son-of-a-bitch has me beat! I seriously think they've packed the wrong pieces in here, like two left sides or something. What are you planning on using these for anyway? 'Cause if you're just going to put more porcelain pussies up there, I'm not going to bother doing any more to help you." He glanced over at the kitten figurines on the bookshelf that made him nauseous every time he came in her apartment.

The grin spread across Stefanie's face. "Some cross stitch pillows my mother gave me a long time ago."

James doubted that would be all. "And?"

"Nipple clamps."

"You sick titty witch!"

Stefanie pinched at one of her nipples through the t-shirt with a degenerate grin on her face, and wagged her tongue at James.

James laughed and started clearing up the pieces a little bit. "I tell you what... Don't take it back just yet. Let me come back this weekend and try again. Or maybe I'll find somebody a little more handy with this stuff than myself. If that doesn't work, then the best thing will be to take it back and try another one."

Stefanie gave a huff of annoyance. She said, exasperated, "Ok, fine. Let's just move it out the way until we can try again."

They moved the pieces against the wall and out of the way, and after she thanked him for doing as much as he could, he took his leave.

Stefanie closed her apartment door behind James and he looked at his watch to see that it was almost 9pm. He heard a noise coming up the stairs behind him and turned around to see Brick there.

Brick smiled when he saw James and greeted him, "Hey, man! What're you doing out here?"

"I was helping Stef put together a bookshelf for her bedroom. She's still manless, so I'm stuck being her stand-in cojones," said James, nodding back over towards Stefanie's door.

"That was nice of you."

"Oh, we're not done! I can't figure the thing out! Either I suck at these things, or they put the wrong pieces in the box. Or it's both of those reasons. It could be both. It's probably both. It's not going together the way it should. Do you think it's both?"

Brick jerked his thumb towards her door. "It's likely. You want me to go take a look at it with you? I might be able to work a little Taylor magic on it."

"Oh, no, I'm done fucking with that thing tonight," said James, shaking his head and opening his apartment door. He turned back to Brick and laughed, "She's going to put cross-stitch pillows and nipple clamps on it!"

Brick laughed as well. He ran his hand through his hair and said, "Oh, I'll have to mention that to Roddy tomorrow. That's just the kind of thing that would drive him crazy to know was going on next door to you! Hell, it'd drive him nuts knowing he wasn't the one doing it for her. He's pretty good... with... that kind... of... uhh... stuff..."

Brick's voice trailed off as the words coming out of his mouth slowed to a crawl. He had gotten a distant look in his eyes, and James had turned to look at him as he spoke, his eyes also betraying deep thoughts. They both stood there in silence looking at each other while the wheels in their heads spun.

Brick finally smiled again and said, "Mmmm, are you maybe thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

The smile spread from Brick to James. "Yeah, I think so. What's Roddy doing Saturday night?"

"I don't know, but I bet he'll cancel it. I can't imagine those two not hitting it off pretty well!"

They both stood there like Cheshire cats for a moment before James said, "I told her I'd try again this weekend, so let's get Roddy over here to build her shelf then. I can fix dinner for all of us."

"I'll tell Roddy tomorrow that he now has plans for Saturday."

James motioned Brick on into the apartment, asking "So what brings you by tonight? You want a beer or anything?"

Brick stopped on his way through the door and just stared at James for a moment, frozen, but then he said, "No, no. I'm fine. Hey, did you ever talk to what's-his-face after what happened earlier this week?"

"He's called and left several voice mails. I won't answer it when I see it's him calling."

"What did his messages say?" Brick asked eagerly.

James shook his head. "I have no idea. I deleted every one of them without listening."

Brick tried to decide if that was a good thing, but then nodded and said, "Attaboy!" through an approving grin.

James found himself smiling, too. Brick and he had been on totally separate landscaping jobs for the last few days, and it was really good to see him now. He asked, "So wait, you didn't come by just to hear me wallow in self-pity over my relationship status, did you? 'Cause if you did, I can definitely wallow... Seriously, what brings you over?"

Brick scratched at the soul patch he was favoring this week. He said, "So, uh... I thought I'd come by and kidnap you and maybe..."

"Cool! Let's go!" interjected James, already walking back over to his apartment door.

Brick stood there slightly stunned while James waited at the door impatiently. Brick glanced around and said, "Uh... okay. That was easy!"

As they were walking out, James asked "Wait, do I need to change clothes? Or take anything?"

"You can go naked if you want," teased Brick, shrugging.

Down in the parking lot, James realized that Brick had brought his motorcycle rather than his truck. Once Brick was on, James climbed up behind him and settled in.

Brick turned back to him such as he could and said, "Hold on tight, I'm going to go a little faster than the last time you were on here."

James grabbed Brick around the midsection like he said and asked, "So where are we going? Will you tell me the general area?"

Brick kicked off and they headed out of the parking lot. He replied, "Kinda over towards the lake. You'll see."

Once they got out on the road, James just held on. Brick had said they'd go a little faster this time, and James was afraid they'd be screaming around corners and straight-aways like madmen, but Brick kept it pretty reasonable.

It actually felt pretty good riding on the motorcycle, with the wind whipping all around. It had been hotter than usual all during the day, and so the evening had kept enough heat to where the wind and open air didn't get chilly. Plus he was pulled up tight against Brick, who was warm and blocked a lot of the wind.

In spite of everything else lately, James couldn't deny one thing — Lawder was a beautiful city in the spring. The trees all tossed aside their bleak winter colors and hauled out fresh, bright new garbs for the awakening of the new season. Tulips, daffodils, azaleas, hydrangeas, and dogwoods all danced up and down the streets, celebrating the arrival of spring.

After they had passed through the busier part of town and were winding through a more residential area out towards the lake, Brick stopped at one intersection and took his helmet off. He put his hand back on James' leg and patted it a couple of times.

"Do you smell that?" he asked.

James took his helmet off, too, and took a deep breath and was instantly hit with the thick, rich smell of some kind of flower. It was a vaguely familiar smell, almost intoxicating, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Yeah," said James, inhaling deeply again, "what is it?"

Brick pointed over to a yard right next to them with a fence along the street, completely overrun with a thick green vine and dotted with bright white flowers. "It's the Cherokee Rose growing all over that fence. Smells good, doesn't it?"

James said, "God, I love the spring here. The only thing you smell at intersections in New York is garbage, maybe a testy little vintage of vomit. New York has nothing on Lawder, smell-wise." They put their helmets back on and took off again.

A few minutes later and they had left the residential streets and houses were getting fewer and fewer. As they got closer to the lake, James looked up and could see the stars and a half-full moon out that night. Except a gathering of clouds off towards the treeline, the night was clear, not the slightly hazy look it would develop in the deep summertime. As the motorcycle buzzed on, James looked up and watched the treetops rush by on either side, but with the moon and stars constant and motionless above them.

James started to get worried about exactly where they were headed, when Brick slowed the motorcycle down and turned his head back a little towards James. He said something, but James wasn't able to make it out over the noise of the engine and wind rushing by.

By the side of a field, Brick turned the motorcycle off the road and right out into the field itself. It took James by surprise to suddenly leave the road like that and he grabbed around Brick even harder to make sure he wasn't thrown off the bike as they bumped across the open plain.

The motorcycle jostled them along to the other side of the field and James was only able to really see just the little bit of ground and tall grass directly in front of them in the headlight.

When they finally stopped, James got off the bike and took his helmet off while Brick did the same. When Brick turned the bike off, the headlight went off, too, and James found himself in almost complete darkness.

"What the hell are we doing out here in the middle of a field in the middle of the night?"

Brick said, "You'll see!"

James couldn't see anything in the dim light.

"If you're a serial killer and wanted to slice me up, you could have done this back at my apartment and saved both of us a lot of trouble!" said James, testily.

James heard Brick's laughter off to his side and felt his hand on his shoulder, "Yeah, but the satanic chant that goes with the ritual murder would have been a little awkward at your place. Hail Satan!"

They stood there for a second longer, and James finally started to see things a little bit more clearly in the field once his eyes became adjusted to the moonlight. Brick didn't seem to be doing anything other than just standing there, so James asked, "Uh, is this it? We just came out here to stand in a field in the dark?"

"No, I'm waiting for our eyes to adjust a little bit. Look over there," said Brick, and walked a few feet away from James.

James followed him, tripping only once in the dark. He could make out a large tree by itself, silhouetted against the dim night sky.

Brick slowed down, and James almost bumped into him. Brick said, in a hushed voice, "Look closely at the tree. Do you see it?"

James looked at the silhouette of the tree against the night sky, but didn't really "see" anything.

He said, "See *what*!?"

Brick came up behind James and put his hand on his shoulder. "Give yourself a chance to see it. Just look."

James stared at the tree for a little longer. Still, all he saw was the darkness of the tree against the night sky. But then he noticed something as his night vision kicked in a little more. There was something in front of the silhouette. Tiny dots moving around. There were tiny dots of light blinking on the tree, almost impossible to see at first. As he watched, he realized that there were hundreds and hundreds of them all over the tree. Not just in front, but swarming around, in, and out of the tree, blinking slowly. The tree was sparkling in slow motion.

The breath caught in James' throat, "Jesus Christ! Look at that!"

He looked over at Brick, and thought he could tell that Brick was trying to watch his face in the dark to see his reaction. But James quickly looked back at the tree, mesmerized by the effect of what had to be thousands of fireflies all converged on a single tree in the middle of a field. They weren't anywhere else in the field; they stuck to this tree in particular for whatever hidden reason.

The field smelled of fresh spring growth. The air was warm. The moon and stars glowed patiently overhead. And a tree out in the middle of nowhere put on a show that James could scarcely imagine happening in real life. It almost took his breath away.

Without realizing it he started walking slowly towards the tree, hypnotized by the dancing lights from the crown of the tree to its base. He had seen plenty of fireflies growing up, but never like this.

The tree was a large magnolia, he discovered as he got close enough, and it even had a couple of blooms on it already. He started to smell the clean, citrus-like smell of the blossoms, and started noticing the fireflies lazily hovering near him, their tails slowly winking like the lights on tiny airplanes.

James reached out to touch a leaf on the tree and one of the fireflies landed on his hand, tickling slightly. It blinked once, then twice, and then lifted off again into the air.

James looked up and wondered at the magnificence of what he saw. The pale greenish-yellow lights slowly wending their way in between leaves and limbs, rising just outside the reach of the boughs, circling around, each one following some path known only to it.

James turned to see if Brick was there with him, but he couldn't see him in the dark. He did see the motorcycle about thirty feet away, though. He started to walk back towards the motorcycle so he could see more of the tree again, and almost tripped over his own feet when he heard Brick say, "Hey! Don't trip over me with your big, clumsy feet, now!"

Brick had lain down in the field so he could look up at the tree, watching the show, so James lay down next to him with his hands behind his head so he could do the same.

"Brick, I wondered what the hell was going through your mind dragging me out into this field," said James, "but I get it now. I don't know what to say. I've never seen anything like this. Anything! It's an amazing, unreal sight. Almost indescribable. How did you find this?"

"I noticed years and years ago that there was something about this tree that lightning bugs liked. I found it back before I even married Jenny, actually. But they're here, all over this tree, every year I come to check."

"Have you brought Jerry or Roddy out to see it?"

"Nah. I'm kinda funny about this place. It's special to me," said Brick in hushed tones, like he didn't want the fireflies to hear his secret. "I keep it to myself mostly, but look forward to seeing it every year. I always worry that I'll come out here and the lightning bugs won't be here. I come out here and I get some perspective on things. I get reminded that there is small and modest magic in the world. That if I would just slow down and look out the corner of my eye, I'd see something pretty amazing."

James thought about what Brick said. Truly, Brick was someone that James had never known the likes of before. He asked, "So, why did you bring me out here?"

There was a brief silence before Brick replied, "Well, I just thought maybe you needed reminding of those things, too, after getting jerked around by dickless. This was the one, small thing I could think of to do to try and make you feel better. It's kind of stupid, I guess, but being out here always made me feel better about things."

It made James feel so good to know Brick would share something like this with him, but he also felt more and more humbled by his friendship with Brick. Almost like he didn't deserve a friend like this. In a way, he felt like he had hardly ever really had a friend before, the feeling he had with Brick was so new and different from any friends of his in his past. So many before had fallen so short, except maybe Ian. And James simply hadn't seen what he had in Ian until too late.

James didn't know what to say in reply, or if he really needed to say anything at all. It gave him something of a thrill to know Brick had shared this with him, and just him. Not Jerry, or Jesus, or Roddy, or anyone else. He just lay there with Brick in the warm night, and a tree sparkling with a slow, yellow-green glitter.

Up in the sky, in the piled up clouds to the east, James saw a brief flash of light and started watching for more. A moment later, another moody rumble of light deep in the cloud flashed briefly and silently.

Brick said quietly, "I love watching heat lightning. I can't think of many things better than an evening like this."

A light breeze crossed over James' face and made its way on across the meadow.

"Me neither. You'd never get to see anything like this in New York!"

A very intense flash occurred in the clouds, causing them to glow orange and pink as the flash reverberated through until it died out a moment later.

James asked, "Is this tree, this night, one of those moments of grace that people should look for that you talked about?"

It took a moment for Brick to answer, as he carefully considered the question before responding. "The tree and the night are, I think," he said. "But even more than just the tree and the heat lightning in the distance, the grace for me, tonight, right now, is to know that you appreciate it as much as I do. That I could do something small to help you through a hard time."

James heard Brick shift in the grass next to him and could see that Brick had turned on his side to face towards him.

"You know, I'll genuinely miss this kind of stuff," sighed James.

James may have only barely been able to see Brick in the dark evening, but he could sense that Brick tensed up in the grass.

Brick asked, "What are you talking about?"

"When I was in New York, if you had described this night to me, I would have dismissed it as being some charming little pumpkin activity barely a step above tossing cow chips. But it really is something. Now that I've experienced it first hand, it's something I'll miss when I eventually move."

"What do you mean move? You never said anything about moving," said Brick, his surprise clearly evident.

"I never intended to stay back in Lawder forever. This isn't where I really belong. Working at the dealership was just an interim thing. It was a good stress-free way to get

myself back on my feet, but in the end, it's really a waste of my talent. And pretty boring, quite frankly. Working with you and Jesus and Roddy and everyone else has been a blast. I really mean that. But I want to get back out there and get another job like I had before. I probably won't go back to New York, but there are other options. L. A., Chicago, or Miami could all work."

There was a stony silence and Brick said, "You never said anything about moving away." It was dark out, but James could sense the disappointment in Brick just through hearing the words.

James sat up in the grass and tried to look at Brick in the dark. "I'm sorry, Brick, I wasn't holding it back. I hadn't thought about it much except when I first moved here, but with some of the things that have happened lately, I've started thinking about it again. You're still one of the best friends I've ever had, and we'd better always be that way. Think of it this way, you'll always have a free place to stay in some half-way cool city any time you want!"

Up in the sky, the heat lightning flashed again, and James caught out of the corner of his eye a streak of light chasing from one part of the clouds to another. James waited for Brick to reply and wondered at how much he had hurt Brick's feelings. It totally wasn't intentional. But everything that had happened with losing his job, and Cory, and now J. T. had all added up. It finally felt like he needed to start accelerating his plans to get out of Lawder and back into the real world.

Brick finally said, "Well, yeah, that'll be cool. 's better than... nothin', I guess." But the amount of conviction in his reply wasn't enough to fill up even a thimble.

James reached out in the dark and put his hand on Brick's leg. "Except for you and Zee, Lawder's just not right for me," he said. "It's my own hometown, and yet I feel like a stranger most of the time. I know I wound up feeling that way about New York, and maybe I'll feel it in whatever city I wind up in."

James exhaled and rubbed his eyes for a moment. He sighed, "And... maybe it's not the place I'm living at all, maybe it's just me. But right now I think I've got to start thinking about moving on. I've sent a few emails to marketing agencies I dealt with in L.A. to see if there's anything out there, but who knows how long it will be before anything comes up. And I may have totally blown my chances to really have any career like I did before, given my meltdown in New York. That kind of stuff definitely gets circulated around the marketing world."

Brick pulled his leg out from under James' hand as he sat up in the grass, too. Brick was quiet and the only response James got was the sound of the crickets and random frog off in the distance. He wished he could see Brick better to really tell what Brick was thinking.

"You're making me a little nervous here," said James, trying to understand Brick's reaction. "I haven't hurt your feelings, have I?"

"No, no," responded Brick, very quietly, "I don't expect you to stay in Lawder just to humor me. I mean, it's been great having you here; you're the one that I could do stuff like *this* with. I'll miss you, that's for sure. Zee'll miss you, too, you know. I wish..."

*Lawder* was a little more worthwhile for you. Just took me by surprise... I guess..." Brick's voice trailed off.

Another flash of light in the distant clouds gave just the faintest illumination to Brick's face in the dark night, and James saw the flashbulb image of Brick looking down, his soul patch punctuating the somber look on his face. James couldn't help but feel like he had screwed up around Brick, yet again.

## *Chapter 36*

“Absolutely not, James! I’m not going to hear of it! It may not be perfect, but Lawder is where you belong. Far more than any of those other cities!” Bea’s voice had actually risen up several notches.

James was so startled by the strength of his mother’s reaction that he wasn’t quite sure what to do. He sat down in the kitchen chair to think about how to proceed, his mother’s face getting warmer the whole time.

He said, “Calm down, mom. I’m not moving anywhere any time soon. It’s just one interview. Who knows what it’ll take to find a job, if I even can. You act like I just said I’m moving out tomorrow.”

His mother picked at her hair some, nervously, and said, “It’s just not right. You don’t understand...” She paused here before trying again. “Kevin, Lindsey and I all need you. Here, not in L.A., or Chicago, or... or some other place where you might as well be in China or something.”

“You’re being a little dramatic there, mom, which means you’re muscling in on my turf. I know you guys like having me here, but, really, you don’t need me. I’m sure you’ll miss me, but you’ll be fine. I love helping with Lindsey, but you’ve got plenty of people that could easily do the little bit that I do.”

Bea’s forehead creased while she thought desperately how to convince James to stay. “Well don’t say anything to Lindsey yet. It’ll tear her up to know you’re leaving her.”

That one hit James pretty hard and made him turn red in the face a little. Yes, it might hurt Lindsey, but she was strong, and she’d get past it. She had Brick and Roddy and Kicker and Rosie and a host of others to occupy her time. In fact, James started to wonder if she’d really miss him that much after all.

He said, "I won't say anything until I have to. It's just that... you knew this was a temporary thing, me being back here in Lawder. We talked about it before I moved back. I didn't think you'd freak out this way."

Bea put her hands on her hips and retorted, "I'm not freaking out. I just thought that with Lindsey and Kevin, you'd have reasons to stay. Not to mention Roddy, Jerry and all of your other friends. And having friends like that is way better than some big-shot career around a bunch of shallow Hollywood types."

"You act like I'll never see or talk to any of them again. I'll have a phone, and I'll be back to visit, and I'll want them to come visit me!"

James watched the wheels turn in his mother's mind for another moment, but she must have run out of arguments for the time being. She threw up her hands in defeat and lobbed one last guilt bomb, "Well, you're an adult and you'll do what you want to do."

He sighed and didn't bother to reply to his mother. She just didn't get it. James didn't fit in here in Lawder. And while Brick and Jerry and the others were good friends, he just didn't feel that critical to anything going on. He wanted to feel a little more central to something. Anything.

The back door opened right then and Roddy walked in, a big smile on his face. He had clearly tried to dress up a little nicer for today, but not so nice as to look ridiculous while putting shelving together. James almost had to laugh at the result - khaki pants that were a little too big (probably Brick's) and a clean, white t-shirt that had been pressed to hell and back.

James asked, "Did you learn to use an iron just for that t-shirt?"

Roddy looked down at the t-shirt and said, "Does it look ok? I want to look nice, but not like I'm trying too hard, either."

James rolled his eyes and said, "Yeah, you're not trying too hard. Don't worry about that!"

Roddy flipped his middle finger at James and stuck out his tongue at him.

"So where's Brick?" asked James.

"Oh," replied Roddy, "he couldn't make it. There was one job yesterday we were supposed to spread some mulch at, and we just didn't get to it. The sucker took it on for himself today."

James said, "Hmm..." He hadn't seen much of Brick since they went out to see the tree earlier in the week. He hoped it wasn't because of what he had said.

Roddy followed James back over to his apartment and they went up to Stefanie's to put her shelves together.

When Stefanie answered the door, James said, "Stef, you met Roddy once before, remember? At the Nitty Gritty? I'm hoping he'll be more of a man than me when it comes to these shelves."

Stefanie smiled at Roddy and shook his hand. "Of course I do! Come on in!"

James could tell that Roddy had turned a little shy now that he was actually in front of her.

Stefanie led them into her living room and showed Roddy the box of shelf parts that James had failed at earlier in the week.

She said, "Do you think you'll be able to do anything with this?"

James jumped in and said, trying to be helpful, "Oh, Roddy's got a magic tool that can fix just about anything!" Roddy's face turned a couple of shades of even deeper red.

Stefanie glanced down at Roddy's crotch and giggled. "Well, I hope so! James, you know this from experience, I take it?"

"Unfortunately, no," replied James.

Roddy interrupted them, "Ok, I *am* standing right *here*, you know!"

Roddy bent down to examine the shelf parts, "It doesn't look that hard. Let me get started." He started sorting the pieces out and digging around for the instructions.

James said, "Stef, you help him, and I'll get us a drink. Do you still have some of that margarita mix in the fridge?"

"Yeah, that'd be great! Roddy? Do you want a margarita?"

"Sure, that sounds pretty good."

James went into Stefanie's kitchen and started rummaging around to find the glasses and ice for the margaritas. It took him longer than he expected to get it all together - everything seemed to be randomly stored in various cabinets.

When he got back into the living room with the drinks, Stefanie was on all fours watching Roddy. Her butt up in the air and her boobs spilling out of her top was proving to be a very sore distraction for Roddy. He seemed to be trying to assemble pieces of the shelf unit while never actually looking at any of them.

James was a little worried at how quiet it was. He could tell that Stefanie liked Roddy and was trying to be friendly without being too aggressive. Roddy, though, had gotten nervous and was starting to freeze up. James decided he needed to keep the conversation going so that Roddy would get more comfortable.

"Roddy's always the one to handle this kind of stuff. He's also the main expert at my mom's company on fish ponds and water gardens. I've seen some of the ones that he's put in at clients' houses and they're really nice."

Stefanie sat up on her legs and exclaimed, "Oh really! I love fish ponds! They're so beautiful and peaceful! Do you put goldfish in them?"

"Some have smaller goldfish," said Roddy, "but most, we put koi in."

Stefanie looked puzzled. "What's a Koi? I've never heard of that."

"It's a kind of Japanese carp. Bigger than goldfish, though. They come in lots of interesting colors. Some can get huge." Roddy held up his hands about a foot apart to show how big some could get. "And they can live upwards of twenty years or so if you take good care of them."

Stefanie was wide-eyed. "That is so interesting! James didn't tell me you knew everything about ponds and fish! And you look like you've gotten the shelves figured out now! I thought James was handy to have around, but you're even better, Roddy!"

James took offense, "Hey, I could have whipped that shit, except I was already too wacked out on margaritas! Besides, if you need national media exposure targeted to specific psychographics, then I'm your man and not Roddy!"

Stefanie rolled her eyes and waved her hand to dismiss him. "Yeah, next time I need that, I'll call you! Roddy, I'd love to see one of the ponds you built sometime. I don't know anything about that kind of stuff. Working at the Nitty Gritty doesn't exactly take a lot of knowledge or skills."

"Oh, I doubt that's really true," encouraged Roddy. "You probably are a master at handling drunk assholes and figuring out who's got money to burn and who's just looking for a free ride, right?"

Stefanie giggled and nodded.

Roddy had gotten about half of the shelf unit put together at this point and was relaxing some, partly from James helping to keep the conversation going and partly from the margaritas.

Roddy ventured, "Plus, you've got to know how to keep a whole bunch of people entertained and interested at the same time. It takes a sexy woman to do that!"

Stefanie smiled. "I can do it with most men." She laughed and said, "James here, though, is a lost cause. He won't let me in his pants to save my life! I've tried to give him freebies I don't know how many times!"

"You'll need to go get a strap-on dildo before you get James interested. And even that will probably only get you part-way there!"

As Roddy was making the last comment, his screwdriver slipped and flipped the screw up in the air. It arced over and landed down Stefanie's tank top, right in between her two tits.

Roddy, Stefanie, and James all froze, not sure if they could believe their eyes.

Roddy started laughing and said, "Oh, shit!" and James exclaimed, "Oh my God!"

Stefanie peered down her shirt and couldn't even see the screw now buried deep down in her cleavage somewhere.

She started laughing and said, "I've been screwed between the tits before, but not quite like this!" Stefanie lifted up both of her tits and waggled them some at Roddy and James. Roddy involuntarily leaned in closer to Stefanie and almost started drooling.

She looked from James to Roddy and said with a dirty smile, "Ok, boys, who wants to go in there and fish the hardware out? Huh?"

James stood up and said, "Ok, I'm outta here. I'm going to go check on dinner. When you've finished putting the shelves together, y'all come on over and we'll have dinner. Roddy, if I don't hear from you in twenty minutes, I'm going to call in the spelunker rescue team!"

James left Stefanie and Roddy to finish putting the shelves together or whatever else they would wind up doing with each other. He wasn't even entirely convinced that he'd see them again that night. If they started having too good a time, they might forget all about dinner.

In his kitchen, James started work on the shrimp salad he was putting together, and before too long, he could hear a tell-tale knocking sound coming from where Stefanie's bedroom was on the other side of his wall. Stefanie and Roddy had hit it off very well, and her bedroom wall was paying the price. James just wished Brick had been there to help. He would have gotten a kick out of the shy schoolboy that Roddy had turned into.

James called Brick to make sure he was wrapping up work and still coming to dinner.

"Hey, man!" said Brick when he answered the phone.

"You jerk! You're missing out over here. Listen to this!" replied James and went to hold his phone up to the wall where Roddy and Stefanie were trying to break through from the other side. James had heard Stefanie having a good time over there a couple of times, but this was the loudest it had ever been.

When he put the phone back up to his ear, he said, "Could you hear that?"

"Yeah," said Brick, "is that someone at your front door?"

"No, dummy! It's Stefanie and Roddy doing the horizontal bone dance already! So, are you finished up with whatever lame work excuse you had for not coming over?"

"Almost done. I'm pretty beat, but I'm finishing up," said Brick.

"Good, so clean up and come on over for dinner! It might be just you and me if those other two can't pry themselves apart from all the dried love mud!" said James.

There was a slight pause at the other end. Brick eventually said, "I probably won't make it over there tonight. Like I said, I'm pretty beat. You know I don't like to miss any of your cooking, but tonight's gonna have to be an exception."

James was very disappointed. He was really looking forward to having all four of them together. But even more than that, he felt a little like Brick was avoiding him. Just like James had avoided Brick early on, now he was the one being shunned.

James hung up and looked at all the food in his kitchen and wondered if he'd be eating completely alone.

## *Chapter 37*

James was surprised at how much faster it had happened than he expected.

He sat looking at the email on his laptop, with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. The email was from Ozwald Halstead, the senior vice president for film marketing at Craft Services, Inc. in Los Angeles, a firm that specialized in marketing film and television. It was a response to one of the emails James had sent out the night J. T. had called him an awful name at the movie theater a week earlier. He had met Ozwald professionally a couple of times while he had worked at Channel:Adage and decided he had nothing to lose in sending an email about any opportunities there. Ozwald was something of a pretentious prick - hell, even the guy's name was pretentious - and James hadn't expected to get a reply, but to his surprise, Ozwald had gotten back to him pretty quickly. His first email explained they had just restructured Craft Services and actually had an opportunity that he thought James might be good for. They had emailed back and forth a few times over the week discussing the opportunity and what James was looking for. James had also sent a copy of his resume, but in his line of work, that was just a formality. James' work was very visible in the public eye, and Ozwald was certainly already familiar with it. And now here was Ozwald asking James to fly out to L.A. to interview at Craft Services the following week. James had told his mother that it would take a while for this to happen, but here it was happening very quickly. Almost too quickly for even James to be comfortable with, but he definitely didn't want to pass up the opportunity. His mom was going to be very unhappy, though.

James sent a note back to Ozwald saying he'd be happy to fly out there to interview. He was sure he'd probably get an email the next day from an assistant making arrangements for his trip.

In the meantime, he did some searching around on the web, researching the specific film campaigns that Craft Services had worked on to brush up on their particular style.

While he was browsing around, his phone rang and he answered it without looking at it.

"Hey, James," said Cory.

James wasn't sure he wanted to talk to Cory and wished he had looked to see who it was before he answered.

"What's up, Cory?"

He heard Cory heave a sigh on the other end. "I'm sorry, James. I'm sorry for what I did to you. And... I've been thinking about what you said last time, and... well, I'm tired of being afraid, and I'm sorry I pissed off the one person I could talk to. Talking to you about everything really meant a lot to me. And the fact that you didn't tell when you had every reason to means even more."

James listened patiently. Cory sighed again.

Cory continued, his voice wavering a little bit this time, "So, I think I'm ready. I'm scared, but I'm tired of being this way. Mom and dad are here and I'm going to tell them."

James was truly surprised, and he felt much better. Finally, maybe Cory was really going to man up and do the right thing. He said, "Cory, I really think you'll be glad once you do it. There's nothing to be afraid of, but I understand you are. Believe me, I know it's a hard thing to do. It's a sign of how much you love them."

"So, you'll probably not want to do this, but... will, uh, will you come by? I know I was really awful to you, but it would be easier if you were here."

"You want me to come over now?" asked James, confused.

"Yeah, if you would. I need to do this before I chicken out again." The tone in Cory's voice told James he really expected him to not come.

"Ok, Cory. If you'll really do it, and if having me there to support you will help, then I'll come by."

The sudden relief in Cory's answer said everything to James, "You will?!"

"I will. I'll be over in just a few minutes. And Cory, I promise that things will be much better once you tell them."

"I hope so. I've been miserable the last few weeks. And my dad has barely spoken to me."

~~~~~

When Carrie Anne opened the door, what greeted James was genuine surprise on her face.

“James?”

“Hey, yeah, Carrie Anne. How are you doing?”

“Uh, I’m fine, James. Please, come on in.” She stepped aside so James could enter.

“Jerry’s here in the den,” she said as she led him in. Jerry was there flipping through the channels on the television, but Cory was sitting off to the side, waiting. He looked pale and scared. Cory didn’t say anything as James came in, but James gave him a supportive smile, which Cory tried to return.

Jerry turned around and saw James, and almost looked startled. He turned the TV off and stood up to greet James. “Hey. Um, I didn’t know you were coming by.” Jerry looked at Carrie Anne to see if she was expecting James, but she just shrugged.

“Uh, yeah, neither did I until just a little while ago.” He glanced at Cory to see if he was ready to have the talk.

Carrie Anne and Jerry both looked over at Cory blankly when he said, “I was the one that asked him to come.”

Jerry and Carrie Anne sat next to each other on the couch and James sat down on the ottoman.

Carrie Anne said, “Sweetie? What’s going on?” She looked between James and her son, bewildered.

The nervousness was pouring out of Cory, practically in waves. His voice was shaking as he spoke, “I know I’ve been a jerk...” He stopped, tried to stop his hands from fidgeting in his lap, and took a long drawn breath before continuing. James’ heart ached for what he knew Cory was feeling. He had felt the same way when he had told his mom, and he was in college by that point.

Cory started over, “Mom, dad, I need for you guys to know... I’m pretty sure I’m... I’m... gay.” He closed his eyes when he finally got the word out. What’s done was done, and he was resigned to whatever the consequences would be from that point.

There was a dead silence in the room for a long moment. Carrie Anne looked at her son, then at Jerry. Jerry was clearly shocked, and he looked over at James, searching for more of an explanation.

Cory opened his eyes and looked directly at his parents. He said “I’m gay.”

Jerry stood up and started pacing a little bit. “Gay?” he asked. His voice wasn’t angry; he just seemed to be processing it.

Cory looked down at the floor and said, “Yeah.”

Jerry looked over at James, trying to make the connection. “Well, uh, are you trying to say that James had something to do with this? That he made...”

James suddenly was terrified again of what Jerry was implying, but Cory jumped up and interrupted his dad. “No, no, no!! James didn’t do *anything* to me. I was feeling this way, figuring it out, even before I met James. James didn’t do anything to me.” Cory looked down at his feet, the shame pulling his eyes down so they didn’t meet James’.

"Actually, he's been great. The only one I could talk to. That's what the phone calls were, dad. I know I treated him horrible, but..."

Jerry cut in on Cory at this point, "So you've been talking to James this whole time?"

Cory sat back down. "Yeah."

"But not me or your mother?"

"Well..." Cory wasn't sure how to answer that.

Jerry seemed to tense up a little bit. James started getting a little nervous about how he was taking this. Jerry said, "Cory, how can you talk to James about this... but... not me?"

Cory didn't seem to know how to deal with this. He looked at James nervously, "Well, I was just scared..."

Jerry interrupted, his voice rising noticeably, "Scared? Cory, I'm your dad! How come you could trust James, but not me? I'm your father! Don't you trust me? You were afraid of me?!"

James had heard enough at this point. He said, "Jerry, stop. Listen to what Cory..."

But Jerry interrupted again, irritated, "James, this is between me and my son."

Carrie Anne had been watching Cory intently. She grabbed Jerry's arm, though, and said, "Jerry, stop. Let James speak, please."

Jerry finally did stop. He looked at Carrie Anne, and then back at James.

James said, with a certain firmness in his voice to make sure Jerry listened, "Jerry, be careful right now. Right now, this isn't about you, ok? Cory's dealing with something really hard. Right at this moment... right now... he's doing one of the hardest things he'll ever do in his entire life."

Jerry's eyes got unfocused and his mouth hung open for a moment while he thought about what James had just said. He looked over at his son, who was looking terrified and as small as he possibly could. You could hear a pin drop in the room.

Jerry drew a deep breath and put his hand over his heart. He said, "Oh, Cory, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He stepped over to Cory. "Come here, son."

Cory stood up and fell into his father's arms. Jerry hugged his son tight and kissed him on the top of his head, "It's ok. I'm sorry, Cory. It's ok. You know I love you more than anything. I love you no matter what! Forgive me, son!"

Carrie Anne had stood up, too, at this point. She pulled her son away from Jerry and hugged him, "Darling, don't you feel bad. It doesn't matter to us. We love you so much, Cory. Don't ever doubt that!" She kissed him over and over.

Cory had started crying at this point, finally able to let the pent-up anxiety flow out of him. Jerry wrapped his arms around his son and his wife. He said, "Gay or straight, you're our son, Cory. Our son. Don't ever forget that." The three of them held like that, Cory finally having to pull away to wipe his eyes a little.

He sat down on the couch with his mom and dad on either side of him. They each took his hands in theirs.

James said, "Carrie Anne and Jerry, it's exactly because Cory loves and cares about the two of you so much that it makes it so hard to open up about this. It's scary for him to face this about himself, and even scarier to think about how other people might think about it. Even the smallest, remotest chance of losing the love of the people you care about the most looms terribly large. You'll do almost anything to not risk it. It's not about how much he trusts you. It's about giving Cory the space to come to some terms with it himself, then to build the courage to risk the most important relationships in his life over it."

Carrie Anne rubbed her son's hand and said, "Cory, sweetie, there's nothing that could make us not love you." Jerry put his arm around Cory and held him close.

"James said you guys would be okay with it," admitted Cory. "But I was just so scared and confused."

Jerry pulled his son tightly again and kissed the side of his head. "Don't worry, Cory. It's okay. I understand now."

"James figured me out, and I was terrified of him," continued Cory. "I was sure he was just going to tell everyone. I called him to beg him not to, and he promised he wouldn't. Not even you guys. And we just talked. He understood what I was going through. But he kept telling me that I needed to tell you guys, but I didn't know how to. I was just too scared."

Cory wiped at his eyes again. "And then you asked about the calls, Dad. I didn't know what to do and I kind of freaked out." Cory looked over at James, "I really am sorry, James. I really am."

James was genuinely proud of Cory. He smiled at him. "It's ok, Cory. It's all turned out good."

Jerry asked James, "And you've talked to Brick about this?" Cory looked nervous once again.

"No. Not Brick. Not anyone. I promised," he said, more to Cory than to Jerry.

He re-explained to Jerry and Carrie Anne. "I promised Cory I wouldn't say anything to anyone at all, and I haven't. Both of you should probably make this promise to Cory as well. He needs to be comfortable before anyone else knows. Even Brick."

Jerry said, "But given the circumstances..."

Cory picked up that there was something going on. "Why Brick?"

Jerry said, "Well, Cory, it turns out that Brick's gay, too."

Cory's eyes got huge, "He *is*?"

"Remember how we talked that sometimes guys don't figure it out for a long time?" asked James.

"Yeah."

"Well, Brick is like that. It took him a while. He just now started admitting it to a few people."

"But, he didn't talk to you about it, even? You guys are friends!" asked Cory.

"There are some special circumstances there. Maybe he'll explain it to you one day, but it's pretty personal."

James smiled and added, "Plus, he and I have a really strange history, and our friendship lately has been kind of a colossal series of misjudgments. So, are you okay if Brick knows about you, Cory?"

"Do you think it'll be okay for him to know?" he asked James.

James nodded. "I wouldn't worry about Brick one bit. Do you want to tell him? Or do you want me to? Or your dad?"

"Uh, would you, James? It's kind of hard telling people."

"No problem, Cory. Brick will be another really good person to have on your side."

Carrie Anne and Jerry asked Cory some more questions. When did he start figuring it out? Was his bullying just part of hiding it? Had he acted on his feelings yet? And so on.

Finally, James decided he should leave them to talk privately about it. When he stood up to take his leave, Cory stood up, too, and went to James and hugged him tightly. "Thank you, James. Thank you." James hugged Cory back, just as tightly, and kissed his forehead. It was so easy to forget that Cory had only just turned fourteen a few months earlier. He was so much bigger and more mature looking than that.

James continued to hold him, and Cory seemed to not want to let go himself. Cory smiled at James, and for the first time, James realized he had the same dimples as his mother. He had told Cory at one point that he would be a heartbreaker, and with that smile, those dimples and that face, James knew there was absolutely no doubt about the truth of that.

James remembered the sensation of finally having people know your deepest, worst secret and realizing they still cared about you. He said, "Cory, you'll still have difficult moments, but the hardest part is done. You've come through it, Cory, and it'll get easier now. You've got people that know and love you no matter what else happens."

Jerry and Carrie Anne walked James out to his car so they could talk to him privately.

Carrie Anne said, "James, I don't even know what to say. How do you even begin to thank someone for something like this? You went through so much trying to help Cory." She gave James a hug.

James shrugged. "He's had such a hard time with it. But I can relate. That's why I did it. He needed someone that he knew could relate to it. All that matters is tonight. Tonight has worked out, and Cory has a safe base to build from now. And Jerry, if you haven't before, tell Cory the story about your Ranger buddy, Clay. It will mean a lot to him, and it will do him a lot of good to hear it."

Jerry had been quiet, but stepped forward to hug James. He hugged James so tightly that James knew his back was going to snap. After what felt like a painful eternity, and without a word, Jerry finally let go and wiped at his eyes in the dim streetlight in front of his house. He held James by the shoulders for a moment longer looking at him. He hugged James again, much more gently this time.

Jerry started wiping at his eyes again and his voice caught in his throat while speaking. "Thanks, James. You stopped me from really screwing up in there. And thank you for being there for my son. Carrie Anne and I can't easily relate to how hard this is for Cory, or really understand what he's feeling, so I'm so glad he's got you around to help him understand. Carrie Anne and I just have to make this up as we go along, and I'm terrified of fucking it up. We need you, James, you and Brick both to help us with this. Cory needs you."

James gave Jerry a couple of pats in the middle of his chest. "Jerry, Carrie Anne... don't worry about it. You've already handled this a hundred times better than most parents do. Cory is extremely lucky to have you guys for his parents."

James left Jerry and Carrie Anne to go back to their son. And he got ready to tell Brick a long story when he got back to his apartment.

Chapter 38

James fidgeted in his seat. If he didn't focus and get his mind where it needed to be, he wasn't going to do very well in the interview, and he knew it. He looked out the airplane window at the thick layer of clouds below. He needed to be thinking about media strategies, public relations techniques, past work of Craft Services and how he would maybe have approached some of their campaigns differently.

But his mind kept dragging him back to the guilt feelings. When he had told people about his trip to L.A. for the job interview, they had been surprised. A few had thinly congratulated him on getting the interview, but the deeper undercurrent seemed to be disappointment in James. Or maybe just disappointment that he might be leaving.

Brick had been blown away when James was finally able to tell him the full story of Cory turning out gay, then teased James a little bit that he was going to wind up turning everyone in the town queer. The two of them wound up meeting up with Jerry and Carrie Anne for one of Cory's baseball games a few days later. James had never really watched any baseball, but actually was pretty excited to see it and support Cory. Jerry was like a changed man, mostly due to the change in Cory. He told them that Cory was back on track in school, he had stopped bullying his friends, he was much less reclusive at home, and for the first time in probably a year, he just seemed happy again.

Cory's team, the Lawder Middle School Lions, won, thanks in no small part to Cory's pitching, and Jerry, Brick, and James took Cory out for pizza afterwards to celebrate. Carrie Anne had decided to let it be a guys' night out and let them have their fun. Cory was thrilled to have James there at the game and with him for pizza; he even insisted on sitting next to James in the booth at the pizza place. Suddenly, and in spite of all the stress between them, Cory seemed to view James as a favorite big brother.

Jerry had saved the story about his gay Ranger buddy to tell Cory, so he told it to his son over dinner that night after the game. Cory was fascinated that the guy had been a Ranger just like his dad and wanted to know if he could meet him sometime. Jerry thought that maybe that would be a really great idea, and Brick and James both liked the

idea of meeting the infamous Clay as well. Jerry, with both James' and Brick's permission, made very sure that Cory understood that he trusted both of them completely, and that anytime Cory had questions or wanted to talk about anything, or just spend time with them, that he should feel free. It made James feel very good to know that, despite the rough last few weeks, Jerry felt that way about James and didn't let any of it come between them.

At some point, though, it came up that James was going out to L. A. for a job interview, and the look on Cory's face when he put it together that James might be leaving Lawder wasn't something that James liked remembering very much. Jerry congratulated James on the opportunity, too, and wished him luck with the interview. But James could tell Jerry was sad at the thought of James leaving, too. It seemed to cast a pall over the late part of their dinner and James really felt bad for bringing everyone down after Cory had played so well that night.

But it wasn't just Cory and Jerry. Carrie Anne called him the next day to say she was sorry to hear he might be leaving. She confided to him that he meant a lot to Jerry, and now even Cory talked about James all the time. James tried to assure her that he hadn't gotten any job yet, and everyone may be jumping the gun assuming he'd be moving away. Nonetheless, Carrie Anne also wished James luck with the interview.

Worse than Cory and Jerry was his mother's reaction. She wouldn't even talk about it. And she definitely didn't want him to tell Lindsey anything about it. They told Lindsey he was going on a trip for a few days, but that was it.

He tried to explain to his mother that it was time, he still had a career that he wanted, that Lawder was always just a place to get back on his feet, that she knew this would come around at some point. But she flatly refused to hear any of it. It wasn't like her to just not listen at all to James, and it bothered him.

Secretly, the thought of leaving Lindsey did upset James. He had gotten incredibly attached to her since she had come into his life. He fought to not admit that too openly in front of his mother, though, since she'd probably seize on that to make him feel much worse about leaving. But the thought of not making cupcakes with Lindsey, or not helping her grow the wildflowers they had planted together, or the thought of not being there with her when she started first grade, tore at him far worse than he ever expected it to.

But probably the one that seemed to maybe bother him the most was Brick. And it wasn't because Brick had acted disappointed, or laid a guilt trip on him, or anything like that. In fact, in the last week or so, Brick had been very positive and supportive. But something about it didn't feel right. Something felt different, and James couldn't put his finger on it. He just couldn't understand it, and it worried him.

Overall, James felt all of this tugging at him, trying to keep him in Lawder. It irked him. Suddenly, it felt like everyone needed him there, and was trying to tie him down. But what about his life? What about what *he* wanted and the goals *he* had for his own life? James had needs, too.

He had to get his mind focused and off of all these personal thoughts, though, so James cranked up his laptop to try to look at some material he had saved relevant to the

interview. But once his laptop started up he got distracted again; he noticed he had a few emails from Jerry that must have been downloaded right before he had dashed out of the apartment to drive to Birmingham for the flight.

Jerry had sent him a few photographs he thought James would like, and so he started to browse through them. The first was a photo he had no idea had been taken. It was a picture of James, and Jesus, and Jerry at the reception after Jerry had been sworn-in as the chief of police. Jerry was resplendent in his full dress uniform, but he had his usual broad smile and his hand on James' shoulder. James and Jesus looked small next to him.

Then there was one from just the other night, with Cory in his baseball uniform at the pizza place, with James right next to him and his arm around him. Then there was one of all four of them together that same night.

Finally, there were a few from the other restaurant, but it was from a different night. It took a moment for James to figure out when the photos had been taken, but he finally decided it had been the night he had gone to apologize to Brick and heard his story about coming out. One photo was one the waitress had taken of the three of them together, with Jerry in the middle and each arm around James and Brick.

The last one, though, was different. It had the feel of more of a candid shot than the others. It was a photo of James and Brick sitting next to each other in the booth. James wasn't paying any real attention, and Brick was looking at James. But there was something about the way that Brick was looking at him in the photo. It haunted James for some reason. He lingered over the photo for another few minutes before he gave up and shut his laptop down entirely.

He realized his mind was only going to let him think about what was now miles and miles behind him, instead of what was approaching ahead.

~~~~~

James wasn't a bit surprised when Ozwald kept him waiting thirty full minutes before beginning the job interview. Not that it really bothered him; he had nowhere else to be and his afternoon was at Ozwald Halsted's disposal. He actually had nothing else in particular going on until early the next morning when his flight back was scheduled.

Finally, James was shown in to see Ozwald. His office was large and starkly modern - it was white, dove gray and silver, with a little muted yellow thrown in as an accent color. There were five large, flat panel screens built into one wall in a strip, all showing the media promotion work that James knew Ozwald had overseen.

Ozwald's way of handling the interview was almost comical to James, though. He had greeted James, but then immediately launched into a very long description of his own career, his influence over the way the film promotion industry now worked, and

how every major film campaign from every other agency could be traced to something he had done first. It was all egotistical bullshit, and James knew it. It would have been amusing to James if it hadn't been so wearing and long-winded. But, it was all completely consistent with his previous encounters with Ozwald, so James was prepared to sit politely through the entire spiel.

During Ozwald's soliloquy to his own perceived value to the world of film promotion, James' mind started to wander multiple times. Irritatingly, it had wandered back to thoughts of the photographs on his laptop. Why did he keep thinking about them? He was in the middle of a job interview, after all, and he really needed to be paying close attention.

Finally, Ozwald finished talking about himself and turned his attention on James.

"So James, you really have disappeared off the face of the earth for quite a while. What happened to you?"

James answered vaguely. "I had some personal issues in my life that I needed to devote some time to and resolve," was how he handled the question. He did go on to admit that it had all come at a rather bad time in the promotion of *Angstrom*, but couldn't be avoided. In reality, James knew that Ozwald probably was aware of what was going on between him and Ian when Ian committed suicide. Ozwald probably also knew what was happening to James' job at Channel:Adage. The world of film promotion was small and had a lot of wagging tongues. But by leaving it just at "personal issues", James could hopefully put off Ozwald from pressing any further, especially during a job interview.

They chatted at some length more, mostly about the work James had done. Ozwald focused heavily on the promotion for *Angstrom*, but James was prepared for that. It was, after all, the most elaborate promotional campaign he had done for a film, and it had paid off well in the end.

James was feeling pretty good about the interview at this point, and the possibility of maybe moving to L. A. started to seem like much more of a likelihood. And despite Ozwald being narcissistic, James' discussion with him actually made him like the idea of getting back into all of it more and more.

Unfortunately, Ozwald launched into another round of things he would have done differently on James' attempts at film promotion that he felt would have been much better. While Ozwald went off, and despite his attempts to focus on Ozwald, an image crept into James' mind. He thought of the photo of him and Brick and Jerry at the pizza place. Why had he not realized it before? The photo made him realize he had become a part of the very thing that he had been envious of when he first moved back to Lawder.

His mind then drifted over to the picture of just him and Brick, with Brick looking at him. A memory about that night he hadn't thought about in a while surfaced. He remembered Brick sitting close enough to him that his arm brushed up against his own multiple times. James remembered feeling the blond hair on Brick's arm up against his own. He remembered feeling the warmth of Brick's skin against his own. It had felt so comfortable.

James had never felt about a friendship like he now felt about the one he had with Brick. He realized that the idea of moving to L. A. and leaving Brick behind in Lawder felt a lot like he felt when he had lost Ian and left New York.

James snapped back to the moment and sat up a little more in the gray leather chair he was in, however, when Ozwald paused very pregnantly.

Ozwald leaned back in his desk chair, clasped his hands behind his head and said, patronizingly, "James, I think that you have a tremendous amount of potential. Let's talk about getting you out of whatever cow pasture you're living in and back into the real world and doing what you were meant to do! Let's talk about your coming to work at Craft Services."

## *Chapter 39*

James drove faster than he probably should, especially given how the back roads from Birmingham to Lawder tended to have a lot of small town speed traps. At least it was a beautiful day - blue skies, warm temperatures, a gentle breeze, and intense sunshine. When he had flown out of L. A. earlier that morning, it was a rare drizzly day for them.

He picked up his cell phone off his car seat next to him and re-dialed Brick's phone. He waited impatiently for Brick to pick up, but it just went to voice mail like the other times he had called since he got in his car on the way back. He scowled at his phone and hung up without leaving a message. He had already left two, so another wouldn't particularly do any more good. He just wanted to get ahold of Brick.

Now that he was only a few minutes outside of Lawder, though, he was getting even more impatient than when he had landed, and it really wasn't like Brick to not answer his cell phone or return a message pretty quickly.

He decided to call Roddy to see if he knew where Brick was or could get in touch with him.

"Hey, James! You on your way back?" asked Roddy, clearly in a good mood.

"Yeah, I'm almost back..."

Roddy interrupted him, "Hey, how did the interview go?"

"Fine," said James, curtly. "Look, Roddy, I've been trying to get Brick and he's not answering. Do you know where he is?"

"Nope. Didn't show up today and I haven't talked to him. Now that *he's* the one playing hooky, I'll be..."

James cut him off, "What about Jesus? Would Jesus know where he is?"

"Huh? Oh. No, Jesus has been with me all day, and we haven't seen him. You think you're going to come to the poker game tonight?"

"Ahh, I doubt it. Been on a plane all day, and I'm worn out. I'll talk to you guys later." James was being abrupt; he didn't feel much like talking to anyone other than Brick right then.

Rather than going home to rest or unpack, James drove directly to Brick's apartment. It was really bothering him that he didn't know where Brick was and couldn't talk to him.

As he pulled into the lot at Brick's place, he was greatly relieved to see Brick's truck parked there. But as his luck would have it, when he knocked on the door, there was no answer. He peeked through a window, and saw Kicker in the apartment looking back at him, wagging his tail, but the apartment looked empty otherwise.

He walked around the outside of the building to see if maybe Brick was on the back porch. He took his phone out as he walked around the side of the building and dialed Brick's number again. As he got to the back porch, Brick clearly wasn't there, either. He stepped up onto the porch while Brick's number started ringing. As it rang, he heard a noise inside. He looked through the back window, and saw Kicker still watching him, tail wagging hard. He heard the noise again and saw Brick's cell phone sitting on the table inside ringing. He cursed under his breath.

James walked back around to the front of the apartment and got out the key that he knew Brick had hidden over the light near his front door. He opened the door and Kicker pushed his way out to greet James, snuffling in his crotch as usual. James absently scratched Kicker between his ears and stepped into the dark apartment.

He called out, "Brick? Hey, Brick!"

There was no answer, and it didn't feel like anyone was home. He got slightly nervous again, but didn't let it stop him. He walked back to the bedroom and peeked in, but there was no Brick to be found there. He checked the rest of the apartment and confirmed that Brick wasn't anywhere in it.

He wasn't quite sure where Brick could be, so he left, tremendously disappointing Kicker. He locked up the apartment and put the key back where he had gotten it.

He stepped out on the front step and looked out over the parking lot trying to figure out where Brick might be.

He suddenly glanced over and realized the tarp normally covering Brick's motorcycle was folded and put to the side, but the motorcycle itself was gone.

James wondered where Brick would go on his motorcycle. Over to the lake, maybe?

He didn't know where else to go look, so he decided to head over that way to see if he could find him. Once again, he drove his car faster than he probably should have, but he wanted to find Brick. He wondered if maybe he was at Dr. Sykes' at the lake. Was there anywhere else he might go?

As he was thinking about it and flying down the road, he had an epiphany. He slowed down so he could turn around and go back the other way, but then heard a loud chirp behind him and looked in his rear-view mirror. When he saw the lights of the police cruiser, James muttered an oath for going too fast and pulled over.

As soon as he rolled his window down and looked in his side mirror at the approaching cop, he muttered an even louder oath. He really didn't have time to deal with this now.

J. T. approached James, taking off his sunglasses as he did so. James was practically squirming in his seat from not wanting to have to confront J. T. right now. It wasn't that J. T. still held some power over James, or that James was afraid of him. In fact, it was almost the opposite. J. T. was just a waste of time, and he really didn't want to waste any time at all right at that moment.

"Hey, James," said J. T., squatting down so he could see James more easily.

James frowned and said, "J. T., I really don't have anything to say to you. And, to be perfectly honest, I don't care what you have to say to me."

J. T. looked thoughtful, gazing up in the sky for a minute. "Look, I know you probably don't want to talk to me. You've made that clear by not answering any of my calls. But I do want to explain..."

James shouted, "Explain?! Are you  *fucking*  kidding me?"

J. T.'s expression hardened just a little. "What the hell was I supposed to do? I was with my buddies and they're pretty opinionated about gays! You're completely overreacting to the whole thing!"

That did it. James wasn't putting up with this. He jerked his seat belt off, threw open his car door, and jumped out, forcing J. T. back a few steps in the process.

"You asshole! You're the worst kind! You want all the sex, but never by stepping out of the closet. You only want others to join you in there long enough to get what you want from them. You're heading straight down a path of nothing but dysfunctional relationships. And why the hell would you even refer to those infantile dipshits as your friends? Huh? Are they really the best you can do?!" He poked J. T. in the chest accusingly.

"And I'm not overreacting at all! In the end, you can have all the crap relationships you want. But not with me. Not at my expense! I'm not going to stand around and take that kind of piss-poor behavior!" continued James.

James spat at J. T., "I know fourteen-year-old kids with more courage than you!"

J. T. stood there, speechless at the enraged James in front of him.

"Are you going to give me a ticket?" demanded James.

"What?" asked J. T., confused.

"*Are... you... giving... me... a... FUCKING... ticket?!*" yelled James, punctuating each word clearly.

It took J. T. off-guard. "Well... no... I just wanted to try..."

"Then I'm done. You blew it J. T. Figure your life out and better luck next time!"

James got back in his car, leaving J. T. standing by the side of the road.

He drove back the way he had come, and then turned down a different road. A few minutes later he got to where the land opened up into wide fields on either side of the road and he slowed down. And sure enough, he saw Brick's motorcycle parked off to the side.

He pulled over and got out. He looked out over the field, thinking to himself that it was beautiful even during the day. The field was evenly covered in knee-high grass and clover, the gentle breeze blowing whispered waves across it. He saw the lone magnolia tree near the back of the field and started walking towards it.

As he got nearer, he saw Brick quietly step out from within the branches of the tree, watching as James approached.

He marched swiftly through the grass and clover towards the tree, still keyed up from his encounter with J. T. But as he got nearer, the breeze shifted direction slightly, and he could smell the blooms from the magnolia tree fill his lungs. The fresh, intoxicating, clean smell filled his lungs and his mind. He instantly slowed and calmed down. Brick stood motionless, watching James and waiting. James examined Brick as he got closer trying to figure out when it had happened. When did his feelings change? How did it sneak up on him so that he didn't even notice it?

When he got close enough, Brick started to say something to James, but James held up his hand to silence him.

Instead, James asked him, "The night you brought me here... You were trying to tell me something that night, weren't you?"

Brick instantly looked down, his face coloring slightly. He nodded feebly, not adding any words to his answer.

James stepped up close to Brick and took a moment to pull some courage together. He muttered, "Ok, I may be about to make a complete ass of myself, but here goes."

James reached out and put his hand on the center of Brick's chest. Brick looked up at James, the expression on his face something between fear and anticipation. James closed the distance between them and leaned forward slowly. He tilted his head slightly, and leaned in a little more until his lips pressed lightly against Brick's, feeling Brick's whiskers tickle his lips and chin. The kiss lasted only a moment, and was as light as the breeze across a field of clover.

Brick pulled away, a frown creeping across his face, and a hurt evident in his hazel eyes.

James exhaled, his shoulders drooping a little. "You don't want me to kiss you, do you?"

Brick looked directly into James' eyes, holding his gaze for all he was worth.

"It's what I've wanted more than anything in this world for a while now."

Then he tore his eyes away from James, looking away. "But, if you're going to be leaving... It'll just... hurt. It'll just hurt too much. They offered you a job, didn't they?" He looked back at James to see the answer in his face.

James nodded slowly.

“So when are you moving?”

James took a small step forward towards Brick. He said, almost whispering, “I told them ‘maybe’.”

Brick’s expression changed, the faintest glimmer of hope now appearing in his eyes.

Brick asked, “Maybe?”

James nodded.

“So you’ll stay?”

James said, “Maybe.”

James could see the hope in Brick’s eyes growing, daring to peek out. A faint smile crept onto James’ face. “Only if I’m sure I mean the world to you,” he said.

Brick’s face lit up with a smile, disbelief now playing across his expression. He scratched at his ear some, unsure whether this was all really happening.

He finally asked, “Can I... kiss you?”

“Only if I mean the world to you,” warned James gently.

Brick put his hands on either side of James’ face and kissed him. Another light, easy kiss. A springtime-and-gentle-breeze kiss. It only lasted a few seconds.

Brick took James by the hand, lacing his fingers with James’. He lifted James’ hand up to his mouth and kissed the back of it, his eyes locked with James’ and a smile on his face. He said to him, “You have no idea what you mean to me!”

James asked Brick, “Will you go out on a date with me? Tonight?”

Brick laughed, “That’s got to be about the stupidest question I’ve ever been asked!”

James insisted, “So, is that a yes?”

“Yes, it’s a yes, dammit!” exclaimed Brick, almost jumping up and down in excitement. He just stared at James, still not entirely sure if this was maybe just a cruel dream masquerading as reality.

Brick suddenly asked, “Can I touch your face?”

James teased him, “That’s got to be about the stupidest question I’ve ever been asked!”

Brick reached out and ran his hand gently over James’ face. James closed his eyes and nuzzled into Brick’s palm as he placed it lightly on his face. Brick ran his hand up through James’ hair, over the tips of his ears, down the bridge of his nose, and lightly across his lips, which kissed Brick’s fingertips carefully. James put his hand behind Brick’s neck and pulled him into another kiss, deeper this time. More intense, more physical, more emotional, more resonant. Their tongues got acquainted with one another and their bodies pressed tightly against each other, trying to melt together into one.

The kiss ended, but their foreheads rested against each other's. James said, "You mean the world to me, Kevin Taylor. I'm just glad I finally realized it."

## *Chapter 40*

The beautiful day had settled down into an equally beautiful evening, the brilliant blue skies from earlier giving way to orange and red hues that whispered of a sleepy sun.

James shifted the bag from one arm to the other and knocked lightly at the door. The food in the bag was warm and making his arm hot, so he shifted it back to the other arm. He had told Brick he'd make something and bring it over, but James was impatient, and giddy, and wanted to get back over to Brick's place sooner rather than later. So he had just picked up some Italian take-out for the evening.

There was no answer at the door immediately, so James tried the doorknob and the door opened easily. Kicker was there to greet him, completely uninterested in his crotch this time since he had a bag that clearly smelled much better.

He stepped in and started over towards the kitchen to put the food down, when he saw Brick step out of the bathroom with nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. Brick jumped when he saw James, but then smiled broadly.

"You scared the crap out of me! I thought I'd have more time to get ready than this."

"Yeah," said James. "I just decided to pick something up instead."

James looked at Brick and wondered if there was a specific point in time that he'd ever be able to identify as the moment when his feelings towards Brick had changed without his realizing it. Or was it so slow and gradual that it would forever be impossible to tell? What he did know was that looking at Brick right now, bare from the waist up, the hazel eyes, the luminous blond hair (perfect even having just stepped out of the shower), the naturally muscular body, the goatee and stubble, the intelligence, the gentle but strong hands, the kindness, the humor, the humility, the loyalty, all resonated with James. He wanted to be with Brick. Brick meant the world to him, and he desperately, sincerely hoped he meant the world to Brick.

Brick had opened the fridge and started digging around in it. "You want a beer?" But he stood up suddenly out of the refrigerator and said, "No. No beer. We should..."

James had crossed over to him and interrupted him. Brick found himself being backed up against the door of the fridge.

Brick said, surprised, "Well, hey there!"

James pressed himself up against Brick and said, "Shut up."

He leaned in and kissed Brick. Brick returned the kiss, winding his tongue around James', and letting out a low, guttural growl of pleasure. For someone that had never really kissed another man before, James found that Brick was remarkably good at it. He loved a good kisser, and Brick was definitely good at it. It felt comfortable. It felt right.

When James pulled away, Brick's arms were wrapped around him.

"So I take it you want to just skip dinner," said James.

Brick didn't make the connection. "What do you mean?"

"A certain part of your body clearly is expressing its wish to skip to dessert," replied James, glancing down at the tented-out towel.

Brick turned red, but James just grinned and leaned in to kiss him again.

And from somewhere in the apartment, they both heard, "Yeah, make it a hot and raunchy dessert, too!"

Brick about jumped two feet in the air the comment from thin air startled him so much, banging into James' chin when he did so. James blurted out "Ow! Shit!" and rubbed his chin even as he looked around behind him to see who was in the apartment with them.

Behind him, in the dark of the rest of the apartment, he could make out a glowing tip of a cigar. The cigar was hanging out of the mouth of a huge hulk of a guy in a full police uniform.

Brick said, "Jerry, dammit! How long have you been back there?"

"Not long enough, obviously."

Jerry took the cigar out of his mouth, stepped forward, and pointed at the towel around Brick's waist, which was still tenting out magnificently. What was underneath was threatening to pop out through the crack in the towel at any moment. He said with a laugh, "Holy shit, look at the size of that hard-on you've got, man!!"

Brick immediately turned an additional five shades of red, and tried to adjust the towel some.

Jerry said, "All I've got to say is that it's about fucking time you two got together!"

Brick demanded, "Why are you even here, Jerry?"

"I *told* you I was maybe going to stop by! You just..."

But Brick had started coming around the counter into the living room towards Jerry. Jerry backed up a step, "Hey man, don't come at me with that weapon drawn like that. You need to be saving that for James over there!!!"

Brick said sternly, "Out! You're uninvited right now! You need to leave, like right this exact moment! Go! Or, if you're going to stay, at least give me a hug!" Brick let the towel drop from around his waist and held out his arms wide for a big hug. He kept walking towards Jerry who now started backing up faster.

Jerry said through his laughter, "Ok, man, you win! I'm really outta here. I mean it! Christ! Stop pointing that thing at me!"

When Jerry reached the apartment door behind him and put his hand on the knob, Brick stopped and put the towel back around his waist.

Brick said, "Sorry to kick you out, my man, but you understand."

Jerry's eyes were twinkling, "Yeah yeah, no worries. Like I said, sincerely, I'm happy to see this happening. I think it's right. You guys have fun, but just promise me you'll make it raunchy and tell me all about it later! James, I'm going to want to hear about the interview, but I'll wait 'til tomorrow."

After Jerry closed the door behind him, Brick turned back to James, the towel still obscenely poking out in front of him.

James smiled and said, "You've got a really nice ass, you know? It was hard to notice under all those saggy pants you wear."

Brick went to go put some clothes on while James got the dinner together, Kicker attentively at his side. He noticed that Brick had put some magnolia blossoms in a bowl on the small dining table.

When Brick came back out, with clean khaki pants, a dark blue knit shirt, and bare feet, he looked like a different person. But James noticed it wasn't just because of the clothes. Unlike when he left to put on his clothes, now Brick looked anxious. Nervous, even. Brick was trying to not let it show as he went to pour each of them a scotch, but James could easily sense it. He knew Brick too well for him to conceal it.

James set the plates down on the table and studied Brick, trying to figure out what had changed in the last few minutes.

James said softly, "You look good."

Brick smiled and nodded as he handed James his glass of scotch, but James could tell it was a little forced.

James sat down, put his scotch on the table, and studied Brick again. He spoke, "Brick, what's going on?"

Brick sat down at the table and tried to be nonchalant when he responded, "What do you mean?"

"C'mon, Brick. We've been through too much to not talk to each other now."

Brick sighed and stared at his glass as he swirled the scotch around in it.

"This is really going to happen..." he said, a slightly pained look in his face. "I just don't want to... disappoint you. I don't know what I'm doing, you know. I've never done... it... before."

Under other circumstances, James would have wanted to tease Brick about making an assumption that he'd be getting past first base on their date, but he didn't do that. Brick looked genuinely worried about it.

James got up from his chair and went to stand behind Brick. He put his arms around him, leaned over and kissed his head, running his nose through Brick's hair, smelling him. He held onto Brick very tightly.

James got very serious and said gently into Brick's ear, "You know, I came to realize that the person that once treated me worse than anybody else, is the person that treats me the best."

James kissed Brick lightly behind his ear.

"That the person that I feared more than anyone else has wound up being the person that I trust more than anyone else."

He moved around to the side of Brick's chair to look him in the eye directly. He squatted down and put his hand on Brick's chest.

"That the person that I once hated the most has wound up being the person that I've kind of fallen in love with."

Brick sat perfectly still, not taking his eyes off of James'.

James put his hand on Brick's knee and said, "There's no way in this world I'm going to be disappointed in the person that I'm pretty much in awe of."

They held for a moment before Brick finally said, "I don't know what to say, James."

James stood up and said, "The last thing in the world I want for tonight is to make you uncomfortable or anxious. If you want, if it would make this a better evening for you, even the tiniest bit, we can just cuddle and kiss and hold each other."

He added, "The leather and whips can wait until the second date if you want."

Brick finally laughed and his eyes sparkled. He put his hand on James'. "Ok, thanks... I think. Thanks for being patient. I want to be with you so bad, but just don't expect much."

James said, "All that matters is that, after a laughable series of mis-steps, and after I finally pulled my head out of my ass, we're here together, at this point, tonight."

Brick nodded. He raised his glass of scotch and touched it to James' glass.

~~~~~

James awoke, a little disoriented. He glanced over to look for the familiar pattern of illuminated stripes caused by the parking lot light shining through his apartment mini-blinds, but instead saw a window with curtains drawn across it. He sat up and looked around the dark room and remembered he wasn't in his apartment or in his bed.

He lay back down, the warm, content sensation coming back to him before he realized Brick wasn't next to him. He glanced over towards the bathroom, but he didn't see any light in there. Instead, he noticed a slight flickering light coming from the den.

He got up, pulled his underwear on, and peeked out into the den, where he saw Brick in his boxers laying back on the sofa, watching the television. Kicker was on the floor next to him asleep, his feet twitching in some dream.

Brick sat up and curled into a ball, bringing his knees up to his chest and wrapping his arms around them.

"You ok?" asked James.

Brick smiled and nodded. It seemed sincere to James, but something still seemed to be bothering him.

He went over and sat next to Brick, carefully stepping over Kicker in the process.

"So, what are you in here thinking about?" he asked Brick.

"Yeah, I just couldn't sleep and needed to clear my head a little."

"It didn't freak you out, did it? You didn't finally get to this point and decide you're actually straight, did you?" asked James. He said it jokingly, but then the fear gripped his insides that maybe he should be concerned that this could actually happen.

"No, no! Hell, no! Tonight was awesome! You have no idea! After what we did together, I'm gayer than ever, seriously. I had no idea it could feel like that!" said Brick through a smile. He said more seriously, "And it didn't freak me out. I know you and trust you, so I'm not worried that you're suddenly going to beat me senseless. But I think even if you did beat me senseless, it'd be worth it."

James put his hand over on Brick's knee. "Ok, good."

Brick looked thoughtful, and admitted, "It never felt like that with any woman... not with Jenny, none of them." His eyes danced and he joked, "Internet porn doesn't do it justice, you know?"

But Brick's face clouded a little again, something still causing him pause deep down inside. He screwed his courage up and started, "You said something earlier tonight. I need to know if you meant it."

"What was that?"

"What happened tonight... everything that's happened today... has been really great, beyond just the, you know, physical parts. Probably more than I have a right to expect."

James was about to protest, but just let Brick talk it through instead.

Brick continued, "I think that I first realized that it wasn't just a physical attraction any more, that I was actually falling for you, the day you came by when I was working

on my motorcycle. You asked me about my philosophy on life and we talked about it. I've never had anyone seem actually interested in something like that. Interested in *me* that way."

Brick was quiet for a moment, reflecting on how his feelings for James had developed over time, until they had become the crushing longing he had suffered for many months now. He suddenly smiled. "By the way, that day, when I took you on the motorcycle ride? I went really fast and made you hold onto me for dear life, remember? I did that just so I could feel your arms around me."

"Anyway, you're everything to me now. You do, actually, mean the world to me. You've meant the world to me for a while. But earlier tonight, you used the 'L' word. I need to know if you really mean that. Because if I'm just the rebound guy, or if you're just going to eventually find a job somewhere else and move away... I don't know that I can take it. Maybe I should just feel lucky that I got laid at all, but I feel like I'm so close to getting what I really want... to having you... I'm so stupid in love with you and... and... I've been in love with you. And the thought of losing that now..."

James was relieved that it was an easy concern to put to rest. His feelings towards Brick had become very clear in the last few days. They had been there for a while, but out of focus, like he was looking past them at something else. And it was only when he stopped squinting off at something else that he saw how obvious the thing right next to him was.

And even better, it had come over him from the opposite direction. His attraction to Brick wasn't initiated by the purely physical desire that had controlled so many of the relationships he had had before. Too often he had gotten physical with someone, then gotten tired of it before he had a chance to figure out if he really liked the guy or not.

Ian had been a little different. He was wildly physically attracted to Ian, but over time, the feelings started to run deeper and deeper. His feelings for Ian had started to transition from being purely hormonal to being based on the person. The mind, the intellect, the heart, the soul of the person. And then it had gotten cut bitterly short.

But with Brick, it had been slowly building up over time. And while he may have arrived in Lawder with nothing but contempt for every aspect of Brick, it had turned into a tolerance, a respect, a fondness, a trust, a love for Brick as a person that had snuck up on him. The physical attraction grew naturally out of that. Brick was a beautiful person; it just took some time for him to realize it.

"I meant it," said James, looking directly at Brick until he was sure Brick's eyes were looking directly at his own. "There's nobody I'd rather spend my time with, at night and during the day, than you. There's nobody I trust the way I trust you. There's nobody I want to make happier than I want to make you."

"Kevin, I love you. I really love you," insisted James.

He let that sink in for a moment, and then quipped, "You're the best friend I've ever had, and I wised up and started having sex with you, too. How great is that? Hell, I probably should hire you to do my landscaping as well!"

Brick looked down, almost embarrassed to have earned this kind of affection, and completely unsure of how to handle it.

Brick said, "Wow. In a way, it's easier when you've got nothing because you've got nothing to lose. But the instant you have something, you worry about losing it. And now I feel like I've got everything. I don't want to screw this up. Don't let me screw this up."

James laughed and said, "You're not going to screw this up."

Brick smiled at him. He stretched out, patted his chest and said, "Would you lay up here against me and let me just hold you for a while?"

James lay back against Brick, the warmth of Brick's body against his back and legs. Brick put his arms around James and held him. "I've wanted so badly to have someone to do this with. I've wanted so badly to be able to hold you like this. It's better than sex."

James turned his head to look back at Brick skeptically.

Brick admitted, "Well, you know. Almost."

They lay together on the sofa, keeping each other warm in the glow of the television for a few minutes. Neither of them could have told you what was actually playing on the TV, though. They were both lost in the simple comfort of each other's presence and touch. James even discovered something that he really liked very much laying there with Brick. He found he really loved having Brick's arms around him, his thick forearms right up on his face and the dense hair on his arms tickling James' lips and the underside of his nose. It was a sensation he had never experienced with any other guy, and he loved it. He found himself keeping Brick's arm there, just so he could nuzzle it and run his lips up and down his arm.

But after a few minutes, he couldn't stand it any longer. James glanced back at Brick. He said, smirking, "You know, you scared me to death on your motorcycle that day, you asshole!"

Chapter 41

The next morning, Brick and James got up and took a leisurely shower together. Brick still almost seemed in a state of disbelief that the last twenty-four hours had actually happened, but insisted on taking James out to breakfast. He put his old cowboy hat on James, loaded him up in his truck and told him they were going to the Gold Plate Diner for whatever James wanted to eat.

As soon as they pulled out of the entrance to Brick's apartment, his cell phone started ringing.

Brick answered, "What's up?"

There was a pause, Brick flashed a slightly embarrassed look towards James and said, "No, Jerry, we're not still balls deep in each other."

James started smiling.

"Probably only 30 minutes," commented Brick, still looking embarrassed.

James could hear Jerry exclaim loudly "That's it? Thirty minutes?" over the phone, and chuckled at Jerry's grilling.

Brick replied, "C'mon Jerry, it's been a while for me, I couldn't have lasted very long last night."

Brick turned slightly away from James and said in a quieter voice, although James could still plainly hear him, "Yeah, man, really good. Better than I have a right to hope for."

There was another pause. "That's none of your fucking business, dude."

Pause, then softly, "Well, there was this one thing he did. Man, I had no idea something like that could feel that good."

Pause. "No, I'm not going to give you a play by play. What is it with you and this fascination with two guys having sex, you big pervert? Aren't you getting any at home? Here, I'll let James give you the rundown."

Brick handed the phone to James, and he said, "Hey Jerry, what's up?"

"So, I wanna hear about it."

James shrugged, "I ate his ass out, Jerry. I rolled Brick over, spread his ass-cheeks wide, and shoved my tongue so far up his bunghole that I could taste his liver. I had him squirming and squealing like a little piggy!"

Brick turned beet-red. "Jesus, James!"

On the phone, Jerry laughed out loud. "Good! You work him over good! But if you're trying to shock me, you'll have to try harder than that!"

James knew he had been stymied with that one, and he was frustrated he didn't get the reaction out of Jerry he wanted. "Are you kidding me?"

"I'm on to you, James. Besides, I don't live in a monastery. I know what your kind does for fun. I'd like to know what it feels like myself, but Carrie Anne would probably divorce me the instant I even mention it."

"Hey," said James, the evil grin spreading across his face, "Maybe you should have Cory do you. It'd be good for both of you."

Jerry laughed again, "Man, I gotta hand it to you, you sick freak, you don't give up easily! Seriously, I hope you guys had a good time. I know you know what you're doing, but I think Brick's still a little intimidated. Did he have a good time?"

"It was good for both of us. It felt right. I had a really good time."

James couldn't help but notice the big smile that Brick got hearing that.

"And I hope all this means you've decided to stay in Lawder?" asked Jerry.

"I'm not going anywhere, Jerry."

"I'm glad to hear it. And I know a certain fourteen-year-old boy that will be thrilled to know you're staying, too. He's been moping around since he heard about this job interview. I hope you and Brick are up to being his big brothers, because... man... you're in for it now!"

James replied, "Well, you can let him know we'll both be here for him whenever he wants."

"Oh, hell, no!" said Jerry crossly. "You get your queer ass over here and tell him yourself, boy."

James gave in. "Ok, ok. Yeah, that would be good. I think you're right that I should tell him in person."

"Good! You know you two mean a lot to me," said Jerry. "I'm glad this finally happened. I'm just sorry it took this long for you two to figure out you should be together. I knew it months ago."

~~~~~

Brick turned his truck into the parking lot at the Gold Plate. The Gold Plate Diner was next door to a bait shop, which guaranteed it a steady stream of breakfast customers as long as it was open early enough, which it was. But it wasn't just the fishermen and hunters in there, contractors loved it, too. Those guys made up the early shift, then it transitioned over to a crowd of business men, moms with kids, potheads and everybody else really.

Rather than sit at the counter this time, they found an empty booth and sat down. Brick had been there enough times to know what he wanted, but he gave James a chance to reflect on his options in the menu. Brick waited patiently, but finally could stand it no more. He asked, "So I guess the interview went good?"

James said, "Well, good and bad. Well enough that they offered me a position at a Director level. Not quite the salary I had in New York, but pretty close."

Brick just nodded, but clearly didn't understand.

James said, "But it went badly as well. After spending time back here in Lawder, here with you, and Jerry, Zee, and Roddy, and Cory, and everybody else, I saw everything at Craft Services a lot differently."

James reflected for a moment on the interview in LA. He continued, "It's funny. It was the same type of thing that dazzled me when I went up to New York for the first time to interview with companies there after graduating from college, but I saw it through different eyes this time. This time, I saw the shallowness, the self-interest, the duplicity, all with a veneer of sophistication and 'importance'. They even tried to get me to talk about Ian. That will clearly follow me no matter where I go. But it was beyond that. Everything they were caught up in just isn't that important to me anymore."

Brick nodded again, this time genuinely understanding what James was saying. He said, "Well, I guess I should be disappointed for you that it wasn't what you were hoping for. But I'm not. Not really. I'm happy. I'm happy to have you here with me. You have no idea. Really no idea how happy it makes me." Brick looked earnestly at James. "It's terrifying, actually."

James reached over and grabbed Brick's hand in both of his for a moment.

Just when he did, a voice said, "Holy shit!"

James and Brick both looked up and saw Jesus standing there, very dirty.

Brick smiled, "Hey, Jesus! What are you doing here?"

Jesus ignored the question. "You guys did it, didn't you? You hooked up last night! You got into the mansex!"

Brick and James looked at each other briefly, unsure what to say.

James finally laughed and said, "What makes you say that?"

"No, it's obvious!"

"It can't be that obvious," countered Brick.

"Aha! See! You admit it! You guys are a thing now! Brick, you're screwing the boss' son! And James, you're fooling around with your boss' boss." Jesus got a confused look and asked, "Wait, so which one of you is sleeping your way to the top?"

"Hold on a minute," said James, "what's so obvious?"

Jesus was smiling from ear to ear having caught them. "Look at you! James, you're wearing Brick's cowboy hat, your feet are all tangled up under the table. You were staring into each other's eyes. You had mansex, didn't you?"

James started laughing and then Brick did, too.

Jesus asked, "Wait, aren't you moving to L.A.? How did the job interview go?"

"It went ok," said James, "but I'm not moving out there. I'm staying here."

Then he added, "So I can continue to be a thorn in Brick's side."

Jesus pointed at them, "I knew it!"

Brick said, "C'mon and sit down and have breakfast with us." He started to move over to make room for Jesus.

"No, man, I'm already done. I finished up with the boxwoods at the Methodist Church and have finished eating. It's about time you two got together. The rest of us are tired of waiting for it to happen!"

Jesus left and James and Brick started wondering if they were really that obvious. James almost took the cowboy hat off, but kept it on, anyway.

Their waitress was probably in her mid-40's, and mostly had brown hair with gray already mixing in. It was a little hard to tell since it had been highlighted blond within an inch of its life.

She lit up when she arrived at the table. "Hey, Brick sweetie! I haven't seen you in here in a little while. How you doin', honey?"

Brick nodded and said, "I'm good, Debbie. It's good to see you, too."

"You've still got my number, right?" she said, hitting her own agenda points before moving on to the order-taking part. "You haven't called me yet. You give me a call and I'll serve you breakfast with a much more personal touch than you'll ever get in here."

This was a scene James was all too familiar with. A very large number of women in town all seemed to be trying to bag Brick.

Before Brick could even answer, Debbie smiled and winked at James, "Direct is the only way to go. At my age, sugar, bein' subtle won't even get you a turd in a ziplock baggie."

James couldn't help but smile. Direct was something of an understatement for her.

What happened next actually caught James off guard, but made him feel very warm inside.

Brick said, "Sorry, Debbie. I'm finally off the market."

Debbie's mouth dropped open. "Well, shit. I wasn't direct enough, was I? Who's the lucky one?"

Brick just smiled and nodded his head across the table at James.

Debbie looked over at James, not understanding at first. James tipped the brim of Brick's cowboy hat slightly and Debbie's eyes got as big as saucers. Her mouth dropped open even further and slowly transitioned into a smile. She started laughing and said to Brick, "Serious?"

"Yeah, serious."

She started laughing even more. "Well, who would have ever thought? I never saw that comin' at all! I guess I might as well go find me a nice bull-dyke and settle down then!"

She finally took their order, pausing a couple of times to express her disbelief a little more.

After she left to put the order in, James told Brick, "You're going to disappoint a lot of women in this town, you know."

"Nah, one or two maybe."

"No, I mean it," said James, "I don't think you pay much attention to it, but there's a lot of women that would love to be me right now."

Brick flushed a little, but just shrugged his shoulders.

~~~~~

After breakfast, they went by Bea's house so James could pick up Lindsey for the day while his mom was helping at the hospital.

When they walked in the kitchen door, Bea was finishing cleaning up the breakfast plates.

She started saying, "Well, there you are! I left you two messages last night asking how the job..."

She stopped short, her eyes narrowed a little and she put her hands on her hips as she studied Brick and James.

A smile eventually crept across her face, she looked at the two of them sideways, and she said, "Well, I, for one, am glad you're not going out to LA, and I'm particularly glad that you two finally got your freak on."

Brick turned bright red and looked like he wanted to crawl under a rock.

James stamped his foot on the ground, looked at Brick then back at his mom.

"There is no way you can tell that just by looking at me!" exclaimed James.

"And you have no business using phrases like 'got your freak on'!" he added.

Bea smiled radiantly at her son. "Honey, it's written across both of your foreheads in big letters. I'm your mom and I can read it as plain as day."

Brick had stuck his finger in his ear to itch it some and was unable to look at Bea. He considered if he could get away with just running out the kitchen door.

James was still not going to accept that. "No, there is no way you can tell that just..."

His mom walked over to him and interrupted him. She kissed him on the cheek and said, "Don't be ridiculous. A mother can tell."

She kissed Brick on the cheek, too, embarrassing him even more. She said, "And you, Kevin. Stop acting all embarrassed, like you got caught with your hand in the cookie jar. As far as I'm concerned, you're just as much my son as James is and I've wanted this for the both of you for quite a while."

She stood back and just looked at the two of them, deeply pleased to finally see the day arrived she had secretly hoped for.

She went back over to James and hugged him hard. "Tell me yourself, though. It's true. You're not going to move away, are you?"

"No, mom, I'm going to stay. I've got the best things that ever happened to me here, and I'm finally smart enough to not leave all that behind."

Bea's eyes started welling up some. "It makes me so happy to hear that. It'll make more people than you realize happy to hear it. You two are right together. You'll make a great couple."

James moved behind Brick and put his arms around his middle and pulled him close. He kissed him on the neck.

"Well, I'll be damned. You're the only person I've ever been with that she's approved of!"

~~~~~

Brick had promised to spend the afternoon fishing with some friends of his, so James spent all afternoon with Lindsey. They made cupcakes together, and the afternoon reminded James just how much he'd miss Lindsey if he had moved away.

When he had dropped Lindsey off, he and his mother had a more one-on-one talk. She reminded James that she loved Kevin to death and that she had no reservations about any aspect of their relationship.

She asked James if he felt like Kevin was a little overwhelmed at starting a relationship with him. Of course, he said he did get that feeling, and that Brick had even pretty much stated that same thing.

Bea told James to keep that in mind. Kevin was somewhat in awe of James and really looked up to him. She told him that it could be easy for this to develop into an imbalance in the relationship, and that James would bear the responsibility for not letting that happen. She said that as long as he showed Kevin they were on an even footing in the relationship and didn't let Kevin feel inadequate, that things would balance out right and what they would have would last their entire lives.

It was something of an odd conversation for James to have with his mother. He always knew she had a very keen insight into other people. He had picked up on this over and over again in his lifetime. But she had never been so completely specific in her advice on how to handle another person. James had already sensed all of this with Brick, but kind of in the back of his mind. His mother spelled it out for him and brought it into a sharp focus.

He told his mother not to worry, that he'd watch out for it. James told his mother that he actually had a tremendous respect for Brick and that Brick was far smarter than he gave himself credit for.

Bea was pleased to hear it and told James to help Brick see it for himself.

In the end, though, James' mother told him that she knew she'd be able to look back on this as one of the best days of her life. And that made James feel very good indeed.

That evening, James made his way back over to Brick's apartment after having dropped Lindsey back off at his mother's. He had decided to bring along a dozen of the cupcakes that he had made that afternoon with him in case they wound up smoking some weed that evening and wanted something to snack on.

He pulled into the gravel parking area at Brick's apartment and saw Jerry's SUV there already. He was looking forward to seeing Jerry since he had gotten booted out of Brick's apartment the night before. It seemed almost like the big lug was more excited about James and Brick getting together than James was.

As he got to the apartment door, he could hear music playing softly inside. He knocked and heard a "C'mon!" from within.

As he stepped inside, he saw Brick sitting in the leather armchair and Jerry sitting on the sofa leaning forward. But the sight so completely fascinated him that he didn't notice Kicker rooting around in his crotch. He barely even noticed Brick telling Kicker, "Hey, dammit, that's mine now. You go get your own."

It was the sight of Brick that made him suddenly oblivious to Kicker. Brick was slouched down slightly in the distressed leather chair, his legs propped up casually on the ottoman and crossed at the ankle. He was wearing a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled mid-way up his thick forearms, very faded jeans, and a pair of brown cowboy boots that were completely worn out. On his head was his cowboy hat, pushed forward over his face a little. All James could see of Brick's face was the bottom of his goatee, and a stub of a cigar sticking out of his mouth, glowing at the tip.

In New York, James had always gone for the more sophisticated look, and not so much the butch look. And now he understood why a little better. Up in New York, butch was just another fashion style, consciously executed, but essentially a lie. In New York, it was just another form of drag. And it too often read that way. Down in Lawder, with certain guys, it was just a basic state of being. And James saw it on Brick the way it was really meant to be — completely natural and unforced. It was, without a doubt, the hottest thing he had ever seen.

For a moment, James felt that if either one of them should feel inadequate in the relationship, it should be himself.

He said "hi" to Jerry as he walked over to Brick, where he squatted down and whispered in his ear, "I'll bet you a hundred dollars that you have absolutely no idea how amazingly fucking white hot you look right now."

Brick took the cigar out of his mouth, looked at James, and said, "Huh?"

James stood up and said, "And just like that, you owe me a hundred bucks!"

"I'm just sitting here."

James smiled. That was exactly the point. Part of what made it so authentic was that Brick had no idea he was being that way.

He took the cowboy hat off of Brick and gave him a big, serious kiss on the lips. Brick's goatee tickled, and he tasted a bit like cheap cigars, but it didn't bother James. In fact, he loved it. Brick was smiling so widely his eyes became just little crescent moons. He put the hat back on Brick's head and reached down his shirt to rub around on his chest.

"I can't keep my hands off this chest of yours!"

Jerry sat up a little straighter on the sofa. He said, "I've got a hairy chest, too, you know," without even taking the cigar out of his mouth.

James laughed. "Jerry, you've got a serious gay streak running through you that you've never given in to."

Jerry smiled slyly at James and said, "What makes you think I've never given in to it?" with a wink.

James went into the kitchen to get a beer, and he grabbed a doggie biscuit for Kicker while he was in there. He went back into the den and sat down on the sofa next to Jerry. Kicker knew he had the biscuit and sat in front of him, intently staring at him with perfect discipline. Except for his saliva glands, which were already drooling in a very

undisciplined fashion. James tossed the biscuit to Kicker who caught it perfectly and almost swallowed it whole.

Brick said, "It's good you finally showed up. Jerry was making me give him details on last night."

Jerry nodded, "Brick sucks at explaining what it feels like to get eaten out."

He slapped James on the leg and said, "C'mon, have a cigar with us before we get into the weed!" He grabbed another cigar out of the box on the coffee table and handed it to James.

James didn't particularly like the things, but he knew Jerry would make him smoke it anyway. He put the cigar in his mouth and Jerry leaned over with a cigarette lighter to light it for him.

Jerry held up his beer and said, "Here's to you two finally figuring out you're right for each other!"

Brick held his beer up and said, "Here, here!" enthusiastically. They clacked their beer cans together in a toast.

Jerry puffed on his cigar a little more before putting it down in the ashtray on the coffee table. "You know you two are like brothers to me. The only two guys in town I feel like I can totally relax around. Except maybe Carrie Anne, but you know, she's not a guy. Around everybody else, I've got to be the police chief. I've got to be 'responsible' and all that. With you guys, I can sit around, smoke weed and just be a dick."

James held up his beer can and said, "And you're excellent at it!"

They finished their cigars and shifted over to a series of joints that they shared, getting increasingly high and drunk in the process.

At one point, James went to hand Brick the joint they had lit, and rubbed his chest again in the process.

Jerry took a drink from his beer. "You really like his hairy chest, don't you?"

"The funny thing is, I haven't typically been attracted to hairy chests in the past," said James. "But Brick's is just right. It feels great."

Then he added with a smile, "And I guess part of it is that it's attached to Brick."

Jerry said, "Yeah, well I've got a hairy chest."

"I know you do, Cherry."

"Come over here and feel it. I bet you'll like it better than Brick's."

Jerry had that grin on his face, and he peeled his t-shirt off, exposing his wide, muscular chest.

James just shook his head in disbelief. He never ceased to be amazed by Jerry. As much as James tried to shock Jerry, it usually turned out that James was the one being surprised by Jerry instead.

Jerry flexed his muscles a little bit, and he had plenty to flex. He may have been out of the Rangers for a while, and sat behind the Police Chief's desk all day, but he still kept his body in remarkable shape.

"C'mon, you won't know what you're missing until you try it."

James decided to humor him and let Jerry have his fun. He walked over and put his hand on Jerry's chest. Jerry had a denser, black carpet of hair on his chest, with some salt starting to mix in on it. It was coarser than what was on Brick's chest. The hair on Brick's chest was an even layer, but was a finer, softer hair, and was the dirty blond color with just a hint of auburn in it that was the same across his entire body. James ran his hands left and right across Jerry's chest, then down across his stomach as well. He had to admit that the muscles were harder than Brick's.

Jerry leered at James and said, "Nice, huh? You like that, don't you?"

James rolled his eyes and said sarcastically, "Yes, Cherry, that's a mighty fine pair of man-hooters you have there! Good for you!"

Brick finally couldn't stand it. "Dammit, Jerr! I finally have a real boyfriend for one single day, and here you are trying to steal him away! Some fucking friend you are!"

James kept his hand on Jerry's chest, but looked over his shoulder at Brick and said, "Believe me, you've got nothing to worry about, Brick."

James grabbed Jerry's right nipple and twisted it roughly.

"Yeouch!" yelled Jerry, jerking back away from James' hand and rubbing his nipple. Brick started laughing.

"What the hell was that about?"

"You'd make a lousy gay man, Jerr! Gay guys love that!"

Brick looked panicked and said, "We do?!"

James winked at him as he moved back over to sit on the floor in between Brick's legs.

Jerry wasn't giving up quite that easily, though. "Do you like hairy asses? I've got a pretty hairy ass. You wanna see it? I'll let you touch it."

James laughed, "Give it up, Jerry. I'm not going to eat your ass out, no matter how you try to get me to."

"Well, shit," was Jerry's disappointed response.

The evening played out with the three of them getting hungry, heading out to McGillicutty's Pub for burgers and a round of pool, then back to Brick's to have some of the cupcakes that James had brought with him.

~~~~~

Brick had gotten quieter as the evening wore on and seemed something along the lines of shy.

James ran his hand along Brick's forearm. "Ok, I'm getting a vibe here. You ok?"

Brick nodded, but said, "Yeah. Well, I think. I'm just not sure. I really like what you said earlier. I've wanted to jump your bones all night, but I don't want to be too pushy, either. I don't want to smother you. I don't have any experience with this."

"That's it?" asked James.

Brick looked downright sheepish and nodded.

James gave Brick a pretend exasperated look. He lifted Brick's arms and rested them on his shoulders so he could step forward into the embrace. He explained, "I love you. I love you in a way that I've never felt about anybody, including Ian. As far as I'm concerned, I belong to you now and you can touch me or jump my bones any time you want, any way you want!"

Brick smiled from ear to ear.

"Did you really mean it earlier when you said I was white hot?"

James nodded. He reached out and ran his hand through Brick's hair. He said, "And the fact that you're completely unaware of it makes you even more attractive."

"Do you think your mom is really ok with us being together?"

"Are you kidding me? She's thrilled!"

There was a pregnant pause and Brick bit at his lip.

Brick asked, "Can I call you Jimmy?"

James tried to stifle his grin, but said, "You can call me anything you want."

Brick asked, the grin on his face spreading, "Can I call you Jimmy-Queer-Bait?"

James stepped forward the rest of the way, pressing himself against Brick and wrapping his arms tightly around him.

He said, right before kissing Brick, "Don't push your fucking luck, buster."

Chapter 42

James dropped the bales of pine straw and stopped long enough to wipe the sweat off of his face. The heavy air of June and aggressive sun was beating down on him mercilessly, and his green Montgomery Landscaping t-shirt was soaking wet. He took a swig out of his water bottle and then went to go get a few more bales from the truck, passing Roddy carrying several bales himself.

The work may have been very physical, but one thing he loved about it was that he was able cancel his membership at the gym. That and the fact that he could eat just about as much of whatever he wanted these days without having to worry about it.

He glanced over at Brick, who was getting three or four others going on laying some new sod at the retirement home they had recently started servicing. He had actually worried that working so closely with Brick would get old or awkward pretty quickly once they had officially become an item over three weeks earlier. But it hadn't. It felt more just like working closely with his best friend than it did someone he was dating. But maybe that was the difference. In so many ways, his relationship with Brick was grounded in what was now a very deep friendship.

The last three weeks had truly been pretty great. And not just because of his new relationship with Brick. A week earlier, James had gone to court with his mother and Lindsey to have the adoption finalized. Once and for all. Lindsey officially became his little sister. Going into it, it was just an administrative step they needed to take, but James was shocked at how emotional he wound up feeling at the end. The thought that Lindsey was firmly a member of his family now meant so much more to him than he would have imagined. When it was final and he hugged Lindsey, he could see in his mother's knowing smile that she knew how much Lindsey meant to James. James told his mother to "Shut up" without any further elaboration, but his mother just laughed.

Cory, too, was excited to hear that James was going to stay in Lawder after all. Cory had done something very special, and Jerry insisted it was entirely Cory's idea. He took James out to lunch one Saturday and gave him a very heartfelt apology for saying all the

nasty things about James he had said. James felt like he really had earned a friend for life by sticking by his promise to Cory. Cory loved having two big brothers that shared his darkest secret and that he could be totally unguarded around, ones that he knew his mom and dad trusted totally, and he wanted to spend as much time as he could with James and Brick. James and Brick had even talked about just giving Cory a part time job if he wanted one so he could be around and help out. In fact, James was going to talk to Cory about it the next day since they had planned to go out and throw the Frisbee around for a while, anyway.

James and Roddy got the last of the pine straw bales out of the truck, just as Brick was walking up, one finger in his ear scratching it.

“Uh, y’all, those last ten bales stay in the truck. They’re for Mrs. Phillips.”

“Shit!” said James and Roddy at the same time. James looked at Roddy, and without a word between them, they took their right hands out and played a round of Rock-Paper-Scissors.

James’ scissors was roundly beaten by Roddy’s rock, and he sniped at Roddy, “Fuck you!” while Roddy just laughed at him.

James started hauling the pine straw back to the truck. He yelled at Roddy, “You could at least bring me a cold bottle of water!!”

He threw the first two bales back into the truck when his cell phone started ringing. He wiped his hands off on his khaki pants and took his phone out of his pocket and saw that it was his mother calling.

James answered, but it wasn’t his mother’s voice.

“Hey, James,” said the voice. James immediately didn’t like the serious tone to it. “I don’t know if you remember me or not, but this is Dr. Sykes at the hospital. I have some bad news for you.”

James suddenly got a lump in his throat.

Dr. Sykes continued, “It’s your mother, James. We believe she’s had a stroke.”

James went pale. “A... what?”

“A stroke. Now, don’t panic... she’s ok, and we think it was probably a very mild one. And she was here at the hospital at the time, so you couldn’t possibly hope for a quicker response than she got from the nurses and doctors here. I think it would be best if you came on over, James. Again, she’s doing fine, but just come on over to the ICU.”

James hung up the phone and stood there frozen for a moment, his eyes staring off blankly, his mouth hanging open slightly. For whatever reason, he remembered the day, when he was small and sitting at the big farmhouse table in the kitchen, that his mother told him that his daddy wouldn’t be coming home. It was when he left home and abandoned James and his mother. But his mother assured him that it was okay because she’d always be there. It’d be the two of them. She’d always be there.

James was so lost in the memory that he didn’t notice both Brick and Roddy running up to him.

Brick was almost starting to panic seeing the look on James' face. He put his hands on either side of James' head. "Jimmy, what's going on? You ok? What was the call, Jimmy? Who was on the phone?"

James snapped out of the memory, and looked at Brick in a daze. He put his hand on Brick's shoulder, "It's my mom. They think she's had a stroke, but maybe mild. Hopefully mild. I, uh, need to get to the hospital." His words were vague and weak as he spoke them.

James focused quickly, though. "Brick, I'm going to need you to go with me."

Brick nodded gravely. He said, "Roddy, can you keep everyone on track to finish up here?" Roddy nodded.

Fortunately, James had brought his own car that day since he needed to run by his mother's house that morning. On their way to the hospital, James described exactly what Dr. Sykes had said, and then Brick called Jesus, who was at another location, to explain the situation to him. Finally, he called Melena. He explained what was happening and asked if she could keep Lindsey for a little while longer until they could swing by later to get her. Brick reached over and put his hand on the back of James neck, comforting him on the way over to the hospital.

~~~~~

Dr. Sykes met James and Brick at the entrance to the ICU at the hospital. He took them to a separate room first to talk.

"James, she's ok. She's only in ICU because we want to keep a very close eye on her right now. She's awake and alert, but when you see her, you'll notice her speech is a little slurry, which isn't unusual," explained Dr. Sykes.

"So what happened, exactly?" asked James.

"Your mother was at the nurses' station talking when Hattie noticed her eyes had gotten unfocused and she started having trouble speaking. She lost her balance and fell. She also lost consciousness, briefly, which is a little troubling. But, everything still points to this being a very mild one."

James said he wanted to see her, so Dr. Sykes took him over to where his mother was.

She was sitting up, with all kinds of sensors attached to her. She looked visibly relieved to see James coming over to her. He took his mother's hand in his.

"I'm glaahd hyou're here. Is Linnsey goin' to be hokay?" she asked immediately.

James smiled. She definitely seemed relatively lucid, and okay other than the slurring Dr. Sykes warned him about.

"She's fine, mom. Melena's got her with Rosie until Brick and I get her later on. How are you feeling?"

"I feel jush fine. I'm ready to gho hhome. Thish is riduchulous, kheeping me here! Brickh, sweetie, you din't leave everywhone elsh to deal with Mrsh Phillips by themshelves, did hyou?"

Brick stepped up closer, "Don't worry about that, Bea. Roddy can turn up the charm and handle her with no problem."

James had to spend a few minutes explaining to her that, no matter how good she felt, they needed to keep her there for some tests and for observation for a little while. He even joked, "Besides, you spend enough time here at the hospital, you might as well have a bed here."

Dr. Sykes came back by and said they were going to take her over for some MRI and CAT scans to see if they saw anything.

He said her motor skills seemed slightly diminished, but only slightly, and despite her speech slurring a little, her cognitive skills seemed pretty normal.

James asked if the damage was permanent or not, and Dr. Sykes explained that only a little time would tell. His gut feeling was that it would get better, though.

The rest of the day was something of a blur to James. He accompanied his mother to the tests that they ran, despite her ongoing protests that she was fine. James had Brick go run by his apartment to pick up some clothes and take to his mother's house so he could stay there with Lindsey. He was a little unsure whether to have Brick bring Lindsey by the hospital so she could see her mom or not. Bea convinced him not to do it, though, since she had some bad memories from the hospital. So the plan was that Brick would also pick up Lindsey and wait at Bea's house for James.

Later, Dr. Sykes came back with some preliminary results to review with James and Bea. The good news was that the tests showed nothing, but the bad news was that it didn't give them much of an idea as to what actually caused it or what kind of a stroke it seemed to be. Dr. Sykes called it, in the absence of better information, a cryptogenic stroke.

He told James to go on home and rest, and they'd let him know if anything changed or they found anything else out. James started to protest, now feeling like he should stay with his mother. But Dr. Sykes convinced him there was no benefit to him being there, and his mother wanted him home with Lindsey overnight so she wouldn't have to stay elsewhere. So James took his mother's car home to stay with Lindsey. Dr. Sykes even gave James his personal cell phone number in case he had any additional questions. He reminded James, with a good-natured grin, that after everything his mother had done for that hospital for well over fifteen years and never asking anything in return, she would be better treated than even the hospital president himself when he had wound up in there for an appendectomy.

~~~~~

Over the next few days, his mother did so well recovering that they sent her home from the hospital. Dr. Sykes was very pleased to find that all of the effects of the stroke seemed to have evaporated and he expected Bea to make a complete recovery from it. The only troubling aspect of it was that they couldn't seem to tell exactly what had caused it.

Her first night back in her own house, Bea took it easy and let James handle most everything. He cooked them a nice meal, then let Bea go and tuck Lindsey into bed for the night. But then James insisted his mother go to bed herself to rest.

In her room, as she settled in for the night, Bea said to her son, "Thank you for everything, James."

"It's nothing, mom. Zee's easy to handle, and you know I like to cook," he said sitting on the edge of her bed. He quipped, "Plus, you know I'm better than you at it."

His mom's expression fixed for a moment before she said, "I'm not talking about tonight, sweetie. It's for everything. For being here for Lindsey. And for being here for me." She smiled, "And thanks for being there for Kevin as well. To think how close he came to quitting because you hated him so much when you moved back!"

James put his hand on her shoulder and she put her hand on his.

"I'd be lying," she added after a pause, "if I said that this doesn't scare me some. But you being here means more to me than you can ever imagine. This would have been much scarier for me if you were still up in New York."

James looked at his mother, and decided it was time.

"I'd like to tell you about someone in New York," he said.

And he told his mother the full story of what happened in New York that drove him back to Lawder. It was much less emotional this time than when he told Brick, and he wasn't telling her to get sympathy or make her feel bad, but it was time for her to know. And James realized, as he told the story to her, that he had healed. It really didn't weigh on him like it once had. The emptiness he had felt when he first left New York was gone. Time had passed. And he had friends and family, and Brick, now.

When James finished telling the story, his mother had a few tears leaking out of her eyes.

But James said to her, "I miss Ian, but things have turned out alright. I'm happy here. And no one's more surprised to hear me say that than me!" And that made his mother laugh a little, despite the tears in her eyes.

She said, "I'm sorry, James, that you had to go through all of that. But Kevin is a good man. You are happy with him, aren't you?"

James chuckled, "Again, no one's more surprised to hear me say this than me, but I am. He's every bit as good a person as Ian was, probably more so. He's wound up being one of the best things that's ever happened to me."

She smiled and held her son's hand in hers. She said, "Good."

Chapter 43

James stood in front of the assembled crowd, all eyes glued to him. His mind wandered, though, to what brought him to this point. There had been so much change in his life – some at his choice, but so much thrust upon him. The place where he found himself was so completely different than what he would have chosen. And yet he couldn't deny, taking the good and the bad, he felt home. All roads led to where he was, and fighting it would have been the undoing of himself. The loss along the way was hard to take, but it was a core part of him. He wouldn't be himself without it. Just as the family and love he had gained along the way were a part of him. Something that made him bigger, something that extended him beyond what he was in isolation.

He scanned the faces watching him. Brick was there, wearing a tie for only the second time James had seen him wear one. One that he even had to help Brick put on. Jerry was there, in his dress uniform, along with Carrie Anne and Cory. Roddy, Jesus, Melena, Rosie, Amos, Agnes, and every single other employee from Montgomery Landscaping was there. There was almost every employee of the hospital not actively working at that moment. And then at least a hundred additional people from the community, some that James recognized and many that he did not.

The crowd before him, seated in rows of folding chairs was larger than James would have ever imagined, but that didn't really scare him. Lindsey, though, standing nervously next to him in her pretty pink dress, was clearly nervous about being in front of all the strange people. She was halfway hiding behind James and halfway peeking out at everyone.

He finally shook himself out of his reverie and began, "I think that everyone here today realizes that what we're here to do, is pretty fundamentally a betrayal of Beatrice Montgomery... Bea... my mother."

He smiled warmly and continued, "We clearly have to sneak around behind her back to make this happen, or she wouldn't have ever allowed it. Anyone that knows...

knew... my mother understands the truth of that statement." The crowd laughed appreciatively, clearly agreeing with James.

"But despite the fact that we would all suffer her displeasure if she were here for this, it's fitting to have this as a reminder, as a community memory, of the lesson that she put forth for all of us by her service here at the hospital. That family is something more than just what you're born into. That family is something you make by caring. By giving of yourself to others. By sticking by those that need you." James looked down pointedly at Lindsey still standing next to him holding his hand. He picked her up and kissed her on the cheek.

"That family is more important than everything else in the world."

He paused.

"So, in spite of how my mother would have felt about all of this fuss today, I would like to thank you. Thank you for the "Beatrice Montgomery Children's Care Center". On behalf of Lindsey and myself, thank you for remembering Bea, our mother, and what she did for *all* of us for so many years."

~~~~~

Dr. Sykes came up to James smiling, everyone else milling around them in the reception after the dedication ceremony. He said, "Thanks for speaking today, James. It was a really excellent speech, and I know Bea would have been very proud of what you said. How are you doing?"

James nodded. Despite the fact that it had only been a month since the second stroke claimed his mother's life - the first one had been just a mild warning stroke - he was doing okay. The message about family wasn't just a quaint marketing message. He really had meant it.

"I'm good, Dr. Sykes. Thank you again for everything you did for my mother."

"James, please. A hundred times more would still only be a fraction of what your mother did for the children that came through this hospital, including beautiful little Lindsey!"

James had to greet an exhausting number of people, all wanting to express their condolences again about his mother's passing, to share memories of her with him, or to thank him for how she had helped make their child's stay in the hospital brighter. Most of them had also come to her funeral, so it felt a little like having to go through it all again, even if this was intended to be a slightly happier occasion. There were so many people, in fact, that Brick went ahead to take Lindsey home at one point.

When James got back to what was now his house, on the corner of Azalea and Franklin, neither Brick nor Lindsey were there. The house was unusually still and quiet.

Even without his mother there any more, it usually didn't feel like this. Lindsey was either playing or watching TV, or Brick and Kicker were there, or Jesus, Roddy or other members of the crew were there for one reason or another. James called out for Lindsey, but there was no answer. He didn't panic, as it wasn't completely unusual for Lindsey to spend time over with Rosie at Jesus' and Melena's house, just like James kept Rosie with Lindsey sometimes to give Jesus and Melena a break. James made his way into the kitchen and found a note on the big, worn farmhouse table, though:

*Lindsey is going to spend the afternoon with her Uncle Roddy  
Meet me you know where  
—Brick*

James smiled. The previous month had been such a whirlwind after his mother had passed away. His mother had a much larger stroke five weeks after the first, taking her life instantly. He had the funeral to handle, Lindsey to tend to, a house to take care of suddenly, a business to run, and all of the hundred other small details to deal with. He had plenty of help from all kinds of people, thankfully. But most of all Brick. Brick had been by his side the whole time. Brick had been his rock through all of it.

But today, after the dedication ceremony for the renaming of the children's floor at the hospital, Brick wanted to give James something special. He was giving James a little peace. James really didn't know how he would have gotten through the last month without him.

~~~~~

James walked across the field towards the magnolia tree, Brick patiently waited for him. Before he got there, Kicker noticed James in the distance and romped through the grass to greet him, snuffling his crotch and licking his hand before leading him back to the magnolia tree where Brick was standing. The sun was hot, the sky dotted with thick clouds passing slowly, but there was a slight breeze playing across the field. James grabbed Brick, embracing him tightly, and they held each other and kissed, the comfort of being with each other needing no words. The quiet of the field on a late summer afternoon — this tree that had come to mean so much to the two of them — all the setting they needed. James had found that there was almost no anxiety or fear that couldn't immediately be allayed just through touching Brick, by a simple confirmation that Brick was there for him.

Brick said, running his hand through James' hair, "I thought maybe after another afternoon of all those people at the hospital, you'd like a little peace and quiet."

James traced his finger down Brick's nose, across his mustache and lips, and down the whiskers on his chin. He leaned forward, touching his forehead to Brick's. "Nobody knows me like you do."

Brick sat down in the shade of the magnolia tree, his back up against the thick trunk. James sat down between Brick's legs and leaned back against him so Brick could wrap his arms around him.

"I'm still not used to being able to do this," admitted Brick, gripping James tightly. "I hope I don't ever get used to it."

James closed his eyes and relaxed for a little while, feeling like he could slow his breathing down for the first time in weeks. Kicker came over from exploring and lay down next to them, his back against them, panting contentedly. The butterflies and dragonflies darted around in the still air above the top of the knee-high grass out across the field. A hawk flew above the treeline at the far edge of the field, riding the summer sky effortlessly. James sighed heavily.

Brick said, "I miss her, too, Jimmy. She was something else, that's for sure."

James looked down, dejected. "It wasn't supposed to be like this, though. She was supposed to see Lindsey grow up, to be a mother to her," he said.

"Maybe. But she had a gift. She had you back. She knew everything was in good hands."

James sighed, "But I'm not her. She always just knew how to handle everything. How to raise a child. How to run the business. It was all so easy for her. I don't know what I'm doing with any of this."

James couldn't see it, but Brick smiled. "I'm here with you all the way. You can blame me if it goes wrong."

James couldn't help but smile himself. He said, "I plan to."

He ran his fingers along Bricks' outstretched legs, then up under the open end of his short pants.

James wondered at how his life had led him to this place. A year ago, the life he now had would have been laughable to him. It would pretty much be something he would have ridiculed others for wanting, and been completely derisive of anyone suggesting this life for him - raising a five year old child, running a landscaping business, settled into a small town, and deeply in love with the person that had been his greatest source of pain growing up. But here he was, in exactly that situation. He had suffered loss and breakdown of everything he thought was right for his life in New York, and was now thrust into everything he never would have wanted. But despite some of the painful losses that helped put him here, he *was* happy with it. He felt at home. He felt content with it. And he was finding out there was an awful lot to be said for simple contentment.

But not quite fully content, not yet. His life was getting back to some sense of normalcy after the loss of his mother, but there was another change that needed to be made. He had been thinking about it some over the last several weeks, in the middle of the tumult with everything else going on, but he had saved it. He had held onto it until things were a little quieter and the time was right. And the time felt right.

James finally said to Brick, "I don't think our lives are done being disrupted, though." He could feel Brick tense slightly as he said it, but he just couldn't resist the urge to be a little over-dramatic about it.

Brick asked, "Oh?"

James nodded. "Yeah. This time yours, though."

"Mine?"

James reached over and rubbed Kicker's belly. He said through a smile, "Yeah. Well, yours and Kicker's, that is. I want you to move in with me. I want you in my life full-time. Sorry... Lindsey *and* I want you in our lives full time."

James heard Brick exhale and relax again. Brick pulled his arms a little tighter around James' middle and he kissed him on the back of his head.

"Thanks. I didn't want to push. I wanted you to want it." Brick chuckled, shaking James gently in the process. "God knows I do!"

Brick pressed his lips against the back of James' head again, inhaling deeply. He said, "All those years wondering if I'd ever have something like this was worth it."

Then he added, "This moment alone was worth it."

They sat in silence, James, Brick and Kicker, together. James closed his eyes and felt Brick behind him, his arms around him. He wanted the feeling to never end. A moment later he opened his eyes and noticed that a large dragonfly had landed on the toe of his shoe, resting from the heat of the sun in the shade of the magnolia tree. It made James think of Ian and the dragonfly in the crystal block. And in the end, this moment, the real thing was better.

Together they watched the sun make its way down, James nuzzling his lips and nose across Brick's arm. James agreed with what Brick had said — it was worth it.

Epilogue – Four Years Later

James looked out from the front porch of his house, out over his front yard and out to Franklin Road. The air was still thick and damp in the late summer heat, even late in the evening. The crickets were out, though, singing a summer song. From inside the house and mingling with the sound of the crickets, he could still hear the remnants of the last few people at the party and the music still playing.

James sat down on the front step, not really looking at anything in particular. He was starting to feel funny, a little unsettled. The party had been a lot of fun, and everyone had enjoyed the food James and Melena had put together for it, but now that most people had dwindled down, he was forced to face this feeling. And he didn't really want to face it. He had thought about going inside and making himself busy trying to start cleaning up to distract from it, but he didn't want to rush the few remaining people off, either.

Leading up to the party over the last few weeks, he'd kept busy, but on the edge of his mind, when his attention wasn't fully occupied, he knew he'd feel this way. Prior to the party, he could ignore the sadness building in him and pretend it wasn't there. But the party gave it a certain concrete finality.

It wasn't that the party was a bad idea - he wouldn't have traded doing this for Cory for anything in the world. It was just that he was going to miss him very badly, and the day Cory would be leaving for college was almost upon him.

Everyone from Montgomery Landscaping had come out for the party to say goodbye to Cory now that he wouldn't be working there part time anymore and to wish him well as he started college. Everyone was rooting for him, too, beyond that. Cory had gotten a full athletic scholarship in baseball, and his pitching skills were already having more than a few people talk of a major league career. Even as a senior in high school, Cory could reliably pitch a fastball over ninety miles per hour. As James understood it, that was very good. Several of those people talking were scouts that had already come to see him play in Lawder High games. They all seemed to be uniformly impressed. James

didn't know enough to know if that was realistic or not, but Jerry was so proud of his son, he could just about pop. He could hear Jerry's loud laugh inside even now.

James was proud of Cory's impressive pitching skills, too. But mostly he was just proud of how Cory had turned out. Despite the rocky start at first, four years ago, Cory had filled out into a man in more ways than one. He had gotten much bigger, just like his father – tall and with wide shoulders and a very strong upper body – but he had his mother's dimples and slightly softer features. He had turned into a remarkably good-looking young man. More important than the physical aspects of manhood, what really made James proud was the kind of person Cory had turned into. He was kind and thoughtful, hard-working, loyal, and every other good character trait he had picked up from Jerry and Carrie Anne. Over the years, he had become something of a surrogate little brother to James and Brick. Ever since James had helped Cory come out, they had become very close, which made his impending move very hard to stomach. It made James' insides tie up in knots as he thought about it.

A car pulled up in front of the house and James watched as Jason got out. Jason was Cory's best friend in high school – one of the few people Cory had trusted with the truth about being gay. It had started out almost as a disaster. Cory had actually developed quite a crush on Jason during his freshman year in high school. Jason was shy and sensitive, and Cory was smitten by him. He wound up falling prey to the stereotypes and thought that, for sure, Jason had to be gay. He got so wound up in it he asked Jason out on a date, and naturally, Jason turned out to not be gay at all. In fact, Jason got a little freaked out by the fact that Cory liked him. Cory felt awful about his bad assumption, but Jason was a great kid, got past it, and even wound up just taking it as a compliment. It wasn't often that someone like him would attract the interest of one of the most popular jocks in high school. The two wound up becoming best friends and Cory loved having a straight friend like Jason who he could be honest with.

Jason walked up the front step and greeted James, "Hey, Jimmy. Is Cory still here? I thought I'd better stop by to check and make sure he showed up at the other party tonight. Kaitlynn will kill him if he doesn't show up."

Kaitlynn was the girl that Cory wound up "dating" in high school. Lawder being Lawder, and after much discussion between him, Jerry, Carrie Anne, James and Brick, Cory had decided to stay mostly closeted during high school. Kaitlynn was Cory's other good friend, the one other high school friend that knew he was gay. She offered to "date" Cory through high school to take the pressure off of him, plus they enjoyed spending time together, even if it was always just as friends.

James said, "Yeah, Jason, go on in. He's still in there. Help yourself to any of the food you want, too. Stay out of the beer!!"

"I make no promises!!" countered Jason, always the smart-aleck.

"Jerry's still in there," James warned him, knowing that would solve that problem. James thought Jason was adorable, and saw why Cory had developed a crush on him. Jason could be shy at first, but had a great sense of humor when you got to know him.

"Aww, crap!" yelled Jason back at James as he went on in through the front door, and James could hear Cory loudly greeting him when he got inside.

James went back to thinking how different it would feel to not have Cory around. Not at his part time job with Montgomery Landscaping, not at the baseball games that Cory almost always won for the Lawder Lions, and not at the other times when he, Brick and Cory (and oftentimes Jerry) just hung out together. He had turned into a wonderful big brother to Lindsey as well. He was already feeling empty, and Cory was not even thirty feet away from him.

Of course, Lindsey being almost ten years old at this point meant James had plenty to occupy his time there. And Brick was always there by his side, the grounding force in his life no matter what else happened. But he didn't like losing any of the people that had become so important to him. He blanched at the word, and it irritated him. He wasn't *losing* Cory. Cory was just moving away to college. But he couldn't help but feel like he was losing him. He hated losing Cory and he hated that he was feeling this way about it.

A few moments later, the front door opened again, and everyone who had been left inside poured out onto the front porch and front yard - Cory, Jason, Jerry, Carrie Anne, Lindsey, Brick, and even Kicker. Lindsey and Kicker immediately started chasing each other around the front yard.

James stood up, a little embarrassed to be caught outside by himself like this. Cory came up to him, grabbed him around his waist and lifted him up in a hug and spun around with James in his arms. Cory's six foot three inch frame made this surprisingly easy for him to do now.

Cory said as he spun James around, "Thanks, Jimmy! You're the best, you know that?"

James found that he couldn't reply. He couldn't get any words out. He looked at Cory helplessly, doing his best to not start crying all of a sudden.

Cory set him down and looked at him suspiciously for a moment. He knew James well at this point, and he pulled James into a much more sincere hug. He whispered into James' ear, "Would you stop being such an old lady? I'm not going far. You know as well as I do that you and Brick and Zee will always be a huge part of my life. Ok?" Cory gave James a sweet kiss on the cheek and ran his hands playfully through James' hair, something that normally would have irritated James no end. But tonight, James let it happen without a word.

Somehow, hearing Cory say these words almost made it harder to face this.

Jason, already heading back out to his car, called after them, "Will you guys stop perving on each other? C'mon Cory, or you know Kaitlynn's gonna kick your ass!"

Cory ran over to Lindsey, grabbed her and threw her giggling and screaming over his shoulder. He said, "I'm takin' Zee to the party... hope you don't mind."

Lindsey yelled, "Cool! Can I go, really?"

Cory said, trying to stir trouble up, "Course you can! You'll be our mascot tonight!"

James watched helplessly, but Brick yelled out, "Uh-uhn! Sorry, Zee, high-schoolers only!"

Lindsey let out a disappointed "Awww, Brick!!"

Cory put Lindsey back down and said, "Sorry your uncle's such an old fart, Zee. Sucks to be you!!"

Cory ran on out over the front yard to catch up with Jason and called back to them, "Thanks, Brick! Thanks, Jimmy! I'm still around for a few more weeks so you'll see plenty of me! And don't forget your promise to me, Jimmy!" James liked being reminded of the promise - something he genuinely looked forward to, while simultaneously being very sensitive about wishing time away right at that moment. James had promised Cory to take him to New York for a wild weekend when he finally turned twenty-one and could go out to all the bars. He knew Cory would get a *lot* of attention in New York.

James watched Cory and Jason get in the car and leave, and there was the sensation of having a dagger thrust into his heart. He felt two strong hands from behind him on his shoulders. He didn't need to turn around to see who they belonged to. James said, "It's killing me. I mean, it's *really* killing me. I can't imagine what you must be going through." His voice was cracking as he said it.

Jerry said, "It's tough, I have to admit. I've had my moments where I've felt like I'd do anything to keep him in Lawder."

Brick came up to James and put his arms around him from the front while Jerry was still hugging James from behind.

Carrie Anne was finally the one that broke what was becoming a morose mood. She said to the three of them, "Jerry, I swear to God, I wish you'd just go ahead and have a three-way with Jimmy and Brick and get it out of the way!"

James, in spite of what he was feeling, turned red and started laughing.

Jerry backed up, but played along, "Carrie Anne, I told you these fantasies were between you and me, dammit!"

Even as the mood turned lighter again, James suddenly caught the emotion welling up in him and didn't think he'd be able to hold it back. Brick, who knew James better than anyone, knew it was coming and was prepared. He turned James around to face the front door and started pushing him through it, "Ok, Jimmy. Party's over. Everyone's gone. I'll kick Jerry and Carrie Anne out. You go inside right now and wait in our bedroom and I'll be in there in a minute. I've got to get Zee to stop horsing around with Kicker and make her get ready for bed. Now, move it."

James was actually relieved to have Brick take over like this.

He said, "Good night, Jerry and Carrie Anne. We'll talk tomorrow! Thanks for coming tonight." And with that he went inside to the bedroom that he and Brick had shared now for four years and broke down crying.

James couldn't hold it back to save his life. It wasn't just Cory moving away that was making him feel this way. That was just what was happening right now. Before he knew it, Zee would be moving away too. Then getting married, and having her own life. It was all a very acute sense of time slipping away. Not in a bad way, not like any of it was

being wasted. Quite the opposite. They were all good things right now. Things he didn't want to end. Things he didn't want to let go of. Even if he knew he must in the end.

He looked over at the digital picture frame beside his and Brick's bed. There was a photo of Zee at her ballet recital from a few years ago. Then a photo of James and Brick together on the Manhattan Bridge in New York - Brick had wanted to see the places from his life in New York, and so James had taken him there.

There was a photo of Jerry's friend Clay and his partner Aaron when they had come to visit. Clay was something else - quiet and reserved and yet extremely intense, but still a very kind person once he warmed up a little. Brick had commented to James that he would be less inclined to cross Clay than even Jerry. Aaron was quite the opposite - a small guy, extroverted and with a wild sense of humor.

The next photo to pop up was the one of Cory sitting in between James and Brick at the pizza restaurant after the first baseball game of Cory's that James had gone to. Cory seemed so much smaller then, even if he was as big as James in the picture. It just reflected how much bigger Cory had become since then.

There was a photo, taken right after her first stroke, of James and his mother sitting on the front porch of the house with Kicker next to them - James and his mother both looking a little worn from the scare of the first stroke, but still blessedly unaware of what was yet to come.

The next photo was a favorite of James', and made him smile to see it. It was a picture of Zee, Cory, Jason, Brick and Jerry, all in dirty, tattered clothes and horrific zombie make-up. James and Carrie Anne had gotten all of them made-up for a Halloween party they had gone to the year before. They had all had a blast and played it for all it was worth at the party. Jerry and Brick were definitely quite a sight - and they had actually gone trick-or-treating after the party. If you had told people that that was the Lawder Chief of Police who had just been trick-or-treating at their house like an overgrown teenager, they never would have believed it.

After that, there was a photo of Zee and Rosie and several other friends at a sleepover that they had hosted, the girls in the process of painting each other's fingernails.

The next picture was *the* picture, as far as James was concerned. It was the one that had actually changed his life at the last possible moment. It was the photo of James and Brick at the steak restaurant, with Brick looking intently at James. It was the photo that, on the way out to the job interview in L. A., had made James think for the first time that maybe Brick liked him as more than a friend. It was the photo that, when that thought crept into his mind, made him suddenly realize how much he wanted Brick to feel that way. He realized he wanted to mean the world to Brick. It was the photo that made him finally stop and look at what had been right there in front of him the whole time. He smiled at the thought that he probably owed Jerry a life debt for taking that picture and sending it to him. And even now, four years later, it made him feel something deep inside to see it.

Even though he hadn't heard a sound, James glanced back while still holding the photo frame in his hands, that very particular photo on the display, and saw Brick standing in the doorway watching him.

Brick said very quietly, "I had such a ridiculous crush on you by that point. It downright hurt to be around you."

He came around the side of the bed where James was and sat down next to him. James put the photo frame back on the nightstand, then climbed around behind Brick. He put his legs around him and wrapped his arms around him. He kissed the back of Brick's neck, not saying a word — just holding on to what he had in front of him.

James sat in the room, in a house, in a town, with a family and in a life that he, for so long, never imagined wanting, but wound up with anyway. So glad he wound up with it anyway. So incredibly thankful he wound up with all of it.

"You were right there, right in front of me, the whole time. You're the grace in my life," he said. He held onto Brick, glad he had looked closely and had seen what was there.

~~~ The End ~~~

## *Other Works By JF Smith*

### ***Latakia***

Matthew likes his life in Richmond. He has his friends and his softball and his volunteer work. And he has a very good-looking boyfriend, Brian, who he's been happily dating for over a year now. So what if his friends tend to question just how good his boyfriend is, and so what if Brian tends to have inexplicable mood swings. And so what if Brian seems to invite Matt's suspicions on occasion. If he just shows a little faith and trust, he'll appreciate what he has with Brian the way he should. Right?

But suddenly, Matt finds himself in a desperate life-or-death situation on a trip overseas, and he realizes just how much he misses home, and Brian. He's luckily rescued by a team of US Special Operations Forces, only to immediately find out they're a bunch of bigoted jerks. Worse, a quirk of his situation forces him to spend time with them that he'd rather not. And that's when he finds out that first impressions can be misleading. When called upon, he steps up when every fiber of his being tells him not to, and discovers something deep inside himself that he didn't realize was even there. And his life will never be the same. He finds that he can, after all, make some very overdue changes in his own life.

What Matt doesn't realize is that the bond of brotherhood runs both ways. And he winds up changing the lives of several of the men on that Special Forces team as much as they changed his.

All it takes is faith and trust.

### ***The Sticks (A Short Story)***

Percy's given up. He's given up and wants to be as far away as possible from the place that has been the source of his troubles all his life. But to his disappointment, he finds himself in the last place he expected. And a chance encounter with a redneck and a stubborn hound dog aren't helping, either. That is... until they do.

Invincibility can be found in the strangest places.

### ***The Last Day Of Summer***

Rett's done some running away in his life, from family and from boyfriends, and he's not above doing it again. His current boyfriend wants to take their relationship to the next level, which makes Rett hesitant and doubtful. Luckily, a job offer in a new town solves his problem for him, giving him the perfect excuse to run away yet again from the uncomfortable feeling of someone trying to get close to him, even if it means picking up after seven years of school and starting over.

Most guys would kill for his new job, and Rett's certainly desperate for the paycheck. But the irony of the new position isn't lost on him — he's never cared a whole lot for sports, and even far less about the world of professional sports, which is right where he's landed. Then he finds out he's not the only one that's new to pro sports, and he gets closer and closer to one of the players as they try to make sense of the whole crazy thing together. And things seem good!

But when his family, whom he had long since left behind, shows back up with a family crisis, his life starts to unwind and Rett allows everything around him to painfully self-destruct. It's only then that he realizes he's got to get back up, stand his ground, and teach himself the one thing he never truly learned growing up.

He's got to stop running away and finally learn what it really means to be a man.



### *About The Author*

*The author, when not writing, spends a little too much time staring vacantly into space. Distractions are always welcome, so feel free to contact him if you like. You may contact him at:*

*[jfsmithstories@gmail.com](mailto:jfsmithstories@gmail.com)  
[www.facebook.com/jfsmithstories](http://www.facebook.com/jfsmithstories)*

