

# *Disastrous Dates & Dream Boys*

## Thanksgiving 1981

Brendan

“Do you think they’re dead?” whispered Casper.

“No, look, their lips are moving,” said Nathan.

“That is the most horrifying sight I’ve ever laid eyes upon,” said Ethan.

“A truly disgusting heterosexual display,” I said. “I may be permanently turned off.”

“Come on,” said Casey, “we’re accepting of all kinds here.”

“Screw all you guys!” yelled Brandon as he finally pried his lips from Jennifer’s.

Casper giggled, and Brandon rolled his eyes.

The hay wagon rumbled on between the empty fields. Brandon put his arm around Jennifer. Casper snuggled up against my side. Ethan and Nathan leaned back against a hay bale, and Casey and Sandy lay half buried in the hay.

“I’m feeling a little left out,” said Jon. “I’m the only one here with no one to snuggle with.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “Shawn’s alone, too. You can snuggle with him.”

“If it gets any colder, I just might.”

Shawn laughed, a bit nervously, and Casey reached over and patted his hand.

I felt slightly sorry for Jon and Shawn; they were the only ones among our little group who had yet to find someone. Jon had notorious difficulties finding himself a girl, and Shawn was still so deeply buried in the closet he was afraid to even approach another guy. Despite all I’d been through, I knew I was incredibly lucky to have found Casper.

There was a definite nip in the air as the old tractor chugged along, pulling the wagon for our hayride. The chill was to be expected. We were lucky it wasn’t snowing.

“I’m beginning to freeze!” said Jon.

“You should’ve worn a jacket, stupid,” said Brandon, “or at least a long-sleeved shirt.”

“Hey, I’m not used to fall yet. My mind’s still back in summer.”

“It’s Thanksgiving,” said Brandon. “Christmas will be here soon, so get used to it.”

Jon looked over at Shawn who was sitting not far from him. He scooted up against him and burrowed himself in the hay. Shawn gallantly took off his letter jacket, draped it across Jon’s shoulders, and put his arm around him. Jon snuggled up against him for warmth.

“You two would make such a cute couple,” said Casey.

“It’s too bad sexual orientation isn’t a choice,” said Brandon. “Maybe you’d have better luck with guys, Jon.”

“I may have to give it a try soon.”

Ethan laughed. “Now that I’ve got to see.”

“Eww,” said Casey.

“I didn’t mean *that!*” said Ethan quickly. “I just meant Jon trying to date a guy.”

“I’d date you if you were gay,” said Shawn, turning to Jon.

“Damn, boy, you must be almost as desperate as me,” said Jon.

“Don’t put yourself down. You have a lot going for you. You’re funny, witty, just plain nice, and...”

“Fugly,” finished Jon.

“You are not! You’re hot, and you know it!” said Shawn.

“I wish!”

“Okay, vote,” said Shawn. “Whoever thinks Jon is hot raise your hand.”

Every hand on the wagon shot up.

“See,” said Shawn.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. Now if I could only find a single heterosexual girl who shared your opinion.”

“You will, Jon,” said Brandon.

“I will die a virgin,” said Jon.

“We can put it on your tombstone,” I said.

“Shut up.”

“If both Jon and I were gay, who would you pick?” Brandon asked Shawn.

“Uh-oh, here we go,” said Ethan.

“What?” asked Casey.

“Just watch,” said Ethan.

Shawn looked suddenly nervous. “Uh, I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it. I uh...I don’t think I can decide.”

“A wise choice,” said Ethan.

“Why?” asked Shawn.

“Because Brandon would pout if you didn’t pick him.”

“I would not!”

“Oh yes you would. Remember that time you got upset when I told you I didn’t find you attractive?”

“Oh,” said Brandon, looking as if he suddenly felt a bit foolish.

Jennifer giggled. “You can’t have him, anyway. He’s mine!” she said.

Brandon and Jennifer turned to each other and started making out again.

“Oh! My eyes!” I said. “My eyes!”

That got a good laugh, but Brandon and Jennifer ignored us. Well, they mostly ignored us; Brandon extended his middle finger into the air in my direction without bothering to look at me.

“They’re gone again,” I said.

The wagon continued bumping along under the stars. Uncle Jack was driving the tractor, but if he had heard any of our conversation, he pretended he hadn’t. He was the coolest old guy ever. We all called him Uncle Jack—Ethan, Nathan, Casper, and I, that is—even though he was truly only Ethan’s uncle. I don’t know where any of the four of us would’ve been without him. It’s likely Casper and I would still be homeless and on the run.

My mind went back to that time in Purity not so many months ago when Casper and I were living in a cheap motel and working at low-paying jobs in a diner. Even that was an improvement over what we’d had before, which was pretty much nothing except for the clothes on our backs. The worst of it was just before we reached Purity, when Casper was desperately ill. I remembered how

scared I was when I covered him up with hay in that old barn, hoping it would keep him warm until I could return, fearing I might come back to find him dead. He was quite alive when I came back, however, and the next day I got him in to see a doctor and even managed to get enough money for his medicine and a motel room. My face darkened when I remembered what I had to do for that money.

“Brendan?”

I turned to Casper and smiled. “I’m okay,” I said. I leaned in and kissed him.

Yeah, things were different now, and I had no reason to let the past haunt me. The future was looking good.

“Uh-oh, I think we’re in danger of losing Brendan and Casper, too,” said Shawn.

“Nah, we won’t abandon you guys,” I said. “We’ve got all the time in the world.”

“I wish I could live with my boyfriend...I mean girlfriend!” said Brandon, coming up for air at last.

“Freudian slip?” asked Ethan.

“Maybe you’ve got a chance with Brandon after all,” said Jon to Shawn.

“You know what I mean!” said Brandon. “You guys are so lucky—Ethan and Nathan, too. You get to sleep in the same bed!”

“And sometimes we even sleep,” said Nathan, wiggling his blond eyebrows, “but not often.”

I looked over at Jon and Shawn for a moment. They were snuggled together like the rest of us. Anyone who didn’t know better would’ve thought they were boyfriends.

“So, Mr. Quarterback. Will you be leading our team to victory against the Trojans next week?” asked Jon.

“That’s the plan,” I said. “With Shawn’s help, we might pull it off.”

Shawn smiled. “You overestimate my prowess.”

“Hardly.”

“Hey, you’re the team captain and all that.”

“Yeah, but just how well would I do out there all by myself?”

“I love football,” said Sandy. “Our team is sooo pathetic.” Sandy was the only one of us who didn’t attend Verona High School. She was from Plymouth, and their team was kind of sad.

“That’s because you don’t have enough gay guys on your team. We kick ass!” said Shawn.

Everyone laughed. I was pleased Shawn was so at ease around us. I think he was still getting used to the fact that he could just be himself with us. I don’t think he’d been able to show anyone the real Shawn for so long that he almost didn’t know how. Until recently, he’d been too scared to even visit us on the farm, but with his older brother in jail and his dad in trouble with the police, his home life had become somewhat safer. He was still buried in the closet about as deeply as he could get, but at least he no longer had to pretend he hated us. I wished he could find someone, but that wasn’t going to be easy. Shawn played the part of a straight boy so well that no gay boy would even think of him as a potential boyfriend. That’s one of the problems with living in the closet; it gets lonely in there.

We all talked and laughed as the hay wagon moved under the crystal-clear sky. I held Casper’s hand as we lay back against a hay bale all snuggled together. Now and then we kissed, but mostly we just enjoyed being with our friends. This small, intimate group was the best of the best. They were the ones who truly understood—including even Brandon and Jon, who were as straight as they came.

Eventually, Jack pulled the wagon back to the barn, and we all climbed off and headed for

the farmhouse for a late Thanksgiving dinner.

Ethan opened the familiar old back door, and we entered the kitchen, greeted by the heavenly scent of roasted turkey, sweet potatoes, green beans, corn, mashed potatoes, sage dressing, pumpkin pie, and freshly baked yeast rolls. The kitchen was lit only by candlelight, making it soothing and romantic. I grasped Casper's hand and squeezed it gently. Casper's grandmother, Ardelene, now also Jack's wife, was just pulling the rolls out of the oven as we entered. The scent and the wave of warmth were inviting.

"Hey, Grandma," said Casper, hugging her.

"Supper is just about ready," she said. "Everyone, have a seat."

We'd all pitched in to help Ardelene earlier, but she'd taken care of the actual cooking. No one could cook like she could. She was a valuable addition to our not-so-little family.

"Where's Dave?" asked Casey. Dave was Nathan's ten-year-old little brother, and Casey had taken up with him in recent weeks, ever since she'd started hanging out with us more. He'd decided not to go on the hayride with us.

"Dave!" yelled Nathan, "Get yourself down here! We're about to eat!"

That brought Dave scurrying down the stairs.

Uncle Jack sat at his usual place at one end of the table. The other end we reserved for Ardelene. The rest of us crowded in on the sides. Even with the extra leaves in, it was a bit of a tight fit around the old Formica kitchen table, hidden for the occasion by a beautiful antique, embroidered tablecloth.

Ardelene set everything except the desserts out on the table. There were candles in the center and all around us. The old kitchen looked so different when lit by candlelight. Casper sat beside me, of course, and we held hands until Ardelene sat down before we all dug in.

There was little talk in the beginning, as we were all too busy eating. Anything Ardelene touched was delicious. I'd had to step up my workouts and even run a little to keep her excellent meals from showing up on my waist. I had nicely defined abs, and I intended to keep them that way.

I looked around the table as I stuffed myself. I wished all of us could have lived on the farm together, right in the big old farmhouse that I'd come to think of as home. Seated at the table were just about everyone I cared about. The only ones missing were my best friend Brad, from Kentucky, and Chad, who'd help me escape from the Cloverdale Center. I wondered where Chad was now. I hoped things were going as well for him as they were for me.

The turkey and dressing were incredibly delicious. I made a mental note not to overstuff myself. I didn't like the way I felt when I was too full. Practicing moderation wasn't going to be easy, though. Everything on the table was so very good that I knew I'd have a hard time resisting. I smiled. Life didn't get much better than this.

An hour later we were still all sitting around the kitchen table finishing off dessert. I was stuffed, but not miserable. Jon reluctantly pushed away the last of his pumpkin pie.

"I can't eat another bite," he said, looking at his plate wistfully. "You are the best cook ever, Ardelene. If I can find a girl who cooks like you, I'll marry her on the spot."

Ardelene smiled.

"That's one of the reasons I did marry her," said Jack. "I wanted to grab her before someone else snatched her up."

"Oh, stop!" said Ardelene, but I knew she loved hearing it.

Everyone had coffee or hot tea, and we talked long into the night. I don't think any of us wanted the evening to end. Eventually, our full stomachs made us too sleepy to carry on, and

everyone headed for home.

Casper and I trudged up the stairs, and Casper sleepily stripped down to his boxers. He was nearly too tired to pull back the covers and slip into bed. I leaned over and kissed him as he drifted off to sleep, then stretched my arms over my head and yawned.

I undressed and slipped into bed beside Casper. Brandon was right: we were lucky to get to sleep in the very same bed, and not just because of the frequent sexual opportunities. I loved just being near Casper, hearing his soft breath, and feeling him beside me. Casper was sleeping peacefully, looking even younger than his sixteen years. I snuggled up against him, my arm across his bare chest. I was so comfortable when I was near him. I was glad our lives had finally settled down, but I wondered how long our peace would last.

### Dane

I fought to keep my eyes to myself. It was a constant struggle in the showers after last-period P.E., but the last thing I wanted was to be pegged as a homo. Brendan, Casper, Ethan, and Nathan were all out at their school, but I didn't dare reveal myself. This was not Verona High School where some of the coolest boys in school were gay and out. This was Marmont High, where homophobia was the watchword of the day. My parents knew about me, and they were totally cool about it, but I doubted my friends would be as accepting.

"Hey, Dane, wanna go to the arcade after school so I can kick your butt in Frogger again?" shouted Billy Holmes from across the small shower area.

"What's this *again* crap? Last weekend you only beat my high score once."

Billy and I had been hanging out a lot since my return from Verona. I'd had a crush on him forever, but it wasn't until the very end of the summer that I worked up the courage to talk to him. We'd become pretty good friends, but he had no idea how bad I had it for him.

Billy laughed, throwing his head back, his blue eyes smiling with mischief. Just looking at him made my heart beat a little faster, and gazing at him naked and wet in the showers made it pound furiously. I quickly ran my eyes down his muscled, taut body. He didn't have the build of Brendan or Ethan, but he was so fine. I wanted him so bad I could hardly stand it.

Billy turned around to rinse his blond hair. He had the cutest butt. I wished we were alone in the showers so I could just stare at it, but I averted my eyes and reached for my bottle of shampoo. I never looked at any of the guys for very long, but I snapped mental pictures of them like crazy when my eyes did fall upon their nude bodies. I was sure they'd beat me senseless if they knew what I was up to, but so far they didn't have a clue.

I felt a little guilty for checking out other boys. I knew there was more to life than sex. What I wanted more than anything was a boyfriend. Strike that. What I wanted more than anything was for Billy Holmes to be my boyfriend. But, how could I not look? Some of the guys in my P.E. class weren't all that hot, but others...wow! My true fascination was with Billy, and I'm proud to say that I was interested in a lot more than just his body, although I would've given about anything to mess around with him.

I rinsed off, turned off my shower, grabbed a towel from the stack in the outer shower area, and then dried off as I walked to my locker. I dressed as I talked and swapped insults with the other guys. I was deadly with insults and innuendo. Sometimes my verbal prowess even allowed me opportunities to check out my classmates, like the time Rick Cotts accused me of looking at his dick. I wasn't guilty at the time, but his accusation allowed me to stare right at his stuff for several long

moments before I looked back up into his eyes and said, “What’s to look at?” I know it wasn’t a completely original slam, but the guys howled with laughter.

I slammed my locker and snapped shut my combination lock after I’d dressed. Billy was already waiting on me. Unfortunately, so was Craig Johansson. Don’t get me wrong; Craig was cool enough. I just didn’t want him inserting himself into my time alone with Billy. A trip to the arcade was hardly a romantic date, so I guess it didn’t matter all that much. At least Craig would provide some nice scenery. He was quite handsome with his blue eyes and slightly turned up nose. His most attractive feature, other than his taut body, was long, curly blond hair that ran down nearly to his shoulders and framed his face as if he was wearing one of those old Scandinavian helmets my ancestors wore in battles hundreds of years ago. Craig was of Scandinavian descent, just as I was, a fact made obvious by his last name.

The three of us headed for the Marmont Arcade, which was wisely placed within easy walking distance of the school. I was walking a bit behind, giving me quite a nice view. Craig had nearly as nice a butt as Billy. Billy and Craig walked close together, and Craig even draped his arm over Billy’s shoulder for a few moments in that way that straight boys can so easily get away with. I burned with jealousy. Craig was touching *my* man. The band of Craig’s tightie-whities was showing, and on impulse I grabbed it and jerked upward, giving Craig a power-wedgie. He howled and immediately turned on me.

“You’re dead, Haakonson!”

Billy laughed as Craig and I scuffled on the sidewalk. Craig got me in a headlock, and no matter how I squirmed I couldn’t break free.

“Okay, we’re even, lemme go!”

“Not until you say, ‘I’m a homo.’”

“You’re a homo? I didn’t know that!” I said, laughing.

Craig tightened his grip and proceeded to give me a nuggy.

“Come on, man, cut it out!”

“Say it!”

“No!”

“Say it!”

“Okay, okay, I’m a homo!”

Craig immediately released me. Billy laughed at me. I glared at Craig. He’d made me look foolish in front of the one boy I wanted to impress. More than anything I wanted to kick Craig’s ass, but chances were it was my butt that would get kicked. There was the added danger that Billy and Craig might get suspicious if I flew off the handle over something neither of them considered a big deal. “Homo” was one of the main insults at M.H.S., and only a true homo would take the dig too seriously.

“We’d better watch this guy in the showers,” said Craig. “Since he’s a homo, he might try to grab our stuff.”

Craig thought he was funny, but he was going way too far. There was only so much I could take. I scowled and moved toward him. Billy put his hand on my chest.

“Cool off, Dane, it’s just a joke, and you did pull Craig’s shorts up his crack.”

Craig was currently in the process of trying to pull his briefs out of his butt, which is no easy feat when you’re wearing jeans. He looked so comical I nearly laughed, helping to dispel my anger.

“Come on, guys, Frogger awaits!” said Billy, putting an arm over each of our shoulders and leading us down the street.

When we arrived at the arcade, Craig headed straight for the restroom, no doubt to take care of his crack problem. Billy and I headed for the Frogger machine. Two players could play, alternating turns. Billy went first. He made it across the road, dodging several speeding cars and trucks, but he didn't fare so well crossing the river. He was nearly devoured by an alligator, and that messed him up enough that his time ran out before he reached one of the frog homes at the top of the screen.

I was just beginning my turn when Craig reappeared.

"I've got winner," he announced.

I did much better than Billy on my turn. I successfully made it to home past all the cars, trucks, alligators, and snakes and other hazards. I even had time to catch a few bugs for bonuses. Billy performed better on his next turn, but when the game ended I was well ahead.

Craig didn't possess my Frogger expertise or Billy's, so I had no trouble whipping his butt. I felt somewhat avenged for him making me say I was a homo. Billy and Craig decided to move on to Galaga, probably because they feared I'd kick their butts in Frogger again. I wasn't as skilled at Galaga, but it was a cool game.

Billy and Craig went first this time. In Galaga, the player controls a starship and shoots at swarms of aliens (which look a lot like insects to me). The aliens fly in formation as they travel toward the ship, but then they go all kamikaze and dive right toward the starship. Galaga requires some fast moves, and even though I hadn't played it as much as Frogger, I'd been getting into it in recent weeks.

Craig beat Billy, which was kind of a surprise. I did pretty well when I took Craig on, but then I had a string of bad luck and lost all three of my ships, plus the bonus ship I'd received for making 20,000 points.

"I think he's been practicing in secret," said Billy, crossing his arms and glaring at Craig with mock anger.

"Jealousy is a beautiful thing," said Craig and laughed.

Craig was actually pretty cool. I wished I could get rid of him, however. Then again, that wouldn't accomplish much. It's not as if Billy and I would be making out if Craig wasn't around.

We continued to play different video games and also some skee-ball. I was the master when it came to skee-ball. Billy knew that full well, but still foolishly tried to challenge me at times. One cool thing about skee-ball is that, unlike the video games, players could earn coupons. The coupons could be traded in for all kinds of cheap prizes, but also for tokens that worked in the arcade machines. I was so good at skee-ball that I could usually come up with enough tokens to just keep on playing. I even had a supply of them at home. I couldn't remember the last time I'd actually spent a quarter in the arcade.

We hung out in the arcade for about an hour and a half. We couldn't stay longer because Billy was expected home. For that matter, so was I. If I was too late my parents would get worried. They usually didn't get home until five, so if I beat them there I was covered. If I was going to be later than that, I was expected to call.

Craig lived on the opposite side of town from Billy and me, so he took off, and I was alone with Billy at last. I had a little daydream that we were dating and we'd go to my place and make out until my parents came home. It was nothing but a dream, however. Billy had no clue I was hot for him, and that's probably the way it would remain. As bad as I wanted him, the risks were too great.

Billy lived just beyond the edge of town, and I lived a bit farther out. I bid him goodbye when he turned into his yard, and then I walked on alone. Things weren't as I wanted them to be,

but at least Billy and I were friends. Unfortunately, there was a drawback to that. Being near Billy made me want him all the more. There was temptation to avoid, too, like when Billy and I leaned close together and I wanted to kiss him so bad I could practically taste his lips. I knew full well that such an act would likely earn me a busted face and a ruined reputation, but it was still tempting. The sight of Billy turned me on, too, so that after a few hours with him my hormones were on the rampage. There were ways to let off the pressure, but they weren't as good as the real thing. I yearned to be older, so I wouldn't have to live in such secrecy. There had to be someplace I could live and just be me.

Shawn

“Shawn, get up,” said someone, shaking me.

“Touch me again and you die,” I said.

“No, really. We're going to be late.”

I opened my eyes and growled. Tim was hovering over me. I knew he wouldn't go away until I put my feet on the floor. I threw the covers back, exposing my naked body, including my morning wood.

“Dude, why do you sleep naked?” asked Tim.

“You know I sleep naked. I've always slept naked. If you don't like it, you can stop staring.”

“I was not staring!”

“Yeah, you were, staring with envy.”

“You wish!”

“I know! Now shut up and leave me alone, micro penis.”

Tim flicked me off, but I ignored him. I rummaged through my dresser and came up with a clean pair of boxers. I was getting low. It looked as if I could no longer put off doing the laundry. It was my job by default. Mom was gone, permanently; my older brother Tom was in jail; Dad wouldn't have stooped to do “woman's work” to save his life, and my little brother, Tim, didn't have enough sense to separate colors from whites. Damn, how many sixteen-year-olds had to run a house?

I didn't mind my load of responsibilities too much, though. Things were so much better than they had been. Dad had calmed down considerably since he'd barely escaped a conviction of child abuse and neglect. Tom was in jail and would probably be staying there for his dumb-ass attempt to kill Brendan. It was good riddance as far as I was concerned. Tom was downright mean and just plain no good. I couldn't begin to count the times he'd beaten me down. Dad had been just as bad. I still winced when I remembered the beating he gave Tim and me when he caught us skinny dipping that one time. My dad was a total homophobe, which was one reason I'd always kept my secret hidden from him. He was on his best behavior for the moment, but I had no illusions about his attitude. I very much feared he'd make good on his threat to “kill any of my boys if I find out they're fags.”

I put him out of my mind as I walked into the bathroom and stepped into the shower. The less I thought about Dad the better. The hot water soothed me. I loved a good steamy shower, and I didn't have to worry about popping wood at home like I did at school. It was torturous to be surrounded by all those gorgeous guys sometimes, although I sure liked the scenery. I didn't dare give the slightest hint of interest, however. I wasn't like Ethan, Brendan, and their whole gang. If I got exposed, I'd have to run for my life, literally. The guys on the team wouldn't get too bent out of shape about it. They accepted Brendan after all and even made him team captain. Word would

get back to my dad, however, and the shit would hit the fan. I could just imagine him coming after me with a shotgun. At the very least, he'd kick my butt out of the house for good. I planned to leave home the second I finished high school, but I knew I had to stay put for the time being. At least Ethan and the guys had told me they'd help me if there was trouble. Damn, I was thinking about my dad again. I wished I could get that man out of my head.

My shower finished, I dried off and walked back down the hall in my boxers. I quickly dressed and headed downstairs. Tim was sitting there waiting on me. I poured myself a bowl of cereal and ate it in three minutes flat.

"Let's go," I said, grabbing my backpack.

We climbed into my beat-up Cutlass Supreme and headed for town. Tim was right. We were cutting it close. If I didn't hurry, I'd be late. I noticed after a bit that Tim kept gazing at me.

"What?" I asked.

"Do you know any girls?"

"I know lots of girls stupid; so do you."

"No, I mean any that would be interested in me?"

"Oh, so you mean girls who have *really* bad taste?"

"Shut up!"

"I'm just teasing you, little bro."

"I know." Tim paused. "You seem... cooler now that Tom's gone and Dad's... different."

"I'm more relaxed is what I am. I don't have to worry about getting my butt kicked every other day."

"I hope he rots in jail," said Tim.

"You know you've changed, too. You used to be Tom's little minion."

"His what?"

"Like his servant. You were always on his side."

"I pretended. I did it to keep him off me."

"If you can't beat 'em, join 'em, huh?"

"Sort of like that."

"You and I should have stuck together," I said.

"We would still have been outnumbered. Well, not outnumbered, us against Tom and Dad, but outgunned anyway."

"Yeah, I know."

"I'm sorry I was a little shit, but I was scared."

"Hey," I said, putting my hand on Tim's knee. "I understand, okay?"

Tim nodded.

"What if he comes back?" asked Tim.

"He won't."

"But what if?"

"He won't!"

"What if Dad goes back to the way he was?"

"He probably will, once Social Services isn't watching him like a hawk, but it will be us against him then. It won't be like it was before."

"You think you can stand up to him?" asked Tim, nervously.

"If he tries to hurt you, I'll sure try."

"Thanks, Shawn." Tim was silent for several moments before he spoke again. "I'm not as

strong as you, but...I've got your back."

"Thanks, bro," I said.

Tim had sure changed in recent weeks, but he'd been running scared when our older brother was still living at home. Who wouldn't have been frightened living in our dysfunctional family? Now that Tom was out of the picture, Tim was a hundred times nicer. Before, I'd been almost as afraid of him as I was of Tom. I could take Tim in a fight fairly easily, but I always figured it would be both my brothers against me if it came down to it. Maybe if I'd been more assertive, Tim would have allied himself with me from the beginning instead of sucking up to our big, bad brother. I'd been too scared to be forceful, however, too scared that someone might someday discover my secret.

*The past is the past, Shawn. Forget about it.* No, that wasn't quite right. The past was the past, but I needed to learn from it. Tim and I would never be on opposing sides again. We needed each other if we were going to survive, and now that he was no longer acting like a little jerk, I liked him a good deal more. I loved him. I wondered how he'd feel about me if he knew I was a homo.

"You never answered my question."

"What question?"

"About girls! Can you help me find one?"

"The girls I know wouldn't go for you."

"Why not?"

Because you're a freshman."

"So, you're only a junior!"

"Yeah, and junior girls won't have anything to do with a freshman. They think of you as a little kid."

"I'm only a year younger than you."

"Yeah, but I'll be seventeen next February. It doesn't matter, anyway. You're a freshman, so you're out of luck. You need to try for some freshman girls."

"You know any?"

"Now why would I know any freshman girls? I don't associate with little freshmen, either, except for you."

"Grrrrr," growled Tim. I laughed.

I was glad Tim was a freshman. It kept me from having to admit I didn't know many girls, period. Thank God I had Casey. Without her in my life everyone would've been asking embarrassing questions.

I pulled the car into the parking lot and got out. Devon was standing there. *Great, just what I need to start my day.* I wanted more than anything to kick Devon's ass, but I had to play nice or he might've suspected I wasn't as straight as I pretended to be. Beating his face in would've been a tip-off for sure.

Ethan drove up in his uncle's old Ford pickup before I had more time to think about Devon. Brendan, Nathan, and Casper were all squeezed into the cab with Ethan.

"Oh look, the fag-mobile," said Devon.

"Let's see you say that to Ethan's face," I said.

"You first."

"You're the one who said it, and I don't have a death wish."

"It's disgusting, isn't it?" said Devon. "Fags are taking over the whole school. I guess I can understand the wrestling team allowing Ethan to stay on; they're all kind of queer in those little uniforms of theirs anyway, but the football team electing Brendan captain: what the fuck were you

guys thinking?”

“Brendan is captain because he’s the best,” I said.

“He’s still a fag, and fags have no place here,” said Devon.

“Why are you such a homophobe? You have something to hide, Devon?”

Devon sneered at me. He looked as if he was ready to launch himself at me, but he held himself back, probably because he knew I could kick his butt.

“Fuck, no! I’m no more a fag than you are, but at least I have the good sense to stay away from them. You should, too, or they might rub off on you.”

Devon beat a hasty retreat before Ethan and the others could get out of the truck, but Ethan noted his departure.

“What did Mr. Personality want?” he asked.

“Just running you guys down again.”

“Maybe Devon’s due for another beat down,” said Brendan.

“Hey, Tim,” said Ethan.

“Hey.”

“We’d better run or were gonna be late,” said Nathan.

We were a good fifty yards away from my car when I remembered I’d left my backpack in it.

“Catch you guys later!” I said.

I ran back to the car, grabbed my backpack, and headed back toward the school. Tim had hung back from the group. He was just standing there looking at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Why are you so friendly with those guys, those... queers?”

I rolled my eyes. “Brendan and I are on the same football team, remember? He’s the quarterback and team captain; any of this ring a bell?”

“Yeah, but he’s... you know, and the others aren’t on your team.”

“So what if he’s ‘you know’? What’s it to me? It’s not as though he’s got some contagious disease now, is it? I noticed you said ‘hey’ to Ethan just now.”

“That’s because he said it first. What am I supposed to do, just ignore him?”

“So why is it such a big surprise that I’m friendly with them?”

“That’s different. It’s like you’re becoming friends with them or something.”

“What if I am?”

“They’re queers.”

“They’re still guys, and plenty of guys who aren’t queer are friends with them.”

“But Tom said...”

“Are you seriously going to quote Tom to me? Do I have to remind you what a total and complete asshole Tom was?”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s just... I dunno... hard to get used to. What if Dad finds out?”

“He’s not going to find out. I’m not dating one of those guys, okay? They’ve all got boyfriends, and you seem to be forgetting I have a girlfriend.”

“Sorry, I guess old habits die hard.”

“Now, if you’re done with your little bout of homophobia, I need to get to class, and so do you.”

“Okay, bro.”

We took off. I thought I’d handled our little conversation quite nicely, although my guts were

crawling around inside. I had been taking a calculated risk being openly friendly to Brendan and the others. I'd pretended to be hostile before, but things had changed. Tom was no longer around to watch my every move, and Tim was no longer a little spy for him. If Dad found out there'd be hell to pay, but I wasn't stupid. He'd never know. Any time I was with the guys I was covered, like on Thanksgiving. For all my brother, my dad, and anyone else knew, I was on a date with Casey that night. Casey and I spent quite a few of our "dates" with Brendan and the guys. Besides, as long as I hung out with them on the farm, no one had to know about it. Tim's questions still made me nervous. He was right: old habits died hard.

The hallways were nearly empty as we stepped inside. Tim scurried off to class, and I hurried along to first-period U.S. History. The old school seemed so quiet and safe now, quite unlike the day when I raced from home ahead of Tom to warn Brendan that my brother intended to kill him. The whole place had been crawling with state and local police soon after. Thank God Ethan got Brendan out of the building before my brother arrived. It was a good thing for me the police nabbed Tom on the front steps, too. Otherwise who knows what would've happened. Tom knew I was the one who ratted on him and the one who let the air out of his tires to slow him down. I was afraid of the retribution he'd exact if he ever got out of jail.

I met Casey at her locker between first and second periods and gave her a passionate kiss. She wrapped her arms around me as those around us watched.

"Want to meet me after practice? We can go to Ofarim's if you like."

"It's a date," said Casey.

"See you then, gotta run!"

I pecked her on the cheek and hurried down the hall. The two of us did put on a good show of heterosexuality, if I do say so myself. I don't think a single soul suspected that our relationship was a sham. They'd probably freak out if they discovered Casey had a girlfriend and I was gay. Our relationship wasn't a complete scam, however, as we were very close friends. I didn't mind kissing her on the lips one bit, although tongues were a bit much. We had to keep up appearances, however, at least for the time being. If my dad ever found out about me...

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Coach Jordan blew his whistle, "That's it men! Showers!"

I pulled off my helmet and slung my head around, sending droplets of sweat flying. It might be the end of November, but I still worked up a good sweat during practice. I loved football. I was no star like Brendan and not even as good as my older brother Tom had been, but I had some talent at least and had even been considered for quarterback. I'd wanted it badly, but was smart enough to recognize that my chances weren't too grand. Brendan beat me hands down, and there were no hard feelings.

Football rocked, but I was still ill at ease in the locker room and showers. Ever since puberty hit me when I was thirteen, and perhaps even before, the locker room and showers had been a source of both fascination and fear. I had an intense interest in other guys' bodies even before I knew what I was. When I was eight, I made the mistake of looking too long at Tom while he was naked. It had earned me a hard jab in the mouth and Tom's lingering suspicion that I might not be 100% hetero. I made sure to avert my eyes any time he appeared before me naked after that day. It was the same with Tim, although he had much less to look at.

I had some difficulty coming to terms with my sexuality in the beginning. I'd been told so

often by my dad that “homos are sick bastards” it was hard to believe otherwise. If he hadn’t been so violent, uncaring, and abusive, I might have taken his words to heart, but if someone like him was so against it, I reasoned it couldn’t be too bad. Others agreed with my dad, however, and that gave me pause. It took me a good long while to come to believe I was okay. I don’t think I ever quite came to that realization until Taylor and Mark were outed just the previous school year, sometime in October if I remembered correctly. Taylor and Mark were THE soccer jocks, and finding out they were like me had destroyed any doubts I had about myself. From that moment on I had nothing but pride in what I was. I saw how those two boys were treated, however, how they were beaten and abused. I was at peace with myself, but no way in hell was I going to reveal myself to others. Even if my dad and older brother wouldn’t have killed me for being gay, I knew there were plenty of others who would have it in for me. Devon, in particular, came to mind.

Things had changed so much in the past year. I think the suicides of Taylor and Mark were what did it—that and Ethan coming out just after winning the school wrestling championship. Things were a lot safer in the halls of Verona High School for boys like me, but I still didn’t dare come out. That’s one reason I didn’t let Devon know how much I despised him. I didn’t pass up an opportunity to make him look foolish, however. I could do that without putting myself in danger, and it was a heck of a lot of fun! It was surprisingly easy at times, too.

I reached the locker room and stripped. Damn, there were some fine-looking guys on the team. I never let my gaze rest on any one boy too long, but you can bet I was intently observant. I had a good memory, and I’d stored up naked images of every guy on the team in my mind. I could picture exactly how they looked without clothes. Of course, seeing them in motion was even better, and there was just something about naked boys in a locker room. Mmm.

The showers were even more intriguing. I don’t know what it was—the steam, the rivulets of water running down their naked bodies or what—but the guys were even more stimulating in the showers. Therein lay the danger—stimulation. I was terrified my manhood would rise to the occasion and give me away. I bet I did more algebra in the locker room and showers than anyone else.

Brendan had the best body, hands down. He was simply gorgeous. There were a lot of hot guys on the team, but he put the rest of us to shame. I selfishly wished Casper was out of the picture so I could make a play for Brendan. I don’t mean I wanted Casper to have an accident or something, but if they decided they just wanted to be friends and nothing more, I’d be celebrating. I’d do nothing to bring about a separation between Brendan and Casper, but if one occurred I was prepared to swoop right in and make a play for Brendan. That made me feel just a bit guilty, but, like I said, I’d only try for Brendan if Casper was out of the picture.

I sometimes wondered what Brendan saw in Casper. He was undeniably cute and had a nice body, but he was rather small. I don’t mean small in terms of what was between his legs. I didn’t know what he had down there. I mean small in stature. He couldn’t have been over 5’6”. Compared to Brendan, he looked like a kid. They sure seemed to love each other, however, and I was happy for them. They had what I wanted. While I secretly wished they’d break up, another part of me wanted that never to happen. Seeing them together gave me hope for the future.

I dried off in the locker room, allowing the taut bodies of my teammates to give me a rush without getting me too aroused. Who needed drugs when I could get high off of hot guys? I smiled and nearly laughed.

I dressed and departed. Casey was waiting for me in the gym. I gave her a hug and, since some of the guys were coming out of the locker room, a lingering kiss. She smiled sweetly at me.

I took her hand and we walked outside.

I pulled the Cutlass up in front of Ofarim's, and we got out and went in. Ofarim's had the best ice cream around, but after practice I was hungry for a burger. The place was empty except for us, so I knew it wouldn't take long at all for us to get our food.

"I'm starving," I said, as I picked up a menu.

"Tell me something I don't already know," said Casey.

I leaned across the table and said, "You're beautiful."

"I said tell me something I don't *already* know." Casey laughed.

"Um, you and Sandy are really cute together?"

"You're just not good at this, are you?"

"Hey, I'm a jock, we're supposed to be stupid."

"That's just another stereotype, and I happen to know you're not stupid."

"Okay, let's discuss food. I know what I want, how about you?"

"I'm ready."

"What does a guy have to do to get some service around here?" I shouted.

Casper appeared from behind the counter and smiled.

"Keep your shirt on," he said, "or, in your case, take it off."

"Oh, baby!" said Casey.

"Okay, what do you guys want?" asked Casper.

"You first, milady," I said.

"I think I'll have a cheeseburger, fries, and a Tab."

"A triple cheeseburger, fries, onion rings, a hot dog with relish and onion, and a Coke," I said.

"I thought you said you were starving," said Casey. "That sounds like your average meal."

"I'm going to have a banana split for dessert."

"Okay, I'll be right back with your drinks," said Casper, departing.

"So, how's Sandy?" I asked.

"She's wonderful, but we don't get to see each other as much as we'd like, and, of course, it's a long-distance call even though Plymouth is only about fifteen miles away. We write a lot of letters."

"At least you can keep letters in a way you can't store phone calls."

"True. We see each other every weekend and sometimes get together during the week, but I want to see her every single day."

"It sounds like you've got it bad," I said.

"Yes, but it's not easy being in a relationship."

"We seem to do okay."

"That's because we're friends. If we were really dating it would be much more complicated."

"Well, at least we don't have to worry about that. You're cute, but not quite my type."

"The same to you, mister."

We both smiled. Casey had quickly become my best friend. It was no trouble at all for us to masquerade as a heterosexual couple, since we wanted to spend most of our free time together anyway. It worked out well for both of us. Casey didn't have to worry about guys hitting on her, and I didn't have to worry about the guys figuring out why I enjoyed the showers so much.

Casper came back with our drinks and joined us, since there were no other customers in Ofarim's. It was just Casey, Casper, me, and Agnes, who owned the place. It didn't matter if Agnes overheard our conversation, because she knew all about our situation. Agnes was Sandy's great aunt,

and she's the one who introduced her to Casey. Agnes knew Casey and I were dating just for show, and, to top it all off, Agnes was gay herself. Our secrets were safe with her.

"I don't see how you can drink that," said Casper, indicating Casey's Tab. "Those things are nasty."

"I've gotten used to them. Besides, it's this or water if I want a drink with virtually no calories. Some of us can't eat everything in sight and still not put on weight." Casey glared at me for a moment.

"What?" I asked innocently.

"Wouldn't it be cool if they made something that tasted like Coke, but didn't have any calories," Casey said.

"I heard something about that," said Casper. "I don't remember where, but someone was saying they were going to come out with a 'diet' Coke that has no calories, but tastes the same as Coke."

"I hope that wasn't just a dream you had," said Casey.

"No, someone was talking about it—maybe one of the teachers at school."

I frowned.

"What's wrong?" asked Casey.

"Nothin', or rather the same old something. I need a boyfriend."

"It's too bad Jon isn't gay or at least bi, it would solve both your problems," said Casper.

"Yeah, but he's not, so we're both out of luck."

"You'll find someone," said Casper.

"I don't see how. I can't be out like you and the guys. If I could be, then I'd have a chance. At least then maybe some guy would approach me. I know there have to be other gay guys at school, but they're in hiding just like me, so we can't find each other. It's so frustrating!"

"I understand completely," said Casey, taking my hand across the table. "I would have never found Sandy if Agnes hadn't overheard me talking. Well, I guess I didn't find her. Agnes got us together, but maybe something unexpected will happen to bring you together with someone, too."

"I want that more than anything. Right now I'd settle for just sex. I need sex so bad!"

"Whoa, calm down there, hot stuff," said Casey. "You look like you're ready to breathe fire."

"Sometimes I feel like I could."

"Maybe that's why you're so good at football. You channel all that...um...excess energy into aggression on the football field," said Casper.

"So why is Brendan so much better than I am? I doubt he has any of that excess energy you're talking about."

"He has none at all," Casper said, blushing.

"Okay, I'm getting *really* frustrated here."

"Sorry, baby," said Casey, rubbing my hand. "Things will get better, somehow."

The bell over the door rang, and Perry Monahan and Nate London entered. They were both on my team so our intimate talk had to end. It was just as well, anyway.

Perry and Nate said "hey" and took a booth not far from ours. For the rest of supper, Casey and I would have to play girlfriend and boyfriend. It wasn't difficult. We generally acted almost the same as a real couple. We just had to edit our conversation a little when others were around.

Casper got up to take care of Perry and Nate, so Casey and I were left alone again. She squeezed my hand and gave me a sad smile. Yeah, she understood.