

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS

Shannon M. Kirkland

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS

By Shannon M. Kirkland

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A man is leaning forward, holding a child piggyback-style. He is kissing another man who is leaning out of a sliding glass doorway, bracing his hands on the frame. The child's eyes are looking over the man's shoulder, observing the exchange, with a smile that looks to be the beginning of a giggle.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My mother left when I was a few days old, it was only daddy and me for years. Then he met and fell in love with Jim. It wasn't easy; there weren't many families like ours back then. All of the hardships were worth it though, because today is the day I'm officiating the marriage of the two men I called my dads.*

I want you to write their story; whether it be contemporary and/or historical, or whether it revolves around on the child(ren) and/or the couple.

Sincerely,

MC Houle

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: men with children, family, businessmen, coming out, sweet, non-explicit sex

Word Count: 14,191

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Chapter One

Fortunate Meetings

“Hi! I’m Brandon!”

I’d smiled at the little boy before settling in the chair at the table next to him with my coffee and bagel. He was sitting alone and toying with his bagel, although it was obvious from the abandoned coffee cup and half-eaten bagel on the other side of the table that he was here with an adult.

“Hi, Brandon, I’m Jim,” I replied.

“I can’t decide if I want butter or cream cheese on this half,” he declared.

“What did you have on the other half of it?”

“Cream cheese and it was really good, but I like butter too.”

“Hmmm... that is a dilemma. Tell you what, we’ll play *Rock, Paper, Scissors*. If I win, it’s cream cheese, and if you win, it’s butter.”

“You know *Rock, Paper, Scissors*? My dad and I play that all the time!”

“Okay, here goes... One... Two... Three...”

“Scissors,” he exclaimed, jumping in a second before I chose paper.

“Looks like it’s butter then!”

“Good, ’cause I really wanted the butter.”

I chuckled at him as he grabbed the paper cup of butter and squeezed it haphazardly over the bagel, making a mess. He reminded me of my niece and nephew. I unwrapped my own bagel, slathering it with cream cheese. It was my first time visiting this place and so far I was very impressed. They had a lot of choices of freshly baked bagels and the coffee was actually made by a barista, not the brewed stuff that I’d found in most places around here.

I looked over at Brandon, who was thoroughly enjoying his meal. He had as much butter on his hands and face as he did on the bagel. He grinned over at me between bites.

“Decided on the butter then, Brandon?” A man walked past me, and it was obvious that he was Brandon’s father. He had the same golden-wheat blond hair as Brandon and when he turned and looked over, I could see he had the same bright blue eyes, pertly upturned nose, and generous mouth.

“Daddy, this is Jim. He knows *Rock, Paper, Scissors* and helped me pick butter for my bagel.”

“Nice to meet you, Jim, I’m Rick,” he said, holding out his hand.

I quickly wiped mine on the napkin, reaching up to shake his.

Are we having a moment? I thought as we looked into each other’s eyes, and then, realizing that the handshake was getting unusually long, I quickly withdrew my hand, immediately picking up my coffee.

“Nice to meet you too,” I managed before I took a sip.

He pulled out his chair and sat down, which put him facing me. I’d picked up one of the free papers on the stand when I’d walked in and kept my gaze firmly on it as I ate, acutely aware of every little movement from the table beside me.

Brandon was fidgety and kept looking over at me as he ate. He gulped at his juice, letting out an exaggerated “ahh” after each swallow, giggling. I glanced over at him and smiled, catching Rick’s eyes. He smiled back and kind of shrugged as if to say, “that’s kids for ya.”

“So what do you do, Jim?” Brandon asked, looking very serious.

I held back a laugh, surprised at hearing him mocking an adult’s mundane question.

“I’m an architect,” I replied, adopting an equally serious expression. “So, what do you do, Brandon?”

He giggled with delight at the question. “I don’t do anything; I’m going to be in first grade this year!”

Rick looked on grinning. He began clearing the table, getting up to take the trash to the bin, grabbing a handful of napkins for Brandon’s messy hands and face.

“Do you work for Trivell Industries then?” Rick asked as he attempted to help Brandon clean up.

“Yes, I do. In fact, I just started there a couple of weeks ago. How did you guess?”

“They’re the largest developer in Crawford and I work on their account. I’m a copywriter with McCormick Advertising.”

“That explains it then.”

“Daddy, can Jim go with us to the park?” Brandon interrupted.

Rick looked a little embarrassed at the pseudo invitation and explained, “It’s our Saturday morning ritual, coming here to have a bagel for breakfast and then going to the park. You’re more than welcome to join us... if you want to.”

“Sure. I’d love to.”

“Yay!” Brandon yelled and, with all of the pent-up energy of a little boy ready for playtime, barreled out the door.

Chapter Two

A Walk in the Park

“So you’re raising Brandon by yourself?” Jim asked as we sat on a park bench, watching Brandon play on the jungle gym with several of the other kids.

On the walk to the park, I’d learned that Jim had just moved here, and shared the fact that Brandon and I had moved here four years ago.

“Yes, it’s just us. His mother left a few days after he was born,” I replied. I always hated telling people that. Usually, I’d just tell them that she was no longer with us and they’d just assume that she had died. Most people felt too sorry to say anything else, so I didn’t have to explain any further. For some reason, I felt compelled to tell Jim the truth.

It was in my second year of college that I’d started dating Belinda. The relationship, like the ones before it, had begun to run its course, and then it happened... an accidental pregnancy. I’d never tell Brandon that he was an accident. He’s the best thing that has ever happened to me.

Obviously, neither of us was prepared for this and we were in a complete state of shock. Belinda wanted to get an abortion and just forget it ever happened. When I confessed to Mom, she insisted that I bring Belinda home to meet her. In her typical take-charge fashion, she had already investigated what we needed to do to get married *and* had my old room ready for us—all of us. She already had a crib in the room.

“You two will get married, live here to save money, and Rick can commute to the college,” she’d told us. She always had a way of taking over and there was no arguing with her.

“It was probably one of the most miserable marriages that anyone could ever have,” I confessed to Jim. “I had hoped that it would work out for the baby’s sake but Belinda hated being pregnant, hated living with Mom, and frankly had no interest in being a mother, much less a wife. Actually, I think Mom was only too thrilled when she left.”

“What about your dad?”

“My dad died when I was three, in an accident at the factory he worked at.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Jim replied, laying his hand on my thigh in a sympathetic gesture.

“It’s okay; I barely remember him,” I quickly reassured him.

The heat from his hand seemed to expand, shrink-wrapping everything else around us until the sound of Brandon’s laugh cut through the film. I tore my gaze from Jim’s, checking on Brandon. He was fine, just having fun.

Noticing several people milling about, I shifted uncomfortably on the bench, and Jim removed his hand.

“So... I’ve been monopolizing the conversation. What about you? Parents, siblings?”

I kept an eye on Brandon while Jim talked about his family. He had an older brother who had two children, a younger sister, and his parents were still together. It sounded like they were all really close.

My mom and dad had me when they were almost forty. A surprise, Mom always said, and I often wondered if she’d considered it an unpleasant or a pleasant surprise. Neither of my parents had any siblings so I didn’t even have cousins, and we rarely visited my grandparents so she was the only family that I had.

“I imagine you’re happy then to be back living closer to home,” I offered.

“Yeah, I am. It’s still a four-hour drive but much better than living across the country.”

“Hey, Dad! Hey, Jim! Are you going to come play too?” Brandon asked, running up to where we were sitting. The kids he had been playing with had left, and he was getting bored of entertaining himself.

“Sure, buddy,” I replied. “The swings?”

“Yeah, come on, Jim!” He grabbed our hands, pulling us up, and we followed after him.

Jim just laughed when I looked at him askance, hoping that Brandon’s enthusiasm wasn’t wearing him out.

After the swings, we rode the merry-go-round and then walked over to Brandon’s favorite space, the area with the spring riders.

“You can have the tiger ’cause that’s your favorite; I’ll ride the giraffe, and Jim can ride the elephant ’cause he’s the biggest!” Brandon shouted.

Jim was a big man, not fat, just tall with broad shoulders and slim hips. When he walked in front of me, I couldn’t help but notice how well he filled

out his jeans. He was wonderful with Brandon, not at all self-conscious, and acting just like a kid himself.

I couldn't remember ever letting myself just go like that, even as a child. I was always different, a loner, and I never could seem to fit in. I didn't want Brandon to grow up like I had, so I did my best to make sure he spent time with other kids. I already felt guilty that he didn't have a mother so how could I even contemplate the feelings that Jim was stirring in me—the ones I'd tried to bury and deny for so many years?

“Do you think Jim will be here today?” Brandon asked as we made our way to the coffee shop.

“I don't know, buddy.”

“I hope he is. He's really fun.”

I hoped he was too. I'd thought about him all week, having a constant battle between *what if* and *I can't*. I'd almost convinced myself that what I'd felt last week had been a one-off and today would be different.

When we'd parted ways last Saturday, I hadn't known what to say. “Meet you at the coffee shop same time next Saturday?” he'd suggested.

Brandon had been ready to crash, and I was feeling unusually exhausted myself, not being used to having such long personal conversations. When we'd arrived home, I'd taken a nap, which was very rare for me.

“He's not here, Daddy,” Brandon said. The disappointment on his face was as plain as day.

“Maybe he'll come later,” I reassured him.

We ate our bagels and lingered over our drinks; still, Jim didn't show up.

“Are we still going to the park?” Brandon asked.

I glanced at my watch and saw that we had an hour to get Brandon ready to go to his first overnight birthday party.

“Sure, buddy; thirty minutes and then we have to go home and get your bag and Tony's present.”

I could tell that Brandon was feeling let down; maybe I was too. Maybe I'd read all the signs wrong. *It's for the best*, I told myself. *He couldn't ever be more than a friend anyway.*

Brandon wanted to swing and I tried to make it fun for him, but I couldn't erase the images of the three of us laughing and having such a good time last Saturday. Brandon gave up too, and we started to head back to the car.

"Jim! There you are," Brandon exclaimed.

I looked up to see Jim walking towards us. Brandon ran up and hugged him, saying, "We thought you weren't coming."

Brandon always was very affectionate. He could melt even my mother's cold heart.

"I'm sorry. I had to go out of town and I couldn't get back until this morning. I didn't have a phone number for you and I didn't even know your last name to call directory assistance," Jim said.

"That's okay," I replied. "Our plans were tentative anyway."

"Yeah, but I really wanted to see you guys. Are you leaving?" he asked, noticing that I was holding Brandon's hoodie and had my car keys in my hand.

"Yeah, I'm taking Brandon to a birthday party that starts in about thirty minutes."

"I'm staying the night too. It's my first sleepover," Brandon chimed in, looking up from where he'd been watching some ants scurry in and out of an anthill.

"That sounds like fun," he said, smiling down at Brandon, who just nodded, distracted by his fascination with the ants.

"Sounds like you'll have a busy afternoon then, keeping up with all the kids," he said, turning his attention back to me.

"Oh, no," I shuddered. "No way would I hang out with all the moms; they'd be trying to set me up with their single friends. I paid for the birthday cake just so that I could get out of it."

"Smart man," he chuckled. "Well, would you like to do something later then?"

Before I could stop myself, I replied, "Sure. Why don't you come over for dinner? I don't want to be away from the house in case Brandon needs me."

I wrote down my address and phone number for him, confirming the plan to see him at five.

“I wish I could stay home with you and Jim,” Brandon said on our way back to the house.

“You don’t want to go to the party? It’ll be fun.”

“Yeah, I know...” He didn’t sound entirely convinced.

Chapter Three

Honesty

“Stop! I shouldn’t, I can’t do this,” Rick said, pulling away.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

He sat up, leaning over with his elbows on his knees, covering his face with his hands. After catching his breath, he looked over at me. “I’m so sorry; I shouldn’t have let myself... I just... I don’t know how it happened. I got caught up in the moment, but I... what if someone finds out?”

My brain was slowly engaging as my heartbeat slowed down. Our attraction to each other had drawn us closer and closer all evening to this moment where we were both writhing and lying naked on the couch, and then he’d pulled back. Finally, I realized what he was saying.

“You’re not out then?” I asked. “Why?”

“I... well, there’s Brandon to consider... and I don’t think Mr. McCormick is exactly gay-friendly... or anybody else I work with or even anyone I know, for that matter...” There was more than a trace of bitterness in the tone of his voice—actually, real pain.

My mind whirled, trying to process what he’d just told me. I wanted to ask him so many questions, including what this meant for us. When I’d first arrived, he seemed nervous and slightly shy. I offered to help with dinner preparations and managed to nick my finger slicing some tomatoes. When it became obvious that I had no clue what I was doing in the kitchen, he tactfully suggested that I pour us each a glass of wine and just sit down.

After that, he relaxed and I found that we had many things in common including similarities in the type of work we did, the music we liked, and the kind of movies we both enjoyed. His vulnerability drew out my protective instincts yet there was a quiet strength about him and an indescribable something that I completely connected with. After dinner, we were talking and laughing and then we were touching and kissing and *God*, he’d just pushed all the right buttons.

“So... what did you mean by ‘there’s Brandon to consider’?” I asked.

“I... I don’t want him to have to live with the same kind of shit I faced when I was young. No father, an older mother... I always felt like such a freak. Kids would ask about my dad, and Mom didn’t really hang out with the other parents or let me do much of anything really. It’s bad enough that Brandon doesn’t have a mother. It would be a hundred times worse if he had a gay father too.”

“A hundred times worse? You make it sound like having a gay father would be a death sentence. I know that it wouldn’t be easy. It’s still not easy for me sometimes to tell people that I’m gay. Once they know, some people can only see this one fact about me and they won’t even consider that there is more to me than that. That’s their shortsightedness, their issue, not mine. Brandon seems to be intelligent and well-adjusted; don’t you think he could handle it?”

“It’s not that I don’t think he could handle it; I don’t want him to even *have* to, Jim. You don’t understand. You’re not a father and you have *no idea* about the responsibility I have to make sure that he has the best in life,” Rick retorted, crossing his arms defensively.

That hurt. No, I wasn’t a father and the thought that I may never have the chance to be one was painful. An angry reply rose to my lips, but seeing the pain on Rick’s face quelled the urge to bat it straight back to him.

I reached out, rubbing my hand along his thigh. “You’re absolutely right, Rick; I don’t know what it’s like, but what kind of message are you sending Brandon by not being true to yourself? What if he turns out to be gay too? Do you want him to spend his life ashamed of it, having to live the kind of lie that you’ve been living?”

Rick looked stricken by my bluntness, as if he hadn’t even thought of the possibility that his choice to deny this fundamental part of himself could have any negative repercussions for Brandon.

“I... you’re right. I *have* been living a lie, but I don’t want Brandon to end up hurt because of me. Fuck, Jim, I just don’t know what to do.”

I sat up slightly and reached over to pull him into my arms.

“I’m not trying to tell you what to do. I’m just telling you how it is for me. I made myself a promise that I would never hide who I am. I have nothing to be ashamed of and neither do you. I don’t know what is always best but I do know that all we can do is be honest... honest to ourselves and to everyone else. The rest will work itself out.”

“Can it really be that easy, Jim? It just seems too simple.”

“Maybe not easy but it is simple. Here’s a simple truth…” Cradling his face with my palm and looking into his eyes, I swallowed down my fears and let it all out.

“I love what I know of you and I would give *anything* if you would give us a chance. I’ve never met anyone who I felt as connected to, and so immediately, as I do with you. Maybe it seems too soon but I know how I feel and—”

He dived forward and crushed his mouth on mine, cutting off my words, the tension and the conflicting emotions giving way to passion and the telltale heat of fresh hope. His touches were so ardent and yet so tender; the expression on his face was both serene and intense. The longing in his eyes betrayed at once his loneliness and need, filling my heart with a kind of ache, filling it with the strongest emotions that I had ever felt, ever hoped to feel, ever truly believed possible. While still kissing, we maneuvered—rather clumsily—so that I could open for him; only then, as he sank into me, did I understand the weight of my need and his. I don’t think our lips parted the whole time he thrust back and forth, even after we came.

Chapter Four

Facing Fears

After Jim left, I sat on the couch, still feeling his warmth, cocooned in his scent. My lips felt bruised and my muscles ached slightly, deliciously so. The reminders of our passion made me feel cherished, loved, and accepted, and I never wanted the feeling to end.

I had to do this while I still had the strength and resolve. I couldn't go back to the way it was before, pretending that my life was fine, avoiding it by filling the days with work and taking care of Brandon. Brandon... he was my everything, but what if I was doing him more harm than good? I didn't want him to ever feel the pain and emptiness that I'd felt for so long. Was I inadvertently teaching him by example to hide himself, feel shame, live a lie?

I couldn't do it anymore. Not now. Jim had changed everything for me, and I had to take this next step and call my mom. We'd had a strained relationship since Brandon and I had moved out. She couldn't seem to forgive me for cutting the apron strings, and I had a hard time forgiving her for being so controlling. It had taken me years to see how she'd conditioned me to give in to what she wanted. There always seemed to be this three-step process of first, making me doubt myself, and if that failed, second, the guilt trip, and if necessary, third, the ultimatum.

"You don't want to do that; it won't work. You can't leave him with strangers and you can't take care of him by yourself. You can barely take care of your own self."

"You're just being selfish, Richard. Brandon needs a mother; he needs me. How's he going to feel? He was already abandoned by his mother. I don't understand how you could do this to us. Why aren't you thinking about Brandon?"

"Well, you're making your bed, Richard, and you'll have to lie in it. Don't expect to come back here once you've left and it doesn't work out."

I had been terrified at the prospect of raising him by myself, but I knew I had to do it. I'd started noticing how she was already making little jabs at Brandon that undermined his confidence, and his reactions were reminiscent of how I'd felt as a child. I wanted something different for him. I wanted him to be

confident and independent and never doubt himself like I always did. If I wanted all of those things for him, it seemed paradoxical that I was denying him the truth about who his father truly was: a gay man.

Brandon and I went to see her every few months. Sometimes I wondered why I did but I felt like he needed some semblance of family. I barely remembered my own grandparents. I'd gotten more adept at handling her behavior, and he seemed to enjoy seeing her.

Calling her now was like a test. I'd stood up to her before and if I could face her, then I could face anyone. I took a deep breath and picked up the phone.

Chapter Five

How Do We Do This?

When the phone rang, and I saw it was Rick, I wasn't sure what to expect. When I'd finally left his house, he'd said he would need some time to think. I'd spent the entire day willing for my phone to ring, wondering if I'd totally fucked up by telling him how I felt. Maybe it was too soon; maybe I'd been too honest.

Too soon, too honest... well, there wasn't any kind of timetable on love, I knew what I felt and I wasn't going to let my fears keep me from saying it. I'd done that before, playing the game, waiting for the other person to make the first move. This time it wasn't a game. This time it felt like it was for keeps.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jim. I... I've told my mother and Brandon about us."

He sounded exhausted and possibly on the verge of tears.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Do you just want to come over for dinner tomorrow night? We can talk then."

"Sure, I will. I can come over now if you want me to."

"I do. God knows I want to see you, but I'm exhausted and just need to go to bed. Brandon's already in bed. See you tomorrow?"

"Okay," I replied and before I could say anything else, he choked out, "Bye," and hung up the phone.

"Hey, Brandon, what's up?" I asked when he opened the front door. He was bouncing around in excitement and immediately hugged me, then grabbed my hand to tow me inside, chattering all the way.

He pulled me into the kitchen where Rick was standing at the counter chopping up vegetables. As we walked in, my heart was thumping madly in my chest. When he turned around, we just stood, looking at each other for a moment, our eyes asking all of the searching questions.

Brandon broke the silence, unaware of our *conversation*.

“Come on, Jim, we get to put the toppings on!”

As I walked up to the kitchen island, Rick walked around and gave me a much-too-brief kiss and a really quick hug. I glanced down at Brandon, wondering if he had seen the exchange.

He had and just grinned, saying, “Daddy told me that you two are dating; it’s what grownups do. I don’t think I’m going to date ’cause I don’t want to kiss Rebecca because she’s always like ‘Oh, that’s gross,’ and Tony doesn’t brush his teeth very good...”

We all laughed, shattering some kind of force field, and commenced making the best homemade pizza I’d ever tasted.

“He’s down for the count,” Rick said as he returned from Brandon’s bedroom, walking up, wrapping his arms around me, and leaning in for a kiss.

We’d had our dinner out on the back deck, and after clearing up we all went into the living room to play a video game with Brandon. After a few games, he was getting sleepy so Rick put him to bed while I tidied up.

“No! We can’t do this here; what if Brandon wakes up?” Rick blurted out, backing away, trying to catch his breath from what had started out as an innocent enough kiss but had quickly heated up to a grabbing, groping, cock-grinding-against-cock make-out session.

“Bedroom?” I suggested.

Rick looked indecisive for a moment and then let out a choked laugh. “Oh my God! I don’t fucking know how to do this.”

You so fucking do, I thought with my little head, then the big one took over, and I knew what he was saying.

“It’s up to you how we play this, Rick. Obviously we wouldn’t want to be having sex on the couch and have Brandon walk in on it, but it’s your decision if you want me to stay over.”

“I don’t know. What do people do? I’ve never been with anyone else around Brandon.” He sat down abruptly on the couch and then continued. “Can you believe that Mom actually said she would apply for custody of Brandon if I continued seeing you?”

“Can she do that?”

“No, I’m the only legal guardian of Brandon. Belinda signed her rights away when we filed for divorce. I have the court documents attesting to that fact which I reminded my mother about before she slammed down the phone.”

“That’s good. But what possessed her to say that in the first place?”

“It was the ultimatum part of her three-step process.”

I sat down beside Rick, placing a comforting hand on his thigh, feeling shocked. I could only imagine how nerve-racking it must have been for him to come out to his mom, but it hadn’t occurred to me that she would react like this.

“What does that mean?” I asked, and he explained how he’d figured out her game.

“I know she’s always loved me and she’s done so much for me over the years. I’ve just never been able to figure out why I couldn’t ever please her.”

“Rick, you don’t have to. Some people you’ll never be able to please.”

“I’m figuring that out and this just put the icing on the cake. It doesn’t matter anyway; I doubt she’ll ever speak to me again now. What was it like for you when you told your parents?”

“I was probably fourteen or fifteen when I told Mom. It was easy for me because I think my mom suspected it anyway. Dad didn’t say much, but then he’s kind of like that.”

“If only I’d admitted to being gay a long time ago... I just kept thinking that my attraction to other guys was something that would pass. I dated a few girls and even thought I loved one or two... I guess I did but it just fizzled out. It wasn’t until Dave, a guy I met at a conference for work when Brandon was still a baby, that I really knew without a doubt that I was gay. I couldn’t keep seeing him though... not after what happened...”

“What happened?” I encouraged him when he seemed lost in thought for a moment.

“It was the last day of the conference and I’d spent the night in his room. When I got back to mine, Mom had called and was in a panic about Brandon. He was sick with a high fever and I just felt so guilty. I should’ve been thinking of him, not myself. It was just so selfish.”

“But how could you have known that he was gonna fall sick? Your mom was there with him so it’s not like you’d abandoned him. It wasn’t anything to feel guilty about.”

“I just now realized that and it makes me wonder how often I’ve let misplaced guilt control my actions.” He sighed and then let out a half laugh. “Oh God! This is too much. Can we just go to bed?”

“Maybe we just lock the door?” I suggested.

“Good plan! We’ll figure this out together, won’t we?”

Chapter Six

The Going Gets Tough

“Who was that with your dad?” Angie asked when we went out for recess.

“That’s Jim; my dad’s dating him,” I proudly replied.

“Dating? Men date women, not other men,” Angie stated, looking at me like I was from outer space.

“Well, Dad said they’re dating so you’re wrong,” I retorted.

“I’m not wrong; your dad is just weird.”

“No, he isn’t.”

“Is too!”

“Is not!”

“Kids! What’s going on here?” Miss Smith asked, walking over to where we were standing.

“Brandon said his dad was dating a man. I told him that men date women,” Angie replied.

“Angie, go over and play on the swings; I need to talk to Brandon.”

Miss Smith grabbed me by the arm, marching me over to one of the play tables. She seemed angry, and the other kids were looking at me.

“Now, Brandon, do you care to tell me why you told Angie that your dad is dating a man?”

“Cause it’s true,” I replied. “He’s dating Jim.”

“I need to talk to your father about this. When he comes to pick you up today, please tell him to come in and talk to me. Now go and play, and for goodness’ sake don’t say anything else about this to anyone.”

I was scared to death to tell Dad about what had happened when he picked me up. I’d never been in trouble before. I was valiantly trying not to cry as he pulled up and was barely able to tell him that he had to go in and talk to Miss Smith. When we got to her room, she told me that I needed to sit in the hallway and wait while she talked to my dad. I couldn’t hear what they were saying but their voices got really loud.

“Come on, Brandon; we need to go home,” Dad said, angrily striding out of her room, letting the door bang.

Oh no, I'm really in big trouble. I was frantically trying to remember anything else wrong I may have done that Miss Smith could have told him about.

“I’m sorry, Daddy.” My throat closed up and the tears started spilling down my face.

He stopped abruptly, squatting down and placing his hands on my shoulders. “Brandon, sweetheart, why are *you* sorry? *You* didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But, I said, Miss Smith said—” and that is all I got out before the floodgates really opened.

He hugged me to his chest, rubbing my back while I sobbed out all of my confusion and pain. When the outburst was over, he wiped at my tears with his thumbs, saying, “Brandon, you did nothing wrong. I’ve talked to Miss Smith and she understands the situation now and she won’t be saying anything else about it.”

“Okay, Daddy... can we go home now?”

“Hey, dude! Your dad said you had a tough time today,” Jim said after he’d walked in and swooped me up, playing airplane for a few minutes.

“It was okay; Angie is just mean. She’s mean to everyone. She’s just a stupid girl anyway. What does she know?”

“I guess Jim and I should have explained things better to you, buddy,” Dad said, sitting down on the couch.

“You know how I told you that Grandma didn’t like it that I am dating Jim and we may not see her for a while?”

“Yeah, and I said I liked Jim better anyway. He makes us happy.”

“You make me happy too, Brandon,” Jim said, giving me a squeeze.

“The thing is, son, there are going to be people that don’t like the fact that Jim and I are dating. Some people may look at us strangely, ask questions about it, you may even get teased at school and some of the kids won’t want to play with you.”

“Like Jessie? He’s new and dresses funny. Tony made fun of him and I told him I didn’t want to be friends with him anymore. I like Jessie.”

“Yeah, like that. If someone is mean to you, you can always come to me or Jim and we’ll do everything we can to make it better. If you have a question, just ask, okay?”

“Okay. Are we going to eat now? I’m starving!”

Chapter Seven

Meeting the Family

“Just relax, Rick. They’re going to love you.” Jim removed one of his hands from the steering wheel and placed it on top of mine, if only to stop me from cracking my knuckles which I tended to do when I was nervous. He always winced when he heard the popping sounds.

“I can’t help it. You know how I am.”

“Always worried... just chill; it’ll be fine.”

I’d put off meeting Jim’s family for as long as I could. Finally, Brandon got tired of my excuses and told me off. He wanted to meet them too. Jim had been to visit them a couple of times over the last few months, but I’d made excuses each time. I’d been tempted to just send Brandon with him this trip, but I really didn’t have a good excuse lined up this time.

What if they hated me? Jim was close to his family, and I was sure their opinion meant a lot to him. That was selling Jim short, though; he wasn’t that easily swayed. Still, it was going to be really uncomfortable and I’d rather have avoided it.

Brandon was in the backseat, occupying himself with an electronic game, looking up every half hour or so to ask if we were there yet. He was adjusting really well but I still found myself full of worry and doubts. The incident with Brandon’s teacher was only the beginning, and if it hadn’t been for Jim’s support and Jessie’s mom, Adrienne, I don’t know how I would have survived.

When I met her, she already knew about me and Jim. When I started to apologize for any teasing her son may have endured, she instantly set me straight. “Rick, kids are going to be teased for anything and everything; that’s just the way kids are and it’s part of growing up. My Jessie and your Brandon are going to be just fine.” It helped knowing she was in our corner, but I still so often found myself feeling like the awkward kid that just couldn’t fit in.

I was so tired of the knowing looks, and some of the snubs I’d gotten from the other kids’ parents really hurt. The worst was Tony’s mom, Karen, who flat out told me that Brandon wasn’t welcome to come to her house anymore. Everywhere I went, I felt like people were staring at me, and it was only in the sanctuary of home that I felt like I could breathe.

“Are we there yet?” Brandon asked yet again.

“Almost,” Jim replied. He began pointing out various places, telling us stories about them, and before I knew it, we had arrived.

Their house was an old farmhouse with a couple of newish looking buildings on the property. Jim pointed at one, explaining, “That’s Dad’s workshop and the other one is a garage.”

When we pulled up, a couple of kids were playing in the backyard; Jim’s niece and nephew, I assumed. Which meant his brother and his wife were probably already here and likely his sister too. *Best just get it all over with at once*, I told myself.

Brandon jumped out of the car, and I could tell he was getting ready to bolt over to play with the other kids. “Wait a minute, Brandon,” I admonished him.

As we were retrieving our bags from the trunk, the front door opened and a woman stepped out. “You finally made it,” she said, walking up to give Jim a hug.

“Hi, Mom; this is Rick.”

“I’m so happy to finally meet you,” she said as she enveloped me in a vanilla-scented hug.

“Nice to meet you too, Mrs. West.”

“Oh, please, just call me Catherine,” she replied. “And you must be Brandon,” she said, immediately giving him a hug.

“You smell nice,” he said, “like cookies.”

We laughed, and Catherine took Brandon’s bag from his hands, telling him he should go play with Cathy and Chase.

“So Jimmy, Rick, how was the drive down?”

“Jimmy?” I mouthed to Jim. He just shrugged and grinned.

“It was nice, Mom,” he replied and proceeded to tell her about our trip as we walked inside.

Once inside, I was immediately drawn to the cozy, slightly cluttered but clean feel of the place. It was so unlike my mother’s house, which bordered on sterile.

“Take Rick up to your room, Jimmy, and show him around. Oh, Rick, do you think Brandon will mind bunking with Cathy and Chase? Their room is down here.”

“I’m sure he would be delighted,” I replied.

“Good. Ted put another twin bed in there for him but we probably should have asked first.”

As we walked up the stairs, I was surprised to see Brandon’s school picture hanging on the wall with the other two children’s pictures.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Jim said. “It’s one of the pictures I asked if I could have.”

“No, I don’t mind at all. It’s really sweet actually.”

“No doubt she’ll have a lot more of us after this weekend. She loves taking pictures.”

The entire staircase was filled with family pictures. It was like looking at a huge photo album of Jim’s life. All of my school pictures were tucked away in a drawer at my mom’s house. Jim pointed out various ones on the way up, explaining where they were taken. Even more framed photos decorated the hallway. Finally, we arrived at his room.

“It’s only a full-size bed but at least it’s not two twin beds,” Jim said.

“Oh. I didn’t even think to ask where we would be sleeping. I just assumed your mom would put us in separate rooms.”

“Why? She knows the score and we *are* adults.”

“That’s true. I guess I just thought...” I trailed off, not wanting to finish my sentence.

“That she would think what we do is wrong?” Jim finished.

“Well, I...”

“The question is, do you think it’s wrong?” he asked, drawing me into his arms.

“No, it only feels right being with you but I know what people think.”

“Who cares what people think? They aren’t living our lives or feeling our love,” he replied before pressing his lips to mine.

“Jimmy! Mom said I’d find you up here.”

I quickly backed away, flushing with embarrassment. A younger, smaller, female version of Jim stood at the door.

“Oops, sorry! You must be Rick. I’m Claudia,” she said, coming into the room and immediately giving me a hug. “I’m so happy to meet you finally. Jim’s told us all about you.”

“Nice to meet you too.”

“I’ve met Brandon already; he looks like the spitting image of you. What a little charmer he is. Jimmy, are you going to keep him up here all day? Come on, you two. Steve and Mary want to meet you.” She grabbed us both by the hand, towing us downstairs, chattering all the way.

We walked into a large kitchen. Catherine was standing at the stove. Seated at the large farmhouse table, breaking up green beans, were Jim’s brother, Steve, and his wife, Mary.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in!” Steve quipped, jumping up to give Jim some kind of strange handshake and then a hug. “Nice to see you, bro.” He turned to me, adding, “You must be Rick. Glad to finally meet you.”

Oh, God; I hope he doesn’t expect me to know that handshake, I thought, feeling overwhelmed by his exuberance.

Instead, he gave me a quick, one-arm hug and then introduced his wife. She seemed a little shy but she smiled and said she was happy to meet me too.

“Have a seat,” Jim suggested, pulling out a couple of chairs. He sat down next to Mary and I sat down beside him.

“Would you like something to drink, dear?” Catherine asked. “I’ve got iced tea or lemonade.”

“Tea would be nice, thank you,” I replied.

Claudia sat down across from us and pretty soon they were deep in conversation, talking about one of their cousins.

Catherine brought me a glass of tea, and I sat, sipping it, occasionally smiling as I listened to the conversation. I was glad that they hadn’t started giving me the third degree but I still felt awkward. I could see Brandon through the French doors, and he appeared to be having a blast, playing with the other kids. He always did make friends easily.

The tea quickly made its way to my bladder, and I excused myself to use the restroom in the hall. When I'd finished, I loitered about, taking in the displays of various pieces of pottery. I picked up a vase, admiring the delicate pattern, and almost dropped it when a voice said, "It's one of my latest pieces."

"Oh God, you scared me to death!" I blurted out, quickly replacing the vase. "It's beautiful; I'm so glad I didn't drop it!"

"I'm sorry. Catherine is always saying I have a bad habit of sneaking up on people. Come on; let me show you something," he said, motioning for me to follow him out the door.

So this was Ted. Jim had told me that his dad wasn't very talkative but he hadn't really gone into much detail about him so I hadn't been sure what to expect. He had a very gentle, easygoing, loose manner about him, appearing almost hippyish, with his longish gray hair pulled back into a ponytail. I'd recognized him immediately from the pictures I'd seen in the hallway.

I followed him to the building that Jim had pointed out when we drove up, craning my neck to catch a glimpse of Brandon to make sure that he was still playing in the backyard.

He noticed and said, "They'll be fine. My Catherine doesn't miss a thing."

He didn't seem to miss much either.

We ambled into the building, and my attention was drawn to all the pieces of pottery in various stages on shelves and tables. He had several pottery wheels and invited me to sit down at one.

"Let me show you how it's done," he said, pulling a piece of clay out of a plastic bag and throwing it on the wheel. He grabbed a sponge from a nearby bucket of water and wetted the clay down.

"You have to get it centered first; always the hardest thing to learn in the beginning. Then the trick is to keep everything wet, tuck in your elbows like so, and keep your hands touching each other."

I watched him for a while, fascinated by how quickly and deftly he formed the clay.

"Now your turn," he said, pulling another piece of clay out and throwing it on the wheel in front of me.

"I don't think I'd be any good at it," I protested, not wanting to make a fool of myself in front of him.

“You won’t know unless you try then, will you?” he replied, grabbing the sponge from the bucket and wetting down the clay. “Here, let me get this centered for you and then you can have a go at it. Just push the pedal down slowly to get the wheel started.”

Once he had the clay securely in the center of the wheel and it wasn’t wobbling, he rewet the sponge and handed it to me. “Just get a good feel for the clay and let it take form under your hands.”

I put my hands on the clay, not knowing what to expect. It felt firmer than I expected yet still very malleable.

“You’re doing great,” he encouraged. “It’s just art so you can’t mess it up.”

I slowly worked with the clay, enjoying the feel of it taking shape. Very gently, I lifted the sides, glancing over at him as he worked on his, copying his movements.

“You know, Rick, it’s much simpler when you just let go of your fears and let what happens just happen.”

I had a feeling he was talking about more than just forming the vase.

Chapter Eight

Our Family

When Rick came back to the house with Dad, he seemed a lot more relaxed. I'd quickly realized that he hadn't come back from the bathroom. When I'd started to get up to go look for him, Mom had told me he'd gone out with Dad. I'd intentionally tried to distract Claudia and Steve so that they hadn't started to bombard him with questions the minute he'd walked through the door. I could appreciate his nerves but he was so different when he was alone with me and Brandon, and different still when I'd overheard him on the phone, talking about a project with someone at work. Then he was so sure and confident, authoritative even, but when we were out with other people, he seemed to withdraw like a snail back into its shell.

Over dinner, I was happy to see him laughing and joining in on the conversation. I noticed Dad observing him at various times and wondered what he was thinking. Dad was often quiet, not prone to voice his opinion, always encouraging us to think for ourselves.

After dinner and clearing up, everyone retreated into the family room. The kids put on a movie while we sat on the sectional, drinking coffee and chatting.

Dad got up after a while and I knew he was going outside to sit in his favorite spot on the veranda. Rick was deep in a conversation with Claudia about the advertising business. She still hadn't decided what she wanted to do for a living, drifting from job to job.

"I figured I'd find you out here," I said, settling in a chair next to Dad. He gave me a nod and we both just sat, enjoying the peace and quiet as we gazed at the stars. "Settles the mind," he'd always say when asked why he liked to just sit and look at the sky.

"Beautiful night," he finally said, breaking our silent reverie.

"Yes, it is," I replied, and then I just had to ask, "Dad... what do you think of Rick?"

"The question is, son, what do you think of him?"

"I love him, Dad, more than I ever thought it was possible to love someone else. He's the man I want to spend the rest of my life with; it's like we were made for each other."

“That’s how I’ve always felt about your mother.”

“I guess it won’t all be plain sailing though, will it?”

“Some folks don’t like my work, some love it... Those that don’t like it go away empty-handed, and those that love it always leave with a smile on their face. Can never tell when they walk through that door... stopped worryin’ about it a long time ago...”

That was a typical kind of response from my dad. I could take it however I wanted to but I knew what he was saying.

“Thanks, Dad. I better get inside before Rick thinks I’ve gotten lost.”

“Night, son.”

I went back inside, settling in beside Rick, who was now listening to Mom tell stories about us kids growing up. I swear she always recounted events as if *I* was the most precocious one of the bunch, when everyone knew it was Steve that had instigated everything.

“I love your family. They are just so down to earth and comfortable to be around,” Rick said as we were getting ready for bed.

“See, I told you they would love you. How could they not?”

We got into bed and I could tell that there was something on Rick’s mind.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked, not really knowing what could be coming.

“Jim... I love you... and I want *us* to be a family. How would you feel about moving in with me and Brandon?”

“You’re asking me to move in?”

“Yes, I am...”

“Are you sure?” Then I mentally kicked myself for asking the question, knowing how fragile our happiness was at times.

“I know I’ve made things difficult for us... it’s just... Well, I’ve seen how little any of that really means when I think about what I have and how precious it is... I never want to be without you.”

I’d been waiting so long for those words; nothing more needed to be said. We melted into each other and sunk down in the bed.

For a time, we just held each other, making sure it was real, I guess. He kissed me first, seeking out my lips, at first tentatively—maybe scared, and

hell, I sure was—and then more ardently. Taking my lead from him, I kissed back, parting my lips to invite his tongue. The tip of it whipped across my lips and then plunged in. I sucked it gently, but our needs were always pretty uncontrollable and soon we were entwined.

Our lovemaking was the slowest and most tender it had ever been, heightened by the fact that we were desperately trying to be quiet.

Chapter Nine

Trouble

“What the hell happened to you?” Jim demanded as soon as I got home from school, intercepting me before I could make a beeline for my room. My shirt was torn, the knees of my jeans were dirty, and my right eye was swelling shut.

“I got in a fight,” I mumbled, looking down at my feet, hoping he didn’t notice my face.

“A fight? Who with?”

“Nobody; please don’t tell Dad.”

“*Nobody* sure hits pretty hard, don’t they? Come on; let’s get some ice on that eye.”

Jim towed me into the kitchen, grabbing a bag of peas out of the freezer and handing them to me. I made a move to leave, but he grabbed the torn hem of my shirt, saying, “No way, dude, you have to tell me how the other guy looks.”

I laughed and sat down on one of the barstools, relieved that he was acting cool about it. “Actually, worse.”

“So, do you want to tell me what happened?”

“Only if you promise not to tell Dad.”

“Tell me what happened and we’ll figure out the best way to tell your dad.”

“I was walking home with Jessie and there was a couple of guys—Nate and Frank, they’re a little bit older and go to high school. Anyway, they were walking behind us. They kept making comments and one of them yelled out, asking if we were the faggots with the faggot parents...”

I glanced over at Jim, embarrassed, wondering how he felt. He just frowned slightly then nodded at me to continue.

“I was just going to keep walking and ignore them but Jessie got really pissed and turned around to confront them. Then we... well, you know, started fighting. Jessie doesn’t look nearly as bad as me but you know how much bigger he is.”

Taking the bag of peas from my eye, I asked, “So does it still look noticeable?”

“Better but it’s definitely going to turn all kinds of nasty colors.”

“What do you think Dad’s going to say? I hope he doesn’t make a big deal out of it. You know how he gets; he’ll be trying to take me to the hospital.”

“I don’t know, Brandon. Do you want me to talk to him first?”

“Naw, that’s okay. I’ll tell him when he gets home but I’m going to go clean up and change first.”

“That may be best... and Brandon, you two should’ve walked away... but I’m proud of you.”

He reached out and gave me a quick hug. I ran up the stairs to get ready for when Dad came home. I wasn’t afraid that he’d be angry with me. I just knew he’d worry and feel bad because of what happened, like always.

Why couldn’t people understand how great our family was?

“You’re sure you’re okay?” Dad asked again.

“Yeah, Dad, it’s just a black eye and a few bruises. I had worse when I wrecked my bike last month.”

“True, and you are almost a teenager now; I guess it’s par for the course,” he sighed, giving me my good-night hug.

“Night, Dad. Night, Jim,” I said, giving Jim his hug before going up to bed.

The conversation with Dad had gone much better than I’d hoped. Of course, he told me I should have walked away but he understood why I chose to stand by Jessie’s side. I was worried that he’d try to call the school or find out who the boys’ parents were and make it even worse. As it happened, Nate’s mom called Dad and apologized for her son’s behavior and told him that Nate had been grounded for a week.

“Hey, Brandon, Jessie... wait up!”

“Oh shit,” I whispered to Jessie. “It’s Nate.”

“Well, I guess he’s coming back for some more whup ass then, isn’t he?”

Jessie had developed a badass attitude, as well as a swagger, since our fight.

“Listen, guys, I just wanted to say I’m sorry,” Nate said. “Frank... Well, Frank’s the one that started it but I shouldn’t have gone along with him.”

I looked over at Jessie and he was looking at Nate suspiciously. I gave him a nudge, then stuck out my hand and said, “We’re even then, Nate.”

Jessie stuck out his, saying, “Yeah, man, but that totally wasn’t cool.”

“I know,” Nate replied. He looked down for a minute, drawing a pattern on the ground with his foot. “The thing is, my uncle’s gay and he’s a really cool guy, you know, and he’d be really pissed at me if he found out.”

The three of us continued on down the path towards our houses, shooting the breeze about nothing in particular. When we reached Nate’s cross street, he gave us a nod, saying, “See you all around.”

“Huh, I guess he ain’t so bad,” Jessie ventured.

“Naw, he seems okay,” I replied.

Would it always be like this? Next year we’d start high school and it was bigger with a lot more people. How many of them would have a problem with me and my family? And why did anyone care anyway?

Chapter Ten

High School

“You want me to drive you and Jessie to school?” I offered, knowing Brandon would probably say no. Jim had already said that Brandon would be fine, especially if he was with Jessie.

“That’s okay, Dad. Jessie and I are just going to take the bus.”

“Okay, son. I... well, just call me if you need anything.”

“Okay, Dad. Bye!” With that, he shot out of the door.

The first day of high school and *I* was a nervous wreck; needlessly, I suppose because Brandon *did* seem pretty cool about it. I’d offered to drive him and Jessie to school, thinking it may help although I probably would’ve just made it worse.

I spent the entire day at work, checking my phone, and left early so that I’d be home when he arrived.

“So?” I asked him as soon as he walked through the door.

“It was great, Dad. I’m really going to like high school; you wouldn’t believe how much bigger it is.”

As I prepped the vegetables for dinner, he sat and told me about all of his various classes and how cool it was to have shop class in a different building.

“I’m going to try out for the track team,” he announced.

“Are you sure you want to do that?”

“Why not? I like running and Jim’s always saying that I run like a deer.”

“Sure, you have always run fast. I was just thinking...” I stopped, catching myself before I voiced my fears.

“Thinking what?”

“Nothing, son; it’ll be great!” I replied, injecting a forced enthusiasm in my voice. My mom had always questioned everything that I had wanted to do, finally convincing me that I couldn’t do it. I hadn’t played in any sports, electing to join the Science Club, which firmly put me into the nerd camp. The

athletes were always held in higher esteem, part of the popular crowd of which I'd never really belonged.

Over dinner, Brandon filled Jim in on all of the details.

"You could definitely do track. Find out what kind of equipment you need and we'll go over to Franklin Sports this weekend and get you some killer shoes."

"Cool! I already have homework to do tonight and I'm going to call Jessie and ask him if he wants to try out for track too."

"How was your day?" I asked Brandon as soon as he walked through the door.

"Fine," he replied curtly and started to head down the hall towards his room.

"Are you sure? Did something happen?"

He turned around and rolled his eyes. "Nothing happened, okay? You ask me that every day. I'm fine, everything's fine. Why do you treat me like I'm five years old?"

He turned and stomped down the hall.

"I'm here if you need to talk," I yelled after him.

The slam of his bedroom door was his only reply.

Teenagers. Moody one minute and laughing the next. I did need to quit coddling him. I didn't want to smother him like my mother had me, but I couldn't help but to worry.

Even Jim suggested that I tone it down. "Rick, you're just going to have to face the fact that he's growing up and he probably will get into scraps. It's what kids do; it's part of growing up."

"I know. My mom never let me do *anything* so I was always afraid to do anything. I don't want Brandon to have the same fears but I'm having a hard time shaking it off."

"I know, sweetheart, but he's a teenager now and needs to flex his wings. He'll be okay," he reassured me.

Jim was always the voice of reason, our navigator through the troubled storms. He was my rock, my refuge, my comforter, and I never ceased to be

grateful that we had him in our lives. If only I could just let go of this idea that I was doing it all wrong and that Brandon would suffer because of my failure to be a good parent.

Chapter Eleven

Nate

“4:21. Not bad, Brandon,” Coach yelled as I steamed past him. I slowed down, lifting my arms and catching my breath.

“Good job!” Nate said, already going through his cooldown. “Keep that up and you’ll make varsity.”

“Still want to join me and Jessie at Pizza Palace tonight?”

“Sure, wouldn’t miss it.”

I was disappointed when Jessie hadn’t wanted to try out for the track team, but Nate was on the team. Neither Jessie nor I had seen him since that day when he’d apologized about the fight. I found out later that he’d moved to a different neighborhood. I asked him about Frank, and Nate said they weren’t friends anymore and besides, Frank hung out with the *Heads*. The *Heads* was the nickname for the kids who smoked pot and were considered the lowlifes, always getting into some kind of trouble.

Nate and I had become pretty good friends and ran together every morning. Jessie was still skeptical about Nate. When I mentioned inviting him to go with us to our Friday night hangout of pizza and video games, he reluctantly agreed.

Jessie and I met up with Nate and we actually had a pretty cool time. Jessie still acted a little weird around Nate but I figured it was because he seemed to like it best when it was just me and him.

On the way home, I asked him if he’d had a good time.

“Yeah, it was okay, I guess.”

“You still think Nate’s an asshole?”

“Naw, he’s okay.”

“What’s wrong, then?” I persisted.

He stopped, a look of indecision on his face, finally he blurted out, “Damn, Brandon, you don’t see it?”

“See what?”

“He’s got the hots for you.”

“He what?” It took me a minute to compute what Jessie was saying.

“Yeah, he likes you. Like, I mean *likes* you.”

“Naw, you’ve got to be shitting me. We’re just friends.”

“Whatever! I know what I saw.”

“What did you see?”

“You didn’t notice how he stared at you all night and how he had to play the games next to you? What about when we went to take a leak? I swear he was trying to check you out.”

“No way, man.”

“Well, whatever. I’m just saying.”

What the hell? I was trying to remember if Nate acted weird. Maybe he did, I didn’t know.

“See you tomorrow, man,” Jessie said as we approached our houses.

“M’kay.”

I went in and Dad and Jim were still up watching a movie.

“You want to watch the rest of this with us?” Jim asked.

“Naw, I’m going to bed. Gotta be up early for practice.”

“Okay, good night.”

I mumbled my good nights and headed up to my room, changing for bed and brushing my teeth.

Did Nate like me that way? I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. Nate was cool and I liked him, but I didn’t think I liked him like that. Shit! My dads were gay but I never really thought about if I was.

Actually, I really liked Jenny from my history class. She was beautiful and so sophisticated. I remembered exactly what she was wearing in class today, a pink, V-neck T-shirt. I’d accidentally dropped my pencil and when she’d bent over to retrieve it for me, I could see her boobs and I think she saw me staring at them.

Just thinking about her, her shiny long blonde hair, her slightly crooked front tooth, that view down her shirt and... oh my God... she was gorgeous!

The alarm blared much too early. I groaned and swung out of bed, and started to reach for my shirt on the floor then remembered that there was no way I was putting that back on. I stuffed it deep into my hamper and grabbed another one out of the drawer. I had to meet Nate at the track in thirty minutes.

Oh God... Nate. What the hell was I going to say to him?

I gobbled down my breakfast, barely managing to say more than “Bye” to Dad and Jim before I headed out the door and jumped on my bike. I managed to arrive just as Nate was getting out of his truck. The lucky dog. He’d just gotten his license and his parents had bought him the truck.

“Hey, Nate. How’s it going?”

“Hey, Brandon.”

I was watching him closely, trying to gauge if he liked me for more than a friend. I couldn’t tell exactly, but I thought I caught some kind of vibe. Shit! Maybe I was the one acting weird.

“Let’s hit the track; we have a meet next weekend.”

Running helped relieve the tension, and in concentrating on keeping pace with Nate, all thoughts about what Jessie had said left my mind.

After we cooled down and were rehydrating, we sat and chatted for a while, mostly about the team and the upcoming meets.

“So, are you going to the school dance?” he asked.

“Yeah. I was thinking about asking Jenny Crawford if she would go with me.”

“Jenny Crawford?”

“You don’t know her? Oh my God, unbelievable body—” I pantomimed large breasts “—long blonde hair, big blue eyes, long legs... she’s just freaking gorgeous. I’m definitely asking her. What about you?”

“Oh, I don’t know. There’s not really anyone I want to go with.”

“What about Laura White? I’ve seen you talking to her.”

“We’re just friends; I wouldn’t want to go out with *her*.”

I didn’t miss the way he emphasized “her” as if the idea grossed him out, nor had I missed the disappointed look on his face when I mentioned that I planned to ask Jenny. Maybe Jessie had been right. Well, Nate knew where I stood, so hopefully he’d never say anything to make it awkward.

“I better head home,” Nate said, standing up.

“Okay, man; see you bright and early Monday morning?”

“Sure, see you.”

It may have been my imagination but it seemed he looked rather dejected as he left. He’d mentioned driving me home in his truck earlier but seemed to have forgotten about that offer.

I went home and showered and then popped over to see Jessie. We’d talked about going to catch a movie that afternoon and then over to my house to play a video game.

“So did you go running with Nate this morning?” he asked as we were biking our way over to the movie theater.

“Yeah.”

“So?”

“Okay, you may be right... but he definitely knows I like Jenny. I told him that I was planning on asking her to the dance.” I hated admitting to Jessie that he may be right. He had an annoying way of rubbing it in. Of course, now I just gave him some more ammunition.

“Jenny? Jenny Crawford? You got the hots for Jenny?”

“Yeah, so? Don’t you think she’s absolutely gorgeous?”

“She’s okay I guess.”

“Who are you going to ask?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I even want to go. It’s really not my thing.”

I had a feeling he wouldn’t want to go. He hated anything organized, saying that it was too structured and forced societal norms on everyone. He was a free spirit. For some reason though, I felt the need to keep pushing, wondering who he may like.

“Yeah, but if you were going, who would you ask?” I persisted.

“Probably Cathy Jones.”

“Oh yeah, she’s nice. Kinda looks sorta boyish though, doesn’t she?”

“I don’t know, maybe. There’s just something about her. She’s kinda like me, doesn’t really care about fitting into a stereotype.”

That was true. Jessie really didn't care. He'd let his hair grow long and then occasionally buzz it off, and he'd wear anything no matter if it looked like a girl's shirt. It didn't bother me any, but I personally wouldn't have been caught dead in some of the stuff he wore. Sometimes, I wondered if he and his mom just swapped clothes. He often wore the jewelry his mom made and some of it was a little "out there."

"So aren't you worried about asking her out? What are you going to say?" Jessie asked after the movie.

"Oh shit. I don't know. I'll probably think of something. Oh God, what if she says 'no'; that'll be so embarrassing."

"Yeah, but what if she says 'yes'; that'd be cool."

It would be cool and I was going to do it. Too bad I'd have to ask my dads if one of them would drive us; I couldn't exactly ask her if she wanted to ride on my bike handlebars! I couldn't wait until I actually had my driver's license and thought maybe I should start hinting around now about a vehicle. A truck like Nate's would be awesome!

Chapter Twelve

Thank God!

“Hey, the school dance is coming up in a few weeks. I was wondering if one of you could drive me and my date?” Brandon asked over dinner.

I glanced over at Rick and he looked as surprised as me. I don’t know why either of us hadn’t thought about Brandon going on a date. He was about that age, so it shouldn’t have come as a surprise.

“Um, I could, if you want,” Rick volunteered.

This was new territory for both of us. Brandon hadn’t talked about anyone he was interested in dating. He’d only mentioned his friends.

“So who’s your date?” I asked, seeing that Rick wasn’t going to.

“Jenny Crawford. She’s in the same English and Math classes as me.”

“Oh, I don’t think you’ve mentioned her before,” I said, wondering why he hadn’t until now.

“Well, there really wasn’t any reason to. I just asked her to go with me today.”

“So, what’s she like?” Rick asked, and I could tell he was really curious but also relieved about something and attempting to mask his reaction from Brandon.

“She’s awesome! She’s really, really pretty, about the same height as me, long blonde hair and blue eyes.”

“So you really like her then?” Rick queried.

“Well, duh! Why would I ask her if I didn’t?” Brandon replied, looking at his dad like he’d just grown two heads.

Only then, I figured out why Rick appeared to be relieved.

“I guess we’ll need to go shopping now,” I ventured, letting Rick off the hook. Brandon hated shopping for clothes.

“Naw, that’s okay, I’ll just wear something I’ve already got,” Brandon replied.

“You want to look nice for your date, don’t you?” Rick asked.

“I guess... maybe a new shirt or something then,” he relented.

After dinner, Brandon ran up to his room to do homework, leaving us to clear up. As soon as he was out of earshot, Rick laughed and said, “Thank God!”

“Yeah, so now all we need to worry about is dealing with his first heartbreak... Do you think we should mention condoms yet?”

“Oh, God!”

When we went to bed, it was obvious that Rick was still thinking about something. Gee, maybe he was worried about having *that* conversation. I wondered what his mother had said to him. I don't suppose she handed him a packet of condoms like my brother had.

“What are you thinking about, sweetheart?”

“I didn't turn him gay!” he gleefully replied.

“What? What are you talking about? Turn him gay? You can't turn someone gay! What in the hell gave you that idea?”

“Well, you know... since we are, then maybe he would be... but...” Rick trailed off as if he was finally realizing how dumb that was. “...um, I guess that actually doesn't make any sense, does it?”

“No, not at all. Oh God, Rick, I can't believe you thought that!”

He gave me a sheepish look, shaking his head at himself. “I can't believe I even let that worry me.”

“You worry too much, Rick, and even if he were, it wouldn't have mattered.”

“No, of course, it doesn't matter. I love him no matter what.”

And this was the crux of the matter. He accepted everyone else just as they were, but he still couldn't accept himself. Sometimes, I despaired that he never would.

Chapter Thirteen

Acceptance

“Hurry up, Rick. We’re going to be late,” Jim called out.

It was the day of Brandon’s championship meet and he was their star runner. I couldn’t have been prouder of his dedication; he had worked so hard to get to this point.

“Hey, come meet the new coach,” Brandon said as soon as we arrived. I knew he would miss his old coach next year, who was retiring. He had been such an inspiration for Brandon.

“Coach, these are my dads, Rick and Jim.”

“Yeah, nice to meet ya,” he muttered, quickly looking back down at his clipboard. “Ten minutes, Brandon.”

“Gotta go,” Brandon said and he started to head over with the rest of team. I tripped over my own feet as we turned to walk back over to the bleachers, feeling awkward and embarrassed at the coach’s obvious snub. Jim grabbed my hand saying, “Careful, sweetheart.”

The coach was still in earshot and muttered, “Fucking fairies,” as he turned to walk away.

Brandon swung around, striding towards the coach.

“What did you say Coach Focker?” Only he pronounced it more like “Fucker” than “Focker”.

I grabbed for his arm, saying, “Let it go, son.”

He shook me off and continued towards the coach, who turned back slowly, saying, “I didn’t say anything.”

Brandon was absolutely shaking with fury. I’d never seen him so angry before.

“I heard what you said. My dads are two of the greatest *men* you will ever meet and if you can’t show them the respect that they deserve then I’m not stepping a foot on that track.”

The coach looked over at me and Jim, blowing out his cheeks, dropping his shoulders in defeat. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it...”

Jim gave him a curt nod, and I just stood there feeling stunned. There was my son and he hadn't given a second thought for standing up for us. He completely accepted us... accepted me.

In an instant, all the negativity, the doubts, and the fears collided with the truth, and I could see it all so clearly. I'd wasted so much energy concerned about what other people thought, feeling rejected, feeling guilty, worrying about how it impacted Brandon. He was absolutely fine; *I* was the one still holding onto the belief that I was somehow damaged. He never felt that way about me, so why had I been feeling that way about myself?

It didn't matter, none of it mattered. I was a man in love with another man and it didn't matter one bit what anyone else thought, good or bad. Finally!

Jim had let go of my hand, knowing how sensitive I still was about public displays of affection. I grabbed his again, proudly and confidently, walking with him up into the bleachers. I didn't pay any attention to anyone else. Did they stare, did they ignore us, did they smile? It didn't matter anymore, I was free. All that mattered was watching my son race, and holding on to the man that I loved more than anything else in the world.

Chapter Fourteen

An Announcement

“Brandon, we have an announcement to make,” Dad said as we were gathered around a table at one of the most expensive restaurants in town.

I grinned at him and Jim, having a pretty good idea of what it would be.

“We’re getting married!”

“It’s about time!” I exclaimed and lifted up my glass. “Congratulations! To the two most wonderful dads a guy could have!”

They beamed back at me, their hands grasped together on the table for the entire world to see. I was so proud of them. Especially Dad, who I only recently realized had such a tough upbringing.

“So, have you all set the date?” I asked

“We were thinking July 10th. It’s the date we met for the first time,” Dad replied.

“That’s only in two months! Thank goodness for Aunt Claudia and Adrienne.” It was still surprising to all of us that Aunt Claudia had finally found something she enjoyed doing, event planning. Even more so was when she met Jessie’s mom and the two of them had become a couple.

Couples in love all around me and still neither me nor Jessie had settled down. Of course, we still had college to finish and neither of us was interested in settling down right now. One thing I did know for sure, was that when I was ready, I hoped I’d find someone that I loved, and who loved me, just as much as Dad and Jim loved each other. They were made for each other.

“Are we going to send one to your mother?” Jim asked Dad as they were sitting at the kitchen table, deciding on the list of guests to invite to the wedding.

“Yeah, I think we should,” he replied.

If there was one dark blot in my childhood, it was my grandma’s rejection of Dad. I hardly remembered her, but I did remember that the few times I had asked about her, Dad always seemed sad. I knew he still tried to call her every

year on Mother's Day and on her birthday, but she either didn't pick up the phone or would hang up on him. Not too long ago, I'd had a conversation with him and Jim, and learned how she'd made his life so difficult.

"I wouldn't waste the paper or the postage on her, Dad," I angrily interjected.

"I know she isn't going to come, Brandon, and actually I am perfectly fine with that. I won't say that it doesn't still hurt sometimes but I'm okay. Everything that happened in my past has brought me to this very moment and I'm happy... really and truly happy."

I thought about all of the difficulties each of us had faced but realized that he was right. One small change in our past and we may not be the same people or in the same place as we were now.

The morning of the wedding and I was still practicing my lines. I'd surprised Dad and Jim by asking them if I could officiate their wedding for them. I don't know what made me think of the idea but once I had found out how easy it was to become ordained by simply filling out an online application, I knew I had to do it. They'd done so much for me and were the best parents I could've asked for. Doing this for them seemed like the best way I could really show just how much I loved them and how very proud I was to call them my dads.

The End

Author Bio

I have been an avid reader all of my life, primarily reading fiction in the mystery/suspense, fantasy and m/m romance genres. Having switched to predominantly reading e-books, I've discovered many self-published authors. One of my favorites is Alp Mortal. I contacted him via his website to ask about one of his books and after exchanging a few emails with him, I mentioned how I always thought it would be fun to write fiction. He urged me to try it and even gave me an idea from which my first title, The Golf Widow, was born.

It has been an exciting and rewarding experience. I encourage everyone to try it for themselves. I've always appreciated the skills and talent it takes to write fiction but never realized the extent of the challenges and how thought provoking it is compared to business writing. This experience has definitely given me a new perspective and an even greater appreciation for the craft. It's been so enlightening and exhilarating; now that I've started, I can't stop.

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