

DEFINING DEREK

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CHAPTER 1

I sat alone at a small round table in front of the tray drop counter. The sound of clanking dishes broke through the reverberating roar of the room. An older, heavysset lunch lady with yellow gloves and a net in her hair, reached for pieces of trash and sorted trays to be washed. She looked up at me, then turned back to the mountain of mess in front of her.

I stared down at my almost empty lunch tray. The pieces of tater tots and mystery-fruit that were bonding like cement to the blue plastic were what I just couldn't stomach. It was day four for me at this new school, but it was a month into the winter semester for everyone else. They had their routines, their friends, their patterns of life—none of which included me. I'd already gone through the awkward first few weeks of school back in Fort Worth. I missed my old school. My old friends. My old life.

Things were hard for me here in Palo. My father's career change had led us, the Thomas family, to an area that was so different from the familiar Fort Worth suburb I grew up in. It never occurred to me how much of the world I was missing, and I didn't know why, but I feared this world. Yes, my parents took a pay cut, forcing us to downsize into an old southern California rental property my dad had owned since the stone age. Yes, I had to leave behind a life in Fort Worth that I was finally fitting into. Yes, I went from a state-of-the-art, upscale early-college high school to this somewhat decrepit alternative. But none of that seemed to justify my complete and utter distaste for Palo. I guess it's normal to fear the unknown, but it was more than that. I just didn't want to be here.

I thought about what my father had told me on the golf course just before I started high school—the first time—about how important it was for me to find a niche to fit into because, after all, I was a *Thomas*. This badge of a name had followed me my entire life. My father wore it proudly. In the old days my great-grandfather owned half of Fort Worth, but the stock market crash in the late twenties wrecked his finances, and a lot of it was sold off for pennies on the dollar in the early thirties. Somehow the family name had stayed intact. I was never given the full history, I just knew that my dad's father had been able to repair a lot of my great-grandfather's damage in the sixties with a string of hotels he owned in Arlington across from the newly opened Six Flags Over Texas. My uncle Marshall owns most of that business now. My father went the school route and became a general family medical practitioner, and prior to this sudden trip to California, he'd owned a successful clinic just between Dallas and Fort Worth. Everyone in town knew of my uncle's hotels and, more than that, anyone who lived anywhere near the area knew my father, the renowned Dr. Thomas.

As for finding *my* niche, my mother told me that, as a violin player, she really liked the music program when she was in school. I wasn't much of a violin fan, but because of some recent tensions between us, I saw band as an opportunity to get on my mother's good side. That plan backfired when both her and my father expressed, in their go-to soul-crushing way, their disappointment in me for choosing to play the saxophone. Not that I was surprised, but how was I supposed to know that they were expecting me to play some sort of chamber instrument? A "respectable instrument" as my father called it.

They always found something wrong with what I was doing. Or maybe they just got off on reminding me of their elevated expectations, and how I would never live up to them. Like, when I found out that we were moving to California, they made sure to point out how "un-

Thomas-like” my response of storming off to my bedroom was. I knew I should’ve reacted better, but I needed time to let it all sink in. Couldn’t they see that for the first time ever I was fitting in like they wanted me to? That I finally had friends with similar interests, who liked me for me, not for who my father or uncle was? I’d always struggled to fit in, both inside my own home, and within the world outside of it. Now, I was losing everything and starting over.

The cafeteria was a spacious room, with tables arranged in a careless way. A large wall of windows along the far side of the eating area overlooked a quad outside. Clusters of kids, some in groups of only two or three, others as many as half a dozen or more, were all scattered around at different tables. I could see a handful of students at some concrete planters outside; some sitting, some standing, and others somewhere in between.

“Hey! You’re the new kid, right?” I looked up and saw two dark brown eyes peering down at me from the other side of the table.

“Yeah, uh...hi. I’m Derek.”

“Dante.” He said, “I think I saw you in the band room earlier. You play sax in beginner band, right?”

“That’s me.”

“I’m in marching band, but I hang in the band room whenever I can sneak away from my other classes.”

Dante looked to be about 5’6”, much shorter than me. At 15 years old, I was already over 6 feet tall. I also noticed he was petite—scrawny, like the runt of the litter. This was yet another contrast to my natural, but also unearned athletic build. Dante was wearing black Dickie pants with a dark gray button-down shirt and a red necktie. All of that was tied together with a pair of classic black and white Converse high tops. It was bold, but it also worked somehow. Dante’s

straight white teeth and dimpled cheeks, that worked together to form a daffy grin, seemed friendly as he held his hand out in front of him like a squirrel reaching for an acorn. I placed my hand in his and gave it a shake.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“I moved here last week from Fort Worth.”

“Oh, I’ve never been to Texas. Hell, I’ve never even been out of southern Cali.”

“This is only my second time in California. I came down here last summer with my parents to check on my dad’s rental house here in Palo. Then, we spent a week in San Diego. That city is much nicer than here, but I guess I should have some pride in this place since I do live here now.”

“Try not to sound too excited about it!” Dante laughed and made his way around the table. I studied him as he plopped down in the seat next to me.

“I know how you’re feeling,” he said. “Last year when I came up from middle school, I asked a kid what building had the science classes. He told me the wrong way.”

“You’re a sophomore?”

“Yes. As the experienced sophomore, I’ve decided to help you get to know this place. Oh, and don’t worry, I won’t give you bad directions.”

Dante had a confidence I found intriguing—a confidence I knew I lacked.

“Where’s your next class?” I asked.

“I have geometry. How about you?”

“I have English next.”

“I don’t get why we even need to do English. We already speak it.”

I laughed and nodded, but I couldn't have disagreed more. I liked English. My nose had been pressed into one book or another pretty much since I was able to hold my own head up. It was maybe the only place here that I wouldn't spend weeks or more trying not to get lost.

"Have fun learning English!" Dante said after the bell rang. He ran towards the cafeteria's main entrance, almost tackling a girl on his way out.

"Watch it, shrimp!" she yelled at his vanishing back.

Just as fast as he'd come up to me at the table, Dante was gone and out of sight. Thanks, I thought. I'll see you later.

I made my way outside through a side door of the cafeteria and opened the door to the Fine Arts building next to it. Walking in, the dark green hunk of metal closed harder than expected behind me, drafting the back of my legs with a chilly blast of air and almost knocking me over. I thought California was supposed to be warm.

I walked into the stale, brightly lit classroom. Mrs. Muñoz was at the front of the room writing out some words on the blackboard. On my first day, she'd been quick to mention that she's from Colombia, and—with more excitement than anyone would think necessary—that English is her second language. She went on and on about her early days in America, saying that she enjoyed learning the language so much that she got an advanced degree in it. I think she expected more of a response from me, but at the time I'd pretty much tuned her out. I was also amazed that, in 2004, schools even used blackboards anymore.

I sighed.

"These are your vocabulary words for next week," Mrs. Muñoz said from the front of the room. Then she looked at me. "As I mentioned on Monday, Derek, I assign weekly vocabulary

words every Thursday that you will use in two or three assigned activities to be turned in on the following Wednesday.”

“Miss, I never even seen any of these words b’fore,” a kid in the back of the room said.

“That’s okay,” she said. “That is precisely why I have assigned them, and they directly accompany the next book we’ll be reading.”

A few people groaned.

Mrs. Muñoz had gone out of her way to make sure everything that was expected of me was clear, but I hated being singled out like that and wondered how long it would be until I stopped being the new kid. I looked up at the vocabulary words. Most of them were words I already knew.

Next we were given a copy of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. With its loose binding and worn-down corners, mine looked more like it was used as a doorstop than as something people actually read, but I was looking forward to reading it. After I skipped over the words “so fucking bored,” written in black marker on the first page, I read the opening line of the book: *When he was nearly thirteen my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow*. Kind of a unique way to start a novel. I closed the book.

After going over the definition, origin, and grammatical details of each of the words, Mrs. Muñoz had us write a journal entry using at least three of them. The prompt was about what we planned to do over the weekend. I didn’t know what to write about, so I pretended it was a long weekend in Fort Worth. First, an early lunch at the cafe across from my old high school with my two best friends, Michael and Nathan. Next, going over to Nathan’s house and packing up the gear. Then, driving down to Port Aransas to stay in the beach house that Michael’s family owned. Beverly Bistro was a weekly occurrence for us, but the Port A. trip was something we’d

planned for spring break. Nathan had just gotten his driver's license and my parents were quick to give their blessing on the trip. It was unusual for them to go for something that big without a detailed business proposal from me, especially if it meant I'd be missing church, but I figured they only agreed to it knowing that I wouldn't be there to go anyway. I detailed in my journal how I'd imagined the trip would go, and before I knew it class was over. Mrs. Muñoz usually called on volunteers to share their response, but for whatever reason we didn't have time.

I closed my notebook, crammed it into my backpack, and followed the kids from my class out into the hall. Once back inside the cafeteria, I walked across the now almost empty eating area to a hallway that led to the library. The hallway was lined with lockers on both sides and seemed to stretch for at least a mile. My locker was halfway down.

I spun the four dials on the combination lock to the number I'd set earlier in the week; my birthday, 0913. It made a clicking sound as it released.

I set the copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* on the empty top shelf and bent down to grab my biology book from the bottom. As I put the large, blue, brick of a book in my backpack, I looked across the hall at a group of kids standing around two open lockers. One of them made a joke that I didn't get, and they all laughed.

I missed inside jokes.

I closed my locker and leaned against it. I got lost in the idea of meeting with my own friends at their lockers after band.

"What are you looking at? You some kind of faggot!"

Not on purpose, but I guess I'd been staring across at this guy, daydreaming about home.

I looked away.

"Answer me, guerito!" he shouted.

“Jorge, let it go,” one of the girls he was with said. No one else seemed fazed by his yelling.

“No. I wasn’t staring at you. I was just staring off into space,” I said.

“Don’t let me catch you looking at me again, new kid, I ain’t into no gay shit!”

Jorge’s bluntness caught me off guard. I tried to take him in without staring. While not quite my height, I noticed he was tall, with a handsome face and dark hair that contrasted his light, but naturally tanned skin. He was wearing a faded pair of dark, loose-fitting jeans and a plain white t-shirt. The harsh way he spoke seemed to clash with his casual, almost generic choice of clothing. His white Etnie shoes were the only brand name thing he wore. I looked down at them, then up at his face. I realized I was drawn to him in a way that I didn’t understand.

“Wait...I’m not—” my response was cut short by Jorge slamming me into the front of my locker. Hard. I tensed a little as I felt his hands slide halfway down my back before breaking contact. The feeling of his fingers lingered on me for a moment. I exhaled, startled. A group of nearby guys and a couple of girls laughed as I turned and saw him walking away like nothing had happened. Then, he turned back around, looked me dead in the eyes, and winked.

What had just happened? The truth is, while I’d seen him in the group, I hadn’t noticed Jorge until that moment. I played the events in my head over and over in slow motion. I wasn’t really upset, just confused by how abrupt it had been. There was something about his heavy hands on me. The tingle of his touch. And what was with that wink?

The now familiar sound of the bell reeled me back to reality. Palo’s bell was much higher-pitched than the one at my school in Fort Worth. Crap, I’m late.

I left through a nearby door and walked towards the Natural Sciences building. Mrs. Shepard was a nice lady, and, from what I'd been told, a good biology teacher, but I'd been late to her class every single day so far and yesterday she told me it could not become a habit.

"I'm nice and laid back," she said, "but don't you dare get on my bad side."

I took off running.

"So that just means, as we've been discussing, that some genes are reces—"

I cut Mrs. Shepard off by darting through the door, which unfortunately, was located at the front of the room.

"Late again, Mr. Thomas?" she said. "Ah, but only two minutes this time, not almost seven like yesterday."

"I'm so sorry, ma'am. It's 'cause my English class is all the way on the other side of campus, and I have to stop at my locker on the way to grab my book. I'm still trying to get in a routine that works," I said, out of breath.

"Might I suggest," she paused, looking at me like she was going to say something else but changed her mind, "that you put your bio book in your bookbag during lunch? Surely it can't be too much trouble to carry it with you to your English class before here."

"Yes, ma'am." I collapsed into my chair.

Earlier in the week I'd been given the seat next to a girl named Sydney. We hadn't really talked much, except for a few words when I was assigned as her lab partner. Other than being quite a bit bigger, Sydney reminded me of my Jamaican housekeeper, Elise. Sydney's gray and blue striped sweater and black pants fit tight, but looked good on her large frame. She had a

smart-looking face and a booming personality. Sydney was the type of girl you just wanted to be friends with, but I also found her intimidating. I wondered if she was Jamaican.

Mrs. Shepard continued with her lesson.

“Boy, why you always late?” Sydney said.

“I don’t know. My class is just far, I guess.”

“I have the same class as you. I also have a lot more ass to carry around than you do. You just dilly-dally too much.”

“You’re in Mrs. Muñoz’s class?”

“Yeah. How do you not know that? For someone who watches people all day, you sure don’t pay much attention, do you?”

“I guess not.”

“You can start walking with me if you want. I know a shortcut. Just make sure you have your book already like Mrs. S. said.”

“Sure. That sounds fi—,”

“Mr. Thomas and Miss Walker, am I interrupting something? Would you like to share with the rest of the class what’s so important right now? Oh, and please tell me you caught everything I just said?” Mrs. Shepard dusted chalk residue from her fingers.

“Yes, Mrs. S., you told us that since we have been learning about DNA all week, we will be doing some sort of activity that involves us making babies with our lab partners,” Sydney said.

Make babies? I looked at Sydney with my head cocked like a dog. Did I hear her right? Did *she* hear Mrs. Shepard right? I shifted my gaze from Sydney to Mrs. Shepard, then back to Sydney.

“On paper, of course,” Mrs. Shepard said. “I will be passing out instructions first thing Monday at the start of class. The activity will be to identify each other’s features. You will need to keep in mind the dominant versus recessive gene chapter we started yesterday—the one that we’re finishing up right now—and, using the scientific probability stuff we will go over tomorrow, you guys will create a baby with your combined features and draw a sketch of it to present to the rest of the class.”

A kid in the front raised his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Carson,” Mrs. Shepard said.

“Um, but my lab partner is a guy.”

“So?” she said.

“But, that’s kinda gay, no?”

The whole room laughed.

“For the purpose of this exercise, gender is not really important. Besides, it’s not like I’m asking you to actually get it on with each other.”

She paused and I got the sense that she knew that wasn’t the right thing to say to a room full of teenagers. I was the only one who laughed.

Most of the class turned and looked at me, including Sydney. I could feel my face turning red with embarrassment. Mrs. Shepard went back to her lesson.

I sighed and started doodling in my notebook. First, I drew a house, the only thing I could draw that anyone would recognize, but at some point that changed to me drawing the letter J over and over in different artistic styles. I was glad it was the last class of the day and was, again, paying no attention to Mrs. Shepard’s lesson. I also thought that Sydney might be watching me.

After Mrs. Shepard was cut off by the high-pitched tone of the bell, I was the first one out of the room. Swarms of students were spewing into the hallway from other science rooms and I got swallowed up as we all struggled to fill the small space. Luckily, the Natural Sciences building was located right next to the student pick-up area. I could see the silver Lincoln that my parents had given Elise to chauffeur me and my sister around. I turned and started in her direction.

“Derek! Wait up!” Dante called from under the breezeway between the two buildings. I stopped and let him catch up to me.

“Hey man,” he said, approaching.

“Hi Dante. What’s up?”

“Not a lot. I have band rehearsal right now at 3:30, but I have like 45 minutes to kill if you wanna chill for a bit.”

“Can’t,” I said. “My ride is already here.” I gestured towards the Lincoln.

“Oh, alright then.” He seemed disappointed.

The truth was, I could’ve told Elise to come back, but more than anything, I just wanted to get out of there. “Thanks for the invite, though.”

“Fa sho,” he said. “See you tomorrow.”

I nodded.

Reaching the Lincoln, I grabbed for the door handle. It wouldn’t open. Elise rolled her eyes and pushed the unlock button on the door panel.

“Sorry about that,” she said. I got in the car.

“It’s whatever,” I said. “Where’s Bethany?”

“She went over to play with some little girl she met at school.”

I didn't answer. Of course my sister was making friends already.

"And you? How was your day?"

"It sucked."

"Oh. Did you have fun in band, at least?"

"No. All the other kids are friends already. I just sit there quiet the whole time unless we're playing some boring scales or something. We barely have any actual music yet."

"I'm sure it'll get better," she said.

I considered telling her about Dante, but that would mean I'd have to admit that today wasn't a total train wreck. I didn't want to do that. I just wanted sympathy for the parts of it that were. Besides, Dante was in marching band, not beginning band.

Elise was actually the reason I chose to learn saxophone. Her husband, Ronnel, was a jazz musician in the late 80s. "He played the brass aphrodisiac like God himself," she always told me. He was in his mid-twenties when they got married and Elise was just 16. He died in a bar fight only a few years after they tied the knot. The official reports said his death was accidental, but Elise claimed, with a passion, that it was a hate crime.

"Those white assholes had it out for him from the very beginning," she always said to anyone who would listen. She was sure to leave out that she wasn't actually there with him that night. It was only a few months later that my mother met her trying to wash the windshield of her car at a gas station. I don't know exactly how it all happened, but the next thing any of us knew, Elise was moving in. I always wondered why she didn't just remarry. She was smart, and pretty, and easy to get along with. Instead, she chose to stay with the "perfect little Thomas family" through all our crap. I think it just reached a point where she was too invested in Bethany and me to walk away from it.

Up until my mom canceled the church group book club she held at our house and stopped attending the almost daily events at the Southern Grace Country Club a few weeks before our move to Palo, Elise was the only parent figure my sister and I had. I grew up with her. Once, when I was 9, she read to me from the Grimm book of fairy tales she'd found on a bookshelf in the den. An hour later I woke up screaming, and she rushed in to save me from whatever monster I thought was trying to eat me. She held me until I fell back asleep.

I loved Elise, and in reality she was probably my closest friend, but lately, just like with all the other adults in my life, our relationship was on the rocks. She was patient with me whenever I tested her or one of my parents, and I appreciated her for it. She probably got me more than anyone else, including myself.

We pulled up to the mid-sized, track-style house and Elise clicked the garage door opener on the visor. I could see my mom's Mercedes appear as the door opened. This house only had a two-car garage, instead of the four we had before, so Elise parked the Lincoln in the driveway.

Elise grabbed a bag of what looked like laundry supplies and walked to the laundry area inside the garage. I got out and went to the front door. I thought about our massive laundry room back in Fort Worth and wondered if Elise missed having an actual room, instead of a closet in the garage.

"Der, is that you?" my mother said from the other room as I walked into the house we were still trying to move into. For all intents and purposes, it was a nice enough house. Even then, I knew that most people would find it more than suitable. But I hated its cookie-cutter layout and how it felt more like a stranger's house than my own. I remembered standing in that very spot the previous summer as my father looked around the property to see what needed to be done to get it ready for its next tenants. Who knew they'd be us?

“How was school?” she asked. I heard the fridge door open and close.

“Fine,” I said, becoming irritated after almost tripping over a box labeled “Wall Art.”

“Where’s Elise, in the garage?” she said.

“Yeah, and Bethany is at a friend’s house,” I rolled my eyes at no one.

“I know. Isn’t it exciting? Her new friend—Sarah, I think her name is—seems like such a nice girl.”

I didn’t answer as I walked up the first few steps of the stairs to the left of the front door.

“Anything exciting happen today?” my mother asked, coming into view with a plate of cookies and a glass of milk.

At first I thought she was implying I should know something I didn’t. Like that something exciting was supposed to have happened that day, and she was inquiring about that particular something. I stepped back down to the landing at the bottom of the stairs and thought for a moment. I then realized she was just trying to make small talk—something I was not even close to being interested in. I’d hardly spoken more than a few words to my mother since our arrival in Palo a week ago. Our relationship had already been tense because she, being a woman of fifty-four, was going through menopause, as I, barely having turned 15 a few months ago, was on the back end of puberty. All those hormones in the air at once had become quite a recipe for disaster between us, and now, with the family picking up and moving halfway across the country during a time in my life when I needed stability, the air was thicker than ever.

“No. I doubt anything exciting ever happens in this shithole of a town!” Usually the thoughts in my head hit some sort of filter before becoming actual words. Not today.

“Watch your mou—I mean, don’t say that, honey, you just haven’t given it a chance is all,” she said. It was unusual for her to accept that kind of “un-Thomas-like” language from me, but for whatever reason she decided to let it go and held out the plate of cookies instead.

“I don’t want cookies. I don’t want anything from you. This whole thing has been nothing but stupid,” I said. As I turned to go up the stairs, she moved her cookie hand closer to me, and when I reached for the handrail, I slapped the plate right out of her hand. I cringed as I saw the white ceramic disk smash into pieces on the floor, launching bits of cookies and debris in all directions across the room.

Tears began to well up in my mother’s eyes, but she fought them.

“Oh, it looks like a bakery bomb went off in here,” Elise said. “What happened?”

“We had a little—,” my mother trailed off. “Elise, clean this up, please. I don’t want ants.”

”Yes. Ms. Shelley,” Elise said. I turned away without saying anything else, and b-lined up the stairs to my bedroom. The door slammed in the jamb behind me, and I threw myself on my bed and cried. It was a soft sob at first, but I was full-on bawling within seconds. I wondered if my mother could hear me, but maybe I wanted her to.

CHAPTER 2

Face down on my bed, I looked across the dark room and saw the light in the hallway glowing through the gap under my door. I sat up, puffy-eyed, and checked the Buzz Lightyear alarm clock on my nightstand. My father had given me that clock before I started middle school. 7:21pm, the glowing green digital numbers underneath the Buzz Lightyear statue read.

Every time I looked at it, the alarm went off in my head. “Hello Space Rangers, it’s Buzz Lightyear. Time to wake up and move out cadets! Meet me at Star Command for your daily assignment. Buzz Lightyear, over and out!”

It would repeat this inspirational space-ranger spiel over and over until it annoyed me enough to either snooze it, to turn it off, or to throw the entire clock across the room. I was probably too old for an alarm clock like that, but it reminded me of brighter days. Of my friends sitting around a big Texas bonfire. Of home before my dad decided to take a lower-paying job in LA. Of when I actually got along with him and my mother. That seemed like ages ago.

My annoyance with my mom came and went, but with my dad things were on a whole other level. He made no effort to see things from my side, and I blamed him for everything. I felt a resentment there that ran deeper than anything I was able to understand, and the mere sight of him enraged me.

A knock on my door made me sit up.

“What?”

“Your father is home and dinner is on the table. Please come down and join the rest of us.” My mother’s voice was muffled through the door.

“I’m not hungry,” I said, as my stomach growled.

“At least come down and have a drink or something until dessert. You’ll be happy, I made your favorite.”

The idea of facing my father, and having to pretend everything was happy-go-lucky, made me consider staying up there until I starved to death, but I thought about my mother’s fresh, from-scratch brownies—their cake-like exterior encasing their warm, fudgy center—my all-time favorite dessert. I knew she was trying to get on my good side, but after my blow up earlier, I didn’t know why.

“Fine,” I said.

Elise did all the cooking in the house, it was part of her job, but for as long as I could remember my mother loved to bake. She was good at it.

In the old days, mom would bake at least once or twice a month. She worked as a receptionist in my dad’s clinic back then, but whenever she could, she’d spend time with the oven. And with me.

I thought about the green Toy Story apron she got me that went with the pink one she used to wear, and wondered where it was—in a box somewhere, or maybe a landfill.

A stream of light flashed into my eyes as I flipped the lamp switch. After letting my eyes adjust, with about as much motivation as I could muster, I stepped into the hall. I could hear voices downstairs. My mom’s soft hum, asking her husband about his day. My younger sister, Bethany, chiming in about hers. My dad’s occasional “is that right,” “huh,” or “I see,” in response to Bethany’s fifth-grade adventures. A random laugh here and there from Elise, and the sound of the dishes clanking in the sink.

I looked around the dimly lit entry area as I reached the bottom of the stairs. My cookie mess from earlier had since been removed, with no trace that it ever existed. There were still

boxes scattered around the room in various stages of unpacking, but I figured my mom had started decorating somewhere, since the box labeled “Wall Art,” that had been taped shut earlier, was now open, with most of its contents spread out on the floor next to it.

Stepping over a canvas my mother had painted of the sun above the ocean a few years ago at a friend’s “Wine and Watercolor” birthday party, I walked towards the archway that led into the combined kitchen and dining room. The smell of hot food, including the brownies, hung heavy in the air. To the untrained eye it looked like a warm and inviting place to be. If you didn’t know that two weeks ago the same people were enjoying a meal together in a much larger house, in a far less complicated place, you might think this was a snapshot of the picturesque. But I knew there was something going on that my parents were being secretive about, and that the family portrait in front of me was all an illusion.

“Hey kiddo.” My father was staring into a work file and didn’t even look up at me from his seat at the head of the table. It was the same chunky wooden table that we’d had in our dining room in Fort Worth. With only eight chairs, it always seemed so small compared to some of the banquet-style ones my friends had, but in this room it barely fit. I didn’t answer.

“I got an A on my spelling quiz and I only had the words half the days as the other kids,” Bethany said.

Bethany was the only person in the family I was on full speaking terms with. I was rarely short with her because I knew how much the 10-year-old looked up to me. We always had a special bond because, being that my mom was just a few weeks past her forty-third birthday when she held up that drug store pee-stick with a plain as day positive reading on it, it made Bethany a high-risk pregnancy. I was so excited to find out I’d be a big brother, but all of that came crashing down when my mother’s scream shattered me awake in the middle of the night,

two months before her due date. Whenever I thought about getting mad at Bethany, the memory of her tiny, four-pound body, lying motionless in an incubator, kept me in check. Standing as close to her as they'd let me, I could see tubes coming out from everywhere, not knowing for sure if she'd survive. I don't think my parents ever told me what was happening, but even being only four years old, I knew my sister was fighting for her life.

Bethany was a smart girl, but unlike me she wasn't into reading and the arts. Instead, she preferred math and science over musical instruments and the world of fiction. Knowing how important my approval about an English-related assignment was to her, I held both my thumbs up and nodded at her.

My mom sat a large glass of Dr. Pepper in front of me, then sat in her seat between Bethany and my father. It was a well-known fact that Dr. Pepper was my favorite, and I did intend to drink every drop of the super-sized soda that I was now sliding closer to me, but since everyone had full meals in front of them, I was confused by it.

"Is this all I get?"

"Oh, didn't you say you weren't hungry?"

I could feel the blood rushing to my face. How stupid could this woman be? It had been almost seven hours since the last time I ate, how could I not be hungry?

Trying to push down my frustration, I took a deep breath. It had almost no effect.

I looked over at Elise who had backpedaled from taking her seat next to me and was already reaching into the cupboard for a plate. "No, don't! I'll do it. You go ahead and eat."

I pushed back from the table. My chair screeched across the tile floor like a dog being stepped on. I looked up at the peeling beige wallpaper on the wall behind Bethany and my mother. Was it being removed to be updated, or was the house falling apart?

Everyone except my father stopped and looked at me.

I ignored them as I stood and walked over to Elise. Without thinking, I grabbed the plate and mashed-potato spoon from her hands and began plopping large balls of the white fluff onto my plate. Elise stepped aside, and to my surprise she didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry," my mother said. "I should've asked when you came down if you had changed your mind about wanting food."

I saw Elise try to get my mother's attention. My mother ignored her. I wasn't sure if Elise was trying to signal my mom to drop it, since my dad's interest in the work file had kept him from fully catching on to what was happening, or if she was as shocked as I was that my mother was allowing this kind of behavior. I knew Elise wouldn't want me to get in trouble, but she wasn't one to just accept disrespect. Elise turned her attention to me. She stayed silent but the look she gave reeled me into the reality of what I was causing. It was too late.

"You apologize to Elise this instant, young man," my father said. "Your attitude is out of line."

I ignored him.

"I know you heard me!"

I was acting like a jerk, but something inside me needed to and I didn't know why. I mouthed an apology to Elise that she accepted with a nod. I guess neither of my parents saw.

"I see you're raising yourself a regular little asshole here," my father said to my mother.

Knowing how explosive they could be with each other, I shot Elise a nervous glance. She gestured to Bethany to leave.

In what seemed like slow motion, my mother stood up. She adjusted her hair and bit her lip, making it clear that she was thinking hard about her next move. "Everyone. Sit down, Now!"

Elise and Bethany shuffled to their seats. I followed behind them, but tried to look unbothered. My father just went back to the work file.

“We are going to have a nice dinner as a family,” my mother said, sitting back down.

“Derek. Tell us how your day was.”

“It was...fine,” I said.

“Fine is pretty nondescript. How about you tell us something good that happened to you at school today,” she said.

Forcing small talk was only making things worse. No one else said anything, so I thought for a second. I knew I had to answer, but I guess I took too long.

“I give up! If you all want to sit here and be pissed at each other, count me out.” She looked at me, then glared at Elise, sighed loud enough for everyone to hear, then picked up her cup of coffee and left the room.

Being much more careful with my movements, I moved over to the other counter where the brownie tray was sitting. Elise was already up and cutting them for me. The dark-brown chocolate squares were still steaming with warmth as she dropped three of them on my plate. I could tell my father disapproved, and this restored some of the need to rebel I had before. I gave him a what-are-you-going-to-do-about-it look and took the plate—filled only with brownies and mashed potatoes—up to my room.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I ate my mound of a meal in silence. Normally, I’d go online and chat with some friends on AIM, but since my computer—and even my desk for that matter—wasn’t set up yet, I just sat there thinking. I recalled the night my father had announced that he was closing his private clinic and transferring his practice to a hospital in LA. Nothing about that had been brought up until I was sitting across the dinner table from him that night.

“Is it a promotion?” I asked. At first I didn’t get exactly what he was saying.

“No. Not really.”

“So, will you be traveling back and forth?”

“What? No, son. I’m saying Friday is the last day the clinic will be open and we’re moving to Los Angeles the middle of next week.”

Los Angeles. For some reason it bothered me that he said the actual words, instead of just calling it LA like everyone else. Letting it sink in, I was crushed.

I’d just had my first concert with the beginning band. A Christmas concert where I’d played a solo in front of an audience of over five-hundred people. It was such a cool feeling to beat out two other sax players for that solo, and it was that night I realized I loved the thrill and excitement of performing. I was eager to get to work on the new set of music we’d just been given, and my band friend, Michael, had invited me up to his parent’s house on White Rock Lake to celebrate. We talked about me wanting to do the section leader audition for the following marching season, and it felt good knowing that I actually had a shot.

After years of not fitting in, but being expected to by my family, I thought I’d finally found something that checked all the boxes for everyone. Now, it was being ripped from under me like a tablecloth pulled from a fully set table. Only, instead of everything remaining perfectly in place, my life was left a broken mess on the floor.

I sat the empty plate on the chair that went with my disassembled desk. I pulled off most of my clothes, leaving just my Hollister boxer-briefs and a pair of tube-socks. I saw that the bits of blond hair that were growing in patches on my chest and stomach had spread and were starting to darken. I rubbed the hairs with my fingertips. They felt soft but also wiry. I thought about something else I could rub, but pulled up the blanket instead. I reached for my iPod and

placed an earbud in each ear. I set it to my Phantom of the Opera original Broadway cast playlist and pressed play. The first few notes of the prologue filled my ears as I closed my eyes. Soon the track switched to *Overture* and I felt myself dozing off. The sound of the organ, even as loud and triumphant as it was, was a relaxing distraction from the day I'd just had. I was asleep before *Think of Me* came on.

CHAPTER 3

“Hello Space Rangers, it’s Buzz Lightyear. Time to wake up and move out cadets! Meet me at Star Command for your daily assignment. Buzz Lightyear, over and out!”

I’m not a morning person. At first I didn’t recognize the foreign room I was in, but Buzz was relentless, and soon I was awake enough to know it was my new bedroom. I was also awake enough to know how annoying the alarm clock was. Leaning over, I could see the green numbers glowing 6:46am. Only a minute had passed since the alarm first started going off, but it seemed like Buzz had been yelling at me for hours. I smacked the snooze button, turned over, and went back to sleep.

After what seemed like only seconds, the alarm went off again. I let it continue its spiel for another minute or two, but this time when trying to hit the snooze button, the alarm clock went tumbling off the nightstand and stopped.

Maybe I finally killed it, I thought.

“Hello Space Rangers, it’s Buzz Lightyear. Time to wake up and move out cadets! Meet me at Star Command for your daily assignment. Buzz Lightyear, over and out!”

The alarm clock again fanfared its monotonous motivational message through its extra-loudspeakers, and when it got to the point of torture, I got out of bed to find Buzz’s face buried in the carpet. I grabbed it and gave him a look of disgust as I forcibly flipped the switch to off, as though doing it harder would somehow get back at him for having the audacity to wake me up. Did I mention I’m not a morning person?

I dragged a box labeled “Derek’s Room” over next to my bed and sat on the floor. After rummaging through clothes, and toys I probably didn’t need anymore, I dumped the box on the floor.

“Where the crap is it?” I said out loud, spreading the pile out and checking each item one by one. “I know I saw it yesterday.”

I could feel myself getting frustrated. I started tossing balled up handfuls of clothing to the other side of the room. Then, just before I was about to go insane, I saw the other, nearly identical box by my desk chair. Its snide black marker “Derek’s Room” label glared at me.

Who labeled these? I thought, remembering that I was, in fact, the one who packed and prepared my own stuff back in Fort Worth.

I went over to the other box and the blue Hollister t-shirt I’d been searching for was right on top, exactly where I remembered leaving it. I sat on the edge of my bed. I didn’t want to go to school and considered pretending to be sick. At least it’s Friday, I thought, as I sniffed the shirt, decided it was clean enough, and pulled the cobalt-colored cloth over my head.

“Derek! Elise is already going out to the car. We’re gonna be late,” Bethany called from the hallway.

I looked back over at the clock. 7:23am. I shifted up to Buzz and took note of the smirk on his face. “What are you smiling about?”

I put on a pair of jeans and headed out into the hall.

“Elise is leaving in five minutes. You better be in that car,” my father yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

“I know, I know” I said, walking down the hall to the bathroom.

The door was already open so I stepped inside the chilly room. The basic hall bath was dimly lit by a small window on the wall behind the toilet. Flipping the switch on the wall, the room flooded with light. The six round bulbs above the mirror made it look like a dressing room vanity. I pretended I was getting ready for my big film debut—or for a concert, I thought, holding up an air sax before reminding myself that I was in a rush.

I washed my face and brushed my teeth. Bethany again yelled up that it was time to go.

“Alright, I’m coming!” I walked back to my bedroom. Just inside my door, my backpack sat in the same place I’d left it the day before. I hope I didn’t have homework. I grabbed it, placed one strap over my shoulder, and went out to the front yard.

The silver Lincoln was its usual morning spot, parallel to the curb out front. Elise and Bethany were inside the car, waiting.

“What took you so long?” Elise said as I opened the front passenger door.

“Had an issue with my alarm this morning. I think it might be broken.”

Elise responded with a sort of “hmm” sound. I could tell she didn’t believe me, but why should she? I was the last one to the car almost every morning.

I turned the radio to a decent morning station I’d found earlier that week and cranked the volume up. I didn’t want to deal with anyone trying to chit chat. Elise reached over and lowered the volume. It was still loud enough, so I didn’t readjust it.

Soon, we got to Bethany’s school, which was only a mile or so down the street from the house. The Kindergarten through eighth grade Palo Valley School was just as old and rundown as the high school. While not all of Palo was falling apart, the oldness was a recurring theme. Outside of our 80s subdivision, the rest of town was made up of narrow streets lined with wood-sided houses and shops. The historic district of Palo, that we’d driven through when we came

into town with our lives in the trunk, reminded me of the Fort Worth Stockyards. I'd made it known how ugly I thought it was, but really, it had a classic kind of charm to it.

"Bye, Dek," Bethany said, getting out of the car and standing next to my door. Dek was Bethany's nickname for me. It went back to when we were really young and she couldn't pronounce the "r" in my name. In response, I'd always called her Bet. The loading zone was filled with children, some older than her, but most way younger. I rolled the window down and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Have a good day at school, Bet." I gave her hair a tug.

She pulled her pink Blue's Clues backpack over both shoulders. I was never a fan of Blue's Clues, but thanks to Bet's obsession with it, I'd seen almost every episode. The picture on the back was Magenta the dog sporting a new pair of purple glasses. It was fitting when that episode aired because Bethany had just been through yet another follow-up eye exam, and her new glasses were in the process of being made. She was so upset about having to get them that she lost the first pair in less than a week. She claimed it was an accident, but after the second pair went missing, we all knew she was losing them on purpose. When the third pair came in, my father told her that if she lost another pair she'd be in more trouble than she'd ever been in. I don't know if Bethany took him seriously, but now that Magenta wore glasses, she was fine wearing hers, saying that, "four eyes are better than two."

Elise pulled out of the loading zone and turned in the direction of the high school. Palo High School was located on that same street about three miles away. I was listening to a commercial for some fast food place, which made me realize I was ready for breakfast. Then, I remembered it was Palo High's breakfast and was no longer looking forward to it. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something that caught my attention. I wasn't sure at first, but there was a

kid walking up ahead that looked like it might be Dante. As we got closer, there was no doubt and I told Elise to pull over.

I lowered both the volume and the window. "Hey Dante."

"Oh, Derek, hi," he said. Elise pulled up next to him and the car came to a stop.

"Where are you walking from?" I asked.

"I live right behind PVS," he said. "I walk this way to school every day."

PVS were the initials for my sister's school, where we just were.

"But...it's freezing," I said, "and that walk is probably three miles or more."

"Yeah, last year I had a bus pass, but my ma's benefits got cut this year 'cause my pops stopped paying her, and so she couldn't afford it this time," he said. "I've been walking like this all year."

"Get in," I said. Elise gestured towards the back door.

Dante got in, setting a well-used black backpack on the seat next to him.

"Thank you," he said. "This is real nice of you."

"I mean. We're on our way to the same place. Plus, that's a really long walk."

"I'm used to it."

As Elise pulled back out into the road, I found myself really bothered by Dante having to walk that far. "Hey, so...we have to come through here to drop my sister off at PVS. I'm sure we could just grab you on the way by."

"Everyday?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

"You don't have to do that."

"I insist. And Elise doesn't mind. Do you?"

“No, I suppose it doesn’t really make much difference.”

“Well, yeah, if it’s no trouble, that would be great.”

I turned the radio back up. Staring out the window, I noticed that the landscape in between sections of houses and shopping centers was mostly desert, but also sort of beachy. We didn’t have palms like that in Fort Worth. At least, not natively. Some of my mother’s book club friends gossiped about importing plants from other places, including those, “beautiful California palms.” I didn’t think they looked much different than normal palms, but in this setting they looked like nothing I’d ever seen before. A few minutes later we pulled up to the front of the school.

“Thanks again,” Dante said to Elise.

Dante and I got out of the car and walked in the direction of the breezeway gate.

“Who is that?” Dante asked after Elise drove off.

“Who, Elise? She’s my housekeeper.”

“Housekeeper that drives you to school?”

“Yeah. My dad hired her when I was really young. She cooks, cleans, drives me and my sister to school—all kinds of stuff.”

“So, she raised you?”

“Well, no. I mean...” I thought about it. “Elise is basically a personal assistant to my parents, but she does help a lot with Bet and me too. She’s more of a friend than a parent or whatever.”

“She moved here with you?”

“I mean, yeah. Where else would she go?”

“I don’t know. It’s just me and my ma at home. She does all the cooking and the cleaning and all that, and I help as best I can. The idea of having a nanny—or whatever—is kinda weird to me.”

“I guess,” I said. “She’s always just kind of been there. I can’t even remember how things were before.”

It never really occurred to me how unusual it was to have Elise. Sure, not everyone where I grew up in Fort Worth had a live-in housekeeper, but most of them had at least a regular cleaning lady, and some even had a full house staff. Dante walked towards the cafeteria. I wasn’t sure if he expected me to follow, but I decided to skip breakfast.

CHAPTER 4

My Buzz Lightyear alarm clock went off at 6:15am, telling me to report to Star Command. At first I wasn't sure why it was waking me up so early on the weekend, but as I gained consciousness, I remembered. After three weeks in a row of not going, my mother had finally found a church suitable for us.

I was brought up a southern Baptist. My family always had an affiliation with church, but even though it was never said, it was just for appearances. We were very much an only-on-Sundays type of family. Lately though, my mother had been adamant about us becoming more in touch with our faith. I didn't think much of it since she was always the more spiritual of my parents, but ever since moving to Palo, even my father had been referencing God and religion more than before.

For me, having a relationship with the man upstairs was more about having something to believe in. The idea of a life on Earth, with war, and starvation, and all the hate, made me feel hopeless. I only prayed when I remembered to once or twice a week before bed—not nearly as much as I knew I should—but religion was something that mattered to me. I'd met some of my closest friends at church, and most of the people in marching band back home went to Pastor Armstrong's First Baptist. I wasn't as much a fan of getting up that early, but I was looking forward to getting plugged back into the Christian community.

My mother had visited several churches in and around the area—some even outside the Baptist denomination—and with her mile-long list of requirements she'd had very little luck. Those requirements included: not too far from the house, a pastor who was well-known, not too big, not too small, a newer facility, a place where people with status went, but they couldn't have

as much status as we had, etc. After countless visits, she'd all but given up, so it was perfect when Pastor Paul Jenkins had been recommended to her by a family friend.

"He's originally from Dallas," she said at the dinner table the Friday before. "So, he's one of our own. I also heard he has similar views to Pastor Armstrong, and even attended services there at First Baptist a few years back when he was studying to be a pastor."

Pastor Bill Armstrong had been our religious leader at First Baptist Church in Fort Worth for as long as I could remember. I'd only ever heard a few of his sermons because children spent most of their time in Sunday school or youth group, but the services I did attend were uplifting and inspirational. He was an older man—late 50s maybe—with an old-school mindset, but he seemed to really care about people, and my mother adored him. She'd even put a bumper sticker on her car that said "Follow Me To FBC" a few years ago. You could hardly read it anymore.

After hushing Buzz with a firm press, I got out of bed. I opened my closet and found my dark-blue slacks and matching blazer, a white button-down shirt, and a yellow tie. My tie collection was a big one that included mostly bright colors. I liked the contrast they gave with the rest of the outfit, and back in Fort Worth I would sport a different color every week. Yellow seemed like a good, neutral one for my first day.

I parted my hair, brushed my teeth, and went down to meet the rest of the family. Elise and my mother were sitting at the dining table; my mother drinking coffee, Elise preparing a cup of tea. Elise was wearing a blue dress with yellowish flowers. Simple, but she looked pretty in it. My mother was on another level, wearing what almost looked like a wedding dress. It was off-white with puffy shoulders. Long and flowy, and only form-fitting at the waist. It looked ridiculous, but my mother liked to make a statement.

Bethany was still in her pajamas, and was in a mood because she'd wanted to sleep over again at Sarah's house the night before and not be forced to go to "stupid church."

"We have to go spend some time with Jesus today, honey. If we stay away for too long, he might not continue to bless us," my mother said.

"Besides that, you go over to your little friend's house almost every day after school, and you spent the night Friday and was there all day yesterday," Elise said.

Bethany glared at her. After a moment, and to the surprise of no one, she threw herself on the floor and started crying.

"Aren't we a little old for tantrums?" Elise said.

"I don't want to go to stupid church! Sarah's family doesn't have to go and they're all happy and good and I think it's not really fair that I have to..." she became impossible to understand. I opened the fridge and grabbed a can of Dr. Pepper, while Bethany wailed and we all ignored her.

"What is going on here?" My father came in from the hallway that led to their master bedroom. He was wearing the same kind of suit he wore to work everyday. He went to the counter and poured a cup of coffee.

"Bet is throwing a fit about going to church," I said.

"Is that right?" My father said, picking my sister up from the floor and setting her on his lap. Bethany sobbed into his shoulder.

"How about this. What if we go to church this morning and then afterwards, we stop by and pick up Sarah, grab some ice cream, and she can hang out with you here at the house. How does that sound?"

Bethany stopped crying instantly, proof that the waterworks were all for show, and gave our dad a hug. “That sounds like a good idea, Daddy. Can she stay the night?”

“Not on a school night,” my mother said.

I could tell Bethany was gearing up to go back into tantrum mode. My father stopped her. “I’ll call Sarah’s parents and ask if they’ll allow her to stay. I’m sure Elise won’t mind letting her tag along in the car on the way to school tomorrow.”

Elise nodded.

“Alright then, go finish getting ready, sweet one. We want to look our best for the new pastor, don’t we?”

“Yeah,” she said. Her uncombed hair bounced behind her as she trotted to the stairs.

I looked over at Elise. She hated it when my father bribed Bethany to get her to do something. This was a tactic he almost always resorted to and Bethany had come to expect it. Elise gave me a smirk and mouthed the words, “sweet one”. I rolled my eyes.

Then it dawned on me. This was no different from how I’d been acting earlier that week at the dinner table. I’d seen plenty of grown adults throw versions of fits like that. I guess people never really do grow up. Like my aunt Lorrie one time in a restaurant. She made the biggest fuss about every little thing, just for the sake of being difficult. I thought about how bad I felt when the waitress, who could only have been a few years older than me, walked away in tears, fearful that she’d lose her job for not being able to take care of such “high-profile” patrons.

“The Thomas’s helped build this city,” the manager yelled at the waitress whose rap sheet included everything from putting too much ice in my aunt’s drink, to being “too smiley”. Christina was the girl’s name. The manager then proceeded to bribe Aunt Lorrie with a comped

meal and the middle-aged-woman equivalent of ice cream: a free bottle of wine. I was embarrassed.

On our way out, I told my parents I needed to use the restroom. I saw Christina staring down at the receipt with ZERO written on the tip line of a \$300 ticket. I reached for my wallet and took out what cash I had, \$17. I apologized for Lorrie and for the ugliness of my family. I told her that I knew it wasn't nearly enough. She told me that my apology meant more to her than any amount of money, and she gave me a hug. I headed back out to the car where, of course, Lorrie was complaining to my parents about me making her wait.

Bethany came down wearing a pink Sunday-school dress. She really did look adorable when she was all dressed up like that. She also appeared to be in a better mood. With everyone ready, the five of us headed out to the garage. Elise's Lincoln was parked at the curb, which meant she was off the hook for her usual driving duties. Elise didn't always go to church with us. Up until two or three years ago, Sunday was her only day off. I never knew what happened, but for the last few years my parents had been making her tag along. I imagined it was because one of my mother's book club friends, or someone at church, had said something about it, but I couldn't be sure.

"Elise and Bethany can ride with me." My father opened the back door to his Infiniti SUV and signaled for Bethany to get in. Elise got in the front seat.

I opened the side door of my mother's Mercedes and she reached over to remove a large stack of papers from the front seat. It was normal for her to have stuff there, so I wouldn't have thought much of it, except I took notice because of *how* she took it. There was a sense of urgency to make sure it was out of sight. I didn't see much, but she wasn't quick enough for me not to make out the logo on the top page that said, "UCLA Health Beverly Hills Specialty Care."

I paused.

“Oh, it’s nothing honey. I just had a checkup on Friday and that’s all the paperwork for it. It’s a lot of papers because I’m a new patient.”

I shrugged and got in the car. I didn’t believe her, but I decided it was too early in the morning to push for more. I started to turn the radio dial. My mother stopped me before the numbers made it to my favorite country station, KFROG, and put in a CD. A gospel song called “The Value of One” began to play. I wasn’t all that fond of gospel music—every song sounded kind of the same to me—but the woman singing this version of the familiar song had a nice voice and it seemed appropriate since we were on our way to church. We both sang along.

We drove past the landmarks I’d become familiar with. The pink house at the end of our street that I imagined a nice old lady lived in—or maybe a mean one. The Jack-in-the-Box restaurant that was a ghost town unless it was 10 at night. The radio tower that was covered with fake palm leaves. I guessed it was to make it blend in better, but it had the opposite effect.

After a few minutes, we pulled into the church complex with my dad’s SUV pulling in behind us. It was a large property with nothing around it, and I was surprised because other than the small section next to what looked like the main building—that was too full for us to park in—the majority of the parking lot was a dirt field. The main building itself was shiny bright white with a blue tile roof, and an older metal-roofed building that looked like it was recently painted in the same white color sat across the dirt parking area about 300 yards away. As the others walked over to us, I could see my father taking it all in.

“They just had this new building built,” my mother said. “The old building over there is now the youth area, but from what I understand they haven’t finished paving the parking lot between the two yet.”

“Haven’t finished? It looks like they haven’t even started,” my father said.

“Well, they have that area over there paved, but Rob assured me that they spared no expense for the new facility and that a proper parking lot is next on their list.”

Just as she was finishing her explanation, a man approached.

“Speak of the devil! Good morning there, Rob,” my father said. “You all remember Robert Rice, don’t you? Him and I studied pre-med together at UT Dallas. Rob is an oncologist at UCLA.”

“Hello again, Rob,” my mother said. She turned to the rest of us. “Rob is the one who referred us to this church.”

I’d seen Dr. Rice once before back in Fort Worth, and thinking about it, it hadn’t been that long ago. Maybe three weeks before we moved to California, my father had told us that Dr. Rice was in town for a work event and that he’d invited him over for dinner. It wasn’t ever explained what he did or who he was, but even though I’d met a few of my father’s work associates at the clinic, it was the first time a colleague of his had ever been invited to the house.

I knew Dr. Rice had to be about the same age as my father, but he looked younger. He was a good-looking and friendly man. I suspected that he must be mixed-raced because, even though he had deep brown eyes and his dark black hair coiled neatly on top of his head, his skin wasn’t much darker than mine. Dr. Rice had a certain charm about him—exactly the type of charisma and trustability that a doctor who dealt with something as serious as cancer would need. His smile seemed real and he walked with an elegance that showed a sort of status, without being off-putting. I liked him when we first met. He’d talked to me about big brass bands and told me how great it was that I was learning the saxophone. But there was something strange about his

presence in this scenario. Why would my mother be in such direct contact with him that he'd invite her to church?

"Let me show you into the sanctuary," Dr. Rice said, pointing in the direction of the large new building.

We walked around the side of the building to the main entrance and I saw the words "Praises of Palo Baptist Church" painted above three sets of open glass double doors. Dozens of people were gathered in different groups out front, some in jeans and t-shirts, but most dressed in Sunday clothes. After waving to a few of them, Dr. Rice led us through the middle set of doors, into a wide but not very deep foyer. On one end there was a table with pamphlets, VHS tapes, CDs, and a selection of books for sale. An elderly woman stood behind it and smiled at me as she caught my gaze. On the other end of the foyer there were two doors with the typical MEN and WOMEN restroom signs on the front of them.

As we walked across the shiny, gray marble tile, we were greeted by a second set of doors. These were made of wood with intricate vine carvings and they stood closed in front of us. The door handles were shaped like crosses and were made of a dark metal. Dr. Rice pushed the door in front of us and we continued through. The oversized room was filled with row after row of cushion-covered pews. The main aisle extended all the way down the middle of the yellow-painted, maroon accented sanctuary, to a white pulpit perched at the front. A few people were seated throughout the room, but my eyes were immediately drawn up to the elaborate wooden beam that ran the length of the vaulted A-frame ceiling.

Halfway up the aisle we were stopped by a man dressed in a gray suit with a light-blue dress shirt, and a dark-red tie. With his smooth face, his neatly parted blond hair, and his young,

dynamic, but otherwise official-looking appearance, I assumed he must be in his late twenties or early thirties.

“Good morning, Brother Robert,” the man said to Dr. Rice.

“Morning, pastor. This is Dr. Nathaniel Thomas, his wife Shelley, and their lovely family.”

“Ah, yes, the Texas family you told me about. We’re glad to have you here at POP,” he said.

Everyone must’ve looked as confused as I was because he then clarified that POP stood for Praises of Palo—the name of the church.

“Thank you for having us,” my father said. “This is my son, Derek, my daughter, Bethany, and our housekeeper and close friend, Elise.”

“Nice to meet you, sir,” I said as the young pastor grabbed my hand.

“Likewise, Derek,” he said with a firm handshake. “And, no need for this *sir* business. Everyone just calls me Pastor Paul.”

Pastor Paul continued down the line, shaking each person’s hand and giving them a by-name greeting. Then he had one of the choir ladies lead Bethany back out across the parking lot to the other building for Sunday school. Dr. Rice excused himself and walked up to the choir section behind the pulpit. The room was filling up fast, so my parents and Elise made their way up to the second row. I started to follow, but Pastor Paul stopped me.

“Derek, the teen service starts a half hour before the main service because they take their own offering, go over their own agenda and announcements and all that, and have a small Bible study session before joining us here for my sermon. They get here about twenty minutes after this service starts and that middle section of pews on the far side is reserved for them. We time it

so that our music ministry is gracing our ears with a joyful noise when they come in. Since that service has already started, you can stay here with your parents for today. I'll get you linked up with our youth pastor here in a bit, so you'll know where to go next week."

"Oh, alright. Thank you, Pastor Paul." I reached out to shake his hand again. It was awkward and clumsy because I don't think he was expecting a second handshake. I felt my hand go limp in his as he attempted to give it a squeeze. Time slowed down as the pastor looked at me, cocked his head to the side, and let out a muffled sigh. I felt like he could see into my soul, that somehow he knew everything about me. I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks and I knew I was blushing. My fevered brain searched for a way to recover, but before I could give any sort of response, Pastor Paul pulled his hand back, wiped it on the front of his suit coat, and walked away.

Well, that was a literal nightmare, I thought, as I sat down and melted into the pew next to Elise. I remember when Pastor Armstrong had given a sermon about the importance of a solid handshake. "You only get one chance for a first impression," he had said from the pulpit. So much for that.

"What a handsome man, huh?" Elise said.

I didn't know why she was asking something like that to me. "Uh, yeah...I guess so. He seems really young."

"I think he's close to the same age as your father," she said.

I looked at her for a second and realized she was talking about Dr. Rice, not Pastor Paul. I sank further into my seat.

After a moment, a much older man with an accent from Boston or somewhere, who introduced himself as Brother David, addressed the congregation from the pulpit. "We have an

update about the parking lot. Brother Greg and myself have arranged for several quotes this week. If by the grace of God one of those companies is meant to be, we will have a parking lot before summer.”

“Amen!” several people shouted.

“Indeed. It has been a long time coming. We have also taken care of the restroom issue in the youth building. No longer will our kids be subjected to the foul fumes that those burst pipes gave us—truly a gift from the devil himself—and, luckily, the Lord was able to send us a plumber who was in need of His services as much as we were in need of the plumber’s. If I’m not mistaken, I believe Mr. Danson is in the room with us for the first time today. Where are you, kind sir?”

A large man in the center section, wearing a white button-down that was partially untucked from a pair of old jeans, stood up.

“Thank you again for your services, Mr. Danson,” Brother David said.

The man gave a slight wave as he sat back down.

“On that note, let’s take a moment to meet all of our first-time guests. If you are new to Praises of Palo, please stand up at this time.”

At least a dozen people stood up, including us. I found the process of being new to such an established place more than a little uncomfortable.

“On behalf of the POP leadership, I would like to welcome all of you,” Brother David said.

The congregation applauded, and those who were seated near anyone who was new offered a quick welcome and introduced themselves. A man across the aisle, whose name I don’t remember actually hearing, shook my hand and said, “Welcome, fellah.”

“In other news, our very own Mrs. Gladstone has made it out of the hospital this week and will be rejoining us for services next Sunday,” Brother David continued. “As many of you know, she took quite a fall last month trying to get some Christmas supplies back up in the attic. God is truly good for taking such great care of her during her recovery.”

“Amen!” several people shouted.

“As a side note, only church staff members are allowed to use ladders from now on.”

A few people laughed.

“Before we take the offering, I’d like to again remind you of the quotes we will be getting this week for the new parking lot,” he said with a smirk.

More people laughed.

Brother David presented himself in a way that made it seem like he’d been doing this for years. I thought it felt a little sales-pitchy, but there was an underlying humor that, to some degree, took the give-me-your-money edge off.

“Calling all ushers,” he said.

The pianist and organist started playing an upbeat version of “Jesus Loves Me” as eight or nine men wearing maroon blazers came up the aisles, each holding a stack of brass offering plates. A moment later, the man I’d met from across the aisle handed the felt-lined plate to an usher who passed it over to me. I gave it to Elise without adding anything to the small stack of bills. She put in what looked to be eight or nine dollars and passed it to my father. My father put in three crisp fifty dollar bills that my mother topped off with another hundred. This was the most I’d ever seen my parents put in, but I figured they were making up for the last few weeks and trying to make a good impression, you know, in case anyone was watching.

After the offering ended an announcement was made about the Wednesday night youth service. I wondered if I'd have to go. There was also a reminder about a Sunday afternoon sermon for newly married couples. Then the choir sang two songs; one hymn that everyone sang along with from the hymnals in the back of each pew, and one much more upbeat gospel song that I'd never heard before. I was surprised by how good they sounded. As dedicated and enthusiastic as the choir back at First Baptist was, they sounded about as good as a cardboard box full of cats, but POP's choir was nice to listen to. Then a group of teenagers took the stage and sang a song that compared God's love and power to different types of candy. It was another song I hadn't heard, and after the first verse, I heard Elise laugh. At least it had a catchy tune.

As the song was ending, the two side doors opened and probably 80 or so teenagers came flooding into the room. I was able to spot the kids of church officials right away, since they were dressed up, carried Bibles with them, and did their best to sit as close to the front of the designated section as possible. None of the teens paid any attention to me. I wasn't sure if it was because they didn't care, or if they just hadn't seen me. Either way, I found their presence intimidating.

Once everyone was settled, Pastor Paul approached the pulpit. "Well, what a song that was," he said. "It makes me want both a candy bar and a date with Jesus."

Everyone laughed.

"Great job, guys. It's always a treat when we're able to get a group of young people up here to sing," he said.

Everyone applauded.

“It’s too bad we didn’t do the song before the offering,” he said. “Then maybe someone would’ve been compelled to use their Payday to put an extra Hundred Grand in there. We do need a parking lot.”

The room erupted into laughter.

“Yes, a date with Jesus,” he chuckled. “Speaking of men dating men, we got a new member to the church this week.”

Everyone responded with a collective, “Amen!”

“In fact, the Lord sent this man to me just this morning,” he continued. “His name is Doug.”

“Welcome, Doug!” A man sitting on the stage behind Pastor Paul said out loud.

Pastor Paul looked back at him and smirked. A few people laughed.

I was confused because Brother David had just introduced all the new members, so I wondered where this was going.

“Doug is a recovering homosexual,” he said.

A few people heckled.

I didn’t understand how being gay worked, but I knew it wasn’t something you recovered from. Pastor Paul made it seem like it was an addiction, or something that could easily be prayed away. I stared up at him, anxious for what he’d say next.

“Now, now,” he said. “We accept all sinners here at POP.”

A few women said, “amen”. Everyone else stayed quiet.

“Although, I do have to admit. After I gave him a handshake, I felt the need to wipe my hand on my jacket.”

I looked around the room to see how others would react. The roaring laughter gave me my answer, as anger spread up into my face.

Elise also seemed uncomfortable and I could tell she was deciding how to respond. After the laughter subsided, she stood up. With our pew being only a few feet away from Pastor Paul, he noticed right away.

“Falling asleep already? If you plan to stand, can you do it in the back of the room, ma’am?” he said.

She stood looking up at him, as my parents sat up straighter in the pew knowing that people were now staring at us. I didn’t know why Elise was just standing like that, but the tension was growing with every passing second, and I wanted to reach over and pull her back down. Then, she turned for her purse, walked to the back of the room, and left out the doors we came in through.

It probably didn’t look like a big deal to everyone else, but given their focus on status and appearances, I knew my parents were pissed. I wanted to leave too, but I feared that it would only add onto it, so I just sat there. Pastor Paul proceeded by quoting a passage in Leviticus that he said proved that homosexuality was an abomination in the eyes of God, and flipping around to other sections that he interpreted to apply to the alternate lifestyle of, as he put it, “your typical faggot.”

I’d never heard a religious leader speak so bluntly about homosexuality. The closest Pastor Armstrong had ever gotten was a sermon about traditional marriage. One of the girls who worked in the First Baptist bookstore had told a deacon she was a lesbian, but nothing ever came of it. I knew First Baptist’s stance on the issue had to be similar to POP’s, but, except for an occasional joke from the boys at youth camp, everyone just ignored the subject altogether.

I zoned in and out of Pastor Paul's sermon as my mind reeled, but I remember him saying something like, "The only good thing gays have brought to this country is AIDS."

Wait. What? Was he saying that he was glad masses of people had their lives cut short by an incurable virus? I knew it was meant as a joke, but I felt dizzy.

He concluded by again emphasizing that POP accepted all types of sinners and that he was happy to have Doug as a member of the church. He then made a joke about him never becoming a Sunday school teacher because of how inappropriate it would be for him to be around young boys.

Again, everyone laughed, including my parents. My heart sank.

When the service was dismissed, Pastor Paul walked over to a man in the front row of the teen section. After a brief exchange, the man stood up and they made their way over to me.

"Derek, this is Brother Ryan," Pastor Paul said. The other man reached out for a handshake.

I tried not to act angry, but inside I was livid. I thought about Pastor Paul wiping his hand on his jacket after our handshake—like he claimed to have done with Doug—when I didn't give him a firm grasp. As much as I now despised him, I didn't want any assumptions to be made about me, or worse, to further embarrass my parents. I wanted to be somewhere...anywhere, but there. I shook Ryan's hand as firmly as possible. I noticed that Pastor Paul looked down at the handshake as if he was doing some sort of quality inspection.

"Well, I'll leave you to it, Ry," he said, walking away.

I guess I passed.

Brother Ryan was even younger than Pastor Paul. He wore a gray suit coat with tan slacks, and his jet-black hair was pushed forward then combed upward like a duck's bill. I stood

probably five inches taller than him, but he had a presence that made him seem bigger. As we walked through one of the side doors that the sea of teens had come through earlier, he led me down a long hallway that was lined with offices and doors to facility rooms.

As we walked across the dirt field parking area, Ryan asked me what I thought of the sermon. I didn't know what to say and I think he could sense my hesitation.

"Pastor Paul can be a bit edgy sometimes," he said.

I stopped walking. Edgy made it sound like the way he delivered information was cutting edge and progressive, but to me it was the opposite of that.

"The sermon was...different," I said. I didn't lie. It was, in fact, different from what I was used to. Pastor Armstrong interpreted the scripture from a place of authority, but he knew that we didn't always have to agree. He also mentioned once or twice that certain ideas and concepts were outdated, and because of that, he told us to pay attention to how they made our own hearts feel. Beyond that, he would never call someone out or shame a person like Pastor Paul had just done. What I didn't say was that I completely disagreed with every part of Pastor Paul's sermon. That his words were harmful, hurtful, and a complete contradiction to the spirituality I felt inside myself.

"Not all of us feel as strongly about certain issues as he does," Ryan said. "The world is changing and the more we resist it, the more it will leave us behind."

I nodded. I wasn't sure how I'd be able to commit myself to a church with a leader like Pastor Paul, but I knew that if my parents decided this was our new house of God, I wouldn't have a choice.

"I'm happy to meet you, Derek. We discussed your family at our staff meeting this week."

“My family, specifically?”

“Yes. Paul is very familiar with your dad’s medical practice. We don’t get many people of your financial stature here in Palo.”

“You’re happy to have us because we’re rich?”

“No. When it was said that we welcome all types of people, we really meant it. I just mean that we don’t get visited by people like your family all that often.”

“Then, why did Pastor Paul publicly call out Elise like that?” I said. “My parents don’t like to be embarrassed.”

“To be fair, she was the one who stood there and made a scene. He had to address it as it was happening, didn’t he?”

“I guess,” I said, “but maybe he could’ve noted that his ‘edginess’ was making people uncomfortable, and taken it as an opportunity to shift gears a little.”

“Pastor Paul only has one gear,” Ryan said with a laugh. “You’ll get used to it.”

I wasn’t satisfied with that. How could a man as seemingly in touch with reality as Ryan—not to mention hundreds of other people—just accept a leader who laughs about mass death, and encourages hate?

Brother Ryan showed me where the teen department met on Sundays, where my freshman Bible study sessions would take place, where the restrooms in the youth building were located, where I could find the best vending machines, and we ended our tour in his office. As he invited me in, I noticed the nameplate on his door, “Ryan Marks, Youth Pastor.” He took a seat on the far side of the desk and gestured for me to sit in one of the two seats in front of it.

“This is where all the fun happens,” he said.

I didn’t know what that meant.

“You don’t have to be so tense around me. I know being the new guy can make you feel vulnerable. It wasn’t that long ago that I came here for the first time and started this job without any experience. I try to be as approachable as I can be because, even though my dad is Paul’s assistant pastor, I didn’t always see him as someone I could look up to.”

I nodded.

“That’s not to say I’m expecting you to see me as a mentor, but I just want you to know that I think you and I could be good friends.”

“Alright. Yeah, maybe,” I said. I again didn’t know what he meant.

“I have some work to do for this afternoon’s newlywed service,” he said, removing his coat and loosening his tie. I just wanted to end off here, so you’d know where my office is...in case you ever need anything. You’re welcome to stick around for a bit.”

“No. I’ll let you work on your wedding thing. Thanks for the tour. Um. See you around.”

“You got it, bud.”

Brother Ryan had a dorkiness that charmed me from the second I met him, but I didn’t know what to make of him being so friendly towards me. I didn’t feel threatened by him, but this didn’t seem like a normal visit with a youth pastor.

When I came back into the sanctuary, I saw Dr. Rice talking with my parents. Elise was back but didn’t seem to be in on the discussion. I tried to listen in, but my mother noticed me before I could get close enough to hear anything. Elise flashed me a look that told me she’d let me in on everything later.

CHAPTER 5

Getting into my mother's Mercedes, there was a heaviness that wasn't there on the ride over to church that morning. She grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the center console and pushed the electric car lighter into its slot so it would heat up. It was rare for my mother to smoke. Especially in the car, and even more so in front of me. The sun reflected off the plastic coating of the green and white cigarette box and glared into my eyes. I looked away and stared out the window.

The lighter popped from its port with a perceivable click, making me jump. It wasn't a big jump, but my reaction was big enough that I knew she must've noticed.

I watched as she opened the box and put the filter end of one of the four remaining cigarettes in her mouth, but she didn't light it. Instead, she looked down at the box in her hand and started flipping it in her fingers. The air was thick and I felt a little like I couldn't breathe as we sat in sheer, suffocating silence.

"There's something you need to understand," she said after a while. She put the cigarette back in the box and dropped it in the cup holder.

"Understand about what?"

"About everything." She looked at me like there was no way I couldn't know what she was talking about.

Everything. I thought hard. Everything having to do with what? With church? With Elise? With Pastor Paul? "Um...okay."

"It has been weighing on my mind since this morning, and now, with this disaster of a church service, you have to know that I know."

Know what? My mind reeled. Did she know about my awkward fumble with Pastor Paul? Did she see him wipe his hand on his jacket? Could she see right through me? I felt the air in my lungs deplete, and now I really couldn't breathe.

"I know that you know about my medical stuff," she said.

I studied her face, even more confused. She was wrong. I didn't know anything. I knew there was more to the stack of papers than she'd let on, but I really knew nothing about anything. "Medical stuff?"

"Derek, you're my only son. You're about as observant as they come, and you're smart as a scholar. I know you've been trying to piece together why we sailed out here so suddenly. Why your father closed his clinic and downsized his career."

She wasn't wrong.

"It has nothing to do with us needing a change of pace. I cringed when your father told that lie to you and Bethany. It's because—" I could tell she was struggling to find the right words. "Because I have an aggressive form of lung cancer called SCLC."

My chest tightened. The C-word was not what I was expecting. At all. My mother was only a social smoker, not a multiple-packs-a-day smoker like the people you see on TV with a hole in their neck. Smoking was just her "dirty little habit," as she called it. It wasn't the continuous cancer-causing kind of smoking, it was a cute, once-in-awhile thing she did at parties. I could feel the color draining from my face. I didn't know what to say.

"Rob—Dr. Rice, has been running tests and monitoring me for the last few weeks. It's stage three right now and doesn't seem to be progressing at the pace this type of cancer usually does. I've been lucky."

“Lucky?” I said. “Lucky is getting 11 nuggets in your 10-piece. Lucky is finding a four-leaf clover. You go for jogs almost everyday and always take the stairs. You wear sunscreen even when it’s cold out. You choose salad over steak. People like you don’t get cancer. What do you mean you’ve been lucky?”

“I just mean, we’ve caught it early enough to proceed with treatment options that would otherwise not be available. That’s why we’re here. UCLA has a research facility that has some of the latest and most experimental forms of treatments for cancers like this, and how lucky are we that Rob is at the helm of it all?”

“How long have you known?”

“Two months,” she said.

“Two months!” I felt my face get hot with anger. “You’ve known for two months? Two. Whole. Months? How could you not tell me? If I hadn’t seen those papers, would you even be telling me now? Would I find out when all your hair falls out? Wait! Will all your hair fall out?”

“Derek, I wanted to—”

I wouldn’t let her answer. “I thought I was your only son. The one who was smart and observant. The one you could confide in. And what about Bet? Something like this would just kill her.”

“You absolutely cannot tell Bethany! And no, it won’t, it’ll kill me.”

Her words sent a chill to my chest. I looked at her with widening eyes. Her eyes remained glued to the road as we came to a stop at a red light. I didn’t know which emotion to feel. Death hadn’t even crossed my mind. Sure, cancer and death go hand in hand, but that was something that was only seen on TV, something that only happened to other people, something far away from the here and the now.

We both sat motionless as she waited for the light to turn green. I hadn't been close to either of my parents for a long time now, but my mother had at least made an effort to be around when she could, an effort that I'd felt more in the last few weeks than ever before. It was nice getting to see Shelley Thomas the mother, instead of the stranger who was always away at some social event. I used to joke that I really didn't need parents because I had Elise, but now, in this moment, as my mother's hand reached over and cupped the top of mine—a feeling so foreign that I almost pulled away—I realized I needed my mother more than ever.

"It's going to be okay, Der Bear," she said as the car lurched forward and turned onto our street. My mother hadn't called me that since I was a kid. It used to make me feel special—no one else was ever allowed to call me anything close to that—but it now had an empty feeling to it that somehow felt heavy.

"Does Elise know?" I asked.

"She does, but she's limited on the details, so please don't mention this to anyone, including your father, since I know he wouldn't want you knowing. I should've told you sooner—I wanted to—but you have to understand how hard this is for me. How hard this is for him."

I sat in the sound of silence as she pushed the button on the remote hooked to the visor and the garage door opened in front of us.

I wanted to hug her, or something. I needed to comfort her, but more than that, be comforted by her. I didn't know how—or what—to do, so I stared down at the pack of cigarettes in the cup holder and sighed out loud as the air grew even thicker. The car came to a stop inside the garage and she pulled her hand away.

“Remember not to say anything about this,” she said. “I’m glad you know, but it’s no one’s business but my own.”

I nodded. We walked inside the house, her in front with me trailing behind her, and neither of us said another word.

CHAPTER 6

Seeing my mom stare down into a *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book in the kitchen with her usual oversized glass of wine, I knew I had to get away. It had only been an hour since we'd gotten home from church and, as far as I knew, everyone had gone out of their way to ignore each other.

"Hey, you wanna go explore the neighborhood?" I said, pulling on a red sweatshirt.

"You talking to me?" Bet replied.

"Yeah. I just figured since Sarah couldn't come over you'd be bored."

Bet hadn't been affected much when Sarah's parents said she needed to stay home and do all the homework she hadn't done while her and Bet were hanging out together all week. Bet said she'd met another "really cool" girl at church, so I guess Sarah wasn't the new toy anymore. I think she was surprised I was asking her to go out. In the two weeks we'd been in Palo, I hadn't left the house for any reason other than absolute necessity. Even though its walls were a constant reminder that everything was different, somehow the house had become my safe place. It didn't feel like that today.

I hadn't seen much of our neighborhood beyond what we drove by on the way to school, so after Bet grabbed her glasses and a pink jacket, we left and went in the opposite direction than we were used to going. Past our house were five or six others in varying sizes, some nicely kept up, the others not so much. We talked about school and Palo in general as we walked. Bet told me she was really liking it here. I chose not to tell her I wasn't.

We had to cross a street on the edge of the subdivision. After that, the area got more and more rural, until every house was a mobile home on dirt lot or a small farm. It was funny to me how fast suburbia faded into nothingness.

After maybe a mile, we came up to a park. It wasn't a big park, but it was nicely landscaped. Being that it was pretty much in the middle of nowhere, it felt out of place. It was also hilly compared to the flat land around it, which made it seem like someone had picked up a park from somewhere else and managed to drop it by mistake in the middle of the desert.

The far side of the mostly square park backed onto a rocky dirt field that could barely be seen from the gravel road we stood on in front. This road looked to be the main access and was crossed by two smaller dirt ones on the park's other two sides. It wasn't clear where those roads led to.

"Wow! I didn't even know this was here. Did you bring me here on purpose?" Bet asked.

"Yes," I lied. I could tell by her faster pace that she was excited to go explore the park.

A few yards down the gravel road, we stepped onto the grass and stopped. She looked up at me with a playful grin on her face, and in response I stuck my tongue out. I looked left, then right, then back at her as I lunged forward. She knew this meant I was going to chase her and she took off running. I let her get about 30 feet ahead and started after her.

I was surprised by how fast she was. The last time I'd chased her like this we were at church camp about six months ago. Me and my friend Nathan had no trouble catching her, no matter how much of a head start we gave her. Today, catching my little sister was something I actually had to work for.

She's growing up, I thought, as I finally wrapped her in a bear hug and threw both of us to the ground a few feet from a brown brick building. I rolled on my back, pulled her on top of me to cushion her from hitting the ground too hard, and we both laughed.

Out of breath, she slid off beside me and we laid there in the grass. The sky had a mix of big and small clouds pasted against a silvery blue backdrop. It was a canvas that I started to get lost in. The day was cool and although a little bit dusty, the air was fresh.

Then, we both sat bolt upright. I looked at her and she looked at me, and I knew she heard it too. A man's voice was coming from the building next to us.

"Yeah. Just like that! Come on boy, don't be afraid of it."

The sounds that followed were something I knew, even though I'd never actually heard them before. They were the salacious slobbering sounds of oral sex. I'd seen it in a magazine my friend Michael found in his dad's tool shed. A blonde woman in a thong was on her knees in front of a man in a business suit. His penis was deep in her throat, but a good portion of it was still sticking out. It looked like the man was thrusting forward when they snapped the picture and, being that it was the biggest dick I'd ever seen, I wondered if her mouth could make room for any more of it. Michael seemed more interested in the woman's breasts, or "titties" as he called them, but I couldn't stop looking at the man's thick shaft and the boulder balls that were half-buried in the fabric of his dark blue slacks.

I heard another slurp and saw Bethany look over at the brick building. Part of me wanted to know more. To see more. Who was doing it? How were they doing it? What were they wearing, if anything? Were they in a stall, or out in the open? I knew that the two men were only a few feet away from me. That made me both excited and nervous beyond belief.

"What the heck is that!" Bet said.

I put my finger to my lips, gesturing for her to be quiet. The hair on the back of my neck stood up while I ninjaed to my feet. Bethany also stood up and I motioned for her to follow. We walked in slinking silence back over to the gravel road.

“What was that?” she asked, as we stepped from the unseasonably green grass back onto the gravel road.

“It was....nothing.”

“Dek, it wasn’t nothing. Were those guys having sex in that restroom?”

Hearing her say the words out loud made me blush. I nodded and looked away.

“Ew!” Bet’s repulsed reaction almost offended me at first, as she took off running expecting me to chase after her. I, too, thought the idea of a park restroom—with all its refuse and lingering aromas—seemed like a nauseating place to do it, but there was something about her response that pointed at me. My head reeled as I ran after her. I didn’t catch her until we made it to the crossing just before our subdivision.

“You’re getting slower,” she laughed, as I again noticed the last couple of not-so-well-cared-for houses.

“No. You’re getting faster.” I didn’t tell her that I hadn’t caught up to her on purpose because I was afraid she’d have more questions about the restroom thing. I also had a lot of questions.

As we pushed through the front door, I knew I needed to go up to my room and sort things out alone. That’s when I saw the absence of glasses on Bethany’s face. “Bet, did you leave your glasses at the park?”

A look of fear spread into her unframed eyes and I knew I had to go back.

When I got back to where the road met the grass of the park, I stopped. I was there on a mission to get Bet’s glasses, but there was something about crossing that line that, to me, meant I was giving in to something. Once, motivated by the same morbid curiosity I felt now, I found myself in a M4M online chat room. There, I’d heard about truck stops and other hot spots where

men met for casual sexual encounters, but I clicked out after only a minute. I never thought about them existing in real life, let alone that there'd be one so close to where I lived. Part of me thought that maybe I'd imagined it—that the sounds were something else—but then, Bet had heard them too.

I stared into the park from outside it. I could just barely make out the roof of the restroom building over the top of the first hill. I looked down at the spot where Bethany had broke into a full sprint less than an hour before and stepped forward. I exhaled, but it was the opposite of a sigh of relief. I was scared. Not the kind of scared you feel when you watch some horror flick in the middle of the night. Not the kind of scared you feel when a car runs a red light missing you by mere inches. This was the kind of scared that I imagined you'd feel when the skydiving instructor tells you it's time to jump. It's a fear mixed with excitement. Only, in this case, it was also fused with forbiddenness that made me feel both vulnerable and invincible at the same time.

I scanned the ground in the immediate area as I retraced our steps. Their purple color made the glasses easy to find—right next to the restroom building. I leaned down to pick them up, then inched my way to the edge of the building so I was out of sight from the other side but could still see anyone who walked in.

One car was parked in the nearby dirt clearing, but there seemed to be no one else around. I turned to walk away when I almost ran right into someone who was walking up behind me. I jumped back and fell against the restroom's brick exterior, somehow managing to keep a hold of the glasses.

“Oh, uh...hi Derek. I thought that was you.”

I looked down and saw a pair of white Etnie shoes. What in the world! Standing in front of me was Jorge.

“Hey, Jorge.” I choked out. I tried not to look suspicious. “What are you doing here?”

“I live right over there.” He pointed across the street to a single-wide mobile home on an overgrown lot. “This is where I come when I can’t stand being in my dump of a house. What are you doing here?”

I felt a rush of fear as I searched in my brain for an excuse. The glasses. Right. We were here innocently, then Bet left her glasses. I cringed as I stammered out, “My glasses left her sister here.”

Jorge’s face scrunched up. “Who did what?”

“Err, I mean, my sister, Bethany—her name is Bethany—left her glasses when we were here hanging out earlier. We live around here too.”

“I guess we’re neighbors then.”

“Well, sorta. My house is back there in the Chino Heights subdivision, but yeah, we’re pretty close.”

“Chino Heights. Looks like yours is better than mine. Go figure. This area is called Nueva. I think it used to be its own town at one point but Palo came in and took over. God knows why.”

“It looks like it’s a bunch of farms and stuff.”

“Not really. A few people around here still farm, but it doesn’t make money like it used to. It’s mostly just poor people and crackheads now.”

“Right.” I wondered which of the two categories his family fell into.

“I sometimes come over here to, uh,” he looked at the restroom, “relieve some stress. I saw you standing here and thought no way it could be you, but low and behold.”

“This is my first time here. We found it by accident earlier. This park is so nice compared to everything else around here—well, I mean, it’s so green and lush compared to the area around it.”

“Yeah, it’s maybe the nicest thing we have in Nueva. There’s an area just on the other side of this building that has picnic tables and grills and such. I come here to do homework when I actually feel like doing it.”

I laughed. “It seems busy for being out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“Mhm. There’s almost never any supervision over here.”

“Supervision?”

“Yeah, man. No one wants to come over here, even the po po. They only come if they’re called.” He looked at the restroom building again and I thought I saw him adjust his basketball shorts.

I nodded. I knew what he meant, or at least I thought I did, but I didn’t know how to ask. I thought he might have been on his way to the restroom—or maybe he’d just come from it—but I didn’t want to be wrong.

He stepped towards me like he was going to put his arm on my shoulder or something, but stopped just short of actually touching me. He was now inches from me and I could feel the heat of his body. I couldn’t tell what he wanted from me.

“I guess I’ll, uh, see you around, Jorge.” I stepped back.

“Oh, alright then.” He seemed surprised, but he didn’t say anything else. He just turned, walked across the street, and pushed through his front gate. I looked back at the parking area and two more cars had pulled up. Afraid that Jorge might be watching me, I turned around and headed back to Chino Heights.

CHAPTER 7

Sunday night I stood in the shower. I let the warm water hit the back of my neck as I thought about the park. Well, more specifically, about Jorge at the park. Did what Bet and I heard happen there often? Is that why Jorge was there? And his house—his rundown little trailer—being right there across from it all. Of all people, Jorge. Our interaction also felt different. Cordial. I understood the need to appear a certain way in public, but why was Jorge so ugly to me that day at the lockers? The make-sure-the-new-kid-knows-his-place thing is so childish and played out. Then I thought about the basketball shorts and the heat of his body. I reached down and grabbed my penis. It was already hardening. The steam of the shower added to the sensation as I gave it a few quick pulls. That's all it took and I stepped back to keep from getting any of the shooting white liquid on me.

I splashed water to make sure the mess I'd just made would go down the tub drain. Then, I turned off the shower and grabbed my red and blue striped towel that hung across the top of the curtain rod. As I dried my body, I was still a little out of breath. I felt a soreness—a tenseness—like I'd just worked out. I tossed the towel over the top of the curtain rod and pulled on some Hollister underwear.

Dinner earlier had been awkward, but unlike the other night everyone kept it together. Mom, Bethany, Elise, and even my father carried on like nothing was out of place, similar to the pretty painted portrait you'd see any night of the week—unless I was having an episode. On the inside, I was. I sat there trapped in my thoughts. I knew my mother was trying to keep me from knowing how serious her cancer was. The fact that we'd moved to a city hundreds of miles away and downsized our entire life because of it made that all too clear. But something about how they'd gone about everything didn't sit right with me. I caught her eyes a few times during the

meal, but we both looked away. We were nowhere near attempting to sort through any of it. Not that we ever talked about serious things anyway. At least Bethany only brought up going to the park—not all the intimate details—when talking about the adventures of her day. That would’ve been way more than I could handle.

With steam coating every surface in the humid bathroom, I put on a plain white t-shirt and walked out into the hall. Even though it was still pretty early, the house was dark and quiet. I had wanted someone to ask what was wrong when I sat there in my usual chair across from Bethany earlier. I’d hoped it would strike up a conversation that would maybe clear the air on everything, but I knew that since my mother didn’t want all the details out in the open, and that Elise was probably on thin ice with my parents for walking out of church, it would never happen. I even decided to leave before dessert, thinking skipping my favorite part of the meal would make some kind of statement. Not a single word from anyone.

But now, I was glad there weren’t any signs of life in the house because I didn’t want to be noticed. I made sure that the door to my room was closed before turning on the light. I wanted to hide from everyone—from everything.

“I’ve been lucky.” My mother’s words kept playing over and over in my head like a CD with a scratch on it. A knock on my bedroom door jolted me from my thoughts.

“What?” I said.

“Hey, Derek, it’s Elise. Can I come in?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

She opened the door and stepped inside. Her nightgown, the same maroon and yellow flower one she’d worn for as long as I could remember, matched the scent of her rose perfume. Something about it made me feel safe.

“I know today was hard,” she said. Elise always knew how to make it seem like everything would be okay, but thinking about all that was happening, I didn’t know how she’d be able to do that today. She sat on the edge of my bed and rested her hand on my leg.

I looked down at her but didn’t answer.

“I want you to know the things Pastor Paul said were wrong.”

“Yeah? Which things exactly?”

“Everything,” she said.

“Everyone seemed to think the whole service was some sort of fucking comedy hour.” I looked for a reaction to my language, but her face retained its soft expression. “I don’t know how all those people—especially mom and dad—could sit there and laugh like that.”

She slid up next to me. “Your parents, as you know, aren’t the most open-minded people. I get the idea that your mom sees gays as more of an accessory than as actual people, and who knows what your dad thinks.”

“I’d guess he probably doesn’t like the idea, but I never expected either of them to buy into hate like that.”

“I don’t think it was that so much as they were just going along with it to show face. You know how they are.”

“Don’t you dare make excuses for them,” I said.

She nodded.

“I see you came back in after the service. What happened after I left with Ryan?”

“Nothing, really. Your mother told me not ever embarrass her like that again. I don’t even think they know why I stood up like that.”

“Why did you?”

“I didn’t like what was being said. I’d originally planned to step away quietly, but when I stood up I couldn’t help but stare at him in anger. Before I knew it, everyone had noticed.”

“Yeah. I almost pulled you back down. Did my father tell you anything?”

“Not at the church, but in the car on the way home he said I have to maintain a level of professionalism because I represent the family. Blah blah blah. I didn’t want to argue—there’s no point with a brick wall—so I kept quiet.”

“Did Paul say anything?”

“He acted like nothing had happened at first, but I guess he could tell I was still angry. He said something like ‘Quite a statement you made there. Do you always oppose the word of God?’”

“He said that?”

“He did. Not that I’m surprised. If fire could shoot from a person’s eyes, there’d have been a big red truck at church today. I was careful with my words, but I told him the God I knew wasn’t a bigot. That he didn’t hate for sport. That my God would never send a message like the one *he*—a mere man—was sending there today.”

I sat up. “And then?”

“He told me that *my* God doesn’t exist. That *his* God was the only God, and that his word was *the* word.”

“And what did my parents say to that?”

“Nothing. You know they’d never do anything to cause a scene.”

“Yeah. I wish I’d been there to see the look on their faces, at least.”

“I didn’t get to either. I left before it went any further. I was on the losing side, and I would’ve lost it if Paul had any other jackass comments to make.”

“Your God doesn’t exist—who says that?”

We both laughed.

“When we got back home they did try to talk to me about it,” she said. “I told them there was nothing to discuss. Of course they were expecting an apology, but I refused.”

“Wow! Have you ever stood up to them like that before?”

“Not really. But I told myself that if I was forced to move across the country with a decrease in pay, I was going to have more of a voice. For years, I’ve just let things go because I was afraid they’d toss me out. I know now that they need me too much. There’s power in that.”

Before the move, Elise and I talked often. She’d always give me the rundown of what was going on with everything, and we’d both make fun of the inner drama of our somewhat scripted lives, but this was different. She didn’t open up to me like this, and more than that, no one defied my parents. No one.

She moved closer to me. “Plus, I could tell you were uncomfortable by everything. I almost wish you would’ve walked out with me.”

“Yeah, ‘cause that would’ve made my parents real happy.”

She nodded.

“You could tell?” I said. “I guess I wasn’t hiding as well as I thought. Was it that obvious?”

“Yes. I’d say so. It was more than how you looked. I felt what you were feeling.”

We laid there and I stared at the ceiling. “That’s all I ever try to do. Hide. You’d think I’d be better at it.”

She studied my face. “Hide from what?”

“From everything. Everyone. I wear the Thomas name everywhere I go and all I ever do is disappoint.”

“Disappoint who?”

“My parents. You. Everyone.” Tears welled up in my eyes, so I turned away from her. I could hear myself screaming inside. Finally, as if she could hear it too, she grabbed me by my shoulders and pulled me into a hug. I cried out loud as she held me.

“You could never disappoint me,” she said, hugging me tighter. “No matter what mistakes you make, no matter who you decide to be, I can see your heart.”

I pulled away and thought for a moment. “I’m gay,” I said. The words echoed off the walls of my room and throughout my mind, but it was a voice I didn’t recognize. An inner voice that I’d never let speak before. My stomach tied itself into a tight knot. A noose, I thought.

“I know.” She smiled wide. “I’ve always known.”

“Always?”

“Well, I guess not always, but for a long time now. I don’t know how I knew, or when I knew. I just looked at you one day and I knew you were someone special.”

“Special...as in, special needs?”

“No. Special as in a gift to the world. Some cultures revere people like you. You have the structured mind and physical strength of a man, but the kind-heartedness and nurturing spirit of a woman. You’re mechanical, but also creative. You light up every room you walk into.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Is this why you’ve been so on edge lately?”

I took a few shallow breaths. “It wasn’t until I got here that I even thought about it. I don’t even know for sure if I am *that*. And with this big move, and now with mom being sick—”

I remembered that I wasn't supposed to tell her that I knew about my mother's cancer. "I just feel like I'm losing control of everything."

She pulled me into another hug. This time it was her turn to cry.

"It's all going to work itself out. Your mom—all of it." She caressed my back. "And being gay is not something to be ashamed of. Being gay is a gift."

A gift? I didn't know what she meant. My whole life it was a first-class ticket to Hell. It had been preached into me over and over again that those kinds of feelings could not be entertained, let alone tolerated. At my best, I knew it was something I'd have to suppress. At my worst, I hated myself for it. A gift? No, it was more like a curse.

CHAPTER 8

I woke up Monday morning with mixed feelings. My big reveal to Elise made me feel relieved, but not being able to hide anymore made me feel anxious. I also had the same kind of feeling towards my mother. My initial reaction was anger, then fear, then sadness. Now, I just felt weird about the whole thing. If they didn't want me to know—to the point of lying and keeping it all some big secret—why should I even care about it? Part of me knew I was probably still processing everything, but it was easier for me to just go numb to it.

I actually *wanted* to go to school because at least it would put me away from everything. As I got ready and went out to Elise's car, I told myself I was going to have a good day. I don't know where the optimism came from, but I needed to reject negativity.

Dante greeted us at the Lincoln as we were dropping Bethany off at PVS. He complimented her Blue's Clues backpack, and to no surprise at all to me, they hit it off right away.

"She looks a lot like you," he said as he held the door for her to get out of the back seat.

"Yeah, that's what everyone says. I don't really see it, but I guess it's easy to tell we're related, huh?"

"She's cuter than you are," he flashed Bethany his daffy grin.

"You used to be cute like me, Dek. You're too old now to be cute."

"Hey...I'm not old," I said.

"You are definitely not old." Elise laughed. "And you've only gone from cute to handsome. Isn't he handsome, Dante?"

Dante got in and buckled himself into the seat where Bethany had just been. Elise's question and tone had made me nervous. What if she thought Dante was more than just a friend?

As Bethany walked away, I could see Magenta the dog fading from view on her backpack, and I wondered if my face was a shade of that same reddish color. I gave Elise a be-careful-what-you-say-right-now look as she pulled out of the parking lot, but it wasn't needed because Dante changed the subject to marching band and I figured that anything Elise had implied had gone over his head. Or maybe I was just overthinking it.

When we got to PHS, Dante walked with me across the quad and into the front door of the cafeteria. As we approached the lineless register, a young lunch lady with thin, smooth lips that curled up into an unforced smile, took my ID card and scanned it with a price gun. Even though she wasn't at the register every time I went, I'd seen her a few times for breakfast already. As early in the morning as it was, she always seemed to be in a good mood. After a second, the word "Standard" displayed on the small screen in front of her.

"That'll be 75 cents," she said.

I gave her a dollar. She pushed a couple of buttons and the drawer under the counter popped open with a "cha-ching" sound. She handed me a quarter and closed the drawer. Dante gave her his ID card and she repeated the scanning process. This time the word "Reduced" came up on the screen.

"Yours will be 25 cents," she said.

"Wait. Are you sure?" he asked. I could tell he was getting flustered.

"Yes. Are you usually free?"

"Yeah. My ma fills out the packet for free lunch every year. It's been a few days since I've eaten for breakfast, but my lunch on Friday was free like normal."

“Oh, no. I’m sorry. You’re gonna have to have your mother call the school. It seems they’ve changed you from free to reduced. There’s no way for me to check why, only the main office would know.”

“Oh, alright then.” His voice was low as he turned to walk away.

“Hey, I got you.” I handed the quarter back to the lady. Dante looked embarrassed.

“Thank you,” he said. “You’ve really helped me a lot.”

“It’s just a quarter,” I said.

“And also a ride.”

“It’s really no big deal.”

When we reached the counter I saw that there was a choice between rectangular pizza slices and peanut butter and jelly sandwiched between two graham crackers. Both Dante and I choose the pizza. There were also cups of mystery fruit and bladders of milk. I’d never seen these weird plastic bags of milk until I got to Palo. In Texas, milk was served in cartons. I decided against both the fruit and the milk sack.

“You don’t like boobs?” Dante said.

“Um...what?”

“The bags of milk. We call those boobs.”

I laughed. “I do like milk, but I don’t know if I like it in bags like that. Does it taste the same?”

“Yeah, pretty much. In elementary school we had paper cartons, but I think California switched to these to save trees or something,” he said. “They taste alright. I usually toss the straw because it’s fun to just bite the corner off and suck on them. That's why we call them boobs.”

Dante grabbed his pizza with a paper towel and put a regular milk bag in his pocket, leaving the tray on the counter. I grabbed a chocolate one and started walking to a table.

“Let’s take it to go. We can eat in the band room,” he said.

“The band room?”

“Yeah. Mr. Zepeda always lets the band peeps hang in there.”

“But I’m just in beginning band. I don’t even think he really knows who I am.”

“Sure, he does. You have a class with him. But, anyway, it’s okay either way since you’ll be with me.”

I stacked my tray on top of his. We walked out the side door that connected to the quad and headed around to the corridor that led to the band room. The large, standalone building had a fresh section of tan paint where some graffiti had been on my first day. It stood out from the rest of the more faded tan, and the paint in the dark green accent area near the top was cracking and peeling. This was how most of Palo High’s buildings looked, except for the Natural Sciences building in front, which I could tell was newer than the rest of the school.

When we got close, I saw a pair of white Etnie shoes and a face I recognized. It was Jorge.

“Is Jorge in band?” I asked.

“Yeah, man, he’s really good. He’s the section leader for the trumpets. During band camp over the summer he beat out all the sophomores and juniors for it. Not many freshmen ever do that.”

“Oh,” I said. “That’s great.”

Just freaking great. I already have an enemy in marching band and I’m not even in it yet.

“Oh, and not to brag or anything, but yours truly just beat out this other sophomore, Eddie, to be section leader for the clarinets next semester,” Dante said.

“That’s awesome! Congrats.”

“Thank you, thank you.” Dante bowed.

As we approached, I could feel Jorge’s eyes glued to me. Dante walked up first and opened the band room door.

“Where do you think you’re going, new kid?” Jorge said, blocking the doorway with his arm. “Band geeks only.”

I looked at Dante, who looked at Jorge. “Shut up, Jorge! He’s in beginner band. Plus, you see he’s with me.”

“Yeah? What is he your boyfriend now?” Jorge said, pulling his arm away and making a kissing gesture at me.

I tried to act unfazed, but Jorge was perplexing. It was only for a few minutes, but he was so much less confrontational at the park—almost normal—but here he was, back to being a jerk. I also couldn’t tell if Jorge really thought I was gay, or if that was just his go-to insult.

Dante rolled his eyes.

As the door closed behind us, I thought about the first time I stepped into this large multi-tiered room. Until now, I’d never stopped to notice how nicely equipped the ensemble was. It impressed me. During beginning band, since there were only 22 of us, we’d stick to just the middle area of the first two rows of seats. I imagined what the room must look like with all four rows filled to their full extent with people and instruments. I wondered how many players PHS’s main band had.

Dante led me across the front of the room. A few groups, totalling about twenty people or so, were talking and laughing in various areas. We ended up at the far end where three kids were already sitting.

“Morning, gents, this here is Derek. Derek, this is Eddie, Scott and Jamal.”

“Hi,” I said. I could feel my shyness kicking in and I tried not to show how nervous I was.

“Eddie is a clarinet player like me, Scott plays sax, and Jamal is a euphonium player, but we’ve adopted him as an honorary woodwind,” Dante said.

“Derek also plays sax, Scott,” Dante continued. “He has third period with Mr. Z.”

“Oh, beginning band. What kind of sax are you learning to play?” Scott asked.

“Alto,” I told him.

“Sweet! That’s what I play too. Lots of great sax players at this school and they all call me Scottrick. You can call me that too if you want.”

Scottrick was blond and about average height. His nose was big for his face, but I considered him good-looking. He had a likeable quality that I thought was due, in part, to him being soft spoken, but also because he let me in on his nickname. He was wearing a pair of light-blue, straight-cut jeans and a band t-shirt that said “Let Me Play You a Love Note,” on it.

Jamal removed his green, cloth, satchel-style bag from one of the nearby chairs and gestured for me to sit down. He had a similar appearance to Dante, but was taller, darker, and quite a bit thicker. Then again, everyone was thicker than Dante. Jamal’s face and hands contrasted with the white “PHS 2004” sweatshirt he was wearing. His shiny, gray, smooth-textured pants were baggy on him, but complemented a fresh pair of white Nike shoes.

“Ashley broke up with Geoff, did you guys hear about all that mess?” Eddie said.

“Oh yeah, Geoff told me in history yesterday,” Scottrick replied.

“Really? I didn’t know you had history with him,” Dante said.

“Yeah, we have world history together, sixth period.”

“Do you still have a thing for Ashley?” Eddie said. He jabbed Scottrick with his elbow and looked at me like he’d just let me in on a big secret.

“Yeah, but I’ll wait ‘til the dust settles with this Geoff thing to make my move,” Scottrick grinned.

“I think Ashley likes Jorge,” Jamal said. “She was really into him when he beat the others for section leader last summer.”

“Too bad Jorge doesn’t like anyone but Jorge,” Dante said.

“Yeah, that dude was a legend at the beginning of the year,” Jamal said. “He acts like such a tool now.”

“Wait. Jorge made section leader during band camp *before* school even started?” I asked.

“Yeah. Imagine starting school as a freshman, and on day one being in charge of an entire section,” Jamal said.

“I wouldn’t want the responsibility,” Scottrick chimed in. “Think of the pressure.”

“Yeah,” Dante said, “I’m stressed about next semester and I’ve been through two marching seasons already. I’m really excited for next season, though. Mr. Z. is looking into some cool field show possibilities.”

“I really liked our Planets theme this season, but as long as it’s not a random bunch of pep tunes like last year, I’ll be happy with whatever,” Scottrick said.

“Oh, I liked the pep tunes,” Eddie said.

“You would,” Dante said.

“Word is they might make Geoff assistant drum major,” Jamal reported.

“For reals? Do you think him and Ash can work together like that after the breakup?”

Scottrick asked.

“I’m sure it’ll blow over quick, but I don’t think we can afford to lose Geoff for drum major. He’s our best tromboner,” Eddie said.

I chuckled at the word “tromboner.” It had been awhile since I’d hung out in a group like this and it reminded me of the band room banter back in Fort Worth.

I stood up as the last part of the bell strained through an ancient speaker on the wall. As I was leaving, Jorge walked into the room. I avoided eye contact at all costs. To my surprise, Jorge didn’t say anything, but his shoulder brushed mine as we both pushed through the narrow entry that was now filling up with students. Even with the tight space, I was pretty sure this contact was on purpose. An electric feeling that both excited me and made me cringe with uncertainty rushed over me.

I made my way outside and passed a small outdoor eating area with several scattered concrete tables. Kids were rushing in all directions, but I noticed a guy and a girl kissing at one of the tables, paying no attention to what was going on around them. A security guard yelled over to them to “break it up and head to class.” I wondered if I’d ever be told something like that.

After passing a restroom building, the cracked concrete pathway opened into a wide blacktop. Some students were already lined up in the basketball courts wearing gray shorts and a green PHS physical education t-shirt. One girl was wearing a shirt two sizes too big that she’d cut and tied so it would look more stylish. I was pretty sure that was against the dress code. I sighed when I thought about how I’d be standing out here later, in the same drab shorts and puke-colored t-shirt, for my own P. E. class.

I got to the portable classroom where my health class was held. The two rows of rectangular buildings were tucked away in the back of the school next to a soccer field. These buildings were trailers that they'd put a few extra decorative mouldings on, in a failed attempt to make them look nicer and more permanent than they were. I'd never seen classrooms like this before.

A lot of the students made fun of Ms. Clifford, my health teacher, because she made it a point on the first day of class to tell everyone she was a lesbian—the same rehearsed introduction I'd received from her last week—but I thought she seemed nice enough.

"It's better for you all to get confirmation from me than to have rumors being spread," she said after telling me that we would be discussing everything from suicide and sexually transmitted diseases, to nutrition and the development of the human body. That last part gave her the perfect segway into her big coming out spiel. Ms. Clifford was one of the first openly gay people I'd ever met. I wasn't sure how to feel about how open she was about it, but part of me envied her. I don't know what I was expecting, but after getting to know her for over a week now, I was surprised by how normal she seemed.

"The Lord doesn't need us to understand everything," I could hear the voice of Pastor Armstrong in the back of my head. "He just needs us to have faith in His almighty and all-powerful Word." I imagined being back in Fort Worth, watching the old pastor hold up a large, black, original King James version Bible above his oversized pulpit.

Ms. Clifford's sudden change in inflection snapped me from my daydream. "This is what a penis looks like with gonorrhea," she said, clicking past an intro slide about STDs to the first one of many on the list of diseases.

Some people gasped at such a bold and private picture, while others laughed. A couple of boys pointed and started making penis jokes.

“You guys are pigs,” a girl near me said. She was clearly grossed out by the milky discharge coming from the tip of the shriveled penis. As the slides progressed into other, much nastier STDs, I couldn’t help but feel the same way. We hadn’t done the STD unit in my health class back home, but I couldn’t imagine it was anywhere near as graphic as this one. Was this even allowed?

A slide for HIV came up. A rail-thin, broken down young man with purple spots all over his face and neck stared down at me. He couldn’t have been more than a few years older than me, but it looked like he was on the brink of death.

“That’s what’s gonna happen to Farkle,” a boy named Armando said, pointing at a kid in the front row.

James Farkle was a soulful and flamboyant member of Palo’s hip-hop dance team Fluorescent Neon Lights, or just FNL for short. Jamie, as he called himself, was always sporting some sort of FNL apparel—like the black polo with the glittery purple letters he had on now—but other than the few days I’d seen him in this one class, I didn’t really know him. He sank down into his chair and brought his hands up to cover his face.

“Is Farkle gonna cry?” Armando said.

“No, I’m—” Jamie’s voice cracked. His curly, jet black hair got lower in my field of view. I felt bad for him.

“Jamie is not going to get Kaposi Sarcoma, Armando!” Ms. Clifford had an angry look on her face. “The man in this image contracted the HIV virus during a time when there was no treatment for it and came to have this rare cancer because of a weakened immune system.”

Jamie pulled himself back up.

“Why are we even talking about this? AIDS is only for gay people anyway,” Armando said.

“You just bought yourself detention. I’ll see you after class for your write up,” Ms. Clifford said.

I thought I saw her mouth something that resembled the words, “for fucks sake,” but I couldn’t be sure.

“Now,” she continued, “let’s discuss the differences between being HIV-positive and having full blown AIDS, and go over the fact, Armando, that HIV is a virus that affects all of us.”

The lesson continued, but I kept thinking about how much the man from the slideshow reminded me of the leper colony I’d seen in a Bible study series I was forced to watch as a kid. Like the nightmares I had then, I couldn’t get his image out of my head.

I left the room and headed to my Algebra class that was located in the same cluster of buildings. Then, I made my way back across the blacktop to the main part of campus. Dante came out from a side door of the gym and I let out a sort of yelping sound as he grabbed me from behind with a loud “Rawr!”

“Oh! Hey, Dante, you scared the hell out of me. Did you just come from P. E. or something?”

“No. Those of us who do marching band don’t have to do P. E. I just finished with history.

“Oh, I’m on my way to the band room for third period with Mr. Z..”

“I’m going there too. You can almost always bet to find me there at every break. Hell, Mr. Z. even lets me ditch classes sometimes.”

“He does? Wow. That’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah, Mr. Z. is about as chill as they get.”

I would’ve normally waited outside until the start of class, but Dante again brought me into the band room with him. The large metal door, with small amounts of rust showing between patches of chipped green paint, closed behind us with its usual clunky loudness. Inside, Dante led me to the door of the band director’s office where, through a long, vertical window, I could see a group of students inside. The only people I recognized were Jamal and Mr. Zepeda, and when I came in behind Dante, the room went quiet.

“Hey there, Derek,” Jamal said after a moment.

“Hi, Jamal...and hello everyone, I’m Derek.”

“I’m Ashley,” a tiny red-headed girl with green eyes and a full face of freckles said.

“Ashley is our drum major,” Mr. Zepeda said.

I realized that every other person in the room was probably also in some sort of band leadership role. As just a baby member of the beginning band, I felt out of place.

“Don’t be nervous, Derek, everyone in here is chill,” Dante said.

“Yeah, and if anyone gives you any trouble at all, you just let me know,” Ashley grinned.

Mr. Zepeda called Ashley over to his computer to look at some music warm-ups and band exercises they’d been working on in a program called *Finale*.

Recess ended and I followed Dante out of the office. He gave me a see-you-later nod as he left back through the main door. I went to the back of the room and spun the dial on the lock that was hanging from a tab on the green door of my instrument locker. On the first day of class,

since all the good lockers were already taken, I ended up with one in the bottom corner behind the drum set. I took out the case of my rented instrument. A cloth case that was newer and did not match the Conn alto saxophone that it housed. Back home I'd borrowed a much better alto from a family friend with the intention of eventually buying my own, but I couldn't take the borrowed one with me to California, and since I wasn't sure if I'd like the band enough here in Palo to stay in it, my parents decided we'd rent a cheap one from the school. Not that they wanted me to do band anyway.

"Learning on a lower quality instrument is better," Elise had told me when I brought home the heavily used, student-grade saxophone that was in desperate need of some new pads—among other things.

At the time I saw the sad excuse of a saxophone as the perfect representation of my life: it looked nice from a distance, but up close it was scratched, only barely functional, and in need of a good tune up. Today, as I lifted it to attach the neck and mouthpiece, I thought it almost looked like an old piece of jewelry.

I took my seat in the front row between a clarinet player named Lydia and a bassoon player named Mark, and started warming up. As I went through the B-flat scale, I realized that the old Conn alto saxophone was playing smoother than ever before, and I really started to get into a groove.

"Alright, quiet down," Mr. Zepeda said. "I have another exercise for you."

Really, another exercise? What about if we were to get a real piece to play? I found the lack of actual music frustrating, but when Mr. Z. slid the sheet onto my stand, I noticed this exercise was more than just scales. It started out with the typical whole notes, followed by half notes, followed by quarter notes, eighth notes, arpeggios, and all that, but this piece also had

melodies, harmonies, and running phrases that got more difficult and more exciting as it went along. There was a tempo change at about the halfway point, and the second section had some of the most complicated strings of notes I'd ever been expected to play. While this was still just a warm-up, I was excited that this one at least had some movement to it.

"This is a little exercise that our drum major helped me put together for the main band. Being that they are our honors level ensemble, I'm expecting you guys will have a hard time with this. That said, we're gonna take it full-speed as a site-reading exercise, then we can slow it down and break it apart." Mr. Zepeda turned to the first page and held up his white baton, counting us in by tapping it in tempo on the music stand in front of him. On the next downbeat, the eclectic mix of instruments began to play. It was a solid, full sound considering the small size of the group, and while the piece started off slow, there were some nice contrasting tones happening across the different instruments. The note combinations increased in speed and complexity, and the sound began to thin out as some players were no longer able to keep up. I flipped the page as the tempo changed and we moved into the second half. I felt a rush of energy and somehow managed to hit every single note on the page. Two measures ahead I saw a string of sixteenth notes. Other than scales, I'd never played a full run of notes like that before. I heard the sound of the instruments around me stopping one after another, but I moved through the phrase without any issues. Suddenly, no one else was playing. All that could be heard was the sound of that old Conn alto, belting out notes like it was being played by a much more experienced player. I looked up and saw that everyone was looking at me. Mr. Zepeda continued conducting, nodding that he didn't want me to stop. The final bar of Ashley's exercise came to an end with an obligatory formata, and Mr. Zepeda cut that final note off by waving the baton.

The room fell silent.

“Well, that was something,” Mr. Zepeda said.

I fidgeted in my chair and turned the sheet back over to the front page. Everyone was still looking at me.

“Alright,” Mr. Zepeda’s voice again broke the silence, “Let’s take it back to measure nine. I just want to hear flutes, clarinets, and also trumpets. We’ll take it about half speed to start.”

The bell rang and everyone started packing up their instruments to leave.

“Derek, when you’re finished putting everything away, can you meet me in my office, please?” Mr. Zepeda said. He then picked up the baton and score from the conductor’s stand.

“Uh...sure,” I said, “but I do have to go change for P. E.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll write you a pass.”

I cleaned the pieces of instrument, set the tired alto into its nylon case, and put it back in the locker. Mr. Z. had never kept me after class before, so I was nervous as I walked into his office.

“Why are you in this class?” he asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“Why are you in this class?” he repeated.

I thought for a second, searching for what I thought he wanted to hear. “To learn an instrument. Because I like music. Because I’ve always really wanted to—”

“No. Why are you in *this* class?”

“I only played a few months in beginning band back home. I didn’t do music in middle school or anything. When I registered for classes they put me here to continue where I left off.”

“Derek, I don’t know how the program was structured over there, but you have way too much to offer to be doing scales and warm-ups all day.”

“Beginning band over there was pretty much the same. We did play some real songs for the Christmas concert, but nothing like I just played.”

“I gave this piece to the class today on purpose. I was testing you,” he said.

“Testing *me*?”

“Yes. I’ve noticed since you came in last week that you’re a real stand-out player. Today I decided to see what you’re made of. Derek, I’d like to move you up to the regular band. Is that something you’d be interested in?”

“Yes,” I thought for a moment, “but I don’t think they’ll let me because of—.”

“Let me take care of that. What class do you have first period?”

“I have health with Ms. Clifford,” I said.

“Oh, perfect. I’m pretty sure Colleen has a third period freshman health class. It should be an easy swap. Stop by after school and I’ll have a printout of your new schedule—first period band with me, and third period health with Ms. Clifford.”

“Uh, alright then.”

“Oh, and one more thing. Do you mind switching to tenor sax?”

“I’m not sure I’d know how to play it.”

“All the fingerings are the same on tenor, it’s just bigger. You easily have the wind power to play it. We only have one tenor in the symphonic winds, and since we’re losing our top trombone player to an assistant drum major position, we could really use more mids.”

“Sure, that’ll be fine.”

“Great.” Mr. Zepeda pulled out a pad of paper and scribbled on it. I then left, pass in hand, and went to the gym.

I was in such a hurry to get to class that what had just happened didn’t start to sink in until after P.E. When I came back in range of the music building, I saw Dante under the overhang, waiting by the door. I also saw Jorge. My mind was reeling as I tried to sort through everything that had happened in the last few days. My life just continued to change and evolve with each passing moment, and I was trying not to be overwhelmed by it.

“Derek!” Dante yelled as he saw me walk up. He met me a few feet in front of the door.

“Hey. What’s up?”

“I just found out the crazy news.”

“Oh? How do you know already?”

“If you’re gonna survive in band, you have to know that word spreads fast.”

“And what do you think about it?”

“I think it’s...great! Concert season isn’t as much fun as marching season, but I’m excited. Plus, now we’ll get to chill after school everyday.”

Everyday? Rehearsals, concerts, events. I hadn’t had a chance to think about how much busier I’d be.

“What did you do, spend some time on your knees?” Jorge said, walking over to us.

“Jorge, why is everything a gay joke with you? Derek is obviously a good sax player, nothing else,” Dante said.

“Yeah, he’s good at blowing something,” Jorge laughed.

“I seriously doubt Mr. Z. would be interested in favors like that. God, you’re annoying sometimes.”

“I second that,” I said.

“Oh, really? All of a sudden you have a voice now, new kid? You better watch your back.”

“Aren’t you doing that enough for him?” Dante said.

“Fuck that. I ain’t no fairy like Derek here.”

“Derek isn’t gay either. Find a better hobby.”

I gave Jorge an intense look as his eyes met mine. He made a throat-cutting gesture with his hand, then bit his lower lip. I felt a rush of energy as our usual tension filled the air. There was a mystery to Jorge that fascinated me, and we lingered for a moment. I wondered if Dante could feel the tension too.

“Come on Derek, let’s go tell everyone you’re in honors now, even though they’re probably already in there talking about it.” Dante pushed through Jorge.

As I walked past him, I felt Jorge’s hand brush my arm. I knew this wasn’t an accident, and my reaction was to push back against his hand. I felt his fingertips slide down my forearm before he pulled his hand away. I exhaled and ran my hand across the spot where his had just been.

When we walked in, I felt like a celebrity.

“Hi bro, I’m Geoff,” a lanky guy, whose pale skin contrasted the dark mop of hair on his head, said.

“Hello there, I’m—”

“Derek. Yes, I know. I’ll be working with you a lot come marching season. I’m your assistant drum major.”

Nice to meet you, Geoff,” I said.

“For sure, bro.”

“Derek! I hear you’ll be joining us in the big boy band,” Scott called across in a much louder voice than the soft-spoken one I’d heard from him earlier. I was puzzled by how excited everyone seemed to be about this. About me.

“Oh my, is that him? He’s cute,” a short, dark-haired girl I’d never seen before said to Scott. Even though they were only a few feet away, I got the sense she didn’t think I could hear her. Or maybe she knew I could and didn’t care.

“Yeah, man,” I said to Scott. “Mr. Z. is switching me over to tenor, though.”

“Oooh, he’s gonna play tenor. Tenor is way sexier than alto,” the girl said. Scott flashed her a look that I couldn’t make out, then looked back at me.

“That’s cool. We have too many altos anyway,” Scott said.

“Yeah, hopefully it’s not too much harder to play.”

Scott looked like he was about to answer, but a large, round, Hispanic, but somehow Kevin James looking kid, who was sitting behind him and the unknown girl, cut in instead.

“Tenor isn’t that hard to play. I switched over to tenor from alto two years ago and have never looked back. I also sometimes play bari. I’m Herman, the section leader for the saxophones. That makes me your new boss.”

I laughed because the “new boss” comment seemed like a joke. No one else reacted to it.

“Uhm...I’m Derek, nice to meet you.”

“You’re a freshman, right?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Hmm,” he paused and looked me up and down. “K, well, I’ll see you around.”

I found Herman intense. I suspected that he probably took his job as section leader a little too seriously. Dante and I continued into Mr. Z.'s office.

"You're just in time for the spring concert," Jamal said.

"Oh, speaking of..." Mr. Z. opened a drawer in his desk. "Here are the tenor parts for the twelve pieces we are working on for that. I've included the two jazz pieces as well. I'm not sure yet if you'll be doing those, but I want you to have them, just in case."

I ruffled through the pages. I liked the variety. I put the stack of sheet music in my backpack while Ashley and the others discussed the latest and greatest gossip. Some of it I'd heard with Dante and the guys that morning, but a lot of it was new.

Lunch ended and I left in a rush. I needed to grab my copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and my bio book from my locker. I thought I'd see Jorge outside the band room door, but the small crevice between the handrail and the wall outside was empty. At first I was disappointed, but since I didn't have time to be slowed down, I knew it was a good thing he was already gone. Mrs. Muñoz always locked the door immediately after the final bell and, unlike Mrs. Shepard, she refused to let anyone in even a second late.

For the first half of the class, we started reading chapter one of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I was glad that Mrs. Muñoz had decided to start fresh with it this week because my book hadn't made it home with me over the weekend. A few pages in, some students said that the title didn't make sense, so Mrs. Muñoz stopped the read-along. She said something about how the mockingbird represents innocence, and therefore, to *kill* a mockingbird symbolically shows evil destroying innocence. The discussion was exactly the kind I would normally be interested in, but I had way too much going on to be anything close to focused. I also knew that meant I'd have to re-read the first chapter.

As I started packing up my stuff, I felt someone walk up behind me.

“Boy, you act like we have nothing but time to be wasting. Let’s go, or Mrs. S. will give her ‘don’t get on my bad side’ lecture to both of us today.” Sydney’s voice startled me, but it did make me move faster.

We went through a quad area that I’d never seen before and got to Mrs. Shepard’s classroom with time to spare. I noticed that only about half the class had gotten there. I’d never seen the room so empty.

“Mr. Thomas, it’s a wonder to see you here so early. I’m guessing you took my textbook advice?” Mrs. Shepard said, as we took our seats.

“He also came with me through my shortcut,” Sydney said.

“Well, I expect you won’t be late anymore, then.”

A few minutes later the classroom was full. “Time to make babies!” Mrs. Shepard announced from the front of the room.

Several students snickered. I’d completely forgotten about that.

“Here is a packet that explains how this will work. Follow each step as accurately as possible, and create your babies to the best of your artistic abilities. Any questions?”

No one responded.

“Alright then, your silence is my answer. I’m going to have Mr. Carson here pass these out to everyone.” She handed the stack of packets to a kid named Jack in the front row. Jack passed them around to each set of lab partners.

“Can you draw?” Sydney asked.

“What?”

“Can. You. Draw?”

“No...not really.”

“Really, now? You sure like to scribble and doodle a lot. What’s with the letter J anyway?”

“What?”

“Boy, are you half deaf or something? I saw you drawing the letter J all over your notebook.”

“Oh. I don’t know. It’s just easy to draw it in a lot of different ways, I guess.”.

“Sure,” she said. I could tell she was unconvinced, but I was glad that she didn’t continue to push it. “I can’t really draw either, so this should be a whole lotta fun.”

I handed her the packet.

“Step one says to pick a gender,” she said. “Should we do a boy or a girl?”

“I don’t really care. A girl is good with me.”

“Fine. We can call her Dereka.”

I laughed. It almost sounded like a real name.

“Next we need to look at each other’s eyes. Yours are blue and mine are brown.

According to the sheet, since my entire family has brown eyes, I probably don’t have a recessive blue-eye gene, but with your blue eyes, you might have a recessive brown-eye gene. Therefore, there’s a 25% chance that Dereka will have blue eyes.”

“We should go with brown then, right? Since that has the higher probability.”

Each of the next steps had us determine different facial features and draw them. When we were done, somehow our baby looked pretty good.

“Not a bad looking little girl,” Sydney said.

“Not bad at all,” I said.

Finally, Mrs. Shepard had everyone share their drawings with the class. Some were really good. Some were really bad. Sydney and I were the last ones to go. Sydney started off by telling the class our daughter's name was Dereka. Everyone laughed. She continued by explaining why we chose brown eyes. Then we went back and forth telling the justifications for each of the other features. Sydney's outgoing personality blended well with my awkward shyness. Everyone seemed to like our drawing.

"High-five on making a baby together." I held up my hand.

"High-five?" Sydney said. "Are we like ten years old?"

"Well...no, I guess not."

Sydney paused for a second, then clapped her hand against mine.

I stuffed the baby drawing into my backpack and headed out the door. Once in the breezeway, I could see Elise's silver Lincoln parked in the drop-off area. I ran over and told Elise I needed to stop by the band room.

"Should I wait, or come back in a little bit?"

"I don't know how long it will take. Maybe like twenty minutes."

"Sure. I'll come back in like a half an hour then. Everything alright?"

"Never better," I said. "Where's Bet?"

"She went over to her little friend's house again."

"Oh, coolness. See you in thirty."

Walking up, I saw Jorge in his usual place outside the band room. He always looked like some sort of doorman.

"Do you ever leave that spot?" I asked.

"I obviously go to six classes a day, just like you. Why?"

“No reason,” I said. “I’m just saying hi.”

“Then just say hi.”

“Sure thing.” There was something off about him. He was pretty much always a jerk to me at school, but his tone lacked the playful tension that I was getting used to. None of my business. I walked into the band room and knocked on Mr. Z.’s door.

Dante opened it. “Derek, no one ever knocks. Just come in.”

“Oh, alright,” I said.

“Yeah, just come on in, Derek,” Mr. Zepeda said. “If ever I’m using my office for something official, the door will either be locked, or a sign will be posted. This room is mostly a space for band leaders to hang out and strategize.”

“Mostly the first one!” Ashley said.

“Uh. Right. I’m here because you told me earlier to stop by,” I said.

Mr. Z. took a sheet from the top of the printer on his desk and handed it to me. My new schedule. He then stood up and grabbed a large block of an instrument case from a counter on the far side of the room. “I dug this out of storage for you.”

The case was quite a bit bigger than I was expecting.

“This is the best tenor we have,” he said. “Herman uses his own, so you get dibs on this one.”

I opened the case and saw that it was a YTS-26 that looked almost brand new. “Wow! It’s super nice.”

“We could even work out a rent-to-own arrangement if you like the way it plays.”

“Oh, cool. Thank you, Mr. Z.”

“Are you gonna stay and hang out with us?” Dante asked.

“Elise will be back soon. Do you guys have rehearsal right now?”

“No,” Ashley said. “We do usually have sectionals, but today’s were optional and only the drumline decided they need it.”

“We’re just hanging out,” Dante said.

“Gotcha. I should get going, but I’ll hang out next time, for sure.” I did think about calling Elise so I could stay a bit longer, but I figured there’d be plenty of hanging out in the coming weeks.

Jorge was still outside the door. I planned to ignore him, but I again noticed that something about him was off. Why this mattered to me, I didn’t know.

“You okay, man?” I said.

He just stared down at his Etnie shoes.

“Alright. Well, bye, I guess.” I started walking away.

“What do you care?”

I stopped and turned back to him. “I’m used to you messing with me, but right now you seem down, or off, or something.”

I could tell he was thinking hard about something. “How did it go with Mr. Z.?”

“Oh. It uh...went fine.”

“That’s good. I never did congratulate you.”

I was surprised by how normal he was being. “Are you sure you’re okay, Jorge?”

“I never said I was okay,” he said, looking up at me. “You know that feeling you get when you enter the band room? That warm, excitement kind of feeling?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said.

“I used to get that feeling too.”

“Used to?”

“Yeah. At the beginning of the year, people were so surprised a freshman could be as good as I am. I’ve been playing trumpet since I was a kid, so I have experience on almost everyone here. Most people start in middle school, or like you, in high school, but not me. My mom started me off on trumpet years ago because she wanted me to do mariachi. I hated all the practice it took, and I was never good enough because my dad was a professional trumpet player. Do you have any idea what it’s like to have to live up to something like that?”

“Well, yes...actually, I do. I’m sure your dad is proud of you, especially with the whole section leader thing.”

“My dad died when I was nine. I thought I’d be free from his unreachable standards, but it just made my mom push me harder. I remind her of him. She tells me that all the time, in both English and Spanish. Being anything other than the best is not an option for me.”

“At least you enjoy playing though, right?”

“I did.”

“Did?”

“Like I said before. People were impressed. I came to PHS and even the older players couldn’t keep up with me. It was a cool feeling. But then when I got section leader, everyone changed.”

“How do you mean?”

“It’s like...they no longer take me serious. Take, for instance, Mr. Z.’s office. I used to hang out in there too, but now I know they don’t want me around.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I’m not stupid. I can feel the awkwardness. That’s why I stand here. I watch and hope I’ll get a vibe that people want me in there with them.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

He paused and seemed nervous. “I don’t really know. I get a different kind of feeling from you.”

“Feeling?”

“Come on. I know you can feel the tension too.”

“Well...yeah, but it comes from you having an attitude towards me all the time. That same attitude, I suspect, is to blame for others not wanting you around.”

“I have to assert myself, or people will take advantage—or worse, make fun of me.”

“Confidence is one thing, but you come off like an asshole.”

“Who you calling an asshole, new kid! You better watch yourself or that pretty face of yours will make friends with the pavement.”

“See. That’s what I’m talking about. You get all defensive and threaten people. Hell, my first interaction with you was you throwing me into the front of my locker. It’s no wonder people reject hanging out with you.”

Jorge’s face morphed into a kind of devious half-smile. “You were staring at me. It made me uncomfortable. I didn’t even know you and there you were, looking over at me with that smug look on your face.”

“Smug look? I told you, I was staring off into space. I’ve been struggling to adjust to this new school, leaving my friends behind, not being sure why we’re even here, and all that. I’d never even noticed you before.”

“I noticed you,” he said. “I noticed you on day one. Last week I thought you were staring at me because right before that I was staring at you.”

“You were?”

“Yeah, man, I get such a weird feeling from you.” Jorge started playing with the collar on his t-shirt. “Forget I said anything. I’m just in a weird mood today because I see them treating you like they used to treat me. There’s been such a buzz about you in band. You’re like...the new prodigy.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m *that* good. I think I only stood out because they expected me to be a beginner. I learned a lot at my school in Fort Worth.”

“Yeah, but you joined a group who started the same time you did, yet, you’re miles ahead of them.” He paused. “I don’t know how you’re so good at sax anyway. All those keys and crap.”

“Since when do you compliment people?”

“There’s more to me than people think,” he said.

“I guess that makes two of us. Anyway, I’m pretty sure my ride is here by now.”

“Alright, bye new kid.”

CHAPTER 9

First period started and I felt nervous. I hadn't tried out the YTS-26 yet, and even though I knew it would be better than any of the saxes I'd played up to that point, I still wasn't sure if I'd know how to play tenor. Putting it together was the same process of putting the reed in my mouth to get it wet, attaching the neck to the main part of the horn, securing the reed on the mouthpiece with the ligature, cranking that onto the cork at the top of the neck. This was a process I was all too familiar with, but today it felt different. Everything, from the reed to the sax itself was bigger, but the room felt smaller. It was loud with people talking and messing with different pieces of instruments, music stands, and sheets of paper. Not unlike the start of beginning band, but as more and more people came into the room, this seemed like a much bigger deal.

When Mr. Z. stepped up to the conductor's stand, there were probably 200 kids stretched across the four tiers of the now tiny-looking room.

"Good morning, guys," he said. "Today we will be working on our spring concert set—particularly the Moss piece, *A Disney Spectacular*, and Ford's arrangement of *Go West*—but first and foremost I'd like to welcome our newest member, Derek."

A few people said hi to me and others started talking amongst themselves.

"Quiet please," he said. "Derek is new to PHS, but spent over a week in my beginning band, proving he belonged here instead. He will be playing the *safionghtthtmf*."

I stared up at him. What did he say I was playing? I looked down at the instrument in my hand and it wasn't the tenor sax I'd just put together, it was something I didn't recognize.

"For starters, Derek, why don't you give it a try. We'll all tune to you."

I held a shiny silver end piece that I thought must be the part that went in my mouth to my lips. All eyes were on me.

“What is he doing?” I heard Herman say to the girl sitting next to him.

Scott tried to gesture to me how to hold it right.

Mr. Z. just stood there with a white baton in his hand waiting for me to figure out how to start us off.

I tapped a red button on the bend in the neck. This caused the brass of the instrument’s body to stretch down my side and, once it hit the floor, it bent at a 90-degree angle towards the front of the room. It was growing like a tree and heading straight towards Mr. Z.

“Derek, you have to press valves 7 and 9 at the same time and blow into the middle mouthpiece to stop it from growing. If it gets too long it will no longer be a B-flat instrument and we won’t be able to tune to it.” I could tell Mr. Z. was losing patience.

What did he mean? My alto was an E-flat instrument and we tuned to it plenty of times. Heck, in beginning band we usually started with a flute player and tuned from high to low. Flutes weren’t in B-flat either, they were in concert pitch. Once, my friends Michael and Nathan had even tuned their bottles of Coke to be perfect thirds to each other. I was no expert but I was pretty sure we could tune to anything.

Why did any of this matter?

My focus went back to my growing instrument that had hit the front of the conductor’s stand and was now shooting up towards the ceiling.

“I knew letting him in here was a bad idea,” Herman said.

Dante stared at me horrified. Scott put his hands over his face like he couldn’t bear to see any more of what was happening. Eddie laughed.

“Real it in, Derek! We’re wasting time,” Mr. Z. said, as my supersized snake of an instrument hit the top of the room and knocked down two ceiling tiles. It then bent towards the lockers at the back.

I looked down at where the silver mouthpiece had been. It was now joined by a dull black one and one that was covered in what looked like mystery fruit from the cafeteria. I blew into the black one in the middle. A screeching sound echoed through the room and the growth seemed to get faster.

Right. I needed to do something with valves 7 and 9. Wait. Saxophones didn’t have pressable valves like brass instruments, only keys. But this was neither brass nor woodwind. How was I supposed to know what to do?

In a panic I started pushing, pulling, and twisting everything that would move. Each key, button, valve, pad, and wire created its own response. One set of keys caused the lights to go out. When the next pad made contact with the body of the instrument, a disco ball dropped from the ceiling and the lights began to pulsate in different colors with every noise I managed to squeak out.

A couple of the girls screamed and one boy fainted.

Then, to the sound of a trumpet fanfare, Jorge jumped from out of nowhere with a sword in his hand. He tipped his Indiana Jones-style hat at me and sliced through the mound of mangled metal that was now growing towards him. I’d never really considered him a hat person.

He gave one last jab and everything stopped as the instrument—now made out of some sort of rubber material—fell to the floor in a cloud of smoke.

The room fell silent.

I looked at Jorge. He holstered the sword and walked over and bent down like he was going to pick me up, but stopped when Ashley stood up from her chair that was right next to the conductor's stand. I hadn't noticed, but she must've been sitting there the whole time.

"You need to report to Star Command, Space Ranger," she said to me.

What did she say?

She stood at the conductor's stand—which was now somehow not being used by Mr. Zepeda, who was nowhere to be found—and held up the baton as if to cue us all in. "Hello Space Rangers, it's Buzz Lightyear. Time to wake up and move out cadets! Meet me at Star Command for your daily assignment. Buzz Lightyear, over and out!"

I stared up at her.

She repeated the message again. And again. Everyone started saying it along with her and I couldn't figure out what they were trying to tell me.

Then, the room and everything around me started to fade. It didn't go black, but more of a hazy green. The green light became brighter as I was almost blinded by the display of numbers in front of me. I knocked my Buzz Lightyear alarm clock off the nightstand, causing its repetitive message to stop dead, and sat up straight in my bed.

Time for school.

As Dante and I sat down with Scott, Jamal, and Eddie. Bits and pieces of the dream came back to me while they talked about most of the same stuff they'd brought up yesterday. I thought about writing the dream down somewhere, but there were already holes in it where I couldn't remember what had happened, so none of it made sense anymore. Not that it ever did.

"I guess everyone knows Geoff is the assistant drum major by now," Jamal said.

“Yeah and I heard Ashley’s over him and back on the market.” Eddie made sure Scott knew he was mostly talking to him.

“I’m gonna stay away from that,” Scott said. “Oh! Today is Derek’s first day in first period.”

“That’s probably what everyone is gossiping about this morning,” Dante said. “I even told my ma about it yesterday.”

Something about this interested me and pulled me out of my daydream about my night dream. “You talk to your mom about me?”

“I tell my ma everything, even if she doesn’t know most of the people I say stuff about. She tells me about her day too. It’s what we do every night at dinner.”

On nights when we’d all have dinner together—which was less and less lately—everyone else talked about their day, except me and my mother. I guess I knew why she didn’t talk about hers, since they were full of doctor visits and tests and stuff. But my days had been pretty eventful lately, and the only one who knew even a fraction of what was going on was Elise.

“Are you excited, Derek?” Jamal asked.

“I’m actually pretty nervous.”

“Don’t be. I’ll be right there next to you,” Scott said.

“Yeah, man. You already have friends here. We want you to do good,” Jamal said.

The bell rang and they all got up without saying anything. I didn’t even know where I was supposed to sit. I walked to the back of the room and grabbed the YTS-26 from my corner locker. When I turned back around I could start to see where the different sections were forming, but Scott was still back at a locker sorting through some sheet music. I tried to get his attention, but I didn’t want to be awkward about it, so I figured I should just wait.

Then, a girl I'd never seen before waved me over to an unclaimed area of the second row. At first I didn't know she was waving at me, so that awkward moment I was trying to avoid happened when she stood up and yelled my name. Several people looked over at me. The room remained loud as most people were still getting their stuff together, but a few people whispered to those around them and pointed in my general direction.

I walked over to the waving girl, trying not to seem lost.

"You seem lost," she said as I approached.

So much for that.

"I'm Jasmine."

"Derek."

"Scott sits to my right and you'll sit on my other side, next to Herman," she said.

"I sit by Herman?"

"Yes. Where else?" she said.

Oh, right. I play tenor now.

"I'm actually surprised he's not here yet. Herman almost never misses."

As if she'd cued him in, Herman walked in the main door. He looked over at me and Jasmine, and nodded his head like he'd just been reminded I'd be there this morning.

I sat next to Jasmine and started putting the YTS-26 together.

"Oh, you picked that one," Herman said.

"Yeah. It's really nice," I said.

"Meh. It's alright. Yamaha isn't my favorite company." He pulled out some old-looking saxophone of a brand I couldn't make out.

"This is a 1967 Buescher 400 jazz tenor," he said. "It's worth more than your life."

I pretended to know what it was. Other than being really old, I didn't think it looked that impressive. I tried to make it seem like I was genuinely interested.

"Tune to me," he said. "Jasmine are you and Scott ready to tune?"

"Scott has his sax set up, but is still at the lockers," she said.

Herman looked down at the expensive-looking watch on his left wrist and shook his head. "If we're not in tune when Mr. Zepeda gets up there, the whole section will be doing push-ups."

Push-ups? He can make us do push-ups?

"I'm right here," Scott said, sitting between Jasmine and another girl I was introduced to later as Sandra. There was an empty seat on the other side of her and one last alto sax player at the far end named Kieth. Was that all of us? I thought our section would be bigger than this. I looked around and noticed that the 200-piece band I was expecting was half that at most.

Herman played a note and gestured me to tune to it.

I put the mouthpiece in my mouth and pressed the top three keys to make a G. I created a nice, solid sound, but it wasn't the same note.

"You have to play a C, Derek," Scott said. "Tenors tune to concert B-flat with C, not G like altos."

I removed the top and bottom finger, leaving just the middle key pressed against the upper section of the horn. It matched Herman's note perfectly. Soon we were all in pitch with each other.

"Is this all of us?" I asked.

"Diego isn't here today, but yeah, it's just the six of us—actually seven now with you," Jasmine said.

“How many total band members?” I asked.

“Like 90-something,” Herman said.

90-something seemed low to me. The marching band in Fort Worth had over 200 people in it, and the sax section was close to twice the size of this one.

“97 to be exact,” Mr. Z. said from the front of the room. “We’ve actually grown quite a bit in the last few years. Come marching season I expect we’ll break 100.”

“Sounds like a plan, Stan,” I said.

Why did I say that? I’m so awkward.

Mr. Z. either didn’t notice, or chose to ignore it. “Have you had a chance to try the horn out?”

“Yeah. We just tuned.” I looked down to make sure my saxophone was still a saxophone.

“Before we begin this morning,” Mr. Z. said, “I want to let you all know that today’s rehearsal is canceled. I completely forgot about the department faculty meeting today. It’s painful because we fall in with English, theatre, and the rest of fine arts, so I pretty much just sit there and take up space while they discuss metaphors and miming.”

Mr. Z. then turned his attention to a flute player named Marina in the front row. “Concert B-flat,” he said.

Marina played a B-Flat and Mr. Z. cued the rest of the flutes in and started with the clarinets.

“Eddie, pull your mouthpiece out a little bit,” he said.

Eddie did and played the note again. Mr. Z. nodded that it was now in tune.

Next, he gestured for the saxes to come in. We all played in perfect pitch. Herman was noticeably happy about this.

“Great tone, Derek,” Mr. Z. said.

Soon the entire room was playing one continuous note.

“That’s the wall of sound I like to hear,” he said, cutting us off with his baton. “We’re sounding good this year.”

After a few scales, we spent the rest of the period working on a few of the pieces he’d given me the day before. I struggled with some of the faster sections, but for the most part, I was able to keep up.

CHAPTER 10

It felt a little weird going in reverse order from algebra to health class. I almost went back to the band room for beginning band at first, but caught myself. They say it takes three weeks for something to become a habit. When it comes to high school, I guess it's half that. Maybe it's because a school day can either seem like two or three hours or drag on for what feels like two or three years. There's no in between.

I walked around to the back row of portable buildings, and stopped. Standing outside the door was Jorge. He was everywhere. Yes, we were in the same grade, but PHS was a big campus, and other than Sydney, I couldn't think of anyone else I had more than one class with. Band was one thing, but to run into Jorge at a park in the middle of the desert, and now health class too. I couldn't seem to shake this guy.

He was looking at me as I walked up, but I got the sense he already knew I'd be there. We made eye contact and he gave me a what's-up nod. I reached for the door handle, expecting him to put an arm up or make some unnecessary crack at me, but instead he beat me to it and held the door open for me.

When I walked in, only a handful of students were in the classroom. Ms. Clifford called me to her desk and told me that this class was about a week behind, so that meant I'd have to go through the STD lecture again. She waited for a reaction from me, but when I just nodded, she laughed and told me it was just a joke. I didn't get it. Third period happened to be in basically the same spot as her first period class was. That's convenient. She gave me a seat one row over and one seat forward of where I sat before. After a few minutes, Jorge came in and took the seat right behind me. Of course.

The class was uneventful. Ms. Clifford just talked about the importance of good nutrition, but I thought I could feel Jorge's eyes glued to me. I never looked back to confirm, but what else could he be doing...paying attention to why carrots were better than cupcakes?

The rest of the day was a blur. P. E. was just as terrible as usual. I was glad that next year I'd be doing marching band instead. No more PHS physical education shirt and stupid shorts. I guess it would be a band uniform and a shako with a plume instead, but I wouldn't have to wear that everyday. I had lunch in the band room, and it seemed that the prodigy freshman thing was still all the buzz. English and biology were business as usual. I said goodbye to Sydney and Mrs. Shepard as I left into the crowded hallway. Following the flow, I made it out the side door in less than a few minutes.

"Yo Derek!" Dante hollered at me across the sea of students from the other side of the breezeway.

"Hey Dante," I said, now pushing against the flow of traffic to get over to him.

"Hey man, sorry to ask, but since band rehearsal was canceled, is there any chance I can get a ride from you?"

"Sure," I almost cut him off before he even finished asking.

"Appreciate it."

"No problem at all."

We started walking towards Elise's silver Lincoln.

"This is kind of a crazy idea, but what if you come over and chill for a bit?" he said.

I looked at him for a moment. I'm not sure why I hesitated. Maybe because this was the first time I'd been invited over to anyone's house here in Palo. Was I ready for it? Maybe

because I compared the idea to hanging out with my friends in Fort Worth. Would it be the same? Maybe because I instantly got nervous. About what I didn't know.

"Like...to your house?" I asked.

"Yeah. I mean, You don't have to if you don't want to. No pressure."

"Oh, no. It's not that. I'm just not—uh...sure, I'm down."

"Okay, but only if you're sure."

"I am," I said.

We approached the silver Lincoln. Elise seemed excited when I told her I'd be dropped off at Dante's house with him. She'd been pushing for me to make friends since we got here. Plus, I still got the sense she thought something was happening between the two of us.

It only took us a few minutes to get to his house, right behind PVS like he said. It was a row of small townhouses that looked out of place with the neighborhood around it. I thought it might be government housing, but I didn't know for sure. Dante's townhouse had a well-kept and homey look to it. Elise waved us off and Dante opened a narrow gate that broke up a chain link fence. The fence stretched across the entire front of the property about chest high. The gate had to be lifted while it was pulled out towards the street, and it made a screeching sound as it scraped through a permanent groove it had carved in the sidewalk.

As we walked, I noticed the concrete pathway had its share of cracks, with each slab being at a slightly different height than the one next to it, from where they'd shifted and settled over the years. The path was lined with an array of plants and flowers—some potted, some planted—that were already starting to come to life, even though it was still pretty cold out. The whole front yard was a garden of flowers, shrubs, and landscaping that a lot of work had gone into creating and maintaining. The front of our house was more xeriscaped than anything, partly

because it needed to be easy maintenance from when it had renters, but even our house back in Fort Worth, with a gardener coming to keep it up every other day, was less lush and manicured than this one.

“My ma has a green thumb. She’s always out here watering and tinkering with her babies—that’s what she calls her plants—and, as you can see, she’s good at it,” Dante said as we stepped up onto a small porch.

“Yeah. It’s uh, very pretty. I’m kind of blown away by it.”

“Everyone always brings it up when they walk up. I figured you noticed. The pizza boy will ring the bell, and instead of saying, ‘Your pizza’s here’ when we open the door, they’ll ask about the plants. I don’t really know what my ma does, but I didn’t get that gene from her. I could kill a garden of rocks.”

“She does this all on her own? No gardener, no landscaper—you don’t help her?”

Dante stopped. I think he thought I was suggesting he doesn’t help his mom with yard work, but I really was just surprised that one person could make something this beautiful.

“Well, I do help with, like, weeds and stuff, but I help around the house in other ways. It’s just the two of us here, so we both have our own chores.”

“No. I didn’t mean you don’t help. I’m just impressed that—”

The front door opened in front of us. It was as though whoever pulled it open knew we’d be there at that exact moment.

“Oh. You’re home!” A tall, beautiful, petite black woman stood looking down at Dante. Her gaze then shifted to me. I could feel her eyes burning a hole in my collared shirt and blue cardigan. Or maybe they weren’t, but it felt that way.

“Oh. You have a guest. Who’s this boy with you?” she asked.

“This is Derek. The new guy I was telling you about. Band practice was canceled so he gave me a ride home. I thought it would be cool if he came over for a bit.”

“Oh, well...I was just thinking what we might do for dinner. I took out some pork chops, but we only have enough for two. My check hasn’t hit yet.”

“Oh. That’s okay, ma’am, I can just call my ride back,” I said.

“Why, this isn’t a boy at all. We have ourselves a polite young man here, don’t we? It’s alright, we have a few hours until I need to cook.” She thought for a second. “You could hang around until then.”

“Come on Derek. I’ll show you where I rest my skull,” Dante said.

I followed him into the front room of their house. It was a little dark, with frilly maroon coverings on all the windows, and it was overloaded with a mix of furniture and household items. The house was obviously lived in, but looked and smelled clean. The smell was floral, almost like an old lady’s house, but also lemony like ours smelled after Elise cleaned it. Back in Fort Worth that smell would linger much more often than here in Palo, but given that our house was half the size, Elise only had to clean it once a week or so. It was a comforting smell.

The floor was covered in a worn linoleum, and in front of us was a wall with a radiator heater on it. I hadn’t ever seen one in person. To the left was an opening in the wall that led to a dining room and, I assumed, a kitchen. To the right was a narrow staircase that led to a cramped second floor. I followed him up the stairs where the linoleum transitioned into carpet. The carpet on the stairs was duct-taped down against the linoleum lower floor.

At the top of the stairs there was an open door to a bathroom directly across the landing from us and two closed doors on each side. We went into the door on the right. Dante’s room was bright compared to the living room and stairway, but two of the walls were paneling, instead

of drywall like I'd seen in the rest of the house. The mis-match in materials wasn't jarring, but it also didn't look like an intentional feature. On the largest of the two drywall walls was a poster of Usher. I only knew that because his name was printed over his head. It was a giant poster that barely fit above his nicely made bed.

"Cool poster," I said.

"Oh, yeah. My ma and I both like Usher. Good guy. Great music."

"I don't really know any of his stuff. I'm sure I'd recognize it if I heard it."

Without missing a beat he pressed the play button on a small CD-player boombox and the first track began to play.

"This is Usher's first album."

"Oh, yeah. I recognize this," I lied. "A girlfriend of mine used to be obsessed with Marshall Mathers, so I've heard some of his stuff. Not much into rap really, though."

"You've had a girlfriend?"

"No. I mean, a friend, who was also a girl."

"Marshall Mathers? Oh, you mean Eminem. Yeah, he's cool."

"Eminem, right." I had no clue if Marshall Mathers and Eminem were the same person, but agreeing seemed better than looking stupid.

"So, what are you into? Classical and shit like that?"

Shit like that. I don't think I'd ever heard him talk like that, even at school.

"Well, I mean, my parents are, sure, but I like pop and mainstream music mostly. Britney Spears. Nsync. People like that."

"Britney Spears? You willingly listen to that noise?"

"Well, I mean, just whatever's on the radio, you know."

“Right.”

I assumed he'd made some sort of judgement about that, but at least I didn't tell him I fell asleep to the sound of Broadway musicals almost every night. Before we could dwell on it he changed the subject.

“So, this has been a crazy week for you, huh?”

“Yeah. A week ago I was sitting alone at a table in the lunchroom with no friends feeling sorry for myself. Now, here I am at a friend's house talking about music, preparing for a band concert, and getting to know a new city. I owe it to you, man.”

“No, you don't. You're the sax genius.”

“Well, I mean I guess that part was me, but you were the one who came up to me at that table knowing nothing about me, and then took it upon yourself to help me become part of the group. I really do thank you more than you could ever know.”

“Aw. Look at us. Two guys, alone on a bed, staring into each other's eyes, being sappy as shit. Better be careful, people might get the wrong idea.”

“Wrong idea?”

“Yeah. I know neither of us are homos or anything, but you know how people are.”

“Right. Yeah, I gotcha.” But I didn't. Did thanking him make me unmasculine, or somehow suggest I'm gay? It was heartfelt, but it's not like I thanked him with a kiss, or while wearing a dress. I just wanted him to know I appreciated him. Being a guy is so complicated sometimes.

“Plus, imagine what Jorge would do with something like that. He already seems to be obsessed with gayness. Maybe he has a crush on you.” He made a kissy gesture towards me.

I laughed. It was a nervous laugh that I hoped he wouldn't notice. The last thing I needed was people thinking Jorge and I were anything more than just acquaintances. Jorge was a deeply layered person, who I found more than intriguing, but those kinds of friendships were hard enough without the world butting in. I knew I couldn't go there. Not now.

"Jorge is weird," Dante said. "He used to be so funny and easy-going, but I don't know what happened. I think he let the trumpet talent go to his head. Don't you dare do that, Mr. sax star."

"I won't."

I liked that people were so supportive about me moving up from beginning band, but I was kind of getting tired of being *that guy*. I also didn't like being compared to Jorge, like, at all. Jorge was chaos. Jorge was drama. Jorge meant a disruption to order. Jorge, Jorge, Jorge. Why couldn't he just leave me alone? Why couldn't I stop thinking about him? There was something about Jorge. Something strong, something powerful, something I'd never felt with anyone before.

The Usher song finished and the CD skipped to the next track. Dante and I talked like old friends, but also got to know each other like new ones. I found out that his parents had split up when he was really young and that his dad had been absent for most of his life.

"Sometimes he'll stroll in with a late birthday gift and try to have a relationship with me, but there's always some other motive and the second he doesn't get what he wants, I'm not important anymore and he's gone again," Dante told me.

I couldn't decide what was worse—having an absent dad who was never there, or having a dad who was there but was always absent. One thing was true for both us, our dads were only interested on their terms, otherwise, we were just a disappointment.

After what felt like only a few minutes, I looked at my watch and saw that it was 5:33pm. Time flies. “I wonder if your mom is doing your food yet.”

“Yes. I was just coming in to let you boys know that I’m getting ready to figure out dinner.” Dante’s mom was standing in the doorway. It was again as though she knew I’d be asking about it at that exact moment.

“Alright. If it’s okay to use your phone, I’ll call my ride.”

“Actually, the pork isn’t quite thawed, so I was thinking we could get a five-dollar pizza. We’d be glad to have you stay for that if you like, Erik.”

Dante laughed, “It’s Derek, mom.”

“Oh, I’m sorry—Derek—I’m so bad with names.”

“It’s okay, ma’am, you can call me whatever you want...just don’t call me late for dinner.”

Did I just use one of my dad’s quotes? It fit the situation, but I hated myself for it.

“You’re so polite, I love it. But there’s no need for ma’am, just call me Trini, it’s short for Trinity.”

“Okay, Trini, I like that name, and I’m happy to stay for pizza.”

“Great. Pepperoni okay?”

“Yes, ma’am. Uh, I mean, Trini.”

CHAPTER 11

When my alarm went off Sunday morning, I knew my parents were set on us attending church with Pastor Paul. I didn't know what they saw in POP, but I assumed it had to do with them staying on good terms with Dr. Rice. To my father's disappointment, Elise decided not to go with us. My guess is that he thought it would send a bad message, but my mother seemed less bothered by it. Maybe she knew that meant things would be less dramatic. My mother loved drama, as long as it didn't involve her.

I rode with my father because I needed to be there earlier than everyone else and my mother and Bet were nowhere near ready in time. He tried for small talk, but didn't like that I chose to talk about band.

"I don't know why you waste your time with that noisemaker. What if you switch to piano or something?" he said.

I ignored him, which led to him ignoring me the entire car ride. No surprise there.

When we pulled into the dirt parking area, he was happy to find a spot in the small paved area next to the main building. I was happy to get away from him.

I walked through the doors of the youth building that Brother Ryan had guided me through before. The exterior door was right across the entry area from the double door entrance of the main teen room. That was flanked by a hallway on either side that led to the different Sunday school classes. I could hear voices inside as I walked up to the partly open set of doors.

Stepping inside, I walked through a small gap in the rows of seats that were perpendicular to the door. It felt a little weird coming into the side of the room like that, but no one seemed to notice me. The roar of different conversations made the room feel lively, even though no one was doing anything but sitting and waiting. Most of the front rows were full, and not knowing if

the areas were divided by grade level, I didn't know where to sit. My anxiety kicked in as I realized that I'd have to ask someone.

I saw a young girl in a mint-green Easter-like dress right across from the walkway. She didn't look new, but she also wasn't chatting with anyone.

"Excuse me, do you—"

"Derek! You made it." Brother Ryan gestured me to the front of the room. The girl never even looked over at me.

"Hello, uh, Ryan. Yeah, I'm here."

"Good. I saved you a seat up here. We're gonna get started right now, but in the meantime, I want to introduce you to Brother Mike. He's the freshman boys bible study leader."

Brother Mike shook my hand. He appeared to be maybe 19 or 20, but what stood out is that his face was bright red. It looked like he'd spent at least the last hour or so yelling, or maybe he was sunburned. His blond—almost white—hair and eyebrows stood out against the redness of his skin. I tried not to stare.

I sat in the chair that Ryan had offered me, right in the front row. I thought I saw a few people look at me, then chat amongst themselves.

"I know it's a classic, but I'd like to talk about the story of David and Goliath today," Ryan said, approaching the conference-room pulpit with a painted cross on it at the front of the now full room.

Everyone turned their attention to him.

"In life, we are often placed in moments of adversity. Moments where it feels like we're a little person standing in front of a giant. I believe that God brings us to these moments to either expose our weakness, or to make us stronger. The best part about it is that the choice is ours."

Several kids shouted amen.

“Who can tell me where in the Bible we find the story of David and Goliath?”

Easter-dress girl raised her hand.

“Yes, Erin,” Ryan said.

“I know it’s in the book of first Samuel,” she said.

“Good. And what chapter?”

“Chapter 17,” I said under my breath.

“Good, Derek, yes, First Samuel, Chapter 17.”

I felt my face go red. Good thing Brother Mike was sitting next to me so no one could notice.

“Let’s all turn there now,” Ryan continued. “Erin, do you wanna read those first few verses for us?”

The sermon continued for the next 15 minutes with Ryan having people read different sections and us having an open discussion about the meaning. The format felt informal, even though we approached the information in an academic way. Ryan concluded by telling us to be courageous in our own David and Goliath moments because that’s what they are designed for us to do.

“You’re stronger than you think you are,” he said.

“Amen!” I yelled. I was glad that others had said it with me because it felt awkward and forced, even though I did agree with what Ryan was saying.

“That’s all I’ve got this morning,” he said. “For the next five minutes, I want you to break into your Bible study groups. Then, we’ll head across the desert.”

It took me a second, but I realized that “the desert” was the nickname for the dirt parking lot. I wondered what it would be called after the area got paved.

Brother Mike arranged the seats around us in a circle. Eight other boys came over to us while everyone else formed into groups by grade and gender. Mike introduced me and another new kid named Tyler to the other seven. All but one of them said they went to PHS, but I’d never seen any of them at school. Mike did a Bible drill with us and restated a couple of the points that Ryan had made. Then, we were told to head across to the main building.

I stood and helped Mike put the chairs back. Everyone else left towards the door. That’s when Ryan walked over. “Derek, my man, how’d it go?”

“Fine. I think today’s sermon and stuff made a lot of sense. Let’s see how edgy Paul wants to be today.”

I thought he’d laugh at my joke, but he looked more concerned than anything. “Derek, let’s take a walk.”

He didn’t say anything else until we were completely outside. I thought that maybe I was in trouble.

“Listen,” he said, once we were out of earshot from everyone. “I know you’re not comfortable with Paul’s style. He’s direct and opinionated, and frankly, I see him as more of a Goliath than a David. He has all the power in the world here since he’s the one who founded the place. That gets the best of him sometimes.”

“Are you saying that you don’t like him either?”

“Well, not that exactly, but I will say that him and I butt heads quite often.”

“Then, why doesn’t he just replace you?”

“Well, that’s the thing. My father, Greg, is his right-hand man. His link to the resources from higher up the chain. If he loses my dad’s endorsement, he might not be able to survive it.”

“The plot thickens. So, what’s the point in you telling me this?”

“Well, I like you Derek. I know what it’s like to feel powerless, but God always finds a way to give us any power we are lacking. For me, that was this youth pastor gig. For you, I hope it’s the fact that I see you, Derek Thomas.”

“You see me? Like...how?”

“I think you know what I mean.” He placed his hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. At first, I didn’t know what he meant, but as I felt a wave of excitement rush over me, there was almost no doubt.

I knew I should’ve pulled away. I knew this was wrong. Sinful. Illegal. But I didn’t feel threatened by him. I felt my hand reach up to touch his, but he looked around, seemed suddenly nervous, and pulled his hand away. “Let’s go to my office.”

We walked across the desert and into a side door that led to the hallway connecting to his office. He ushered me in first, then turned the light on and made sure the door was closed behind us.

“Look,” he said, sitting in his chair on the other side of the desk. “I’ve never done anything like this before, and as you know, I could get in a lot of trouble. I think we should start having private prayer sessions in here, instead of forcing you through Paul’s sermons.”

“I doubt there will be much praying.” I sat in a chair across from him. “But what about my parents? You know they’re expecting me to come in there right now, right?”

“I don’t plan to hide this if anyone asks, but there *will* be praying. We need to be productive with these sessions if we don’t want people to question them.”

“But wait. I’m confused. Are you not coming on to me?”

He grimaced at the question. “Well, no. Err...I mean, I don’t want you to do anything you’re not comfortable with. I had no intentions of this happening today, but I can’t help my urges sometimes. You understand urges, don’t you, Derek?”

“Yes. I’m 15, so, of course.”

“Well, when you’re my age, those urges don’t go away...they get worse.”

“And how old is that?”

“21.” I knew he was young, but 21 was not what I was expecting.

“Let’s take it slow,” I said. “We can just talk about the Bible and shoot the breeze most of the time. Let’s not get overwhelmed by things.”

“What an incredibly mature answer.” He relaxed in his chair. “Yeah, let’s get to know each other first and not rush into anything crazy right away. Um...do you have any questions about anything?” He picked up his Bible from the desk.

“For starters, are you gay?”

“I don’t—I’m not really sure how to...I meant, do you have any Bible or general life-related questions?”

“Right.” I thought for a second. “What’s your favorite Bible story?”

“Oh. Good question. The story of creation is always a good read. No—let’s go with the story of Jesus walking on water.”

“And why’s that?”

“Peter doubted Jesus and almost drowned because of it. Jesus showed him that true faith is all it takes to get through any challenge, and forgave him. I think that regardless of the type of sinner you are, having faith that you are loved and accounted for—that’s what keeps me going.”

“Do you have faith that being gay, you’ll still get into Heaven?”

“I mean, I guess I do. I’d have to. I don’t believe that God would create people a certain way just to set them up for failure. Giving into temptation is, of course, a sin, but then, so is getting divorced. Lord knows that happens more times than not. It’s not up to us to decide what is too big of a sin. Some are laid out in plain text, like murder for example, but most are left open-ended and ambiguous. We just have to do our best to be good people. God will sort out the rest.”

After church, my parents didn’t ask where I was. I wondered if they even noticed I was missing. They probably just assumed I came in with the rest of the sea of teens and didn’t bother to look for me. I knew they wouldn’t think twice about me meeting with Ryan. Hell, they might even look at it as me being taken under the wing of a high-ranking church leader—they’d love the message that would send.

I went up to my room, stripped down to my underwear, and tossed myself on my bed. I reflected on my meeting with Ryan and thought maybe I should pray about it. Instead, I ran my hand down my chest and across my stomach, stopping for a second at the elastic waistband, and then pushed my hand down into the front of my boxer-briefs. My dick hardened at the sudden contact as I remembered the excitement I felt when Ryan had touched me. It was similar to the feelings I got with Jorge, but with Jorge, it went to a much more emotional place. With Ryan, it felt dirty, forbidden, and dare I say it, hot.

“Dek, Elise said she’s making us sandwiches.” I heard Bethany call through the door and I jumped because I was afraid she might open it.

“Uh. Okay,” I said. “I’ll be right down.”

I readjusted my underwear and put on a pair of jeans. When I pulled my red Hollister t-shirt over my head, I noticed that the jeans were doing very little to hide my enthusiasm.

“I’m gonna need you to go away,” I said, looking down at my crotch.

“Are you talking to me?” Bet said from the now open doorway.

“Whoa, shit!” I said, turning away from the door and covering myself.

“Did I scare you?” She laughed louder than I thought necessary, but it didn’t seem like she knew what had just happened. Thank God.

“No. You’re uh...fine. What do you think about us packing our sandwiches and going to the park?” I said.

“Oh! Like a picnic?”

“Exactly. A picnic.”

Halfway to the park, lunchpails in hand, it dawned on me where we were going. Yes, I suggested the park in hopes that I could see more of the restroom, but I now had Bet to deal with. Inviting her, at the time, seemed like a good idea because making it a picnic meant no one would question it. Now, I’d have to figure out a way to ditch her, without leaving her alone at a strange park in the middle of nowhere.

We laid out a small blanket at the top of the last hill, just before the restroom building. I could see a few cars in the parking lot, but no one could be seen. After a few minutes, two of the cars left. I watched as we ate, and Bethany told me about all the friends she was making at church. I didn’t mention my new church friend. As I pushed the final piece of sandwich into my mouth, a man came out of the restroom and got in the last remaining car. He seemed like he was in a hurry as he pulled out onto the gravel road and drove out of sight.

“Dek, look. I think I see some kids playing over there.” She pointed at a small playground on the other side of the restroom.

“Oh, yes. Looks like there is. You head over there, I’m gonna pee first.”

Bethany got up and started for the playground. I picked up our lunchpails and folded the blanket. Looking over at the restroom, there were still no cars.

I set our stuff on a table next to a smoke pit outside the door. I stared up at the word MEN above the door closest to me. I couldn’t have been any more nervous as I walked inside. It smelled like a mixture of pee, urinal cakes, and what I recognized as cum. On the left side were four sinks. Each with its own scratched up mirror. On the right were three urinals. Past that, the brick room turned into an area where three stalls were situated in the back. All three stalls had doors that were half open and it was clear that no one else was in there. As I entered the cubicle farthest from the entrance, I latched the door behind me and looked around the stall. Scribbles, tags, and graffiti were everywhere, including phone numbers and drawings of stick figures in suggestive positions. I was about to leave when I heard someone come in.

Any and all nervousness returned as I sat, fully clothed, on the toilet, thinking that if they came over there, at least they’d think it was someone using the toilet. I could hear footsteps as the person came around the corner. They stopped for a second, I assumed when they saw my occupied stall, but continued into the one right next to me.

I heard the movement of the fabric and the clinking of their belt as they pulled down their pants. They sat on the toilet and for what seemed like a long time, but no other noise could be heard. Then, I saw a white Etnie shoe come up to the edge of the stall. I stared at it and knew who it belonged to. The room started to spin because I felt like I’d just been caught. Did Jorge know it was me too? I was wearing a pair of hiking-type shoes for our walk over to the park. I’d

never worn those to school. Still, there were cracks and gaps in the stall dividers. If he wanted to, he could get in a position to look right at me.

The shoe tapped on the floor. It was three distinct taps that I knew must be some sort of signal. Was I supposed to tap back? I hesitated for a second, but moved my own foot closer to the edge of the stall. Tap, tap, tap.

His hand came under the divider and made a “come here” gesture. I wasn’t sure if that meant I was supposed to go over to his stall, or if he wanted me to put my dick under the partition. I stood and pulled my pants down, but otherwise didn’t respond. After a minute or so, Jorge stood up, turned towards me and dropped to his knees. A good-sized uncut cock pointed out into my stall, just below the dividing wall. I had seen a couple of uncircumcised penises in the country club locker room back in Fort Worth, but I’d never seen one hard before. The skin around the top was pulled partially back, revealing a pink head that stood out against the brown skin around it. My own dick twitched and leaked precum without me even touching it. I stepped over and went down to my knees. His hand again came through, but this time it grabbed my dick. I grabbed onto his and started pulling the foreskin back and forth over the head. It surprised me how wet the tip and area inside the foreskin was. I found it weird, but I also wanted to taste it. Then, I thought for a second. What if it wasn’t Jorge? What if it was some stranger who was stroking me? I started to pull away, but that made the person pull me even closer to the divider. It was a firm pull, but not all that aggressive. Then, I felt a wetness. It was a warm wetness that I knew had to be a mouth. I looked down and confirmed that he was sucking my dick. My face went hot and I could feel my balls tighten. I wasn’t going to last much longer.

“Holy fuck!” I said. It was somehow both loud and muffled at the same time. I started to fill his mouth with cum and expected him to pull off and spit it out. Instead, he drank it and

started having his own orgasm on the floor. I could tell he was really into it. It was a lot of cum, more than I'd ever come close to producing. He kept me in his mouth until every drop was out of both of us and he'd caught his breath. He then pulled at the roll of toilet paper next to him and ran a large ball of it across the lake on the linoleum. I stood and pulled my pants back up.

“Thanks, Derek,” he said as he left the stall. Of course it was Jorge.

[NOTHING FOLLOWS]